

HYMN INTERPRETATION

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Old Testament Images of the Cross in “Beneath the Cross of Jesus”

Beneath the Cross of Jesus I fain would take my stand,
The shadow of a mighty Rock within a weary land;
A home within the wilderness, a rest upon the way,
From the burning of the noontide heat and the
burden of the day.

O safe and happy shelter! O refuge tried and sweet!
O trysting-place where Heaven's love, and Heaven's
justice meet!
As to the holy Patriarch that wondrous dream was
given,
So seems my Savior's Cross to me a ladder up to
heaven.

There lies beneath its shadow, but on the farther side,
The darkness of an awful grave that gapes both deep
and wide;
And there between us stands the cross, two arms
outstretched to save,
Like a watchman set to guard the way from that
eternal grave.

Upon that Cross of Jesus, mine eye at times can see
The very dying form of One who suffered there for
me:
And from my smitten heart, with tears, two wonders I
confess—
The wonders of his glorious love, and my own
worthlessness.

I take, O Cross, thy shadow for my abiding place;
I ask no other sunshine than the sunshine of His face,
Content to let the world go by, to know no gain nor
loss,—
My sinful self my only shame, my glory all the Cross.¹

Elizabeth C. Clephane (1830-1869)

A rock in the desert. A stairway to heaven. An angel guarding us from death. Scriptural allusion and metaphor is prominent in late nineteenth-century gospel hymnody, and is crucial to an understanding of the brand of piety that produced it. This should hardly surprise, since two important predecessors of gospel hymnody—the psalm paraphrase of Watts and the campmeeting song of the Second Great Awakening—were characterized by vivid imagery. Prominent in many nineteenth-century gospel hymns are intertextual allusions conjoining Old and New Testament the-

ologies and symbols that reveal a considerable grasp of scripture on the part of their writers. Scriptural metaphor provided the gospel hymnwriters a vivid vessel to hold and convey the hymn's message. Metaphor unified, galvanized, and became the ultimate message.²

“Beneath the Cross of Jesus,” written by the Edinburgh-born Elizabeth C. Clephane in 1868, expresses her longing for the shelter of the cross, and for renewal in weariness. The cross image is fleshed out with Old Testament references from the Pentateuch, Psalms, and Isaiah. The opening couplet depicts the cross as a source of spiritual protection and sustenance by evoking a famous Old Testament symbol described in Isaiah 32:9, “the shadow of a great rock within a weary land.”

In the hymn's most vivid picture, the poet sees Christ's cross as the New Testament parallel of Jacob's ladder, the fulfillment of a dream that to the patriarch was theophany but to future generations could be understood as prophecy—as the path, stair, or bridge leading to heaven. Leland Ryken observes that this image “takes its place within the two-tiered picture of the universe that the Bible everywhere assumes. Heaven is above earth . . . angels ascend back to heaven after completing an earthly assignment.”³ The picture of Jacob's ladder, he notes, symbolizes at once God's transcendence and His immanence.⁴

The Psalms evoke the expanse between earth and heaven as a synonym for the vastest space imaginable (Ps. 103:11) and as a way to visualize the chasm between God's justice and his *hesed*, his unfailing covenant kindness. Psalm 85:10 foretells the ultimate uniting of God's justice with his mercy in the picture of His righteousness and peace kissing each other. Clephane's phrase “trysting-place where heaven's love and heaven's justice meet,” echoing the Psalmic reference to the kiss, paraphrases the Psalm in exalted language that seems closer to Watts or Wesley than to that of her own gospel tradition. Elaborating on this image, Psalm 85:11 describes truth springing out of the earth and righteousness looking down from heaven, suggestions of the Incarnation.⁵ Clephane's hymn captures the essence of the miracle this Psalm foretells, and transmutes the incarnational mystery back in time into the patriarch's life and the event of his dream. Underlying the hymn's second stanza seems also to be the climactic declaration in James's epistle, “Mercy triumphs over judgment!” (James 2:13b, NIV).

Clephane envisions in the third or middle stanza a dark “awful grave” on the farther side of the cross, but likens the cross to “a watchman set to guard the way from that eternal grave.” The scene called to mind is that of the angel guarding the gate of Eden to prevent the original couple's return after the Fall.

The final two stanzas present the cross as a symbol for "His glorious love" and the shelter whose shadow is the poet's chosen "abiding place." Not until the fourth stanza does her eye discern the actual form of Christ on the cross, suggesting a process of being drawn into a state of deeper meditation during the course of the hymn. Rather than dwelling on Christ's passion, however, or on the doctrinal verities of His substitutionary atonement or the cross's salvific power, Clephane is swept away by her own deeply personal response to the sight, expressed both in wonder and tears. Although the escapist, world-rejecting sentiment of the final stanza has been discussed as problematic,⁶ the stanza and the hymn end strongly with the Pauline proclamation (based on Galatians 6:14) of the cross as the believer's glory.

Few gospel hymns present a picture of the cross so grounded in Old Testament images, yet enveloped in New Testament theology. Thus much of the hymn's argument is lost and its progression interrupted when stanzas two and three are deleted, as in modern hymnals. In the complete poem we move through images of the cross as rock and shelter from the vicissitudes of life, as meeting-place of God's love and holy justice, as protector and guardian from eternal death and damnation, and ultimately as both our home and our complete and only glory. The image most richly explored is that of Jacob's ladder as a type of the cross—or, viewed another way, of the cross as the apotheosis of Jacob's ladder—that finally and forever has reconciled love and justice, and brought heaven down to us in the "very dying form of one who suffered there for me."

The hymn traces a journey from a longing for the cross's shelter as a "rest upon the way," to a resolve appropriate for every disciple (voiced in an apostrophe to the cross): to take the cross's shadow "for [our] abiding place," the place where we spend our lives. Clephane's hymn, rooted both in biblical image and theology, creates one meditational space where we may do so.

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Notes

¹No. 32 in Sankey et al, *Gospel Hymns Nos. 1 to 6 Complete* (Cincinnati: John Church and New York: Biglow and Main, 1894).

²The surge of scholarly interest in image and metaphor has in recent years borne fruit in Leland Ryken's exhaustive, elegantly written *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (1998). See Leland Ryken et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, Ill. and Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1998). Notable cutting-edge work in this field includes Dianne M. Bowker's interdisciplinary study (1999) of tree imagery in scripture, sermon, and hymn. Dianne Bowker, "Theology through the Arts: Tree Imagery in Christian Hymnody as an Exposition on the Person and Work of Jesus Christ" (Th.M. thesis, Regent College [Vancouver], 1999).

³Leland Ryken et al, 1998, 49:2.

⁴Leland Ryken et al, 1998, 433:1.

⁵This verse (Psalm 85:11) also recalls nineteenth-century biblical illustrations from the era of Clephane's hymn, in which God is often depicted in the clouds at the top of Jacob's ladder, looking down.

⁶See Donald P. Hustad, "An Interpretation: Beneath the Cross of Jesus," (THE HYMN, vol. 37, no. 3, July 1986): 36-37.

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