

## “The Dream of the Rood” Dr. Jonathan A. Glenn

**Manuscript:** The Vercelli Book (chapter library of the cathedral at Vercelli, Codex CXVII). **Editions:** Krapp, George Philip, ed. The Vercelli Book. ASPR 2. New York: Columbia UP, 1932; Dickens, Bruce, and Alan S. C. Ross, eds. The Dream of the Rood. Methuen's Old English Library. New York: Appleton, 1966; Swanton, Michael, ed. The Dream of the Rood. Manchester Old and Middle English Texts. New York: Barnes (for Manchester UP), 1970. Pope, John C., ed. Seven Old English Poems. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1981. It will be obvious that I have relied heavily on Swanton's edition in my notes (click on the hyperlinked superscripts in the text to go to the notes). A general observation should be made here: this poem is remarkable for its extensive use of hypermetric lines, "used contrapuntally to accommodate significantly more complex thematic material" (Swanton 61).

### Text

Listen! The choicest of visions I wish to tell,  
which came as a dream in middle-night,  
after voice-bearers lay at rest.  
It seemed that I saw a most wondrous tree  
born aloft, wound round by light, [5]  
brightest of beams. All was that beacon  
sprinkled with gold. Gems stood  
fair at earth's corners; there likewise five  
shone on the shoulder-span<sup>1</sup>. All there beheld the Angel of God<sup>2</sup>,  
fair through predestiny<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, that was no wicked one's gallows, [10]  
but holy souls beheld it there,  
men over earth, and all this great creation.  
Wondrous that victory-beam--and I stained with sins,  
with wounds of disgrace. I saw glory's tree  
honored with trappings, shining with joys, [15]  
decked with gold; gems had  
wrapped that forest tree worthily round.  
Yet through that gold I clearly perceived  
old strife of wretches<sup>4</sup>, when first it began  
to bleed on its right side. With sorrows most troubled, [20]  
I feared that fair sight. I saw that doom-beacon<sup>5</sup>  
turn trappings and hews: sometimes with water wet,  
drenched with blood's going; sometimes with jewels decked.  
But lying there long while, I,  
troubled, beheld the Healer's tree, [25]  
until I heard its fair voice.

Then best wood spoke these words:  
"It was long since--I yet remember it—  
that I was hewn at holt's end,  
moved from my stem. Strong fiends seized me there, [30]  
worked me for spectacle; cursèd ones lifted me<sup>6</sup>.  
On shoulders men bore me there, then fixed me on hill;  
fiends enough fastened me. Then saw I mankind's Lord  
come with great courage when he would mount on me.  
Then dared I not against the Lord's word [35]  
bend or break, when I saw earth's  
fields shake. All fiends  
I could have felled, but I stood fast.  
The young hero stripped himself--he, God Almighty—  
strong and stout-minded. He mounted high gallows, [40]  
bold before many, when he would loose mankind.  
I shook when that Man clasped me. I dared, still, not bow to earth,  
fall to earth's fields, but had to stand fast.  
Rood was I reared. I lifted a mighty King,  
Lord of the heavens, dared not to bend. [45]  
With dark nails they drove me through: on me those sores are seen,  
open malice-wounds. I dared not scathe anyone.  
They mocked us both, we two together<sup>7</sup>. All wet with blood I was,  
poured out from that Man's side, after ghost he gave up.  
Much have I born on that hill [50]  
of fierce fate. I saw the God of hosts  
harshly stretched out. Darknenses had  
wound round with clouds the corpse of the Wielder,  
bright radiance; a shadow went forth,  
dark under heaven. All creation wept, [55]  
King's fall lamented. Christ was on rood.  
But there eager ones came from afar  
to that noble one. I beheld all that.  
Sore was I with sorrows distressed, yet I bent to men's hands,  
with great zeal willing. They took there Almighty God, [60]  
lifted him from that grim torment. Those warriors abandoned me  
standing all blood-drenched, all wounded with arrows.  
They laid there the limb-weary one, stood at his body's head;  
beheld they there heaven's Lord, and he himself rested there,  
worn from that great strife. Then they worked him an earth-house, [65]  
men in the slayer's sight carved it from bright stone,  
set in it the Wielder of Victories. Then they sang him a sorrow-song,  
sad in the eventide, when they would go again  
with grief from that great Lord. He rested there, with small company.  
But we there lamenting a good while [70]

stood in our places after the warrior's cry  
went up. Corpse grew cold,  
fair life-dwelling. Then someone felled us  
all to the earth. That was a dreadful fate!  
Deep in a pit one delved us. Yet there Lord's thanes, [75]  
friends, learned of me, . . . . .  
adorned me with silver and gold.  
Now you may know, loved man of mine,  
what I, work of baleful ones, have endured  
of sore sorrows. Now has the time come [80]  
when they will honor me far and wide,  
men over earth, and all this great creation,  
will pray for themselves to this beacon. On me God's son  
suffered awhile. Therefore I, glorious now,  
rise under heaven, and I may heal [85]  
any of those who will reverence me.  
Once I became hardest of torments,  
most loathly to men, before I for them,  
voice-bearers, life's right way opened.  
Indeed, Glory's Prince, Heaven's Protector, [90]  
honored me, then, over holm-wood<sup>8</sup>.  
Thus he his mother, Mary herself,  
Almighty God, for all men,  
also has honored over all woman-kind.  
Now I command you, loved man of mine, [95]  
that you this seeing<sup>9</sup> tell unto men;  
discover with words that it is glory's beam  
which Almighty God suffered upon  
for all mankind's manifold sins  
and for the ancient ill-deeds of Adam. [100]  
Death he tasted there, yet God rose again  
by his great might, a help unto men.  
He then rose to heaven. Again sets out hither  
into this Middle-Earth, seeking mankind  
on Doomsday, the Lord himself, [105]  
Almighty God, and with him his angels,  
when he will deem--he holds power of doom--  
everyone here as he will have earned  
for himself earlier in this brief life.  
Nor may there be any unafraid [110]  
for the words that the Wielder speaks.  
He asks before multitudes where that one is  
who for God's name would gladly taste  
bitter death, as before he on beam did.

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And they then are afraid, and few think [115]  
what they can to Christ's question answer<sup>10</sup>.  
Nor need there then any be most afraid<sup>11</sup>  
who ere in his breast bears finest of beacons;  
but through that rood shall each soul  
from the earth-way enter the kingdom, [120]  
who with the Wielder thinks yet to dwell."  
I prayed then to that beam with blithe mind,  
great zeal, where I alone was  
with small company<sup>12</sup>. My heart was  
impelled on the forth-way, waited for in each [125]  
longing-while. For me now life's hope:  
that I may seek that victory-beam  
alone more often than all men,  
honor it well. My desire for that  
is much in mind, and my hope of protection [130]  
reverts to the rood. I have not now many  
strong friends on this earth; they forth hence  
have departed from world's joys, have sought themselves glory's King;  
they live now in heaven with the High-Father,  
dwell still in glory, and I for myself expect [135]  
each of my days the time when the Lord's rood,  
which I here on earth formerly saw,  
from this loaned life will fetch me away  
and bring me then where is much bliss,  
joy in the heavens, where the Lord's folk [140]  
is seated at feast, where is bliss everlasting;  
and set me then where I after may  
dwell in glory, well with those saints  
delights to enjoy. May he be friend to me  
who here on earth earlier died [145]  
on that gallows-tree for mankind's sins.  
He loosed us and life gave,  
a heavenly home. Hope was renewed  
with glory and gladness to those who there burning endured.  
That Son was victory-fast<sup>13</sup> in that great venture, [150]  
with might and good-speed<sup>14</sup>, when he with many,  
vast host of souls, came to God's kingdom,  
One-Wielder Almighty: bliss to the angels  
and all the saints--those who in heaven  
dwelt long in glory--when their Wielder came, [155]  
Almighty God, where his homeland was.

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## Annotations

[ 1 ] shoulder-span. OE *eaxlegespanne*. Of this hapax legomenon, Swanton writes: "It would be tempting to identify this with the 'axle-tree' or centre-piece of the cross, although 'axle' in this sense of wheel-centre is not otherwise recorded before the thirteenth century. . . . It might . . . simply refer to the beam of the gallows along which Christ's arms were stretched, although the 'crux gemmata' normally has jewels along all four arms." [Return to text]

[ 2 ] All . . . God. Most editors assume that *engel* 'angel' is the subject of the sentence, but I follow Swanton in treating *ealle* 'all' as subject and *engel* as object. Swanton considers this to cause difficulties about identifying the *engel*, but the OE word can carry the sense 'messenger,' which obviously suggests that the Cross itself is the *engel* *dryhtnes* 'angel/messenger of God.' [Return to text]

[ 3 ] fair . . . predestiny. OE *fægere þurh forðgesceaft*, an ambiguous phrase, *forðgesceaft* being used elsewhere to mean both 'creation' and 'future destiny.' See Swanton for a discussion of the possibilities. My translation indicates that I take it to mean 'what is preordained.' Thus the Rood is part of an eternal plan, like "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8). [Return to text]

[ 4 ] old strife of wretches. OE *earmra ærgewin*, lit. 'of wretches ere-strife.' The phrase, in this context, appears to refer to the whole battle between Christ and Satan, Good and Evil; more immediately, of course, it refers to Christ's Passion, viewed as battle. [Return to text]

[ 5 ] doom-beacon. OE *fuse beacen*. Considering that "the word *fus* is commonly associated with death," Swanton notes: "Clearly, within the poet's vision we must recognize not simply the church year hastening to its sacrificial end, but a concrete symbol of death and the doom to come. This *beacen* is at once an emblem of death (Christ's) and of doom (that of the dreamer and world). At Judgement Day it is this symbol that will be seen again in the heavens. . . ." [Return to text]

[ 6 ] *cursèd* . . . me. As Swanton observes, the syntax could conceivably support the rendering "made me lift *cursèd* ones." [Return to text]

[ 7 ] both . . . together. OE *unc butu ætgædere* 'we two both together.' *Unc* is dual in number, underscoring the close relationship--the near identification--of Cross and Christ in the poem. [Return to text]

[ 8 ] *holm-wood*. OE *holmwudu*, a hapax legomenon and obscure. Swanton notes three possible ways to find meaning in the term: (1) interpret it as 'sea-wood' (either 'ship' or--more understandably--*lignum vitae* 'tree of life,' which grows by the waters of Paradise);

(2) emend to holtwudu 'forest wood'; or (3) take holm in the OS sense 'hill,' providing a "powerful oblique reference to the gallows of Golgotha." [Return to text]

[ 9 ] seeing. OE gesyhð 'thing seen, vision' (> NE sight), clearly referring to the dreamer's vision of the Cross. B. Huppé, Web of Words, entitles this poem "Gesyhp rodes." [Return to text]

[ 10 ] Christ's . . . answer. More literally: "what they may begin to say to Christ." [Return to text]

[ 11 ] most afraid. OE unforht, usually emended to anforht 'fearful'; Swanton retains the MS reading un- as an intensive: 'very afraid.' [Return to text]

[ 12 ] small company. See line 69. This is one of the numerous echoes set up to link Christ, Cross, and Dreamer. [Return to text]

[ 13 ] victory-fast. I.e., secure in or sure of victory. [Return to text]

[ 14 ] with . . . good-speed. OE mihtig ond spedig 'mighty and successful' (the latter being the original meaning of speedy). [Return to text]

While the term "rood" refers to a cross, the dream is really about a tree that has been fashioned into a cross. Specifically, the tree has been turned into the cross used to crucify Christ, and feels immense sorrow and pain at what he has become which he relates to the dreamer in a long passage. While the poem is clearly a religious text, a closer examination actually reveals some elements of German Heroism (a non-Christian culture competing with Christianity during this time). While the basic narrative of the text is a version of the Crucifixion of Christ, it is overlaid throughout with heroic sentiment. During this period in history, the Christian religion was still gaining ground, and many practitioners sought varying methods of popularizing the new religion. The rood goes on to explain that the cross was once an instrument of torture and death, and is now the dazzling sign of mankind's redemption. It charges the poet to tell of his vision to all men so that they, too, might be redeemed of sin. Historical Significance. The poem has been the subject of literary and historical study for generations and has been interpreted in a variety of ways. (2020, August 27). How Old Is 'the Dream of the Rood' and What Does It Mean? Retrieved from <https://www.thoughtco.com/the-dream-of-the-rood-1788873> Snell, Melissa. "How Old Is 'the Dream of the Rood' and What Does It Mean?" ThoughtCo. <https://www.thoughtco.com/the-dream-of-the-rood-1788873> (accessed May 12, 2021). 'Dream of the Rood', an Old English poem, presents a dream in which the speaker saw the cross describing him the episode of crucifixion. "Rood" originated from the Old English word, "rād" meaning pole. It is a reference to the "crucifix" on which Christ accepted his glorious death. "The Dream of the Rood" was preserved in the Vercelli Book in the 10th century. However, the 8th-century Ruthwell Cross contains this poem, predating any manuscripts having Old English poetry. Apart from that, there is not any clarity regarding the authorship of the poem. The argument regarding the authorship deals with two famous Anglo-Saxon poets, Caedmon and Cynewulf. Explore The Dream of the Rood. 1 Summary of Dream of the Rood. 2 Meaning of The The Dream of the Rood. translated by. Charles W. Kennedy. I will tell the fairest of dreams, that came to me at midnight when mortal men abode in sleep. It seemed to me that I beheld a beauteous tree uplifted in the air, enwreathed with light, brightest of beams. All that beacon was enwrought with gold. Four jewels lay upon the earth, and five were at the crossing of the arms. All the winsome angels of the Lord gazed upon it through the firmament. Nor was that the cross indeed of any evil-doer, but holy spirits looked upon it, men on earth, and all the bright creation. Wondrous was that victor-tree, and I was stained with sin and wounded with my wick