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The Tree of Life: a Hymnological and Iconic Perspective of Life

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Abstract

The subject of the article is the analyse of Tree of Life figure in the hymns of the Lenten Service of the Orthodox Church, reflected in the iconic representations of eastern and western sacred art. The subject is also related to the relationship of the Tree of Life figure with Jesus Christ. The aim of the study is to reveal the theological value of life attributed to the Tree of Life in Christianity and the theological relationship of the Tree of Life with the Tree of Knowledge. In the study, we will see that the Tree of Life is in a symbolism based on Jesus Christ Cross. Also, in Christian theology, in the writings of the Holy Fathers, it was determined that the adaptation of the Tree of Life-Jesus Christ was made most clearly through the Cross. The cross was the most obvious direction in associating the Tree of Life with Jesus Christ. So, the Holy Cross made of heaven tree has brought which another tree, the Tree of Knowledge, has lost.

Keywords

The Tree of Life, icon on glass, original sin, Holy Cross, the Lenten service, Triodion

I. Preliminaries

The theological theme of life can be traced throughout the texts of the Holy Scriptures from the beginning of the book of Genesis, included in the canon of the Old Testament, to the last book of the canon of the

New Testament, Revelation. The meanings that life has in the texts of the Holy Scriptures are emphasized through a series of associations: *life as a dynamic element*, which animates everything, namely that “breath of life” (Genesis 1, 30¹, Job 12, 10²; Isaiah 42, 5³); *life as wisdom* (wisdom as a Tree of Life – Proverbs 3, 18⁴); *life as light, justice, order and joy* (Job 3, 20⁵; Psalms 35, 9⁶; Proverbs 10, 11⁷); In complementarity with the texts of the Holy Scriptures, liturgical texts come to light in the theological meanings of life. Of these texts, the liturgical texts of the Triodion Period, have a particular depth.

According to the statements of Mircea Eliade, in mythical geography, sacred space is the essentially real space, for, as it has lately been shown, in the archaic world the myth alone is real. It tells of manifestations of the only indubitable reality – the sacred. It is in such space that one has direct contact with the sacred – whether this be materialized in certain objects (tchuringas, representations of the divinity, etc.) or manifested in the hiero-cosmic symbols (the Pillar of the World, the Cosmic Tree, etc.). In cultures that have the conception of three cosmic regions – those of Heaven, Earth and Hell – the “centre” constitutes the point of intersection of those regions. It is here that the break-through on to another plane is possible and, at the same time, communication between the three regions ⁸.

The Tree of Life which was a religious and mythical symbol of the first importance in the civilization of antiquity in the Near East, lost its significance in late Greco-Roman civilization and degenerated into a mere palm or candelabra ornament. But in late antiquity it was revived as a symbol in two centres geographically and ideologically distinct: in

¹ “And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food. And it was so” (Genesis 1, 30).

² “In His hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind” (Job 12, 10).

³ “Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it...” (Isaiah 42, 5).

⁴ “[wisdom] She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called blessed” (Proverbs 3, 18).

⁵ “Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul...” (Job 3, 20).

⁶ “For with You is the fountain of life; in Your light do we see light” (Psalms 35, 9).

⁷ “The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence” (Proverbs 10, 11).

⁸ Mircea ELIADE, *Images and Symbols*, Sheed & Ward, New York, 1961, p. 40.

early Christianity and in the Sassanian empire among the inheritors of Iranian civilization. Eventually it was expelled by the Christian cross, or rather it assumed this form among the Christians, and among the peoples of Islam it degenerated into ornament⁹. Jean Chevalier makes a synthesis of the general symbolism of the cosmic tree, mentioning that this is a symbol of life that is in permanent transformation, and by its continuous ascension to heaven, it reminds of the entire symbolism of verticality¹⁰. For religious man, the appearance of life is the central mystery of the world. Human life is not felt as a brief appearance in time, between one nothingness and another; it is preceded by a pre-existence and continued in a post-existence. Only the religious vision of life makes it possible to decipher other meanings in the rhythm of vegetation, first of all the ideas of regeneration, of eternal youth, of health, of immortality. The religious idea of absolute reality, which finds symbolic expression in so many other images, is also expressed by the figure of a miraculous fruit conferring immortality, omniscience, and limitless power, a fruit that can change men into gods. The image of the tree was not chosen only to symbolize the cosmos but also to express life, youth, immortality, wisdom. The tree came to express everything that religious man regards as pre-eminently real and sacred, everything that he knows the gods to possess of their own nature and that is only rarely accessible to privileged individuals, the heroes and demigods. This is why myths of the quest for youth or immortality give prominent place to a tree with golden fruit or miraculous leaves, a tree growing “in the distant land” (really in the other world) and guarded by monsters (griffins, dragons, snakes)¹¹.

II. The Tree of Life: a biblical and patristic interpretation

Throughout history, each religion has used images and symbols to transmit its teaching. This fact is also found in the case of the Christian religion, which also adopted different images and symbols already existing in

⁹ Zofja AMEISENOWA, W. F. MAINLAND, “The Tree of Life in Jewish Iconography”, in: *Journal of the Warburg Institute* 2, 4 (1938), p. 327.

¹⁰ Jean CHEVALIER, Alain GHEERBRANT, *Dicționar de simboluri : mituri, vise, obiceiri, gesturi, forme, figuri, culori, numere*, vol. I, Artemis, București, 1995, p. 124.

¹¹ Mircea ELIADE, *Images and Symbols*, pp. 39–40.

the cultures and territories in which it began to spread, adding to them new meanings. Thus, the symbolism of the Tree of Life in Christianity has its roots in the sense that the Tree had in Judaism, but also in the territories in which it began to expand, senses to which it has impregnated new interpretations, according to its own message. The Tree of Life is a frequent mythological symbol found in Semitic and other cultures. In the ancient Near East, the idea of a Tree of Life (or bread, water or plant of life) is quite common, appearing in the tales of the descent of Inanna to the nether world, Adapa, and Gilgames (where the plant of rejuvenation is ultimately stolen from the hero by a serpent). The motif is used in the biblical account of the Garden of Eden, where the Tree of Life is mentioned alongside the Tree of Knowledge (Genesis 2, 9)¹². In the Jewish tradition, the tree is used as a metaphor for the Torah on the basis of the verse from Proverbs 3, 18. The value of a tree consists chiefly in the fruit it produces and so, too, the student of the Torah should be fruitful in the performance of good deeds¹³.

The Old Testament shows us that there were many trees in Heaven, but two of them were different from the others. One was the Tree of Knowledge, and Adam received a command not to eat of it: "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, «From every tree in the garden you may freely eat; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat the fruit of it, you shall surely die»" (Genesis 2, 16-17). The other tree was the Tree of Life. After the man disobeyed and ate of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, God drove him out of Paradise "and He placed Cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life" (Genesis 3, 24). The reason why God expelled the man from Paradise after his disobedience was that after his fall he was not to eat of the tree of life. "And now, lest he put out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever" (Genesis 3, 22).

So it seems that there were two trees in Heaven which had a special meaning and purpose, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the Tree of Life. From one he ate and died and from the other he was

¹² R. J. ZWI WERBLOWSKY, Geoffrey WIGODER, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997, p. 703.

¹³ Louis JACOBS, *The Jewish Religion: A Companion*, Oxford University Press, USA, 1995, p. 509, <https://b-ok.cc/book/1226006/37bd19>.

prevented from eating, lest he remain in the fallen and evil state forever. So here we see God's love for mankind. He expels man from Paradise so that he will not remain mortal forever, but may repent and at the suitable time, through the Incarnation of the Son of God, may taste of the Tree of Life and overcome death and enter Heaven again. So then man's expulsion from Paradise was not punishment by God, but an act of His love and philanthropy¹⁴.

II.1. Philon of Alexandria (c. 15 BCE. Hr – 50 CE).

Under the influence of Philo of Alexandria, in Eastern asceticism, the allegory took the form of a spiritual exercise of the search for the high spiritual meanings of Scripture. The allegorical method was used subsequently by Ambrose of Milan and Augustine. Also under Filon's influence, Clement Alexandrine is the first church writer to use Filon's cosmology in favor of Christological doctrine about the participation of the Logos, identified with Jesus Christ, in the creation of the world¹⁵. Regarding Heaven, Philon states that through the Garden of Heaven the Scripture speaks to us about the leading part of the soul, which encompasses a multitude of opinions such as innumerable plants, while through the Tree of Life is indicated the piety, the greatest virtue, through which the soul immortality acquires, and through the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil one speaks of the practical wisdom of mediators, capable of distinguishing natural opposites¹⁶.

II.2. Saint Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215).

In the interpretation of St. Clement of Alexandria, in the book of Genesis, "Moses allegorizes the divine understanding, wisdom, naming it the Tree of Life, which was planted in Paradise. This Paradise can be the world in which all that was created was planted. In this world the Logos

¹⁴ George KONSTANTOPOULOS, "The Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life", *St. Andrew Greek Orthodox Church*, <http://saintandrewgoc.org/home/2015/8/20/the-tree-of-knowledge-and-the-tree-of-life>.

¹⁵ FILON DIN ALEXANDRIA, *Despre crearea lumii potrivit lui Moise*, Univers Enciclopedic Gold, 2016, p. 91.

¹⁶ FILON DIN ALEXANDRIA, *Despre crearea lumii potrivit lui Moise*, p. 191.

flourished and brought forth fruit; through His incarnation, He gave life to those who tasted of His goodness, because the Logos was not made known to us without the wood of the cross; The logos, our life, was hung on the cross for our faith”¹⁷.

II.3. Saint Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-395).

At St. Gregory we also recognize Filon’s interpretation of heaven as a place of virtues, but the interpretation of the two trees as a virtual one is his most important contribution in this context. In a literary interpretation, the Tree of Life and the tree of knowledge were one and the same, thinks Saint Gregory, because “The Scripture says that both of them were in the heart of heaven”. Yet, Saint Gregory notices that: “the place quite amid the trees of God is the life, while death is not planted and has neither roots, nor place anywhere”. “Life is amid the trees ... and when ruining it, death appears”, says the Bishop of Nyssa. So, although both trees are “at the same place, in the middle”, one of them “is there by nature while the other one becomes what it is by absence”, because only “life has real subsistence while death installs instead of life”, “manifesting as absence of good” (life). The tree appears to be of life or of death not in front of man’s eyes, but in his soul, as man receives it as a gift of God or, on the contrary, he wants “to own it autonomously, selfishly or evilly”. The fruit that man found was not life but death, because man’s attitude was dominated not by faith but by pleasure, by the selfish desire to ascribe to him what was not (is not) accessible to him but by the gift of God ¹⁸. By deepening the problem of the two trees, Father D. Stăniloae states that the bipolarity of the two trees may mean that the same world perceived exclusively through the senses and the reason put into the service of the senses, is a source of the good, which is not the good itself, but perceived in its meaning by a deeper reason, which on the contrary takes the feeling in its service, is a source of life¹⁹.

¹⁷ CLEMENT ALEXANDRINUL, *Scrieri, partea a doua*, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 5, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1982, p. 352.

¹⁸ GREGORY OF NYSSA, *The Sacred Writings of Gregory of Nyssa*, Jazzybee Verlag, 2012, p. 375, <https://books.google.ro/books?id=CXUtDwAAQBAJ>.

¹⁹ DUMITRU STĂNILOAE, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. I, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1996, p. 326.

II.4. Saint Ambrose of Milan (c.340–397).

The main target of Saint Ambrose's whole literary activity is the spiritual edification of his spiritual sons, rewriting God's Word in their hearts. In this context, regarding the heaven and the trees in it, he uses an allegory which, at first sight, seems forced, in which the interpretation of the biblical realities is metamorphosed into moral, spiritual states; however, in order to educate the listeners:

“The Heaven is the human soul, in which the germs of virtues have developed. The four rivers of heaven are the foreshadowing of the four cardinal virtues: wisdom, gratitude, courage and justice; Therefore, if heaven is where the branches appeared, heaven seems to be the soul that multiplies the received seed, the soul in which every virtue is planted, one by one, in which the Tree of Life was built – that is, wisdom, as Solomon said wisdom did not come from the earth, but from the Father; for it is the brightness of the everlasting light and the overflowing of the glory of the Almighty”²⁰.

So, in Saint Ambrose's exegesis, the Tree of Life is identified with *wisdom*, according to Proverbs 3, 18. Let us remember, therefore, that where God planted the Tree of Life, there also planted the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Scripture actually says that God has planted the Tree of Life in the midst of heaven. Therefore, both life and the cause of death were decided in the middle of heaven²¹. Saint Ambrose identifies the river that irrigates the garden of heaven with the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, the source of eternal life, just as the Father, for it is written: “For with You is the fountain of life” (Psalm 35, 9) and elsewhere: “Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water” (John 7, 38). “We find written both spring and river, as water that irrigates the Tree of Heaven to produce fruit for eternal life. Therefore, just as wisdom is the source of life (as Tree of Life), so is spiritual grace the source of the other virtues that guide us

²⁰ Sfântul AMBROZIE AL MILANULUI, *Scrieri, partea întâi*, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești*, vol. 52), Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2007, p. 63.

²¹ Sfântul AMBROZIE AL MILANULUI, *Scrieri, partea întâi*, p. 76.

towards the path of eternal life”²². We can state that in Saint Ambrose’s writings there is a typological interpretation of the Tree of Life. It also prefigures the person of Jesus Christ. So, Christ is the wisdom, the Tree of Life, the spring of life. This interpretation can be paralleled with the text of the Epistle to Colossians of the Holy Apostle Paul, where, in chapter 3, verses 1-3, Paul tells the baptized that through the Holy Baptism they have died to sin and their life it is hidden in God with Christ: “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3, 1-3).

II.5. Saint Maximus the Confessor (c. 580-662).

Regarding the Tree of Life, Saint Maximus the Confessor states:

“I believe heaven shows the heart of man rooted to the uprising of the knowledge of God. For in the midst thereof hath the Lord planted the Tree of Life, and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Tree of Life is understood as *rationality of the intelligible*, and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil as rationality of the sensitive, because it has the knowledge of good and evil: on the one hand, for those who know the Creator from the beauty of the creatures and through them they are led to their cause, [the tree] is the knowledge of the good, for others, who only delve into the senses and are deceived by the appearance of the sensitive things and who turn their soul with all lust towards the material ones, [the tree] is the knowledge of the evil”²³.

And if someone, puzzled, would answer, “How could this be understood about one man, so that knowledge can be good, bad, or come from one and the same tree?” we must answer that since it is said that the intelligible and the sensitive world are the two trees and man participates in each of them as one that is made up of body and soul, therefore, when the power of the soul inclines the body towards the senses, behold, he shared with this tree

²² Sfântul AMBROZIE AL MILANULUI, *Scrieri, partea întâi*, pp. 66-67.

²³ Sf. MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Întrebări și nedumeriri*, Doxologia, Iași, 2012, p. 111.

and knew the trial of good and evil; on the one hand, of the good, by the fact of having naturally deprived his body by enjoying the sensitive ones, and, on the other hand, of the evil, by subduing the soul of the inferior, thus weakening their natural powers ²⁴.

III. The Tree of Life and the Holy Cross in the hymns of the various services of the Orthodox Church

The tree full of sap and fruit was considered a symbol of the Cross and was connected with the Tree of Life in heavenly Jerusalem (Revelation 2, 7²⁵; 22, 1-2²⁶), which restores the harmony of the Garden of Heaven. Hymns to the Cross are scattered throughout the various services of the Orthodox Church. There are hymns daily at the Ninth Hour because at that hour our Lord through the Cross opened the way to Paradise. There are hymns to the Cross (and the resurrection) at Matins on Sunday as each Sunday is a “little Pascha”. There is the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross in September. And finally, there is this Third Sunday of Great Lent. One of the major themes in these hymns, appearing again and again, is the Cross of the Lord as the Tree of Life²⁷.

Throughout the church year, we will find hymns in which the Cross of the Lord is associated with the Tree of Life, both in Irmologion and in Menaion. Here are some relevant examples:

Glory ..., Now & ever ..., Troparion of the forefeast, in Tone IV:
“Make ready, O Bethlehem! Open unto all, O Eden! Adorn thyself, O Ephratha! For the Tree of Life hath blossomed forth

²⁴ Sf. MAXIM MĂRTURISITORUL, *Întrebări și nedumeriri*, p. 111.

²⁵ “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God”. (Revelation 2, 7).

²⁶ “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22, 1-2).

²⁷ John WEHLING, “The Cross – The Tree of Life”, *St John of Chicago Orthodox Church*, <https://www.ocanwa.org/single-post/2019/03/30/The-Cross-The-Tree-of-Life>.

from the Virgin in the cave. Her womb is shown to be a noetic paradise, wherein lieth a divine garden, eating from whence we live, not dying like Adam. Christ is born to raise up His image which before was fallen”²⁸.

“O Christ, Thou didst show the tree of Thy Cross to be more radiant than fire and more powerful than flame, for it consumeth our sins and illumineth the hearts of those who hymn Thy voluntary crucifixion. O Christ God, glory be to Thee!”²⁹.

Aposticha Stichera of the Cross, in Tone VII, Tuesday evening:

“No longer are we forbidden the Tree of life, for we have Thy Cross as our hope. O Lord, glory be to Thee!”³⁰

On the Beatitudes, Troparia, in Tone VII, Wednesday morning:

“Thou didst stretch forth Thy hands upon the Cross, in Thy great goodness setting aright the fall of Adam, who stretched out his hands to the fruit of the tree, O Compassionate One; wherefore, we glorify Thee, O Benefactor and Lord”³¹.

During the pre-Lenten period, the services of the Church include hymns from the **Triodion**, a liturgical book that contains the services from the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee, the tenth before Pascha (Easter), through Great and Holy Saturday. Here are some of the hymns where the Cross of the Lord is associated with the Tree of Life:

Exapostelation of Matins, Tone II, Hymns and Prayers of the Forgiveness (Cheese-fare) Sunday

“We were expelled of old, O Lord, from the Garden of Eden, for wrongly eating from the tree. But, O my God and Savior, You once again have restored us through Your Cross and Your Passion. Thereby, O Master, fortify and enable us purely to finish Lent and to worship Your holy resurrection, Pascha our saving Passover, by the prayers of Your Mother”³².

²⁸ *Mineiu lunei lui decemvrie*, Tipografia cărților Bisericești, București, 1873, p. 296.

²⁹ *Catavasier sau Octoih mic*, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2002, p. 207.

³⁰ *Octoihul mare*, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2003, p. 549.

³¹ *Octoihul mare*, p. 557.

³² *Triodul*, VIII, Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1986, p. 95.

Stichera in Tone II, at „Lord, I have cried”, Tuesday Vespers, first week of lent

“Once we were cast out of paradise through eating from the tree, but through Thy cross we are restored again. We offer unto Thee Thy cross in supplication, O Lord of many mercies, praying to Thee in faith: send down upon us fountains of tears in this time of abstinence to cleanse the filth of our passions and offenses, that we may cry fervently to Thee: “Glory to Thee O Lord!”³³

The Byzantines developed the metaphor of the Holy Vine that Jesus Christ describes in the Gospels. The vine is, in fact, the tree of life, Christ Himself, in the splendor of nourishing its branches, respectively those who worship it. The connection between humanity and divinity is made organically, by swallowing the fruit of the tree of life, respectively His Body and Blood in the Eucharist. In the vision of Eastern Christianity, the community of believers takes on cosmic proportions as much as tasting the fruit of this tree of life, that is, the person of Jesus Christ, a tasting that must lead to the acquisition of another way of being, like Him, the savior of humanity³⁴:

The Sessional Hymn, in Tone III, Thursday in the Second Week of lent at Matins

“Christ the beauteous Vine, presented you as clusters of grapes, filling the earth with the sweetness of salvation, O ye God-bearing apostles. Wherefore I entreat you, to deliver me from the drunkenness of sensual pleasures; granting unto my soul tears of compunction on this divine day of the Fast, that I may attain unto the life of salvation”³⁵.

The Sessional Hymn, in Tone V, Friday in the Third Week of lent at Matins

“Mankind, who of old died through eating from the tree, hath been restored to life by Thy Cross, O merciful One. By its power,

³³ Triodul, p. 125.

³⁴ Daniil IACȘA, “Copacul vieții”, *Dilema veche* 790 (11 aprilie 2019), <https://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/tema-saptamanii/articol/copacul-vietii>.

³⁵ Triodul, p. 206.

O good One, strengthen us, that with compunction we may pass through the season of abstinence, obediently executing Thy will, and behold the day of Thy light-bearing Resurrection”³⁶.

First Canon, Ode VIII, Friday in the Third Week of lent at Matins

“Thou didst stretch out Thine arms upon the Cross, O Christ, and destroy the sin of our forefather, who stretched out his hands in greed. By the Tree Thou hast healed the curse of the tree: wherefore we sing Thy praises throughout all ages”³⁷.

Stichera in Tone V at “Lord, I have cried”, The Third Sunday in Lent at Vespers

“Rejoice! O life-giving Cross, the fair Paradise of the Church, Tree of incorruption that hath brought unto us the enjoyment of eternal glory: Through thee the hosts of devils have been driven back; the hierarchies of angels rejoice, and the congregations of the faithful keep festival. Thou art an invincible weapon, an unshakable stronghold; thou art the victory of the faithful and the glory of priests. Grant us now to reach the Passion of Christ and His great mercy”³⁸.

The main theological theme of the hymns of Triodion could be resumed in the following ideas: the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil irrevocably produced death, when once eaten of, while the fruit of The Tree of Life would have required renewed partaking of. For through one transgression the breaking of the law generally took place, and the rupture of communion with God was effected, which is itself death; whereas the life of the spirit, as also that of the body, requires continued nourishment; and that too in the religious, moral development, in order to arrive out of the isolation of its motives and their conditioned consequence, at the absoluteness of the holy everlasting life³⁹.

³⁶ *Triodul*, p. 260.

³⁷ *Triodul*, p. 262.

³⁸ *Triodul*, p. 272.

³⁹ Ferdinand PIPER, “The Tree of Life”, in: *Journal of Sacred Literature and Biblical Record (Fourth Series)* 4 (January 1864), p. 393.

IV. The Tree of Life – an iconic perspective

This section will present some examples of iconizations of the Tree of Life in Christian art. In this sense, several images have been selected from both Western and Eastern art, either from various prayer books, glass icons or mural paintings. As common elements from a compositional perspective, we have the Tree in the middle of the composition, Adam and Eve on both sides of the Tree, the snake perched on the Tree's trunk.

Figure 1 presents a scene from the Garden of Eden with an illustration of Christ on the Cross, suspended in the Tree of Knowledge (transformed in Tree of Life). The image shows Satan, disguised as a serpent with the head of a woman, in the Garden of Eden, with Adam and Eve.

We can see the fact that Adam and Eve appear naked, without the clothes made from the leaves, after falling into sin.

I selected this particularly image because of the compositional similitudes with the icons on glass representing Adam and Eve, in Romanian territories.

Figure 2. This image precedes the liturgy for the feast of Corpus Christi in a missal created for the Archbishop of Salzburg. The central roundel depicts a tree that bears both fruit and sacramental hosts. It thus combines the paradisaical Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge from Eden.

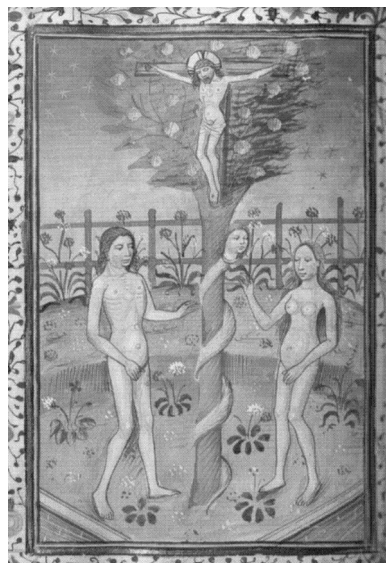


Figure 1. "Adam, Eve, and the Serpent", Ludolphus de Saxonia, 1455, In Book of Hours, Use of Salisbury, 90-91



Figure 2. "Eve and Mary", by Berthold Furtmeyr, in the Missal of Bernhard von Rohr, Archbishop of Salzburg, 1481

On the right is Eve, who hands a forbidden fruit to a man kneeling at her feet. A death's head appears among the fruits on her side of the tree. The tempting serpent winds around the trunk, and offers Eve another piece of fruit from its mouth.

On the left side is Mary-Ecclesia. Rather than a death's head, a crucifix hangs on this side. Instead of fruit, Mary-Ecclesia administers one of the hosts to a kneeling man who opens his mouth to accept it, and she is in the process of plucking yet another wafer. She is presented as a mirror image of Eve and thus the salvific antidote to the Fall.

An angel accompanies Mary-Ecclesia on the left and Death accompanies Eve on the right. Both hold banderoles bearing text: Angel: *ecce panis angelorum factus cibus viatorum* [behold the bread of angels made food for pilgrims]; Death: *mors est malus vita bonis inde* [death is evil, life therefore is goodness]; Adam reclines in a gesture of sorrow at the base of the tree and also holds a banderole. In the upper two roundels are princely figures who hold banderoles bearing the text of Psalm 77, 25⁴⁰ on the left and Psalm 36, 16⁴¹ on the right.



Figure 3. "Adam and Eve", icon on glass, Nicolae Oancea (1806-1890)

Three shepherds depicted below illustrate Thomas Aquinas's Corpus Christi sequence "Lauda ducem et pastorum", but they also embody the virtues expected of a good ruler. The one on the left is the personification of "Prudentia", the one in the center is "Regalitas", and the one on the right is "Verus Pastor". All are accompanied by banderoles⁴².

Figure 3. Icon on glass (copied after a woodcut) shows the scene of original sin inscribed in a medallion made up of two circles. The medallion is supported by four cherubim placed on the clouds.

⁴⁰ "Man ate of the bread of the angels; he sent them food in abundance" (Psalm 77, 25).

⁴¹ "Better is the little that the righteous has than the abundance of many wicked" (Psalm 36, 16).

⁴² Christoph WAGNER, *Meisterwerke der Buchmalerei : und die Regensburger Kunst in Spätgotik und Renaissance*, Schnell Und Steiner, Regensburg, 2010, pp. 149–151, <https://www.abebooks.co.uk/servlet/BookDetailsPL?bi=9277047817>.

The medallion consists of two large ovals that touch the edges of the icon. In the centre, on both sides of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil) are Adam and Eve, naked, covered with leaves in the middle. Eva accepts a fruit (an apple) from the snake curled up on the tree. On the ground, the grass is suggested by tufts consisting of two horizontal and three vertical lines.

Between the two ovals appear: God the Father, the sun, the moon and four cherubim, surrounded by clouds. Two-thirds of the bottom of the medallion is bordered by a wreath of leaves.

The drawing is simple, but amplified compositionally by the introduction of the moon and the sun – symbols that frequently appear in Romanian epitaphs – which we find in the Orthodox-Byzantine iconographic representation, but also in the entire Romanian popular creation. The symbolism of the solar hierophanies is developed by Mircea Eliade in his work *The Sacred and the Profane*. He asserts about these hierophanies that they express the religious values of autonomy and power, sovereignty and intelligence. The moon confers a religious valorisation on cosmic becoming and reconciles man to death. The sun, on the contrary, reveals a different mode of existence. The sun does not share in becoming; although in motion, the sun remains unchangeable; it's form is always the same⁴³.

Figure 4. The image represents a fresco by Giovanni di Corraduccio detto Mazzaforte in the Monastery of Saint Anna, also called the Monastery of the Countesses, which is in Foligno, Perugia, Italy. The fresco, circa 1430, represents Jesus Christ hung on a tree. At the base of this tree, there is a skull and next to it a scroll that says “Unless a grain of wheat falls on the ground and dies it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest” (John, 12, 24).



Figure 4. “Jesus Christ hung on a tree”, fresco, Giovanni di Corraduccio

The 12 scrolls indicate some detailed moments in the history of salvation, as follows:

⁴³ Mircea ELIADE, *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion*, Harcourt, Brace & World, New York, 1963, p. 157.

The first scroll: the Incarnation of Christ; Daniel interpreting Nebuchadnezzar's dream; the Annunciation; Visitation and Nativity of Christ.

The second scroll: the Circumcision; the Adoration by the three Kings; the Presentation of Jesus to the Temple and the Slaughter of the Innocents.

The third scroll: the Baptism of Christ; Christ in the desert; Christ tempted by Satan; Christ giving Sight to a Man Born Blind; the Transfiguration.

In the fourth scroll we have Christ in the garden of Gethsemani, the Resurrection of Lazarus, Christ's Entry to Jerusalem, Washing of the Feet and the Last Supper.

In the fifth scroll Judas receives his Compensation, Christ is praying in the garden of Gethsemani, there is the Kiss of Judas, the Death of Judas and the Capture of Christ.

In the sixth scroll Peter denies Jesus, Christ is in front of Caiphas, Christ is in front of Pilate, and there is the Scourging.

Christ is mocked in the seventh scroll and we have Christ Ascending Mount Calvary, Christ nailed to the Cross, Soldiers Quarreling for his Tunic, the Crucifixion, and Christ is given vinegar.

In the eighth scroll we have the Death of Christ, Longinus piercing the side of Christ, God the Father and Two Angels showing the bloody tunic of Christ and Christ in the Sepulcher.

The ninth scroll contains the Descent of Christ to Limbus, *Noli me tangere*, Christ holding a rod that is blooming and Christ resurrected appearing to the Apostles.

The tenth scroll has the Ascent of Christ, Christ seated at the Right Hand of the Father, Pentecost and Christ forgiving the Sins of the Elected.

The eleventh scroll contains the Resurrection of the Dead, the Last Judgment, the Fall of the damned and the Coronation of the Virgin Mary.

In the twelfth scroll Christ is surrounded by the Virgin Mary, Apostles and Angels, Christ is at the Right Hand of the Father with the Apostles, *Christ fons vitae*⁴⁴.

Figure 5. The Tree is set on purple and golden background. This icon seems to capture the moment after falling into sin. An indication in this regard would be that Adam is holding his hand to his neck, as if he were

⁴⁴ Massimilla HARRIS, "The Cross as a Tree of Life", in: *The Atlanta Jung Society* (November 14 2013), <https://www.budharris.com/the-cross-as-a-tree-of-life/>.

aware of the sin he had just committed. Also, Adam and Eve are already clothed.

The golden background is used in an attempt to achieve an unreal, elegant effect, to extract the character from the mundane sphere and translate it into that of transcendence. Gold, unlike yellow, does not have a material coloration, it is the pure reflection of light.

The sun and the moon (also present in the mesopotamian miniatures of the sixth century⁴⁵) symbolize the participation of the whole creation at this moment. The same representations of sun and moon we can find in the Crucifixion icon glass. We should mention that the organs and their functions were given religious valorisation by being assimilated to the various cosmic regions and phenomena; the historian of religions encounters some *homologies* that presuppose a more developed symbolism, a whole system of micro-macrocosmic correspondences. So is, in this context, the assimilation of the veins and arteries to the sun and moon⁴⁶.

Figure 6. It seems that the motif “Christ – The Vine” evolved from the composition “Mystical Vine Press”, based on two biblical texts: the grapes in Canaan as a type of Christ crucified on the cross (Numbers 13, 24⁴⁷) and Isaiah’s prophecy about the One who comes with the red garments as of the one who treads in the press: “I

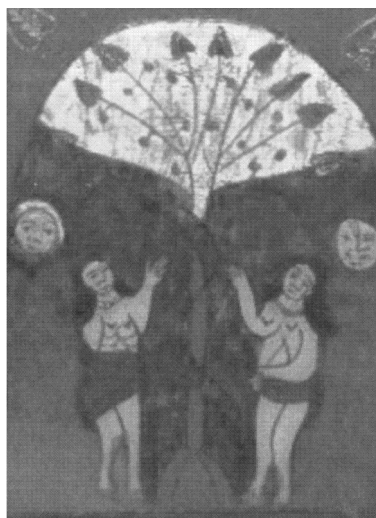


Figure 5. “Adam and Eve”, icon on glass, XVIII-XIX century, Museum of Hystory Sighișoara

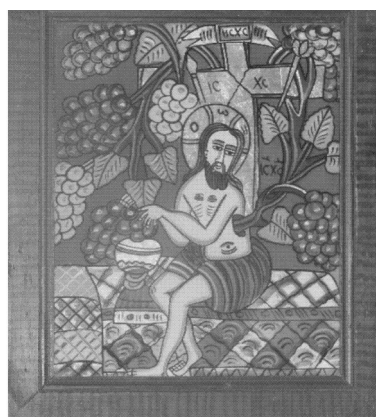


Figure 6. “Christ the Vine”, icon on glass, end of XIX century, National Museum of Union Alba Iulia

⁴⁵ Marcel MUNTEAN, *Tipologia artei bizantine*, Renașterea, Cluj-Napoca, 2012, p. 116.

⁴⁶ Mircea ELIADE, *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion*, p. 169.

⁴⁷ “And they came to the Valley of Eshcol and cut down from there a branch with a single cluster of grapes, and they carried it on a pole between two of them; they also brought some pomegranates and figs”.

only walked in the press, and among the nations no one was with me” (Isaiah 63, 1-3⁴⁸). Starting from these two biblical texts, which were joined and interpreted by the Blessed Augustine in a typological key (“Jesus is the grape of the Land of Promise, the clusters that was placed under the press”), a special devotion to the Holy Passions of Christ has developed.

The idea of immortality and fellowship of believers in eternal life is illustrated in the Romanian space, in the second half of the eighteenth century, by the symbolism of another tree, namely: that of the vine, through the representations of the scene known as “Jesus the Beauteous Vine”.

The glass icon depicts Jesus sitting on the tombstone, decorated like a dowry box. From its shores grows a vine that extends to the cross placed on the background. The vine describes a circle arc around His body. Christ squeezes grapes in a cup placed on the tombstone. On one side of the Cross are seen the spear (with which Jesus was laid on the coast) and the spear with the sponge (from which Jesus was given to quench his thirst). The iconographic theme symbolizes the Sacrament of the Eucharist according to the words of Jesus at the Last Supper: “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins”. (Mathew 26, 28).

By representing the crushing of the grape in the liturgical cup, the meaning of the sacrifice and the priest (office) function of Christ Himself is explained iconographically, while the simple raising of the cup under the eucharistic grapes visually accentuates its gift character.

When Philo, influenced probably by references to the golden vine in the temple of Herod, describes the world-tree as a giant vine with grapes as big as a man, the uncertain distinction between the original cosmic tree and the eschatological Tree of Life disappears; this often happens in works of these authors just as it had happened in the prophetic and apocalyptic writings⁴⁹.

⁴⁸ “Why is your apparel red, and your garments like his who treads in the winepress? I have trodden the winepress alone, and from the peoples no one was with me; I trod them in my anger and trampled them in my wrath; their lifeblood spattered on my garments, and stained all my apparel”.

⁴⁹ Zofja AMEISENOWA, W. F. MAINLAND, “The Tree of Life in Jewish Iconography”, p. 331.

V. Conclusions

As Mircea Eliade said, “life is not possible without an opening toward the transcendent; in other words, human beings cannot live in chaos”⁵⁰. If the Tree of Knowledge has at all times been the subject of much discussions, less has been said of the Tree of Life. The Scripture presents the Tree of Life to us; the Church associates the Tree of Life to the person and Cross of Christ; Some of the Holy Fathers (Saint Gregory of Nyssa, Saint Ephrem the Syrian) consider that the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge are one and the same tree, the old tree of death, converted by Christ Crucifixion into the Tree of Life. Father Daniil Iacşa concludes that the meanings of the tree of life, however, do not stop there, the Byzantines developing the metaphor of the Vine which Jesus Christ describes in the Gospels. The vine is, in fact, the Tree of Life, Christ Himself in the splendour of the nourishment of its branches, respectively of those who worship Him. The connection between humanity and divinity is made organically, by swallowing the fruit of the Tree of Life, respectively His Body and His Blood, in the Eucharist⁵¹.

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⁵⁰ Mircea ELIADE, *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion*, p. 34.

⁵¹ Daniil IACŞA, “Copacul vieţii”, *Dilema veche* 790 (11 aprilie 2019), <https://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/tema-saptamanii/articol/copacul-vietii>.