

“Tæpti ég mínum trúarstaf á tréð, sem drýpur hunang af”:²

The Hebrew Scriptures in Christian Liturgical Use

An obscure passage of 1 Samuel 14, not read in either the Icelandic lectionary or the Revised Common Lectionary used by my church, tells of Jonathan, the son of Saul and a mighty warrior against the Philistines, coming across a honeycomb dripping honey on the ground when he is desperately hungry. Not knowing that his father has exacted an oath from the troops requiring them to fast until evening, Jonathan reaches with his staff for the honey and uses his hand to eat what he gathers. He ate, the text says, “and his eyes brightened” (1 Sam. 14:27). Told only then of his father’s required fasting, Jonathan strongly recommends, intentionally against Saul, that the others join him in eating so that their vision might also be brighter, clearer.

Iceland’s national hymn writer, Hallgrímur Pétursson, knew that passage. Passion Hymn 32 is an extended meditation on the words about the “green tree”³ that Luke has Jesus say to the women of Jerusalem on the way to the cross: “if they do this when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry” (Luke 23:31). For Hallgrímur, the “green tree” is Jesus Christ himself, and his death on the dry tree of the cross, amid the dry and withered tree of humanity, enacts an exchange whereby the blossoms of the green tree might now appear on the dry, just as the cross has become the tree of life. Then the singer makes use of the image from the Hebrew scriptures as a lively metaphor for faith: “Tæpti ég mínum trúarstaf á tréð, sem drýpur hunang af.” “I dipped the staff of my faith into the tree from which the honey drips ... and the vision of my heart, all angry before, was brightened as I tasted of it.” Thus sings stanza 21 of Hymn 32 and, for that matter, stanza 6 of Hymn 135 in the Icelandic *Sálmabók*, since a shortened version of Passion Hymn 32 is also included there.

For us in the twenty-first century — even for Icelanders accustomed to Hallgrímur — this seventeenth century use of paradoxes, contrasts, multiple metaphors, and layered imagery, what English scholars of seventeenth century poetry call “metaphysical conceits,” is rather too much, too thick, *baroque* even: green tree and dry; cross and tree of life; Jonathan’s honeycomb; Saul and anger; brightened vision; faith as a staff to lean on and to eat with; the implied holy

¹ Það sem hér birtist er fyrirlestur sem fluttur var í hátíðarsal Háskóla Íslands 3. nóvember 2017 í tilefni af hátíðardagskrá þar sem dr. Gordon Lathrop tók á móti heiðursdoktorsnafnbót frá Guðfræði- og trúarbragðafræðideild.

² Hallgrímur Pétursson, *Passíusálmur* 32:21, Reykjavík: Hallgrímskirkja, 1991, p. 180.

³ The *New Revised Standard Version* has “wood” in Luke 23:31, but the Greek word is ξύλον.

communion; and on and on. Still the images are stunning, and read aloud during Lent in the “baðstofa” — or, more recently, on the radio — and sung in church, those images are part of the Icelandic communal tradition. Christ is the green tree and the seat of the honeycomb; the hungry, withered, yet believing people are together Jonathan, the “I” of the hymn.

Even more: I think Hallgrímur is building on an old tradition of *trees* in Scandinavian myth. I know it is hard to find a tree in Iceland currently! But let me tell you: I have seen and walked in a forest of beautiful trees in the valley around Hólar. I am sure you have, too, somewhere in your land. Trees are very slowly coming back. And in the myths there is Yggdrasil: *Ask veit ek standa, heitir Yggdrasil*,⁴ says the Icelandic sybil. “I know of an ash tree standing; it is called Yggdrasil, Óðin’s steed.” Indeed, if honey drips from a tree in Hallgrímur, then dew drips from that mighty world-tree, dew that according to Vafþrúðnir is the very life-saving food of Líf and Lífþrasir who are hid in the tree, human beings being rescued from Ragnarök to begin again as in a new world.⁵ Indeed, a recent work by the American Jesuit Germanist, G. Ronald Murphy,⁶ has argued that early Scandinavian and Germanic Christianity conflated the tree of life of the Hebrew scriptures, reborn in the Christian Apocalypse, with the mythic Yggdrasil and proposed that Christ is that tree — sometimes imaged in baptism as washing in the pool of fate under the tree or in communion as drinking the dew from the tree or in wood churches built to look like the great tree itself (look at those tree-like church door columns you have in your national museum!), above all in the cross understood as the tree of life — Christ is that tree in which humanity can take refuge and come to new life in dangerous times.

After all, in the actual text of 1 Samuel 14 no tree occurs, simply a “honeycomb dripping.” But Hallgrímur sees a *tree*, a tree holding the honeycomb, recapitulating the green tree saving the dry. From Jesus’ saying in Luke, Hallgrímur reads backwards to Jonathan’s eating and Jonathan’s recovered sight. Thus Hallgrímur also conflates the trees: the tree of life; the tree he sees holding the honey; the tree of the cross; the green tree. Hallgrímur’s tree functions like Yggdrasil in early Scandinavian Christianity, whether or not he knew the *Völuspá* or the *Vafþrúðnismál*.⁷ Hallgrímur can certainly sound like he thoroughly believes in a punitive Anselmian theory of atonement, but at least in much of this hymn, in a way far more accessible to us in the twenty-first century, we are saved simply by the life-giving *presence* and sight-healing *food* of the tree that is Christ, by that tree’s exchange of life for our death.

Reading this hymn of Hallgrímur makes me think of the saying of Luther preserved in the Table Talk by Nikolaus Medler from the 1530’s: “The Holy Scriptures are a vast and mighty forest, but there is no single tree in it that I have

⁴ *Völuspá* 19.

⁵ See *Vafþrúðnismál* 45.

⁶ G. Ronald Murphy, *Tree of Salvation: Yggdrasil and the Cross of the North*, New York: Oxford, 2013.

⁷ The *Codex Regius* of the Elder Edda was recovered by Bishop Brynjólfur in 1643 and given to the Danish king in Copenhagen in 1662. Brynjólfur was very important to Hallgrímur, ordaining him priest and installing him at Hvalsnes in 1644. Hallgrímur became pastor at Saurbær in 1651. He most likely wrote the Passion Hymns there in 1656-1659. Michael Fell, *And Some Fell into Good Soil: A History of Christianity in Iceland*, New York: Peter Lang, 1999, pp. 131, 140–141.

not shaken with my own hand.”⁸ In this year of Reformation commemoration, I want to say that your own Hallgrímur Pétursson has shaken those biblical trees—nested in their shade, eaten their fruit, been healed by their leaves, been grafted into their vine, reached out the staff of faith for their honey, and warmly recommended the same to us — just as did Luther. Luther, after all, was a professor of Bible, even of what we would call the Old Testament, and he fiercely resisted setting the Old Testament aside. He argued rather that in faithfully reading the old scriptures we encounter Jesus Christ and what he means, an encounter that would be far less profound and anchored if we had only the New Testament. In doing so, Luther quoted Jesus in John: “... search the scriptures ... it is they that testify on my behalf” (John 5:39). And then he wrote, “What is the New Testament but a public preaching and proclamation of Christ, set forth through the sayings of the Old Testament ...”⁹ It is as if the Hebrew scriptures are the text and the New Testament the sermon. This Reformation commemoration should call us again to a vigorous use of the Hebrew scriptures.

For all of the seventeenth century rhetoric in Hallgrímur and for all of his interest in obscure texts, I think he works in parallel to Luther and that both have learned their use of biblical imagery from the way the New Testament reads the Old and, taught by that reading, the way the Christian liturgy uses the Hebrew scriptures.

Let me say more. I have recently sought to write about the ways the Bible relates to Christian liturgy in a book that Fortress Press will publish twelve days from now: *Saving Images: The Presence of the Bible in Christian Liturgy*.¹⁰ One chapter of that book, a chapter about the Gospels and liturgical reform, had an earlier form as a lecture I gave here in the theology faculty two years ago. But another chapter seeks to reflect on the images of the Hebrew scriptures in their Christian liturgical use. It is a few passages from that chapter I want to give you today, setting them beside Hallgrímur and Luther, and thus asking you to understand the publication of that book as partly a response to your kind conferral of this degree in this year.

Christians have loved the honesty and human reality of the Hebrew scriptures. They have seen themselves in need of the absence of idealism and the concrete anchor in the earth that characterize those books. Christians have learned to pray truthfully and profoundly by using the Psalms. Christians have been formed by the critique of religion found especially in the prophets. Christians have believed that the ancient mission of the people of God to bear witness to God for the sake of the life of the world, a mission outlined in passages like Exodus 19:6, continues still and profoundly influences the mission of the churches. And Christians have delighted in the manifold names for God, the manifold images for God’s promise, the range of ways God is pictured and imagined woven throughout these scriptures.

But then we are at the principal way that the Old Testament is alive in Christian worship: in the use of its images. Another important hymn writer, for example, the fourth-century Syrian Christian Ephrem of Edessa, many of whose hymns shaped the liturgical texts of the Christian East, filled his writings with Old Testament

⁸ WA, TR 1: 320, #674: *Scriptura est ingentissima silva sed nulla arbor est quam manu non pulsari*. English translation from LW 35:227.

⁹ See the first paragraphs of the 1523/1545 Preface to the Old Testament; English translation in LW 35:235–236.

¹⁰ Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017. What follows is drawn from chapter 2 of that book.

references and images. Indeed, he often described these images as “a garment of names” that God puts on so that human beings can encounter who God is. “Loving is the Lord,” he sang in one of his hymns, “who himself put on our names” (*Hymns on Faith* 5.7).¹¹ Or, as another hymn put it (*Hymns on Faith* 31.4):¹²

In one place He was like an old man and the Ancient of Days,
then again, He became like a hero, a valiant warrior.
For the purpose of judgement He was an old man, but for conflict He was valiant.
In one place He was delaying; elsewhere, having run,
He became weary. In one place He was asleep,
in another, in need. By every means did He weary himself so as to gain us.
Blessed is He who has appeared to our human race under so many metaphors.

The text of this hymn recalls the image of the Ancient One holding court in Daniel 7 or God as a warrior in the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15) and the Song of the Arm of the Lord (Isaiah 51). It also reverses the images and, from passages in Isaiah and the Psalms, sings of God as delaying (see Ps 40:17; Isa 5:19), weary (see Isa 1:14; 7:13), and even asleep (see Ps 44:23; 78:65). But Ephrem is a Christian; woven into his use of these images, these “names” that he finds in the Old Testament, is their further occurrence in the texts of the New Testament. In the transfiguration accounts of the Gospels as also in Revelation 1, for example, Jesus Christ appears marked by the very white garments and white hair that characterized the Ancient One in Daniel, as if he is not only the “Son of Man” approaching the throne but also the very presence of the old man come in judgment. Then in the Johannine passion as also in Revelation, Jesus appears as a valiant hero. Still, the reversals are found as well: in Matthew 24 and John 11 Jesus delays. In John 4 he is weary. In Mark 4 he is asleep. And in Matthew 25 he is profoundly in need.

For Ephrem, these all are metaphors that God has put on in the Hebrew scriptures, so that we might see and approach the invisible and unapproachable one. Reused in the New Testament as imagery for Jesus Christ, they bring us to know that when we encounter the crucified risen one we encounter God. Indeed, they cause us to reconsider what we mean by “God.” For Ephrem, God — the triune God, God as God is known in Jesus Christ — puts on this garment of images. But the names that are used, present in the Hebrew scriptures, reused in the New Testament, are “our names.” They have a human history. They belong to our speech. They express our hopes. They arise from our world. None of them is enough. Used together, used in tension and even contradiction with each other, and then used again of Jesus, they begin to point in the right direction, toward God’s identity, God’s judgment and mercy, God’s presence, God graciously “gaining us” by using our names. They also, thus, are images for us: we are the ones gained, judged, saved. In Christ, God is hero for us; in Christ, God is weary together with us. God has “put on” the images as a garment, a garment found already in the Hebrew scriptures. God condescends to our names. But Ephrem writes the hymn, uses the images, creates the liturgical song, and leads us in the singing.

These characteristics of the garment of names can be found repeatedly as marks of the way healthy Christian liturgy has used and, I want to argue, ought still use the

¹¹ Translated in Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992, p. 66.

¹² Translated in *ibid.*, pp. 60–61.

Hebrew scriptures. Faithful liturgy uses our *names*, our words, as they are found in the ancient scriptures. It uses them as *metaphors* for God and for us before God. It uses always *more than one*, always in creative tension and even contradiction with each other. And it repeatedly discovers Old Testament images reused — “reborn,” we might say — and applied in new ways to sing and proclaim Jesus Christ. But of such a rebirth, so deeply characteristic of both Bible and liturgy, I need to make a fuller account.

In his 1948 Bampton Lectures, published as *The Glass of Vision*,¹³ Anglican theologian and biblical scholar Austin Farrer proposed an important way to think about the continuity of Christianity with the Old Testament. Though these lectures took place nearly seventy years ago, they are still preeminently worthy of attention, and their proposal about the way Christianity uses biblical images could not matter more in the present time. It is a way we have already been exploring with Ephrem’s garment of names. In seeking to think about what could be meant today by “the inspiration of scripture” or “biblical revelation,” Farrer argued that Christianity itself should be understood as a use and transformation of several primary images found in the Old Testament.¹⁴ This assertion built upon Farrer’s sense that all of the Bible is a tissue of images, that the right way to read the Bible is to look for the images and their interactions,¹⁵ and that theology is most properly “the analysis and criticism of the revealed images.”¹⁶ Here is Farrer himself: “The great images” (Farrer was thinking especially of such Old Testament images as “the kingdom or reign of God,” “Israel as the people of God,” “the Lamb,” and “the enthronement of the Lord’s anointed”)

interpreted the events of Christ’s ministry, death and resurrection, and the events interpreted the images; the interplay of the two is revelation. Certainly the events without the images would be no revelation at all, and the images without the events would remain shadows on the clouds. The events by themselves are not revelation, for they do not by themselves reveal the divine work which is accomplished in them: the martyrdom of a virtuous Rabbi and his miraculous return are not of themselves the redemption of the world.¹⁷

He goes on:

The appearance of a new religion, and the transformation of basic images, are not simply connected things: they are one and the same thing. . . . The apostles know that they are transforming the images by referring them to Christ, or rather, that Christ has transformed them, by clothing himself with them and dying in the armour.¹⁸

As a contemporary thinker, I am more than a little doubtful about our access either to Jesus’ imaginal picture of himself or to what the apostles knew. We have the astonishing texts of Paul and the Gospels; behind those texts, however, I think we cannot easily know much about what Jesus or Peter were thinking without mostly making it up ourselves, perhaps mostly about ourselves. But I do think that Farrer was on to something very important, especially as he had counsel for how to read the Bible. He argued, for example, that while theologians of the late Middle Ages primarily looked in the scriptures for propositions and modern theologians have

¹³ Austin Farrer, *The Glass of Vision*, London: Dacre, 1948.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 43; cf. pp. 42 and 146.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

primarily looked there to sort out what is historical,¹⁹ we should be looking for images. He said, I think rightly, that “the sort of criticism of most use for getting to the bottom of the New Testament is often more like the kind of criticism we apply to poetry than we might incline to expect.”²⁰ Such criticism, by his account, considers especially the use, juxtaposition, and reuse of *images*. Farrer himself, about a year after these lectures, published a commentary on the Revelation to John that worked with the way images from the Hebrew scriptures were reused in that late New Testament writing to speak the Christian faith. Farrer’s commentary was called *A Rebirth of Images*.²¹ I think he was right to see that, in the New Testament generally and not only in the Apocalypse, the primary biblical images have been “reborn” by being wrapped like clothing around the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus and around our encounter with the holy trinity in him. Of course, he shared a metaphor here with Ephrem — the metaphor of clothing — just as he also shared a method. I myself, with Farrer, gladly confess that I find in these layered biblical images, turned to the purpose of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the very revelatory gift of God.

But I think we can go a step further. The biblical images about which Farrer speaks are not simply found to be doing their work for the enlivened but singular Bible reader.²² Rather, the “rebirth of images,” which Farrer so insightfully outlines as a key to reading the New Testament books, continues into Christian liturgy, continues communally now, continues, for example, in Hallgrímur’s hymns. Indeed, in a manner that Farrer himself does not note or chooses not to see,²³ the rebirth of images is already characteristic within the Old Testament itself. Christian liturgy learned the method, not first of all from Ephrem or other Christian hymn writers, but from the Hebrew scriptures. Even more: the method was already a characteristic of the use by many Old Testament texts of preexisting cultural, mythic, and poetic material. If the New Testament and Christian liturgical use turns or shifts or even “breaks”²⁴ the images for a new purpose, then that turning and breaking was also learned from the method of the ancient scriptures themselves. For the sake of clarity, let me explore an example.

I think about the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15). The deity as a warrior going to war at sea — indeed, war *with* the sea — and then, victorious, amazing the other gods, constructing a new world and building a sanctuary, a place for the divine abode on a mountaintop: these features were already found in creation stories from Mesopotamia and Canaan. They occurred in the Enuma Elish, of Marduk’s defeat of Tiamat, and in poems from Ugarit, about Baal’s conquest of Yam, the sea. These very features recur in the ancient song of Exodus 15, reused however in a new way: the imagery of the wild sea remains, but the adversary is now an historical one, an

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 44.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 136.

²¹ Austin Farrer, *A Rebirth of Images: The Making of St. John’s Apocalypse*, London: Dacre, 1949.

²² Ibid., p. 51: “The theologian may confuse the images, and the metaphysician may speculate about them; but the Bible-reader will immerse himself in the single image on the page before him, and find life-giving power in it, taken as it stands.”

²³ Ibid., p. 134: “The apostles know that they are transforming the images by referring them to Christ... the prophets are not aware of any such transformation.”

²⁴ On the breaking of myths and symbols in Christian use, see my *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003, pp. 30–45.

oppressing army. It is the nations, not the gods, that are amazed. And the new abode of God is among the people themselves: they are planted on the land as temple of the Lord. Israel's telling of the story of the exodus from Egypt as the originating and people-gathering event of the nation's history was thus made to bear mythic meaning and the old mythic force; the event of the escape of some slaves was sung in such a way as if it were about the conquest of the primal chaos and the bringing to birth of a new creation. That one event, thus, was proposed as having significance for the many, for all times and places, by being told in mythic terms.²⁵ The biblical narrative itself, then, has involved a powerful shift or rebirth as Canaanite mythic and religious language was made to speak of a historic, narrative event. That shift occurs in one of the very most basic narratives of all of the Bible.

But the rebirth of images goes on. The Song of the Sea of Exodus 15 leads us on to read the Song of the Arm of the Lord in Second Isaiah (Isa 51:9–11). There one of the ways the prophet says that the God of the exodus has become the God of the return from exile is by recasting the imagery of the conquest at sea. Now the arm of the Lord, which slew the ancient dragon and mastered the ancient chaos, which then made a new world by bringing the people through the sea, is to be the source of the people's return from their exile by doing a new thing, making a path through the desert and not only a path through the sea. Mythic creation and then exodus and then return from exile: these have become a succession of reborn images. A “new thing” is promised (43:18–19), but that new thing comes with all the strength of the mythically charged history of Israel, of “the former things.”

Then this image — or chain of images — has yet a further rebirth in the New Testament. It stands behind the disappearance of the sea and its replacement by “the river of the water of life” in the “new heaven and new earth” of the Apocalypse. It very likely also stands behind the Markan story of Jesus stilling the sea as well as the Johannine account of the fish breakfast beside the sea. For both evangelists, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus is the new conquest of chaos, the new creation, the new making of a people to bear witness, the new overcoming of evil. To meet Jesus is to meet the very Arm of the Lord, to meet the one who makes life and hope and food out of death and chaos. Indeed, the fish that appears in all of the accounts of the feeding of a multitude in the wilderness — as well as in many early Christian painted images of the meals of Jesus and the church — may well have been meant to evoke the biblical idea of the sea and death transformed into life, chaos made into food.

In any case, the biblical rebirth of images, the pattern Christians learned from reading story next to story in the Hebrew scriptures, a pattern continued into the New Testament books, has continued also into the liturgy. Many Christians sing the Song of the Sea, the song of Miriam and Moses, at the great Vigil of Easter, in response to the reading of the account of the exodus and in the midst of a whole series of readings that lead us to the baptismal font. (Let me, dear friends from the Church of Iceland once again recommend to you both the Great Vigil of Easter and the Revised Common Lectionary which uses these texts and knows this rebirth of images!) In any case, the God who is victor at sea, making a people and making

²⁵ Cf. Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973, pp. 121–144.

a world new, is the God known in the death and resurrection of Jesus and, so, the God of the font. There, in *that* “sea,” a people is delivered to become God’s dwelling place through Christ. And many Christians, at that same Vigil, have watched a great candle lit to lead the assembly, as if it were at once the “pillar of fire” of the exodus and a sign of Christ risen. In thanksgiving for this candle, a cantor or deacon sings, “This is the night in which . . . you delivered our forebears, the children of Israel.”²⁶ Also the use of this candle belongs to the rebirth of images. “This is the night!” respond the members of the assembly, finding themselves joined to that rebirth.

Such a rebirth of images, as Farrer calls it, may also be called “intertextuality”²⁷ or, with New Testament scholar Richard Hays, “reading backwards.”²⁸ Indeed these two characteristics are major themes in biblical studies today, though they also need to be seen as alive in Christian liturgy. Indeed, this intertextuality, this use of scriptural images in a garment of names, this rebirth of images, this reading backwards, when also juxtaposed to an assembly keeping the baptismal washing and the eucharistic meal, is the primary form taken by the *theologia prima*, that most basic Christian speech about God come to expression in Christian liturgy.

But does such a “rebirth of images” ignore the plain sense of the ancient texts? Does it propose that there is some higher, more spiritual meaning that Christians can extract, say, from the Song of the Sea? No. It is certainly true that some Christian interpreters in history — like some Jewish interpreters, as well — have read the scriptures with a Platonic eye, a search for the invisible or spiritual meaning beyond and above the historical and literal sense.²⁹ It is also true that this kind of interpretation could lead to excesses: a text could be made to mean anything. Martin Luther is famously supposed to have said, “When I was a monk . . . I allegorized everything, even a chamber pot.” He also described his own exegetical history in these terms: “At that time I dealt with allegories, tropologies, and analogies and did nothing but clever tricks with them. . . . Now I’ve let that go, and this is my last and best art, to translate the scriptures in their plain sense. The literal sense does it.”³⁰ And it is true that Platonic or spiritual readings, proposed as God’s original intention with the inspired text, have sometimes been understood to be what is meant by reading the text liturgically or “typologically.”³¹

Still, I mean none of these characteristics here. Christian use of the Song of the Sea, for example, ought do nothing to detract from the brilliant original song and its meaning in Israel. Rather, the pattern of the song, its celebration of the Lord overcoming in the sea the threat of death and making a people into the divine abode, is — by Christians — seen to correspond to the central pattern of their faith: the

²⁶ “Easter Proclamation,” in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Leaders Edition, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006, p. 646.

²⁷ See, for example, Craig A. Evans and H. Daniel Zacharias, eds., *Early Christian Literature and Intertextuality*, 2 vols., New York: T&T Clark, 2009. The books of the Bible also sometimes interact intertextually with books outside of the canon. See, for example, Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000, and MacDonald, *The Gospels and Homer: Imitation of Greek Epic in Mark and Luke-Acts*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015.

²⁸ Richard B. Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness*, Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014.

²⁹ For a clear account of Platonism shaping Christian and Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament, within the context of a masterful account of the history of the interpretation of Genesis, see Ronald Hendel, *The Book of Genesis: A Biography*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, 83–108.

³⁰ LW 54:46–47, 406; *Table Talk* #335 and #5285.

³¹ For a classic example, see Jean Danileou, *The Bible and the Liturgy*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956.

death and resurrection of Jesus. It is also seen to correspond to the Christian sacrament for “making a people,” to baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus. When Christians borrow the imagery of the song to say what happens in the resurrection and in baptism, they are certainly saying that they believe that the God of the exodus is the very God we encounter in Jesus Christ. They are certainly celebrating the presence of God’s new creation now. They are certainly asserting that the event of “the martyrdom of a virtuous rabbi and his miraculous return” are of universal significance, have mythic force. And they are establishing a poetic use that can evoke all of the Old Testament accounts of creation-through-ordering-the-sea and, like Hallgrímur, can use parts of those stories as figures in liturgical song to show God acting in Jesus Christ and in the assembly gathered by the Spirit around Jesus Christ.

But in doing so Christians need not — or they ought not — engage in denying or minimizing the “plain sense” of the Exodus 15 text. At their best, they do not mean to say that the story of the exodus or its interpretation in the Song of the Sea were originally intended to prefigure the death and resurrection of Jesus or baptism into him. Rather, I think that the rebirth of images treasures the plain sense of the text and gladly collaborates with those who seek to further establish what that plain sense might be.

In the case of the Song of the Sea, scholars have now made clear that the *plain* sense is itself already a *poetic image*, a reuse and breaking of old Canaanite mythic terms to tell of the importance of the origin story of the Israelites. Note that this reuse of Canaanite myth is very like Scandinavian Christian reuse of Yggdrasil to tell the meaning of the cross as tree of life, to make biblical terms newly and powerfully available. More: the narrative of the exodus, interpreted here poetically, does not even need to be a historical event for its importance to still matter profoundly. Here may be one way we differ now from Luther and Hallgrímur. Indeed, some scholars (and some current rabbis) question the historical reliability of the account.³² Perhaps some slaves escaped from bondage. Perhaps other peoples joined them, adopting the escape narrative as an identity-giving story. Or perhaps the story was just that: a story, around which people could gather, redoing the old stories of the gods in a new and life-giving way. In any case, in the faith of Israel, the God who saves the oppressed is the one who dwells amid the people and continually makes the world new. Now. There is wonderful freedom from dangerous literalism and a new joy in the truth of poetic imagery present in this symbolic use. It is that narrated event, its ancient poetic interpretation, and the faith underlying this interpretation that provide the source for the borrowed imagery that Christians used already in the New Testament and continue to use in the liturgy.

“Borrowed imagery”: the phrase intentionally expresses a certain humility. By using it I hope to suggest a renunciation of mastery. These ancient images have their own important location in religious history. They do not automatically belong to Christians. Christians borrow them to interpret the central matters of their faith:

³² For example, George E. Mendenhall, *Ancient Israel's Faith and History: An Introduction to the Bible in Context*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001, pp. 50–52, 80–81, argues that a “mixed crowd” of *Apiru* slaves did indeed escape from Egypt and that their story of the Lord became the ideologically unifying symbol for the “twelve tribes” in the hill country of Canaan, people who were themselves for the largest part not the literal descendants of the escaped slaves.

the death and resurrection of Jesus; the holy trinity; the church as the people called to witness; the world as continually created; faith as eating God's promise. Indeed, that discipline of image use limits the possibility of an image being made to mean anything at all. And that discipline seeks to avoid an anti-Jewish, supersessionist reading of the images. It should be noted that the Christian and Jewish traditions of reading the Hebrew scriptures are different traditions. The books are scriptures for both communities and have been so since Christianity and Judaism separated, two religions drawn from the same sources, two branches from the same roots. Christians, who call Jesus the *Christ*, believe that God creates and sustains the world, confess the faith of Abraham, listen to the prophets' call to serve the poor, and pray the Psalms, cannot really say anything at all profound about their faith without using the language and images of the Hebrew scriptures. But that does not mean that they thereby assert their way is the only way to read these texts. Still, by "borrowed images" I do not mean to imply that Christians are borrowing them from someone else who does own them. The images are being borrowed from the past and from the scriptures. The scriptures are larger than we are. Also the Jewish communities do not "own" them, but in a variety of ways, quite different from Christians and often different from each other, also work at interpreting them now.

Luther, who loved images when they were disciplined to the gospel, knew this use of the Hebrew scriptures. And I think the passage from the Passion Hymns with which I began is both an example of this image use and itself a metaphor for its importance. Hallgrímur read backwards from the passion to 1 Samuel and found there both an image clothing Christ — he is the honey bearing tree — and a garment of names for us in church: we together take up the staff of faith whereby to eat from the tree. He did this with the intertextuality already characteristic of the scriptures themselves and of the liturgy that reads them as scripture. And he thereby gives us a model: touch the tree of the scriptures, the Bible read and sung in assembly, with the staff of faith and eat. Against all the terrible religious literalism and legalism of our day — against both Saul and the Philistines, if you will — we will there find a food that enables us to see again, clarifying our vision of God and the world, of ourselves and our neighbor, marking that vision by a mercy quite reversed from the angry heart.