The Dream of the Rood

Listen, and I will tell you the very best of dreams which came to me in the middle of the night, while the tongues of men remained at rest. It seemed to me that I saw an extraordinary tree, brightest of all beams, towering up into the air and wound about with light. That beacon was all covered with gold and lovely gems: some stood at its base, fair on the surface of the earth, and five more gleamed above up on the crossbeam. Hosts of angels, eternally fair, kept watch over it. This was no gallows for a common criminal. Holy spirits watched it, men all over the earth and all this glorious creation.

Strange and rare was that triumphant tree, while I, stained by sins, was torn by my faults. I saw the tree of glory in honorable attire, shining, beautiful, arrayed with gold: the Ruler's tree was honorably covered with gems. Yet, through that gold, I could still see an earlier wretched ordeal, for it began to shed blood on the right side. I was terribly troubled with grief, afraid because of that fair vision. I saw that quick beacon change attire and color: sometimes it was drenched with moisture, covered with the flow of blood, sometimes arrayed with treasure.

But as I lay there for a long time, sadly I watched
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the Savior’s tree—until I heard it call out, and the best of all wood spoke these words:

“It was long ago—well I remember!—when I was cut down at the edge of the forest and taken from my trunk. Strong enemies took me there and made a spectacle of me, ordering me to lift up their criminals. Men bore me on their shoulders there until they set me up on a hill; enemies enough fastened me firmly there. Then I saw mankind’s Lord hastening and full of zeal: he wished to mount upon me. I did not dare to break or bend against the Lord’s command when I saw the trembling of the surface of the earth. I could have dashed down all the enemies, but I stood fast.

“The young Hero—who was God almighty—stripped off his attire; strong and resolute, he mounted the high gallows, brave in the sight of many when he wished to free mankind. I trembled when the Warrior embraced me; however, I did not dare to bow to the earth or fall down to the surface of the ground. I had to stand fast. I was raised up as the rood; I lifted up the powerful King, Lord of heaven, and I did not dare bow down.

“They drove through me with dark nails: the wounds are still visible, open signs of malice. Yet I dared not harm any of them. They mocked us both together. I was terribly drenched with blood, flowing from the Man’s side when he yielded up his spirit. Many cruel blows of fate I endured on that hill! I saw the God of hosts grievously stretched out. Darkness had covered the Ruler’s corpse with clouds; over that bright radiance there came forth shadow, dark beneath the clouds. All creation wept, lamenting the King’s fall. Christ was on the rood.

“But now quick men came from afar, hastening to the Prince. I watched all that. I was sorely troubled with grief, but I bowed down to the warriors’ hands, humbly, full of zeal. There they took almighty God, lifting him up from the heavy torment. The warriors
left me standing there, covered with blood: I was terribly torn with iron points. They laid the weary Warrior down and stood by the head of his body. There they watched the Lord of heaven, and he rested there for a while, exhausted by the great ordeal. They began to make a sepulcher for him—warriors still within view of his bane—carving it out of bright stone, and in that they set the Ruler of triumphs. When they were ready to depart, exhausted, from the glorious Lord, they raised a song of sorrow, wretched in the evening-time: he rested there, with little company.

“We 2 still stood there, weeping in that place for a long time. The voices of the warriors faded away. The body grew cold, fair dwelling of the soul. Then someone came to fell us all to the ground: that was a frightful fate! Someone buried us deep in a pit. But the Lord’s friends and servants 3 found me there and arrayed me with silver and gold.

“Now, my dear friend, you must understand that I have endured the work of evildoers and suffered sore grief. Now the time has come when I am honored far and wide by men all over the earth and all this glorious creation prays to this beacon. On me God’s Son suffered for a while: therefore I now rise up glorious under heaven, and I can save every one of those who hold me in awe. Once I became the hardest of torments, most hateful to the people, before I opened up the right way of life for men of all tongues. Behold: the Father of glory, Guardian of heaven, then honored me above all wood of the forest, just as the almighty God honored his mother, Mary, over all womankind, for all men’s sake.

“Now, my dear friend, I bid you to tell this vision

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1Probably refers to the Cross, as unwilling instrument of Christ’s death.
2The three crosses (though the other two are not mentioned before, they are clearly included in the following lines).
3A reference to St. Helena and the Invention (finding) of the True Cross.
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to men, revealing in words that this is the tree of glory on which almighty God suffered for mankind’s many sins and Adam’s deeds of old. He tasted death there: nonetheless, after that the Lord arose in his great might to be of help to men. He ascended into heaven then, but he shall return to earth again on Doomsday, the Lord himself to seek out mankind. Almighty God shall come with his angels, and he who is Judge over all shall give judgment to each of them according to what he has earned here in this transitory life. None can then be unafraid of the words the Ruler speaks, for he shall ask the many where that man is who for the Lord’s name would taste bitter death, as he did before on the beam that is the Cross. And they shall be afraid then, and think of little which they can say to Christ. Yet neither need any man be afraid there who bears in his heart the best of all beacons, for through the rood shall every soul seek the kingdom from his earthly path, if he wants to remain with the Ruler.”

Then, in joyful mood and full of zeal, I made my prayer to that beam, alone as I was with little company. Urged by my heart to go quickly forth on the way, I endured a time of great longing. Now it is my life’s joy to seek alone for that triumphant beam, to honor it more often than other men do: my desire for it is much in my mind and I look for my protection from the rood. I have few powerful friends in this world; they have all departed, leaving worldly joys behind. They sought the King of glory and now they live in heaven, remaining in glory with the Father of all. Every day I expect the rood of the Lord, which I saw before here on this earth, to fetch me away from this transitory life and bring me where true bliss is, and joy in heaven, where the Lord’s people sit at the feast and bliss is everlasting.

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4 i.e., “the right way of life,” the way to heaven, which the Cross has just explained that it “opened.”
and set me there where for ever after I may remain in glory and fully share in the joys of the saints.

May the Lord befriend me, he who once on earth suffered on the gallows-tree for the sins of man. He then freed us, and gave us life in a heavenly home. Joy was restored, and abundant bliss, for those who had endured the fires of hell. The Son was triumphant, mighty in battle, when he returned with those many-a great host of spirits-into God’s kingdom, almighty Ruler: to the joy of angels and of all the saints who had remained before in glory in heaven, the Lord, the almighty God, came into his own realm.