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The Dream of the Rood

That this is the finest, most imaginately conceived and most original of the OE religious poems few will dispute. Some commentators have felt the standard of poetry in the latter part of the poem to fall gravely below that of the Dream itself; but it would be strange and improper for the intensity of the reflective re-action to match that of the deep religious experience.

The poem appears to be early, probably before 750, as passages from it are carved on the Ruthwell Cross, which the experts generally believe to have been carved then or earlier, for discussion of which see the editions listed below and further references there given.

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The Dream of the Rood

Hwæt, ic swefna cyst secgan wylle,
hwæt mē gemætte tō midre nihte,
syðþan reordberend reste wunedon.

Pūhte mē þæt ic gesāwe syllicre trēow
5 on lyft lādan lēohte bewunden,
bēama beorhtost. Eall þæt bēacen wæs
begoten mid golde; gimmas stōdon
fægere æt foldan scēatum, swylce þær fife wæron
uppe on þām eaxlegespanne. Behēoldon þær engeldryhta

10 fægere þurh forðgesceaft; ne wæs ðær hūru fracodes
feala,
gealga,

ac hine þær behēoldon hālige gāstas,
men ofer moldan, and eall þeos mære gesceaft.
Syllic wæs se sigebēam and ic synnum fāh,
forwunded mid wommun. Geseah ic wuldres trēow

15 wædum geweorðod wynnnum scīnan,
gegyred mid golde; gimmas hæfdon
bewrigen weorðlice Wealdendes trēow.
Hwæðre ic þurh þæt gold ongytan meahte
earmra ærgewin, þæt hit ærest ongan

20 swātan on þā swiðran healfe. Eall ic wæs mid sorgum
gedrēfed;
forht ic wæs for þære fæggran gesyhðe. Geseah ic þæt fūse
bēacen
wendan wædum and blēom; hwilum hit wæs mid wātan
bestēmed,
beswyled mid swātes gange, hwilum mid since gegyrwed.

2. *me gemætte*, literally 'I dreamed'.

9. *engeldryhta feala* MS *engel dryhtnes ealle*. The MS reading does not make sense. Dickins and Ross omit *ealle* and emend to *engeldryhte*, but Pope's proposal (*Rhythm of Beowulf*, p. 111, footnote), which is here adopted, is palaeographically preferable.

12-13 The two sentences are combined in the translation.

The Dream of the Rood

Hear while I tell about the best of dreams
Which came to me the middle of one night
While humankind were sleeping in their beds.
It was as though I saw a wondrous tree
Towering in the sky suffused with light,
Brightest of beams; and all that beacon was
Covered with gold. The corners of the earth
Gleamed with fair jewels, just as there were five
Upon the cross-beam. Many bands of angels,
Fair throughout all eternity, looked on.
No felon's gallows that, but holy spirits,
Mankind, and all this marvellous creation,
Gazed on the glorious tree of victory.
And I with sins was stained, wounded with guilt.
I saw the tree of glory brightly shine
In gorgeous clothing, all bedecked with gold.
The Ruler's tree was worthily adorned
With gems; yet I could see beyond that gold
The ancient strife of wretched men, when first
Upon its right side it began to bleed.
I was all moved with sorrows, and afraid
At the fair sight. I saw that lively beacon
Changing its clothes and hues; sometimes it was
Bedewed with blood and drenched with flowing gore,
At other times it was bedecked with treasure.
So I lay watching there the Saviour's tree,

THE DREAM OF THE ROOD

Hwæðre ic þær licgende lange hwile
 25 behēold hrēowcearig Hælandes trēow
 oð ðæt ic gehýrde þæt hit hlēoðrode.
 Ongan þā word sprecan wudu sēlesta:
 'Þæt wæs gēara iū, ic þæt gýta geman,
 þæt ic wæs āhēawen holtes on ende,
 30 āstyred of stefne mínum. Genāman mē ðær strange
 fēondas,
 geworhton him þær tō wāfersýne, hēton mē heora
 wergas hebban.
 Bæron mē þær beornas on eaxlum oð ðæt hie mē on
 beorg āsetton,
 gefæstnodon mē þær fēondas genōge. Geseah ic þā
 Frēan mancynnes
 efstan elne micle þæt Hē mē wolde on gestigan.
 35 Þær ic þā ne dorste ofer Dryhtnes word
 būgan oððe berstan þā ic bifian geseah
 eorðan scēatas. Ealle ic mihte
 fēondas gefyllan, hwæðre ic fæste stōd.
 Ongyrede Hine þā geong hæleð þæt wæs God ælmihtig,
 40 strang and stiðmōd; gestāh Hē on gealgan hēanne,
 mōdig on manigra gesyhðe, þā Hē wolde mancyn lýsan.
 Bifode ic þā mē se beorn ymbclypte; ne dorste ic
 hwæðre būgan tō eorðan,
 feallan tō foldan scēatum, ac ic sceolde fæste standan.
 Rōd wæs ic āræred; āhōf ic ricne Cyning,
 45 heofona Hlāford, hylðan mē ne dorste.
 Durhðrifan hī mē mid deorcan næglum, on mē syndon
 þā dolg gesiene,
 opene inwidhlemmas. Ne dorste ic hira ænigum sceððan.
 Bysmeredon hie unc būtu ætgædere. Eall ic wæs mid
 blōde bestēmed,
 begoten of þæs guman síðan síððan Hē hæfde His
 gāst onsended.
 50 Feala ic on þām beorge gebiden hæbbe
 wrāðra wyrda. Geseah ic weruda God

THE DREAM OF THE ROOD

Grieving in spirit for a long, long while,
 Until I heard it utter sounds, the best
 Of woods began to speak these words to me:
 'It was long past—I still remember it—
 That I was cut down at the copse's end,
 Moved from my roots. Strong enemies there took me,
 Told me to hold aloft their criminals,
 Made me a spectacle. Men carried me
 Upon their shoulders, set me on a hill,
 A host of enemies there fastened me.
 And then I saw the Lord of all mankind
 Hasten with eager zeal that He might mount
 Upon me. I durst not against God's word
 Bend down or break, when I saw tremble all
 The surface of the earth. Although I might
 Have struck down all the foes, yet stood I fast.
 Then the young hero (who was God Almighty)
 Got ready, resolute and strong in heart.
 He climbed onto the lofty gallows-tree,
 Bold in the sight of many watching men,
 When He intended to redeem mankind.
 I trembled as the warrior embraced me.
 But still I dared not bend down to the earth,
 Fall to the ground. Upright I had to stand.
 A rood I was raised up; and I held high
 The noble King, the Lord of heaven above.
 I dared not stoop. They pierced me with dark nails;
 The scars can still be clearly seen on me,
 The open wounds of malice. Yet might I
 Not harm them. They reviled us both together.
 I was made wet all over with the blood
 Which poured out from His side, after He had
 Sent forth His spirit. And I underwent
 Full many a dire experience on that hill.
 I saw the God of hosts stretched grimly out.

THE DREAM OF THE ROOD

pearle þenian; þýstro hæfdon
 bewrigen mid wolcnum Wealdendes hræw,
 scirne scíman sceadu forðeode,
 55 wann under wolcnum. Wēop eal gesceaft,
 cwīðdon Cyninges fyll. Crist wæs on rōde.
 Hwæðere þær fūse feorran cwōman
 tō þām æðelinge; ic þæt eall behēold.
 Sāre ic wæs mid sorgum gedrēfed, hnāg ic hwæðre þām
 secgum tō handa,
 60 ēaðmōd elne mycle. Genāmon hie þær ælmihtigne God,
 āhōfon Hine of ðām hefian wite, forlēton mē þā
 hilderincas
 standan stēame bedrifenne; eall ic wæs mid strælum
 forwundod.
 Alēdon Hine ðær limwērigne, gestōdon Him æt His
 lices hēafdum,
 behēoldon hie ðær heofenes Dryhten, and Hē Hine ðær
 hwile reste,
 65 mēðe æfter ðām miclan gewinne. Ongunnon Him þā
 moldern wyrcan
 beornas on banan gesyhðe, curfon hie ðæt of beorhtan
 stāne,
 gesetton hie ðæron sigora Wealdend. Ongunnon Him þā
 sorhlēoð galan
 earmes on þā æfentide. Þā hie woldon eft sīðian
 mēðe fram þām mæran Þeodne, reste Hē ðær mæte
 weorode.

63. *hine ðar* MS *hie ðar*, Ruthwell Cross *hie hine*. The MS reading is acceptable, but some editors have felt that the accusative should be expressed rather than understood. Sweet therefore takes *hie hine* from the Ruthwell Cross. *hine ðar* equally overcomes the difficulty, as the scribe could have caught *hie* from the following line. The nominative does not need here to be expressed.

66. *banan*, singular, can only refer to the Cross. C. L. Wrenn (*Beowulf*, p. 306, s.v. *wyrsan*) argues that *banan* is a late WS genitive plural and explains similarly *guman*, l. 146.

69. *mate weorode*, a rather weak litotes for 'alone', see l. 124.

THE DREAM OF THE ROOD

Darkness covered the Ruler's corpse with clouds,
 His shining beauty; shadows passed across,
 Black in the darkness. All creation wept,
 Bewailed the King's death; Christ was on the cross.
 And yet I saw men coming from afar,
 Hastening to the Prince. I watched it all.
 With sorrows I was grievously oppressed,
 Yet willingly I bent to those men's hands,
 Humbly. They took up there Almighty God,
 And from the heavy torment lifted Him.
 The soldiers left me standing drenched with moisture,
 Wounded all over with the metal points.
 They laid Him down limb-weary; then they stood
 Beside the corpse's head, there they beheld
 The Lord of heaven, and He rested there
 A while, tired after the great agony.
 The men then made a sepulchre for Him
 In sight of me. They carved it of bright stone,
 And set therein the Lord of victories.
 Next, wretched in the eventide, they sang
 A dirge for Him; and when they went away,
 Weary from that great Prince, He stayed, alone.

THE DREAM OF THE ROOD

- 70 Hwæðere wē ðær grēotende gōde hwile
 stōdon on staðole, stefn up gewāt
 hilderinca; hræw cōlode,
 fæger feorgbold. Pā ūs man fyllan ongan
 ealle tō eorðan; þæt wæs egeslic wyrd.
- 75 Bedealf ūs man on dēopan sēape; hwæðre mē þær
 Dryhtnes pegnas,
 frēondas gefrūnon,
 gvredon mē golde and seolfre.
 Nū ðū miht gehýran, hæleð mīn se lēofa,
 þæt ic bealuwara weorc gebiden hæbbe,
 80 sārra sorga. Is nū sæl cumen
 þæt mē weorðiað wide and sīde
 menn ofer moldan and eall þeos mære gesceaft,
 gebiddaþ him tō þyssum bēacne. On mē Bearn Godes
 prōwode hwile; for þan ic prymfæst nū
 85 hlifige under heofenum, and ic hælān mæg
 æghwylcne ānra þāra þe him bið egesa tō mē.
 Iū ic wæs geworden wīta heardost,
 lēodum lādost, ær þan ic him lifes weg
 rihtne gerýmde reordberendum.
- 90 Hwæt mē þā geweorðode wuldres Ealdor
 ofer holtwudu, heofonrices Weard,
 swylce swā Hē his mōdor ēac, Mārian sylfe,
 ælmihtig God for ealle men
 geweorðode ofer eall wīfa cynn.
- 95 Nū ic þē hāte, hæleð mīn se lēofa,
 þæt ðū þās gesyhðe secge mannum,
 onwrēoh wordum þæt hit is wuldres bēam,
 se ðe ælmihtig God on prōwode
 for mancynnes manegum synnum

71. MS *syððan up gewat* makes no sense. Some editors insert *stefn* after *syððan*, which makes good sense but is metrically abnormal. *stefn* for *syððan* remains the best suggestion.

THE DREAM OF THE ROOD

Yet we remained there weeping in our places
 A good long time after the warriors' voices
 Had passed away from us. The corpse grew cold,
 The fair abode of life. Then men began
 To cut us down. That was a dreadful fate.
 In a deep pit they buried us. But friends
 And servants of the Lord learnt where I was,
 And decorated me with gold and silver.
 Now you may understand, dear warrior,
 That I have suffered deeds of wicked men
 And grievous sorrows. Now the time has come
 That far and wide on earth men honour me,
 And all this great and glorious creation,
 And to this beacon offer prayers. On me
 The Son of God once suffered; therefore now
 I tower mighty underneath the heavens,
 And I may heal all those in awe of me.
 Once I became the cruellest of tortures,
 Most hateful to all nations, till the time
 I opened the right way of life for men.
 So then the Prince of glory honoured me,
 And heaven's King exalted me above
 All other trees, just as Almighty God
 Raised up His mother Mary for all men
 Above all other women in the world.
 Now, my dear warrior, I order you
 That you reveal this vision to mankind,
 Declare in words this is the tree of glory
 On which Almighty God once suffered torments
 For mankind's many sins, and for the deeds

THE DREAM OF THE ROOD

100 and *Ādōmes ealdgewyrhtum.*
Dēað Hē þær byrigde, hwæðere eft Dryhten ārās
mid His niçlan mihte mannum tō helpe.
Hē ðā on heofenas āstāg; hider eft fundap
on þysne middangeard mancynn sēcan
105 on *dōmdæge Dryhten sylfa,*
ælmihchtig God and His englas mid,
þæt Hē þonne wile dēman, se āh dōmes gewæld,
ānra gehwylcum swā hē him ærur hēr
on þyssum lænum life geearnaþ.
110 Ne *mæg þær ænig unforht wesan*
for þām worde þe se Wealdend cwyð.
Frined Hē for þære mænige hwær se man sie,
se ðe for Dryhtnes naman dēaðes wolde
biteres onbyrgan swā Hē ær on ðām bēame dyde.
115 Ac *hie þonne forhtiað and fēa þencap*
hwæt hie tō Crīste cweðan onginnen.
Ne þearf ðær þonne ænig anforht wesan
þe him ær in brēostum bereð bēacna sēlest,
ac ðurh ðā rōde sceal rice gesēcan
120 of *eorðwege æghwylc sawl,*
sēo þe mid Wealdende wunian þenceð.'
Gebæd ic mē þā tō þān bēame bliðe mōde,
elne mycle, þær ic āna wæs
mæte werede; wæs mōdsefa
125 *āfýsed on forðwege. feala ealra gebād*
langunghwīla. Is mē nū lifes hyht
þæt ic þone sigebēam sēcan mōte
āna oftor þonne ealle men,
well weorþian. Mē is willa tō ðām
130 mycel on *mōde, and mīn mundbyrd is*
geriht tō þære rōde. Nāh ic ricra feala
frēonda on foldan, ac hie forð heonon
gewiton of worulde drēamum, sōhton him wuldres

Cyning,

lifiaþ nū on heofenum mid Hēahfædere,

THE DREAM OF THE ROOD

Of Adam long ago. He tasted death
Thereon; and yet the Lord arose again
By His great might to come to human aid.
He rose to heaven. And the Lord Himself,
Almighty God and all His angels with Him,
Will come onto this earth again to seek
Mankind on Doomsday, when the final Judge
Will give His verdict upon every man,
What in this fleeting life he shall have earned.
Nor then may any man be without fear
About the words the Lord shall say to him.
Before all He shall ask where that man is
Who for God's name would suffer bitter death
As formerly He did upon the cross.
Then will they be afraid, and few will know
What they may say to Christ. But there need none
Be fearful if he bears upon his breast
The best of tokens. Through the cross each soul
May journey to the heavens from this earth,
Who with the Ruler thinks to go and dwell.
I prayed then to the cross with joyous heart
And eagerness, where I was all alone,
Companionless; my spirit was inspired
With keenness for departure; and I spent
Much time in longing. Now my hope in life
Is that I may approach the tree of triumph
Alone more often than all other men,
Honour it well; my wish for that is great
Within my heart, and my hope for support
Is turned towards the cross. I have on earth
Not many noble friends, but they have gone
Hence from earth's joys and sought the King of glory.
With the High Father now they live in heaven

THE DREAM OF THE ROOD

- 135 wuniaþ on wuldre; and ic wēne mē
daga gehwylce hwænne mē Dryhtnes rōd,
þe ic hēr on eorðan ær scēawode,
on þysson lænan life gefetige
and mē þonne gebringe þær is blis mycel,
140 drēam on heofonum, þær is Dryhtnes folc
geseted tō symle, þær is singāl blis,
and mē þonne āsette þær ic syppan mōt
wunian on wuldre well mid þām hālgum,
drēames brūcan. Sī mē Dryhten frēond,
145 se ðe hēr on eorðan ær þrōwode
on þām gealgrēowe for guman synnum.
Hē ūs onlȳsde and ūs lif forgeaf,
heofonlicne hām. Hiht wæs geniwad
mid blēdum and mid blisse þām þe þær bryne þolodan.
150 Se Sunu wæs sigorfæst on þām sīðfate,
mihtig and spēdig, þā Hē mid manigeo cōm,
gāsta weorode, on Godes rice,
Anwealda ælmihtig, englum tō blisse
and eallum ðām hālgum þām þe on heofonum ær
155 wunedon on wuldre, þā heora Wealdend cwōm,
ælmihtig God, þær His ēðel wæs.

146. *guman*. Cook and Sweet emend to *gumena*, but a collective sense is possible. See note to l. 66 above for a suggestion by Wrenn.

148-51. This passage refers to the Harrowing of Hell.

THE DREAM OF THE ROOD

And dwell in glory; and I wait each day
For when the cross of God, which here on earth
I formerly beheld, may fetch me from
This transitory life and carry me
To where there is great bliss and joy in heaven,
Where the Lord's host is seated at the feast,
And it shall set me where I afterwards
May dwell in glory, live in lasting bliss
Among the saints. May God be friend to me,
He who once suffered on the gallows tree
On earth here for men's sins. Us He redeemed
And granted us our life and heavenly home.
Hope was renewed with glory and with bliss
For those who suffered burning fires in hell.
The Son was mighty on that expedition,
Successful and victorious; and when
The one Almighty Ruler brought with Him
A multitude of spirits to God's kingdom,
To bliss among the angels and the souls
Of all who dwelt already in the heavens
In glory, then Almighty God had come,
The Ruler entered into His own land.