
“LO, HOW A ROSE E’ER BLOOMING” BY UNKNOWN (1599)

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Wikipedia - “Es ist ein Ros entsprungen’ (lit., “A rose has sprung up”), is a Christmas carol and Marian Hymn of German origin. It is most commonly translated in English as “Lo, how a rose e'er blooming”, and is sometimes known as “A Spotless Rose” or “Behold a Rose of Judah”. The rose in the text is a symbolic reference to the Virgin Mary, and the hymn makes reference to the Old Testament prophecies of Isaiah which in Christian interpretation foretell the Incarnation of Christ, and to the Tree of Jesse, a traditional symbol of the lineage of Jesus. Because of its prophetic theme, the song is popular during the Christian season of Advent. The hymn has its roots in an unknown author prior to the 17th century. It first appeared in print in 1599 and has since been published with a varying number of verses and in several different translations. **It is most commonly sung to a melody which was harmonized by the German composer Michael Praetorius¹ in 1609.**”

Musical performances: The King’s Singers, *Christmas Presence* (2017); Sting, *If On a Winter’s Night* (2009); Chanticleer in *Christmas with Chanticleer & Dawn Upshaw* (2001), a setting by Hugo Distler,² the “Chorale”; Robert Shaw Chorale, *Christmas Hymns and Carols*, Volume 1 (1954).

ROSE – “A floral symbol sacred to Venus/Aphrodite and signifying LOVE, the quality and nature of which was characterized by the color of the rose. A symbol of PURITY, a **white rose** represented innocent (non-sexual) love, while a **pink rose** represented first-love, and a **red rose** TRUE LOVE. When held by a martyr [in Paintings, for example], the red rose signified a “red

¹ *Britannica Online* – “**Michael Praetorius**, original name **Michael Schultheiss**, (born February 15?, 1571, Creuzburg, Thuringia [Germany]—died February 15, 1621, Wolfenbüttel, Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel), German music theorist and composer whose *Syntagma musicum* (1614–20) is a principal source for knowledge of 17th-century music and whose settings of Lutheran chorales are important examples of early 17th-century religious music.” And, **Praetorius, Michael (1571–1621)**. A German Lutheran music scholar and composer of *hymn tunes and settings, including “Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming” and “Good Christian Men, Rejoice!” [Brett Scott Provance, *Pocket Dictionary of Liturgy & Worship*, The IVP Pocket Reference Series (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 103.]

² *Wikipedia*: “**Hugo Distler (24 June 1908 – 1 November 1942)** was a German organist, choral conductor, teacher and composer.”

martyrdom”, or the loss of life, and the white rose “white martyrdom”, or celibacy.³ According to St. Ambrose of Milan, the thorns of the rose were a reminder of human finitude and guilt, because the rose in Paradise had no thorns. A thornless-rose was an attribute of Mary as the Second Eve. A garland of roses denoted the Rosary.”⁴

Verse 16 —My beloved is mine, and I am his; he feedeth (his flock) among the lilies. These are the words of the bride. The latter clause is repeated in ch. 6:2, with the addition, “in the gardens,” and it is evident that Solomon is lovingly regarded as a shepherd, because Shulamith delights to think of him as fully sympathizing with her simple country life. She idealizes. The words may be taken as either the response given at the time by the maiden to the invitation of her lover to come forth into the vineyards, or as the breathing of love as she lies in the arms of Solomon. **Lilies are the emblem of purity, lofty elevation above that which is common. Moreover, the lily-stalk is the symbol of the life of regeneration among the mystical mediævalists. Mary the Virgin, the *Rosa mystica*, in ancient paintings is represented with a lily in her hand at the Annunciation. The people of God were called by the Jewish priests “a people of lilies.” So Mary was the lily of lilies in the lily community; the *sanctissima* in the *communio sanctorum*. There may be an allusion to the lily-forms around Solomon in his palace—the daughters of Jerusalem; in that case the words must be taken as spoken, not in remembrance of the first love, but in present joy in Solomon’s embrace.** Some would render the words as simply praise of Solomon himself, “who, wherever he abides, spreads radiancy and loveliness about him,” or “in whose footsteps roses and lilies ever bloom.” At least, they are expressive of entire self-surrender and delight. She herself is a lily, and the beloved one feeds upon her beauty, purity, and perfection.⁵

The Book of Tobit⁶ 39 –

¹² Once more I will set forth my theme
to shine like the moon in its fullness!

¹³ **Listen to me, my faithful children: open up your petals,**

³ At its most generalized, “**celibacy**” indicates the state of being, and remaining, unmarried. But in the tradition of the Religious Orders in the Church, the “vow of celibacy” was early on associated with a freely-chosen sacrifice of a person’s most intimate power/capacity ... for the sake of, and in the hope that, God would take that sacrifice and made his or her life fruitful anyway.

⁴ Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, *Dictionary of Christian Art*. New York: Continuum, 1994).

⁵ H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., *Song of Solomon*, The Pulpit Commentary (London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), 41–42.

⁶ TOBIT, BOOK OF One of several deuterocanonical books of the Bible. It was received as canonical by the Council of Trent (1546) and is found in the Roman Catholic Bible, but it was never included in the Hebrew Old Testament and is placed with the Apocrypha by Protestants. [Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, Tyndale Bible Dictionary, Tyndale reference library (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 1267.]

like roses planted near running waters;
¹⁴ **Send up the sweet odor of incense,**
break forth in blossoms like the lily.
Raise your voices in a chorus of praise;
bless the Lord for all his works!
¹⁵ Proclaim the greatness of his name,
loudly sing his praises,
With music on the harp and all stringed instruments;
sing out with joy as you proclaim:
¹⁶ The works of God are all of them good;
he supplies for every need in its own time.^{b 7}

^b Sir 39:33; Gn 1:29–31; Eccl 3:11.

⁷ *New American Bible*, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Sir 39:12–16.

TEXT (TRANSLATED BY THEODORE BAKER)⁸

Lo,⁹ how¹⁰ a rose¹¹ e'er blooming,
From tender stem¹² hath sprung¹³.

⁸ See: <https://www.lyricsforchristmas.com/christmas-carols/lo-how-a-rose-eer-blooming/>.

⁹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the interjection “Lo!” – “†(a) In early use, an interjection of vague meaning, corresponding approximately to the modern O! or Oh! *Obsolete*. (b) Used to direct attention to the presence or approach of something, or to what is about to be said; = Look! See! Behold!”

¹⁰ “**how**” – A lot contained in this adverb, modifying the verb “blooming.” It doesn’t say “Lo, that, or when, etc. “How” directs our attention, then, not to the existence of an action, or where it takes place, but to the mode of that verb, the manner in which the doing is done. **In other words, the poem begins by calling our attention to the way a “rose is ever blooming”, how it blooms.**

¹¹ Notice here how “**rose**” is not capitalized, which means that this one refers to the actual flower. In the second stanza “Rose” it clearly becomes a metaphor for the Savior – “with Mary we behold it”, even though soon enough the rose became associated with Mary, the Mother. As to the symbol of a “rose” in Christian history: “**The Rose**: since the dawn of time roses have been used as a symbol of beauty and love: it was sacred to a number of goddesses including Isis and Aphrodite; **in Rome a wild rose would be placed on the door of a room where secret or confidential matters were being deliberated: The phrase *sub rosa*, or “under the rose”, thence signified “to keep it a secret”**. In the Holy Scriptures the rose first appears in the **Book of Sirach [Sirach 39:12-16] as a symbol of the ever growing wisdom**. The rose also began to appear in Christian symbolism when it was united to the Chi-Rho sign in order to symbolize the blood and the suffering [a “red-martyrdom”] of Jesus. **This flower is one of the few symbols that never have been connected to evil, as even in pagan times it has always been a symbol of love and purity, thus being used to symbolize Our Lady and many saints**. The shape of the rose has inspired the architects in the construction of rose windows. In the image, the rose window of the Cathedral of Troia.” [<https://christiansymbols.wordpress.com/2011/11/19/the-rose/>]

¹² “**tender**” We might imagine that because the stem – that which sustains the bloom – is “tender” it must mean that the stem is “frail”. And the definition of “tender” at the *Oxford English Dictionary* supports such a reading of this adjective here: “Soft or delicate in texture or consistence; yielding easily to force or pressure; fragile; easily broken, divided, compressed, or injured.” However, when the adjective “tender” is applied to a person, the adjective indicates the presence of a human power, a strength a person may gain. Thus, to be “tender” while suffering much at the hands of bullies, is actually a powerful achievement of a “strong” person.

¹³ “**sprung**” – To my ear, this verb expresses vigor, and deliberate and quick action. So the line creates a nice tension between “tender” and “sprung”. The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the verb “**to spring**”, in Old English it meant: “*intransitive*. Of a liquid (esp. blood, tears, or sweat): to flow suddenly or violently, esp. in a jet or stream; to pour or spurt out; to gush.” But later on, in the 16th century, it could mean: “*intransitive. figurative*. To move, act, or react with speed, suddenness, or alacrity; (of mountain peaks, the sun, etc.) to appear, emerge, or arise in a manner suggestive of sudden movement.” In other words, **this “rose e'er blooming” has energy in it, surging, bursting.**

Of Jesse's lineage¹⁴ coming,¹⁵
As men of old have sung¹⁶;
It came,¹⁷ a flow'ret bright¹⁸,
Amid the cold of winter,¹⁹
When half spent was the night.²⁰

¹⁴ It is important to recall that this “lineage” of David was a severely broken, damaged one. And even with the “unconditional” Covenant God made with David and his descendants, the historical fact is that a strong and united monarchy shattered right after King Solomon, when the united Kingdom was divided into northern and southern. So, we should not romanticize this “lineage”, but see if for what it was: a mess.

¹⁵ JESSE*, ROOT OF Figure of speech used by **Isaiah (Is 11:10)** to express the hope of a messianic king from the line of David. The “root” of a family is its progenitor. **Jesse, David's father, is listed as an ancestor of the Messiah (Is 11:1, 10; Mt 1:5–6; Lk 3:32; Acts 13:22–23)**. Isaiah pictures God's judgment upon Assyria as the cutting down of a forest (Is 10:33–34); Judah likewise will be felled and the proud tree of David's sovereignty hewn down, **but a remnant will remain, described by Isaiah as a shoot from a stump (6:13)**. *The messianic shoot will come forth from the stump of Jesse as a branch from his roots*. The Spirit of the Lord will rest upon this one who stands as an ensign to the people, so that the nations will seek him in the glory of his dwelling place (Is 11:1–10; see Is 53:2; Jer 23:5; 33:15; Ez 17:22–23; Zec 3:8; 6:12). [Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, Tyndale reference library (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 695.]

¹⁶ “men of old” – Presumably the Prophets of the Old Testament in particular, of which group St. John the Baptist was the last. Normally we would expect men of old “to speak” or “said.” But to get the rhyme with “sprung”, the author chose “sung”. But by doing so, the “sprung” adds vigor to the meaning of OT prophet – they who were particularly vivid, unconquerable spirits energized by the Spirit of God, who “sprung” upon the people of God.

¹⁷ “It came” – We are surprised by the neuter pronoun here. We might have thought “*He* came”.

¹⁸ The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “floweret” – “*Chiefly poetic*. A small flower.” By using this diminutive form of “flower”, we are again gaining a portrait of the “rose” in mind: tender, a small flower. Such images suggest frailty; insignificance. Yet when the “rose” becomes in the second stanza the “Rose”, these images captures nicely *the hiddenness of the divine* in the incarnate One born of Mary.

¹⁹ The obvious fact, especially in northern European context, in Germany in particular, is that Winters there can be bitter cold and long. And so for a “rose” suddenly to spring up in the “dead” of Winter is not only startling but impossible. Perhaps this the poet's point: the utterly unexpected, “impossible” reality of a God-Man! And, further, for God Himself to choose to dwell with human beings, who so regularly act in ways inimical, hostile to God, also seems impossible, and at the very least utterly improbable. Yet that is what God chose to do.

²⁰ “when half spent was the night” – I have always loved the sound of this line. But I am not sure why it was important to the poet to indicate when during the night this “rose” suddenly burst up “bright” through the snow and ice of winter. And that the poet then repeats the same line at the end of the second stanza is puzzling to me, as to why he chose to emphasize this fact.

Isaiah [Isaiah 11:10]²¹ ‘twas²² foretold it,
The Rose²³ I have in mind,
With Mary we behold it,²⁴
The virgin mother²⁵ kind;²⁶
To show God’s love aright,²⁷

²¹ **Isaiah 11: 10** On that day, / The root of Jesse, / set up as a signal for the peoples— / Him the nations will seek out; / his dwelling shall be glorious. [*New American Bible, Revised Edition*. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Is 11:10.]

²² “**twas**” – A contraction of “it was”; thus, “It was Isaiah who foretold it” (i.e., about Jesse and his descendant).

²³ **“The Rose I have in mind”** – The poet now identifies, as metaphor, the “Rose” with a rose, which must mean that this “Rose” is the God-Man, Who “came amid the snow of winter” (in Germany, in December, there would be snow and bitter cold. This is interesting because I have always associated the “rose” in Christian Art, when applied to a person, with Mary, the Mother. See, for example, in *Wikipedia* at “Rosa Mystica” – “The Virgin Mary is referred to by many poetic titles in Christian tradition. **Rosa Mystica** or **Mystical Rose** is one such title of Mary. One form of Marian devotion is invoking Mary’s prayers by calling upon her using a litany of diverse titles, and the title ‘Mystical Rose’ is found in the Litany of Loreto.” **St. John Henry Newman** in a devotion he wrote on the “Mystical Rose”: “Mary is the most beautiful flower ever seen in the spiritual world. It is by the power of God’s grace that from this barren and desolate earth there ever sprung up at all flowers of holiness and glory; and Mary is the Queen of them all. She is the Queen of spiritual flowers; and therefore, is called the Rose, for the rose is called of all flowers the most beautiful. But, moreover, she is the Mystical or Hidden Rose, for mystical means hidden.”

²⁴ **“with Mary we behold it”** – Again, notice the “it” rather than the “Him.” This is the line that convinces me that the “Rose” he “has in mind” here is the God-Man, born of Mary, rather than His mother Mary. We can’t “behold it” and doing so “with” Mary if it were about beholding her, Mary.

²⁵ **“the virgin mother”** – We get so used to such language about Mary that we miss the oxymoronic quality of this name: “the virgin mother” should not be possible: to be both a “virgin” and a “mother.” And so we have another image of Impossibility: a rose springing up through the ice and snow of Winter; a virgin mother.

²⁶ **“kind”** – It is striking to me how widely attested is this descriptor of Mary, the Mother of Jesus: she is “kind”. There are so many other adjectives, equally appropriate and worthy of Mary, but it is her *kindness* that seems over and over again to strike those who know her. But the adjective “kind” has an unexpected meaning. It originally meant something natural or in-born a person, heard in the German noun *kinder* meaning one’s children. The *Oxford English Dictionary* at **“kind”** – “In accordance with the natural or normal course of things; naturally or predictably arising or resulting from the circumstances.” So to speak of the “virgin mother” as “kind” might not be referring so much to a quality of kindness as we mean it, but it may be emphasizing that she was a fully natural mother, really pregnant in the normal way of motherhood.

²⁷ **“aright”** – The *Oxford English Dictionary*, a tenth century adverb meaning – “In a right way or manner; rightly, justly, correctly, properly.” How very often have I found myself in my work needing in others to work against a *false image* that they have of God! All the time. And so, I grasp this poet’s insight that a big part of our redemption is the dismantling of false images, and therefore understandings, of God. And as the adverb means not only “rightly”, so it also means *justly*. It is *unjust* of us to have images of Him that are so unworthy of Who God is.

She bore to men a Savior,
When half spent was the night.²⁸

O²⁹ Flower,³⁰ whose fragrance tender³¹
With sweetness fills the air,³²
Dispel³³ with glorious splendour
The darkness everywhere;³⁴
True man, yet very God,

²⁸ By the poet's repetition of this same line as that which concluded the first stanza, it creates a parallelism between the two stanzas. That is, the "rose ever blooming" in the first stanza is the *same* "Rose" born of Mary and foretold by Isaiah the Prophet. It also suggests, then, that the "tender stem" refers to Mary the Mother. Somewhere in a poem by Theodore Roethke (I think), he uses an image of the stem of a flower like a buttercup. He reflects how the power of LIFE is as fully present in the tiny stem of that flower as it is in other things large and powerful. He wonders how the same power that created the Universe, and sustains it still, is in greatest humility able to "accept" the confinement of itself in a "tender stem".

²⁹ "O" here weaves nicely with the opening "Lo". "O" now signals the vocative; the poet is now openly addressing the God-Man, making his or her prayer, the gist of which is carried in the three verbs: **dispel ... save ... share**.

³⁰ Ah, now this makes it clear: the "rose" and then the "Rose" and now the "**Flower**" (capitalized) – all three are metaphors of the same One, the God-Man.

³¹ "**whose fragrance tender**" – First of all, it seems unusual that the "fragrance" of the God-Man is what the poet notes, until one realizes that he or she does not want to "break" the metaphor: the Rose, the Flower, whose lovely *fragrance* is one of its most striking attributes. Second of all, there is a repetition of the adjective "tender" here. We do not normally speak of a "smell" as "tender." There is then to be understood a compression of meanings here. It perhaps is meant to evoke how a mother loves to smell her newborn; she will often remark about how much she loves the smell of her child. And so by speaking of "fragrance" as "tender" we have evoked the image of a mother being tender with her newborn, holding Him and smelling Him – it evokes the relationship of love between mother and newborn babe.

³² "**sweetness**" – We associate "sweetness" with the senses of taste and smell. Sweetness we associate with something, or someone, we like, favor. In contrast, we associate bad things, things that have gone bad (like food), with a bad smell. I have noticed how "badness" or "evil" is something that I can "smell" somehow. Images of Hell include its smell as "sulphureous". The *Oxford English Dictionary* at "**sweet**" – "Pleasing to the sense of taste; having a pleasant taste or flavour; spec. having the characteristic flavour (ordinarily pleasant when not in excess) of sugar, honey, and many ripe fruits, which corresponds to one of the primary sensations of taste. Also said of the taste or flavour. Often opposed to bitter or sour (so also in figurative senses)."

³³ "**dispel**" – The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the verb "**to dispel**" – "*transitive*. To drive away in different directions or in scattered order; to disperse by force, dissipate (e.g. clouds, darkness, doubts, fears, etc.)."

³⁴ The image abruptly shifts from smell to sight; from a sweet fragrance to an effulgence, an incandescent splendour against which "darkness" cannot prevail – "And a light shone in the darkness / and the darkness could not overcome it."

From Sin and death ³⁵now³⁶ save us,
And share our every load.³⁷

³⁵ “**sin and death**” – These two are regularly paired in Christian literature, inasmuch as Death (as an enemy of humanity) was judged a primary result of sin: with sin (of Adam and Eve in particular) came death. However, while it makes sense that we pray to be “saved” from death, when we are facing a particular dangerous circumstance in our life, it does not make sense to be “saved” from what is actually a profound grace innate to created things, and especially to human beings: that we *can* eventually die ... rather than, Faust-like, just go on and on and on.

³⁶ “**now**” – Such an important word in the spiritual vocabulary.

³⁷ “**share our every load**” – To “share a load” could mean that we are asking someone to help us carry ours. Or, it could mean that as we have our load to carry, so the God-Man has His to carry. I think this latter meaning more powerful and more like the way it actually works with God and humans.