

The Dream of the Rood

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, 5
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 creation, eternally fair,
beheld the Lord's angel there;¹ that was no shameful lynching tree, 10
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, 15
bedecked with gold; gems had
covered worthily the Creator's tree.

And yet beneath that gold I began to see
an old wretched struggle, when 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

¹ This is the sense of the OE lines; the ‘angel of the Lord’ is presumably the Cross itself, God's messenger to earth.

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 eager ones came
 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.²
 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

² i.e., utterly alone.

all to the earth – a terrible fate!
 They threw us in a deep pit, yet the Lord's thanes, 75
 friends sought me out ...
 adorned me with gold and silver.³
 Now you might 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 will honor me,
 men over the earth and all this glorious creation,
 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 85
 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.
 Listen! the King of glory, Guardian of heaven's kingdom 90
 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, 95
 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. 100
 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, 105
 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

³ 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.

beforehand here in this loaned life.
 No one there may be unafraid 110
 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 has done on that tree.
 But they will tremble, and little think 115
 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 we shall seek the kingdom,
 every soul from this earthly way, 120
 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
 for the journey forth; it has felt 125
 so much of longing. It is now my life's hope
 that I might 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 130
 fixed on the cross. I have few wealthy friends
 on earth; but 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 135
 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 140
 is seated at the feast, with ceaseless bliss;
 and then set me where I might afterwards
 dwell in glory, share joy
 fully with the saints. May the Lord be my friend,
 He who here on earth has suffered 145
 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.⁴

The Son was successful in that journey, 150

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, 155

their Ruler, returned to his rightful home.

source: the Exeter Book

translation: R. M. Liuzza

⁴ 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. He conveyed them to Heaven, then returned to earth for his resurrection.