

Day 7: Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming

Dec. 4

*1 Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming
From tender stem hath sprung!
Of Jesse's lineage coming
As men of old have sung.
It came, a flower bright,
Amid the cold of winter
When half-gone was the night.*

*2 Isaiah 'twas foretold it,
The Rose I have in mind:
With Mary we behold it,
The virgin mother kind.
To show God's love aright
She bore to men a Savior
When half-gone was the night.*

*3 This Flower, whose fragrance tender
With sweetness fills the air,
Dispels with glorious splendor
The darkness everywhere.
True man, yet very God,
From sin and death He saves us
And lightens every load.*

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
(Isaiah 11:1)

Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming is not as familiar in most churches today as many other Christmas hymns. This is in part due to its age, dating to the 14th century. The original German text had 23 verses, so when he translated it into English, Theodore Baker had lots to work with. Baker was an astute musical scholar from New York, who spent many years both studying and working in Germany. He was thus well acquainted with German music.

Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming is themed out of the prophetic vision of Isaiah 11 which prophesies a coming offspring (shoot, or bud) from the “stump” of Jesse. This Jesse was the father of Israel’s greatest king, David. Isaiah foretold that Jesse’s even greater descendent would someday cause both righteousness and peace to become universal. And as Isaiah 11:9 describes it, “The earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” The fulfillment of Isaiah’s messianic prophecy was Jesus.

With just a phrase, the hymn’s first verse manages to capture the twin nature of Jesus – fully God and fully man. It begins, “Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming.” The “rose” here (Jesus) is ever (e'er) blooming; that is, he has always existed, for he is the eternal God. And yet now he “from tender stem hath sprung!” meaning he has now been born into our very time-bound, limited world. The great mystery of the incarnation (in-flesh-ment) of God is what Christmas is all about. The all-encompassing God is localized in this very flesh and blood offspring of Jesse.

The third verse of the song puts this mystery in the language of theology; he is “true God, yet very man.”

Verse 2 harkens us back to Isaiah’s other great prophecy about Jesus, namely his virgin birth to Mary. Isaiah 7:14 foretells of a virgin who would be found *with child*, which would be a *sign* to us from God. The son she bears is Immanuel, which translates literally: “God with us”.

The rose motif is certainly applicable, for Jesus is beautiful and pure as the Son of God. But there is an undercurrent of struggle and pain that is not as explicitly stated as the happier parts have been. Jesus has come with a purpose: “From sin and death He saves us.” The price of our salvation would be the cross, which the God-man alone is capable of bearing as payment for our sins. The music, more than the lyrics carries the mystery to us, with its slightly melancholy undertones.

Whereas some Christmas hymns are relatively simplistic in their presentation of the gospel story, *Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming* is finely crafted theology. Fortunately, it is more than that. It reminds us of the very welcome accomplishments of Jesus. He does indeed “lighten every load.”

Questions

1. What comes to mind when you contemplate the dual nature of Jesus: God-man?
2. How important do you think the doctrine of the virgin birth is to the message of the Bible?
3. When you meditate on the suffering Jesus endured for your sin, what takes your attention most easily?

Prayer

Jesus, you are the eternal Son of God. And you are my Savior. These facts bend my mind and make my heart sing all at the same time. I want to know your revelation from the Scriptures. And most of all I want to know you, Jesus, my Savior. Amen.