"The Dream of Rood"

Dr. Jonathan A Glenn

## Introduction to the Poem

"The Dream of the Rood" is one of the most admired examples of Old English poetry and, because of its central Christian theme, it remains a poem which, for many people, still carries a message of salvation as relevant as when it was written. It is a poem of subtle structure and conception, approachable on many different levels and from many different aspects. Its genesis remains debated. Does it precede the Ruthwell Cross (which then quotes from it) or does the poem which we have gain its inspiration from the runic lines inscribed on the Cross? Its context in the Vercelli Manuscript would suggest that its natural milieu is the monastery, that its message is one of the hope of salvation for those who have committed themselves to the Cross and Christ. It has been seen as fundamentally related to and influenced by the liturgy of its day.

It is certainly deeply embedded in its own culture and this program attempts to offer some of the visual and written material which may help the reader to gain a sense of that context. So much has been written on the poem that it is pointless to attempt in an introduction of this type to offer anything that might be considered an adequate study of the poem. The interested reader is directed to the bibliography to follow up the various interpretative approaches to the poem. Attention is drawn to one or two major themes or motifs: firstly the overall structure of the poem. The poem is a dream vision (vision is surely truer than dream as a description) and the development is centred in the dreamer. The cosmic and universal pattern of salvation and judgement becomes a message of individual faith and hope of that salvation for the dreamer. The poem's ambiguous and riddle-like opening symbol to which the dreamer can only respond with a feeling of awe and sinfulness is expounded to him in such a way that the meaning of both the suffering and the glory is understood as a message of intense personal hope for him and hence for all other readers.

Although the dreamer is from one perception the "centre", from another the symbol of the cross is clearly central. For the period the Cross existed both as probably the most universal Christian symbol - one that not even the iconoclasts wished to reject - and as a real and powerful material relic. The timeline indicates known instances of relics of the true cross coming to England and the poem "Elene" which follows. "The Dream of the Rood" in *The Vercelli Book* tells of the finding of the true cross by the mother of the Emperor Constantine (who also experienced a vision of the triumphant cross). The cross within the poem will remind readers of real crosses which existed in their churches and brings its explanation to revitalise their symbolism. Examples have been offered in Analogues and Images of the many ways in which the symbol of the cross was used. Through its intimate relationship with Christ the poet is able to negotiate the theological and emotional minefield of the dual nature of Christ (orthodoxly two natures separate and yet indivisibly united - a paradox of

the same type as the nature of the Trinity). Exploring the multiple symbolism of the cross is, perhaps, one of the most interesting approaches to the poem for the beginner.

The nature of Christ complements that of the Cross. It has been suggested that the Cross represents Christ's humanity but that is too crude a division. The Cross represents the sacrificial aspect of Christ. It is the Cross (reflecting Christ in the garden of Gethsemane) which refuses to use its power to destroy its enemies and prevent the crucifixion. It is the Cross's pain and suffering of which we are aware. Christ is not just divine but is also the heroic warrior, battling on man's behalf. It is worth looking at the nomenclature which is applied to Christ. Crâst occurs only twice, HÔlend once and se Sunu once. Most of the titles applied to Christ are those which would apply equally (or even, more normally) to God the Father. Just as the opening vision is of the triumphant cross, the "sigebeam", so one is very aware of Christ as powerful Lord and Judge.

The aristocratic culture which possibly found the interpretation of the crucifixion as Christ the heroic warrior battling Satan for mankind in tune with its social and literary norms would also no doubt respond strongly and emotionally to the concept of the Cross as Christ's retainer, forced by its master to commit the retainer's ultimate crime of betraying and killing that master. The emotional identification of the reader with the cross as "bana" has, of course, a very real point. Each reader, as a sinner, does indeed "crucify" Christ continuously. The immediacy which the vision form gives to the historical event of the crucifixion as well as the fact the the cross's speech spans the past and future of the dreamer/reader makes this emotional involvement in the guilt to the cross an integral part of the movement to salvation.

The idea that this is a disjointed poem (see, for example, Alexander's translation) is obviously not accepted here. While I would not deny that it is possible that an earlier poem existed (possibly consisting of a speech by the cross which somewhat resembled a riddle), the poem we have, I would argue, is a closely structured whole which spans the history of the world from Adam's fall to the final judgment and relates it to the movement of the individual soul from sin to the hope of salvation. The didactic conclusion is integral to the meaing of the poem, not an aesthetically less worthy addendum added to an aesthetically pleasing vision. Like the crucifixion itself, the vision becomes meaningless unless the dreamer (and the poem becomes meaningless unless the reader) is drawn to bear "in breostum" "beacna selest" for

.... ðurh ða rode sceal rice gesecan
of eorðwege aghwylc sawl
seoþe mid wealdende wunian þenceð.

## The Language of the Poem

The language of the Dream of the Rood presents few problems for the student in its spelling and grammatical forms since it is written in very regular West Saxon and thus is close to the forms of the paradigms given in the standard grammar books. There is also considerable consistency about the way individual words or word-roots are spelled.The following description will pick out the most obvious of the features which characterise it as West Saxon as well as those places where it does show evidence of dialectal or late linguistic features.

Old English sound changes are not explained here. They have been given their traditional names and can be looked up in standard Old English grammars e.g. Campbell, Hogg.

Characteristic West Saxon spellings and/or sound change results:

The text regularly spells the result of OE "a" before a "breaking group" of /-lC/ or /-rC/ as "ea" e.g. "eall" (6), "gealga" (10), "healfe" (20), "wealdend" (67), "bearn" (83). There are no examples of the Anglian /-alC/ or Northumbrian /-arC/ forms.

It also shows /ea/ spellings in forms like "geseah" (14, 21 etc) and "meahte" (18) rather than the Anglian forms with "smoothing".

Characteristic West Saxon "back-mutation" is found e.g. in "heofon", "weorod", and combinative back-mutation in e.g. "worulde" (133). Curiously "weruda" (51) doesn't show either combinative back-mutation (which would be unusual) or ordinary back-mutation which one would expect and which is found in this word elsewhere in the text; "werede" (124) may also lack back-mutation or may be a form with an alternative suffix that did not contain a back vowel. In such a regular text it is quite unusual to find a word with three different spellings. "feala" occurs 3x (50, 125, 135) although it is unusual to find back-mutation of /e/ by /a/ in West Saxon.

**Morphology: evidence of late Old English**

The majority of the spellings of the inflections in this poem represent the unstressed vowels by i,e,a,o,u as they are used in standard grammars. However, there is some evidence of the later West Saxon spelling of terminations which can use some of these vowels interchangeably. While this may in part indicate reduction in distinctiveness of unstressed vowels, the variation seems also to be limited to certain inflections e.g. -en (the plural subjunctive) may vary in spelling, -en (the past participle of a strong verb) does not seem to do so.

Preservation of earlier /u/ - except in the /-um/ and /-u/ terminations (e.g. wynnum, sunu) West Saxon tends to represent earlier unstressed / u / by /-o-/. Occasionally in this text -u- remains e.g. "worulde", "weruda" "ærur"

Places where an original back vowel (o in standard spelling) is represented by (e):

wunedon (3, 155), forwunded (14), bysmeredon (48), heofenes (64), heofenum (85, 134), heofenas (103) (cf. heofonum 140, 154). With the exception of /forwunded/ all these concern an unstressed vowel which is followed by a further unstressed syllable and the use of /e/ here is very common in Old English spelling. It is quite surprising how frequently the back vowel appears in the spelling in this text. The /eo/ spelling in the stressed syllable of /heofen-/ is assumed to be the result of the sound change "back-mutation" which would require an original back vowel in the /-on-/ syllable. werede (124) (cf. weorode 69, 152) may be similar but see above.

geniwad (148) ; the /-ad/ in place of more regular /-od/ might be simply late variation of spelling but non-West Saxon varieties of Old English tend to have -a- as the medial vowel of weak II verbs rather than -o- which is regular in West Saxon. This spelling, therefore, might reflect a dialect form from an earlier manuscript version.

**Places where /-on/ is represented by /-an/**

genaman (30), þurhdrifan (46), cwùman (57), þolodan (149). In every case the regular /-on/ is the pl.past indicative inflection. Again this is a very common later spelling variation and it is perhaps surprising how infrequently it occurs in the poem. The majority of forms have /-on/ while the past participle has /-en/, the infinitive /-an/ and the plural subjunctive /-en/ (onginnen 116).

**Confusion of /-um/ and /-an, -on, -n/**

This seems restricted to adjectives and demonstratives and it is difficult to be certain in some cases whether one has a poetic feature of syntax or late spelling confusion: "of beorhtan stane" (66), "on deopan seaþe" (75) both could be explained as poetic use of the weak adjective without a preceding demonstrative; however, "mid deorcan næglum" (46) because the plural is needed must have /-an/ for /-um/. The variation in the spelling of "on þyssum lænum life"(109) and "on þysson lænan life" 138) would suggest confusion of /-um/ for /-an/ in "lænum" in the former and /-on/ for /-um/ in "þysson" in the latter. This tendency to confuse /-n/ and /-m/ possibly accounts for "þan" (121) in place of "þam". The existence of the instrumental "þan/þon" may have helped the spelling confusion.

**Representation of /-ig/**

In the majority of instances this is regular but "manegum" (99) seems to show the tendency of unstressed vowels to reduce in distinctiveness. "hefian"(61), "manigeo" (151) show the spelling variation that can be used to represent this syllable with /-i/ and -ige/ repectively. "frineð (112) shows that /i/ can equal /ig/ in stressed syllables as well.

Places where scansion suggests that the written form does not match the spoken : 120b æghwylc sawl - this appears only to have 3 syllables rather than the required 4. When said sawl must be given the full form of its unstressed syllable, sawol/sawel. 121b wunian þenceð , on the other hand, needs to uncontracted form of þenceð as written.

The number of present indicative verb forms is limited in the poem but whereas "cwyð" (111) shows the i-mutated and contracted form of 3sg.pres.indic. of "cweðan" characteristic of West Saxon, "frineð" (112) and "þenceð" (121) do not show contraction and "bereð" (118) shows neither i-mutation nor contraction. Such reformation is more characteristic of Anglian texts. Since frineð is unstressed and "bereð" as two resolved short syllables is the equivalent of "birð" as one long one, the scansion does not tell us whether these are scribal or possibly original. As mentioned in the previous point, "þenceð" requires two syllables since "wunian" must resolve the first two syllables.

Individual points of grammar or syntax which raise problems are indicated in the notes.

## The Metre of the Poem

### Hypermetric verses

The most striking feature of the metrics of the poem is its use of hypermetric lines. Lines 8 - 10; 20 - 23; 30 - 34; 39; 40b - 43; 46 - 49; 59 - 70 are all hypermetric. 75 has also been printed and scanned as a hypermetric but the fact that the text is clearly corrupt at this point makes it uncertain. 39a and 40a are not clearly hypermetric. 133 would also seem to me to be a hypermetric line (its scansion is otherwise difficult). Bliss does not appear to accept this one. 9 does not scan even as a hyprmetric line. The metrical difficulty supports the case for emendation of this line.

As the numbers above show, the hypermetric lines occur in irregular blocks of 3, 4, 5, 5, 4, 9 lines together at irregular intervals in the first half of the poem. Hypermetric lines are so called because they appear to have 3 stresses (or equivalents) in each of the verses rather than the normalæ 2. The Dream of the Rood is not the only poem to vary its metre in this way. Judith shows a similar arrangement of irregular blocks of lines and occasional lines or groups of lines ocur in a number of other poems. Bliss, The Metre of Beowulf p.162-8 lists all the hypermetric verses he considers to exist in Old English poetry with their proposed scansion.

As a literary and textual feature these lines present a problem. The rules which govern their scansion are even less clear than those which govern normal verses. It is not clear, either, what effect they were intended to have or what artistic conventions governed their introduction. Suggestions have been made that their effect is to slow up the verse, to produce a more solemn tone, perhaps. They obviously have the effect of breaking the possible monotony of the same repeated verse patterning but, if variation is what they provide, it is curious that they do not occur more frequently in the longer poems.