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Emily Dickinson's Poems on the Life of Jesus Christ

Yumiko Koizumi

Critics have acknowledged that Jesus Christ is the central figure in Emily Dickinson’s religious poems. The crucifixion of Christ on the cross is the poet’s most frequent subject on the life of Christ. Dickinson’s poems examine the validity of human suffering on earth in terms of Jesus’ anguish on the cross. James McIntosh in *Nimble Believing: Emily Dickinson and the Unknown* clarifies Dickinson’s singular angle of approaching the life of Christ as thus;“In particular, she read the story of Christ’s crucifixion as the central instance in history of human courage, love, and renunciation.”¹ McIntosh deals with what the image of Christ means in Dickinson’s poems. Instead of explaining the poet’s complex idea on the Christ figure, I will try to demonstrate exactly how the imagery of Christ on the cross functions in each religious poem. Finally, this paper attempts to reveal some of the reasons for the centrality of Christ’s crucifixion in Dickinson’s religious poems in order to explore the meaning of the cross.

Many critics have stated that Jesus Christ is the most important figure in Dickinson’s religious poems.² For example Dorothy Huff Oberhaus places Dickinson’s poems on the life of Christ in the poetic tradition of Christian devotion, and considers Dickinson as a religious poet in the style of John Donne or George Herbert. Jane Donahue Eberwein claims that “it was Jesus with the mortal circuit and manifested as a suffering man who attracted her rather than the resurrected Lord.” Roger Lundin points out that “Dickinson was drawn irresistibly to Jesus the Son” while wrestling with God the Father. An alternative reading is drawn in James McIntosh’s summary in which “though she was poetically drawn to a mysterious and distant God of power, she might focus alternatively on a God who works graciously through a loving Christ.” Roxanne Harde explores Dickinson’s Christology and explains why the stories of atonement and resurrection are largely ignored in Dickinson’s poems, to focus rather on Jesus as a fellow sufferer. On the other hand, Magdalena Zapedowska consistently maintains that “the poet focuses most of her attention on the relationship with the Calvinist Godhead rather than construe an intimate relationship with the human Jesus as a remedy for spiritual longing.” Each critic is subtly different in his or her position of viewing the presence of Jesus Christ in Dickinson’s poems, yet the fact that Christ is a significant figure in Dickinson’s religious poems cannot be overstated.

The crucifixion of Christ on the cross is the concrete example of human suffering on earth. Following Christ’s example simply means that we are destined to suffer, and hopefully to be reborn in heaven. Uncovering the trick of Christ’s redemption, the young Emily explains how the mystery of redemption works on humans: “How strange is this sanctification, that works such a marvelous
change, that sows. In such corruption, and rises in golden glory, that brings Christ down, and shews Him, and lets him select his friends!” (L 35) Eberwein elucidates the importance of Christ's mercy in the work of salvation in nineteenth century America when Christ had a major role as a “great Purchaser” who buys life. Later in her career, Dickinson denies Christians’ stress by referring to “that Affliction which is sanctified”(L 395).

Thomas á Kempis’ book, The Imitation of Christ, gives us some clues to reading Dickinson’s mind. The Imitation of Christ is Emily’s favorite book which guides the reader to become a good Christian. Chapter 12, “On the Royal Road of the Holy Cross” is the key chapter for the reader to understand the meaning of the Cross in Dickinson’s poems. Kempis begins the chapter with the quotation of Matt. 16: 24. “Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Me.” Kempis urges the potential Christian to learn to “despise all earthly things, that you may go freely to Christ” (57-8). Therefore, the book presumably helps her set up the dialogue between Christ and herself.

There are two alternatives shown in Chapter 12, “Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Me” (Matt. 16: 24), or “Depart from Me, you cursed, into everlasting fire” (Matt. 25: 41). Emily’s friends all answered Christ’s call except Emily (L 36). For them, “the Cross” signifies the road to the kingdom, salvation of the soul, and hope of eternal life. Emily, however, finds it very hard to accept the idea of the denial of self and earthly joys, and the total acceptance of intense suffering. She has struggled with these prerequisites under which each individual has to follow silently. Even though Kempis encourages the reader to follow Christ’s path, and “desire to die on the cross with Him” (85), young Emily seems to refuse to follow Him on the cross.

The following conditional sentences in the chapter maintain an absolute necessity for salvation: “For if you die with Him, you will also live with Him. And if you share His sufferings, you will also share His glory.” (Rom. 6: 8) The conjunction “if” illustrates the way to go as an absolute necessity for humans to achieve glory in heaven. No alternative ways are shown. The way of the Cross is suggested as the only way to life and to true inner peace. Traditional Christian theologies maintain that Jesus’ suffering and death were necessary for the Resurrection. Christ’s death and the resurrection are a part of the whole Christian mystery of redemption. One cannot be justified without the other. Suffering on earth and glory in heaven, loss and gain, death and resurrection are two sides of the same coin. Each conditional sentence mentioned above implies an inevitable opposite causing humans to move towards a specific direction, the road of a cross.

Kempis shows two ways to live, “If you bear the cross willingly” and “If you bear the cross unwillingly.” The difference in his use of adverbs, “willingly” or “unwillingly,” shows that either way you have to bear the cross after you are born. No other ways are possible. The physical affliction is justified by the growth of the spiritual grace within. Christ's life culminates in a cross and martyrdom. Kempis further elucidates the justification of suffering as thus, “And the more
the body is subdued by affliction, the more is the spirit strengthened by grace within.” The acute tension of Puritanism found very often in Dickinson’s poems is created by sublimating extreme suffering on earth. Her poems mainly question the very formula of redemption.

In one of earlier poems, Dickinson projects the image of Christ’s crucifix on our screen in order to imagine Christ as “the smaller size”:

Jesus! thy Crucifix
Enable thee to guess
The smaller size!

Jesus! thy second face
Mind thee in Paradise
Of our’s! (Fr 197/ J 225)

The “Crucifix” is the very proof of Christ’s humanity, because it signals Christ’s suffering and death on the cross. Instead of presenting the glorious portrait of Jesus Christ on the resurrection morning, Dickinson tells the other side of Christ’s story. Her deliberate omission of the redemptive aspect of the crucifixion gives us an image of human Christ being powerless to ease anguish like all of us humans.

The order of information given in the poem is first the human face of Christ, then the divine side. The reversed order emphasizes Jesus’ human weakness and belittles his divinity. The similarities between Christ and humans is stressed more than the differences. Drawing some similarities, Dickinson claims that divinity resides in every human. From her point of view, “To be human is more than to be divine, he was uncontented till he had been human” (L 519). In the last line, Christ’s face superimposed upon humans suggests our possibility of being reborn in Paradise.

Dickinson responds to the human aspect of Christ, so she can more easily identify herself with Him except the fact “he didn't sin”:

I had read of Christ's temptations, and how they were like our own, only he didn't sin; I wondered if one was like mine, and whether it made him angry - I couldn't make up my mind; do you think he ever did? (L 36)

The poet feels closer to Christ's human weakness more than his divine greatness. The similarities between Christ and her draw the poet very close to Him, while a big difference between them distances her from Christ. Yet she does not deny the possibility of walking the same path Christ had trodden
when on earth.

The poem, “To put this World down, like a Bundle -” appears to express the speaker’s appreciation of sacrifice involved in renunciation of the worldly for the spiritual life:

To put this World down, like a Bundle -
And walk steady, away,
Requires Energy - possibly Agony -
'Tis the Scarlet way

Trodden with straight renunciation
By the Son of God -
Later, his faint Confederates
Justify the Road -

Flavors of that old Crucifixion -
Filaments of Bloom, Pontius Pilate sowed -
Strong Clusters, from Barabbas’ Tomb -

Sacrament, Saints partook before us -
Patent, every drop,
With the Brand of the Gentile Drinker
Who indorsed the Cup - (Fr 404/ J 527)

The first two stanzas tell the story of Jesus Christ’s “Scarlet way” “trodden with straight renunciation.” Yet some of the irregular patterns repeated in the poem signal another message beneath the surface. First, “Agony” is bracketed by two dashes to be placed in the air. Second, the third stanza is written in the tercet form; there are the shortest odd-numbered lines in the third stanza with an irregular rhythm in the second line.

The word “Agony” would seem to indicate the best way to the salvation of mankind. We are told that only through the crucifixion, can we enter the Kingdom of Heaven. By putting an emphasis on the particular noun “Agony” accented by the adverb “possibly,” Dickinson appears to show some hesitancy in admitting traditional Christian theologies, which claim that Jesus’ suffering and death were absolutely necessary for the resurrection.

The odd-numbered, irregular stanza among other regular stanzas serves to focus on the story of Jesus Christ on the cross, even though his name goes unmentioned. Dickinson’s deliberate omission
of Christ’s name from the text illuminates her emphasis on the crucifixion itself. Ironically, two other names associated with the crucifixion are introduced to dramatize the historic moment of Christ’s death on the cross. In the gospels, Pontius Pilate is portrayed as doing his best for Jesus but is unable to save him. The crowd, however, is said to demand the crucifixion of Jesus and the release of Barabbas, when asked “Which do you want released?” (John 18: 39) Finally Pilate orders the death of Jesus by crucifixion on the charge of high treason. Instead of presenting Christ himself, the poet describes a cluster of images of the crucifixion and the resurrection; “Flavors,” “Filaments,” and “Strong Clusters.” The crucifixion holds the dual imagery of life and death, resurrection in passing Calvary.

Dickinson’s meditation on the crucifixion is fully practiced in the following poem:

One Crucifixion is recorded - only -
How many be
Is not affirmed of Mathematics -
Or History -

One Calvary - exhibited to stranger -
As many be
As Persons - or Peninsulas -
Gethsemane -

Is but a Province - in the Being’s Centre -
Judea -
For Journey - or Crusade's Achieving -
Too near -

Our Lord - indeed - made Compound Witness -
And yet -
There's newer - nearer Crucifixion
Than That - (Fr 670/ J 553)

Again in this poem, the name of Christ is erased, although there are some clues remaining such as “Calvary,” “Gethsemane,” and “Judea.” These concrete images suggest the places where Christ’s life and death took place, further metonymically describing the stories of betrayal, suffering, and death on the cross. Each place geographically illustrates another step Christ takes on earth.
Depicting the historic scene objectively in the first stanza, the speaker turns her eyes on our own crucifixion juxtaposed upon that of Jesus Christ. Dickinson breaks the parallel structure in the third stanza, and thus, creates a rhetorical space between “Gethsemane” and the predicate verb “Is.” Because of the stanza break and the irregular pattern, “Gethsemane” is rendered isolated. It delivers the poem’s central message in the very center of the poem:

Gethsemane

Is but a Province - in the Being’s Centre -

By setting the subject and the predicate verb apart, Dickinson introduces a new interpretation of Christ's story. Dickinson’s particular choice of words lies in her placement of “Gethsemane” “in the Being’s Centre” and her choice of “Gethsemane” as the central “Province.”

“Gethsemane” is the place where Christ was arrested because of the betrayal of his disciples. The focal point is that the disciples relayed the authorities information to betray Jesus and enable them to arrest him. The associated image of Judas during the last moment of Christ's life on earth intensifies his suffering:

The loveliest sermon I ever heard was the disappointment of Jesus in Judas. It was told like a mortal story of intimate young men. I suppose no surprise we can ever have will be so sick as that. The last “I never knew you” may resemble it. I would your hearts could have rested from the first severity before you received this other one, but “not as I will.” (L 385)

The episode of Peter’s thrice denial of Jesus is echoed in the above quoted letter. Betrayal is a part of human nature, but so is faithfulness. Dickinson dramatizes the moment of Peter’s thrice denial in the poem “He forgot - and I - remembered-”; “’No’ - said Peter - ’twas’nt me -/Jesus merely ‘looked’ at Peter - ” (Fr 232/ J 203). Jesus’ manner of looking back at the person who would sell his life suggests the most poignant and painful moment of the human Christ.

One of Dickinson’s early poems starts with the line “They have not chosen me”:

“They have not chosen me” - he said -
“But I have chosen them”!
Brave-Broken hearted statement -
Uttered in Bethlehem! (Fr 87/ J85)
“Bethlehem,” Christ’s birthplace in Dickinson’s poems, according to Oberhaus, functions as “a metonymy for and typologically for those of His followers whose birth, like His, necessitates suffering and death.” The disciples’ betrayal suggests the sinfulness of all humans and signifies a clear difference between humans and divine Jesus. The broken hearted statement of Jesus is followed by his merciful statement; “But I have chosen them!” Although the second line is filled with pain, it reminds us of Christ’s statement in the Bible: he came to “give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). This is a moving heroic speech act for Jesus to have fully expressed his active involvement in salvation. Jesus, Savior of the world, was born to save his people from their sin. But Jesus, in this poem, is deeply shaken by his disciples’ betrayals.

Another image of Jesus is depicted in one of her letters where Dickinson conjures up the image of Christ superimposed upon a beautiful mourner, “looking so crushed, and heart-broken, yet never complaining, or murmuring, and waiting herself so patiently” (L 36). The beautiful mourner reminds Emily of the suffering Christ, “bowed down with her weight of agony, yet smiling at terrible will.” Dickinson finds a sense of beauty in the image of the suffering Christ, bearing the extreme agony, yet standing, still compassionate.

Roger Lundin in Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief points out a striking difference between Dickinson and other romantic predecessors the way in which Jesus Christ is represented; “she apprehended him most fully in the singular intensity of human suffering” while “her romantic forebears detected Christ in the innocence of the infant and the imagination of the poet.” Ludin also emphasizes Dickinson’s unique treatment of crucifixion; “For Dickinson, crucifixion was important as an example of suffering love and not as an act of atonement.”

The third stanza of the poem “I should have been too glad, I see - ” dramatizes the very moment of crucifixion:

Earth would have been too much - I see -  
And Heaven - not enough for me -  
I should have had the Joy -  
Without the Fear - to justify -  
The Palm - without the Calvary -  
So Savior - Crucify -  (Fr 283/ J 313)

The subject changes from the first pronoun “I” to the object “Earth” and “Heaven” in the beginning of the third stanza of the poem. And the stanza concludes with the shaking line; “So Savior - Crucify -.” Dickinson dramatizes the death of Christ on the cross, eliding his glorious moment of resurrection. These associated terms of crucifixion such as “the Fear,” and “the Calvary” are heav-
ily stressed and located after the conditional phrase “without” in the subjunctive mood.

The meaning of Christ’s redemptive death is slightly cancelled by the last word “Crucify.” Dickinson’s uninflected verb “Crucify,” expresses grammatically the eternal meaning of Christ’s death by means of crucifixion. “Justify” in line 4 is perfectly rhymed with “Crucify” in line 6, which is unusual for her. The transitive verb “Crucify” followed by the white meditative space is transformed into intransitive to convey the ambiguous meaning of the cross. The fact that Christ bears the cross willingly or unwillingly remains unsaid.

The mortal story of Jesus Christ appeals to the poet. Dickinson feels very close to Jesus only when he reveals his weakness openly like us:

> When Jesus tells us about his Father, we distrust him. When he shows us his Home, we turn away, but when he confides to us that he is “acquainted with Grief,” we listen, for that also is an Acquaintance of our own. (L 932)

“Grief” is a very special word for Dickinson to express the uttermost anguish associated with the cross. As M.K. Louis in “Emily Dickinson’s Sacrament of Starvation” explains the cultural background attached to the term “Grief;” “Protestant culture of her time, had been impressed with the conviction that to regret one’s losses is a form of rebellion against Providence.” Taking all cultural considerations of her time into account, grief is not socially acceptable, not allowed public expression. Christ’s acquaintance with grief makes her feel akin to him, for grief is a very human emotion.

Dickinson associates “Grief” with the imagery of “the Cross” and “where passing Calvary” where “I measure every Grief I meet”:

> There’s Grief of Want - and Grief of Cold -
> A sort they call “Despair” -
> There’s Banishment from native Eyes -
> In sight of Native Air -

> And though I may not guess the kind -
> Correctly - yet to me
> A piercing Comfort it affords
> In passing Calvary -

> To note the fashions - of the Cross -
> And now they’re mostly worn -
Still fascinated to presume
That Some - are like my own - (Fr 550/ J 561)

There are some things that stay, Dickinson names three: “Grief - Hills - Eternity -” (L 89). Grief is a human emotion buried deeply in the human heart. Grief means “deep and poignant distress caused by or as if by bereavement, a cause of such suffering” (Webster).

“I measure every Grief I met” expresses how Grief is deeply connected with human fate or Christ on the cross. The speaker of the poem measures every Grief and cannot remember “the Date of Mine - / It feels so old a pain -” Grief is such an old pain that she cannot remember when it began, and so she meditates on the vulnerability of living.

In the last four stanzas, Dickinson explores various causes of Grief; “Death,” “Grief of Want,” “Grief of Cold,” “Despair,” and finally “Banishment from native Eyes -” The last issue to be discussed seems to be the most difficult to define and probably the most important issue for the poet. Dickinson subtly draws allusion to this in the line “A piercing Comfort it affords / In passing Calvary -” Here, Grief is closely associated with Jesus Christ on the cross.”

Woe is another term associated with Christ's crucifixion. One of the best examples is “A Sloop of Amber slips away”:

A Sloop of Amber slips away
Upon an Ether Sea,
And wrecks in Peace a Purple Tar,
The Son of Ecstasy - (Fr 1599/ J1622)

The variant of the “Son” is “A Woe,” therefore the implicit meaning is oxymoronic. The destructive feature of wreckage in the third line is lined with “in Peace.” It is clear that the oxymoronic combination of “wrecks” and “in Peace” is juxtaposed upon the woeful ecstasy of the sunset to imply the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Margaret H. Freeman and Masako Takeda in their discussion on this poem summarize the implicit meaning of the last line; “The Son/ woe of Ecstasy” phrase thus takes on richer metaphoric meaning if one considers the sunset as Dickinson’s image for death and, in particular, the death of Christ, the Son of God, who is both creator and destroyer.” Dickinson is obviously a poet of sunset rather than sunrise. She is concerned with sunset, death, Christ’s death in particular.

Christ’s path is described as “Best Beauty’s way -” in “Must be a Woe -.” Again, bearing “A Cross” is associated with “a Woe.” To walk the scarlet way “Must be a woe / A loss or so.-” To look at this sideways, “It notes Delight.” The double meaning of “A Woe” and “Delight” implies
the dual value of “a cross.” The cross is a symbol of defeat but also of triumph, gain in loss, resurrection in passing away:

Must be a Woe -
A loss or so -
To bend the eye
Best Beauty’s way -

But - once aslant
It notes Delight
As difficult
As Stalactite -

A Common Bliss
Were had for less -
The price - is
Even as the Grace -

Our Lord - thought no
Extravagance
To pay - a Cross -  (Fr 538/ J 571)

Although the speaker seems to affirm the Christian dogma of redemption, there are a few signs to indicate some hesitancy. The third line of the third stanza “The price - is” delivers a different message, something odd. Being the shortest line, the split-sentence, the unexpected line break, “Is” being the last word followed by the white space remains ambiguous, though the next line concludes the idea of redemption.

The last stanza consists of odd-numbered lines. It indicates the poet’s deepest concern with “a Cross” separated by two dashes to draw the reader’s attention:

Our Lord - thought no
Extravagance
To pay - a Cross -

“The price” in the third stanza is synonymous with the last line. The last line brings us back to
the first line, “Must be a Woe -”

Compared with Jesus Christ, the last line implies that the poet might have assumed “Extravagance” to pay the price. Jesus’ divinity is revealed finally in the last line which clearly shows the difference between Christ and human beings.

Considering extreme suffering as sublime on earth is at the very core of Puritanism. By imitating Christ’s suffering, finally to gain ultimate victory enriched by pain and suffering is a goal for most Puritans. Dickinson’s poems seem to teach the necessity of imitating Christ’s scarlet way, yet they also suggest the difference that exists between the divine Jesus and human beings.

Redemption is employed with an emphasis on the idea of purchase. This stress on the commercial aspect of life brings us back to Christ’s own words; he came “to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Redemption, moreover, is not to be taken figuratively, in the sense that Christ has procured salvation for humans at the cost of great suffering, even of his life. Furthermore, Dickinson’s terms such as “price,” “purchase,” and “pay” are not employed metaphorically but quite literally and concretely. Dickinson’s poems tend to emphasize the severe condition of deprivation rather than the prize gained after great suffering. Therefore, the human side of Christ is focused on and the moment of crucifixion is dramatized in her poems.

The problem of suffering which Dickinson is very much concerned with, writes Wolosky, “is expressly and centrally the case in Christian terms, whose metaphysics continued to frame Dickinson’s own experience and understanding.” When we look for a significant meaning in each human experience, “its significant place in a meaningful order;” “This divine order was specifically revealed through biblical pattern, focused in the life of Christ.” Christ’s own suffering as the path and means of redemption is clearly shown in Dickinson’s poems. As Roger Lundin elucidates the presence of Christ in her poetry; “Christ travels with us down the hard path of suffering, and his crucifixion binds him most fully to our experience.”

The way Dickinson views the crucifixion is not a Christology of atonement, as Roxanne Harde and Roger Lundin maintain, but one of love “as she elides the Resurrection and addresses the reality of suffering with grief and sympathy.” What is more, she does not envision suffering as an absolute necessity to solve the problem of human sinfulness, to enter into the kingdom of heaven. Facing the reality of betrayal, suffering, and death in the midst of the Civil War, the universal pattern of Christ’s suffering emerges as a very persuasive line of thought.

Dickinson practically ignores the redemptive aspect of the crucifixion, attentively focusing on the very ultimate moment of Christ’s death on the cross. In Dickinson’s poems, the cross clearly shows the difference between Jesus’ complete obedience to the Father and the utter failure of the disciples to do the same thing. This then reveals the human side of Jesus as sorrowful and troubled.
Dickinson writes her poems on the crucifixion of Jesus Christ because that is the only way she can feel very close to the human-divine Jesus. Her deliberate omission of the story of atonement illuminates how she views Jesus Christ. In one of her letters, Dickinson writes “We are all human - Mary - until, we are divine -” (L 235). Jesus is included in “We.”

NOTES


5. Matt. 16:24, King James Version. Hereafter, biblical references are noted in parentheses in the text.
7. Roger Ludin, Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief, 169.
11. Roger Ludin, Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief, 168.
12. Roxanne Harde, “‘Some - are like My Own.’: Emily Dickinson’s Christology of Embodiment,” 10.