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In Hac Fossa Me Reconde

by Sigfrid Estborn

It is a special pleasure to publish this study in comparative hymnology by a Swedish scholar, which comes to us through the good offices of our friend Dr. Eric J. Sharpe. Dr. Estborn was formerly Principal of Gurukul Theological Seminary, Madras.

AMONG those things which the different parts of the divided Christian Church have in common is a vast number of Christian hymns. Several investigations on this matter have shown that A. M. Toplady's "Rock of Ages" in this respect comes very near the top of the list. This hymn appears in the hymn-books of nearly all Christian churches all over the world. It has become really ecumenical property.

The reader, however, must not expect this essay to contain an analysis of the theology of this famous hymn. The writer's objective is a much humbler one, namely that of tracing the roots of the chief imagery of the hymn. The essay will offer a merely historical research into the origin of the verbal content of the hymn.

The story of the circumstances of the first publication of the hymn has often been told and is well known. It is one of the many paradoxes in the history of the Christian Church, that this most ecumenical hymn was born in a hot religious controversy and was first published as a formidable weapon of opposition in a theological debate.

I. THE STORY

In the *Gospel Magazine or Treasury of Divine Knowledge, Designed to promote Experimental Religion*, there appeared in 1776 an article, "A remarkable Calculation," written by A. M. Toplady. He told a story of a man who had landed himself in a most miserable situation on account of a debt which he, in reality, never would be able to pay. Transferring the situation to the spiritual life, the writer made a calculation of how much sin a man would commit in just one minute of his life, and what the amount of debt would be in a few years, and in a long life. The result, of course, would be an enormous debt which never could be paid. "Eternity itself, so far from clearing us of the dreadful arrear, would only add to the score by plunging us deeper and deeper, even to infinity." The article was written in opposition to the Wesleyan doctrine of a sanctification which would result in almost perfect freedom from sin. The attack was very vehement and unbalanced, and would probably soon have fallen into oblivion had it not been for the poem by which the writer

concluded his article: "Rock of ages cleft for me." In this hymn he summed up his own theology of salvation: by grace alone we are saved.

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to thy cross I cling.
Naked, come to Thee for dress,
Helpless look to Thee for grace . . .

This hymn seems to give an adequate expression to the feelings and experiences of a sinner who has become truly aware of his sin and desperate need of salvation.

II. THE IMAGERY

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee.

The symbolism contained in these well known lines has become integrated into the religious language of almost the whole Christian world. From where does it come? Its origin is not altogether clear. Every reader of the Bible of course, will be familiar with the many-faceted symbolism of "the rock". Holy mountains—Horeb-Sinai, Nebo, Zion, Carmel, Tabor, Hermon—have a prominent place in the Old Testament. They are all "rocks of ages". They symbolize steadfastness, faithfulness, strength, help, refuge. The Lord himself is likened to a rock (Ps. 144: 1), "the rock of salvation" (Ps. 89: 27).

Yet there is something more in the symbolism of the "rock of ages" in Toplady's poem. The rock is "cleft", and the sinner takes refuge in it. In looking for a biblical origin of this feature of the symbol reference has often been made to the story of Moses smiting the rock in the desert, so that water came out of it and the people could drink (Ex. 17: 6; Num. 20: 11; Ps. 78: 16). Paul refers to this event, interpreting the water as "spiritual drink"—"and the rock was Christ" (1 Cor. 10: 4).

But even so it does not give a satisfactory explanation of the symbolism in Toplady's verse. The biblical references speak of water to drink coming out of the rock that is cleft. Toplady's symbol, however, speaks of the cleft as a refuge, in which the sinner "hides" himself. There is nothing of that in the biblical references mentioned above. We will have to look into other biblical stories for this purpose.

Sometimes reference has been made to the story of Moses standing in the cleft of a rock, waiting for the glory of God to pass by (Ex. 33: 21 ff.).¹ Others have pointed to the story of Elijah taking refuge in a cave at Horeb, waiting for the Lord (1 Kings 19: 9).

It may be said that Toplady's symbolism is a combination of all these references. Yet it seems to be a little too complicated to serve

¹ Richard Bingham, *Hymnologia Christiana Latina* (London, 1871), p. 50.

as a satisfactory explanation. This may be the reason for a story that has been repeatedly told in connection with the "Rock of Ages". At the roadside in Burringdon Coome, near the place where Toplady was living, is shown a great rock which is split by a fissure from the bottom almost to the top. It is said that the poet once was overtaken by a thunderstorm there and took refuge in this cleft till the storm had passed. It was on this occasion, the story says, that the idea of this hymn came to him.²

There is, however, no historical foundation for this story, and most scholars doubt the truth of it. A similar story is told of Charles Wesley in connection with his hymn "Jesu, lover of my soul". There are doubts also about that story, though in his case it seems to fit better. In the case of Toplady's hymn it does not fit well, particularly when we consider what "cleft" the hymn is speaking of: the "riven side" of the Saviour. For the real origin of the symbolism of Toplady's hymn we may have to look elsewhere. The objective of this essay is to show that it can be found in the poetry of the medieval mysticism of Christ's passion. But before we turn to this poetry it may be appropriate to say a few words in general about that mysticism.

III. THE MEDIAEVAL CHRIST-MYSTICISM

The Christian crusades to the Holy Land in the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries ended in a tragic fiasco. But they created many unexpected effects and fruits in the life of the European peoples. Among these fruits was a new kind of piety. Thousands and thousands of people took part in these wars, came to the Holy Land, walked on the roads where Jesus and his apostles once had been walking, saw the places where the holy events of the life of Jesus had taken place, first and foremost the places of the suffering. Many of these crusaders returned to their homes in Europe and told their relatives and friends of what they had seen. Christ and his life came alive to the people in Europe as never before. This created a personal devotion to Jesus and a new love for his person.³

This Jesus-devotion, as is well known, had an epoch-making effect on many aspects of the religious life of Europe, above all on Christian mysticism. It was St. Bernard who, in his meditation, replaced abstract spiritual subjects by the events of the passion of Christ. Thereby he made mediaeval mysticism really Christian. The person of Christ became the centre of Christian meditation. Bernard wanted to make the sufferings of Christ as real as possible to his mind, to make himself one with Christ in his passion. His meditation became

² James H. Hodson, *Hymn Studies: Their message in biography and devotion* (London, 1925), p. 12.

³ Edvard Lehmann, *Mystik* (Stockholm, 1915), pp. 158 ff.

an *imitatio Christi* in his sufferings. St. Bernard meditated in his prayers on the details of the passion, on the wounded head of Christ, on his pierced feet and hands, on the open wound in his side.

St. Bernard's influence went far and wide, and everywhere we meet these features in this passion mysticism. Mediaeval prayer-books from the 12th century onwards are full of it. How concretely people tried to make the details of the passion live in their meditations we can see in the pictures which illumine the pages of some of these books. There are pictures of the thorns in the crown, of the nails, of the wounds in his body. "Thus big were the nails that pierced his hands and feet", "thus wide was the wound in his side", etc.

IV. THE POEM "AD LATUS"

Many prayers were later made into poems, some of which are well known to us. Most famous among these is a poem divided into seven parts, each one devoted to a special detail in the passion: the first to the feet of the Saviour, the second to his knees, the third to his hands, the fourth to his side, the fifth to his breast, the sixth to his heart, the seventh to his sacred head.⁴

For a long time this poem was supposed to have been written by St. Bernard, but it has been proved beyond doubt that it was written by Arnold of Louvain in the 13th century.⁵ For our present purpose it is the fourth part of this poem that is of special interest, the poem *Ad Latus* (to the Side). I quote from the Latin text some relevant verses (along with my own translation):

Salve, latus Salvatoris,
In quo latet mel dulcoris,
In quo patet vis amoris,
De quo scatet fons cruoris,
Qui corda lavat sordida.

Ecce, tibi adpropinquo;
Parce, Iesu, si delinquo;
Verecunda quidem fronte,
Tamen ad te veni sponte
Scrutari tua vulnera.

In hac fossa me reconde,
Infer meum cor profunde,
Ubi iacens incalescat
Et in pace conquiescat,
Nec prorsus quemquam timeat.

Hora mortis meus flatus
Intret, Iesu, tuum latus;
Hic exspirans in te vadat,
Ne hunc leo trux invadat,
Sed apud te permaneat.⁶

Blessed be the Saviour's side,
In which sweetest cures abide,
In which love reveals its power,
From which flows the blood outpoured,
Which washes clean a sordid heart.

Lo, to Thee I now draw near.
O, have mercy, Jesus dear.
Full of shame I bow before Thee.
Yet my troubled heart here drives me
To search Thy holy wounds for cure.

In this cleft me safely hide,
Let my heart therein abide,
Where resting it will quicken,
And by anguish never stricken,
Henceforth will it fear nothing.

In the hour of my death,
Jesus, let my fleeting breath,
Here expiring, find protection
'Gainst the lion's grim affliction,
With Thee ever be secure.

⁴ St. Bernard, *Opera Omnia* (Paris, 1609), cols. V, 55-56.

⁵ G. M. Dreves, *Ein Jahrtausend Lateinischer Hymnendichtung*, I (Leipzig, 1909), pp. 323 ff.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 326.

Having Toplady's hymn in mind when reading this mediaeval poem, one will immediately note the line *In hac fossa me reconde*, "in this cleft me safely hide". Here is the same idea of the cleft as a hiding place. Already this fact points to a connexion between the mediaeval poem and Toplady's hymn.⁷

But there are several other features common to the two poems. The mediaeval poem is a devotion "*Ad Latus*", "To the Side", of the suffering Saviour. The "cleft" in Toplady's hymn is "the riven side" of Christ.

De quo scattet fons cruoris,
Qui corda lavat sordida—

"from which flows the well of blood outpoured, which washes clean a sordid heart". This reminds us of Toplady's verse:

Let the water and the blood,
From Thy riven side which flowed
Be of sin the double cure,
Cleanse me from its guilt and power.

The sinner approaches the Saviour, bowing down in shame, yet seeking relief in His wounds, praying for mercy:

Ecce tibi adpropinquo,
Parce, Iesu, si delinquo.

In Toplady's hymn:

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy Cross I cling . . .

The poem ends with a supplication for succour and protection in the hour of death, *hora mortis*, praying that the fleeting breath may be granted refuge in the Saviour's side: *meus flatus intret, Iesu, tuum latus*. There the soul will for ever be saved from the roaring lion. In Toplady's hymn the terrifying vision of *leo trux* is replaced by the thought of "the judgement throne".

It is interesting to note that Gladstone's Latin version of "Rock of Ages", *Jesu, pro me perforatus*,⁸ on some points comes fairly near to the vocabulary of the mediaeval poem *Ad Latus*.

V. MEDIATING LINKS

That there exists some connection between the mediaeval poem *Ad Latus* and Toplady's hymn "Rock of Ages" seems evident. This, however, does not necessarily mean that the connection was direct. Whether Toplady was aware of the mediaeval poem and had it in mind when he wrote his hymn is not known. The connexion may have been mediated in some way or other. There are several ways in which the mediaeval imagery may have reached him. Through many channels mediaeval mysticism streamed into evangelical Christen-

⁷ S. Estborn, *Prayerbooks, Medieval and Evangelical* (Guntur, 1937), p. 12.

⁸ Richard Bingham, *Hymnologia Christiana Latina* (London, 1871).

dom. Mediaeval prayer-books delivered a rich material to evangelical prayer-books in the 16th and 17th centuries. J. Arndt's *Paradies Gärtlein* had its mediaeval counterparts in books like *Hortulus Animae* and *Paradisus Animae*. Andreas Musculus used for his prayer-book *Precandi Formulae* much of the treasures of the prayer-life of mediaeval mysticism. The same is the case with Caspar Schwenckfeld's *Deutsch Passional unsers Herrn Jesu Christi*. These are only a few examples. Lutheran hymn-writers translated many mediaeval poems and introduced them as hymns into evangelical hymn-books.⁹

For our present investigation Paul Gerhardt's translations into German are of particular interest. He translated and adapted among other things the above-mentioned seven parts of the poem of Christ's passion,¹⁰ most of which later have been translated into English several times.¹¹

With the Herrnhut Brethren and the Moravian movement in the 18th century a new wave of mediaeval mysticism flowed into the life of evangelical Christendom. Everyone who has studied the devotional literature of the Bernardian passion mysticism will recognize the source of the Moravian devotion to the Saviour, to "the blood", "the wounds", "the hole in the side" of Christ. *Das Gesang-Buch der Herrnhut und anderer Brüdergemeinden* (1741) contained not only Paul Gerhardt's *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden* ("O sacred head. . ."), but also, in other hymns, a number of the mediaeval expressions typical for this kind of Jesus-devotion, like

Zu deinem Wunden fliehe ich,
In deiner Seiten stärk ich mich

or

Die angefochtene Seel
Erlang in deiner Seitenhöl ..
Das Gnadn Öl

or

Schliess mich in deine Wunden ein,
Das ich fürm Feind kan sicher seyn.

These and other hymns were translated into English and published in the Moravian Hymn-book. They have greatly influenced the Wesleys, both John and Charles. In England many found them too sentimental, and some of these expressions of Jesus-devotion were considered to be too emotional and even distasteful. But in Charles

⁹ S. Estborn, *Evangeliska Svenska Bönböcker under Reformationstidevarvet* (Akad. avh. Lund, 1929), pp. 96 ff.

¹⁰ Philipp Wackernagel, *Paul Gerhardts Geistliche Lieder* (Gütersloh, 1907).

¹¹ Th. B. Hewitt, *Paul Gerhardt as a Hymn-writer, and his Influence on English Hymnody* (Yale University Press, 1918).

Wesley's hymns they were purified and given a worthy and beautiful form.

Toplady was well acquainted with these hymns and was also himself influenced by them. In spite of his opposition to the Wesleyan perfection-doctrine, he accepted much of this poetry, and in his own collection of *Psalms and Hymns for Public and Private Worship* he included several of these hymns.

All these things are part of the background to Toplady's religious poetry. The roots of his hymn "Rock of Ages" reach deep down into the history of Christian devotion.

VI. CONCLUSION

Finally, knitting the end of this essay to its beginning, we may ask the question: how is it that this hymn, born in a theological controversy, has become the highly esteemed and loved property of Christian churches all over the world? The answer may give some food for thought in our present debate on "Salvation today". Is salvation a personal concern of the individual, the change of his personal life and his ways among men? Or is it a change of the structures, cultural, social and political, which form men's life, the liberation from social and political oppression, and exploitation, enabling men to live a worthy and meaningful human life?

The Christian answer is, of course, Both! And we are assured by some—not by all—advocates of a "new theology", that there is no intention to minimize the importance of the individual and personal aspect of salvation. But from many statements in theological discussions and in reports of mission conferences and meetings one often gets the impression that the concern is mainly for a change of social and political structures, and one has an uneasy feeling that the new enthusiasm gets its inspiration less from a personal commitment to the Saviour than from other ideologies and a concern for social and political aims.

The enormous popularity of Toplady's hymn in the Christian churches is an evidence that its message corresponds to a fundamental and deeply-felt need in human life. "Rock of Ages" is a reminder that salvation first and foremost is a liberation from personal sin and guilt through the grace of God in the cross of Christ.

Perhaps I should add a slight reservation by quoting a famous word from St. Bernard: *Mihi quidem, de aliis nescio* ("For me anyhow; as to others I do not know").

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