

Signs of Prayer in *The Dream of the Rood*



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Abstract: The Dream of the Rood is a poem about the mental and emotional processes that underlie the experience of prayer. The poet is interested in how words and signs transform feeling and perception and produce the ability to experience God. The poet does this, I argue, using two literary tropes. The first is the setting, in the middle of the night, which is a familiar setting for private prayer in Anglo-Saxon narrative sources. The second is through the figure of the cross, which represents Christ as the 'Word of God' who, in prayer, gives words to the solitary mystic. The patterns of transformation seen in The Dream of the Rood – from fear and passivity to joy and expressiveness – follow a pattern that is also found in many accounts of nocturnal prayer, particularly in the Anglo-Latin poem De Abbatibus and in Felix's Life of Guthlac, as well as in Bede's writings. In each of these accounts, true prayer is a response to signs of God's presence.

Augustine of Hippo, in his treatise on Christian teaching *De Doctrina Christiana*, explains that God has revealed himself to mankind through many signs. Chief among the signs used by God are words. For this reason, Augustine concerns himself mainly with the interpretation of Scripture. Yet Augustine is also conscious of the fact that God's disclosure of himself took place most comprehensively not through the giving of Scripture but rather through the Incarnation when Christ, God's word, 'became flesh'. He describes this occasion using the metaphor of speech:

When we speak, the word which we hold in our mind becomes a sound in order that what we have in our mind may pass through ears of flesh into the listener's mind: this is called speech. Our thought, however, is not converted into the same sound, but remains intact in its own home, suffering no diminution from its change as it takes on the form of a word in order to make its way into the ears. In the same way the word of God suffered no change although it became flesh in order to live in us.¹

Augustine's writings present a picture of the world wherein physical reality, rightly used, becomes a point of interface between the mind of God and the mind of men. God transforms the heart using words and signs.

De Doctrina Christiana was an extremely rare text in Anglo-Saxon England, and scholars have recently questioned the extent of Augustine's influence on Anglo-Saxon thought.² Nevertheless, accounts of prayer from Anglo-Saxon England tend to be aware of the idea that emotional transformation and healing are related to God's self-disclosure through a variety of words and signs, and principally through his Incarnation. John's gospel, which begins with the pronouncement that Christ, the word of God, existed in the beginning, reminds us that God's revelation of himself is intimately related to words: speech, by which he created the world; the scriptures, through which he communicates; the incarnate Christ, through whom his salvation is accomplished. Surviving collections of private prayers from Anglo-Saxon England

¹ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. and trans. by R.P.H. Green (Oxford, 1996), pp. 23–24.

² The knowledge of Augustine's works amongst the Anglo-Saxons has been the subject of some debate. Joseph Kelly has argued that familiarity with Augustine in Anglo-Saxon England was 'both broad and deep'. Joseph Kelly, 'The Knowledge and Use of Augustine among the Anglo-Saxons', *Studia Patristica*, 28 (1993), 211–16 (p. 216). Leslie Lockett, on the other hand, argues that, outside of a few very well-educated authors, including Bede, Augustine's work was not well known and not influential until the eleventh century. Leslie Lockett, *Anglo-Saxon Psychologies in the Vernacular and Latin Tradition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), pp. 179–81.

attest to a fascination with the Incarnation and an attempt, through words, to connect with the physical suffering of Christ and with his redemption.³

The *Dream of the Rood* is a celebrated Old English alliterative poem concerning the death and burial of Christ, told through the figure of the cross using Anglo-Saxon heroic diction. The poem has long been understood as a poetic meditation on the practice of prayer, and critics have fruitfully explored the poem's deep liturgical resonances.⁴ This paper argues that *The Dream of the Rood* is fundamentally about prayer, and the ability of prayer (which, more often than not, consists of words) to mediate between Christ and the individual. Words, particularly Scripture, provide mental and emotional healing in the poem and are thus deeply affective. It is conventional to think of affective piety as a later medieval phenomenon and yet, as Allen Frantzen has shown convincingly, 'felt prayer', the positioning of the self in relation to the natural order and God, and the *remissio peccatorum*, each of which have been considered eleventh-century phenomena, are ubiquitous in the Anglo-Saxon devotional tradition.⁵

Furthermore, this paper argues that the emotional catharsis of the dreamer is associated with the setting of the poem in the middle of the night, which was a conventional time for private prayer and visionary encounter with the divine. The representation of nocturnal prayer in Anglo-Saxon sources is particularly affective,

³ See, in particular, Marie Schilling Grogan, 'Praying with *the Book of Nunnaminster*: Healing the Soul and Increasing the Body of Christ in a Medieval Benedictine Convent', *Magistra*, 20.1 (2014), 97-113.

⁴ See Howard R. Patch, 'Liturgical Influence in *The Dream of the Rood*', *PMLA*, 34 (1919), 233-57; Earl R. Anderson, 'Liturgical Influence in *The Dream of the Rood*', *Neophilologus*, 73 (1989), 293-304; Éamonn Ó Carragáin, 'Sources or Analogues? Using Liturgical Evidence to Date *The Dream of the Rood*', in *Cross and Cruciform in the Anglo-Saxon World*, ed. by Sarah L. Keefer, K.L. Jolly, and C.E. Karkov (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2010), pp. 135-65.

⁵ Allen J. Frantzen, 'Spirituality and Devotion in the Anglo-Saxon Penitentials', *Essays in Medieval Studies*, 22 (2005), 117-28 (pp. 120-21).

with compunction, shock, awe, and fear being common features. In placing the dreamer's vision in the middle of the night, the poet relates the experience of the dreamer to the experience of many Anglo-Saxon mystics whose prayers in the middle of the night were the catalyst for transformational encounters with God.

I begin, therefore, with an outline of the meaning and purpose of nocturnal prayer in the Christian tradition that was largely inherited by the Anglo-Saxons. I will then outline the representation of nocturnal prayer in a variety of Anglo-Latin sources, before turning to an analysis of *The Dream of the Rood* and the ninth-century Anglo-Latin poem *De Abbatibus*.

NOCTURNAL PRAYER IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

The association of certain times of night with prayer predates monasticism and finds ample scriptural precedent. Christ commands his followers to 'keep watch' and asks them to remain awake with him in prayer the night before his crucifixion.⁶ In Acts, Paul and Silas pray in prison at 'about midnight'.⁷ Repeatedly, the psalmist commits himself to prayer at midnight.⁸ Early Church Fathers, including Tertullian and Hippolytus, make reference to private prayer, either at midnight or at cockcrow, the hour before the break of dawn. These hours for prayer were understood metaphorically in Late Antiquity and, in the prayers of the Office and the liturgy, were suffused with the symbolism of light and dark.⁹

⁶ Mark 13.35; Matthew 24.32.

⁷ Acts 16.25-34.

⁸ Psalm 118.62; Psalm 15.7; Psalm references in this paper refer to the Vulgate numbering.

⁹ For the spiritual significance of various times of day, see Robert Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in the East and West: The Origins of the Divine Office and Its Meaning for Today*, 2nd edn (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993), pp. 347-55.

Christ's death took place in the afternoon. According to Bede and others, this happened just prior to nightfall.¹⁰ In staying awake in prayer, then, the Christian participates in the event of Christ's death and his descent into hell, which represents his final defeat of evil. The attention given to the Harrowing of Hell in homiletic, devotional and poetic texts produced throughout the Anglo-Saxon period suggests a vivid mindfulness of the descent of Christ into hell before the break of dawn, at the hour for nocturnal private prayer.¹¹ Mary W. Helms explains that the primary significance of nocturnal prayer lay in remembering the resurrection and awaiting the *parousia*, or second coming.¹²

Early monastics privileged prayer at night and, under the influence of the Desert Fathers, praying throughout the night became an ascetic and penitential exercise that was principally undertaken in private, usually in the hours before dawn or around cockcrow.¹³ This tradition influenced the Irish practice of keeping vigil, which often included the singing of the whole psalter and was undertaken as an ascetic exercise. While the *Rule of Columbanus* includes prescriptions for communal prayer at night, an 'extra burden' remained, which enjoined the monk to pray in

¹⁰ Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels: Book Two – Lent to the Dedication of the Church: Lent to the Dedication of the Church*, trans. by Lawrence T. Martin and David Hurst (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1991), pp. 58–59.

¹¹ The Harrowing appears in the form of a dramatised prayer at the end of the ninth-century *Book of Cerne*. Later, a vernacular rendition of the story, which seems to derive from a similar source, appears in 'Blickling Homily 17' for Easter Sunday. In these two texts, the story is focussed on the prayers of the righteous dead and the penance of Adam and Eve, which releases them from hell. The entire *Gospel of Nicodemus*, which tells the story of the Harrowing, is translated into Old English in two eleventh-century manuscripts. See Thomas Hall, 'The *Euangelium Nichodemi and Vindicta Saluatoris* in Anglo-Saxon England', in *Two Old English Apocrypha and their Manuscript Source*, ed. by J.E. Cross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 36–81.

¹² Mary W. Helms, 'Before the Dawn: Monks and the Night in Late Antiquity and Early Medieval Europe', *Anthropos*, 99. 1 (2004), 177–91 (pp. 185–86).

¹³ See Helms, 'Before the Dawn' and Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours*, pp. 126–28 for the development of the night office. The tradition in Egypt, which came to influence Irish and Anglo-Saxon monasticism, was based on the recitation of the psalter throughout the night.

private at night.¹⁴ John Cassian, whose work was well known in Anglo-Saxon England, explains that the devil ‘does his utmost to disgrace them in that short hour [after the night office]’.¹⁵ Cassian argues that monks are particularly susceptible to demonic temptation, sloth, and ‘polluting’ dreams at this time, for which reason monks should be encouraged not to go back to bed and await the morning office.¹⁶ At the same time, the presence of spiritual protection in the night hours is also a part of this tradition. Hippolytus, writing in the third century, explains that ‘the whole army of angels that serve God praise him at this moment (midnight) in union with the souls of the just’.¹⁷ Prayer at night, then, brings the spiritual world into sharp focus. Without the distractions of the day, men and women become open to spiritual reality.

NOCTURNAL PRAYER IN ANGLO-LATIN LITERATURE

Anglo-Latin hagiographic literature frequently refers to prayer, sleep, and visionary experience. Praying at night is mentioned in narrative sources and even attributed to lay people. Oswald, according to Bede, was known to pray from morning until daybreak.¹⁸ Oswald was a king, not a monk, yet Bede is still careful to mention the specific time of day at which he prays and the Latin terms that he uses (*matutinae* and

¹⁴ As Josef Andreas Jungmann writes, ‘in Ireland we have the phenomenon of an extra burden, in the shape of private prayer, to be undertaken by the individual monk, a burden which far outweighed what he was already expected to perform’. Josef Andreas Jungmann, *Christian Prayer Through the Centuries* (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), p. 37.

¹⁵ Cassian, *Institutes*, trans. by Edgar C. S. Gibson in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. by Phillip Schaff and Henry Wace, 14 vols (New York: T&T Clarke, 1894) XI, 212–13.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Hippolytus, *Traditio apostolica*, cited in Irénée Henri Dalmais, Pierre Jounel, and Aimé Georges Martimort, *The Liturgy and Time*, trans. by Matthew O’Connell (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1986), p. 167.

¹⁸ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. by Bertram Colgrave and Roger Aubrey Baskerville Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 250–51.

laudis) have obvious connotations with the praying of the Office.¹⁹ Likewise Asser explains that Alfred was in the habit of praying before daybreak at the shrines of saints.²⁰ In Bede, Egbert's tearful repentance comes in the morning (*tempore matutino*).²¹ Egbert is able to reflect on his sins when he finds himself alone and awake while others are sleeping. Likewise, the penitent Adamnan receives a vision whilst occupied with psalms and vigils at night in which he is commended for his spiritual vigilance.²² Both Leoba and Boniface are noted for their keeping of vigil and are said to have been awake in prayer before the regular hour for Nocturns.²³ Bede also relates Fursey's dream-vision, wherein 'from evening until cockcrow being out of the body he was thought to be worthy to behold the sight of the angelic company, and to hear their blessed thanksgivings'.²⁴

Amongst the many references to prayer at night or in the early morning, before dawn, several themes emerge. Firstly, this form of prayer is more often private than communal. Secondly, it is often penitential and ascetic. This is perhaps most obvious in the behaviour of monks from a Celtic background such as Cuthbert and Drythelm,

¹⁹ The terminology around the night and morning offices is confusing and reflects the ambiguous development of these hours for prayer. The night office is variously called Nocturns and Vigils, while the morning office is variously called Matins and Lauds, although in some traditions, these offices took place before the breaking of dawn. As we have seen, Prime could be properly considered as the morning office in Anglo-Saxon England. Jesse Billett has shown that the night office and Lauds formed a single office in Anglo-Saxon England, which were either completed before cockcrow (in winter) or began at cockcrow (in summer). Monks, rising from their 'second sleep', would sing Prime. It is clear from narrative sources that the hours just prior to dawn were extremely important times for private prayer. Jesse Billett, *Divine Office in Anglo-Saxon England, 587-c.1000* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2014), pp. 35-36.

²⁰ Asser, *The Medieval Life of King Alfred the Great*, p. 32.

²¹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, pp. 312-13.

²² Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, p. 425.

²³ Willibald writes that Boniface 'rose before the hour for night vigil to occupy himself in the laborious exercise of prayer'. *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany, Being the Lives of S.S. Willibrord, Boniface, Sturm, Leoba and Lebuin*, ed. and trans. by C. H. Talbot (London: Sheed and Ward, 1954), p. 33; pp. 209-10.

²⁴ 'et a vespera usque ad galli cantum corpore exutus, angelicorum agmimum e auspectus intueri, et laudes beatas meruit audire'. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, pp. 272-73.

who spend the night reciting psalms neck deep in water, alone. Drythelm's practice is also the result of a near-death experience, which took place before cockcrow. Thirdly, this hour is often associated with contact with the spiritual realm, often on the verge of death. The practice of praying at night is associated with healing. Laymen and monastics frequently fall asleep while keeping watch and are healed in their sleep, usually through direct contact with the saints. Baduthegn, who is healed by Cuthbert's relics while sleeping near the tomb, felt Cuthbert's hand reach over him while he was asleep and awoke having been healed.²⁵ Likewise, an infirm man praying at Swithun's watched, according to Ælfric, until it was becoming day (*oðþæt hit wolde dagian*). At this point he fell asleep, and his friends saw the tomb trembling (*bifigende*) and a shoe being dragged off the sick man's feet. He awoke healed by Swithun.²⁶ Sleep, in these situations, does not disqualify them from the genuine encounter with saints and with God. This is seen clearly in Bede's account of Laurentius, who received a vision of St. Peter while keeping watch in his church even though he had fallen asleep.²⁷

Three incidents from Felix's Latin *Life of Guthlac*, an eighth-century text, show in detail the relationship between prayer, divine intervention, and the hours before dawn. Guthlac prays at night three times in response to the temptations of the devil. In the first instance, Guthlac is awake at night meditating, and becomes overwhelmed by his perception of his own sin. This is described as a 'poisoned dart' sent by the devil.²⁸ Remaining in this state of affliction for three days (with metaphorical parallels

²⁵ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, pp. 446–47.

²⁶ Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*, ed. and trans. by Walter Skeat (London: Trübner, 1881), pp. 448–51.

²⁷ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, pp. 146–48.

²⁸ Felix, *Life of Guthlac*, ed. and trans. by Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), pp. 94–97.

to Christ's descent following his death), Guthlac began to sing Psalm 17.7, 'In my distress I called upon the Lord', at nightfall on the third day.²⁹ He is then rescued by St. Bartholomew, who appears 'before his gaze in the morning watches'.³⁰ Guthlac's vision of St Bartholomew on the cusp between the night and morning is able to dispel the bad thoughts that plague him. The night is both literally and metaphorically the time of testing and mental torture, and persistence in prayer brings illumination and mental clarity. In this episode, the special words of the Psalms bring mental relief to Guthlac, while simultaneously protecting him from the assault of demons.

At another time, Guthlac is keeping vigil in the dead of night. He is interrupted by hoards of demons and taken to hell for part of the night. Guthlac sings Psalm 15.8, at which point the demons begin to beat him with whips. Bartholomew again appears to rescue Guthlac and take him back to his own dwelling. They arrive at Guthlac's home by dawn (*aurora*), implying that this experience has taken place in the hours just preceding dawn. After his enemies have been dispelled, Guthlac is able to give thanks and attend to his morning prayer (*matutinas laudes*). The final scene depicting Guthlac's keeping of vigil comes when the hermit, engaged in vigils and prayers at cockcrow meets a hoard of British-speaking demons.³¹ At this point, it seems that Guthlac has fallen asleep, or at least into some kind of stupor. The saint dispels the demons with the words of Psalm 67.2, 'Let God arise, etc.'³²

²⁹ Felix, *Life of Guthlac*, p. 96.

³⁰ Felix, *Life of Guthlac*, p. 100–101.

³¹ 'orationem vigiliis incumberet [...] gallicinali tempore.' Felix, *Life of Guthlac*, pp. 101–102.

³² 'exurgat Deus et dissipentur inimici eius et fugiant qui oderunt eum a facie eius'. Felix, *Life of Guthlac*, pp. 111–12.

At the end of the *Life of Guthlac*, we also find Æthelbald keeping vigil as he seeks intercession from Guthlac following his exile. Æthelbald prays at Guthlac's sepulchre, prostrate with tears and many words. Shortly after, when following his nightly prayers, Æthelbald enters a light sleep and is suddenly aroused by a great light.³³ This incident confirms the real presence of Guthlac at the sepulchre and emphasises the reality of his intercession. Felix calls this a *visione* and yet it remains unclear whether Æthelbald is awake or asleep.³⁴ These episodes in Guthlac's life, and several of the episodes in Bede, have a common narrative: mental, emotional, or physical turmoil is a catalyst for prayer. This might take the form of remembrance of sin or persistent fear, or an illness, and is sometimes associated with the presence of demons. There is, at times, an ambiguity between sleeping and waking. Prayer is coupled with the appearance of a heavenly comforter and is related to the change from one state of mind to another. Finally, prayer at night is associated with visionary experiences that allow for mental and emotional transformation. There is an interest in the power of words – often the words of the Psalms – which bring special illumination to the man or woman at prayer and protect them from demonic assault. These ideas exist alongside the conventional motifs already discussed: that the hours before dawn are associated with Christ's death and the harrowing, that the spiritual world is readily perceivable at night, and that the final judgment would take place in the middle of the night. This complex web of associations was reinforced by a devotional culture in which praying at night was privileged as an especially pious activity.

³³ Felix, *Life of Guthlac*, pp. 148–51.

³⁴ Felix, *Life of Guthlac*, pp. 138–42.

POETIC DREAM VISIONS: *THE DREAM OF THE ROOD*
AND *DE ABBATIBUS*

The *Dream of the Rood*, which probably existed in some form by the eighth century,³⁵ opens with a proclamation that the poet will speak of the 'best of dreams' (*swefna cyst*) that he dreamed in the middle of the night (*to midre niht*) after the 'speechbearers' (*reordberend*) had gone to rest.³⁶ This opening sentence is loaded with associations and, already, parallels with the stories of Bede and Felix are evident. Often critics of the *Dream of the Rood* focus on the inactivity of the dreamer. Anne Savage, writing on the meditative tradition in Anglo-Saxon England, contends that there is a sharp distinction between mystical experience and meditation: 'The dreamer in *The Dream of the Rood*', she writes, 'is frankly asleep, not meditating in any sense of the word'.³⁷ Contrary to Savage, the time *midre niht* places the dreamer in *The Dream of the Rood* at a time that is conventionally associated with private prayer, visionary experience, and eschatological reflection on the final judgment. Bede, Felix, and a variety of other authors associate private prayer with the period between the end of the night office and dawn, variously called *uhtan*, *dægred*, and *ærmorgen* in Old English, and *matutinae*,

³⁵ Dating *The Dream of the Rood* has been the topic of some debate. Éamonn Ó Carragáin writes that each surviving fragment of *The Dream of the Rood* is 'best understood in the immediate context which comprises, respectively, the eighth-century Ruthwell Cross; the eleventh-century Brussels Cross; and the late tenth-century Vercelli Book'. Éamonn Ó Carragáin, 'Sources or Analogues? Using Liturgical Evidence to Date *The Dream of the Rood*', p. 135. For the most recent and controversial counter-argument, see Patrick W. Conner, 'The Ruthwell Monument Runic Poem in a Tenth-Century Context', *The Review of English Studies*, 59 (2008), 25–49.

³⁶ *The Dream of the Rood*, 1–2. All excerpts are from *The Dream of the Rood: An Electronic Edition*, ed. by Mary Rambaran-Olm (2002) <http://www.dreamofrood.co.uk/frame_start.htm> [accessed 10 November 2015]. Translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

³⁷ Anne Savage, 'The Place of Old English Poetry in the English Meditative Tradition', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England*, ed. by Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: Brewer, 1987), pp. 91–110 (p. 91).

uigilis, noctis intempesto, and galli cantus in Latin. *Midre niht*, the term used in *The Dream of the Rood*, translates the Latin *media nocte*, which is frequently glossed as *uhtan*.³⁸ The Old English translation of the *Rule of St Benedict* sheds further light on the English terminology surrounding the night office. Benedict quotes Psalm 118 (*media nocte surgebam*) to justify night watches, which are called *nocturnis uigiliis* in Latin and *benihlicum uhtsangum* in Old English.³⁹ Both of these terms capture the sense of the Latin *media nocte* and the Old English *midre niht*. *Uht* is a common setting for Old English poems, including *The Wanderer*, who is *ana uht* and *The Wife's Lament*, which defines itself as the expression of *uhtcearu*.

Recently, Francis Leneghan has argued that *The Wanderer* is a poetic meditation based on the experience of *hesychasm*, 'the harnessing of meandering thoughts prior to approaching the stillness of prayer'.⁴⁰ Perhaps, then, the poet's appearance alone before the dawn suggests that he was engaged in some form of spiritual activity or watching prior to his dream. At the very least, the poet remains alone at the conclusion of his vision and prays to the cross *to midre niht*. Nevertheless, Guthlac and Laurentius both experienced visions that came about when they fell asleep keeping watch. Isabel Moreira, in her study of dreams and visions in Merovingian Gaul, points out that visions and ecstatic experiences are rewards for prayerful contemplation, the primary purpose of which 'was spiritual and mental illumination'.⁴¹

³⁸ John Fleming, "'The Dream of the Rood" and Anglo-Saxon Monasticism', *Traditio*, 22 (1966), 43–72 (p. 52).

³⁹ H. Logemann (ed.), *The Rule of St. Benedict* (London: Early English Text Society, 1888), p. 46.

⁴⁰ Francis Leneghan, 'Preparing the Mind for Prayer: *The Wanderer*, *Hesychasm* and *Theosis*', *Neophilologus*, 100.1 (2016), 121–42 (p. 121).

⁴¹ Isabel Moreira, *Dreams, Visions, and Spiritual Authority in Merovingian Gaul* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 43.

Andrew Galloway has discussed the Gregorian tradition of dream theory, which posits a state of nocturnal clarity in which spiritual reality is perceivable – God's voice emerges only when the daily tumult is silenced.⁴² Evagrius, whose spiritual teachings informed many of Cassian's writings, maintains that we see the spiritual world more clearly at night.⁴³ The depiction of night-time prayer discussed so far shows that the sense of the active presence of both saints and demons at night, and the ability to perceive them, was very much a part of the mindset of many Anglo-Saxons.

Let us now turn to the dreamer's vision, which consists in the first instance of a jewelled tree:

It seemed to me that I saw a beautiful tree
led up into the air, covered in light,
the best of beams. That beacon was all
covered with gold; gems stood
fair at the four corners; there were five up on the shoulder-span.⁴⁴

⁴² Andrew Galloway, 'Dream-Theory in *The Dream of the Rood* and *The Wanderer*', *The Review of English Studies*, 45 (1994), 475–85 (p. 477).

⁴³ 'Ὁ ἐν τῇ διανοίᾳ κόσμος κτιζόμενος μεθ' ἡμέραν μὲν δυσδιάγνωστος εἶναι δοκεῖ, τῶν αἰσθησέων περιπωσῶν τὸν νοῦν, καὶ τοῦ αἰσθητοῦ φωτὸς περιλάμποντος· νύκτωρ δὲ ἔστιν ἰδεῖν αὐτὸν περιφανῶς κατὰ τὸν καιρὸν τῆς προσευχῆς ἐκτυπούμενον'. Translation: 'The world created in the mind seems difficult to see by day, the nous being distracted by the senses and by the sensible light that shines; but at night it can be seen, luminously imprinted at the time of prayer'. Evagrius, *kephalaia gnostica*, ed. and trans. by Luke Dysinger (Camarillo: St John's Seminary, revised September 2005), <http://www.ldysinger.com/Evagrius/02_Gno-Keph/00a_start.htm> [Accessed on 20 November 2015].

⁴⁴ *The Dream of the Rood*, 3–9a: 'þuhte mē þæt ic gesāwe syllicre trēow / on lyft lædan lēohte bewunden, / bēama beorhtost. Eall þæt bēacen wæs / begoten mid golde. Gimmas stōdon / fægere æt foldan scēatum, / swylce þær fife wæron / uppe on þām eaxlgespanne'.

The transformation of the tree into the cross of Christ takes us firmly into the devotional context already suggested by the midnight dream. Michael James Swanton notes that the verb *begoten* is usually associated with water or blood, and thus prefigures the transmogrification of the tree into Christ's suffering and bleeding body.⁴⁵ The movement from contemplation to transformation begins with the dreamer's recognition of himself in this awe-inspiring vision: 'That victory-beam was wondrous, and I was adorned with sin, wounded with iniquity'.⁴⁶ The dreamer's emotional crisis deepens as he notices that the cross is bleeding on the right side:

However, through that gold I might perceive
the ancient strife of the wretched ones, when it first began
to bleed on the right side. I was all troubled with sorrow.
Because of that fair sight I was afraid⁴⁷

Reality becomes fractured in the dreamer's vision; he perceives (*ongytan*) first 'ancient strife' (*ærgewin*), a complex compound probably referring to fallen, vindictive humanity and the suffering of the cross. By beholding this external object, the dreamer turns to self-reflection. Riddling and bizarre, the visual spectacle of a cross that is at once sweating and changing colour, now adorned with treasure and now adorned with blood and sweat, vividly represents the theme of meditative dislocation:

⁴⁵ Michael James Swanton, ed., *The Dream of the Rood* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996), p. 64.

⁴⁶ *The Dream of the Rood*, 13-14b: 'Syllic wæs se sigebeam, ond ic synnum fah, forwunded mid wommum'.

⁴⁷ *The Dream of the Rood*, 18-21b: 'Hwæðre þurh þæt gold ongytan meahte / earmra ærgewin, þæt hit ærest ongan / swætan on þa swiðran healfe. Eall ic wæs mid sorgum gedrefed. / Forht ic wæs for þære fægran gesyhðe'.

At times it was drenched with water,
flooded with the going of blood, at times adorned with treasures.⁴⁸

These words recall the image of the body at the Last Judgment in Vercelli IV, a homily from the same manuscript as *The Dream of the Rood*. The good soul speaks fairly to its body, which moves through *manigfealdum bleon*, first appearing as a small man, then as a beautiful man, then moving through various degrees of fairness until it finally:

has a colour like gold and silver and like the most precious gems and stones. And after this is glitters like the stars, and glows like the moon, and shines like the sun when it shines most brightly.⁴⁹

The evil body, on the other hand, 'sweats with very hateful sweat, and from him fall ugly drops, and he changes into many hues'.⁵⁰ Payne's identification of *The Dream of the Rood* as a conventional poem about the Last Judgment makes this common trope all the more striking.⁵¹ It is particularly interesting that the cross sweats, as does the 'evil' body in Vercelli IV, and also shines with gems like the good body. Thomas H. Hall has identified these descriptions as suggestive of a 'purgative and purifying' process that both bodies must undergo – the good body to be perfected, the bad body

⁴⁸ *The Dream of the Rood*, 22–23: '[...] hwilum hit wæs mid wætan bestemed, /beswyled mid swates gange, Hwilum mid since gegyrwed'.

⁴⁹ 'hæfð gelic hiw golde 7 seolfre 7 swa þam deorwyrðestan gymcynne & eorcnanstanum. 7 æt nehstan þæt he glitenað swa steorra, 7 lyht swa mone, & beorhtaþ swa sunna þonne hio biorhtust bið scinende'. *The Vercelli Homilies and Related Texts*, ed. by D. G. Scragg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 96.

⁵⁰ 'swæt swiðe laðlicum swate, 7 him feallað on unfægere dropan, 7 bryt on manig hiw'. *The Vercelli Homiles and Related Texts*, p. 96.

⁵¹ Richard C. Payne, 'Convention and Originality in the Vision Framework of "The Dream of the Rood"', *Modern Philology*, 73.4 (1976), 329–41 (pp. 330–32).

to be consumed finally by evil blackness.⁵² Thus, the representation of the cross changing hue anticipates the crucifixion while also expressing themes of judgment and purgation.⁵³

Through this portion of the vision, the poet has the dreamer in a passive mode – viewing, perceiving, and afflicted, with no avenue for response except to lie down, see the cross, and hear its words. The dreamer’s break with reality and the intensity of his vision pushes him into the realm of affective engagement with the cross. *The Dream of the Rood* is centered on the ‘paradox of a speaking tree’.⁵⁴ The dreamer, throughout the poem, is struck dumb by the wonder of the cross. Ironically, in the first line of the poem, the poet exclaims that he will *secgan*, speak, yet the verbs of the poem’s opening all concern sight and perception – he beholds the tree and perceives his own sin. It is not until the cross speaks that the dreamer is offered any absolution from his state of dejection, in which he can do nothing but lay dormant until the tree speaks.⁵⁵

The poet in *The Dream of the Rood*, although alone, is aware of the presence of those spiritual agents who, along with him, contemplate the cross:

All those fair through eternal decree there

⁵² Thomas H. Hall, ‘The Psychadelic Transmogrification of the Soul in Vercelli Homily IV’, in *Time and Eternity: The Medieval Discourse*, ed. by Gerhard Jaritz and Gerson Moreno-Riano (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2003), 309–22 (p. 322).

⁵³ David Johnson interprets the entire dream vision, including the changed appearance of the cross, through the lens of eschatology and the final judgment. David Johnson, ‘Old English Religious Poetry’, in *Companion to Old English Poetry*, ed. by Henk Aertsen and Rolf H. Bremmer (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1994), 159–87 (pp. 161–63).

⁵⁴ Andy Orchard, ‘*The Dream of the Rood: Cross-References*’, in *New Readings in the Vercelli Book*, ed. by Samantha Zacher and Andy Orchard (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), pp. 225–53 (p. 247).

⁵⁵ Fleming suggests that the phrase *licgende lange hwile* may refer to the dreamer praying prostrate. Fleming, ‘“The Dream of the Rood” and Anglo-Saxon Monasticism’, p. 65.

beheld the angel of the Lord. Nor was that a gallows for criminals,
but holy spirits beheld it, men over the earth and all the fair creation.⁵⁶

The most significant aspect of this section, from the perspective of nocturnal prayer, is the fact that the dreamer is no longer alone. Others who are contemplating the cross, including holy ghosts and holy men, accompany him. The dreamer has emerged into a state of communion with the saints *to midre niht*.⁵⁷

A similar vision takes place at the same time of night in the ninth-century Anglo-Latin poem *De Abbatibus*.⁵⁸ The penultimate chapter of the poem concerns a vision seen by the poet, again, immediately after the other brothers have gone to sleep following nocturnal prayer, just before cockcrow, at the same time as the dreamer in *The Dream of the Rood*. The vision comes to Æthelwulf as a 'lurking dream':

⁵⁶ *The Dream of the Rood*, 9–12: 'Beheoldon þær engel Drhtynes alle / fægere þurh forðgesceaft. Ne wæs ðær huru fracodes gealga. / Ac hine þar beheoldon halige gastas, / men ofer moldan ond eall þeos mære gesceaft'. Interpreting 9b is difficult, principally because the plural *beheoldon* demands a plural subject. If, indeed, the angel of the Lord is the object of *beheoldon*, then some explanation is required as to what is meant by the *engel Dryhtnes*. Critics have suggested that this might be a reference either to Christ or to the Cross. Willem Helder offers an emendation of the text with the translation 'gems stood, beautiful on the surface of the earth, as likewise were five around the center of the cross, signifying the full glory of the angelic host', Willem Helder, 'The 'Engel Dryhtnes' in "The Dream of the Rood"', *Modern Philology*, 73.2 (1975), 148–50. This translation follows Raymond P. Tripp's rendering of the passage in his article "'The Dream of the Rood': 9b and Its Context,' *Modern Philology*, 69.2 (1971), 136–37. Several attempts have been made to emend the edition, but since none have made the passage any clearer it is generally taken as it appears in the manuscript.

⁵⁷ Michelle Brown argues that the theme of the *communio sanctorum* was a major feature of Anglo-Saxon devotional life and the guiding principle of the ninth-century prayer book known as the *Book of Cerne*. Michelle Brown, *The Book of Cerne: Prayer, Patronage and Power in Ninth-Century England* (London: The British Library and the University of Toronto Press, 1996), p. 16.

⁵⁸ *De Abbatibus* is an 819-line hexameter poem celebrating the achievements of the poet Æthelwulf's monastery, a subsidiary of Linsdisfarne somewhere in Northumbria. It is dedicated to Bishop Ecgberht and can thus be dated confidently to his pontificate, 803 to 821. *De Abbatibus* moves from a history of Æthelwulf's monastery similar to (and probably based upon) Alcuin's poem on the history of York to a description of the monastery in the poets' own day.

It was the time of night when the cock announces the approach of dawn, and after I had relaxed my chill limbs in rest after the singing of hymns, a lurking dream came and stole before my eyes. Behold, suddenly a shining being appeared to be my leader. Frightened as I was, I approached and accompanied this person, who was shining in very bright vestments and radiant with fair face, and of my free will I placed my steps on unknown paths.⁵⁹

This passage is replete with Virgilian imagery, which also seems to have informed Felix's description of the dream vision. Æthelwulf's dream is called a *somnus*, which, in Macrobius' scheme, suggests a prophetic dream with allegorical significance.⁶⁰ We are also told in the headings, which seem to be an original feature of the poem, that the *somnium* comes to him on a Sunday night – the conventional night for vigils and also the night most strongly associated with Christ's resurrection and second coming. The occurrence of a vision on a Sunday night, therefore, carries eschatological overtones that again occur in *The Dream of the Rood*.

This opening of Æthelwulf's *somnus* is strongly reminiscent of Sulpicius Severus' vision of St Martin, which also takes place in a dream at morning time (*matutinis*). Sulpicius finds himself overwhelmed by melancholy brought on by

⁵⁹ Æthelwulf, *De Abbatibus*, ed. and trans. by Alastair Campbell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 54–55: 'tempus erat noctis, lucem cum predicat ales / algida post ymnos laxassem membra quieti, / furtius adueniens somnus subrepsit ocellis. / candidus en subito uidebatur ductor adesse. / hunc ego prepauidus niidis iam uestibus album / uultibus ac pulchris radientem gressibus ultro / callibus ignotis peditans comitatus adiuu'.

⁶⁰ A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 10. Macrobius was probably known in the early Middle Ages but he was not nearly as widely read as he came to be in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Thus, we may note the possibility of some influence but cannot assume that Macrobius' dream theory is synonymous with 'medieval' dream theory. Andrew Galloway has discussed the influence of Gregorian dream theory on *The Dream of the Rood* and includes in his paper a detailed analysis of possible sources for Anglo-Saxon dream theory, including an evaluation of Macrobius' influence. See Galloway, 'Dream-Theory in *The Dream of the Rood* and *The Wanderer*', pp. 475–85.

'weariness of the present world, a terror of judgment, a fear of punishment', classified by Severus as a 'train of thought'.⁶¹ Again, the focus on fear brought on by unrelenting thoughts indicates that Sulpicius begins his vision in the same place as Guthlac and the dreamer in *The Dream of the Rood*. Suddenly, Sulpicius describes falling into the 'somewhat light and uncertain' sleep of the morning hours in which 'one can feel that he is almost dreaming while he is awake'.⁶² In this ambiguous state, Sulpicius receives a vision of St Martin, 'clothed in a white robe, with a countenance as of fire, with eyes like stars, and with purple hair'.⁶³ Martin appears much like Æthelwulf's *candidus ductor*. Having received consolation from Martin and from the presbyter Clarus, Sulpicius wakes rejoicing until a monk from Tours comes to inform him of Martin's death.⁶⁴ This is, to Sulpicius, a source of 'unbearable sorrow', yet his grief is also his comfort: he concludes the letter by stating that Martin's death brings him the hope of the saint's intercession.⁶⁵ Both the anonymous and Bede's *Life of Cuthbert* refer to the life of Martin, and the letters were sufficiently well known to suggest that both Bede and the anonymous author, and perhaps the author of *De Abbatibus*, were aware of the story.⁶⁶ This points to a long, persistent tradition of the dream vision in the hours of late night/early morning.

⁶¹ Sulpicius Severus, Epistola II 'Ad Aurelium Diaconum', trans. by Alexander Roberts in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. by Phillip Schaff and Henry Wallace, 2nd series, 6 (New York: Cosimo Classics, 1896), pp. 19–20.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ 'Sulpicius Severus' in *Sources of Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture: A Trial Version*, ed. by Frederick M. Biggs, Thomas D. Hill, and Paul E. Szarmach (Binghamton, N.Y: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, State University of New York at Binghamton, 1990), pp. 158–59.

THE THEOLOGY OF PRAYER IN *THE DREAM OF THE ROOD* AND *DE ABBATIBUS*

The Dream of the Rood is, at its core, a poem about divine encounter. The poet shows how meeting with God moves the mind from a state of fear and dejection to a place of joy. In the beginning of the cross's speech, he explains how he was 'stirred up' (*astyred*) from the edge of the forest and hewn down from his trunk (*stefne*).⁶⁷ Literally, the cross is explaining the process of being cut down, yet here, in the dream vision framework, we can see that the poet evokes the language of sleep to link the plight of the dreamer with that of the cross. The cross, like the dreamer, is awakened. If we allow that the word *stefne* (trunk) might contain a pun on the Old English word *stefn* meaning voice, then the cross' awakening is related to his ability to speak. The cross' awakening is traumatic: he is taken from his home, seized by his enemy and forced, almost against his will, to participate in the death of 'the Lord of mankind' (*freamancynnes*).⁶⁸ Of course, he is not *forced* to crucify Christ, *per se*, but does so out of obedience to his lord. He did not dare 'to break to bits or bow against the word of the Lord'.⁶⁹ The poet relays the cross' experience in highly affective language that resounds with trauma and emotional dislocation. The cross, sorrowful bearer of the young hero warrior Jesus, takes on Christ's human nature and becomes the suffering servant. Orchard notes 'the poet expects his audience to make specific connections between his characters'.⁷⁰ The cross, like the dreamer, is 'wounded with arrows' (*mid*

⁶⁷ *The Dream of the Rood*, 30.

⁶⁸ *The Dream of the Rood*, 33.

⁶⁹ *The Dream of the Rood*, 35-37b: 'Ðær ic þā ne dorste ofer dryhtnes word / būgan oððe berstan, þā ic bifian geseah / eorðan scēatas [...]'.
⁷⁰ Orchard, 'Cross-References', p. 232.

strælum forwundod)⁷¹ in the same way that the dreamer is wounded by his own sin.⁷² The arrow image appears elsewhere, including in Guthlac's first vision, and is a conventional metaphor for demonic temptation.⁷³ Both the dreamer and the cross are *gedrefed* with sorrow (*[mid] sorgum gedrefed*), a verb that implies being afflicted but also moved, literally driven, by sorrow.⁷⁴ This metaphor of movement and internal turbulence also appears in Guthlac's life:

Now when meanwhile the poisoned weapon had poured in its potion of black venom, then every feeling [*totis sensibus*] of the soldier of Christ was disturbed [*turbatus*] by it [...] and turning things over in his troubled mind [*turbulentum animum*] he knew not in what place to rest [...]. The servant of the Lord for the space of three days did not know whither to turn.⁷⁵

Each of Guthlac's three visions resolves because of the saint's power of speech, which is naturally related to his ability to pray. Twice he recalls psalm verses that rescue him from despair and demonic attack. Once, returning to his morning prayers, Guthlac speaks words of thanksgiving and recites his prayers. Salvation, in these instances, consists of finding the right words, and divine encounter allows Guthlac to pray against demonic attack.

⁷¹ *The Dream of the Rood*, 62.

⁷² *The Dream of the Rood*, 14.

⁷³ This image appears in Ephesians 6:11-17 and was popular in the Old English homiletic and poetic tradition: see, for example, the Old English poem *Andreas* line 391 and especially *Vercelli Homily IV*, lines 308 to 318, which contain a catalogue of different sins, each described as a different arrow in the devil's arsenal. See also Felix, *Life of Guthlac*, ed. and trans. by Colgrave, pp. 94-97. For a discussion of *Vercelli IV* see Thomas H. Hall, 'The Psychedelic Transmogrification of the Soul in *Vercelli IV*', in *Time and Eternity: The Medieval Discourse*, ed. by Gerhard Jaritz and Gerson Moreno-Riano (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2003), pp. 309-22 (p. 322).

⁷⁴ *Dream of the Rood*, 20; 59.

⁷⁵ Felix, *Life of Guthlac*, ed. and trans. by Colgrave, p. 97. Emphasis mine.

We find a similar movement from abjection to prayer in *The Dream of the Rood*. The figure of a speaking tree represents the revelation of God, mediated through the cross just as his very act of atonement was accomplished through the Cross. The appearance of lines from some recension of *The Dream of the Rood* on both the Ruthwell Cross and the Brussels reliquary cross adds a literal element to the speech of the cross: the Brussels Cross first person inscription reads ‘rod is my name; trembling, I once bore a powerful king, drenched in blood’.⁷⁶ The rood was fashioned, according to the dedication, ‘to praise Christ for the soul of Ælfric, their brother’.⁷⁷ It has been noted that the attribution of speech to an inanimate object is an Anglo-Saxon commonplace.⁷⁸ Crosses in Anglo-Saxon England are frequently inscribed with prayers and so there is a symbolic, as well as a literal, dimension to the figure of the speaking cross.⁷⁹ Such crosses, literally, were erected as a form of prayer and a reminder to pray. The Ruthwell Cross is an exceptional example of this phenomenon, containing as it does a runic inscription related to some portion of the poem *The Dream of the Rood*. While it is unlikely that people were able to read these runes *in situ* when

⁷⁶ ‘rod is min nam; geo ic ricne Cyning bær byfigynde, blod bestemed’. Michael Swanton, *The Dream of the Rood* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1970) p. 48. S. d’Ardenne, ‘The Old English Inscription on the Brussels Cross’, *English Studies*, 21 (1939), 145–64, 271–72 (p. 146). Éamonn Ó Carragáin believes that there were many recensions of this poem-model, some shorter and others longer; such a theory makes the sole extant text version of the poem preserved in the late tenth-century Vercelli Book simply a redaction of an earlier version that dates perhaps from as early as the seventh century. Éamonn Ó Carragáin, ‘Sources or Analogues? Using Liturgical Evidence to Date *The Dream of the Rood*’, pp. 38–39.

⁷⁷ ‘Criste to lofe for Ælfrices saule hyra beropor’. d’Ardenne, ‘The Old English Inscription on the Brussels Cross’, p. 146.

⁷⁸ For a discussion of this trope see Bruce Karl Brasswell, ‘*The Dream of the Rood* and Aldhelm on Sacred Prosopopeia’, *Mediaeval Studies*, 40 (1978), 461–67.

⁷⁹ Generally, these take the form of reminders to pray, with the formula of a personal name and the command to ‘ora pro anima’, or words to the same effect. These inscriptions could appear in Latin or Old English, for example, the runic inscriptions of the Thornhill Crosses, dated somewhere between 750 and 850. Davd Howlett, *Insular Inscriptions* (Chippenham: Antony Rowe, 2005), p. 214. For more Old English commemorative runes, see R. I. Page, *An Introduction to English Runes* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1999), pp. 141–45.

looking at the cross, it may be that the runes signify the cross' power of speech and its ability to exhort men to prayer.⁸⁰ At the same time, the complex iconographic program of the Ruthwell Cross is related to the eremitic life.⁸¹ The cross encapsulates the life of prayer.

The cross in *The Dream of the Rood* also represents the human nature of Christ.⁸² The figure of Christ in the poem, Lord and 'young hero/saviour' (*geong hælend*), is unaffected by the suffering inflicted on the cross, and the dual representation of both the Cross and Christ is part of the complex theological imperative of the poem, and its meditation on the nature of the second person of the Trinity.⁸³ In the same way, the poem is also interested in the concept of the word of God (*verbum dei*). The idea of the Word is complex and multifaceted in medieval religious culture: Christ, in his person, is the Word of God, and his words (especially his words of prayer, such as the Pater Noster) are doubly so.⁸⁴ The Bible is also the word of God and, consequently, its words resound through the literary, material, and devotional culture of Anglo-Saxon England as powerful words of prayer. Likewise, the prologue to John's Gospel, which discusses the Word of God (*in principio erat verbum*), was held to have protective powers in the Middle Ages.⁸⁵ These first words of John's Gospel appear in later Anglo-

⁸⁰ Patrick W. Conner, 'The Ruthwell Monument Runic Poem in a Tenth-Century Context', *The Review of English Studies*, 59.238 (2008), 25–51 (p. 28). Conner argues for a tenth-century context for the Ruthwell poem, based partly on its use of vernacular.

⁸¹ Meyer Schapiro, 'The Religious Meaning of the Ruthwell Cross', *The Art Bulletin*, 26.4 (1944), 232–45 (p. 235).

⁸² See Rosemary Woolf, 'Doctrinal Influences on *The Dream of the Rood*', in *Art and Doctrine: Essays on Medieval Literature*, ed. by Heather O'Donoghue (London: The Hambledon Press, 1986), pp. 29–48 (p. 39). Woolf discusses the theological imperative to emphasize the coexistence of Christ's humanity with his divinity in light of the Monophysite controversy of the seventh century.

⁸³ *The Dream of the Rood*, 39.

⁸⁴ Daniel Anlezark discusses the charm-like quality of the Pater Noster. *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, ed. and trans. by Daniel Anlezark (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2009), pp. 26–27.

⁸⁵ Patrick Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature in Western England, 600–800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 292. Augustine tells of a Platonist who was in the habit of saying

Saxon medicinal charms.⁸⁶ In Leechbook I.lxii.3, there is an instruction to write the text of John, suggesting a power accorded to the written word. The notion of the 'word' in the poetic and religious imagination is well expressed by the eccentric *Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*. In this poem, God's word is the Lord's prayer, and it is ascribed special powers. God's *cwide*, according to the poem, 'opens up heaven, blesses the holy, makes the Lord merciful, strikes down murder, extinguishes the devil's fire, kindles the Lord's [fire]'.⁸⁷ In this tradition, the word of God and, indeed, the words of God are powerful. Henry Mayr-Harting notes that the idea of God's words as sacred and needing to be used and pronounced correctly is a constant theme in Carolingian regulations.⁸⁸

As a poem about prayer, *The Dream of the Rood* plays on the idea of words and God's word as the means of salvation. Critics have suggested that the image of the cross suggests not only an ornamental devotional cross but also perhaps a gilded

that this passage should be written in gold and hung up in all churches. Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. by R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 437.

The council of Seligenstadt in 1022 links the recitation of this passage explicitly with lay superstition: 'Quidam etiam laicorum & maxime matronae, habent in consuetudine, ut per singulos dies audiant evangelium, in principio erat Verbum, & missas peculiares, hoc est de sancta Trinitate, aut de sancto Michaele: & ideo sancitum est in eodem concilio, ut hoc ulterius non fiat, nisi suo tempore, & nisi aliquis fidelium audire velit pro reverentia sanctae Trinitatis, non pro aliqua divinatione: & si voluerit ut sibi missae cantetur, de eodem die audiant misas, vel pro salute vivorum, aut pro defunctis'. Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio* (Florence and Venice, 1758-98), pp. xix; 398. <<http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb37252744r>> [accessed 19 November 2015].

⁸⁶ Leechbook I.lxii.3, in Oswald Cockayne (ed.), *Leechdoms, Wortcunning and Starcraft of Early England*, 3 vols (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts and Green, 1863) II, 136-7. See also Karen Louise Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 118-19.

⁸⁷ 'heofonas ontyned, halige geblissað / Metod gemiltsað, morðor gefilleð / andswæced deofles fyr, Dryhtnes onæled' (39-42). Anlezark (ed.), *Solomon and Saturn*, pp. 62-63.

⁸⁸ Henry Mayr-Harting, 'Praying the Psalter in Carolingian Times: What Was Supposed to Be Going on in the Minds of Monks?', in *Prayer and Thought in Monastic Tradition: Essays in Honour of Benedicta Ward SLG*, ed. by Benedicta Ward and Santha Bhattacharji (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 77-100 (p. 81).

Bible.⁸⁹ In *The Dream of the Rood*, the cross is powerful because it enables men to experience Christ himself and, crucially, to pray to him. The cross warns the dreamer of the fate of the men who will not know what to say to Christ. This, however, is not a problem for those who bear the beacon within their breast and who have learnt to distinguish the way of the kingdom from earthly paths. Fleming here points to the monastic way of self-denial – *per crucem ad lucem*.⁹⁰ Yet there is a more specific reference here to the power of the cross to give speech to men, those who would wish to give an answer to the Lord on the day of judgment. They need not fear who have experienced communion with the cross and with Christ, those who, like the dreamer, come to be able to pray happily. Furthermore, the ultimate redemption of the dreamer comes through his opportunity to meditate on the scriptural story and to experience the emotion of the Passion as if he were there, since the cross functions, in J.A. Burrow's words, 'doubly as a surrogate for both the dreamer and Christ'.⁹¹ Extant witnesses to the tradition of private prayer in Anglo-Saxon England point to deep and sustained meditation on the life of Christ, and particularly on his Passion, as the basis for private prayer.⁹²

Immediately following the words of the cross, therefore, it is logically consistent that the dreamer responds by praying with joy to the cross. In doing this, he obeys the first of his commands:

⁸⁹ Barbara Raw, 'The Dream of the Rood and its connections with Early Christian Art', *Medium Ævum*, 39.3 (1970), 239–56 (p. 242).

⁹⁰ Fleming, "'The Dream of the Rood" and Anglo-Saxon Monasticism', p. 50.

⁹¹ J.A. Burrow, 'An Approach to "The Dream of the Rood"', *Neophilologus*, 43 (1959), 123–33 (p. 127).

⁹² Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, p. 290. The Gospel lections in the Book of Cerne (Cambridge, University Library L.I.10) and the Book of Nunnaminster (B.L., Harley 2965) begin with the evening before Christ's death and end either with his assumption (Cerne) or his burial (Nunnminster).

Then I prayed to the cross with friendly spirit,
with great zeal, where I was alone
with little company. My mind was
impelled on the way hence, it experienced very many
times of longing.⁹³

Swanton writes that 'catalysed by his vision, the poet's resolution forms the directly devotional basis of the poem's conclusion. The visionary no longer lies passive and silent'.⁹⁴ No longer paralysed and unable to pray, his encounter with the cross has affected an emotional transition.

The final command of the cross is not merely to pray, but to tell men about his vision.⁹⁵ This command is fulfilled in the composition of the poem. Given the complex transmission history of *The Dream of the Rood*, it is possible that the whole poem or segments of the poem were transmitted orally or memorised. Indeed, we know Alfred was instructed to memorise Saxon biblical poetry.⁹⁶ Anglo-Latin prayer books from the early ninth century show us that engagement with the Bible sat at the centre of private prayer in Anglo-Saxon England, as too do the accounts of Guthlac singing psalms at night.⁹⁷ *The Dream of the Rood* shows a similar interest in Christ's Passion as a catalyst for prayer and, indeed, his Passion is the only reason why one is able to pray to God at all. In a sense, then, the poem is about prayer and is also in itself the outcome

⁹³ *The Dream of the Rood*, 123–26a: 'Gebæd ic mē þā to þām bēame bliðe mōde / elne mycle, þær ic āna wæs mæte werede. Wæs mōdsefa / āfysed on forðwege, feala ealra gebād / langunghwīla...'

⁹⁴ Michael James Swanton, ed., *The Dream of the Rood* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996), p. 77.

⁹⁵ *The Dream of the Rood*, 95–105.

⁹⁶ Asser, *The Medieval Life of King Alfred the Great*, 23, trans. by Alfred P. Smyth (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 14.

⁹⁷ Asser, *The Medieval Life of King Alfred the Great*, pp. 6–9.

of prayer, since it provides evidence of a mind no longer condemned by fear but enlightened by divine revelation and the love of God. The setting of this poem *to midre niht* offers a conventional setting for such a transformation to take place.

In *De Abbatibus*, the movement from crisis to comfort comes through a vision of the cross:

The venerable cross rose up shining on a very long stem from the top of the table. A golden plate yellowed with tawny gems, and upon it emeralds shone full bright. The cross shone with reddening gold and shining gems from the east. A sparkling vestment of linen covered the top of the tomb, which had the consecrated bones of a saint held in the heart of its interior.⁹⁸

Campbell and Orchard have briefly noted some superficial similarities between this passage and *The Dream of the Rood*.⁹⁹ An adorned cross appears in both poems. Both poems depict a similar movement from fear to prayer mediated through engagement with the cross. While Æthelwulf's cross does not speak with words, his description of the church, which merges the symbolic and the literal, the earthly and the heavenly, is a picture of eternal reality that takes Æthelwulf from fear and silence to prayer. Furthermore, as Robert Gallagher points out, there is a theme running through the

⁹⁸ 'crux ueranda nitens precelso stipite surget / uertice de mense nimium candente smaragdo. aurea cum gemmis flammescit lammina fuluis. / [...] / haec rutilo ex auro gemmisque nitescit opimis / ex oriente, micans de bisso culmina tume uestis contextit, cuius que nescio sancti / membra dicata qui tenuit sub uiscere uentris'. Æthelwulf, *De Abbatibus*, ed. and trans. by Campbell, pp. 56-57.

⁹⁹ Æthelwulf, *De Abbatibus*, p. 56. Orchard, 'Cross-References', p. 226.

whole poem wherein the poet suggests that the way to 'achieve salvation [is] through introspective thought and spiritual solitude'.¹⁰⁰

Stopping before the cross, Æthelwulf finds himself terrified, deprived of a leader and unable to speak:

As I was searching into these things and distinguishing them from my dull mind, behold, my leader had left me suddenly and, departing from the church, disappeared into thin air. And I, afraid, bent my face close to the ground, calling on Christ: 'have mercy, I pray, and remember to save a frightened man whose enemies press against him'. Henceforth, turning my eyes away to the right, where there was a chair, which shone, and was adorned with gilt carvings and a venerable old man had seated himself upon it. In front of his face, an altar decked with garlands of golden flowers sent dedicated gifts to God, the highest one, and at the top it had the sign of a tall cross.¹⁰¹

Æthelwulf's prayer alludes loosely to the psalms in its plea for mercy and protection against enemies. Curiously, there are no obvious 'enemies' in this narrative, save Æthelwulf's fears alone. His identification of 'enemies' in the context of psychological turmoil is reminiscent of saints' prayers against demonic temptation and suggests a link between emotional unrest and spiritual attack, also seen in the life of Guthlac. Campbell translates the word *cor*, which is usually heart, as mind.¹⁰² Æthelwulf

¹⁰⁰ Robert Gallagher, 'Aediluulf's *De Abbatibus*: A Soteriological Reading', *Quaestio*, 9 (2008), 129–43 (p. 142).

¹⁰¹ 'talia dum cernens stupido de corde rimarem, / ecce repente meus ductor me linquerat atque degrediens templo uacuis se condidit auris. / ast ego pretrepidus faciem cum pronior aruis / inserui rogicans Christum, 'miserere precamur / hostibus aduersis pauidum seruare momento', hinc oculos uertens partem qua dextera monstrat / aurigeris solium splendescere rite tabellis / quo senior quidam uenerandus membra locabat. / ante suam faciem fuluis redimita coronis / ara dicata deo mittebat munera summo / quae crucis excelse porrexit uertice signum'. Æthelwulf, *De Abbatibus*, pp. 726–36.

¹⁰² Æthelwulf, *De Abbatibus*, pp. 56–57.

ascribes to the *cor* what are arguably mental functions – searching and distinguishing – as well as calling it dull (*stupido*).¹⁰³ Phillips, writing about Old English terminology, points out that 'with verbs of thought and speech, *on heortan* [in the heart] and *on mod* [in the mind] can be used seemingly interchangeably'.¹⁰⁴ In the life of Guthlac, it is the *mod* that is repeatedly tortured and the *mod* that is eventually set free. Likewise, in *The Dream of the Rood* the poet's *mod* is *bliðe* (happy) at the end of the poem.

Æthelwulf's vision continues for some fifty lines until he finds his old teacher, Eadfrith, who takes him to an altar. The vision concludes with an image of the Eucharist. Eadfrith blesses the sacred cup with 'pious prayers' and Æthelwulf, drinking the wine, 'sent to the skies praise and thanks unto the Lord'.¹⁰⁵ Æthelwulf, upon waking, begins to write what he has seen. This vision is represented as the catalyst for his poem.

The similarities between these poems and other hagiographic materials suggest a shared devotional context wherein private prayer between the hours of nocturns and matins offered unique opportunities for transformative prayer, mediated by interaction with the real presence of Christ and his saints in the spiritually charged hours of night. Sarah Foot has noted that hagiographic texts 'incidentally reveal not only the approximate timing of the ordinary offices but also the fact that the less ascetically religious were accustomed to return to bed in the intervals between

¹⁰³ Æthelwulf, *De Abbatibus*, pp. 56–57.

¹⁰⁴ Michael Joseph Phillips, 'Heart, Mind, and Soul in Old English: A Semantic Study' (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1985), p. 124.

¹⁰⁵ Æthelwulf, *De Abbatibus*, pp. 60–61.

them'.¹⁰⁶ Robert E. Burlin has argued that *The Dream of the Rood* 'as a whole rests firmly upon a clear development of the theological symbolism of the Cross and upon a pattern of contemplation which suggests a possible link with the ascetic tradition of the early Northumbrian Church'.¹⁰⁷ This paper has suggested a further point of intersection between *The Dream of the Rood* and works produced between the seventh and ninth centuries, arguing that they have in common a shared understanding of the potential for nocturnal prayer and associated visions to affect thoughts and feelings. Burlin further suggests that *The Dream of the Rood* 'might be the product of a contemplative who is attempting to express a real experience in available literary terms, but it might equally be the work of a poet who is exploiting the materials of his craft to convey the sort of experience for which he has merely an imaginative understanding'.¹⁰⁸ The author of *The Dream of the Rood*, I suggest, is using poetry not only to express his experience but also to share his experience with others.

Augustine writes that:

in this mortal life we are like travellers away from our Lord: if we wish to return to the homeland where we can be happy we must use this world, not enjoy it, in order to discern 'the invisible attributes of God, which are understood through what has been made' or, in other words, to ascertain what is eternal and spiritual from corporeal and temporal things.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Sarah Foot, *Monastic Life in Anglo-Saxon England, c. 600-900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 199.

¹⁰⁷ Robert E. Burlin, 'The Ruthwell Cross, The Dream of the Rood and the Vita Contemplativa', *Studies in Philology*, 65.1 (1968), 23-43 (p. 42).

¹⁰⁸ Robert E. Burlin, 'The Ruthwell Cross, The Dream of the Rood and the Vita Contemplativa', p. 38.

¹⁰⁹ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. and trans. by R.P.H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 17.

The Dream of the Rood and *De Abbatibus* are examples of the process of reflecting on real and imagined devotional experience through literary traditions addressing nocturnal prayer. In so doing, the authors are able to represent the way that the act of prayer transforms perception to bring direct contact with the divine. Both authors present us with a multiplicity of words and signs through which the incarnate God might speak, whether through a cross, through architecture, through scripture or through the symbolic presence of his saints. The practice of composition becomes, in the final instance, the logical conclusion of such an experience, and the act of reading the poem becomes an encounter with the living Word of God that can itself transform the thoughts and feelings of the reader.



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