HYMN INTERPRETATION

EMILY R. BRINK

There in God's Garden

We owe the English text of "There in God's Garden" to Erik Routley, who prepared this unrhymed loose paraphrase from a prose translation of the Hungarian hymn "*Paradicsomnak te szép élo Fája*" for inclusion in the 1974 edition of *Cantate Domino*. Routley served as chair of the editorial board for that ecumenical hymnal published by the World Council of Churches, and he was undoubtedly instrumental in seeing to it that there was at least one example of a hymn from Hungary, along with translations in German and English. Dieter Trautwein worked with Vilmos Gyöngyösi to prepare the German text, which is more a translation. Routley's text is so different from the original that it could be better considered his own text, inspired by the Hungarian hymn.[1] Yet, it is a powerful link to a tradition about which little is known; at the time, Routley wrote that this hymn "is just about all that is yet available from Hungarian Protestantism."[2] We still have little access to translations of Hungarian hymn texts, but "There in God's Garden," is a wonderful example, made especially memorable by a recent tune by American composer K. Lee Scott.

The Text

The text was written for Good Friday by Pécselyi Király Imre (c.1585–c.1641), who began a career as a school teacher in Komarom (now in Slovakia) before studying theology in Heidelberg (1609–1612). In 1615 he became a pastor in a Reformed church in Komárom, later in Érsekújvár.[3] He also served as dean of the *tractus* (like a classis or presbytery). He wrote several studies, including a popular introduction to rhetoric, a catechism dedicated to the Protestant soldiers in Érsekújvár, and a theological treaty. He also wrote several hymns that are still included in Hungarian hymnals, including this one, *Paradiczomnak te szép elö fája* ("You beautiful living tree of Paradise").

The scriptural sweep of the text is breathtaking, moving from Genesis to Revelation in the opening two lines. The text begins with the reference to the Garden of Eden, with all kinds of trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food, with "the tree of life also in the midst of the garden" (Gen. 2:9). The very next line takes us to the last chapter of the Bible, in a description not of a garden, but of a city, with the tree of life somehow on either side of the river of the water of life, "and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations" (Rev. 22:2).

The second stanza identifies Jesus as the tree of life. A closer look at the tree reveals branches that bear "scars of suffering" from those who "feed on its life-blood." The blood language is Eucharistic in tone; our very lives are rooted in Jesus, our Savior (Matt. 1:21); our nourishment comes from him, who gave his life-blood for us. The identity of Jesus as the Tree of Life could be seen as an extension of two of the "I am" passages in the Gospel of John. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35–58), indicating that eternal life comes through feeding on Christ. Jesus also said, "I am the true vine" (John 15:1–8), to which we are grafted; we cannot bear fruit unless we abide in Christ.

From the whole tree in stanza one, to the branches in stanza two, we now take an even closer look at thorns "not its own" that are tangled in its foliage. Once more the John 15 passage comes to mind: "Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned." But this is not the end. In a direct invitation, we are invited to look even closer: "Yet, look, it lives!" This exclamation of joy and hope come in the exact center of the text. Christ as the vine, even with branches that deserve to be burned and destroyed, is not destroyed or consumed by our sin. Christ lives, and in his life, we find hope for life.

Stanza four now returns to the branches. If we consider Christ as the vine, and ourselves as the branches, connected to Christ, this stanza represents the Body of Christ echoing his words of invitation, "Come to me, ye weary" (Matt. 11:28).

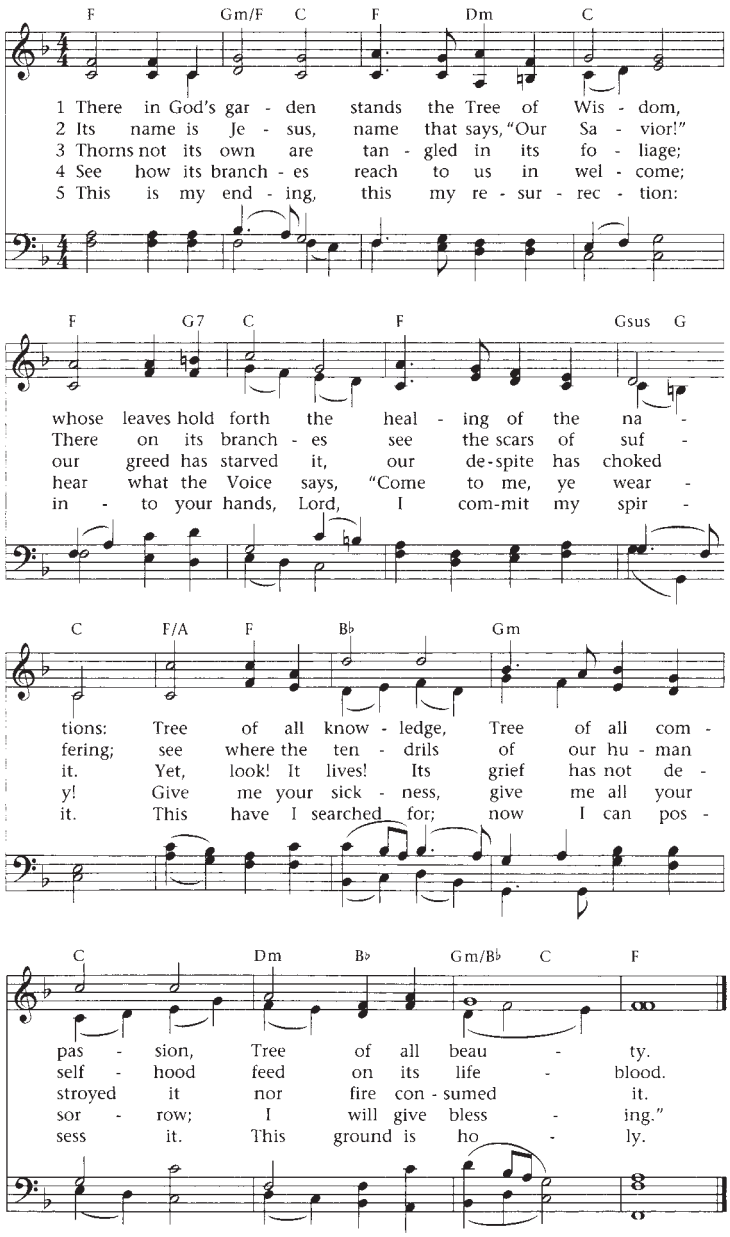
In stanza five, suddenly the pronouns become first person singular; a personal testimony that our own resurrection is rooted in the resurrection of Christ. Like Simeon in the temple exclaimed when he saw Jesus, we too exclaim with the psalmist: "Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God" (Ps. 31:5).

The text could well have ended here. But one final stanza returns to the eschatological hints of the opening reference to the new Jerusalem and the tree of life. Now the vision of St. John opens for us to see all heaven singing in thanks and praise to Christ who offers us life and hope. The final line, balancing out the invitation of stanza three to "look" at Christ, now invites all peoples and nations to "take, take it freely," one final eucharistic reference.

The Music

The Hungarian tune dating from 1744, still found in Hungarian hymnals, was also included in *Cantate Domino*. For the inclusion of the text in *Rejoice in the Lord* (Eerdmans, 1985), Routley followed the English penchant for separating text and tune combina-

There in God's Garden



6 All heaven is singing, "Thanks to Christ whose Passion
offers in mercy healing, strength, and pardon.
Peoples and nations, take it, take it freely!"
Amen! Our Savior!

Text: Erik Routley (1917–1982), based on a Hungarian hymn by Pécselyi Király Imre c.1585–c.1641. © 1976, Hinshaw Music, Inc.
Printed with permission. 11 11 11 5

Music: K. Lee Scott (b. 1950). Tune Copyright © 1987 MorningStar Music Publishers All rights Reserved. Used by Permission. SHADES MOUNTAIN

tions, and chose DIVA SERVATRIX, a little known tune that did not serve the text well. It was not until K. Lee Scott wrote a new tune for this text that other North American hymnals began to include it.

Scott wrote the tune SHADES MOUNTAIN for Routley's text as a commission for the Episcopal Churches in the Diocese of Alabama for their Year of Evangelism in 1995. He named the tune after the mountain on which he lives near Birmingham, Alabama; Shades Mountain is the first ripple on the bottom of the Appalachian chain. He remembers studying Routley's texts ("because Routley had such an eye for texts") and being drawn especially to this one because it was so panoramic. In fact, its very panoramic scope makes it difficult to decide where to place it in a hymnal. Scott remembers late at night sitting on the organ bench with just the organ light on in little Altadena Valley Presbyterian Church, walking back and forth from the organ bench down the aisles, as the tune gradually emerged out of his meditating on the text.

The exact repetition of the rhythm of the three long lines help make this tune very accessible, even though there is no direct repetition of phrases. Scott describes this tune as belonging to the ADESTE FIDELES family of tunes, simple and sure-footed. It climbs up a third in the first phrase, another third in the second phrase, and up to the climax on D in the third phrase. It then gently descends to the final tonic. Russell Schultz-Widmar wrote about Scott's tunes:

> K. Lee Scott builds his hymns on the received tradition. This is an important asset in a genre that resonates so clearly with the folkloric. He writes natural melodies and his accompaniments are supportive and leading. Most importantly, once he has initiated a musical idea he generates it consistently. (This is, I think, where a number of new hymn tunes fail today.) He can sustain a good idea to the end, holding up in the face of it, maintaining and developing it with apparent ease. This is a great gift.[4]

I chose this hymn as the closing hymn of the closing hymn festival for the joint international conference of our Hymn Society in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in August, 2003. In fact, rather than sing only the hymn, we all had copies of Scott's anthem setting, "The Tree of Life" (MorningStar 50-3000), a very simple setting, since Scott didn't want any-

thing musically complicated to get in the way of such a rich text. Whoever was there will remember the joy of a packed church with many from around the world singing together:

All heaven is singing,
"Thanks to Christ, whose Passion
offers in mercy healing, strength, and pardon.
People and nations, take it, take it freely!"
Amen! Our Savior!

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Notes

[1]My thanks to Gabriella Ráksok, professor of theology at the Reformed Seminary in Sarospatak, for the following prose translation of the original Hungarian for st. 1–2, 12–15:

You beautiful living tree of Paradise,
O merciful Jesus, Lamb of God,
You are the true Redeemer and Savior
Of our souls.

You, the only one, suffered dreadful pains for us,
Being crucified, you were wearing thorns,
For our sins you paid with your blood
And were killed.

Sweet Jesus, sanctify our lives
So that we could also forgive the sins
Of all those who sinned against us
And failed.

Grant us that we also could pray for them,
Following you to plead from the heart,
So that with many saints we could come to you
And find salvation.

Having completed the race,
We could offer our souls into your holy hands.
Being redeemed we could then say
At the end of our lives:

Thanks be to God in the heavens,
Who is the Redeemer of sinful people
And the worker of our holy peace:
Our salvation.

(Stanzas 3–11 are meditations on and include the Seven Words from the Cross.)

[2]Erik Routley, *A Panorama of Christian Hymnody* (Chicago: G.I.A. Publications, Inc, 1979), 216.

[3]I am grateful to Fekete Czaba, the librarian at the Reformed Seminary in Debrecen, Hungary, for providing me with biographical information. Czaba wrote that the correct spelling of his name is Pécseli Király Imre, not Pécseli Imre von Király, as found in several recent hymnals. The "von" would be German rather than Hungarian, and adding "Imre" indicates a common practice of educated people in the 17th century who added the local name of their origin.

[4]*Rejoice in God: The K. Lee Scott Hymnary* (St. Louis: MorningStar Music Publishers, 2000), 5.