

# The Dream of the Rood and the Image of Christ in the Early Middle Ages

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[23] Though the author of the book of Hebrews states that "Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever" (1) it is clear that humankind's image of Christ has changed throughout the ages. Jaroslav Pelikan, author of *Jesus Through the Centuries*, writes: "It has been characteristic of each age of history to depict Jesus in accordance with its own character." (2) In "The Dream of the Rood," an Anglo-Saxon poem written in the early Middle Ages, Christ's death and burial is described in a manner which is startlingly different from the original biblical accounts. In order to emphasize the momentous triumph of the crucifixion, the poet of "The Dream of the Rood" depicts Christ as an aggressive warrior who boldly confronts and defeats sin. This depiction is consistent with the honor and courage so highly valued in the early medieval culture.

The words used to describe Christ's approach to the crucifixion in "The Dream of the Rood" reveal the poet's conscious choice to portray Jesus as a purposeful courageous warrior:

Then the young hero (who was God Almighty)  
Got ready, resolute and strong in heart.  
...the warrior embraced [the cross]. (3)

Instead of simply using the word "Christ," the poet calls Jesus "the young hero" and "the warrior." In other translations, Christ is called the "heroic, fair, young knight," (4) and "mankind's brave King." (5) These images, along with the words resolute and strong in heart, create a vivid image of Christ which echoes the description of Beowulf, an admired mythical hero of the Early Middle Ages. In Beowulf, Beowulf is praised as a "king," "the hero," and a "valiant warrior." [24] He is said to possess "strength and vigor," "daring," and "determined resolve." (6)

The poet also presents a warrior-like image of Christ by portraying Jesus exuberantly preparing for combat rather than being led passively to the cross. Where the Bible states that "they [the Roman soldiers] stripped him," (7) "The Dream of the Rood" poet

writes that "the young warrior, God our Savior, valiant-ly stripped before the battle."(8) Later, the poet suggests that Christ actually initiates the battle to redeem mankind:

He climbed onto the lofty gallows-tree,  
Bold in the sight of many watching men,  
When He intended to redeem mankind.  
...the warrior embraced [the cross].(9)

This tone of action is also present when the Cross says: "the Lord of all mankind hastened with eager zeal that he might mount upon me."(10) According to Peggy Samuels, a medievalist, the original text repeatedly uses the word *fus*--which has "the following range of connotations: hastening, eager, ready, willing, dying"(11)--to emphasize Christ's warrior-like approach to the cross. These words evoke an image of Christ which differs strongly from the "Passover lamb that has been sacrificed"(12) described in the Bible. By presenting Christ as a confident hero, the "Dream of the Rood" poet emphasizes the voluntariness of Christ's undertaking the crucifixion.

The attitude the poet gives Christ as he approaches the cross is similar to the daring spirit often expressed by Beowulf, a fictional Anglo-Saxon hero. When Beowulf prepares to go to battle against Grendel's mother, he is unanxious for his life,"(13) and says "I am eager to begin!"(14) Just as Christ in "The Dream of the Rood" boldly rushes to mount the cross, Beowulf plunges into battle with great enthusiasm :

[25]

"With Hrunting shall I achieve this deed--or death shall take me!"  
After these words the Weather-Geat prince dived into the Mere--  
-he did not care to wait for an answer--and the waves closed over the daring man.(15)

The fact that "The Dream of the Rood" poet endows Christ with the jubilation and heroic bravado that typify great warriors of the medieval period shows that the image of Christ had changed to fit the values of the current culture. According to Edward Irving, Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Pennsylvania, Germanic culture was a "society that was dedicated to aggressive behavior and the strutting niceties of personal honor."(16) By emphasizing Christ's boldness and bravery over his more submissive characteristics, the poet presents an image of Christ that falls in line with the heroic ideals of the Middle Ages.

The poet's word choice in the description of the final moment of Jesus' life also reflects the image of Christ as a warrior. Where the gospel-writer John records that Jesus "bowed his head and gave up his spirit,"(17) the poet of "The Dream of the Rood" says that Christ "sent forth his spirit."(18) The subtle distinction between these two statements is significant because the poet of "The Dream of the Rood" does not imply that Jesus quietly relinquished his spirit, but rather that he forcefully and willfully ended his life, in control of the situation until the very end. Dying courageously was crucial to the medieval image of Christ because as Irving writes, "for the aristocratic class of warriors, to die bravely and publicly [was] all."(19)

Just as "The Dream of the Rood" poet omits details in the biblical accounts of the crucifixion that imply Jesus was a passive participant in his death, he or she de-emphasizes the disgrace, humiliation, and indignity of Christ's position. Nowhere in "The Dream of the Rood" is it mentioned that Jesus was mocked, flogged, and spit upon in the manner described in the gospel of Matthew:

Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus into the Palace and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him and mocked him. "Hail, king of the Jews!" they said. They spit on him, and took the staff and struck him on the head again and again. (20)

[26]Though "The Dream of the Rood" does mention that the cross and Christ "were reviled together,"(21) it does not detail the pain and humiliation Christ suffered. Michael Swanton, Professor of English Medieval Studies at the University of Exeter, suggests that "the extent of Christ's physical condition [is] carefully masked in favor of his victorious rule from the cross."(22) The poet de-emphasized the abuse Jesus experienced in order to focus complete attention on Christ's triumphant victory over sin.

In keeping with the warrior image of Christ, "The Dream of the Rood" also downplays many aspects of the crucifixion story which reveal Christ's physical pain and weakness. Rather than describing the suffering that Jesus experienced, the poet chose to transfer Christ's anguish to the cross. The cross, rather than Christ, feels the pain of the crucifixion: "I [the cross], was "pierced with dark nails; / The scars can still be clearly seen on me, / The open wounds of malice."(23) In this way the poet is able to "evade the awkward issue of Christ's susceptibility to pain."(24) The poem also says nothing about the drink Jesus requested while he was on the cross--an

incident that is included in all four gospels--perhaps because it would imply that he was subject to human frailty and weakness.

Similarly, the Bible shows that Christ was exhausted at the time of his crucifixion. When he was forced to carry his own cross, the burden was too great for him so "the soldiers seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus." (25) In "The Dream of the Rood," neither Christ nor Simon of Cyrene carry the cross. It is already in position when it sees Christ advancing to it:

Men carried me [the cross]  
Upon their shoulders and 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.(26)

In this way, the poet avoids mentioning Christ's inability to shoulder the weight of the cross. Swanton writes that this departure from biblical accounts of the crucifixion was also found in medieval art: "No flogged, suffering stumbling Christ drags the cross to Calvary.... as in contemporary iconography, he is a young and confident champion striding from afar." (27). By presenting Christ as a warrior [27] impregnable to fatigue and weakness, the poet shows that Christ was an ultimate hero.

Interestingly, the poet's tendency to omit indications of Christ's weakness is not shared by medieval poets writing about the great secular heroes of the day. The author of *Beowulf* makes little attempt to hide Beowulf's frailty when he falters under Grendel's mother's wrath: "The strongest of fighting-men stumbled in his weariness, the firmest of all foot-warriors fell to the earth." (28) Perhaps "The Dream of the Rood" poet's unwillingness to admit that Jesus was weary shows his or her desire to show that Christ embodied a level of supreme strength and heroism above Beowulf and the other great warriors of the time period.

The "The Dream of the Rood's" description of Christ's burial also reflects the unique image of Christ in medieval times. In biblical accounts of the crucifixion, Jesus' burial is quiet and simple:

Taking Jesus' body, the two of them [Joseph and Nicodemus] wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen.... At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because

it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there. (29)

In contrast to this humble, convenient, and time-efficient burial, "The Dream of the Rood" portrays Christ's burial as a monumental event befitting a warrior. Instead of depositing Christ's body in the closest available tomb, "the men then made a sepulchre for Him. . . . They carved it of bright stone, and set therein the Lord of victories." (30) "The Dream of the Rood" also adds a dirge to the biblical account of Christ's burial. After the warriors placed Christ's body in the sepulchre, they "next, wretched in the eventide, sang a dirge for Him." (31)

The addition of the sepulchre and dirge to traditional accounts of Christ's burial reflects an important tradition in medieval Europe in which "warriors honored their dead Prince before they left him in the solitude of death." (32) The poet's description of Christ's burial echoes the burial of Beowulf:

[28]

Then the Storm-Geat nation constructed for him [Beowulf]  
a stronghold on the headland, so high and broad  
that seafarers might see it from afar.  
That beacon to that battle-reckless man  
they made in ten days.....  
Then the warriors rode around the barrow,  
twelve of them in all, athelings' sons.  
They recited a dirge to declare their grief,  
spoke of the man, mourned their King. (33)

The depiction of Christ receiving a Beowulf-type burial rather than the type of burial recorded in the gospels shows how the image of Christ in the Middle Ages had been adapted from the image of Christ recorded in the gospels. Rather than presenting Christ as a lamb or a passive participant in the universal plan for redemption, the poet presents Christ as a martyred hero, an image that reflects the preeminent values of the early medieval society.

However, the image of Christ as a warrior found in "The Dream of the Rood" is not merely the result of the Anglo-Saxon language's inability to portray a passive image of Christ. Another poem written in the same time period presents an image of Christ more in line with the biblical accounts:

He suffered many things for the love of sinners..... The false-hearted denied Him, mocked Him with blasphemies, spat their spittle in His face, and spake insults against Him; hell-doomed men, blind of thought, foolish and erring, struck that blessed countenance with their hands, with their outstretched palms, with their very fists, and round His head entwined a cruel crown of thorns.(34)

This passage, from "Christ III," a poem by Cynewulf (ca. 705-783 CE), shows that the more traditional biblical image of Christ was retained in medieval times. Interestingly, many scholars believe that Cynewulf may also have composed "The Dream of the Rood." If he were indeed the author of both poems, the "Christ III" poem would show that he was able to envision a more classical image of Christ, but chose to depict a warrior image of Christ in "The Dream of the Rood."

The image of Christ as a warrior in "The Dream of the Rood" is a reflection of the optimistic manner in which medieval Christians perceived the crucifixion. In contrast to the rather pessimistic view of the crucifixion in "Christ III" in which humans are made to feel guilty about Christ's death, the approach [29] toward the crucifixion in "The Dream of the Rood" is hopeful and reassuring. The focus of the poem is the victory won by Christ over sin. For this reason, some modern historians suggest that it "was composed with a missionary purpose, using the heroic as a way of catching the imagination of the warrior, so that he could embrace willingly Christian doctrine."(35) The poem certainly has an evangelist appeal in that it emphasizes the notion that humankind can obtain salvation through Christ's triumphant battle over sin.

As "The Dream of the Rood's" many deviations from the biblical account of the crucifixion suggest, the image of Christ in the Middle Ages emphasized the salvation Christ brought to mankind by presenting him as a triumphant warrior. Swanton writes: "Unlike the later Gothic sensibility which stressed the explicitly pathetic details of the Crucifixion narrative, the medieval church was less concerned with literal description [of the crucifixion] than with analyzing its significance as the pivotal event of Christian history." (36) Though Christ's crucifixion has held great significance throughout Christian history, it was the especial focus of medieval religion. The warlike Germanic culture of the Early Middle Ages viewed the crucifixion as a victorious battle of good over evil and perceived Jesus as a hero who delivered humankind from sin.

Alexander, Michael. *The Earliest English Poems*. Berkeley:University of California

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## Endnotes

- 1.Hebrews. 13:8. (NIV)

2. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 2.
3. "The Dream of the Rood" in *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse: Selected With an Introduction and a Parallel Verse Translation* by Richard Hamer, trans Richard Hamer (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), lines 36-39.
4. Gavin Bone trans. "The Dream of the Rood" *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).
5. Michael Alexander, trans. "The Dream of the Rood" *The Earliest English Poems*. (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1970).
6. *Ibid*, line 611.
7. Matthew 27:28 (NIV)
8. Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Battle of Maldon and Other Old English Poems* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1966).
9. *The Dream of the Rood*, lines 38-41.
10. *Ibid*, lines 34-36.
11. Peggy Samuels. "The Audience Written Into the Script of 'The Dream of the Rood'" *Modern Language Quarterly* 49 (1988), 318.
12. First Corinthians 5:7 (NIV).
13. *The Dream of the Rood*, line 1442.
14. *Ibid*, line 1473.
15. *Ibid*, lines 1490-5.
16. Edward B Irving, *Introduction to Beowulf*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969), 20.
17. John 19:30 (NIV).
18. *The Dream of the Rood*, line 49.

19. Irving, *Introduction to Beowulf*, 21.
20. Matthew 27:27-30 (NIV).
21. *The Dream of the Rood*, line 46.
22. Michael Swanton, *English Literature Before Chaucer* (New York: Longman, 1987), 100.
23. *The Dream of the Rood*, lines 45-47.
24. Swanton, 99.
23. Luke 23:26 (NIV).
26. *The Dream of the Rood*, 30-33.
27. Swanton, 98.
28. *The Dream of the Rood*, lines 1543-44.
29. John 18:40-42 (NIV).
30. *The Dream of the Rood*, 65-67.
31. *Ibid*, 67-68.
32. Alvin A. Lee, "Toward a Critique of 'The Dream of the Rood'" *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation*. ed. Lewis Nicholson and Dolores Frese (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 172.
33. *Beowulf*. Trans. Michael Alexander (London: Penguin Books, 1973), lines 3156-60, 3169-72.
34. taken from *Anglo Saxon Poetry* ed. R.K. Gordon (London: Dent, 1954).
35. Bernard F Huppe, "The Concept of the Hero in the Early Middle Ages" *Concepts of the Hero in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Albany: State U of New York, 1975), 23.
36. Swanton, 94.