Riddling the Rood: The Paradox of Suffering and Glory in the Ruthwell Cross

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The Old English poem, the *Dream of the Rood*, is a unique piece of literature because it describes Christ's crucifixion from the perspective of the cross. Although scholars speculate over its author and date of completion, it is known to have been written before the eighth century because segments of it are inscribed in runes on the Ruthwell Cross, a sculpture constructed in the eighth century. The Ruthwell Cross is eighteen feet high with Latin letters and runes bordering panels of images on its four sides. The lines from the *Dream of the Rood* have been inscribed along the vine–scrolled north and south sides of the cross (fig. 1). The east and west sides contain a complex program of panels, mostly scenes from the New Testament (fig. 2). Many scholars have explored the symbolic interaction between these sculptural reliefs and the *Dream of the Rood*. Margaret Jennings, in particular, has looked at how paradoxes in the poem and in the reliefs "emanate" from the central paradox of Christianity: Christ's human suffering brings about his divine glory. This paper will explore that paradox by looking at how it functions in the poem and cross, specifically through the use of metaphor, Anglo-Saxon riddle form, and eremitical philosophy.

In her article, "Rood and Ruthwell: The Power of Paradox," Jennings contends that both the *Dream of the Rood* and the Ruthwell Cross express this central Christian paradox. Eighth-century Christians venerated the cross as a symbol for the paradoxical mystery of Christ’s resurrection because “the instrument of defeat”—the cross—“had become the instrument of victory.” The cross, then, took on additional sacred meanings and mysteries in worship ceremonies. Pseudo–Athanasius articulated a common sentiment about the cross when he apostrophized it as “O Paradox and Wonder: Birth of the Second Man from death by wood.” The Ruthwell Cross in its artistic and symbolic program exhibits this same paradox of Christ’s humanity and divinity.

through the paired panels on the north and south sides. On the north side, Christ’s divinity is expressed through images of Christ in Majesty, Hermits, Flight into Egypt, Evangelists, John the Baptist, and the Nativity. On the south side, however, Christ’s humanity is conveyed through sculptures of the Archer, Visitation, Mary Magdalene, Crucifixion, Blind Man, and Annunciation. Although not explicitly involved in Christian worship, the Dream of the Rood addresses the same tension between the human and divine Christ. The poem has been known for its many paradoxes, whether in narration, subject matter, language patterns, or “time levels,” but as Jennings argues, all these paradoxes speak to this central paradox of the divine Christ taking upon himself the corruptible human form. The fundamental paradox of Christ’s life and death thus sets up a series of interrelations: between the front and back panels and between the cross and the poem.

The Dream of the Rood incorporates many metaphors that give insight to the paradox of Christ’s sacrifice. In an article that analyzes how metaphor functions in the Rood, John Mark Jones argues that the poem is metaphorical because it “creates solidarity between two objects that formerly were quite distant from each other”—the cross and Christ—and in so doing “shocks the reader’s imagination.” Like Jennings, Jones believes that the central paradox expressed in these metaphors is that “human suffering” allows “divine glory.” The central metaphor, he argues, is that the cross becomes a type of Christ. This is supported by the fact that the cross suffers vocally in the poem. It cries after Christ has been raised up: “They pierced me with dark nails: the wounds are seen on me . . . I was all wounded with arrows.” They are mocked together, both left “all wet with blood.” In suffering, the cross has become one with Christ because it, too, carries the weight of sin and feels the same pains of crucifixion. Yet through this humiliation and defeat, the cross and Christ are exalted. The cross describes how, after Christ is taken away, warriors of the Lord came and “decked me in gold and silver.” And now, in its newly glorified state, the cross declares that “men far and wide upon earth honor me . . . and pray to me.” Like Christ, the cross has been resurrected and crowned in glory, even made worthy of worship. The startling metaphor of the cross as Christ reinforces the startling paradox of their mutual suffering and exaltation. This idea of the cross and Christ achieving “glory through suffering, exaltation through humiliation, [and] life through death” represents the critical paradox of the poem.

The poem’s metaphor of the cross as Christ situates it in the Anglo-Saxon riddle tradition, which adds yet another layer of paradoxical mystery to the poem’s narrative of Christ’s life and death. The poet of the Dream of the Rood, writing in the British Isles during the first part of the eighth century, probably would have been influenced by Anglo-Saxon riddling techniques. Anglo-Saxon riddles have been defined in a way that is strikingly similar to Jones’ definition of metaphor: they are “metaphors facilitating some fresher insight into texts, on condition that the reader is willing to undertake the effort in deciphering them.” They are intended to leave the reader with “subsequent elucidation” on the object or idea that they express. There are two types of Old English riddles, and the Dream of the Rood falls into the category where “the riddler (man) pretends to be the creature (not man), but the creature describes himself in typically human terms.” This formula can be detected in the poem when the poet, or riddler, is pretending to be the cross, yet the cross is describing itself in terms of Christ, who is both human and godly. It receives the same type of death and resurrection as Christ, and at the same time. This poem also employs other characteristics of Anglo-Saxon poetry because it “uses techniques of evasion and misdirection” to “celebrate Christianity.” This is best exemplified by the different and contradictory ways the cross presents itself in the poem: in the beginning as a “rare tree encircled with light,” then as a beam bleeding from arrow wounds, and then as across encrusted with jewels. In incorporating all of these opposite portrayals of itself, the cross becomes a paradox and riddle itself.

Indeed, the selection of Rood text inscribed on the Ruthwell Cross seems to have been chosen to fit a specific Anglo-Saxon riddle scheme. The lines written on the right border of the south side, for instance, seem to pose a riddle: “Almighty God stripped himself. When he willed to mount the gallows, courageous before all men, [I dared not] bow.” By describing itself as a gallows, the cross challenges the reader to guess its identity, just as Anglo-Saxon riddles did with other objects. The riddle becomes deeper and more important, however, as the cross begins to take on the identity of Christ himself. On the north side of the cross, on the left border, the runes read: “I [lifted up] a powerful king. The lord of heaven I dared not tilt; men insulted the pair of us together; I was drenched with blood [that poured from the man’s side].” Here the inscriber of these runes, or the riddler, has taken on the persona of the cross, which melds its identity with Christ’s by describing how men “insulted

the pair of us together” and how its wood, like Christ’s flesh, was “drenched with blood.” The cross has become one with Christ, and the riddle of the cross’s identity reinforces the paradox of Christ’s divine and human identity.

The same paradox of human suffering and divine glory can be found on the Ruthwell Cross in the many images of desert and eremitical life. Over fifty years ago Meyer Schapiro identified a strong desert and ascetic theme in a majority of the panels. The key support to this argument lies in the panel on the west side in the center, where Christ has been carved standing over two animals. Schapiro argues that this panel is a depiction of the Temptation of Christ in the desert, where “he was with the beasts, and the angels ministered to him” (fig. 3). This desert motif is further carried out in five other panels, such as the image of John the Baptist, “prototype of Christian asceticism,” gesturing towards the Agnus Dei (fig. 4). Furthermore, underneath the panel of the temptation of Christ is an image of St. Paul and St. Anthony eating the bread delivered to them by a raven (fig. 5). St. Paul, a hermit saint, was brought half a loaf of bread every day by a raven. When St. Anthony came to visit him, the raven brought him a full loaf to share with St. Anthony. Anglo-Saxons considered St. Paul and St. Anthony the “two fathers of the desert [and] the first monks and founders of the first monastery,” and by the ninth century Paul and Anthony were regarded as the first anchorites. On the east side of the Cross, Mary Magdalene is shown washing the feet of Christ with her hair (Fig. 6). Her story, too, relates to the overall hermitical theme of the Cross, for it was commonly believed in eighth-century England that Mary had become a recluse and hermit after Christ’s death—the Anglo-Saxon martyrology described her “as a repentant sinner who lived for thirty years in the desert.” Schapiro argues that the Visitation scene (fig. 7) and the Flight from Egypt scene (fig. 8) relate to the theme of asceticism too, but more indirectly. The Visitation depicts the meeting of Elizabeth with Mary, and therefore foreshadows the birth of John the Baptist, the first real ascetic; the Flight from Egypt, strategically placed under the panel of Paul and Anthony in the desert, conjures up the same desert atmosphere of those desert fathers.

The lifestyle of hermits and other ascetic Christians followed the paradoxical idea that human suffering allows one to achieve divinity from God, the same paradox of Christ’s Passion presented in the Dream of The Rood. During the eighth century, increasing numbers of monks were becoming hermits, modeling their lives after the desert fathers, St. Paul and

Because England’s climate did not allow for recluses to live in a desert environment, English hermits had to make do with inaccessible marshlands and forests, anywhere removed from civilization. Nevertheless, the desert continued to be a vital symbol for them, representing a place of temptation, hunger, and tormenting demons. They believed that living in such brutal conditions was necessary to achieve a heavenly life; by suffering pain in the desert, they would be rewarded in being granted the ability to perform miracles, receive the Eucharist from heaven, and communicate with God. The panels of St. Paul and St. Anthony, St. John the Baptist, and St. Mary Magdalene exemplify the eremitical way of life, and the paradox that through their suffering in the desert they achieved sainthood and heavenly distinction.

In the abstract context of riddles, the anthropomorphic cross in the *Dream of the Rood* can be seen as a type of hermit. It was cut down from a secluded woodland, where it too had grown and lived away from civilization. It suffered tremendous physical pain on the hill as nails were driven into its sides and arrows buried in its wood. And yet, the cross proclaims that it “dared not to bend,” suggesting a willingness to suffer, to endure this necessary pain. In the poem the cross receives heavenly exaltation and becomes like a saint, just as St. John the Baptist, St. Paul, St. Anthony, and St. Mary Magdalene became saints. As outlined above, the life of the cross suggests a paradox in its suffering leading to exaltation. This paradox, then, can be applied to the lives of hermits represented on the Ruthwell Cross, both because of the paradoxical philosophy behind heretical thinking, and because of the presence of the *Dream of The Rood* on the cross. This can also be seen as part of the Anglo-Saxon riddling tradition in that the cross has abstractly taken on the identity of a hermit, and it is left to the viewer of the cross to determine this mysterious identity.

Another paradox apparent in ascetic philosophy is the belief that in living in the desert will induce a return to a state of harmony with nature, an Eden. In depriving himself of basic necessities and not following his impulses, a hermit would come to “imagine his ascetic solitude as a recovery of the happy innocence of the first man in Eden.” The paradox here is that in living in a desert environment, dry and spare, one’s state of mind would mirror that of Adam in his lush and verdant Garden of Eden. In other words, the “wilderness” would become one’s “paradise.” This Garden of Eden paradise is represented on the Ruthwell Cross by the carved vines filled with birds and animals (Fig. 1). These vines stand in stark contrast to the cross’s predominantly desert environment.

scenes, reinforcing the paradoxical nature of a desert habitation becoming an Eden. The vine scroll, a motif from the Middle East referred to as the “Tree of Life,” is an obvious reference to Eden, not only because it is the “refuge of birds and beasts,” but also because God planted the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. Yet the “Tree of Life” is also identified with the cross. The worship of the cross evolved from the worship of sacred trees with qualities similar to those of the biblical “Tree of Life.” Earlier crosses were made of wood, and as stone become the norm in constructing crosses for Anglo-Saxons, vine scrolls were carved into the stone to symbolize living trees. The *Dream of the Rood* is inscribed around the vine scroll, emphasizing the motif’s association with both living trees and the cross.

More importantly, the vine–scroll also symbolizes the paradox in the *Dream of the Rood* because it represents “Christ in union with his church and the harmonious coexistence of transformed nature in the living God.” This harmonious coexistence refers to an exaltation and paradise, which the cross obtained through suffering. The sections of the poem that are inscribed around the vine–scroll describe the pain of both the cross and Christ. Therefore, there is an emphasis on paradox in the vine–scroll program, as these vines, representing the cross’s exaltation, surround the narrative of its human suffering. Furthermore, the abstract motif of vine–scrolls, in their complicated and mind–numbing designs, symbolize the web of never–ending mysteriousness, complexity, and riddle–like quality of attributes of the cross: stone being like wood, cross as metaphor for Christ, cross as metaphor for hermit.

In conclusion, the presence of the *Dream of the Rood* has brought new insights in interpreting the sculptural reliefs on the Ruthwell Cross. The paradox and riddle–like qualities of the poem emphasize Christ’s holy and mysterious nature. The central paradox of the poem, that through human suffering divine glory is obtained, is expressed in the panels of eremitical life, for through suffering and overcoming impulses ascetics can receive heavenly manifestations and exaltation. The exalted life of cross and hermit is displayed on the Ruthwell Cross’s shaft containing the vine–scroll. Thus within this paradox of suffering leading to divine glorification, text and image are joined together.

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Figure 3, Christ on the Beasts, Ruthwell Cross Detail, West Side

Figure 4, John the Baptist, Ruthwell Cross Detail, West Side
Figure 5, Sts Paul and Anthony in the Desert, Ruthwell Cross Detail, West Side

Figure 6, Christ and Mary Magdalene, Ruthwell Cross Detail, East Side
Figure 7, Visitation Scene, Ruthwell Cross Detail, East Side

Figure 8, Flight into Egypt, Ruthwell Cross Detail, West Side

Images courtesy of Albert S. Cook, *The Date of the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Crosses* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1912).