

Allegorical Exegesis in the Tree of Life Diagram in Beinecke MS 416

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The diagram on folio 1v. of Beinecke MS 416 is based on Bonaventure's 1260 meditation manual *Lignum vitae*, but also contains a variety of information not found in the original treatise. The diagram provides a window onto the intellectual and spiritual practices of the medieval monks of the Cistercian abbey of Kamp.

The Tree of Life is not difficult to understand. The middle of the diagram, a green cross from which twelve inscribed scrolls come forth, is described thus by Bonaventure in his treatise:

The true worshipper of God, the true disciple of Christ, wanting to conform perfectly to the Savior of all who was crucified for his sake, should try in the first place, with earnest intent, always to carry about, in soul and in body, the cross of Jesus Christ, until he can feel in himself the truth of the [apostle Paul's] words.¹

To achieve this end, the faithful would then need to commit to memory exactly what he was attempting to emulate. Expediting this process is the diagram, a visual mnemonic device that shows the way to the spiritual Cross.

Medieval Christian writers used a system of typological exegesis to explain the fullness of the Word and to link the two Testaments. Everything in Scripture has a dual meaning, the literal meaning – the “letter” – and the spiritual meaning. Since the Bible is also made up of two books written in different ages, this interpretation can be modified to say that the Old Testament is the book of the literal law, while the New Testament is the spiritual fulfillment of that law. The events of the Old Testament thus prefigure those of the New, which fulfills the Old Testament without destroying it. In the light of the New Testament, the old order is renewed.² According to

¹ Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae*, in de Vinck, ed. and trans., *The Works of Bonaventure*, vol. 1 (Paterson, New Jersey, 1960), 97.

² Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. 1, trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids, 1998), 225 and 228.

Augustine, “The Old Testament is the promise expressed in figures, while the New Testament is the promise understood in a spiritual way.”³

The basis for the belief that older events prefigured new ones was nothing new; Old Testament prophets had made similar claims many times before, as in the books of Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, and Ezekiel. The destruction of the Tower of Babel, for instance, prefigures the fall of Babylon for the author of Daniel.⁴ What is radically different in the New Testament is the introduction of Christ, the Logos, the embodiment of the spirit of the letter. “Inasmuch as He is the exegesis of Scripture,” notes Henri de Lubac, “He is also the exegete.” With the coming of Christ, men’s minds were opened to receive the true spirit of interpretation. The veil was lifted, and men could see the true, spiritual meaning behind the letter of Scripture, which is Christ Himself. A final interpretation of the true meaning of Biblical history could then be obtained.⁵

The Old Testament was not to be discarded in favor of the New, but to be reexamined in the light of Christ as interpreter. Thus, elements of the Old Testament become allegories of those of the New Testament, shadows of the glory to come. There is then a unity between the Testaments; as Augustine writes, “We may safely draw out of God’s treasury new and old things that are harmoniously related in a mutually coherent arrangement.”⁶

Key to the unification of the Testaments is the crucifixion, the event at which the Old Law passed and the New emerged. The fulfillment of the cross is the fulfillment of the Old

³ Quoted in de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, 245.

⁴ de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, 230.

⁵ de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, 237-38.

⁶ Quoted in de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, 232.

Testament; only afterwards could men see the true meaning of history in relation to the events of the Gospels.

In *Lignum vitae*, Bonaventure offers the contemplative soul a visualization of this link by conflating a living tree with Christ's cross. "Picture in your imagination a tree," he writes.

Suppose next that from the trunk of this tree there spring forth twelve branches, adorned with leaves, flowers, and fruits. [...] Let there be twelve fruits, endowed with all delights and conforming to every taste, offered to God's servants as a food they may eat forever, being fed but never sated. This is the Fruit born of the virginal womb, and ripened on the tree of the cross to delectable maturity by the midday heat of the Eternal Sun, that is, by Christ's love. It is the Fruit that is placed in the heavenly garden of Eden—God's table—as food for those who long for Him.⁷

In this passage, Bonaventure links the fruit of Eden with Christ, the fruit of the Virgin, and with the mystical tree of life of Revelation 22:2, which bears twelve fruits and whose leaves are "for the healing of the nations." Past and future collide in one life-giving tree, and Christ is identified as the source of life in a fallen post-Edenic world. Seen spiritually, the tree in Eden was the prefiguration of the cross, the restorative tree of life.⁸

In artistic representation, Bonaventure's tree is pictured either surmounted by a cross or crucifix, or as a cross sprouting vines and leaves, as seen in the mosaic in the Church of San Clemente in Rome or in Taddeo Gaddi's painting.⁹ The diagram in MS 416, while certainly not as artistically rendered as the San Clemente mosaic or the Gaddi painting, closely parallels their design. A green cross is centrally situated on the page. Branching from the cross are twelve white scrolls, each of which produces a fruit.

⁷ Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae*, 98-99.

⁸ Gerhardt Ladner, "Medieval and Modern Understanding of Symbolism: A Comparison," *Speculum* 54 (1979): 236.

⁹ Rab Hatfield, "The Tree of Life and the Holy Cross," in *Christianity and the Renaissance*, ed. Timothy Verdon and John Henderson (Syracuse, 1990), 137 and 140.

Inscribed at the base of this cross/tree is the key to its construction, Revelation 22:2, linking the depicted cross to the prophesied tree of life to come. The verse is contained in a four-lobed shape, possibly representative of the four streams imagined to spring from the foot of the tree of life. Bonaventure describes it thus: “Suppose its roots to be watered by an eternally gushing fountain that becomes a great and living river, a river which spreads out in four channels to irrigate the whole garden of the Church.”¹⁰

The shape of the diagram is an immediately apparent teaching tool. Man lost the tree of life through the Fall, but Christ, through his death, is the new tree and the future judgment promises a paradise wherein the resurrected tree will feed the faithful in eons to come.

Bonaventure’s schema divides the twelve branches of the tree into three groups of four, the mysteries of the origin, the passion, and the glorification. Each of the four component “fruits” of the mysteries contains four subheadings, facets of the life of Christ corresponding to the fruits. In true scholastic fashion, Bonaventure organizes the text into outline format, listing the three mysteries, the twelve fruits, and each fruit’s four devotional ideas.

MS 416 does not deviate from this schema. Each of the scrolls branching from the cross contains four devotional ideas, and the leaf or fruit suspended from the scroll gives the appropriate title. Thus the first fruit, at the bottom left of the diagram, is entitled “Praeclaritas Origine” (Illustrious Ancestry), and its branch contains the four relevant items: “Jesus, begotten of God;” “Jesus prefigured;” “Jesus sent down from Heaven;” and “Jesus born of Mary.” Reading from left to right and bottom to top, the student of the diagram meditates on Jesus’ ancestry, the humility of His life, His power, His kindness, His heroism in trial, His patience, His

¹⁰ Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae*, 98.

fortitude, His victory over death, His resurrection, His ascension, His future judgment, and His eternal kingdom.¹¹ By ruminating on the items presented under each fruit, the viewer can attempt to internalize the virtues of Christ in hopes of becoming Christ-like himself.

The diagram in Beinecke MS 416, however, adds to Bonaventure's plan. It contains, first of all, a border of tri-lobed shapes surrounding the cross. These shapes contain biblical references, mostly to the Old Testament, but also to Luke and Revelation. These references are almost entirely absent in the text of *Lignum vitae*. A closer look at the manuscript's chosen quotations, however, reveals the reason for their selection. The verses tie Christ's life to the Old Testament by offering prefigurations of the events memorialized in the various fruits.

The idea is not unique to MS 416; a similar, though more stylized, schema exists in the De Lisle Psalter, produced in the 1330s.¹² The scribe who designed MS 416's tree of life consulted a source similar to that seen by the De Lisle artist and took Bonaventure's work a step beyond the original plan, making plain the implied link between the Testaments. By pairing each branch of the Cross-Tree, the product of the New Testament, with an Old Testament verse prefiguring it, he established concretely the allegorical link between the two biblical books.

The mystery of the origin begins with the first fruit, "Illustrious Ancestry." Paired with this fruit is Isaiah 7:14, "Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son." Isaiah, prophesying to King Achaz, declared that God would send this sign, and that the boy's name would be Emanuel, "God is with us." This prophecy was fulfilled in the coming of Christ.

The second fruit, "Humility of His Life," connects with Baruch 3:38, "Afterwards he was seen upon earth, and conversed with men." Baruch mentioned several occasions when God

¹¹ Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae*, 101-103.

¹² Lucy Freeman Sandler, *The Psalter of Robert De Lisle in the British Library* (London, 1999), 63.

spoke directly to men. These references are taken to be prefigurations of God's return to earth in Christ. The four devotional ideas of this fruit concern Jesus' fulfillment of prophecy and his obedience to the Law; he walked among men and spoke with them.

The third fruit is "Sublimity of Virtue," which refers to Jesus' miracles, the temptation, the transfiguration, and the heavenly baptism. The associated verse is Daniel 2:45, "That the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands," part of Daniel's interpretation of the dream of Nebuchadnezzar, which foretells the coming of a heavenly kingdom during an earthly regime, often interpreted as a direct prophecy of Jesus' birth during the Roman occupation.

Fourth is "Plenitude of Piety," which shows Jesus' kindness as good shepherd, messiah, and consecrated bread, and references his tears. The verse is Micah 5:2, "And thou Bethlehem of Judah, out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be the ruler in Israel," a prophecy of a Jewish leader to come from Bethlehem. While no such earthly king emerged, commentators assumed the leader in question was Christ, whose spiritual reign began with his birth in Bethlehem.

The fifth fruit, "Confidence in Peril," begins the mystery of the passion. This fruit lists the early events of the passion, including Jesus' betrayal by Judas and the hostile crowds accompanying him. The verse attached to this fruit is Zachariah 11:12, "And they weighed for my wages thirty pieces of silver." In the passage, the rod called Beauty is broken, making void the covenant, and the one who breaks it is paid thirty pieces of silver, the same wage given to Judas for his betrayal. In Zachariah, the Lord tells the speaker to "Cast it to the statuary," a prefiguring of the potter's field bought with the blood money.

Sixth is “Patience in Injuries,” which continues the passion through Jesus’ condemnation to death. Wisdom 2:20, appropriately enough, has “Let us condemn him to a most shameful death,” a quotation of the wicked speaking against a “son of God.”

The seventh fruit is “Constancy in Tortures,” which covers the passion from Jesus’ affixation to the cross through the soldier offering him gall. The verse, Psalms 22:17, is again prophetic: “They have dug my hands. And they gave me gall for my food.” David obviously had another incident in mind when writing the psalm, but the prefiguration exists nonetheless.

The eighth fruit, “Victory over Death,” is concerned with Jesus’ death and burial. Isaiah 11:10, “And his sepulcher shall be glorious,” speaks of the “rod out of the root of Jesse,” a prophecy of Christ.

The final fruits compose the mystery of the glorification, beginning with the ninth in the series, “News of the Resurrection,” which mentions Jesus’ triumph over death and power over the earth. The associated verse is Hosea 13:14, “O death, I will be thy death; O hell, I will be thy bite,” a prophecy that God would redeem Israel from death.

Tenth is “Sublimity of the Ascension,” which discusses Jesus as leader of the heavenly host, His ascension, His gift of the Spirit, and His forgiveness of sins. The verse is Amos 9:6, “He that buildeth his ascension in heaven,” to which the scribe of MS 416 added the phrase “his house.” The verse discusses the Lord, but the mention of the ascension links it to the New Testament.

The eleventh fruit is “Justice of Judgment,” a list of Jesus’ tasks at the end of time, when men are presented to God. Malachi 3:5, a prophecy of Christ’s purification of the priesthood and entrance into His temple, reads, “And I will come to you in judgment, and will be a speedy

witness against sorcerers, and adulterers, and false swearers,” a fairly accurate description of Christ’s future actions as foretold in Revelation.

The final fruit, “Eternity of the Kingdom,” names Jesus the “King and Prince,” “Inscribed Scroll,” “Font of Light,” and “Desired End,” descriptions of Him at the end of time. Daniel 12:2, “Shall awake: some unto life everlasting, and others unto reproach,” foretells the final judgment, when Christ will be given all titles and sinners will be cast into Hell.

The scribe of MS 416 used the Old Testament passages accepted as prefigurations of Christ as a border for the tree of life. This series of fruits is not connected to the tree but linked by proximity just as the Old Testament is not part of the New, but shadows it. As if to further this linkage, the scribe included below the tree two additional rows of four verses each; the lower set contains tree imagery, while the passages in the top row describe Christ’s life and death. Here New Testament verses appear as well. Luke 2:35 (“Thy own soul a sword shall pierce”) and Revelation 12:1 (“A woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet”) are both included in the top line. Luke 2:35 is a prophecy made to Mary by Simeon at the presentation in the Temple, yet another foretelling of events in Christ’s life. The Revelation passage contains Marian imagery. The verses on the bottom border of the diagram are not directly linked with the fruits. But, by mixing Old and New Testament passages, the scribe offers a Scriptural basis for the tree of life, and shows how the prophecies of the Old Testament have become the fruit of the New Testament.

The second deviation of the tree of life in Beinecke MS 416 from Bonaventure’s text is the pelican at the top of the diagram. The addition of the pelican is not unique to MS 416; it

appears in Pacino di Bonaguida and Taddeo Gaddi's renderings as well.¹³ The pelican is certainly not out of place nesting in the tree of life. In the medieval tradition, the female pelican was thought to accidentally kill her young by striking them, then to mourn them for three days before piercing her body and letting her blood spill over the dead chicks, thus reviving them. The popular conception of the bird led to its association with Christ, who was assaulted by his people, then was pierced and bled to save them.¹⁴ The tree of life, then, offers fruits of virtue and eternal life sprung from the blood of Christ.

While these additions in our manuscript are deviations from Bonaventure's imagined tree, they are not foreign to its spirit. Like our scribe, Bonaventure based his tree of life on the imagery of Revelation, but the "Fruit born of the virginal womb" could only be Christ, and the tree most closely associated with Him is the cross. The scribe overlaid the cross on the tree, making obvious that he, too, understood this connection. The verses ringing the tree further the typological exegesis, tying the representation to other New and especially Old Testament passages.

As a meditative tool, this diagram would have been instructive to the monks of Kamp, presenting them with a simple layout of many of the mysteries of the faith. It would also serve to demonstrate the strong link between the Testaments. By reflecting upon this diagram, the student would take sustenance from the fruits inscribed upon it, hoping one day to taste its prophesied life-giving fruits himself. To that end, then, the diagram of MS 416 could plant the seeds of the tree of life in the meditative soul.

¹³ Hatfield, "Tree of Life and the Holy Cross," 138, 140.

¹⁴ *Physiologus*, trans. Michael J. Curley (Austin, 1979), 9-10.