

**Introducing the Old English Set Texts 1:  
Dream of the Rood**

**[1] The Vercelli Book (Vercelli, Biblioteca Capitolare, MS CXVII, c. 970) Contents:**

Twenty-two anonymous Old English prose sermons (Vercelli Homilies I–XXII), six OE poems (*Andreas*, *The Fates of the Apostles*, *Soul and Body I*, *Homiletic Fragment I*, *The Dream of the Rood* and *Elene*) and an abbreviated prose life of St Guthlac (Vercelli Homily XXIII).

- Homilies I-V
- *Andreas*
- *Fates of the Apostles*
- Homilies VI-XVIII
- *Soul and Body I*
- *Homiletic Fragment I*
- *The Dream of the Rood*
- Homilies XIX-XXII
- *Elene*
- ‘Homily’ XXIII – Life of St Guthlac

**[2] The Ruthwell Cross runic text**

Ondgeredæ hinæ God Almegttig  
 þa he walde on galgu gistiga,  
 modig fore ... men  
 Buga ...  
 ... ic riicnæ Kyninc,  
 heafunæs Hlafard; hælda ic ni dorstæ.  
 Bismæradu unket men ba ætgadre; ic ... miþ blodæ bistemid,  
 bigoten ...  
 Krist wæs on rodi.  
 Hweþræ þer fusæ feârran kwomu  
 æþþilæ til anum. Ic þæt al biheald.  
 Saræ ic wæs miþ sorgum gidrœfid, hnag ...  
 miþ strelum giwundad.  
 Alegdun hiæ hinæ limwœrignæ, gistoddun him ... licæs heafdum;  
 bihealdun hiæ þer ....

[God almighty stripped himself when he was intent on climbing onto the gallows, brave before ... people. [I did not dare] bend ... a powerful king, the Lord of heaven; I dared not bow down. People mocked us both together; I ... soaked with blood, drenched ... Christ was on the cross. Yet noble ones came hastening together there from far off. I saw it all. I was sorely troubled with cares, [I] bowed down ... Wounded by arrows. They laid him down weary-limbed, stood at the head of his body, they looked there at ...]<sup>1</sup>

**[3] The Brussels Cross text**

Drahmal me worhte.

Rod is min nama. Geo ic ricne cyning  
 Bær byfigynde, blode bestemed.

Þas rode het Æþlmaer wyrican ond Aðelwold hys broþor,  
 Criste to lofe, for Ælfrikes savle hyra broþor.

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<sup>1</sup> Text and trans. from Clayton, pp. 176-177.

[Drahmal made me.

Cross is my name. Once, shaking, I carried a powerful king, soaked with blood.  
 Æthelmær and Athelwold his brother commanded this cross to be made, in honor of Christ,  
 for the soul of Ælfric their brother.]<sup>2</sup>

#### [4] The structure of *Dream of the Rood*

Dreamer II. 1-27	II. 1-3	Opening address
	II. 4-23	Vision of the tree, shifting appearance, jewelled, bloody
	II. 24-27	The dreamer is troubled, the tree begins to speak
Cross II. 28-121	II. 28-77	The cross narrates its history from being cut down and raised as a cross, through the crucifixion, Christ's burial, the burial of the crosses, its rediscovery and adornment
	II. 78-94	The cross explains its role as a symbol
	II. 95-121	The cross commands the dreamer to tell people of the vision so that they will be among the righteous on the Day of Judgment
Dreamer II. 122-156	II. 122-144a	The dreamer prays to the cross, eager for death and the joys of heaven
	II. 144b-156	The dreamer places their hope in Christ and describes the Harrowing of Hell

#### [5] Dreams

Hwæt ic swefna cyst secgan wylle  
 hwaet me gemætte to midre nihte  
 syþban reordberend reste wunedon (*DotR* II. 1-3)

[Lo, I wish to tell the best of dreams, which came to me in the middle of the night when speech-bearers were at rest.]

#### Bede's account of Caedmon, *Historia Ecclesiastica* IV.xxiv:

He had lived in the secular habit until he was well advanced in years and had never learned any songs. Hence sometimes at a feast, when for the sake of providing entertainment, it had been decided that they should all sing in turn, when he saw the harp approaching him, he would rise up in the middle of the feasting, go out, and return home.

On one such occasion when he did so, he left the place of feasting and went to the cattle byre, as it was his turn to take charge of them that night. In due time he stretched himself out and went to sleep, whereupon he dreamt that someone stood by him, saluted him, and called him by name: 'Cædmon', he said, 'sing me something'. Cædmon answered, 'I cannot sing; that is why I left the feast and came here because I could not sing'. Once again the speaker said, 'Nevertheless you must sing to me'. 'What must I sing?' said Cædmon. 'Sing', he said, 'about the beginning of created things'. Thereupon Cædmon began to sing verses which he had never heard before in praise of God the Creator ... <sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Text and trans. from Clayton, pp. 180-181.

<sup>3</sup> Trans. from Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford, 1969).

### [6] Crosses in the Sky

þuhte me þæt ic gesawe syllcre treow | on lyft lædan (*DotR* II. 4-5a)

[It seemed to me that I saw a most wonderful tree raised in the air]

### Vision of Constantine (*Acta Cyriaci*):

Ea vero nocte veniens vir splendidissimus suscitavit eum, et dixit: Constantine, noli timere, sed respice sursum in ccelum, et vide, et intendens in eo, luce videt signum Crucis Christi, ex lumine claro constitutum, et desuper litteris scripture titulum, IN HOC VINCE

[That same night a most splendid man came and roused him and said: 'Constantine, do not fear, but look up into the heavens and behold', and, looking up into the sky, he saw the sign of the Cross of Christ, made out of bright light, and above were written the words, IN THIS CONQUER.]

### *Christ III (Judgement)* II. 195-200:

Donne sio byman stefen    ond se beorhta segn  
 ond ðæt hate fyr    ond seo hea duguð  
 ond se engla ðrym    ond se egsan ðrea  
 ond se hearda dæg    ond seo hea rod  
 ryht arærer    rices to beacne  
 folcdryht wera    biforan bonað

...

[Then the sound of the trumpet and the bright standard and the hot fire and the exalted troop and the host of angels and the terror inflicted and the cruel day and the high cross, raised upright as a symbol of power, will summon the host of the people forward ...]

### [7] Gold and Garments

Geseah ic wuldres treow  
 wædum geweorþode    wynnum scinan  
 gegyred mid golde. Gimmas hæfdon  
 bewrigene weorþlice. wealdendes treow. (*DotR* II. 14b-17)

[I saw the tree of glory honoured by garments, shining splendidly, adorned with gold. Gems had worthily covered the ruler's tree.]

### Formula for consecration of a cross in the Pontifical of Ecgbert, Archbishop of York (A.D. 732-766):

Radiet hic unigeniti Filii tui Domini nostri splendor divinitatis in auro; emicet gloria passionis ejus in ligno; in cruce rutile nos trae mortis redemptio; in crystalli splendore vitae nostrae purificatio.

[Let the splendour of your only begotten Son radiate here in gold, let the glory of his passion shine forth in the wood, let the redemption of our death glow in the cross and the purification of our life in the splendour of the crystal.]

**[8] Blood**

þæt hit ærest ongan | swætan on þa swiþran healfe (*DotR* II. 19b-20a)

[that it first began to bleed on the right side]

***Christ III (Judgement) II. 308-310a:***

Ða wearð beam monig blodigum tearum  
birunnen under rindum reade ond þicce;  
sæp wearð to swate.

[There, under its bark, many a tree was wet all over with bloody tears, red and abundant; the sap was turned to blood]<sup>4</sup>

**[9] Riddling Crosses – *Exeter Book Riddle 30a***

Ic eom legbysig, lace mid winde,  
bewunden mid wuldre, wedre gesomnad,  
fus forðweges, fyre gebysgad,  
bearu blowende, byrnende gled.  
Ful oft mec gesibas sendað æfter hondum,  
þæt mec weras ond wif wlonce cyssað.  
Ponne ic mec onhæbbe, ond hi onhnigaþ to me  
monige mid miltse, þær ic monnum sceal  
ycan upcyme eadignesse.

[I am occupied with flame, I flicker with the wind, wound about with glory, gathered together with the weather, eager for a journey, occupied with fire, a blooming grove, a burning ember. Very often retainers send me from hand to hand so that proud men and women may kiss me. Then I raise myself up, and they bow down to me, many with meekness, where I shall increase for men the upspringing of prosperity.]

**[10] Christ and the Cross**

‘Ongyrede hine þa geong hæleð —þæt wæs God ælmighty—  
strang and stiðmod. Gestah he on gealga heanne,  
modig on manigra gesyhðe, þa he wolde mancyn lysan.

[‘Then the young hero — that was God almighty — stripped himself, strong and resolute. He climbed onto that high gallows, brave in the sight of many, when he was intent on setting mankind free.]

**Rosemary Woolf, ‘Doctrinal Influences on *The Dream of the Rood*’ (1958):**

The most remarkable achievement of the poem is its balance between the effects of triumph and suffering, and their paradoxical fusion in the Crucifixion is suggested first by the alternation between the jewelled radiant cross and the plain and blood-covered cross in the prelude, and secondly and much more subtly and powerfully by the two figures of the heroic virtuous warrior and the passive enduring cross (p. 137-38).

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<sup>4</sup> Text and trans from Clayton, pp. 54-55.

**Christ possesses two natures, human and divine, united in the one person = *hypostasis***

**Rosemary Woolf, ‘Doctrinal Influences on “The Dream of the Rood”’**

that the poet did not simply write a Biblical paraphrase in the native style must surely be accounted for by the fact that he was steeped in the doctrine of the Church, and thus gave to his treatment of the Crucifixion the full richness and subtlety of its theological significance (p. 153)

### [11] The Harrowing of Hell

Hiht wæs geniwad

mid bledum ond mid blisse þam þe þær bryne þolodan.  
Se Sunu wæs sigorfæst on þam siðfate  
mihtig ond spedig, þa he mid manigeo com,  
gasta weorode, on Godes rice (*DotR* II. 148b-52)

[Hope was renewed with glory and bliss for those who had endured burning there. The Son was victorious on that expedition, mighty and successful, when he came with a multitude, a troop of spirits, into God’s kingdom.]

**Gospel of Nicodemus Homily from Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 41:**

Men þa leofestan, her sagað an þisum bocum ymbe ða miclan gewird þe to ðisse nigte wearð, þæt ure Drihten, Hælend Crist, on ðas niht gewearð, þe nu to niht wæs, þæt he of deað aras to midre nihte, and he astagh niðer to helwarum to þan, þæt he wolde þa helle bereafian, and swa gedyde, and þæt ealdordeoful oferswiðan.

[Dear men, it says here in these books about the great event that belongs to this night, that happened to our Lord, Christ the Savior, on this night which was now, tonight, that he arose from death in the middle of the night and he descended down to the inhabitants of hell, because he would rob hell, and he did so, and overpowered the ancient devil.]

### [12] One Poet or Two?

**A.S. Cook, *The Dream of the Rood: an Old English Poem Attributed to Cynewulf* (1905):**

The conclusion, as has been observed, is in quite a different manner, and seems alien to the prevailing sentiment of the poem. It is cool and objective in tone, and has no necessary and vital relation to what has preceded. Pending further elucidation, we can only conclude that it has either come here by accident, or that the poet's judgement was at fault.

**Leonard Neidorf ‘The Composite Authorship of *The Dream of the Rood*’ (2016):**

These instances of verbal repetition shed some light upon the probable process of expansion that The Dream of the Rood underwent. The second poet did not spontaneously or hastily add material to a work with which he was unfamiliar. Although the second poet possessed different literary interests and inferior metrical abilities, which perhaps motivated his tendency to repeat material, it is clear that he apprehended, and probably admired, the language and content of his predecessor’s work. (p. 64-5)

## Suggested Bibliography

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**Criticism:**

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**Digital Resources**

Vercelli Book: <http://vbd.humnet.unipi.it/beta/index.html>

**Further Contexts**

- Brooks, Francesca, *Poet of the Medieval Modern: Reading the Early Medieval Library with David Jones* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021)  
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