

ON THE VICTORY OF THE CROSS¹*Acrostic: BY THE HUMBLE ROMANOS**Proemium 1. Idiomel.*

The sword of flame no longer guards the gate of Eden,²
 For a strange bond came upon it: the wood of the Cross.
 The sting of Death and the victory of Hades were nailed to it.
 But you appeared, my Saviour, crying to those in Hades:
 'Be brought back

Again to Paradise'.*Proemium 2.*

Nailed to the form of the Cross
 As truly a ransom for many³
 You redeemed us, Christ our God,
 For by your precious blood in love for mankind
 You snatched our souls from death.
 You brought us back with you

Again to Paradise.*Proemium 3.*

All things in heaven and earth rightly rejoice with Adam,
 Because he has been called

Again to Paradise.

1

Three crosses Pilate fixed on Golgotha,
 Two for the thieves and one for the Giver of life,
 Whom Hades saw and said to those below,
 'My ministers and powers,

¹The title we have given is that suggested by Professor Trypanis in the Oxford edition. The only MS to give it one calls it simply 'Kontakion for the Cross'. It is not clear for what day St Romanos composed it originally, but it was probably for Good Friday. This is the day given in the western MSS. In the east it has long been associated with the feast of the Veneration of the Cross during the fourth week of Lent, which starts on the third Sunday and continues during the following week. The 1st Proemium and 1st stanza are still used as Kontakion and Ikos for the 3rd Sunday of Lent. It is sung in the 7th, or Grave, Tone. As in Greek tragedy the dramatic events take place 'off stage', and the Kontakion takes the form of a dramatic dialogue between Hades and Satan below the earth as they comment on the drama taking place on earth. This form of poetic 'disputation' is directly inspired by Syrian writers like St Ephrem, but goes back much further into ancient Sumerian literature. There is an easily accessible example of its use by St Ephrem in *The Harp of the Spirit* by Sebastian Brock, in which he translates number 52 of St Ephrem's Nisibene Hymns, which is a dialogue between Death and Satan on the Descent into Hades. This Kontakion is one of the few which are not based on a biblical narrative.

²Genesis 3,24.

³Matt. 20,28.

That by a tree Adam is to be brought up
From wretchedness

Again to Paradise.'

4

'Who gave you such an idea, Hades?
Whence now this cowardly fear, where once there was no fear,⁹
Of a worthless tree, dry and barren
Made for the removal
Of malefactors and those who welcome bloodshed?
For Pilate discovered it, persuaded by my counsels.
And do you fear it, and reckon it powerful?
The universal executioner¹⁰: will it in your view prove a saviour?
Who has misled you? Who has persuaded you
That he who fell by a tree is being raised by a tree,
And, that he may dwell there, is being called

Again to Paradise.'

5

'You have suddenly lost your senses, you of old the cunning¹¹ serpent.
All your wisdom has been swallowed up¹² through the Cross
And you have been caught in your own snare.
Lift up your eyes and see
That you have fallen into the pit which you created.
Behold that tree, which you call dry and barren,
Bears fruit, having tasted which a thief
Has become heir to the good things of Eden.¹³
For it has outdone the rod
Which led the people out of Egypt,¹⁴
For it is bringing Adam back

Again to Paradise.'

6

'Wretched Hades, cease this cowardly talk,
For these words of yours reveal your thoughts.
Were you afraid of a cross and of the crucified?

⁹Psalm 13,5.

¹⁰The neuter, as here, is used for the hemlock employed in Athens as the means of capital punishment.

¹¹Gen 3,1.

¹²Psalm 10,27.

¹³Luke 23,43.

¹⁴Exodus 14,16. This is one of the best known Old Testament types of the Cross, well exemplified by the opening of the Canon for the Feast of the Cross on 14th September,

A Cross Moses traced out as he cut the Red Sea in a straight line with his rod for Israel as they marched on foot; and then united it again, overwhelming Pharaoh with his chariots, as with another line he marked out the invincible weapon.

Therefore let us sing to Christ our God, for he has been glorified.

Not one of your words has shaken me,
 For these deeds are part of my plan,
 For I would again both open a grave and entomb Christ.
 So you may enjoy your cowardice double,
 From his tomb as well as from his cross.
 But when I see you, I shall mock you.
 For when Christ is buried I shall come to you and say,
 "Who now is bringing Adam back
Again to Paradise?""

7

Suddenly Hades began to call out to the devil –
 The eyeless to the sightless, the blind to the blind – 'Look,
 You are walking in darkness, feel around, lest you fall.
 Consider what I tell you, hard of heart,
 Because what you are doing has quenched the sun.¹⁵
 For the tree which you boast of has shaken the universe,
 Has convulsed the earth, hidden the sky,
 Rent the rocks together with the Veil,
 And raised up those in the graves.¹⁶
 And the dead are shouting, "Hades, understand.
 For Adam is running back
Again to Paradise.""

8

'Has the Nazarene's tree been strong enough to scare you?'
 Said the devil to Hades the destroyer,
 'Have you been slain by a cross, you who slay all?
 Truly if a tree has scared you,
 The crucifixion of Haman should have frightened you,¹⁷
 And that stake with which Jael did away with Sisera,¹⁸
 And the five crosses to which Jesus son of Navi
 Once fixed the tyrants.¹⁹
 More than all let the plant in Eden
 Scare you, because it led out
 Adam, yet does not lead him back
Again to Paradise.'

9

'Now is the moment for you to open your ears, Beliar.
 Now the hour will show you the power of the cross

¹⁵Matthew 27,45.

¹⁶Matthew 27,51-53.

¹⁷Esther 7,10.

¹⁸Judges 4,21-22. Jael's stake had been used as a type of the Cross by Origen, as had the following passage from Joshua.

¹⁹Jos. 10,26-27.

And the great authority of the crucified.
 For you the cross is folly,²⁰
 But for all creation it is seen as a throne,²¹
 Nailed on which Jesus, as though seated,
 Hears the thief crying to him,
 "Lord, remember me in your kingdom",
 And answers as from a tribunal,
 "Today, poor beggar, you will reign with me.
 For with me you will go in
Again to Paradise."²²

10

When he heard this, the all-resourceful dragon,
 He began to wilt, and what he had heard he saw,
 A thief witnessing to Christ crucified.
 And so, astounded at this
 He strikes his breast and argues,
 'He speaks to a thief, yet does not answer his accusers?
 To Pilate he never deigned so much as a word,
 Now he addresses a murderer, saying, "Come, live in pleasure"²³
 What is this? Who has seen
 On the cross words or deeds from the thief
 By means of which he is taking
This man to Paradise?²⁴

11

A second time the demon raised the same cry
 Calling out, 'Hades, receive me. My recourse is to you,
 For I submit to your views, I who did not believe them.
 I saw the tree at which you shuddered
 Crimsoned with blood and water.²⁵
 And I shuddered, not, I tell you, at the blood, but at the water.
 For the former shows the slaughter of Jesus,
 But the latter, his life, because life has gushed
 From his side. For it was not the first
 But the second Adam who made Eve,
 The mother of all living,²⁶ bud

²⁰1 Cor. 1,18.

²¹Cf. the famous – or infamous – addition to Psalm 96,1, 'The Lord has reigned *from the tree*', which was already a point of debate with the Jews in the time of St Justin. It occurs in the great Latin hymn *Vexilla Regis*, by Venantius Fortunatus, a younger contemporary of St Romanos.

²²Luke 23,42-43.

²³That is 'Paradise'. See the note to Kontakion 1,1 in this selection.

²⁴The last lines of this stanza in Greek present a number of problems, though the general sense is clear, and the sudden change of refrain may indicate some corruption in the text.

²⁵John 19,34.

²⁶Gen. 3,20.

Again to Paradise.'²⁷

12

With words like these the wholly wicked one
 Grudgingly admitted that he had fallen along with Hades.
 And so, of course, together they bewail their fall,
 'What', he says, 'is this to which we have brought ourselves?
 How have we fallen by this tree?
 For our destruction its stock was rooted in the earth.
 We grafted to it bitter shoots.
 The sweetness in it we did not transform'.
 'Alas, my comrade'. 'Alas, my companion'.
 'As we have fallen together. So let us grieve,
 For Adam is going back

Again to Paradise.'

13

O how did we not remember the types of this tree!
 For of old they were shown forth in many and various ways²⁸
 In the saved and in the lost.²⁹
 By a tree Noë was saved,³⁰
 But the whole world, unbelieving, was destroyed.
 Moses was glorified through one when he took a staff as a sceptre,
 But Egypt, with the plagues that came from it,
 Was drowned as though fallen into deep wells.³¹
 What it has now done, the Cross showed forth
 Of old in image. How then can we not weep?
 For Adam is going

Again to Paradise.'

14

'Wait, wretched Hades', said the demon with a groan,
 'Quiet, be patient, lay hand on mouth,
 For I hear a voice revealing joy.
 A sound has reached me bringing good tidings,
 A rustle of words like the leaves of the Cross.³²

²⁷All the MSS have *eblastêse*, 'bud', 'sprout' or 'shoot'. This is a striking metaphor, but goes somewhat awkwardly with the refrain. Professor Trypanis in the Oxford edition proposes, and prints in his text, *ebastase*, that is 'bears, 'carries'. He compares John 20,15, not wholly relevantly. There is no compelling reason to abandon the unanimous testimony of the manuscripts.

²⁸Hebrews 1,1.

²⁹1 Cor. 1,18.

³⁰Gen, 6,9-8,22. I retain the word 'tree', but the Greek word, of course, means both 'wood' and 'tree'.

³¹Exodus 7-14.

³²The same idea is found in the anonymous kontakion on The Lament of Adam that is still used on the Sunday before Lent.

For Christ at the point of death cried out, "Father, forgive them".

But he grieved me when he then said
That "the lawless know not what they do".³³

But we know that it is the Lord
Of glory³⁴ who is suffering and that he wishes
To bring Adam back

Again to Paradise.'

15

'Did not the Master by the tree he showed to Moses,

Which once sweetened the water at Mara,³⁵

Teach what it was and what its root?

Then he did not say, for it was not his will.

But now he has made it clear to all.

For see, all things have been made pleasant, but we have been embittered.³⁶

A cross which was thrust into the earth

Has sprouted from our root, which became sweet.

That which formerly bred thorns

Now like a vine of Sorec³⁷ has put out branches

Which are transplanted

Again to Paradise.'

16

'Now therefore, Hades, groan and I will harmonise with your wails.

Let us lament as we see the tree which we planted

Transformed into a holy trunk,

Beneath which have sheltered

And will nest in its branches

Thieves, murderers, and publicans and harlots³⁸, that they may reap

Sweet fruit from the supposedly arid.

Share in the pain, O Paradise, of your beggared master

And with the sound of your leaves implore the Creator

Not to shut you.

O Merciful, have mercy on the one who has fallen.

³³Luke 23,34.

³⁴1 Cor. 2,8.

³⁵Exodus 15,23-25. This type of the Cross again goes back to Origen and is taken over by St Cyril of Alexandria.

³⁶Isaias 14,9. 'Hades was embittered'. This sentence is taken up in the Easter homily attributed to St John Chrysostom that is read at the end of Matins on Easter night. The congregation frequently repeats the word 'embittered' each time it occurs.

Isaias proclaimed in prophecy, *Death*, he said, *was embittered when it met you there below*.

Embittered, for it was destroyed. Embittered, for it was mocked. Embittered, for it was slain. Embittered, for it was wiped out. Embittered, for it was bound fast. It received a body, and came face to face with God. It received earth, and met heaven. It received what it saw, and fell through what it did not see.

³⁷Isaias 5,1-7. In Isaias the vine, which should have produced sweet grapes, produced bitter. Now the opposite is true.

³⁸Ezekiel 17,22-24; Psalm 79,9-12.

For as to a plant of life they cling to the Cross.
 Pressed against it and swimming,
 Through it they escape and are brought for anchorage
 As to a fair haven

Again to Paradise.'

17

'Swear then, tyrant, finally to crucify no one.'
 'And you, Tartarus, make a firm decision to slay no one.'
 'We³⁹ have had our experience, let us draw in our hand.
 May what we have undergone become for us
 Knowledge for the future.
 Let neither of us henceforth tyrannise against the race of Adam,
 For it has been sealed⁴⁰ by the Cross, like a treasure
 Containing an unravished pearl⁴¹ in a corruptible vessel,⁴²
 Which a thief, well-suited to his trade,
 Ravished on the cross. For stealing he was nailed up,
 And for thieving he was called

Again to Paradise.'

18

Most high and glorious, God of fathers and of youths,
 Your willing outrage has become our honour.
 For in your Cross we all boast.
 To it let us nail our hearts,
 That on it we may hang our instruments
 And sing to you, the Lord of all, from the songs of Sion.⁴³
 The ship from Tharsis once upon a time
 Brought gold to Solomon, as it is written.⁴⁴
 To us your Tree gives back
 Every day and moment wealth beyond price,
 For it brings us all

Again to Paradise.

³⁹The Oxford editors assume that Hades takes up the dialogue, while the French editor makes the Devil's answer continue from line two to the end of the stanza. The American translator has failed see that the speaker in line two is no the same as that in line one. I follow the Oxford punctuation.

⁴⁰Ezekiel 9,4; Apocalypse 7,2-4. 9,4.

⁴¹Matt. 13,45-47.

⁴²Deut. 32,34; 2 Cor. 4,7.

⁴³Psalm 136,2-3.

⁴⁴1 Kings 10,22.