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A Fruit Tree at Durrow

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Concerning the bitter fruit of a tree turned to sweetness by the saint's blessing.

Near the monastery of the plain of the oak [Durrow], on its southern side, there was a tree that bore much fruit. Since the inhabitants of the place made a complaint against it because of the too great bitterness of the fruit, the saint went to it one day in the autumn season. And seeing that the tree vainly produced abundant fruit, more hurtful than pleasing to those that tasted it, he raised his holy hand, blessed the tree, and said: 'In the name of almighty God, thou bitter tree, may all thy bitterness leave thee, and thy fruit, hitherto most bitter, now become most sweet.' Marvellous to say, more quickly than words, and in the same moment, all the fruit of that tree lost its bitterness, and was changed, according to the saint's word, into wonderful sweetness. (Adomnan, *Life of Columba*, bk. II, ch. 2)¹

This picturesque little story has intrigued me for some time. I have not come across it, or anything that directly reminds me of it, elsewhere - though I doubt that that is of great importance here. One may, I suppose, treat it as merely another medieval miracle story - by implication improbable, if not downright impossible, at the level of historical (or scientific) literalism. But I suspect that such a dismissive approach or reaction would also be simplistic; and that it would be wiser to try to discern the allegorical meaning likely to be concealed by the apparent simplicity of the narrative.

At first I thought that the right approach was to look among the scriptural orchards. Fruit trees seemed to offer obviously appropriate food for thought.

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You will be able to tell them by their fruits. Can people pick grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, a sound tree produces good fruit but a rotten tree bad fruit. A sound tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor a rotten tree bear good fruit. Any tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown on the fire. I repeat, you will be able to tell them by their fruits. (Mt 7: 16-20; cf. 3:10)

Make a tree sound and its fruit will be sound; make a tree rotten and its fruit will be rotten. For the tree can be told by its fruit. (Mt 12:33)

There is no sound tree that produces rotten fruit, nor again a rotten tree that produces sound fruit. For every tree can be told by its own fruit: people do not pick figs from thorns, nor gather grapes from brambles. (Lk 6: 43-4; cf. 3:9)

This is not, however, as it seems to me on reflection, the right way. Adomnan's tree is clearly sound and produces a good crop: the fruit is inedible because it is bitter, not because it is bad. What is significant here is, surely, not soundness and rottenness, but bitterness and sweetness. If this is so, then the signs point, I suggest, to the desert of the Exodus in the first instance, rather than to garden land.

Moses made Israel move from their camp at the Sea of Reeds, and they made for the wilderness of Shur where they travelled for three days without finding water. They reached Marah but the water there was so bitter they could not drink it; this is why the place was named Marah. The people grumbled at Moses. 'What are we to drink?' they said. So Moses appealed to Yahweh, and Yahweh pointed out some wood to him; this Moses threw into the water, and the water was sweetened.

There it was he charged them with statute and with ordinance, there that he put them to the test.

Then he said, 'If you listen carefully to the voice of Yahweh your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commandments and keep his statutes, I shall inflict on you none of the evils that I inflicted on the Egyptians, for it is I, Yahweh, who give you healing.' (Ex 15: 22-6)

Traditionally interpreted, the wood that Moses threw into the water to sweeten it prefigures Christ's cross. "Allegorically," says Cornelius a Lapide, "this wood signifies the wood of the cross of Christ: for in its virtue, remembrance and contemplation every toil and sorrow becomes sweet for the

saints."² Two patristic writers, who illustrate the tradition in works that I have to hand in translation, the Greek St Gregory of Nyssa and the Latin St Ambrose, will at least serve to underline the historical fact that this interpretation was accepted widely and at an early date. So, whatever might have been Adomnan's actual source, directly or indirectly, it is at any rate reasonable to suppose that he was probably familiar with the tradition in Latin form.

After they had crossed the sea, a three days' march ensued, during which they made camp at a place where they found water so bitter that they could not at first drink it. But wood placed in the water made the drink agreeable to those who were thirsty.

The history agrees with what now happens: for to the one who has left behind the Egyptian pleasures which he served before crossing the sea, life removed from these pleasures seems at first difficult and disagreeable. But if the wood be thrown into the water, that is, if one receives the mystery of the resurrection which had its beginning with the wood (you of course understand the 'cross' when you hear 'wood'), then the virtuous life, being sweetened by the hope of things to come, becomes sweeter and more pleasant than all the sweetness that tickles the senses with pleasure. (Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, book II, §§ 131, 132)³

Marah was a fountain of most bitter water: Moses cast wood into it and it became sweet. For water without the preaching of the Cross of the Lord is of no avail for future salvation, but, after it has been consecrated by the mystery of the saving cross, it is made suitable for the use of the spiritual laver and of the cup of salvation. As then, Moses, that is, the prophet, cast wood into that fountain, so, too, the priest utters over this font the proclamation of the Lord's cross, and the water is made sweet for the purpose of grace. (Ambrose, *On the Mysteries*, ch. III, § 14)⁴

The wood of Marah prefigures the cross: in blessing the tree at Durrow, Columba probably signed it with the sign of the cross. The cross, furthermore, is itself a tree. In the first place, it is made of wood. In the second, as the instrument of the crucifixion, it is the tree of death (Ac 5:30; 10:39; 13:29; cf. Ga 3:13). But through the power of Christ's resurrection, it becomes the tree of life (Gn 2:9; 3:22,24).

For St Ambrose, the water and wood of Marah prefigure the water of baptism graced by the cross. And Marah was the Israelites' first named station in the desert after the crossing of the Sea of Reeds. But that crossing also prefigures Christian baptism according to St Paul:

I want you to be quite certain, brothers, that our ancestors all had the cloud over them and all passed through the sea. In the cloud and in the sea they were all baptised into Moses.
(1 Co 10:1-2)

As Moses thereby liberated the people of Israel from Egypt, so Christ liberates the Christian from sin through baptism. Just as, after Marah, the trials of the desert journey had to be faced obediently and patiently by the Israelites before they could reach the promised land, so the Christian, freed by baptism, must go faithfully the way of the cross in order to attain salvation.

The story, then, seems to be many-faceted. Columba is revealed in the prophetic role of Moses, reconciling contradiction (had there, one wonders, been difficulties in the community at Durrow?), and leading a (new) Israel under God's guidance. Elsewhere, Adomnan says more explicitly of him that he has been "predestined by God to be a leader of innumerable souls to the heavenly country" (bk. III, ch. 1). This seems to be envisaged as a function of his abbatial office, rather than as an aspect of a more broadly pastoral ministry, since Adomnan also makes Columba prophesy of the young Finten mocu-Moie, son of Tailchan (St Munnu of Taghmon, Co. Wexford) that "he has long since been chosen by God as an abbot of monks, and a leader of souls to the heavenly Kingdom": he is, therefore, to "construct a monastery... and there feed a flock of Christ's sheep and lead unnumbered souls to the heavenly country" (bk. I, ch. 2). As leader and abbot, furthermore, Columba is also a teacher, who teaches his spiritual sons fear of the Lord (cf. bk. III, ch. 23, p.527). But all this applies equally to Adomnan himself, who was not only Columba's hagiographer, but also his successor as (ninth) abbot of Iona. (As head-abbot of the Columban federation of monasteries, he was also ultimately superior of Durrow). And *he* is the weaver, a detail of whose tapestry we are examining here: *he* is teaching the community of Durrow, the Columban *koinonia* - and us - a lesson drawn from a fruit tree. The lesson is surely that, once shouldered, the yoke of the cross is easy and its burden light (cf. Mt 11: 28-30) for those who accept them faithfully, hopefully and lovingly: the fruit of this tree is sweet if eaten in obedience. It is an undertaking, moreover, that leads to rest, for it leads to freedom eventually from the consequences of eating the fruit of another tree (Gn 3) in disobedience. Either choice, to accept or to refuse, will produce abundant fruit, but only one sweet fruit. And since the choice is made in freedom of will, the decision itself takes the form of a cross (cf. Jr 6:16).

I personally sometimes need to be reminded that - as the eastern churches have always insisted - the way of Christian perfection is an obligation for *all* Christians: in pastorate, in community, in the hermitage *and* in the world. And our own desert journey may, I suppose, reveal itself to each one of us in surprising, unexpected, even unwelcome ways. That journey is then sweet or bitter according as our response to its call is positive or negative: the demands of the cross confront each one of us with the stark choice of self-denial or of denial of ourselves.

But for the one who chooses the better part -

Such a one is like a tree planted near streams;
it bears fruit in season
and its leaves never wither...

(Ps 1:3)

References and Notes

1. *Adomnan's Life of Columba*, ed. and trans. A.O. and M.O. Anderson, Edinburgh 1961. (Revised by M.O. Anderson, Oxford 1991).
 2. *Commentaria in Pentateuchum Mosis*, Auctore R.P. Cornelio Cornelii A Lapide, e Societate Jesu, etc., Antwerp 1630. *Allegorice, hoc lignum significat lignum crucis Christi: illius enim virtute, memoria et meditatione Sanctis omnis labor et dolor dulcescit* (Commentary on Exodus, ch. 15, v.25).
 3. *Gregory of Nyssa, The Life of Moses*, trans. A.J. Malherbe and E. Ferguson, New York - Ramsey 1978, 85-6. For further references, see there n.151, p.172. I am not aware that this work was translated into Latin at an early date: cf. Introduction, 22-3.
- See also Pseudo-Macarius, Homily 47, § 15, in *Pseudo-Macarius, The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and The Great Letter*, ed. and trans. G.A. Maloney, New York - Mahwah 1992, 237-8.
4. *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace, vol. X, *St Ambrose, Select Works and Letters*, trans. H. de Romestin, etc., Edinburgh and Grand Rapids 1989 (reprint).