

THE DREAM OF THE ROOD

Translation by William G. Carpenter

A treasured poem of the Old English corpus, *The Dream of the Rood* was likely composed by a single learned author in eighth-century Northumbria. Scholars have identified scriptural, liturgical, and other literary sources for the poem, including Aldhelm's riddles, and have credited the author with knowledge of the cult of the cross and the christological controversies. The poem was known in its day, serving as a source for other poets, and a portion of it appears in a runic inscription on the Ruthwell ("rivel") Cross in southwestern Scotland. It fell into obscurity until a German law professor discovered the manuscript now known as the Vercelli Book in 1822.

The poem is primarily in traditional two-stress alliterative half-verses, with numerous hypermetric half-verses. It falls into three parts. In the first, the speaker-dreamer leads the reader-hearer from a vision of the jeweled Cross Triumphant to a fearful fixation on the bleeding Cross, which corresponds to the speaker-dreamer's consciousness of sin.

In the second part, the Cross narrates its shameful tale as Christ's executioner. The Cross tells how it suffered the torment and indignity of the crucifixion, in sharp contrast to the bold heroism of Christ the King, who leapt on the Cross like a warrior charging the shield-wall. The Cross then relates its burial, exhumation, and glorification, and its new vocation as an agent of salvation. Lastly it commissions the speaker-dreamer to preach the Passion, Resurrection, and Last Judgment.

In the third part, the speaker-dreamer narrates how he eagerly accepted the Cross's charge, and awaits the day the Cross will escort him to the heavenly mead-hall. The poem closes with an image of Christ returning to his kingdom that fuses the Ascension with the Harrowing of Hell.

By situating the speaker-dreamer as the hearer of the Cross's story, the poet subtly equates the reader-hearer with the speaker-dreamer. By inflicting torture and burial on the Cross, and resurrecting it as a savior, the poet equates the Cross with Christ himself. When the Cross addresses the speaker-dreamer, twice, as *hæleð min se leofa*, my beloved hero, it identifies the speaker-dreamer with Christ, who is also *hæleð* and *beorn*. There are no shields, swords, or helmets in the poem; no royal boars, stags, or dragons; no scourges, cords, or plaited thorns.

Instead, the poet leads the reader-hearer, by means of structural parallels, from the passive wretchedness of the Christ-killer to the energetic devotion of the disciple.

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The Dream of the Rood

Hear me give word to the worthiest dream
that came to me towards midmost night,
when banqueters were all abed.
In thought I traced the truest tree,
lifting aloft, and looped with light,
brightest of boles, the whole beacon
bathed in bullion. Brooches abounded,
lovely on earthlands; of such like five
were cut in the cross-piece. Those who by decree
were fair forever beheld the Lord's herald;
it was, in fact, no felon's gallows,
but wholesome ghosts, and men above ground,
and all glorious creation gazed .

Stunning that trophy, I stained with sins,
gored in my grossness. I saw glory's gage
enshrined in its sheathing, ashimmer with blisses,
and garbed in gilt; glimmering baubles
richly arrayed the Ruler's rafter.
Yet under gold, I was able to glimpse
Wretches' old toil that roused a sweat
in its right side; I was roiled with sorrow,

alarmed for the loveliness. The live sign
changed color and clothing, now was all
awash with wet, gushing with gore,
now graced with glitter. Still lying a while,
I stared, stricken, at the Savior's standard,
until I heard it unhinge its hoard.
The best of spars began to speak:

*In years of yore, yet borne in mind,
hewn down I was at the holtwood's foot,
steered from my stem. Strong foemen took me,
shaped me their staring stock for stretching scoundrels.
The hands humped me high on the height,
and there footed me, no few foes.
I saw men's Sovereign strive to scale me;
I durst not scant the Savior's hest
by bending or breaking, though I saw it bobble,
the earth in its bounds. Able I was
to slaughter all, but stood stock-still.
The green Redeemer – God almighty –
stripped and stoutly sprang up the gallows,
a marvel, bold-minded, when He freed mankind.
I shook when the Soldier seized me in arms,
nor dared humble my height to earth,
incline to its quarters; I was called to hold fast.
A rood I was reared; I upraised the King,
the heavens' Headman, nor heeled over.
With dreary pins they pierced my parts;
yet seen the sores, the unsealed lesions.
Nor dared I mangle any men.
They blasphemed us both; I was boltered in blood*

*that flooded from His open flank
after the Groom sent forth His ghost.
I much endured on that high down,
inhuman haps, saw heaven's Lord
direly drawn. Darkness veiled
the Maker's dust, His dazzling sheen,
in somber cover; the shadow spread,
obscure under stormclouds. Creation sobbed,
bewept the King's fall: Christ was across.*

*Yet there the faithful fared from afar
to seek their Sovereign; I saw it all.
Though soiled with sorrows, I stooped to those soldiers.
Meek-minded, manly, dismounting their Chief,
they raised him from labor, though me they left
to stew in cruor, stuck through with shafts.
They laid out the weary One, watched at His head,
beheld heaven's Lord, how He halted a while,
weak from war fare. They wrought a barrow,
His men by His bane, hewed the bright stone,
and lodged therein their victory-leader;
they commenced to sound their song of sorrow,
aching at eventide. Then would they set out,
spent from the splendid One; He stayed with His squadron.
Yet we, weeping a goodly while,
stood at our station after it ceased,
the warriors' cry. The corpus cooled,
the lovely life-housing. Then men leveled us
down to the ground, a gruesome end;
they scooped a trench, but the Savior's thanes,
His bosom friends, unburied me*

and girded me in gold and silver.

*Now you may hear, beloved hero,
how I abided baleworkers' toil
and sore sorrows. The season is come
when men above ground and glorious creation
pay worship to me, from far and wide
beseeching this spire. On me, the Son
suffered a spell; so I, now stately,
stand under heaven, have strength to heal
all whoever hold me in awe.
Of old I was formed for fiercest torture,
most foul to folk, before I fetched them,
heroes in hall, the highway to life.
Hear how He hallowed me, the Head of glory,
Warden of heaven, above all wood,
as He magnified His mother, Mary,
for the good of men, over all womankind.
Now I command, dear hero of mine,
that you describe this sight to men,
ungarb in words how God almighty
His torment bore on this bright boom
for men's misdeeds and old Adam's doings.
Death He endured; the Redeemer rose
with matchless might to succor men.
He leapt to Heaven, will head hereafter
to this middle world to seek out mankind
at dayspring of doomsday, the Savior himself,
almighty God amid His angels,
when He wants to judge – for judgment is His –
everyone whomever as he has earned*

*aforetimes here in this fleeting life.
Nor can anyone stand unafraid
before the sentence the Chieftain speaks:
He will ask the many where the man might be
who for God's name will death undergo,
as He on that pile once expired.
Then they will fear, and few will fathom
what to say to answer the Savior.
But on that day no one need dread
who bore on his breast the blessed ensign,
but over this sill every soul soever
that longs to lodge with the Lord our God
shall reach the region beyond earth's round.*

I prayed to that pillar, pleasant in spirit,
with ample ardor once I was alone
with my small band; then my soul
pressed on in its journey, underwent much
in seasons of longing. Now my life's joy
is that I entreat that trunk of triumph,
one more often than other men,
and worship well. My will for this
fulfills my mind; and my defense
is fixed on that beam. I have few fearsome
allies in earthlands, for they have gone onwards
from this world's goods. They sought glory's King,
they live in heaven; on high with the Father,
they dwell in splendor. And I have in spirit
that day whenever the Word's timber,
which here on earth I once beheld,
might fetch me from this fleeting life

and billet me where bliss abounds,
where the Savior's people sit down to supper,
and then will set me where I thenceforth
may dwell in glory and relish well
that wholesome mirth. May the Hero befriend me,
He who on earth in old times
groaned on the gallows tree for the guilt of men;
He unloosed us and allotted us life,
a freehold in heaven. Hope was made new,
with blessings and bliss, for them that bore burning.
The Offspring prospered on that campaign,
mighty and thriving, when He led His throng,
the host of souls, to the Holy One's realm,
the powerful Ruler, to the rapture of angels
and all the saints who aforesaid in heaven
resided in splendor, when their Sovereign returned,
the Lord Most High, to His own homeland.