

Bonaventure's *Lignum vitae* and the Tree of Life Diagram in Beinecke MS 416

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The use of diagrams to illustrate theological truths was not an arbitrary effort at decoration or amusement; rather it was a well-considered attempt to aid in the internalization and remembrance of these truths, supported by classical and Christian reasoning. In this regard, the *Lignum vitae* (tree of life) in Beinecke MS 416 is no different in its aims from many of the other diagrams found in the manuscript. It presents, in an attractive way, the events of Christ's life along with scriptural citations and prompts for meditation.

The inspiration for the diagram is an eponymous thirteenth-century contemplative tract by the Franciscan scholar and political leader Bonaventure. Since the diagram relies so heavily on Bonaventure's text, it will be instructive to look to him for guidance on its purpose. In the prologue of his work, Bonaventure quotes St. Paul, "With Christ I am nailed to the cross." He continues, "The true worshipper of God and disciple of Christ, who wants to conform perfectly to the Savior of all men, crucified for him, should, above all, strive with earnest endeavor of the soul to carry about continuously, both in his soul and in his flesh, the cross of Christ."¹

Bonaventure speaks about the function of memory in bearing Christ's cross. The goal of his work is to "...gather [a] bundle of myrrh from the forest of the holy Gospel, which treats at length the life, passion, and glorification of Jesus Christ...to cultivate

¹ Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae*, trans. Ewert Cousins (New York, 1978), 119.

devotion and to foster the piety of faith” so that he may “...enkindle in us this affection, to shape this understanding and to imprint this memory.”²

In the Middle Ages *memoria* was often discussed in texts on prayer and meditation. Authors often advocated the creation in the mind of a ‘picture’ to serve as the location for a “meditational *collatio*, the ‘gathering’ into one ‘place’ of the various strands of a meditational composition.”³ The purpose was not rote repetition but an emotional and moral internalization of the material. Such a conception of memory leaves room for subjectivity and interpretation. Mary Carruthers writes, “Every medieval diagram is an open-ended one; in the manner of examples, it is an invitation to elaborate and recompose, not a prescriptive, ‘objective’ schematic.”⁴

Representational mnemonics were much discussed by medieval monastics. For example, in 1323 Bartolomeo da San Concordio, a Dominican, wrote, “The finding out of images is useful and necessary for memory; for pure and spiritual intentions slip out of memory unless they are as it were linked to corporeal similitudes.”⁵ He further suggested that a logical order of material should be employed: “It is necessary that those things which a man wishes to retain in memory he should consider how to set out in order, so that from the memory of one thing he comes to another.”⁶

The orderly arrangement of the events of Christ’s life in the *Lignum vitae* illustrates this principle. The physical diagram was not conceived as part of the original

² Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae*, 119, 120.

³ Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory* (Cambridge, 1990), 123.

⁴ Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, 256.

⁵ Quoted in Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago, 1966), 87.

⁶ Quoted in Yates, *Art of Memory*, 87.

work, but Bonaventure organized his text to aid in memory. He writes, “Since imagination aids understanding, I have arranged [the passages] in the form of an imaginary tree.”⁷ Memorization was, in turn, reinforced by meditation.

The use of such a device for meditation reveals a great deal about the Franciscan mind. Rab Hatfield writes, “The Franciscans, more than the Dominicans, elaborately developed several mystical images and legends of and about Christ’s cross which might bring them closer in spirit to the fact and lesson of Christ’s redeeming death.”⁸ The *Lignum vitae* diagram of Beinecke MS 416, though copied in a Cistercian monastery, is a good example of Franciscan mysticism informed by medieval mnemonic theory. Utilizing a visual format, it presents the events of Christ’s life in an orderly fashion. The diagram thus aids the viewer in his quest to internalize the significance of Christ’s redemptive sacrifice for man.

Bonaventure’s purpose in composing the work that served as the inspiration for the diagram was to aid those contemplating the life, passion, and glorification of Jesus. The result of this consideration is personalized. Bonaventure writes, “[the fruit] nourishes devout souls with varied consolations in view of its varied states.”⁹ The author also gives preference to faith over reason, calling upon the devout to choose “...simplicity [over] curiosity and...the sacred cross of Christ [over] all carnal feeling or wisdom of the flesh.”¹⁰

⁷ Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae*, 120.

⁸ Rab Hatfield, “The Tree of Life and the Holy Cross,” in *Christianity and the Renaissance*, ed. Timothy Verdon and John Henderson (Syracuse, 1990), 133.

⁹ Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae*, 121.

¹⁰ Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae*, 122.

Bonaventure organizes the events in the career of the Savior in three sets of four under the following titles: origin and life of Christ, His passion, and His glorification, from bottom to top as the tree grows. He follows an initial exposition of the particular category with brief commentaries on each fruit. In this way, Bonaventure offers direction for meditation on the mysteries of salvation.

Under the heading “Mystery of Christ’s Origin,” for example, the concept “Jesus Begotten of God” is presented. Bonaventure comments on this by cautioning his reader to beware when thinking of Jesus begotten of God, “...lest some inadequate thought of the flesh appear before your mind’s eye.” He further urges contemplating “the Eternal Light, which is at the same time measureless and most simple.”¹¹

Discussing the concept “Jesus Prefigured,” Bonaventure emphasizes the long history of God’s relationship with his people. “Through many thousands of years, by many marvelous prophecies he stirred men’s minds to faith and inflamed their hearts with living desires.”¹²

He introduces Jesus’ incarnation by comparing the creation of Adam on the sixth day to the annunciation to Mary at the beginning of the sixth age of history. He also includes a poem about the event, urging the reader to “exalt, rejoice and adore the marvelous virginal conception!”¹³ He completes his comments on this branch by writing about the nativity of Jesus, highlighting God’s providence in bringing peace to the world and preparing Joseph to be father to God’s son. Bonaventure also emphasizes the

¹¹ Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae*, 126.

¹² Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae*, 127.

¹³ Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae*, 128.

humility of Christ who came to live as a man. In a concluding poem, the reader is urged to place himself in the scene at Bethlehem, adoring the manger and keeping watch with the shepherds, singing “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men of good will.”¹⁴

Bonaventure proceeds in this fashion through the twelve fruits of the *Lignum vitae*. Under the heading “The Humility of His Mode of Life,” the author highlights the meekness of Christ’s early life, submitting to the law and being exiled to Egypt as a young boy. This is in contrast to the third fruit, “The Loftiness of His Power,” in which God claims his son on the banks of the Jordan during John’s baptism of Christ, Jesus resists temptation in the desert, and he works miracles. This fruit culminates with a poem about the transfiguration that emphasizes Christ’s glory. The fourth fruit, “The Plenitude of His Piety,” shows Christ’s mercy as the good shepherd who shed human tears of compassion for men. Here, Bonaventure directs the reader to consider the institution of the Eucharist, in which the humility and the glory of Christ are combined.

Bonaventure introduces his readers to the mystery of the passion through the fifth fruit, “His Confidence in Trials.” The reader is encouraged to imitate Christ in his meekness and love for Judas and in his acceptance of God’s will in the Garden of Gethsemane. Addressing the fruit entitled “Patience in Maltreatment” Bonaventure urges the reader to compassion of Christ in the passion and remorseful identification with Peter in his denial of Jesus. The seventh fruit, “His Constancy under Torture,” continues the themes of the sixth fruit, encouraging the reader to unite himself with Christ in his

¹⁴ Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae*, 129.

suffering on the cross. The eighth fruit, “Victory in the Conflict of Death,” shows how the death of Christ fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament, his blood offering plenteous redemption as it stained his garments red like those of the wine presser.¹⁵ Bonaventure concludes his discussion of this mystery with a prayer that, though he was not present at the events of the passion, “[he] may ponder faithfully in [his] mind and experience toward you [Christ]...that feeling of compassion which your innocent mother and penitent Magdalene experienced.”¹⁶

The final mystery, the “Glorification of Christ,” is introduced with a meditation on the ninth fruit, “The Novelty of His Resurrection.” Jesus, triumphant and beautiful, is given dominion over the earth, and the reader is reminded that “in his name every knee should bend of those in heaven, on earth, and under the earth.”¹⁷ The tenth fruit, “The Sublimity of His Ascension,” emphasizes that when Jesus was glorified in his ascension to heaven, he “repaired the fall of the angels [and] increased the honor of his eternal father.”¹⁸ Christ then sent the Holy Spirit on the Church, which still inspires and purifies it. Bonaventure concludes his discussion of this fruit, urging the reader to remain faithful through trials, as have the saints and martyrs of earlier years.

The eleventh fruit, “The Equity of His Judgment,” highlights the roles of Christ as judge, conqueror, and spouse. In this way, Christ is glorified through the just condemnation of the unrepentant, after which “the virgins who were prudent and ready”

¹⁵ Ps 129.7 and Is 63. 2, Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae*, 156.

¹⁶ Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae*, 158.

¹⁷ Phil. 2.10, Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae* 161.

¹⁸ Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae*, 162.

will witness the marriage feast of the Lamb and “will abide in the beauty of peace in the tabernacle of confidence and in opulent repose.”¹⁹

The final fruit of the *Lignum vitae*, “The Eternity of His Kingdom,” presents Jesus as both “King, [and] Son of the King,” whose reign is without end.²⁰ Bonaventure expresses, with the reader, a desire to see the book “in which all things are written according to the deep secrets of God;” he who finds this book “will find life and draw salvation from the Lord.”²¹ The author encourages his reader to “run with living desire to this Fountain of life and light” to receive the sacred oil of gladness and to be refreshed in Jesus, the desired end.²² He concludes by reminding his reader that “No one reaches this state [of ultimate happiness] except by an ultimate union with him who is the fountain and origin of goods that are both natural and gratuitous, both bodily and spiritual, both temporal and eternal.”²³ Bonaventure prays that through “believing, hoping, and loving, [he may be] carried to you, beloved Jesus, as to the goal of all things.”²⁴

Throughout his writing on the twelve fruits of the *Lignum vitae*, Bonaventure balances direction of meditation with an invitation to free contemplation. He ends his text with a prayer to the Holy Spirit, asking to receive the seven gifts of wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear.²⁵ Thus, through the

¹⁹ Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae*, 168.

²⁰ Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae*, 169.

²¹ Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae*, 170. Bonaventure quotes Prov 8.35.

²² Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae*, 171-172.

²³ Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae*, 172.

²⁴ Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae*, 173.

²⁵ Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae*, 174.

inspiration of the Holy Spirit and by using the suggestions offered by the author, the reader can hope to be nourished by the fruits of meditation.

Where Bonaventure had proposed an imaginary tree to aid in meditation, the *Lignum vitae* of Beinecke MS 416 provides a concrete image. As in Bonaventure's tree, the diagram has twelve branches, bearing a total of twelve fruits. The titles on the branches and the fruits are taken from the author's text and are framed in the margins with appropriate scriptural passages.

The diagrammatic tree recalls the tree of life in the Book of Revelation, which bares twelve fruits, one for each month.²⁶ The corresponding scripture passage is cited in the clover-shaped text box at the root of the tree in our manuscript. The tree in Revelation, in turn, calls to mind a similar tree in the Garden of Eden. Reference to this tree is also made in the diagram. In the lower left corner, there is a citation from Genesis 2.9 reading, "The Tree of Life also in the midst of paradise." This tree, of course, invites comparison to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, also present in the Garden of Eden.²⁷

The richness of the tree symbol lends itself to meditation on the connection between the disobedience of Adam and Eve and the obedience of Christ, the "new Adam." Where Adam and Eve had sought knowledge that would make them like gods, Jesus, "Though in the form of God...humbled himself, becoming obedient to death."²⁸ In view of this connection, Bonaventure warns against following Adam's example in

²⁶ Rev. 22. 1-2.

²⁷ Gen 2. 9.

²⁸ Gen 3.4 and Phil 2. 6-8.

seeking the fruit of the wrong tree, and he counsels putting faith before knowledge and devotion before research.²⁹ Only with this sort of humility, can one set out to meditate on and to internalize the true tree of life, the cross of Christ.

The creator of the diagram in Beinecke MS 416 cited several additional biblical trees to inspire reflection on the links between the Old and New Testament. One reference is to the tree from Ecclesiasticus 24.13-14 in the bottom right corner of the diagram. This quote reads, “I was exalted like a cedar in Lebanon, and as a cypress tree, a palm tree, an olive tree.” The voice speaking here would be interpreted as Christ, possibly with an association in the monastic mind to Jesus’ statement in the Gospel of John that he would be “lifted up so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”³⁰

Adjacent to the Ecclesiasticus citation, there is an excerpt from Ezekiel 47: 12. The full verse reads, “Along both banks of the river fruit trees of every kind shall grow; their leaves shall not fade, nor their fruit fail. Every month they shall bear fresh fruit, for they shall be watered by the flow from the sanctuary. Their fruit shall serve for food, and their leaves for medicine.” This description comes from Ezekiel’s vision of the new temple in the new Israel, and it is suggestive of a similar tree in John’s vision of the new Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation.³¹ In both texts, the reference to medicinal fruits is a reminder of Bonaventure’s assertion that the fruit of the *Lignum vitae* is Christ, who “reached... maturity on the tree of the cross.”³²

²⁹ Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae*, 122.

³⁰ Jn 3.14, 15.

³¹ Rev. 22.1-2.

³² Bonaventure, *Lignum vitae*, 121.

The tree of life diagram in Beinecke MS 416 engages in theological reflection while encompassing in one manuscript page the whole of Bonaventure's text. Bonaventure was particularly conscious of the spiritual fruits to be harvested through conformity to Christ, remembering the gift of the stigmata that the founder of his order, St. Francis, bore. Profound, mystical unity with the Savior was possible, and Bonaventure's meditation on the tree of life was a way to foster the devotion necessary for the aspirant to be worthy of such an experience. The diagram based on his work adds a new dimension to this meditative program. Containing additional biblical verses, it is an exegetical tool that encouraged those using it to develop a personal interpretation of the treasurehouse of biblical imagery relating to life, death, resurrection, and glorification of Christ.