

# CHRIST AS SOLDIER AND SERVANT IN *THE DREAM OF THE ROOD*

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*The Dream of the Rood* impresses the modern reader, and, doubtless, also impressed its original audience, as a memorable and powerful poem. One of its most striking features is the portrayal of Christ, who emerges as an active participant rather than a passive sufferer in his Crucifixion, a champion rather than a victim. Such a presentation has been shown to be the product of classical, Christian, and Germanic traditions. Thus, Christ can be seen as the athlete in his ἀγών<sup>1</sup>, the champion who fights single-handed against the Devil,<sup>2</sup> and the chieftain supported by his loyal retainer, the Cross.<sup>3</sup>

In relation to this portrayal of Christ, I would like to examine the poem's Crucifixion scene more closely, with a view to advancing an alternative explanation of one of its details. In the central section of the poem, the Cross, after relating how it was set up for the execution of criminals, describes the approach of, not a criminal, but the Lord of Mankind ("Freaan mancynnes," line 33b),<sup>4</sup> hastening eagerly (line 34a) to ascend the Cross (lines 34b and 40b). He strips himself for his contest (line 39a), of his own accord embraces the instrument of his torment (line 42a), and publicly displays his strength and vigour. There follows a passage focussing primarily on the Cross's own reactions, its steadfastness in spite of suffering and fear (lines 42-49); and the Crucifixion section closes with a dramatic evocation of the scene at the moment of Christ's death (up to line 56). Between the description of the

Cross's own ordeal and that of the death scene come the lines "Feala ic on þam beorge gebiden hæbbe / wraðra wyrda. Geseah ic weruda God / þearle þenian" (lines 50-52a). The resemblance between these lines, where the Cross states that in witnessing Christ's Passion it has endured savage fates ("gebiden hæbbe / wraðra wyrda"), and a later sentence in lines 78-80a which expresses a similar observation, including the words "gebiden hæbbe, / sarra sorga" ("... have endured, bitter sorrows"), suggests that the earlier passage, like the later, is a kind of aside, a synoptic comment on the entire vigil on Calvary. Lines 51b-52a are usually translated "I saw the God of Hosts grievously stretched out," reading þenian (in line 52) with short e, as a form of þennan "to stretch" (related to the modern "thin"). But there are some persuasive reasons for reading instead þēnian "to serve," that is, a form of the verb derived from the noun þegn in its basic meaning of "servant." This was the interpretation of J.M. Kemble in his 1856 edition of the Vercelli Book,<sup>5</sup> but it has not been adopted by the major editors of the poem: Albert Cook,<sup>6</sup> Hans Bütow,<sup>7</sup> Bruce Dickins and Alan Ross,<sup>8</sup> and Michael Swanton.

On a linguistic basis, the translation "to stretch" is justifiable from the immediate context. The movement of a Class I weak verb in a double consonant like þennan into weak Class II with infinitive in -ian is a common development in West Saxon.<sup>9</sup> And, although þenian "stretch" is unattested elsewhere in precisely this form, an infinitive in -ian or ig(i)an may be assumed from the first person singular þenige ("ic . . . mine handa to þe hebbe and ðenige" -- "I raise and stretch out my hands to thee," Ps. 87:9)<sup>10</sup> and the present participle þenigende ("[he] mid hrædestan ryne þenigende arn" -- "he ran, straining with the swiftest speed," Ælfric's *Life of St. Mary of Egypt*).<sup>11</sup> Again, the use of the infinitive in a passive sense ("to be stretched out") is regular enough. Compare "Alfred kyning hateð gretan Wærferð biscep" ("King Alfred commands Bishop Wærferth to be greeted") at the beginning of the Preface to the *Pastoral Care*;<sup>12</sup> also "þa het se hæpena cyning his heafod ofaslean" ("Then the heathen king commanded his head to be struck off") in Ælfric's *Life of St. Oswald*.<sup>13</sup> In *The Dream of the Rood* itself, the phrase "on lyft lædan" ("to be extended in the air") in line 5 provides another example of this usage.

But the larger context of "þearle þenian" does not, I think, support this translation. The use of the infinitive in cases like this is standard enough, in spite of the impression given by the notes in Swanton's edition that the *Dream* is the only Old English poem where it occurs.<sup>14</sup> My objection is not that the use of the infinitive in a passive sense is unidiomatic, but that it

denotes an action in process rather than a completed state. If the poet wished to indicate the latter, the past participle was available to him, and he frequently uses it. The distinction is noticeable if one compares the *Dream* poet's "Geseah ic wuldres treow, / wædum geweorðode, wynnum scinan, / gegyred mid golde" ("I saw the tree of glory honoured in its garments, shining beautifully, adorned with gold," lines 14b-16a) with the *Beowulf* poet's description of Scyld's funeral ship: "ne hyrde ic cymlicor ceol gegyrwan" ("I never heard of a boat being adorned in a more comely way," line 38).<sup>15</sup> In these quotations the participle *gegyred* and the infinitive *gegyrwan* are both passive, but the former indicates the state of adornment, the latter the process of being adorned. Thus, "on lyft lædan," at the beginning of the *Dream*, suggests an actual movement as the vision takes shape and the tree-cross spreads over the sky. This sense of movement is dramatically appropriate at the opening of the vision; it is not appropriate in line 52, where "being stretched out" would have to refer to the action of placing Christ on the Cross. That moment has been described earlier (line 40), and in a way with which the present image is inconsistent: Christ mounted (*gestah*) on the Cross; he was not laid upon it.

Translating "pearle þenian" as "strenuously serve" or "perform a strenuous task" avoids this inconsistency, and renders the description of Christ in lines 51b-52a more consonant with the earlier portrayal. The living Christ has been associated with active verbs: *wolde* (lines 34b and 41b), *ongyrede* (line 39a), *gestah* (line 40b). If *þenian* represents a process, not a state, and if the lines in which the word occurs form a generalizing comment on the Passion as a whole, this infinitive is seen to be another of those verbs attributing vigorous, deliberate action to Christ.<sup>16</sup> The description of Christ's death comes immediately afterwards, beginning -- admittedly abruptly -- in the second half of line 52. It has been argued that alliteration links "pearle þenian" in the first half of this line with *þystro* ("darkness") in the second, and hence with the death scene.<sup>17</sup> But transitions of this kind are quite usual; in fact, there is an equally abrupt one in line 33, where Christ enters in midline. Lines 51b-52a should, then, be associated with the active, living Christ, and not with the dead Christ of the passage which follows. After death, Christ becomes the object of other men's actions, who "take" him (line 60b), "raise" him (line 61a), "lay [him] down" (line 63a), and "set" him in a tomb (line 67a). Previously, the role of passive victim has been largely subsumed by the Cross, an aspect of the poem which has been

frequently pointed out.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the Cross's account of its history up to the Crucifixion resembles its later account of the Deposition. Men "take" the tree (line 30b), bid it "raise" their criminals (line 31b), and "set" it on a hill (line 32b). The echo words establish a contrast between the limp body and the helpless tree on the one hand, and the vigorous living hero on the other.<sup>19</sup>

Echo and parallelism, in fact, constitute a major structural feature in the poem, and "pearle þenian" forms a significant element in this parallelism. By summarizing the Cross's experience of watching its master's struggle, lines 50-52a look forward to lines 78-80a, but also backward to lines 33b-34a: "Geseah ic þa Frean mancynnes / efstan elne mycle" ("Then I saw the Lord of mankind hastening with great zeal"). If þenian is taken as "serve," the parallel between the two sentences becomes very close: at the beginning and at the end of Christ's ἄγων, the Cross declares that it witnessed his action.

There are, then, strong linguistic and structural grounds for translating þenian as "serve." References to the "stretching" of Christ on the Cross in works which the poet would have known do not necessarily constitute evidence in favour of translating þenian accordingly. Thus, Cook, in the notes to his edition, quoted "Christ wæs on rode aþened," from the Benedictine Office, in support of his reading "to be stretched out" rather than "to serve."<sup>20</sup> And Howard Patch, in his article on "Liturgical Influence in *The Dream of the Rood*," saw in "Geseah ic weruda God / þearle þenian" a reminiscence of Venantius Fortunatus' *Pange Lingua*, and, specifically, of the penultimate stanza, where the tree-cross is admonished to soften its native rigidity and to stretch out the limbs of Christ gently: "Ut superni membra regis mite tendas stipite" (line 27).<sup>21</sup> But the tone of the *Dream* is really quite different from that of the *Pange Lingua*. Fortunatus urges his tree to be tender (*mite*), to bend its boughs ("Flecte ramos," line 25), whereas the Cross in the *Dream* is required to be staunch and unbending,<sup>22</sup> an idea which is repeated in lines 42b and 45b.

*The Dream of the Rood's* depiction of the Passion is certainly distinctive, and its tenor is very different from the gospel accounts, although parallels have been pointed out in patristic works.<sup>23</sup> The poem should not be regarded as unbiblical, however. In its conception of Christ as a champion who fights a duel for men, it goes back ultimately to Hebrews 2:14: "ut per mortem destrueret eum qui habebat mortis imperium, id est, diabolum." Further, interpreting þenian as a reference to service makes clearer the poem's connection with the gospel accounts of the Passion and the events immediately preceding

it. Christ speaks of completing the task which he was given to do ("opus consummavi quod dedisti mihi ut faciam," John 17:4); refers to himself as a servant ("Ego autem in medio vestrum sum sicut qui ministrat," Luke 22:27); calls upon him who would be greatest among the disciples to be a servant ("Qui maior est vestrum, erit minister vester," Matthew 23:11; similarly, Luke 22:26); and, although he is Lord, performs the task of a servant for the disciples (" . . . lavi pedes vestros Dominus et Magister," John 13:14). Also, the word *þe(g)-nian* in Old English frequently has the connotation of a religious ceremony,<sup>24</sup> and such a meaning is appropriate in the poem. As Michael Swanton observes, the use of the word in the *Dream* implies "Christ's doctrinal role as minister in his own sacrifice."<sup>25</sup>

Swanton, in fact, proposes "serve" as a subsidiary meaning for *þenian*, which he cites as one of various instances of intentional ambiguity in the poem. Perhaps the most persuasive of his examples are *fāh* (line 13b)-- "stained" by sins, but also "proscribed" (from *fāh* "hostile"), and *heānne* (line 40b) -- "high" gallows, but also "shameful" (from *heān* "wretched").<sup>26</sup> *Ongyrede*, in line 39a, has also been pointed to as an example of double meaning -- "stripped," but in addition "prepared" (the negative and intensive prefixes having fallen together as the same sound).<sup>27</sup> In these instances the *Dream*-poet surely intended a double meaning, although "word-play" might be a better term than "ambiguity."<sup>28</sup> But in each of these examples the two words are exact homonyms and their syntactic usage is identical. Neither of these things is true for *þēnian* and *þēnian*.

In the audience's or reader's response to *The Dream of the Rood*, the interpretation of this word is a vital detail. The conventional reading seems to derive from the observed resemblance to "on rode aþened" and similar expressions. But the fact that Christ was, historically and traditionally, "stretched" on the Cross is not in itself sufficient basis for assuming that statement here; the more unusual assertion, "I saw the God of Hosts perform a strenuous task," is both more distinctive and more appropriate. Such a reading brings out the parallels and contrasts in the Crucifixion scene, demonstrates the essential coherence of this section, and, hence, gives greater clarity to the effect and purpose of the poem as a whole.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Ute Schwab, "Das Traumgesicht vom Kreuzesbaum: Ein ikonologischer Interpretationsansatz zu dem ags. *Dream of the Rood*," in *Philologische Studien: Gedenkschrift für Richard Kienast*, ed. Ute Schwab and Elfriede Stutz (Heidelberg 1978) 150-51.

<sup>2</sup> See especially Rosemary Woolf, "Doctrinal Influences on *The Dream of the Rood*," *MAe* 27 (1958) 137-53.

<sup>3</sup> The aspect of the poem emphasized by much of the earlier criticism. For a recent contribution, see Michael D. Cherniss, "The Cross as Christ's Weapon: The Influence of Heroic Literary Tradition on *The Dream of the Rood*," *ASE* 2 (1973) 241-52.

<sup>4</sup> Citations are taken from *The Dream of the Rood*, ed. Michael Swanton (Manchester 1970). In quoting from this and other OE texts, I omit macrons, for the sake of consistency with editions which do not indicate vowel length, and also to avoid begging the question of the interpretation of *þenian* (line 52).

<sup>5</sup> *The Poetry of the Codex Vercellensis, with an English Translation, Parts I and II* (London 1843 and 1856; repr. as one vol., New York 1971). See Part II, pp. 83-93 for text and parallel translation of the *Dream*; no textual apparatus is supplied. Lines 51b-52a are translated "I saw the Lord of hosts hardly serve." In his Preface, Kemble states that he is including "a literal translation" to assist the reader (Part I, pp. vi-vii). Kemble was followed by Henry Sweet, who included the poem in his *Anglo-Saxon Reader* (1st ed., London 1876) and by F. Kluge in his *Angelsächsisches Lesebuch* (1st ed., Halle 1888).

<sup>6</sup> *The Dream of the Rood* (Oxford 1905).

<sup>7</sup> *Das altenglische Traumgesicht vom Kreuz (Anglistische Forschung 78)*, Heidelberg 1935).

<sup>8</sup> *The Dream of the Rood* (4th ed., London 1954).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. A. Campbell, *Old English Grammar* (Oxford 1959), Section 752, p. 325. It is probable that *þenian* appeared in another form in earlier copies of the poem.

<sup>10</sup> *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records V*, ed. G.P. Krapp (New York 1952) 55.

<sup>11</sup> *Alfric's Lives of Saints II*, ed. W.W. Skeat, EETS, O.S. 94 and 114 (London 1890 and 1900 resp., rpt. one vol. 1966) 12, line 186.

- <sup>12</sup> King Alfred's West-Saxon Version of Gregory's Pastoral Care, pt. 1 ed. H. Sweet, EETS, O.S. 45 (London 1871) 3, line 1.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ælfric: Lives of Three English Saints*, ed. G.I. Needham (London 1966) 36, lines 134-35.
- <sup>14</sup> "An infinitive following a finite verb . . . occasionally has a passive sense in OE prose . . . but not elsewhere in verse" (p. 100: n. to "on lyft lædan," line 5). A similar note in Cook's edition makes it clear that this restriction applies to the verb *lædan* and not to OE verbs in general (p. 12: n. to line 5).
- <sup>15</sup> *Beowulf*, ed. Fr. Klaeber (Boston 1950).
- <sup>16</sup> Aside from the appropriateness of the active reading, a passive translation of *þenian* is impossible, since this verb takes the dative of the person served, the accusative only of the service performed. As it stands, then, "Geseah ic weruda God / þearle þenian" cannot bear the translation "I saw the God of Hosts grievously served," i.e., harshly treated.
- <sup>17</sup> See O.D. Macrae-Gibson, "Christ the Victor-Vanquished in *The Dream of the Rood*," *NM* 70 (1969) 66.
- <sup>18</sup> See in particular J.A. Burrow, "An Approach to *The Dream of the Rood*," *Neophil.* 43 (1959) 123-33.
- <sup>19</sup> Cf. Constance Heatt's article on verbal echoes pointing parallels or contrasts between Rood, Christ, Dreamer, and Mankind and the Rest of Creation, "Dream Frame and Verbal Echo in *The Dream of the Rood*," *NM* 72 (1971) 251-63.
- <sup>20</sup> p. 12: note to line 52. For the quotation, see *The Benedictine Office*, ed. J.M. Ure (Edinburgh 1957) 97.
- <sup>21</sup> *PMLA* 34 (1919) 252.
- <sup>22</sup> Ute Schwab, who takes issue with Patch, feels that the *Dream* lines convey exactly the opposite impression from those in the *Pange Lingua*. See, *art.cit.* (at n. 1) 165 n. 8.
- <sup>23</sup> See, for example, R. Woolf's citation of a passage from Ambrose which describes Christ stripping himself in order to ascend the Cross like a victorious warrior: *Expositionis in Lucam Libri X*, PL 15.1923, quoted in *MÆ* 27, 146.
- <sup>24</sup> All extant occurrences of the form *þenian* occur in homiletic or devotional contexts. See Richard Venezky and Antonette diPaolo Healey, *A Microfiche Concordance to Old English* (Toronto 1981) 230-35.
- <sup>25</sup> "Ambiguity and Anticipation in *The Dream of the Rood*," *NM* 70 (1969) 424.

<sup>26</sup> Swanton (at n. 25) 408, 423.

<sup>27</sup> See Carol J. Wolf, "Christ as Hero in *The Dream of the Rood*," *NM* 71 (1970) 205. Swanton does not include this word in his examples of purposeful ambiguity. In his edition, he simply takes it as "stripped" (Glossary, p. 143). However, Bernard Huppé understands the word as "prepared" (himself), *The Web of Words: Structural Analyses of the OE Poems Vainglory, The Wonders of Creation, The Dream of the Rood, and Judith* (Albany 1970) 86.

<sup>28</sup> "Word-play" is the term used by Huppé in his comments on the double-meaning of *heanne*, *op. cit.* (at n.27) 86.