

Jesse Tree

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The representation of the Tree of Jesse is based upon the prophecy of Isaiah 11:1-2: *And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots: and the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and fortitude, the spirit of knowledge, and of the fear of the Lord.*

In works of art the genealogy of Christ (based on Matthew 1) is frequently shown in the form of a tree which springs from Jesse, the father of David, and bears as its fruit the various ancestors of Christ. The Jesse Tree symbols transform a Christmas tree into a "family tree" of Christ, since each ornament is a symbol of an ancestor or of a prophecy which foretells his coming. Some of the symbols included are the sun, the tablets of the Law, the key of David, Bethlehem, the root of Jesse, Noah's ark, the Ark of the Covenant, the altar of holocaust, the apple, the Paschal Lamb, the pillar of fire, manna, the star of David, Jacob's ladder, Jonah in the whale, the Temple, the crown and the scepter, the sword of Judith, and the burning bush.

The sun represents Christ as bringing eternal life and light, and is based on the prophecy of Malachi: *"But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings."* The six-pointed Star of David symbolizes the lineage of Christ from the royal house of David. The burning bush symbolizes the Virgin Birth, and the prophecy of the birth is seen in the Bethlehem-emblem. The apple is a symbol of Christ, who took upon himself the burden of man's sin, and Jacob's ladder is interpreted as Christ reuniting mankind to God. The ladder has also been interpreted in a moral sense, with each of the fifteen rungs standing for a specific virtue. The lamb is one of the favorite, and most frequently used, symbols of Christ in all periods of Christian art. A typical reference is John 1:29, *"The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world."* Noah's ark is a symbol of baptism, and Jonah in the whale symbolizes death and resurrection. The stories of the Old Testament have been an unlimited source of inspiration for the visual arts. The burning bush was the subject of the triptych painted by Nicolas Froment in the thirteenth century. The star of David was a popular symbol in stained glass windows, as at the Cathedral of Lyons.

The Jesse Tree was an early form of design for the stained glass windows of great cathedrals, such as Chartres. In the portrayal of the descent of Christ from the line of David, there may be as few as four or five figures or as many as fifty. The twisting branches of the tree always start with Jesse and end at the top with Christ. The Tree of Jesse window in the cathedral at Chartres is full of meaning and symbolism. In the lowest panel Jesse is lying upon a couch; from his loins rises the stem of a tree which branches out into scrolls enclosing seated figures of the sons of Jesse holding the branches. Next to the upper panel is the Virgin; the upper panel holds the figure of Christ, much larger, with the dove descending from above. On either side of the panels in semicircular spaces are the prophets who foretell the coming of Christ. A border of interlacing lines and flowers resembling those in the center panel completes the design of this famous window. At Sens Cathedral the Jesse window is a little different, for it shows not only the ancestors of Christ; a donkey on one of the branches honors the animal that played so great a part in the life of Jesus.

The Advent Jesse Tree is fairly recent practice, trying to emphasize "Christ" in Christmas by studying His roots. A home Jesse Tree can be a small evergreen tree, artificial or real, bare branch set in a sturdy pot, or a wallhanging made of felt, posterboard or wood. Each evening in Advent a new symbol is placed on the tree, the Scripture verse is read and the significance in Salvation History is explained.

From The Trees of Christmas, by Edna Metcalfe, ©1979, Abingdon Press

Jesse Tree Prayer Service

Here is a prayer service to use for the Jesse Tree throughout Advent. When the family has gathered around the Tree for the service, the person who made the symbol for the day reads the Bible selection. Parents or an older child can read for a small child. Use either a Bible or a Bible story book for this. Pass around the ornament for all to see. Then the person who made it hangs it on the Tree.

Another family member then reads the prayer for the current week of Advent. (During the time of December 17-23, the "O" Antiphon takes the place of the Advent prayer, or can be used in addition to the weekly prayer if desired.)

After the Advent prayer, the members of the family can pray silently or share prayer aloud for a few minutes. Close the service with a familiar Advent hymn.

JESSE TREE SCRIPTURES

December 1

Creation: Gen. 1:1-31; 2:1-4

December 2

Adam and Eve: Gen. 2:7-9, 18-24

December 3

Fall of Man: Gen.3:1-7 and 23-24

December 4

Noah: Gen. 6:5-8, 13-22; 7:17, 23, 24; 8:1, 6-22

December 5

Abraham: Gen. 12:1-3

December 6

Isaac: Gen. 22:1-14

December 7

Jacob: Gen. 25:1-34; 28:10-15

December 8

Joseph: Gen. 25:1-34; 28:10-15

December 9

Moses: Ex. 2:1-10

December 10

Samuel: 1 Sam. 3:1-18

December 11

Jesse: 1 Sam. 16:1-13

December 12

David: 1 Sam. 17:12-51

December 13

Solomon: 1 Kings 3:5-14, 16-28

December 14

Joseph: Matt. 1:18-25

December 15

Mary: Matt. 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38

December 16

John the Baptist: Mark 1:1-8

On December 17, the Church begins to intensify the preparation for Christmas with the use of the "O" Antiphons during the Liturgy of the Hours. The symbols for the Jesse Tree from December 17 to 23 are based on the "O" Antiphons.

December 17

Jesus is Wisdom: Sirach (or Ecclesiasticus in old Bibles) 24:2; Wisdom 8:1

December 18

Jesus is Lord: Ex. 3:2; 20:1

December 19

Jesus is Flower of Jesse: Isaiah 11:1-3

December 20

Jesus is Key of David: Isaiah 22:22

December 21

Jesus is the Radiant Dawn: Psalm 19:6-7 (in older Bibles this will be Psalm 18)

December 22

Jesus is King of the Gentiles: Psalm 2:7-8; Ephesians 2:14-20

December 23

Jesus is Emmanuel: Isaiah 7:14; 33:22

December 24

Jesus is Light of the World: John 1:1-14

JESSE TREE PRAYERS

FIRST WEEK: O Lord, stir up Your power and come, that we may be rescued from the results of our sins by Your holy protection. Come and free us from sin. We ask this of you through Jesus our Lord. Amen.

SECOND WEEK: O Lord, stir up our hearts to make them ready for the coming of Your Son. Help us to become worthy to serve You. Give us pure hearts and minds. We ask this of You through Jesus our Lord. Amen.

THIRD WEEK: O Lord, we beg You to listen to our prayers. Give us the light of Your grace, that we may see goodness in the world and not be overcome by the darkness of sin. We ask this of You through Jesus our Lord. Amen.

FOURTH WEEK: O Lord, stir up Your power and come to us. We need You to give us strength, grace and forgiveness. Our sins keep much good from us. May Your grace and your strength help us to receive the good we need. We ask this of You through Jesus our Lord. Amen.

THE "O" ANTIPHONS

December 17: O Wisdom, You come out of the mouth of the Most High. You reach from one end of the earth to the other, and keep all things in order by Your power and Your kindness: come and teach us prudence.

December 18: O Lord and Leader of Israel, You appeared to Moses in the burning bush and gave him the Law on Mt. Sinai: come with outstretched arms and redeem us.

December 19: O Flower of Jesse, You are a sign for all the people of God's love for us. Kings keep silence before You and Gentiles pray to you: come to deliver us quickly.

December 20: O Key of David and Scepter of the house of Israel, You open and no man can close, You close and no man can open: come and rescue us who are the prisoners of darkness and death.

December 21: O Radiant Dawn, brightness of light eternal and Sun of Justice: come and enlighten us who sit in the darkness of sin and the shadow of death.

December 22: O King of the Gentiles, You are the one who is desired by all people. You are the capstone that makes both Israel and the Gentiles one: come and deliver us, the race You formed from the dust of the earth.

December 23: O Emmanuel, our King and lawgiver, You are the expected one of all nations and their Savior: come to save us, O Lord our God.

December 24: PRAYER FOR CHRISTMAS EVE:

O God, You fill us with happiness each year as we wait for our celebration of Christmas. May we also joyfully look forward to the coming of Jesus as our final Judge. We ask this of You through Jesus our Lord. Amen.

AN ADVENT HYMN

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.

Refrain

Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Wisdom from on high,
Who orderest all things mightily;
To us the path of knowledge show,
And teach us in her ways to go.

Refrain

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell Thy people save,
And give them victory over the grave.

Refrain

O come, Thou Day-spring, come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death's dark shadows put to flight.

Refrain

O come, Thou Key of David, come,
And open wide our heavenly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high,
And close the path to misery.

Refrain

O come, O come, great Lord of might,
Who to Thy tribes on Sinai's height
In ancient times once gave the law
In cloud and majesty and awe.

Refrain

O come, Thou Root of Jesse's tree,
An ensign of Thy people be;
Before Thee rulers silent fall;
All peoples on Thy mercy call.

Refrain

O come, Desire of nations, bind
In one the hearts of all mankind;
Bid Thou our sad divisions cease,
And be Thyself our King of Peace.

Refrain

Prayer Source: Jesse Tree Kit, A by Betsy Walter, Pauline Books and Media, Boston, MA, 1983

Suggested Symbols for a 24-Day Jesse Tree Stressing the History of the World

December 1	Creation	Sun, moon, stars, animals, earth (Genesis 1:1-31; 2:1-4)
December 2	Adam and Eve	Tree of Life, man, woman (Genesis 2:7-9, 18-24)
December 3	The Fall of Man	Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, serpent, bitten apple (Genesis 3:1-7 and 23-24)
December 4	Noe	Ark, animals, dove, rainbow (Genesis 6:5-8, 13-22; 7:17, 23, 24; 8:1, 6-22)
December 5	Abraham	Knife (Genesis 12:1-3)
December 6	Isaac	Bundle of wood, altar, ram (Genesis 22:1-14)
December 7	Jacob	Ladder (Genesis 25:1-34; 28:10-15)
December 8	Joseph	Well, multi-colored tunic (Genesis 25:1-34; 28:10-15)
December 9	Moses	Baby in basket among reeds, Commandments (Exodus 2:1-10)
December 10	Samuel	Lamp, temple (1 Kings 2:21, 3:1-20)
December 11	Jesse	Tree stump with flower. The classic depiction is of Jesse lying on his side with the branch of Jesus' "family tree" growing from his side. (1 Kings 16:1-13)
December 12	David	Harp (1 Kings 17:12-51)
December 13	Solomon	Temple, scales of Justice, sword and baby (III Kings 3:5-14, 16-28)
December 14	Joseph	Carpenter's tools, flowering staff (Matthew 1:18-25)
December 15	Our Lady	Lily, crown of stars, pierced heart, roses (Genesis 3:15, Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38)
December 16	John the Baptist	Scallop shell, locusts, honey, tall slim Cross (Mark 1:1-8)

The Golden Nights Begin...

Christ as Sapientia	oil lamp (Isaiah 28:29; Wisdom 11:2-3)	oil lamp (Isaiah 28:29; Wisdom 11:2-3)
Christ as Adonai	crown (Isaiah 11:4-5, 33:22)	crown (Isaiah 11:4-5, 33:22)
Christ as Radix Jesse	flower (Isaiah 11:1,10, Micheas 5:1)	flower (Isaiah 11:1,10, Micheas 5:1)
Christ as Clavis David	key (Isaiah 22:22, Isaias 9:6)	key (Isaiah 22:22, Isaias 9:6)
Christ as Oriens	rising sun (Isaiah 9:2)	rising sun (Isaiah 9:2)
Christ as Rex Gentium	scepter (Isaiah 9:7, 2:4)	scepter (Isaiah 9:7, 2:4)
Christ as Emmanuel	Chalice and Host (Isaiah 7:14; 33:22)	Chalice and Host (Isaiah 7:14; 33:22)
The Nativity	Mary holding the Infant Jesus, with Star of Bethlehem over their heads (Luke 2:1-20)	Mary holding the Infant Jesus, with Star of Bethlehem over their heads (Luke 2:1-20)