

The Dream of the Rood

The Dream of the Rood was written, probably at the end of the seventh century, in Northumbria, the northernmost of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, by a poet whose name we do not know. We have the text from the collection of Anglo-Saxon poetry and sermons known as the Vercelli Book, written down in the second half of the tenth century and preserved for centuries in the cathedral library at Vercelli, in north Italy. Certain passages are carved, in runic script, on the sculptured stone cross at Ruthwell in Dumfriesshire, Scotland, probably erected in the early eighth century, the golden age of Northumbria (Fig. 23).

The poem, standing out from the rest of Anglo-Saxon poetry in its graphic intensity, its richly visual quality, and its firmly integrated structure, seems to owe little to any known particular source. There are analogies with and reminiscences of Latin hymns, but they are not many or important. Though the biblical narrative of Christ's Passion naturally stands behind it, the poem's imaginative achievement is far beyond that of the common Anglo-Saxon poetic form of biblical paraphrase. It is built with great skill round the co-existence in the Passion of the human suffering and divine triumph of Christ. Giving the Cross (the Rood) a share in each, and using its degradation and glorification as a figure of Christ on Golgotha, the poet is probably echoing the doctrinal disputes of his day.

In the prelude, he describes how the glorious Cross, glittering with gold and gems (compare the late fourth-century mosaic picture in Sta. Pudenziana at Rome of the jeweled Cross), changes its appearance to the Cross unadorned and bloodied by Christ's Passion, and then becomes again the figure of his triumph. Then, when the Cross itself, by the rhetorical device known as *prosopopeia*, is made to speak, it is

Heart . . . braver the perfect statement of the heroic code of battle, "Heart" being "warrior's pride"
He . . . fight ironic, rhetorical understatement,

not naïveté. Great shame was attached to leaving a battlefield alive if one's lord had been killed —cf. Tacitus, *Germania*, 6.

transformed into a figure of Christ's suffering, its own tortures detailed: as it is hewn from the forest and dragged to become a gallows for criminals, sadly bends to receive Christ, feels his wounds and his agony with him, is itself cut down and buried. Then, in a parallel to the resurrection of Christ, it is discovered, adorned and worshiped, triumphant in the triumph of Christ as he harrows Hell, breaking down the gates and elevating the just to heaven (Fig. 7). Similarly, Christ the divine warrior, hastening boldly and willingly to mount the Cross, confident in divine victory but suffering for a time in his human nature, rises triumphant at his Resurrection and comes again to triumph over Hell and the Devil. The figure of Christ as warrior-hero voluntarily accepting the contest with the forces of evil is an example of both the Anglo-Saxon convention of restating a Christian subject in terms of its own heroic code and the borrowing of a notion of Christ as warrior-contestant that goes back to Greek patristic sources. (A visual expression can be seen in the figure of the imperial, victorious Christ in the Chapel of the Palace of the Archbishop at Ravenna.)

Throughout the poem, the paradoxes of the Passion, its extremes of suffering and glory, of darkness and light, alternate with each other, and culminate in the final triumphant image.

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Lo! I will tell the dearest° of dreams
That I dreamed in the midnight when mortal men
Were sunk in slumber. Me-seemed I saw
A wondrous Tree towering in air,
Most shining of crosses compassed with light.
Brightly that beacon was gilded with gold;
Jewels adorned it fair at the foot,
Five on the shoulder-beam,° blazing in splendor.
Through all creation the angels of God
10 Beheld it shining— no cross of shame!
Holy spirits gazed on its gleaming,
Men upon earth and all this great creation.
Wondrous that Tree, that Token of triumph,°
And I a transgressor soiled with my sins!
I gazed on the Rood arrayed in glory,
Shining in beauty and gilded with gold,
The Cross of the Saviour beset with gems.
But through the gold-work outgleamed a token
Of the ancient evil of sinful men
20 Where the Rood on its right side° once sweat blood.
Saddened and rueful, smitten with terror

dearest most splendid

Five . . . shoulder-beam i.e. either on the cross-beam or at the intersection of the beams, symbolizing the five wounds of Christ
triumph The Cross is often called the Tree of Triumph in Latin hymns.

right side In art the wound in Christ's side is usually shown (especially before the later seventeenth century, but often later as well) on the right of his body.

At the wondrous Vision, I saw the Cross
 Swiftly varying vesture and hue,
 Now wet and stained with the Blood outwelling,
 Now fairly jeweled with gold and gems.
 Then, as I lay there, long I gazed
 In rue and sadness on my Saviour's Tree,
 Till I heard in dream how the Cross addressed me,
 30 Of all woods worthiest, speaking these words:
 'Long years ago (well yet I remember)
 They hewed me down on the edge of the holt,^o
 Severed my trunk; strong foemen took me,
 For a spectacle wrought me, a gallows for rogues.
 High on their shoulders they bore me to hilltop,^o
 Fastened me firmly, an army of foes!
 'Then I saw the King of all mankind
 In brave mood hasting to mount upon me.
 Refuse I dared not, nor bow nor break,
 40 Though I felt earth's confines shudder in fear;
 All foes I might fell, yet still I stood fast.
 'Then the young Warrior,^o God, the All-Wielder,
 Put off His raiment, steadfast and strong;
 With lordly mood in the sight of many
 He mounted the Cross to redeem mankind.
 When the Hero clasped me I trembled in terror,
 But I dared not bow me nor bend to earth;
 I must needs stand fast. Upraised as the Rood
 I held the High King, the Lord of heaven.
 50 I dared not bow! With black nails driven
 Those sinners pierced me; the prints are clear,
 The open wounds. I dared injure none.
 They mocked us both. I was wet with blood
 From the Hero's side when He sent forth His spirit.
 'Many a bale^o I bore on that hillside
 Seeing the Lord in agony outstretched.
 Black darkness^o covered with clouds God's body,
 That radiant splendor. Shadow went forth
 Wan^o under heaven; all creation wept^o
 60 Bewailing the King's death. Christ was on the Cross.
 'Then many^o came quickly, faring from far,
 Hurrying to the Prince. I beheld it all.
 Sorely smitten with sorrow in meekness I bowed

holt forest

hilltop i.e. of Calvary

Warrior The Old English word is parallel to Greek *athlētēs*.bale torment *mekka* *in* *godd* *o* *o* *o*

darkness the eclipse at the Crucifixion, as Christ died; see Matthew 27:45; Luke 23:44-5

Wan dark

creation wept See the Norse story of the lament of all nature, save only one giantess, for the

death of Baldr, the young and beautiful. Christ was thought to be thirty, or thirty-three, years old at the Crucifixion, and to have been surpassingly handsome.

many presumably Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus—see John 19:38-39; perhaps with the three Maries and St. John, who were already present—John 19:25-27. In medieval art, all are sometimes shown as taking part in the Deposition.

To the hands of men. From His heavy and bitter pain
 They lifted Almighty God. Those warriors left me
 Standing bespattered with blood; I was wounded with spears.
 Limb-weary they laid Him down; they stood at His head,
 Looked on the Lord of heaven as He lay there at rest
 From His bitter ordeal all forspent.^o In sight of His slayer^o
 70 They made Him a sepulcher carved from the shining stone;
 Therein laid the Lord of triumph. At evening tide
 Sadly they sang their dirges and wearily turned away
 From their lordly Prince; there He lay all still and alone.
 'There at our station a long time we^o stood
 Sorrowfully weeping after the wailing of men
 Had died away. The corpse grew cold,
 The fair life-dwelling. Down to earth
 Men hacked and felled us, a grievous fate!
 They dug a pit and buried us deep.^o
 80 But there God's friends and followers^o found me
 And graced me with treasure of silver and gold.
 'Now may you learn, O man beloved,
 The bitter sorrows that I have borne,
 The work of caitiffs.^o But the time is come
 That men upon earth and through all creation
 Show me honor and bow to this sign.
 On me a while God's Son once suffered;
 Now I tower under heaven in glory attired
 With healing for all that hold me in awe.^o
 90 Of old I was once the most woeful of tortures,
 Most hateful to all men, till I opened for them
 The true Way of Life. Lo! the Lord of glory,
 The Warden of heaven, above all wood
 Has glorified me as Almighty God
 Has honored His Mother, even Mary herself,
 Over all womankind in the eyes of men.
 'Now I give you bidding, O man beloved,
 Reveal this Vision to the sons of men,
 And clearly tell of the Tree of glory
 100 Whereon God suffered for man's many sins
 And the evil that Adam once wrought of old.
 'Death He suffered, but our Saviour rose
 By virtue of His great might as a help to men.
 He ascended to heaven. But hither again
 He shall come unto earth to seek mankind,

forspent utterly wearied

slayer i.e. the Cross

we the Cross of Christ and the crosses on which the two thieves had been crucified
 buried us deep i.e. in shame for what had passed

God's . . . followers St. Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine, was said by 4th-century writers to have discovered the True Cross

at Jerusalem on her visit there in 326. Other accounts, including Old English, speak of her adornment of it.

caitiffs villains, evil-doers

Now . . . awe The mosaic cross in the apse of Sta. Pudenziana at Rome towers from earth to heaven—see Headnote; such a cross would be always before the eyes of the faithful at worship, and promise salvation.

The Lord Himself on the Day of Doom,^o
 Almighty God with His angel hosts.
 And then will He judge, Who has power of judgment,
 To each man according as here on earth
 110 In this fleeting life he shall win reward.
 'Nor there may any be free from fear
 Hearing the words which the Wielder shall utter.
 He shall ask before many: Where is the man
 Who would taste bitter death as He did on the Tree?
 And all shall be fearful and few shall know
 What to say unto Christ. But none at His Coming
 Shall need to fear if he bears in his breast
 This best of symbols; and every soul
 From the ways of earth through the Cross shall come
 120 To heavenly glory, who would dwell with God.⁷
 Then with ardent spirit and earnest zeal,
 Companionless, lonely, I prayed to the Cross.
 My soul was fain of death. I had endured
 Many an hour of longing. It is my life's hope
 That I may turn to this Token of triumph,
 I above all men, and revere it well.
 This is my heart's desire, and all my hope
 Waits on the Cross. In this world now
 I have few powerful friends; they have fared hence
 130 Away from these earthly gauds seeking the King of glory,
 Dwelling now with the High Father in heaven above,
 Abiding in rapture. Each day I dream
 Of the hour when the Cross of my Lord, whereof here on earth
 I once had vision, from this fleeting life may fetch me
 And bring me where is great gladness and heavenly bliss,
 Where the people of God are planted and stablished for ever
 In joy everlasting. There may it lodge me
 Where I may abide in glory knowing bliss with the saints.
 May the Lord be gracious who on earth of old
 140 Once suffered on the Cross for the sins of men.
 He redeemed us, endowed us with life and a heavenly home.
 Therein was hope renewed with blessing and bliss
 For those who endured the burning.^o In that great deed
 God's Son was triumphant, possessing power and strength!
 Almighty, Sole-Ruling He came to the kingdom of God
 Bringing a host of souls to angelic bliss,
 To join the saints who abode in the splendor of glory,
 When the Lord, Almighty God, came again to His throne.

Late 7th century

Day of Doom Day of Judgment (Fig. 50).
 those . . . burning This is a reference to the
 Harrowing of Hell, when Christ, the King of
 Glory, descended after his death to break down
 the gates of Hell, and bring out of it the souls

of those (including Adam and Eve, the patri-
 archs and prophets) who have awaited this
 manifestation of his victory and his mercy. The
 chief biblical basis for the Descent into Hell is
 Matthew 27:52 ff.

GEOFFREY CHAUCER

c. 1343-1400

Geoffrey Chaucer was born into a well-to-do bourgeois family, in London, about 1343. Of his life he himself tells us almost nothing in his poetry, but from the documents, by which it has been possible to piece together the career of moderately distinguished public service which he made for himself, we know a good many details.

His family name goes back to the thirteenth century in the London area, and the Chaucers were already prosperous members of the rising commercial class in the days of Geoffrey's grandfather. Chaucer's father, a wine merchant, was a member of the growing number of men in the commercial centers of England, especially in London, who were beginning to exert a powerful effect on the structure of English society. They were commoners who were advancing in wealth, office-holding, and social prestige to a position above the ordinary, but were excluded from the aristocracy by birth, and from the country gentry by their city occupations. They were somewhere in between: the beginnings of the English middle class.

There was no place in their thinking—or in Chaucer's—for the leveling doctrines of John Ball, the fourteenth-century social agitator: ". . . matters cannot go well in England and never will until all things be in common, and there shall be neither serfs nor gentlemen, but we shall all be equal. . . ." A father from Chaucer's stratum of society would wish to advance his son's interests. He would send him first to school and then either to the University (which would often mean that the son was intended for the priesthood, the third order of English society); or he would place him in a noble household, where he might have the chance to continue his education in a less formal and devout way. In his early teens, Geoffrey Chaucer was made a page in the household of one of England's most considerable noblemen, Prince Lionel, third son of King Edward III, and later Duke of Clarence. The connections he made there must have served him well in later life and we know that his talents kept him in association with members of the aristocracy. His first great patron was John of Gaunt, fifth son of the king and the most powerful noble in England, who may also have been his friend. From the successive kings, Edward III, Richard II, and Henry IV, Chaucer received offices, grants of money, and other privileges for his services in various capacities. He married well; his wife Philippa was a member of the households of both Queen Philippa and of the third wife of John of Gaunt, and was probably the daughter of a knight. A Thomas Chaucer, probably their son, rose to public prominence and Alice Chaucer, possibly their granddaughter, married into the aristocracy not once but twice. From this tangle of connections, it emerges that the family was steadily rising in its social position.

Geoffrey Chaucer was the chief agent in this rise. The fact that his family had money and had been able to give him certain advantages obviously helped greatly, but his abilities also kept him on the road to advancement. In 1359 he went on one of Edward III's many expeditions against the French, was taken prisoner, and ransomed the following year; he then probably spent some time in study of the law, was made "valet" to the King in 1367 (an honor, not a servant's position), went on diplomatic missions to France several times, to Flanders in 1377 and to Italy in 1372-73 and 1378. In 1374 he was given a rent-free London house and made Controller of the Customs and Subsidies on Wool, Skins, and Hides for the Port of London. This was a lucrative office, for the wool trade was England's most important at the time. Other Customs appointments followed, but in 1386 Chaucer seems to have fallen on less