Séverine Lepape:
“Divine Kinship”

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SHADOW OF THE TREE

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Séverine Lepape

DIVINE KINSHIP Old Testament and New



Tree of Jesse, *Bible des Capucins* (ca. 1150-1200), Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits, Latin 16746, 7v. Online: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b85144288.

Jesse lies sleeping. The stem, in the form of a solid trunk, extends from his crotch. On the main, vertical branch, King David, his son, King Solomon, the Virgin Mary and, at the very top, Christ, haloed by the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are depicted. On the sides, in medallions, all the prophets of the Old Testament are represented. The winged man to the right of Jesse, symbol of Saint Matthew, turns towards him and declares *"sic deus ex Jesse voluit carnaliter esse"* (Thus, God wanted his existence in the flesh to originate from Jesse).

This image of the Tree of Jesse draws its textual sources from a prophecy in the Book of Isaiah, chapter XI. Jesse, at the origin of this stem, is the father of King David. From the fourth century onwards, Saint Jerome understood and glossed the prophecy as the Old Testament announcement of the coming of Christ (the flower) through Jesse (the root) and the Virgin (the stem).

"And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots."

Isaiah XI:1, *King James Bible* (1611). Online: https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Isaiah-Chapter-11/.

The prophecy in Isaiah XI served as textual source for the Tree of Jesse image.

In twelfth-century manuscripts, the Tree of Jesse became the image used to visually explain the beginning of the book of Saint Matthew, the *Liber Generationis*. This text begins with a genealogical list of Christ's ancestors from Abraham to Joseph. In the *Bible des Capuchins* (ca. 1150-1200), the Tree of Jesse image is contained within an illumination of the letter "L."

"The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren; [...] And Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ. So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David until the carrying away into Babylon are fourteen generations; and from the carrying away into Babylon unto Christ are fourteen generations."

Matthew I:1-17, *King James Bible* (1611). Online: https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Matthew-Chapter-1/.

The first chapter of the book of Saint Matthew, verses 1-17, gives the genealogy of Christ. The *Bible des Capucins* illustrates the textual genealogy with a Tree of Jesse.

The notion of incarnation was essential for medieval theologians. Christ could only save mankind because he had become flesh. And how could he become flesh, if not by being born and becoming part of a biological lineage? This is what the Tree of Jesus shows: the kinship of Christ.

DIVINE KINSHIP Virgin Mary

Christ is incarnated in a lineage of the kings of Judah since Jesse, but the original sin transmitted by this lineage is broken thanks to Mary, who begets Christ by the Holy Spirit while remaining a virgin. A woman of the flesh but without sin, she constitutes the point of articulation of these two poles. She is the one who makes it possible to achieve divine spiritual kinship. The ascending plant offers the principle of hierarchization of the two notions, with Christ at the top and the ancestors at the bottom.[1]

From a genealogical point of view, she is also the only one who can make the link between the Old and New Testaments because Joseph, a descendant of David and the kings of Judah, is not Christ's biological father. Christ's father is God. So that Christ could have a relationship with Jesse, theologians invented a story for Mary. In the eleventh century, she became a descendant of the kings of Judah. The Tree of Jesse can therefore also be understood as the Virgin's genealogy. Until the end of the fourteenth century, the Virgin Mary was depicted as an adult, separate from and subordinate to her son in the Tree of Jesse. But from the 1400s, in France, she gained a new position: she became the culmination of the Tree. Christ is depicted as a child in the arms of his mother. From *virga* (the stem), she became the *flos* (blossom), occupying the place once accorded to Christ in the Tree of Jesse.



Tree of Jesse from Jacques de Voragine: *Légende dorée* (late 13th c.), Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits, French 245, 84r. Online: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8425999d.

This illumination from the *Légende dorée* depicts the Virgin Mary as offspring of Anne and Joachim. Under it, two scenes show the kinship of the Virgin. The first illustrates

her birth from the elderly Anna, who was not supposed to be of reproductive age. On the right, Anna is represented with her three daughters. A legend of growing popularity in the eleventh century in Europe said that she was married three times and had from each union a girl: Mary, the mother of Christ, Mary Salome, who begets Saint John the Evangelist and Saint Jacques the Minor, and Mary Cleophas, mother of Joseph Barsabbas, Simon, Jude, and James the Great. All those apostles are believed, according to the legend, to be cousins of Jesus.

Jacques de Voragine's *Légende dorée* (late 13th c.) speaks of the history of the Virgin Mary: all the ancestors of the *Liber Generationis* are to be found there. But the stem bears at the very end her parents, Anne and Joachim, who are not present in the text of Saint Matthew. They embrace. Since the twelfth century, the Church and theologians had been engaged in a protracted debate over the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin. The idea that she was conceived without sexual intercourse gradually gained ground, supported by the story of the Meeting at the Golden Gate of her elderly parents. As they embraced or kissed, they conceived the Virgin. She emerges from a white flower, a symbol of her purity.

DIVINE KINSHIP Spiritual Kinship

The Tree of Jesse expresses Christ's kinship in a hierarchical way, idealized by the Church and its representatives. Since the Gregorian reform of the eleventh century, clerics believed themselves to be separated from the laity by their lifestyle: chaste and celibate, they renounced procreation. Yet they did not think of themselves outside the bonds of kinship. Their relationships are governed by spiritual rather than corporeal kinship.[2]
So it is not surprising that at the beginning of the sixteenth century religious orders represented their history and the ties that bind them according to the paradigm of the Jesse Tree,[3] which can be understood as an "anti-genealogy."



Tree of Jesse and Tree of Dominicans from Hans Holbein, *High Altar of the Dominican Church in Frankfurt* (1501) [76.3 x 277.5cm], Frankfurt: Städel Museum, HM 6-20; LG 1. Online: https://sammlung.staedelmuseum.de/en/work/high-altar-of-the-dominican-church-in-frankfurt-1.

On the outer panels of the altarpiece, Hans Holbein created a dialogue between a Tree of Jesse and a Dominican tree. Saint Dominic is seated in a cathedra, surrounded by three Dominicans: Vincent Ferrier, Thomas Aquinas, and Peter of Verona. The stem starts from Saint Dominic's chest and develops into flowering tendrils, from which emerge ten illustrious Dominicans.
Opposite, the Tree of Jesse shows Jesse seated, surrounded by Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Dominic spiritually begets the members of the order. This lineage is surmounted by the Virgin and Child, who offers a scapular to one of the Dominicans, whereas in the Tree of Jesse, she gives a fruit to the Child Jesus, symbolizing the Virgin's womb and their maternal link.

The Dominican, renouncing the world and the system of carnal kinship that characterizes it, finds in the Virgin – more than a patron saint – a mother, in Saint Dominic a father, and in the other Dominicans brothers.
The Tree of Jesse is neither an appropriate image for Isaiah's prophecy, nor a perfect image of Christ's or Mary's genealogy: as an original and powerful creation of the medieval mentality, it is an image of ideal kinship in which the vegetal is uniting, ordering, and hierarchizing the lineage of god, between carnal and spiritual generation.

Notes

1 Anita Guerreau-Jalabert: "L'Arbre de Jessé et l'ordre chrétien de la parenté", in: Dominique Iogna Prat, Eric Palazzo, Daniel Russo (eds.), *Marie: le culte de la Vierge dans la société médiévale*, Paris: Beauchesne (1996) pp. 133-170.
2 Anita Guerreau-Jalabert: "Spiritus et Caritas: le baptême dans la société médiévale", in: Françoise Héritier-Augé, Elisabeth Copet-Rougier (eds.), *La Parenté spirituelle*, Paris: Archives Contemporaines (1996), pp. 133-203;
Jérôme Baschet: *La Civilisation féodale: de l'an mil à la colonisation de l'Amérique*, Paris: Flammarion (2006), pp. 653-681.
3 Dominique Donadieu-Rigaut*: Penser en images les ordres religieux, XIIe-XVe siècle*, Paris: Editions Arguments (2005).

Further Readings

Séverine Lepape: *Représenter la parenté du Christ et de la Vierge: l'iconographie de l'arbre de Jessé en France du Nord et en Angleterre, du XIIIe siècle au XVIe siècle* (Doctoral dissertation, EHESS Paris 2007), 11 vol. (506, 142, 132, 74, 59, 63, 95, 88, 54, 132 f.).

Séverine Lepape: "L'arbre de Jessé: une image de l'Immaculée Conception?", in: *Médiévales* 57 (2009), pp. 113–136.