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The Olive Press: A Symbol of Christ

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1

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Truman G. Madsen

“All things bear record of me” (Moses 6:63). So we have been taught. But when my feet first touched the ground of Israel more than a decade ago, I still cherished the fallacy that the Master’s words were the main vehicle for his gospel message and that environment and circumstance mattered little, if at all. I soon learned otherwise.

Throughout scripture, the Teacher of teachers and his prophets have invoked their surroundings to verify revelatory acts and sayings. The cosmos is their visual aid. In the very rocks and trees of Israel, God’s meaning is lodged—meaning that can reach the center of the soul. Amid all those surroundings, no figure looms larger on the landscape than does the olive tree.

Religious literature, ancient and modern, is replete with images of a tree of life that is to be planted in a goodly land beside a pure stream.¹ Some typologies regard it as the link at the very navel of the earth—the source of nourishment between parent and child—and place it at the temple mount in Jerusalem, where heaven and earth meet.² Nephi was taught that both the tree of life and the fountain of living waters that sustain it represent the love of God. This love, “which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men,” was, he was inspired to say, “the most

desirable above all things." But even that superlative did not satisfy the angel-narrator of the vision, who responded, "Yea, and the most joyous to the soul" (1 Nephi 11:22–23). Such a tree has symbolized Israel, the family of the faithful, and the Redeemer of Israel. Prophets have sung of the time when the branches that have been rent from that tree and dispersed to the ends of the earth would somehow be gathered. Then, by graftings and prunings, the tree would be renewed and become exquisitely productive (see 1 Nephi 10:12–14).

One Jewish legend identifies the tree of life as the olive tree,³ and with good reason. The olive tree is an evergreen, not a deciduous tree. Its leaves do not seasonally fade nor fall. Through scorching heat and winter cold they are continually rejuvenated. Without cultivation the olive is a wild, unruly, easily corrupted tree. Only after long, patient cultivating, usually eight to ten years, does it begin to yield fruit. Long after that, new shoots often come forth from apparently dead roots. As one stands in the olive groves and is struck by the gnarled tree trunks that are at once ugly and beautiful, it is hard to avoid the impression of travail—of ancient life and renewing life. Today some trees, still productive on the Mount of Olives, are 1,800 years old and perhaps older.⁴ The olive tree appears almost "immortal."

To this day, preparing the rock-pocked land of Israel and then planting, cultivating, pruning, grafting, and harvesting olive trees is an arduous process. Even after the harvest, olives are bitter, useless to man or beast. To make them edible, one must place them in a large stone box, layer them with salt and vinegar, make more layers of olives, and add more purgatives. Slowly the bitterness is purged from them. These refined olives are a delicious staple food that graces the tables of the common people and of the rich.



An olive press in Palestine. It is sobering for people today to visualize the ancient purgation of the olive and the intense, seemingly unending pressures that cause the precious, salving oil to flow. The olive press is an unsurpassed symbol of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the master of the vineyard.

To produce olive oil in ancient times, the olives had to be crushed in a press. Seasoned olives were placed in strong bags and flattened on a furrowed stone. Then a huge, crushing, circular rock was rolled around on top, moved by a mule or an ox encouraged by a stinging whip. Another method used heavy wooden levers or screws twisting beams downward like a winch upon the stone with the same effect: pressure, pressure, pressure—until the oil flowed.

Olive oil was used both internally and externally. It was a cooking oil, made better by heating, and was a condiment for salads and breads and meats. The pure oil had other vital uses: it was an almost universal antidote, reversing the effects of a variety of poisons. It was often used in a poultice believed to drain infection or sickness. As an ointment,

olive oil—mingled with other liquids—soothed bruises and wounds and open sores. Oil and wine were poured by the Good Samaritan into the wounds of the robbed and beaten traveler near Jericho.⁵ Oil and wine were also poured by the temple priests on the altar of the temple.

Olive oil was also the substance of light and heat in Palestine. Into olive lamps—small vessels with a hole at each end—one poured the oil. Even in a darkened room one lamp, one thin flame of light, was enough to lighten the face. A Jewish oral teaching says the drinking of olive oil is likewise light to the mind—that it enhances intellectual processes. The mash that remained after repeated crushings of oil was a household fuel, needed even in the summer in the Judean desert after sunset. The image of pouring oil on troubled waters, and the associated olive branch of peace—such as the offering of peace and relief to Noah after raging seas—were common in Bible lore. In other spiritual contexts oil was the token of forgiveness. Hence Paul speaks of it as “the oil of gladness” (Hebrews 1:9).⁶

Did Jesus know all this? Surely all this—and more. Was there, then, significance in his climactic resort to the Mount of Olives? Is that mount, all of it, symbolic and sacred?

On that mount and the nearby temple mount four holinesses came together: the place, the time, the person, and the name.

First, the *place*. The Mount of Olives overlooked the temple—which by now had been desecrated—the temple that Jesus first called, on a day of cleansing, “my Father’s house,” but later, “My house” (see John 2:16; Matthew 21:13). Beyond the Herodian courts of the temple was a Holy of Holies. Two olive-wood pillars stood before its entrance. Nearby stood the seven-branched Menorah, the perpetual lamp, the everlastingly burning tree. The “heavi-

est and the purest oil," from vessels with the high priest's seal, burned day and night in the Menorah.⁷

For use in the tabernacle in the wilderness Moses had been instructed, "And thou shalt command the children of Israel, that they bring thee pure oil olive beaten for the light, to cause the lamp to burn always" (Exodus 27:20). Later, the rabbis interpreted this to mean that a man, like the olive, must be beaten and bruised, but all in order to glow with light.⁸

We learn in the newly translated *Temple Scroll* (one of the Dead Sea Scrolls) that by at least 150 B.C., a segment of Jewry envisioned a future messianic temple wherein the New Wine Festival was to be followed by a New Oil Festival. One-half *hin* (about three-fourths of a gallon) of oil from each tribe of Israel was to be brought to the temple to light the lamps. The climax was to be the eating of olives and the anointing with new oil. The purpose was to ransom (*kapper*) the year's oil crop for its use by the people and on the temple altar.⁹

A Jewish tradition says that when Adam was about to die, he sent Eve and his son Seth back to the garden for healing oil. At the threshold they were met by an angel who said, "There will be no oil again until the meridian of time when the Messiah comes, and then the oil will be from the olive tree."¹⁰ This tradition saw its fulfillment when Jesus went in his final hours to the Mount of Olives.

Jesus went onto the mount overlooking the temple "as he was wont" (Luke 22:39). In the last days of his life, he lodged or "abode" there (Luke 21:37). On that hill (perhaps halfway up) was a vineyard of olive trees, reminiscent of the allegory of the tame and wild olive tree in the book of Jacob. The trees in that allegorical vineyard would have been hewn down and cast into the fire were it not for the

pleading of the servant (Jacob 5:50). The Lord of the vineyard would be grieved to lose even one tree. The Lord of the vineyard, according to one interpretation, was the Father of us all. The servant in the vineyard was the Messiah. The task, the weightiest in all history.

The garden on the mount is called Gethsemane. *Gat* (*geth*) in Hebrew means “press.” *Shemen* means “oil.”¹¹ This was the garden of the olive press. Remnants of ancient olive presses near cisterns that preserved the costly oil can still be seen in upper Galilee and in Bethany.

As one stands in this garden of the olive press—the setting for the Atonement—it is sobering to visualize the purgation of the olive and the intense, seemingly unending pressure that caused the precious oil to flow. Indeed, the symbolism of the place is inescapable.

Another holiness converged on that event—a holiness of *time*. It was the hour, the week of *Pesach*, Passover—that long-honored sacred celebration of Israel’s divine deliverance from Egypt. After the destruction of the temple in A.D. 72, the ritual was modified. But at the time of Jesus this was the appointed day when they brought the lamb, the unspotted lamb, down that very mount, the Mount of Olives, to the altar. It was roasted and the blood of the lamb was sprinkled on the altar.¹²

The *person* was holy. This was *Yeshua ha-Mashiach*, Jesus the Messiah. As Isaiah foresaw, invoking yet another image of a tree, he was the stem of Jesse, from the stump or root of the house of David (Isaiah 11:1–5; D&C 113). To Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, he had been “the Holy One of Israel.” In the flesh he sat at Jacob’s Well, and to a despised woman of Samaria announced for the first time, “I . . . am he” (John 4:26) who would give to all “living water” (John 4:10).

Finally, the *name* was holy. The root word for *Messiah* in

the book of Daniel means “anointed one,” with connotations of coronation and ordination.¹³ In Gethsemane was the night when in the hardest of hard ways, Jesus would become the *anointed* one. The word *messias*, as used by John, has another Hebrew root: *yīshar* (SHR) meaning to glow with light as one glistens when one is anointed with olive oil.¹⁴ To merit that name, to take it upon him, to seal it everlastingly upon himself—to become the Light of the worlds—Jesus was required to tread the press. In eventual triumph the Messiah was to say, “I have trodden the winepress alone, . . . and none were with me” (D&C 133:50). In this case it is the wine press, not the olive press, but the two merge in allegory as in life. “The Lamb of God hath overcome and trodden the wine-press alone, even the wine-press of the fierceness of the wrath of Almighty God.”¹⁵ It is one thing to take off one’s sandals and trample the grapes in the stone vat. It is another to be trodden upon, trampled, crushed until the very tissues of the heart cry out for relief and release and until “mercy hath compassion on mercy and claimeth her own” (D&C 88:40), “that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people” (Alma 7:12).

“Mine hour,” he had said often, “is not yet come” (John 2:4). But now it had come. As Jesus prayed that night, the motion was internal. It was destruction, not distraction that he threw himself against. Somehow he purged the ultimate bitterness, as bitter as gall, the consequences of death-dealing iniquity of all sons and daughters of God—not just of this earth, but of other earths also.¹⁶

“How?” we ask. But a child can understand. Did he not commend little children to us, promising that the mightiest, the greatest in his kingdom would be as they? Unashamedly little children, without full understanding, wince

and weep with others, and they dance in the contagion of joy. Pain—especially the pain of abandonment—hurts, even the intimation of it. In those of us who are far away, even two thousand years and ten thousand miles away, it hurts enough to unstiffen the neck and melt the heart and bring contrition to the spirit; it hurts enough to make us sick. Or, if we are moved enough to receive Him—who could and did feel, for us with us—it hurts enough to make us well. The pressure worked upon him as the olive press worked upon the olive.

In glorifying the Father, Jesus suffered with a suffering so great that drops of blood came from his pores (Mosiah 3:7; Luke 22:44; D&C 19:18). It is not a spectacle one wishes to recall—rather we recoil—but we are commanded each week to remember that hour. What must it have been like, to have been promised the power to summon legions of angels to end the ordeal—and not to summon them?

When was it enough? During the same night, he was betrayed, accosted, abused—purged like the olive. With lashes he was ripped into, pierced. The descending weight begun on the olive mount was weightier than the cross he was to carry. As the cross ruthlessly held him, he groaned, “I thirst!” And whether in trivial aid or mockery, someone thrust a sponge full of vinegar—one of the purgatives added to olives in the stone boxes—to his lips. “It is finished,” he said (John 19:28–30). “Thy will is done” (JST, Matthew 27:50).

At the last, a spear was thrust into his side. Out of it flowed water and blood, as oil flows from the purged and pressed olive. Simeon, bowed down with age, as he held the infant Jesus in the temple, had prophesied of that last wound, that proof of the full measure of his giving. To Mary he had said, “A sword shall pierce through thy own soul

also, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed” (Luke 2:35).

Today, as we stand amidst the olive groves, the heart hears the promise of modern revelation that the parable of the wise and foolish virgins is yet to be fulfilled: “Wherefore, be faithful, praying always, having your lamps trimmed and burning [alight and afire], and oil with you [reserves equal to days of affliction and of glory], that you may be ready at the coming of the Bridegroom” (D&C 33:17).

And as we stand before the ancient olive press, the heart is invaded with a “never again”: “Never again in indifference will I speak or hear the words, ‘I anoint you with this oil which has been consecrated.’ ” Jesus Christ is the veritable tree and olive beaten for the light, and there flows from him unto this whole earth, and beyond, the redemptive power of healing and soothing and ministering to the needy. When the life of attempted faithfulness is bludgeoned and becomes wearing and wearying, we are to remember that no great and good fruit comes easily. If one is to become like the Savior, the light of the world, it will be necessary to endure the days of affliction and be prepared for joyous reunion with the master-servant of the Lord’s vineyard.

Notes

An earlier form of this essay was published in *Speeches of the Year* (Provo: Brigham Young University, 1983).

1. See Carroll L. Meyers, *The Tabernacle Menorah*, Dissertation Series No. 2, American Schools of Oriental Research (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1976), 133–56; cf. D&C 97:7, 9; 124:26.

2. See E. A. Butterworth, *The Tree at the Navel of the Earth* (Berlin: DeGruyter, 1970).

3. Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 7 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1947), 1:93; 2:119. See also *Apocalypse of Moses* 9, 12. In 2 Enoch 25, a life-giving oil is described, and “the

appearance of that oil was more than a great light, and its anointing was excellent too" (see *Legends of the Jews*, 5:113).

4. *Encyclopedia Americana*, 1979 ed., 30 vols., s.v. "olive," 20:713–15.

5. Luke 10:25–37. See also the apocryphal Gospel of Philip: "The savior gave nothing to the wounded man except wine and oil. It is nothing other than the ointment. And he healed the wounds. For love covereth a multitude of sins." Robert M. Wilson, *The Gospel of Philip* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962); cf. Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), 286. Joseph Smith said of Nauvoo, "If there is a place on earth where men should cultivate the spirit and pour in the oil and wine in the bosoms of the afflicted, it is in this place." *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, Joseph Fielding Smith, comp. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 294.

6. The Greek root of this word is *elaia*, meaning an olive tree or fruit.

7. Leon Yarden, *The Tree of Light* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1971), 43.

8. Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, 2 vols. (New York: Schocken Books, 1947–48), 2:117. Cf. Hosea 14:6.

9. Jacob Milgrom, "The Temple Scroll," *Biblical Archaeologist* (Sept. 1978): 108.

10. Apocalypse of Moses 9:3; 13:1–2.

11. Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), s.v. "Gat" and "Shemen."

12. Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1909), 16.

13. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 602.

14. James Strong, *Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976), 51, No. 3323.

15. D&C 88:106; see also Isaiah 63:3; JST, Revelation 19:15; D&C 76:107; 133:50. In Joseph Smith's translation of Revelation 19:15, in the phrase "he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God," the first *of* is changed to *in*. The *of* renderings make it appear that Jesus was the object of the fierce wrath of God. The *in* revision suggests that as the Son of God he brought his own fierce wrath to bear against sin and sinfulness.

16. D&C 76:24; *Times and Seasons* 4/6 (1 Feb. 1843): 82–85.