

THE DREAM OF THE ROOD

The devotional and visionary poem known as *The Dream of the Rood* survives in a manuscript called the Vercelli Book; the manuscript was written in the southeast of England in the later tenth century but was left in the northern Italian town of Vercelli (an important stop on the pilgrimage route from England to Rome) by the end of the eleventh century. The Vercelli Book contains twenty-three prose homilies and six poems; as with most Old English literature, its origins, authorship and audience are not known.

Although the Vercelli book was copied in the tenth century, *The Dream of the Rood* may be considerably older. Several lines from the poem are carved in runic characters on a large stone monument known as the Ruthwell Cross, found in a small church in Dumfriesshire (on the western border of England and Scotland). The Cross, which has been dated to the early eighth century, is elaborately carved with scenes from the Gospels and lives of the saints, antiphons in Latin, and decorative scroll-work; if the runic inscriptions were part of the original monument (and not a later addition), then portions of *The Dream of the Rood* are among the earliest written Old English poems.

The Dream of the Rood tells the story of the Crucifixion of Christ from the point of view of the Cross, which appears to the narrator in a dream and recounts its experiences. Christ is presented as a heroic warrior, eagerly leaping on the Cross to do battle with Death; the Cross is a loyal retainer who is painfully and paradoxically forced to participate in his lord's execution. The narrator who witnesses all then shares his vision, describes the virtues of devotion to the Cross, and looks forward to the time when the righteous, protected by the Cross, will be taken up into the banquet-halls of heaven. The blending of Christian themes and heroic conventions is a striking example of how the Anglo-Saxons vigorously re-imagined Christianity even as they embraced it. *The Dream of the Rood* interweaves biblical, liturgical, and devotional material with the language of heroic poetry and elegy, and something of the ambiguity and wordplay of the *Riddles*; its complex structure of echoes, allusions, repetitions, and verbal parallels makes it one of the most carefully constructed poems in Old English.



*The Dream of the Rood*¹

Listen! I will speak of the sweetest dream,
what came to me in the middle of the night,
when speech-bearers slept in their rest.
It seemed that I saw a most wondrous tree
raised on high, circled round with light,
the brightest of beams. All that beacon was
covered in gold; gems stood
fair at the earth's corners, and five there were

up on the cross-beam. All the angels of the lord
looked on,
fair through all eternity;² that was no felon's gallows,
but holy spirits beheld him there,
men over the earth and all this glorious creation.

Wondrous was the victory-tree, and I was fouled
by sins,
wounded with guilt; I saw the tree of glory
honored in garments, shining with joys,

¹ *The Dream of the Rood* Translated by R.M. Liuzza for *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature*.

² *All the ... eternity* These lines are difficult and much debated; another possible translation is "All creation, eternally fair / beheld the Lord's angel there," the Lord's angel presumably being the Cross itself, God's messenger to earth.

15 bedecked with gold; gems had
covered worthily the creator's tree.
And yet beneath that gold I began to see
an ancient wretched struggle, for it first began
to bleed on the right side. I was all beset with sorrows,
20 fearful for that fair vision; I saw that eager beacon
change garments and colors—now it was drenched,
stained with blood, now bedecked with treasure.

And yet, lying there a long while,
I beheld in sorrow the savior's tree,
25 until I heard it utter a sound;
that best of woods began to speak words:
"It was so long ago—I remember it still—
that I was felled from the forest's edge,
ripped up from my roots. Strong enemies seized me
there,
30 made me their spectacle, made me bear their criminals;
they bore me on their shoulders and then set me on a
hill,
enemies enough fixed me fast. Then I saw the lord of
mankind
hasten eagerly when he wanted to ascend onto me.
There I dared not bow down or break,
35 against the lord's word, when I saw
the ends of the earth tremble. Easily I might
have felled all those enemies, and yet I stood fast.
Then the young hero made ready—that was God
almighty—
strong and resolute; he ascended on the high gallows,
40 brave in the sight of many, when he wanted to
ransom mankind.

I trembled when he embraced me, but I dared not
bow to the ground,
or fall to the earth's corners—I had to stand fast.
I was reared as a cross: I raised up the mighty king,
the lord of heaven; I dared not lie down.
45 They drove dark nails through me; the scars are
still visible,
open wounds of hate; I dared not harm any of them.
They mocked us both together; I was all drenched
with blood
flowing from that man's side after he had sent
forth his spirit.

Much have I endured on that hill
50 of hostile fates: I saw the God of hosts

cruelly stretched out. Darkness had covered
with its clouds the ruler's corpse,
that shining radiance. Shadows spread
grey under the clouds; all creation wept,
55 mourned the king's fall: Christ on the cross.
And yet from afar men came hastening
to that noble one; I watched it all.
I was all beset with sorrow, yet I sank into their hands,
humbly, eagerly. There they took almighty God,
60 lifted him from his heavy torment; the warriors then
left me
standing drenched in blood, all shot through with arrows.
They laid him down, bone-weary, and stood by
his body's head;
they watched the lord of heaven there, who
rested a while,
weary from his mighty battle. They began to build a
tomb for him
65 in the sight of his slayer; they carved it from bright
stone,
and set within the lord of victories. They began to
sing a dirge for him,
wretched at evening, when they wished to travel hence,
weary, from the glorious lord—he rested there
with little company.¹
And as we stood there, weeping, a long while
70 fixed in our station, the song ascended
from those warriors. The corpse grew cold,
the fair life-house. Then they began to fell us
all to the earth—a terrible fate!
They dug for us a deep pit, yet the lord's thanes,
75 friends found me there ...
adorned me with gold and silver.²
Now you can hear, my dear hero,
that I have endured the work of evil-doers,
harsh sorrows. Now the time has come
80 that far and wide they honor me,
men over the earth and all this glorious creation,

¹ *with little company* I.e., utterly alone.

² *silver* There is no gap in the manuscript here, but something is obviously missing—the story of the Finding of the True Cross, told (among other places) in the Old English poem *Elene*. The Cross is buried, hidden, forgotten, then recovered by Helen, mother of the emperor Constantine; its authenticity is established and it becomes an object of veneration and sign of victory.

and pray to this sign. On me the son of God
suffered for a time; and so, glorious now
I rise up under the heavens, and am able to heal
each of those who is in awe of me.

Once I was made into the worst of torments,
most hateful to all people, before I opened
the true way of life for speech-bearers.
Lo! the Kkng of glory, guardian of heaven's kingdom
honored me over all the trees of the forest,
just as he has also, almighty God, honored
his mother, Mary herself,
above all womankind for the sake of all men.

Now I bid you, my beloved hero,
that you reveal this vision to men,
tell them in words that it is the tree of glory
on which almighty God suffered
for mankind's many sins
and Adam's ancient deeds.

Death he tasted there, yet the Lord rose again
with his great might to help mankind.
He ascended into heaven. He will come again
to this middle-earth to seek mankind,
on doomsday, almighty God,
the lord himself and his angels with him,
and he will judge—he has the power of judgment—
each one of them as they have earned
beforehand here in this loaned life.

No one there may be unafraid
at the words which the ruler will speak:
he will ask before the multitude where the man
might be
who for the lord's name would taste
bitter death, as he did earlier on that tree.
But they will tremble then, and little think
what they might even begin to say to Christ.
But no one there need be very afraid
who has borne in his breast the best of beacons;
but through the cross shall seek the kingdom
every soul from this earthly way,
whoever thinks to rest with the ruler.”

Then I prayed to the tree with a happy heart,
eagerly, there where I was alone

with little company. My spirit longed to start
the journey forth; it has felt
so much of longing. It is now my life's hope
that I may seek the tree of victory
alone, more often than all men,
and honor it well. I wish for that
with all my heart, and my hope of protection is
fixed on the cross. I have few wealthy friends
on earth; they all have gone forth,
fled from worldly joys and sought the king of glory;
they live now in heaven with the high father,
and dwell in glory, and each day I look forward
to the time when the cross of the lord,
on which I have looked while here on this earth,
will fetch me from this loaned life,
and bring me where there is great bliss,
joy in heaven, where the lord's host
is seated at the feast, with ceaseless bliss;
and then set me where I may afterwards
dwell in glory, share joy
fully with the saints. May the lord be my friend,
he who here on earth once suffered
on the hanging-tree for human sin;
he ransomed us and gave us life,
a heavenly home. Hope was renewed
with cheer and bliss for those who were burning there.¹
The son was successful in that journey,
mighty and victorious, when he came with a multitude,
a great host of souls, into God's kingdom,
the one ruler almighty, the angels rejoicing
and all the saints already in heaven
dwelling in glory, when almighty God,
their ruler, returned to his rightful home.

—IOTH CENTURY

¹ A well-known Christian tradition known as the “Harrowing of Hell” tells how Jesus, after His death on the Cross, descended into Hell and broke open its gates, releasing the souls of those unjustly imprisoned by Satan since the creation of human beings. Jesus conveyed them to Heaven, then returned to earth for His resurrection.

rume. pade þu nebid. fnocton þeapre cþafce þu þe
 pade. uton to þam bætan næpe cunnon hvegan þyhtan
 þæt þe hvepony læhte eþpe mid englam agan moton
 gafeum to geoce þonne god wile eorðan lifa. eþde ge
 þyhtan.

Hæt ic fprena cyrc sægan wille hæc mæge mætte
 to midre mæhte eþþan neoyd biþind wæste punodon.
 þahce me þæt ic ge wape wyllicre weap onlyft
 ledan læhte be punden bæama beaphtore eall þæt
 bæacn þæt be geceh mid golde gymmay fcedon wæpne
 æt foldan fcedum. fprece þæt þe wæron uppe
 on þam eare ge fpanne be healdon þæt engel dpreht
 neft ealle wæpne þuþ þeod ge fceapce ne þæt deghupa
 ffracodeft gealga. æchne þæt be healdon halige gefear
 mæn of þæt moldan geall þæt mæge ge fceapce.

Syllie þæt þe wige bearn ic fynnū þæt þe funded
 mid fommū ge seah ic wuld þæt weap. wædum ge weap
 dode fynnū scanan ge gyped mid golde gymmay hefdon
 be wæpne wepndlice wældes weap. hwepne ic
 þuþ þæt gold ongytan mæhte eumma eþgeþn
 þæt hit wepce ongan fprecan on þæt fprecan hæpce
 ealle þæt mid wæpnum ge wæpced. þæt ic weap þe
 weap wæpnan ge wylde ge weah ic weap þæt bæacn.

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Lines 1-21 of the Vercelli Book.

The Ruthwell Cross.