The Dream of the Rood: Christ's Sacrifice in Medieval Cultural Setting

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Abstract

The Dream of the Rood, is an early medieval poem, included in the 10th century Vercelli Book, relating the traditional tale of the Passion of Christ. Taking in consideration the gospel accounts of the crucifixion, one can find that The Dream of the Rood version of the crucifixion and those of the gospel are separated not only by time, but also by cultural conceptions and the depiction of Christ's nature. The poem is a fusion of the spiritual values of medieval heroic culture with the Christian doctrines of sacrifice and redemption. The Dream of the Rood is set in a cultural environment which reverences heroic deeds; therefore, the Passion of Christ is depicted as a battle against death, in which Christ ultimately triumphs by sacrificing himself to redeem mankind from their sins.

The paper finds that the poet of The Dream of the Rood has adjusted the Biblical account of the crucifixion to meet the requirements of the medieval warlike cultural codes which have greatly influenced his depiction of Christ giving him the aura of a medieval hero endowed with a valiant spirit as he boldly faces death.

Key words: Christ, Crucifixion, Heroism, Medieval culture, Rood, Passion, Warrior.
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Jesus Christ is known for his mild, meek, loving, merciful, forgiving and peaceful nature. He carried out his heavenly message of love and peace by teaching his people to love and forgive their enemies as revealed in the holy Bible:

But I say unto you which hear, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you,
Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you.
And unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek offer also the other; and him that taketh away thy cloak forbid not to take thy coat also.
Give to every man that asketh of thee; and of him that taketh away thy goods ask them not again. 

(Luke, 6: 27-30)

The same description of Crist's loving, kind and graceful nature is revealed in the holy Qur'an as the words are put in the tongue of Christ himself, "He [Allah] has made me blessed wheresoever I be; and He has enjoined on me prayer and charity as long as I live. He has made me kind to my mother, and not overbearing or miserable." (19:31-32) Thus, Christ's tender and meek nature has become undisputable facts in different religions.

Interestingly, this image of peaceful Jesus Christ is turned into a completely opposite one in the well-known medieval religious poem, The dream of the Rood. The poem is built on a dream vision in which a speaker relates a detailed dream involving the rood, the cross on which Christ was crucified. The cross is given a voice to speak about the torture that he and his lord, Christ, have gone through in the crucifixion:

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.

(Trapp, 1973: 115)
Technically speaking, *The Dream of the Rood* is divided into three parts: the first one is the speaker's account of his dream of the tree / cross, the second is the rood’s own description of the crucifixion and finally, the dreamer’s persistence to seek the salvation of the cross. The poet juxtaposes the codes of medieval heroism with those of Christianity via utilizing the metaphor of beacon to describe the rood. This metaphor gives a clue that the cross, the symbol of Christianity, is intended to symbolize a battle which is a common theme in medieval poetry.

The poem opens with a dream wherein a cross appears to the dreamer and begins to give a detailed account of the events of the Passion and crucifixion of Christ. The atmosphere created in the poem is a blend of the medieval poetic imagery with the Christian concepts; it is a conceptual blend "of the artistic and the monastic". The cross is personified as a loyal medieval squire to his knight, Jesus Christ, "the poem's fascinating conceptual blend, of course, is the personification of the Cross-as-Christ's 'loyal retainer', who then narrates the story of the Crucifixion" (Oakley, 2014: 335)

The dreamer has a vision of a jeweled rood, decked with gold and jewelry and beautifully shining in the darkness of midnight "compassed with light", it is a "wondrous Tree" as he describes:

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.
(Trapp, 1973: 114)

Then the dreamer realizes that this shiny and "wondrous Tree" is "The Cross of the Saviour"; the very cross on which Christ was crucified: the cross which witnessed and shared all the agony of the Passion to finally become a "Tree of victory". Jaroslav Pelikan argues: "According to *The Dream of the Rood*, his cross was a 'tree of victory,' and even as he was being laid in the sepulcher his proper title was 'the God of victory.'" (1978: 136) However, this tree which is covered with gold and gems still has a stain of blood on its right side, "the Rood on its right side/ once sweat blood". With previously revealing the true identity of the tree, the reader is immediately driven to conclude that the stain belongs to
Christ's blood, which is the hook that cleverly arouses the reader's curiosity and catches his complete attention. The tree in the dream has not only witnessed the Passion, but it has also become one with Christ as it went together with him through all the details of torture feeling all the pains of the crucified prophet:

Beneath the shining and brilliant surface is agony and pain. The cross has shifted its appearance. It is no longer suffused with gold now it is drenched with the flow of blood. The gold and jeweled tree reveals, like a palimpsest, its true nature. Beneath its former fair aspect it is a gallows, an instrument of horrific torture and death. At first the dreamer seems unable to comprehend what has been revealed. Shaken by the cross's oscillation between a shining tree of glory and a dark instrument of torture and humiliation, he cries out in frustration, 'I was all troubled with sorrows'. (MacKenzie, 2010: 231-232)

The personified cross/rood continues telling his story revealing the sorrowful and painful times that he and his "king" had to endure. The rood recalls how it was initially rooted out of the forest by a number of men referred to as enemies, "strong foemen" who "bore me to hilltop/Fastened me firmly" to become the "tree" on which Christ was to be crucified. Reluctant and terrified, the rood watches Christ mounts him bravely and unhesitatingly which makes the rood aware of the calamitous moments that he and his king are going to confront and determines to support and accompany his lord in the arduous challenge that he is going to face:

"Then I saw the King of all mankind
In brave mood hasting to mount upon me
Refuse I dared not, nor bow nor break,
Though I felt earth's confines shudder in fear;
All foes I might fell, yet still I stood fast

(Trapp, 1973: 116)

The Dream of the Rood portrays Christ as a hero warrior who boldly endures the Passion of the crucifixion to crown his suffering by victorious death as he sacrifices himself to save mankind:
Then the young Warrior .......
Put off His raiment, steadfast and strong;
With lordly mood in the sight of many,
He mounted me the Cross to redeem mankind

(Trapp, 1973: 116)

As a loyal medieval retainer, the cross shares his lord's agony. The cross parallels Christ, as both are pierced with nails, mocked, brutally wounded, put to death and buried. As Christ is nailed on the cross, the cross and Christ unite further, at points fusing into one which makes the pain that inflicted upon Christ felt by the cross, "The cross, sorrowful bearer of the young hero warrior Jesus, takes on Christ’s human nature and becomes the suffering servant." (Volkofsky, 2017: 20) The cross recounts these moments of pain, torture and terror that he and his lord experienced together:

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.
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.

(Trapp,1973: 116)

The rood's monologue depicts a vivid image of Christ's Passion with minute details of the rood's own consciousness of their ordeal which creates a likeness between them. Whereas, the extended metaphor of Christ as a hero reflects the poet's familiarity with the medieval culture which puts great emphasis on heroic standards. Thus, the major theme in The Dream of the Rood is the representation of the crucifixion as a battle by employing heroic verse and imagery of medieval poetry which stem from heroic cultural tradition. Eventually, the theme becomes one of victory attained through suffering with which both the rood and Christ transform from defeat to triumph.

By depicting Christ as a king, personifying the cross as his squire with effectively portraying the crucifixion as a battle, and exploiting the
dream vision poetic technique, the anonymous poet of *The Dream of the Rood* mirrors the heroic Medieval culture which adopts "as its basic assumptions the… insistence on the virtues of battle and endurance in the face of all the ills that beset a man" (Trapp, 1973: 10) The seeds of a culture of bravery were planted in the medieval people due to the way of life they used to lead, a way of life "plagued with bloody quarrels, combats, and feuds, they had to learn to face these human dangers in order to survive. They grew up fierce and hardy, ready to seek fighting even abroad" (Mahir, 1993:131) For them, courage in fighting was the acme of honour, pride and fame could only be won in battles as affirmed in *Beowulf*, the famous early medieval poem:

A man must do
Who thinks to win in the welter of battle
Enduring glory; he fears not death. (Trapp, 1973: 62)

Coping with the heroic maxims of the age, the personified rood goes on in his monologue to describe the burial of Christ. The image portrayed in the poem is of a grave ceremony which conveys the people's awe and sadness. Christ's burial is described as a great event that befits a hero whose death is mourned by all "creation":

Wan under heaven; all creation wept
Bewailing the King's death. Christ was on the Cross

Then many came quickly, faring from far,
Hurriying to the Prince. I beheld it all.

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They lifted [Christ]. Those warriors left me
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Limbed - weary they laid Him down; they stood at His head,
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They made Him a sepulture carved from the shining stone;
Then 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.
(Trapp, 1973: 117)
The rood's account of the burial of Christ contradicts the Bible's version of quiet and humble burial in a "nearby tomb":

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. (John 19:38-42)

Instead of laying Christ's body in the nearest available tomb, as the Bible states, the poet of *The Dream of the Rood* alter the traditional version of Christ's burial by adding a sepulcher and dirge to bestow reverence and value to the situation. This addition to the biblical account of Christ's burial reflects an important tradition in medieval culture by which "warriors honored their dead Prince before they left him in the solitude of death." (Lee, 1975: 172) as it is evident in the burial of Beowulf, the great early medieval hero:

The Great folk fashioned a peerless pyre
Hung round with helmets and battle-boards
...........................................
In sorrow of soul they laid on the pyre
Their mighty leader, their well-loved lord.

(Trapp, 1973: 97)

Just like a faithful medieval retainer, the rood is rewarded "with treasure of silver and gold". The rood, is awarded by his lord, Christ, for holding his master and experiencing all the suffering with him. The cross, becomes as powerful as his lord to act as a warrior himself. He uses this gained power to appear, covered with gold and gems, to the dreamer and recounts the story of how he supported his lord out of loyalty and faithfulness to be rewarded by a token of glorious gifts. Furthermore, the cross association with Christ declares his own triumph through suffering and submission to his lord's will, the rood states that his pain and endurance have raised his status and made him superior to all other trees:
Now may you learn, O man beloved,
The bitter sorrows that I have borne,
The work of caitiffs. But the time is come
That men upon earth and through all creation
Show me honor and bow to this sign.

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Now I tower under heaven in glory attird.
With healing for all that hold me in awe.

(Trapp, 1973: 117)

In his affinity with Christ, the cross is resurrected just like his king, sharing with him not only the suffering but also the glory to become a "symbol of Christianity":

After all, in the poem *The Dream of the Rood* it is the tree that is resurrected and becomes the symbol of Christianity when the human Jesus – just as the Germanic warrior – had fought out his battle and suffered death on the Cross.

(Tampierová, 2007:48)

Undertaking the responsibility of a missionary, the cross commands the Dreamer to tell other people about his vision and explain Christ's message of redemption and salvation to mankind:

Now I give you bidding, O man beloved,
Reveal this Vision to the sons of men,
And clearly tell of the Tree of glory
Wheron God suffered for man's many sins

(Trapp, 1973: 117)

Another important trait of medieval culture which can be traced in the poem is feasting in the mead-hall. The merry gatherings of the warriors in the mead-hall is a recurrent image in medieval poetry. The poet of *Beowulf* describes the celebration in the mead-hall:

Then in the beer-hall were benches made ready
For the Geatish heroes..............
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And a beer-thane served them, bore in his hands
The patterned ale-cup, pouring the mead,
There was joy of heroes, a host at ease,
A welcom meeting of Weder and dane.
(Trapp, 1973: 40)

The hall is thus linked with celebrations, feasts, and comradeship. The poet of *The Dream of the Rood* adheres to his cultural tradition by hinting to a great feast with the warrior Christ in a heavenly hall:

“The Dream of the Rood,” which takes the Crucifixion and earthly wanderings of the soul as its subject matter, the soul’s ultimate reunion with the heavenly kingdom of God is cast in the more heroic terms of a feast in a great hall. The speaking persona is comforted by a vision of the afterlife … where there is great bliss, joy in heaven, where the Lord’s people are seated at the feast. Though the image of the hall does not appear here, the *symbol* — the feast — does. … the community of Christian souls ‘is expressed in imagery which suggests the world of the secular hall with its feasting and fellowship among warriors.’

(VanDonkelaar, 2013: 29-30)

With such cultural background, the poet of *The Dream of the Rood* sets the tale of Christ in medieval milieu to address audience familiar with the traditions and the way of life of that culture. His aim is to teach the meaning of Christianity to people, and effectively appeal to them in an attempt to win them to Christianity. *The Dream of the Rood* is a vivid example of the blend of Christian culture of sacrifice with medieval themes and culture. It is considered a historical and literary masterpiece that represents a culture in a transitional stage: attempting to cope with a new religious belief on the one hand, while still trying to preserve in some way to older conceptions and legacy on the other.

Though the significance of *The Dream of the Rood* relies mainly on its emotional and appealing description of Jesus Christ's crucifixion which is the pivotal event throughout Christian history, it is the remarkable employment of the medieval dream vision technique, imagery, and the medieval cultural setting what makes the poem one of the masterpieces in Christian poetry. The warlike medieval culture considers the Passion and crucifixion a battle between good and evil which ends with the
Bibliography


