

The Trees of the Bible

A Study of Symbolism

*I take root in an honorable people,
 Even in the portion of the Lord's inheritance.
 I was exalted like a cedar in Libanus.
 I was exalted like a palm tree in Engeddi,
 And as a rose plant in Jericho,
 As a fair olive in a pleasant field,
 And grew up as a plane tree by the water.
 I gave a sweet smell like cinnamon and aspalathus,
 And I yielded a pleasant odor like the best myrrh,
 As galbanum, and onyx, and sweet storax,
 And as the fume of frankincense in the Tabernacle,
 And as the vine brought I forth pleasant savor,
 And my flowers are as the fruit of honor and riches.
 I am the mother of fair love and fear,
 And knowledge and holy hope:
 I therefore, being eternal, am given
 To all my children which are named of Him.
 Come unto me, all ye that are desirous of me,
 And fill yourself with my fruits.*

—The Song of Wisdom to the Soul

WHEN WE LOOK at the magnificent trees of the earth, we are not in the least surprised that long ago they should have been considered objects of veneration and worship. When we consider how late in our history the ancient rites of tree worship were celebrated and still are celebrated at Christmas and May Day, we realize how in every age, man must have found something in trees that was in unison with the aspiration and desires of his soul. Ancient worship of the gods was usually in groves. As William Cullen Bryant says in his Forest Hymn:

*The groves were God's first temples. Ere man learned
 To hew the shaft, and lay the architrave,*



Oil on canvas. Henri Paul Motte (1846-1922).

Druids Cutting the Mistletoe on the Sixth Day of the Moon
One artist's vision of groves as "God's first temples."

*And spread the roof above them—ere he framed
 The lofty vault, to gather and roll back
 The sound of anthems; in the darkling wood,
 Amidst the cool and silence, he knelt down
 And offered to the Mightiest, solemn thanks
 And supplication.*

Trees and plants are able to exercise a great influence, not only on the human mind, but also on the body. It is for this reason that they have been used so much to assist in healing. It is not the mere sight of the trees that helps man. It is the very life essence of them that gives health to the body, and inspiration to the poet and artist.

As with colors, so with trees. Both are true symbols; that is, there is a very definite and real correspondence between the object and the idea that



Aaron's Rod That Budded

Ancient legend relates that one of the three cuttings from the Tree of Life was inherited by Aaron as his budding rod, which represents the spiritual flowering resulting from the regenerative use of the creative life force.

both convey to the mind. So utterly, however, has the ancient language of trees disappeared, that men seem incapable of understanding the old artists, the old poets, or the ancient Scriptures of the world and the ancient myths. It is therefore with the intention of helping people to realize how much profound knowledge was hidden in tree symbolism that I write this article on the inner meaning of the trees and shrubs which are commonly encountered in the pictures of great artists and in world Scriptures.

In reading the Bible I have often been struck by the fact that every person who is said to have been under a certain tree was a person imbued with the qualities symbolized by that specific tree, or if you prefer, there was a definite correspondence between the life of the tree and the soul life of the man. As below, so above, or as Jacob Boehme would have put it, "There is a Doctrine of Signatures."

In the old pictures which were painted according to the specific rules of the church, when a tree was placed in a picture it was put there, not for ornament nor to structure the composition, but with the fixed intent to show that the person underneath was himself considered to be a Tree of Righteousness, unless of course he was put under a dead tree, in which case he was considered to be spiritually dead. If we realize that in those days few people, other than the clergy, could read and write, we see how much easier it was for the latter to make their congregations realize their spiritual lessons when pre-

sented in the clearcut and definite picture symbolism used by the church.

Since trees represent types of souls, each different tree is the symbol of some quality that it is necessary for the soul to cultivate and develop on its upward path. Some of these tree-soul correlations are well known. For example, there is the willow tree whose story we have encountered in the willow tree pattern in China. The Psalmist knew the meaning of the willow when he said,

By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept,

When we remembered thee, O Zion,

As for our harps we hanged them up

Upon the willows that are therein.

Rossetti addressed those who walk in sorrow and tears with the words, "Oh, ye all ye who walk in willow wood."

We all know that orange blossoms symbolize the purity of the bride, but how many of us know the meaning of the lemon? It is sacred to St. Agnes. It is the symbol of beauty—the beauty of holiness. I believe that a lemon is still used at the Jews' Pentecost (Afartha) when a branch is burned. If a real branch cannot be obtained, a lemon is tied to any twig and then burned. Girolama dai Libra has a picture of the Virgin Mary seated under a lemon tree holding the infant Christ. How full of meaning every detail of a picture becomes when it is realized

that the artists have not been ignorant of symbolism.

It is said that Solomon understood all trees and all herbs from the cedar tree even unto the hyssop that springeth out of the wall. It is not to be thought that he was a botanist in the modern sense of the word. Neither was he merely an herbalist as some would have us believe. He was one who understood the symbolism of trees. Like Boehme, he too believed that each thing in the universe had its signature. Modern botanists have for so many generations ignored this side of nature that much of the ancient lore has been lost. It is a lore that came into being in the days when man dwelt on the life essence of Nature, rather than on classification by form, however necessary this may seem to be.

THE MESSAGE OF THE ALMOND

*The Word of the Lord was brought to me
As I stood by the springing well,
Where the tender buds of the almond tree
In vestal beauty swell.*

*And the Word of the Lord was joy to me
As I hasted upon my way,
With the inward light of a mystery
To grace my heart for aye.*

—Lines on seeing Hacker's *Annunciation**

Under what tree do you stand? You are mystically under the almond tree if you have reached a stage of spiritual development where the eternal Light is ready to give you a message and a vision, which will make life seem different to you forever after.

Perhaps you are a seeker after Truth. You seem to progress for a time. Then there comes a season of doubt and speculation. Shall you continue your life in the old way, you ask, or are there not new paths to tread? Suddenly—if you are a real seeker and not a mere pretender, if the quest comes from the depths of your soul reaching upward for more light on the Path—the answer is given. It may come in a vision, in a dream, by direct voice, but always in the way you will most readily comprehend it.

This answer becomes forever afterward a sacred experience, sometimes one that can be told to others, sometimes one so holy that it remains locked in the

**See page 44 for picture of this painting*



Raffaello Sanzio called Raphael (1483-1520), Brera, Milan

The Marriage of the Virgin (Lo Sposalizio)

As Max Heindel observed, Raphael embodies "the deepest esoteric knowledge" in his paintings. Here, in a Renaissance milieu, he portrays an account of the search for Mary's husband. Suitors appear bearing almond rods. But only Joseph's miraculously flowers, indicating that the Holy Spirit is working regeneratively in his life. Joseph's six toes, here difficult to discern, indicates the sixth sense awakened by Initiation.

heart for aye, and only expresses itself in the depths of the eyes, in the gentleness of the touch, in the timbre of the voice, or in some part of the outer self that is a reflex of the inner being. You are not merely then under the almond tree. You have become the almond tree.

How shall one prepare to receive the vision? Ask and ye shall receive is always true, but the asking must come from the still depths of the Spirit, not from the turbulent desire nature. Ask in calm quiet prayer at night before going to sleep. Ask confidently, expecting the answer the moment you awake in

the morning. Try to attune your ears to receive the answer. Try to open your inner eyes to receive the vision. Train your memory to retain the dream. The answer is always given. Whether you catch it the first time is another matter.

This is one of the first great steps on the Path—to attune yourself to know the Lord’s will and to understand His messages. Fear, anxiety and agitation are all hindrances. Cultivate serenity, confidence, and calm courage. If in trouble, comfort yourself with such sayings as, “Hitherto the Lord has helped me,” or “Underneath are the everlasting arms,” or “The Lord maketh a path through the mighty waters,” or “The Lord’s hand is not shortened that it cannot stay.”

God is always speaking, therefore listen. Do not do all the talking yourself, even though you may call all this talking prayer.

Is the spoken prayer more efficacious than the silent one? Only if it helps one to make the prayer more definite to the self, for being definite develops power. Some people even have to write out their prayers in order that they be more definite; then they place them under their pillows and confidently expect the answer.

Remember that prayer is not merely wishing for something. It is not even a building up of thought into definite form. It is rather, at first, a putting of the self in touch with the creative power of the Spirit of God in order that one’s own Spirit may receive illumination concerning what the real work in life is to be—a vision of the real purpose of the Ego’s existence.

It is not until after this vision has come that one should pray for definite things, for these may not be in one’s best interests. For example: In his youth Dr. Barnardo prayed insistently for the way to open up for him to go to China, but his real work proved to be among the orphans in London. Once the vision is given, however, one may pray with all his might for whatever is necessary to help carry out the revealed mission. Such prayers will be answered quickly and all that aids in carrying out the work will be given.

Therefore, if at present one does not find his prayers are being answered readily, it may be that he has never sat under the almond tree awaiting the vision and message of what his real work is to be, or he may have a warped conception of it. To such a one we would say, “Change your attitude for awhile.



Martin Schongauer (1450-1491), Unterlinden Museum, Colmar, France

Noli me tangere

A pomegranate tree, a symbol of immortality or eternity, is depicted near the sepulcher from which Christ resurrected.

Change your prayers. Ask for illumination instead of things.” Illumination will come, but even here it may not come in all its fullness after a few prayers. It may come in successive stages. One may have to develop in understanding and knowledge before he is capable of receiving it. Remember how Abraham was kept waiting, knowing only very dimly in his early life what his wanderings were all about.

Do you recall how Jeremiah at the beginning of his ministry felt timid and uncertain as to whether he was the chosen prophet or a mere dreamer? He was, however, as he said, sitting under the almond tree. I have often wondered if it were an actual physical tree or one only revealed in the presence of God. God asked Jeremiah what he saw and the seer replied, “I see the rod of an almond tree.” Whereupon God answered, “It is well, for I will hasten my word to perform it.” If the Lord wants you for a particular work, He will not leave you forever in doubt.

Of course we know that the fruit of the almond tree ripens quickly and that the Hebrew word *shakad* means hasten, so that there is a play on words in this passage; but for the student of symbolism there is also a deeper meaning. Jeremiah was to receive great truths, swift messages, and prophetic powers from the Lord—ample compensation surely for his tragic life, his afflictions, and sorrows.

Have you ever seen the picture of *The Annunciation* by Arthur Hacker? It is one of surpassing loveliness. There by a well, stands the Virgin with eyes full of mystery and longing. Behind her is an almond tree, and as you look more intently, a shadowy form takes shape and you see the Angel Gabriel who in symbolism is ever the herald of new life.

Hacker received the idea for this presentation, as have so many ancient and modern painters, from the apocryphal gospels. The well is not painted merely as an effective background. Mary is at the well of truth, whence the soul ever derives its living water. It was a well of living water (John 4:6) of which Jesus spoke. The same rushing water that came out of the east of Ezekiel's Temple (Ezek. 47:1).

The almond tree is employed to signify that a swift message is to be given. The message is given by the Angel Gabriel that Mary is to become the mother of a Great Being. Mary represents mystically every pure soul, and to every pure soul the Christ Spirit is sometime born within. When one looks at Hacker's painting he should realize that he is not looking at a mere historical representation of something that happened two thousand years ago but rather at a veiled record of what happens to every human being somewhere on the path of life.

The almond is mentioned in the apocryphal gospels in connection with the marriage of Joseph and Mary. Mary is said to have been one of the temple virgins. When it was decided that she should marry, many suitors appeared at the temple bearing almond rods. As a sign that he had been chosen of God to marry the virgin, Joseph's rod blossomed almonds (see picture on page 42):

"And out of whatsoever person's rod a flower shall bud forth, and on the top of it the Spirit of God shall sit in the appearance of a dove, he shall be the man to whom the Virgin shall be given and betrothed." (Protoevangelion 9:7)

When the other suitors saw that nothing happened



Oil on canvas (1892), Arthur Hacker (1858-1919), Tate Gallery (Chantrey Collection), London

The Annunciation

The Virgin Mary, in white robe and oriental in aspect, halts at a well near an almond tree where the diaphanous vision of the Archangel Gabriel hovers in the air, bearing a wand of lilies and whispering in Mary's ear his divine message.

to their rods, they all with one accord broke them in half, for they were all men who were not alive with

the Holy Spirit.

Bear in mind that Joseph is said to have been a carpenter, though the word should have been translated as architect. He was the one who fashioned into form “the blessed wood whereby righteousness cometh.” The Spirit has to be married to this wood or material substance, in order to learn the lessons belonging to the material world, which develop its latent potentialities into spiritual powers.

The same symbolism of the almond is used in the Book of Numbers 17:8, concerning Aaron: “Behold the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi was budded and brought forth buds and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds.”

Some of the other priests disputed his right to be High Priest, so God made his rod to bud forth almonds, both blossoms and fruit, as a sign that God’s messages would be given through him.

It is truly a wonderful miracle when the rod of authority breaks forth into the glory of blossoms and fruit; when the hard lessons in life burst forth in the beauty of spiritual powers. Aaron means the *Light Bringer*. He represents man illumined by the great Universal Spirit, and such a man can be the only true Light Bringer to humanity, the only true High Priest.

Aaron was the only one able to give the message and word of God to man, hence he represents the true prototype of Christ who is sometimes called the Branch, the Fruitful Bough, the Stem of Jesse’s Rod, the Scepter, the Governor, the Councillor, the King of Kings. Read these titles of Christ and see how they all grow out of the one idea of a living branch from the Tree of Life, and note too, how subtle is the distinction between Life and Power

Do you remember that when Jacob had deceived his father and had stolen his brother’s birthright, he found it expedient to leave home? One night he lay down, full of fear and distress at Bethel, a place formerly called Luz, which means an almond. If our symbolism is correct, he should have received a mes-



From *Die Bibel in Bildern*, Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1789-1853)

The Bride Resting under the Protection of the Bridegroom

“As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons....The fig tree putteth forth her green figs...”—Song of Solomon. While the above depicted apple and fig trees are associated with willful generation and the Fall, Christ as the Bridegroom redeems mankind and nature. In the context of Solomon’s song, the apple and fig trees represent fruits of the regenerate spirit.

sage there, for names are not given by chance in the Bible. Every name is typical of some soul power of the man to whom it belongs. Jacob did receive a message. He received it, as we so often receive messages from God, in a dream. He saw angels ascending and descending a ladder, that is, he saw that spiritual ascent is possible, no matter how mean and despicable one may have been—that angels are continually coming down to earth to help mankind, and that they are as often found going up to the higher realms with glad messages.

Perhaps of all the vital messages in the Old Testament, none is so important as this one to Jacob. Any sins other than lying and deceit we may think pardonable, but the lesson is that God gives a ladder of ascent even to the most depraved beings when they are ready to turn from evil and work for righteousness.

So Jacob called the place Bethel, that is, the House of God, and we do know that later he built for himself a house more fitted for a child of God. In one of our hymns we sing: “Out of my stony griefs/ Bethel

I'll raise.”

We need to learn that out of past weakness and sorrow we can gain the strength necessary to build beautiful temples worthy of the presence of disciples of the living God.

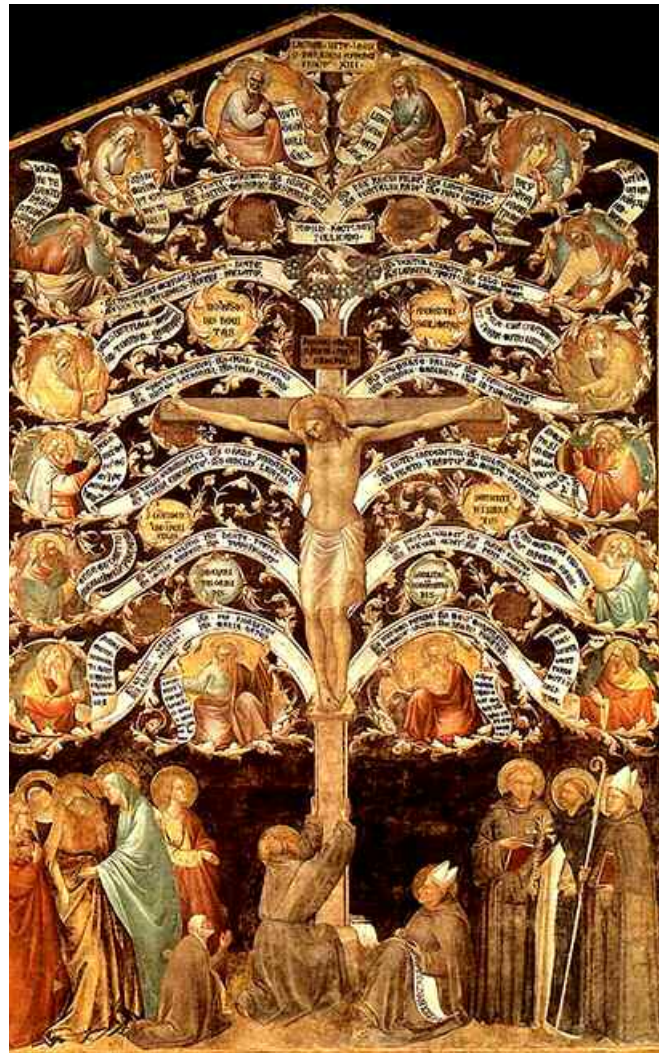
Many years after the death of Jacob, when the Israelites had come out of Egypt, the tribe of Joseph wanted to have Bethel or Luz included in their inheritance. A certain man of Luz helped them. We are told that this man set out toward the land of the Hittites, which is further northward, and built a new Luz there (Judges 1:26). In symbolism going northward represents following a new vision. The old astrologers viewed the sun as traversing a triumphal northern path when it transited from the Tropic of Capricorn in the winter to the Tropic of Cancer in the summer.

You have no doubt seen a Jewish candlestick. The sockets are made to resemble almond blossoms. This shape was commanded for the six-branched candlestick (Ex. 25:32) made in the wilderness and also for the ten-branched version (I Kings 7:49) that Solomon put in his temple. You will remember that the one made in the wilderness was to be placed near the altar of incense in the southmost part of the Holy Place, and that Solomon placed five of these candlesticks on the right of the oracle and five on the left. When we understand the meaning of the almond as a message, how appropriate are the places chosen by Moses and Solomon for these almond-shaped candlesticks!

The almond is sometimes called the *vesica piscis*, or body of the fish, and its symbolism is connected with a fish bladder, which is shaped like an almond.

Some earlier artists were clairvoyant and could see the almond-shaped aureola of light around a devout person, technically called a mandorla or glory. When so depicted it signified that a message and a vision had been received by that person. Those representations that show the mandorla around the Virgin at the Assumption indicate that she had developed her spiritual powers to the extent that she was able to make the mystical marriage within. This almond-shaped light was also used by painters to designate the glory, or divine aura, of Jehovah. When the artist does not wish to represent this great Being as a Person, he shows his presence by a blaze of almond-shaped light.

In this short article we have been able to give only



Fresco, 1330s. Taddeo Gaddi. Santa Croce, Florence

Allegory of the Cross

From the ground of Old Testament events (Creation of Adam, Temptation and Expulsion) grows the tree of the cross whose pictorial leaves give a synopsis of the Gospels. Crucified on the dead wood of humanity's sins, Christ becomes its Tree of Life. His deeds are witnessed, prepared and glorified by prophets, patriarchs, martyrs and saints.

the barest outline of the wonderful symbolism hidden in the trees mentioned so frequently in the Bible; but it is our hope that we have aroused enough interest in our readers so that at least some of them will pursue this fascinating subject and bring more information to light. We need never be afraid of following our inspirational messages. There are greater ones yet to be given. To fear the supply will cease, is to stop it. Know the trees of the Bible and you have a key to the character of the men whose lives were associated with them. □

—Ellen McCaffery