

The Olive Press

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My wife and I have returned only within hours from Jerusalem—the old Jerusalem which is now rapidly becoming new. Heavy on our hearts, therefore, is what we experienced there, and I would like to share with you tonight in an ambling fashion, if you will permit, some of those impressions.

A prophecy uttered by the Prophet Joseph Smith in 1842 is in fact being fulfilled before our very eyes: to wit, “Jerusalem must be rebuilt, and the temple, and water come out from under the temple, and the waters of the Dead Sea be healed, . . . and all this must be done before the Son of Man will make His appearance” (*Teachings*, p. 286).

On first touching that ground with our feet more than a decade ago, I think I had a prejudice that the setting of the Savior’s life really was not significant, that the meaning of his life and his words was what mattered, and that the events in the environment and circumstances of the time were not crucial. After many visits since, for we have both visited and lived there, I am of the contrary opinion: that he cared very much about the setting and that meaning is lodged, still, in the very rocks, in the very mountains, in the very trees of Israel.

On an earlier trip a woman past 82 traveled with us. She had to prepare at length, exercise,

and get constant reassurances from her physician that she could endure the rigors. We were touched that, as we turned our backs on a church that has been built near—and some say over—the ancient site of Gethsemane, she who had come so far and had lived so long was on her knees near the place where tradition says Jesus knelt.

Significance of Setting

North of Jerusalem is the Galilee. And I am struck that the location of Caesarea Philippi is at the mount called Hermon. It may be the Mount of Transfiguration. It is, in any case, at the headwaters of the Jordan, which then feeds the Galilee and in turn flows south and is literally the nourishment of all Israel. It was there, and I think he chose the place carefully, that the Savior announced to Peter, after Peter’s confession, that he would build his church as on a rock. I think it is significant that there is there still a huge, faced rock. Below it and in it is a cave, and out of that cave, at the time Jesus stood there, flowed water. Not so since—an

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earthquake changed all that. But was he, therefore, saying to Peter, who he knew by revelation was to be his presiding apostle, and of Peter, who by revelation had recognized him, “Upon this flowing rock I will build my church”? Well, such are the suggestions of the setting. Is it also, one may ask, only happenstance that he chose to be baptized near the waters called dead at the lowest point of the earth—it’s 1200 feet below sea level—descending thus even physically below all things?

Symbolism of Trees

There are trees in Israel, and we are taught from the record that each in a way was significant in his ministry: palm trees, fig trees, oak trees, but most of all, olive trees. To this day the process of planting, cultivating, pruning, and harvesting from olive trees is a laborious one. The olives are at first bitter and useless. Hard labor and pressure are required to produce ripe, mellow olive oil. That, too, is done today. The recognition that, in the time of the Master, olives and olive oil and the olive mash that resulted from the crushing were the very essence of life comes to mind as one stands there.

The Tree of Life

Indulge me for a few moments further on the background of the every idea of trees. Religious literature is singularly impressed with the notion that somehow there is a tree of life representative of eternal life and love that is somehow planted in a goodly land, some traditions say on the very navel of the earth, the highest point of the earth which symbolically at least is the temple mount in Jerusalem, a tree planted and watered by the waters of life whose fruit is the most precious.

Our own Book of Mormon says further of that fruit that is sweet, that is pure, even that it is white. Even now, incidentally, in Hebron, in Israel, there are ripe, magnificent vineyards where the grapes are white, almost transparent. These happen to be the sweetest and the

purest of the grapes. The imagery that it was so precious impressed Nephi after he was given the blessing of recapitulating the vision of his own father, Lehi. He said, “I behold. . . the tree . . . precious above all.” But even that superlative didn’t satisfy the angel, narrator of the vision, who said, “Yea, and the most joyous to the soul” (1 Nephi 11:9, 23).

The tree of life has been utilized through sacred history as the symbol both of Israel and of the Redeemer of Israel. There are traditions that in due time that tree, from which the branches had been ripped off and dispersed, would somehow be planted anew, and there would be graftings and gatherings anew until the tree was again productive.

The Olive Tree

There is more to know about olive culture. It is interesting that the tree is not really a deciduous one. Its leaves never fall off; they are rejuvenated and stay. It is in that sense ever-green, or ever olive. It can be a wild thing without cultivation, but after long and patient culturing, usually eight to ten years, it becomes productive. More than that it continues to be, with age. There are trees today—for new shoots come forth from apparently dead roots—that are known by actual horticultural study to be 1800 years old. There may be trees on the Mount of Olives older than that. One could even say of the olive tree, “It is immortal.”

As for the product of the processes: not just olives to be eaten, not just olive oil used by many today in the Middle East simply as a condiment for salads or as a cooking device. Olive oil was the substance of light and heat in Israel. Olive lamps, into which one poured the pure oil and then lighted it at one end, provided, even in a darkened room, light, enough light. Moreover, the mash, as I have spoken of it, provided fuel and burned long. Not only all this, but the balming influence, the soothing, salving influence of oil, was well known in their midst. The traditions about the olive

branch and of the pouring of oil, was well known in Jesus' own day. We speak today of the olive leaf as a symbol of peace and of forgiveness (see D&C 88). Paul referred to it as the oil of gladness, and it is in that sense also symbolic of joy.

Did Jesus know all this? Surely he did. Was there something then significant in his choice of the mount known as the Mount of Olives? And was it true then, as now, that Mount Olivet was symbolic and sacred, all of it?

Four Holinesses

On that mount four holinesses came together. First, the place. It was eastward from the temple, the temple which by now had been desecrated, the temple which he first called on a day of cleansing, "my Father's house," but which later he spoke of as "my house." In that house was a Holy of Holies with two olive-wood pillars that stood there as entrances. They were, in turn, connected to the menorah, the perpetual lamp, and from them came two kinds of corridors, or tubes, into which were poured olive oil; then the tree burned.

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."

Moses was commanded to teach 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). Such oil was burning in the time of Jesus, but it had lost its sacred significance, or had not yet received its full consecration.

The Place and Time

He went on the mount overlooking the temple mount, as, says the scripture, "he was wont." Luke says in the last days of his life he lodged there, he "abode there," day and night.

On that hill was a garden-orchard. More properly the word is *vineyard*. A vineyard of olive trees? Yes, precisely that same word is used in the parable or allegory in the book of Jacob, of the tame and wild olive tree. The lord of the vineyard, Dr. Sidney B. Sperry believed, was the Father of us all. The servant in the vineyard was the Messiah. The task, the weightiest in all history.

It is called Gethsemane. *Geth* or *gat* means *press*, and *shemen* in Hebrew means *oil*. The place of the olive press. You can see presses still in Israel, for, after the processes of salt and vinegar and pressure, the olives are gathered, placed in a bag, and then with a huge crushing rock—to push it usually requires an animal—crushed until the oil flows. "The place of the olive press."

The time was holy. It was the hour, the week, of Pessach, Passover. We've been privileged to attend that sacrosanct celebration, Passover. Since the destruction of the temple it has been modified, but at the time of Jesus that was the day when they brought the lamb, the faultless lamb, down that very mount—to the altar, or if Passover was celebrated in some homes, to the home, and it was roasted and the blood sprinkled on the altar or, in the homes, on the doorposts. That was the season, the time.

The Person and the Name

Another holiness was the person. It was ha Yeshua Massiach, Jesus the Messiah, a stem, so Isaiah prophesied, of Jesse from the stump or the root of the house of David—he who had been the Revealer to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, he who had not only approached, but sat upon Jacob's well, so the tradition says, and to a despised woman for the first time announced, "I am he." I am he from whom shall flow living waters. It was he who had been prophesied. The word *messiah*, as it appears today in the King James Version of Daniel, has roots meaning the "anointed one,"

with connotations of coronation and ordination. Now came the night when he would become the anointing one.

The word *messias*, as it is used by John in the Gospel of John, has another root, *tsahar*, meaning to glow with light as one glistens when one is anointed. To earn the name, the holiness of the name, he had to tread the press. The image of the press permeates Isaiah, as it does modern revelation (see Isaiah 63:3; D&C 76:107, 88:106). One day he will say, “I have trodden the press” (in this case the wine press, but the two merge) “I have trodden the wine press alone; I have trodden the wine press of the fierceness of the wrath of Almighty God.”

Gethsemane

Now that we have spoken of the holy place, the holy time, the holy person, and the holy name, a glimpse of what must have gone through him and of what he must have gone through. “Mine hour,” he had said often, “has not yet come,” but now it had. After the Last Supper one episode ended, “And it was night.” That’s an explanation—I think we need no other—for why the three, even though he pled, couldn’t stay awake. Somewhere, somewhere on that mountain, he knelt.

We have witnessed the effort of pious Jews as they stand—they do not kneel—at the place that is but a remnant of the wall below the ancient walls of the temple mount. Rhythmically, they throw their whole bodies into their prayer. They respond to ridicule: “We are fighting distraction. We want to concentrate. Movement helps.” The motions of that night, I suggest to you, were both internal and external. Somehow the bitterness, as bitter as gall, of iniquity entered him. It was the comprehension of the spiritual death, not just of the family of our Father who dwell upon this earth, but, we have been taught by the Prophet Joseph Smith, of other earths also. (So the atonement of Jesus Christ is, as Brother Maxwell has testified, intergalactic.) That

burden, that bitterness, he vicariously took within him.

“How?” we cry out, but a child can understand. Pain, even the presence of it to those of us who merely stand detached and observe, hurts. He who did not and will not take a backward step from the will of the Father, supersensitive, could and did feel for and with us. The pressure worked upon him. Somewhere on the road between the north and south, he cried out anticipating, “Father, save me from this hour.” We don’t know how long the interim between that sentence and prayer and the next, but then he cried out, “But for this cause came I unto this hour. Father, glorify thy name.” And the voice said, “I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again” (John 12:27–28).

Luke, perhaps a physician, is the one who says that great drops of blood came from his pores. The bitterness oozed. It is not a spectacle one wishes to recall, but we have been commanded, and weekly we memorialize it in an ordinance called the sacrament. All his preparation and all that he could summon from his own strength was not sufficient. “More earnestly,” says the record, he cried out. An angel came, strengthening him—strengthening but not delivering. What is it like to have the power, to have been promised the power, to summon legions of angels, to end the ordeal—and not to summon them?

He was, during that same night, betrayed. He was, after it, taken prisoner. He was broken into, pierced, by scourging. And the merciful reading of Pilate’s motives in permitting that is that he hoped it would suffice for those who were crying out against him. It did not. The weight, I submit to you, had begun there on the mount, much greater a weight than the weight of the cross that he was then to bear.

Sitting on the stand tonight is your Regional Representative, Dr. Russell M. Nelson, who once permitted me to put my ear down to a man who had just undergone surgery and who was now suffering radical

internal bleeding. He wanted me to hear what he whispered. What he whispered was, "I am thirsty." "I thirst," Jesus said, and in response—was it an act of appeasement or one of mockery?—a sponge of vinegar was put to his lips. According to the Joseph Smith Translation, his last words were not just, "it is finished," but "My father's will is done" (see JST Matthew 27:54).

Conclusions

Now, brothers and sisters, what conclusions from all this? Let me say first that I pray that hereafter, when you speak or hear the words, "I anoint you with this consecrated oil," you will remember what the consecration cost.

I pray that, as you sit (but in our spirits as we kneel) at the sacrament table, and you are asked to remember his body and blood, you will recall that he is the veritable tree and olive beaten for the light, and that there flows from him unto this whole earth, and beyond, the redemptive power of healing and soothing and ministering to the needy.

I pray that in hours of gladness, should your cup run o'er, you will remember that, to make that possible, a cup, the bitterest of cups, was drunk.

I pray that when your life, the life of attempted faithfulness, is bludgeoned and becomes wearing and wearying, you will remember that no great and good fruit comes easily, that you are the olive plants who were supposedly planted anew in him, and that only time and suffering and endurance can produce the peaceable and perfect fruit which he yearns for you to have.

And finally I pray that, as we seek to be what he said he was, the light of the world, we will endure the days of affliction and be prepared for the day of joyous reunion. All the

prophets have promised that both are ahead. One day he will honor the Mount of Olives again. This time he will descend in triumph. When his foot touches it, the mount itself shall separate, be shaken, and an earthquake will follow. The earth will be purged and cleansed and will eventually shine with celestial light. We are promised we may share in those culminations to descend with him or to ascend to meet him. And either of those is glorious.

Over and over, he spoke of himself as the Bridegroom preparing his own for a feast, the feast we have been promised in our own Doctrine and Covenants, when all worthies who have been made worthy will gather. In the beginning of this dispensation, the Master counseled, "Wherefore, be faithful, praying always, having your lamps trimmed" (that means full) "and burning" (that means alight and afire) "and oil with you, that you may be ready at the coming of the Bridegroom" (D&C 33:17)—and still later "that you may abide the day" (D&C 61:39).

Brothers and sisters, my testimony: I bear witness that Jesus is the Messiah and that he could not have known, according to the flesh, how to succor his people according to their infirmities unless in Gethsemane he had gone through what he went through (Alma 7). I bear testimony that his compassion for us, what one of the prophets calls "the bowels of mercy," reaches out to the Father, who grieves that any tree in his vineyard should be lost. And that the Master pleads even now for more time for you and for me, until we, too, have been purged and can sing the song of redeeming love. I bear my testimony that he lives, that he came to bring life, and life more abundantly, and that he is our Redeemer. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.