

The Tropes of Christianization: Ethnic Ideation in Old English Poetry



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On the basis of this thesis, and of written and oral examinations taken by the candidate on
4/16/04 and on 4/30/04, we, the undersigned, recommend that the candidate be
awarded Honors in History.

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Cover illustration: untitled manuscript illumination [Christ preaching the Sermon on the Mount]; Anglo-Saxon, possibly Canterbury, about 1000 A.D.

For Bruce Mitchell,
who taught me the literal
and figurative meanings
of Old English poetry

Introduction

In 410 A.D., the Emperor Honorius sent word to the Britons that they would have to fend for themselves; the Roman Empire was crumbling in the face of repeated invasions by Germanic tribes, and soldiers had to be conserved to protect the Mediterranean heartland. Facing vicious raids from the Picts (residing in what is now Scotland), Britain needed a replacement for the departed legions. The British monk Gildas writes that British leaders hired mercenaries from northern Germanic tribes; this is most likely a true account, for archeology confirms that large numbers of Germanic settlers moved into eastern Britain during the 5th century. Gildas, writing in the 6th century, curses those days with bitter regret: by his time, the mercenaries had turned on their employers—possibly noting the military weakness that had been the occasion for their employment. The latter part of the century, as is also known from archeology, saw larger numbers of Germanic settlers arriving in Britain; these peoples soon conquered all but the distant extremities of the island and set up many small kingdoms from the spoils of war.

These were the *peoples* who would become the English *people*. It is not disputed that these Germanic tribes arrived in Britain without any overarching sense of unity, politically or ethnically; however, by the 10th century they were united under a shared idea of Englishness. The question is, simply, “what happened?”—what caused numerous tribal kingdoms of varied ethnicity to develop a common ethnic bond? The term used by medieval historians to describe this mysterious creation is ‘ethnogenesis.’ The question of ethnogenesis has political and temporal *implications* (i.e., “did feelings of ethnic unity bring about political unity in the 9th century?”), but all its interest resides in the

development of a notion of ethnic unity: where did the idea originate, and how did it hold sway? What powerful commonality of thought led a massive plurality of individuals to consider themselves singularly English?

My method for investigating this question is based on a synthesis of ideas, particularly those of Patrick Wormald and Nicholas Howe;¹ they, of course, are also part of a greater genealogy of ideas concerning the English ethnogenesis, so some background must be given by way of introduction. Formerly, historians considered politics and nationalism to be of prime importance in the formation of the English people. This notion continued until relatively recently, finding perhaps its best expression in F. M. Stenton's Anglo-Saxon England.² Stenton's well-known thesis on the point holds that a series of high-kings in the pagan, post-invasion years (*bretwaldas*, in the Old English) sporadically united the Germanic states in Britain by force. The general theory is that, though this unity was temporary, semi-sustained political commerce between the Germanic states in Britain formed the notion of a common nature, an ethnic bond. However, a 1983 article by Patrick Wormald revealed fatal flaws in this view. The *bretwalda* theory has its origins in a mistranslation of *bretwalda* (meaning "wide-ruler," not "Britain-ruler"); furthermore, these kings never exercised any real governing power over states besides their own, merely collecting tribute and setting up amenable new rulers.³ Thus there was no 'high-kingship' at all, just a series of memorable heroes, and the ethnogenesis of the English must have come from some other powerful source.

¹ Specifically, ideas from the following: Nicholas Howe, Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) and Patrick Wormald, "Bede, *Beowulf*, and the Origins of the *Gens Anglorum*," in Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies presented to J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, ed. Wormald, et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

² F. M. Stenton, Anglo-Saxon England, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), originally published in 1943.

³ Wormald, 100-120.

Wormald proposes in the same article that the Church filled this role, it being the only other unifying force around, prior to later times (when the idea of “the English people” is already apparent in the sources). He offers the work of the 8th C. English scholar Bede as an illustration of how the Christian conversion relates to ethnic unity: Bede sees the English as a people foreordained by God to conquer Britain, that they might receive the Christ, a type of Israel entering a type of Caanan. This is clearest in a popular anecdote from Bede’s Ecclesiastical History relating how Pope Gregory prophesied the conversion by making a pun on ‘Angles’ (a Germanic people in Britain) and “angels.” It explains nicely why the English (‘Anglish’) took upon themselves the name of a single component tribe: they defined their ethnic unity by their faith.⁴ The evidence is circumstantial, but taken alongside the demise of the *bretwalda* theory, Wormald’s argument is the only one left that holds water. The English ethnogenesis, at the very least, was in some way directly related to the Christian conversion of the English. While intriguing, this observation says little about the ethnogenesis itself, about the way in which Christianity brought about ethnic unity.

The semi-conclusive, limited nature of Wormald’s otherwise groundbreaking article is the result of the limits he places on his investigation. In speaking of the English epic poem Beowulf, he reveals that he sees Old English literature as merely “a window on the thought-world of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy.”⁵ This is true, of course, yet not exclusively. Literature, especially traditional literature based upon the inheritance of the distant past (of which Beowulf is a prime example), offers the richer possibility of looking through a window on the thought-world of the English *gens*, a world perhaps not

⁴ Wormald, 124.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 120.

fully apparent to the authors of the day, or to their society. Wormald's rejection of such an idea parallels the views of Walter Goffart, most famous for his work on continental literature in the early middle ages.⁶ Goffart believes that the reading of myth from literature is entirely unfruitful, arguing strangely from the modern experience that such complex views of the past did not resonate with medieval man.⁷ Herwig Wolfram's criticism of this assumption is entirely justified, and I agree that

Goffart...misses the point [by] treating every text as mere literature, that is, as its author's creation *ex nihilo*. Consequently, Goffart dislikes continuity as a whole and neglects any archaic texture, which past authors (re)used to construct their texts.⁸

This same pointed criticism applies, by extension, to Wormald (although Goffart is much more extreme in maintaining that "the distant past impinged very little on the invasion-age Germans"⁹). Such a view of literature seems unaware of the western Church fathers' thoroughly detailed and symbolic treatment of the past—the unquestioned opinion of the religious heroes of early medieval Europe.¹⁰ Surely, if Wormald's limited approach can only yield such general conclusions, a more complex view of literature is at very least justified in this case by the intriguing and promising nature of his proposal that the Church was central to the formation of the English ethnicity.

⁶ See Walter Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

⁷ Walter Goffart, "Does the Distant Past Impinge on the Invasion Age Germans?," in Andrew Gillet, ed. *On Barbarian Identity: Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), 37.

⁸ Herwig Wolfram, "Origo et Religio: Ethnic Traditions and Literature in Early Medieval Texts," *Early Medieval History* 3.1 (1994). The parentheses are Wolfram's.

⁹ Goffart, "Does the Distant Past Impinge on the Invasion Age Germans?," 37.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Mary Padgett Hamilton, "The Religious Principle in *Beowulf*" in Lewis E. Nicholson, ed., *An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1963).

Wormald does not address the complexity of the English ethnogenesis, instead explaining it in terms of propaganda, ideology, and power. Following Reinhard Wenskus's continental work on the Goths,¹¹ he claims that the Church disseminated ethnic ideology (the ideology of a foreordained Christian-English people) in the liturgy to establish its supremacy. However, Patrick Amory's work gives reason to doubt the power of this sort of ethnic propaganda, as he details quite extensively its failure in Theodoric's Italy.¹² For a leader to take advantage of ethnic ideology successfully, ethnicity must already be firmly entrenched. A more likely explanation, then, is that the clergy spoke of Englishness because they felt it themselves, as Englishmen—it was in the air, the ideation of an entire people. There is a more obvious point to make: notions of ethnic propaganda cannot explain the complex way the English visualized their ethnicity (which will be seen in this investigation). There was clearly more to 'being English' than being a Christian. Even if it was the case that the Church preached a Christian-English people for unifying purposes, the only evidence for such a plan comes from a Christianized 'migration myth,' as read from the Old English epic poem Exodus by Nicholas Howe.¹³ If the conversion of the proto-English founded the English ethnogenesis in areas outside the 'migration myth' (and I will show that these were the *primary* foundations), then 'ethnic ideology' is irrelevant. Without intent, the Church's preaching of Christianity to the "proto-English" (i.e. the Germanic tribes in Britain) led to

¹¹ See Reinhard Wenskus, Stammesbildung und Verfassung (Köln: Böhlau, 1961).

¹² Patrick Amory, *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy, 489-554* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

¹³ Howe, Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England.

an organic process¹⁴ of ethnic ideation, in which the English ethnicity was created out of the fusion of old culture and new religion.¹⁵

I think it better still to describe ethnic ideation in England as a *dialogue* between culture and religion. The proto-English interpreted the core teachings of Christianity by means of what I will refer to as 'cultural ideals,' deeply meaningful aspects of their cultural experience.¹⁶ 'Migration myth' certainly falls into this category, and its Christianization may be used as a 'type' for understanding the structure and workings of the dialogue inherent in the Christianization of other cultural ideals. I base my understanding of 'migration myth' on the work of Nicholas Howe: primarily, the proto-English used their own migration to Britain as an interpretive tool for understanding the wanderings of the Old-Testament Israelites.¹⁷ Through extended metaphor, long-standing cultural ideals were used to translate the new language of Christian belief into the most meaningful language possible: this is half of the dialogue. The other half—and

¹⁴ I believe I owe this term to Herwig Wolfram, though I cannot remember (or find in his works) where he introduces it. For the substance of the term, at least, see his "Origo et Religio," cited above.

¹⁵ It is important to note that there is no evidence of any universal 'old' (pagan) religion—no priesthood, no organization, no architecture. There were various paganisms, to be sure, but they were not unified.

¹⁶ I do not mean to imply by *ideal* its adjectival sense of 'describing an ideal state.' It will become obvious that Anglo-Saxon cultural ideals vary in this sense: fame is certainly ideal, though exile is not an ideal state at all, nor is it ideal to be subject to cruel fate.

Instead, I mean 'ideal' in the Platonic sense of 'ideal forms'—perfected, unique notions residing in the metaphysical world of ideas (Plato's 'heaven'). By definition, Platonic forms are said to be used to describe earthly things by comparison: when we refer to a chair as a chair, we really mean "this object has qualities like those prescribed by my notion of 'the chair,'" and if this is the case, then the metaphor of language is acceptable, though technically untrue. The fact that basic ideals are shared is what makes communication possible. In a parallel manner, *cultural ideals* are not uniformly recognizable in the physical world, but categorize the infinite physical variations of a single metaphysical notion of the cultural experience. Poetry that may properly be called 'the poetry of a culture' in this way communicates its meaning to an entire culture in an organizing, categorizing way. For instance, 'exile,' one ideal to be discussed, properly refers to the specific conditions of a warrior who has been banished. Yet it is also a poetic device for comparison and metaphor for all sorts of exile, and even situations that are 'exile-like.' The individualized situation is understood because of the commonality of language.

¹⁷ Howe, cited above. See his Chapter 3. on Exodus.

this is my own view, based on a reading of Howe's evidence¹⁸—is that these meaningful aspects of pre-conversion culture took on new meaning—were reinterpreted—by virtue of their new, metaphorical association with the higher meanings of the new religion. The poetic dialogue of later generations is a reflection on the historic dialogue, and has its origins therein. The cultural ideals of history naturally became the themes of the culture's poetry, and the more exalted figurative language of Old English poetry, which utilizes these formal cultural ideals, reflects the 'metaphorical' nature of English ethnic ideation in a primordial age to which we are not privy.

Extending Nicholas Howe's example, from the above, gives a paradigmatic instance of the complete dialogue: since the proto-English interpreted the Israelite Exodus through their own migration, they then reinterpreted their own migration to have a higher meaning. Specifically, this particular reinterpretation (as seen in Bede's Ecclesiastical History) held that 1) the proto-English invasion, like the Israelites' exodus, was foreordained by God to punish the Britons (like the Canaanites) for their sins, and that 2) the newly settled proto-English would then receive the messiah (like the Israelites).¹⁹ Thus the dialogue involves culture interpreting religion, and religion reinterpreting culture. The occurrence of these two things brought about ethnic ideation, a diverse group's visualization of itself as a living entity. The pre-existing common culture between the Germanic tribes in Britain did not create an ethnicity, as it was merely a collection of cultural ideals without implications for origins, unity, or destiny. But the Christian conversion caused a massive synthesis of culture, organizing, unifying,

¹⁸ From *ibid.*, chapters 1-3. Howe, rather, holds to Herwig Wolfram's view (as contained in "Origo et Religio") of migration myth's archetypical 'primordial deed' and 'change of religion' as unifying in themselves. As I will postulate, I see the unification as created by the hierarchical ordering and synthesis of culture, including the pagan migration, around the conversion.

¹⁹ Howe, 38-46, 51-58, esp. 53, about British 'spiritual death.'

and elevating the meaning of cultural ideals by subordinating them to Christ the King in a hierarchy of metaphor. The dialogue of ethnic ideation, *interpretation* and *reinterpretation*, was the mechanism that led to this Christianization of culture, and thus to the ethnic unity of the English.

Looking into the matter in depth necessarily involves searching for instances of this dialogue in the sources (such as the example used previously). But the problem with a traditional investigation of this process is that the relatively few sources available are generally not of the type that would reveal instances of ethnic ideation. Some deal with these issues (as does Bede's Ecclesiastical History), but this small sample leads to an artificially simple view of ethnic ideation. The other usual primary sources for Early Medieval England—charters, letters, monastic records, etc.—are too fragmentary, unrelated, and obscure to reveal anything about the macroscopic ethnic ideation of an entire people: being of mere practical value at the time, they contain no hint of 'mythopoeia.'

The poetic record of the Early Medieval English, however, is comparatively rich, and has everything to do with religion and culture—by the intention of the authors and by the very nature of the society in which it was written.²⁰ Unbelievably, this wealth of information has only been used once as a source for understanding the English

²⁰ This needs clarification, since earlier I proposed (pages 5-6) that literature can offer a perspective on "the thought-world of the English *gens*, a world perhaps not fully apparent to the authors of the day, or to their society." I only mean here that the authors intended to speak about religion and culture, not that they had a systematic understanding of their own ethnicity. In the process, however, these authors expressed the collective identity of their society. The systematization I will present is 'artificial' in the sense that no *one source* expresses it as I do, not in the sense of having been manufactured by me. The systematic nature of the English ethnicity is apparent from a survey of *many sources*, but this systematization was unconscious. For this reason, a broad investigation is necessary to make a claim about 'English society.'

ethnogenesis,²¹ that one instance being Nicholas Howe's Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England, which contains the example from Howe quoted above. Taking from Bede the notion that the English saw themselves as a new Israel, Howe proceeds to analyze the Old English epic poem Exodus, as I have suggested, taking advantage of the poem's figurative intricacy to reveal how the visualization of ethnicity manifested itself in English thinking about the pagan past and the Christian future.²² His argument is convincing due to the preponderance of evidence from the Ecclesiastical History: Bede informs the exegesis, and the exegesis elucidates and expands upon ideas in Bede.

However, since Exodus is only a single poem, and since Bede offers only a single perspective, Howe's acceptance of migration myth as almost singularly important must be questioned.²³ It was earlier mentioned that Patrick Wormald's article on English origins is open to Wolfram's criticism, in that Wormald's presuppositions parallel Goffart's to a degree. In the same way, the evidentiary failing of Howe's argument here parallels the failings of Wolfram's work, and Howe's book is open to Goffart's criticism of Wolfram. In a recent volume,²⁴ Goffart and a group of like-minded scholars respond to Wolfram with criticism that is often harsh, yet well-deserved in many instances.²⁵ One

²¹ Patrick Wormald's citation of Beowulf, referenced above, is an exception, but it is, of course, the passing use of a single poem.

²² Howe, 38-46, 52-58.

²³ Howe also analyzes the notion of evangelizing the pagans as an ethnically binding ideal, in this case making parallel use of the epic poem Beowulf. This argument is problematic, but there is not the space to explain here. In short, I believe my own interpretation of Beowulf (in Chapter 2; also see the Appendix on Beowulf) to be more convincing.

²⁴ Andrew Gillet, ed., On Barbarian Identity: Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002). The volume should rather be titled 'Wolfram-critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Middle Ages'!

²⁵ One instance where criticism is certainly not well-deserved is found in Goffart's contribution to On Barbarian Identity, in which he seems to insinuate that Wolfram intends to revive late-Romantic and Nazi-era Germanic mythology (36-7). Such a wild proposition not only verges on paranoid libel, but was answered succinctly by Wolfram years before this volume's publication, in his "Origo et Religio": "Racist mania and Führer-ideology have caused such a vast amount of suffering and evil that today it is difficult to

prominent example in the book's introduction highlights an instance where Wolfram's highly developed reading of myth, when compared side-by-side to the text he is interpreting, is clearly fantastic.²⁶ Admittedly, Wolfram's point-by-point presentation of the Scandinavian origin myths of European peoples in "*Origo et Religio*" strains the imagination due to the thinness of evidence,²⁷ and Goffart follows this criticism in his contribution to the volume mentioned.²⁸ Wolfram's readings of myth are much more fanciful than Howe's, but the basic criticism applies: although Howe has worked out a very coherent and believable (even attractive) theory, it is mostly built upon Bede and two poems. The reader wonders if the theory's coherence is due more to the *lack* of sources than their inherent clarity.

A dialogue between culture and religion in 'proto-England' could have taken many more forms than Howe allows for, given that there is more to the Bible than Exodus, and that there was more to proto-English culture than a migration myth. Ethnic ideation based on the migration is only one instance of the dialogue between religion and culture, and is not readily apparent in Old English Poetry outside of Exodus. Howe works from history to literary criticism, basing an interpretation of Exodus on Bede's Ecclesiastical History, and while the discussion is enlightening and helpful in

1. speak in an unbiased manner about Germanic sacred origins....Misrepresentation does not release us, however, from the obligation of reconsidering ... 'archaic traditions.'

²⁶ Andrew Gillet, "Introduction: Ethnicity, History, and Methodology," in Andrew Gillet, ed. On Barbarian Identity: Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), 1.

²⁷ Wolfram, "*Origo et Religio*." I am speaking especially of the cursory application of his complex *origo et religio* framework (in which an ethnicity is formed by a collective feat of strength followed by the acceptance of a new cult) to entire peoples based on the slight justification of perhaps a single document (see esp. page 28). These first passages are actually Wolfram's strongest arguments. By the end of the article the reader is left with the distinct impression that the author became certain of his theory while working on the Goths and Lombards, and has now attempted to apply it universally.

²⁸ Walter Goffart, "Does the Distant Past Impinge on the Invasion Age Germans?," 36. Goffart is criticizing the same idea in a different article by Wolfram. Of note as well is the attack on Wolfram's extensive use of Tacitus in constructing notions of Germanic myth that seem viable, but are quite flimsy in reality (35).

understanding Bede's place in ethnic history, Howe presupposes what he will find in Exodus. Furthermore, he bases a comprehensive understanding of ethnogenesis upon a very limited selection of sources. If the poetry is surveyed as a whole, larger categories of ethnic ideation become apparent—likelier candidates than even 'migration myth,' given the amazing frequency with which they are seen.

The figurative language of ethnic ideation in Old English poetry could be called *the tropes of Christianization*—poetic parallels to the historical dialogue between culture and religion. These figures reveal the ways in which important aspects of culture were bound to Christianity in this dialogue, both in the interpretation of religion through culturally-based metaphor, and in the reinterpretation of culture by religious metaphor. In both aspects of the dialogue, the Christian synthesis of pre-conversion culture gave cultural attributes a powerful unity, resulting in ethnic ideation. Howe's 'trope,' as I call it—the language of migration myth—undoubtedly reflects this ideation, as seen in Bede's Ecclesiastical History, and there is nothing to add to his proof. The exegesis of Exodus in Migration and Mythmaking reveals much about the Christianization of migration myth and its relevance to the English ethnogenesis.

However, the figurative language that is most prominent in the poetry has little to do with migration myth; instead, it is directly related to the cultural experience of the central social group in pre-Christian society, that is, the warband. This family of tropes covers both the nature and the experience of the warband, including metaphor based on the structure of the warband itself, as well as that based on inseparable notions such as 'fate,' 'exile,' 'transitoriness,' and 'renown.' Each chapter to follow will examine one of these notions and its figurative language in-depth, with reference to the interconnection

present between various tropes. In a dialogue with religion, these aspects of shared Germanic culture were imparted meaningful unity and direction by their metaphorical incorporation into the superstructure of Christian belief: this is the primary source of the English ethnogenesis.

This theory is not without sound historical backing. The work of Bernard Huppé has established the currency in early medieval England of Augustine of Hippo's philosophy of culture and poetry.²⁹ The use of pagan culture to elucidate Christian truth—'interpretation,' as I have called it—merely follows Augustine's call to 'spoil the Egyptians.' That is, the Hebrews took the treasures of the vanquished Egyptians across the Red Sea, so Augustine considers it perfectly acceptable to make use of anything good in pagan culture.³⁰ Even in cases where pagan culture is unacceptable to the Christian, Augustine still allows for its use as illustration.³¹ As Huppé demonstrates, the whole corpus of Old English poetry is thoroughly infused with Augustine's philosophy. Caedmon, the first Old English poet to use the pagan verse form, relied on this transformative process for his art. Finally, it is also likely that the pagan riddling tradition was central to the development of later Old English poetry,³² and the use of metaphor in Old English riddle poems is nearly the same as Augustine's use of "fleshly signs" for metaphysical "things signified." The pagan tradition and the Christian tradition are not at odds in Old English poetry, and the metaphorical dialogue I have proposed is not at odds with either.

²⁹ Bernard F. Huppé, Doctrine and Poetry: Augustine's Influence on Old English Poetry (New York: SUNY, 1959).

³⁰ St. Augustine, On Christian Teaching, trans. and with an introduction by R. P. H. Green (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 64-65.

³¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 22, 53, for Augustine's use of the Roman stage—an institution he detested as a "den of wickedness"—as a way of explaining scriptural interpretation.

³² For a discussion of this point, see the Appendix on Beowulf below (page 59).

In post-conversion Anglo-Saxon England, the themes of pre-Christian culture underwent a profound transformation through the tropes of Christianization, defining the constructive themes of the new English ethnicity. Culture, when used as an extended web of metaphor for interpreting Christian theology, was impressed with a directed unity and a systematic organization by the newly interpreted theological template. The reinterpretation of this web of culture, which naturally followed, elevated it to a new status: cultural ideals were transformed into ethnic ideals, around which the English ethnicity was formed.

A Note on Chronology

It should be mentioned that there will be no discussion of the authorship of the poetry or the dates of its composition. Of the poetry used in the investigation to follow, only The Legend of St. Juliana and The Fates of the Apostles have a known author, and all that is known of him is his name ('Cynewulf'). As for the dates, some are known, and the rest are so hotly contested by linguists that another thesis would be required to give an introduction to the matter. It is hoped that the relatively large group of poems used below covers a wide enough range of period, style, and form to give a rich picture of ethnic ideation, and whether the poetry reflects original thought (if written early on) or reflection and development (if written later) is irrelevant, if the overall story is consistent.

Chapter 1: Christ the Warlord

The basic form of the Christianizing trope is most plainly evident in Old English poetic depictions of the warband. ‘Warband’ is the term commonly used to describe a small group of barbarian warriors or raiders and a leader to whom the warriors were devoted; it is a pre-nationalist notion. This was a pervasive cultural phenomenon in Europe during the post-Roman years. The warband of Old English poetry and society is idealized, an archaism that remained important to cultural thought about lords and retainers of all sorts. That is, by the time of the composition of The Battle of Maldon (ca. 991), political power was vastly more centralized, yet its hero Byrhtnoth, an earl, is described poetically as a warband leader surrounded by faithful retainers, an ancestral heroic ideal.³³ The retainers, ideally, are loyal unto death, as is the thegn Garulf in Finnesburh:

Then *Garulf*, the son of *Guthlaf*, gave his life,
 In the fight, first of all the warriors
 Living in that land, and many heroes lay prostrate beside him.
 ...never did retainers repay their prince more handsomely
 For his gift of flowing mead...³⁴

However, the noble lord abandoned to death by his retainers is also idealized: it is a reversed heroic image, a cultural tragedy. We see this archetype both in Maldon and in Beowulf’s final battle, when warband leaders are abandoned to death by their cowardly warriors.³⁵ Behind these powerful depictions of the common social unit and heroic ideal

³³ Bruce Mitchell, ed., The Battle of Maldon and Other Old English Poems, trans. K. Crossley-Holland (London: Macmillan, 1965), 28, 29 (introduction to the poem).

³⁴ Mitchell, 48.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 35, 47; Beowulf, trans. Kevin Crossley-Holland (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 94.

of the Dark Ages, there was a wealth of Christian meaning for the newly-converted proto-English *gens*, and the poetic warband is often only an abstraction used for illustrative purposes. Warband culture is used by the poets to interpret Christianity with culturally appropriate metaphors, explaining both spiritual battles and a comfortable relationship with God. As well, warband culture was reinterpreted as a sanctified cultural practice due to these prior associations.

The Christianization of this ideal social group to explain spiritual conflict is quite direct in Old English poetry: Jesus is the consummate warlord, both tragically abandoned by his disciples (i.e., retainers) and also the heroic victor over death, a warlord whom loyal believers aspire to follow in battle. The apostolic epic Andreas, which deals with an adventure of the disciple Andrew, in fact begins in formal heroic verse, borrowing much of the opening of the battle-epic Beowulf—Bradley notes that Andreas even owes specific phrases to Beowulf.³⁶ The apostles are “the thanes³⁷ of the Lord,” “keen for the campaigning life.”³⁸ If the disciples become ‘thanes,’ the correspondence of the crucified Christ to the Old English tragic hero is clear: a surrounded, finished warlord is abandoned by those close to him. Consider the boasts made at the ‘mead-hall’ (i.e., the Last Supper) of Christ by men who would soon forsake their Lord:

... Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you."

And so said all the disciples.³⁹

In this context, consider the Maldon poet’s words referring to warriors who fled the field when things went awry:

³⁶ S. A. J. Bradley, ed., Anglo-Saxon Poetry, trans. S. A. J. Bradley (Toronto: Dent, 1982), 111 (from the introduction to the poem).

³⁷ i.e., warband members.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

³⁹ Matt 26:35 (RSV).

At an open council in the meeting place,
 ...many spoke proudly of their prowess

Who would prove unworthy of their words under battle-stress.⁴⁰

In this we may also see the elevation of Christ to the status of the ultimate warlord, the supreme tragic hero who is yet victorious in the resurrection—that is, in the complete payment for sin, the object of the battle. The Dream of the Rood speaks of this victory on the cross in heroic, elegiac terms, of how

...the young warrior. God our Saviour,

Valiantly stripped before the battle; with courage and resolve,

Beheld by many, He climbed upon the cross to redeem mankind.⁴¹

This tragic figure is yet “The Lord of Victories,” not defeated when dead, but “resting,” “weary after battle.”⁴² Christ is stripped by Roman soldiers for humiliation in front of the “many,” yet from this imagery his own obedient will to suffer for sin is brought to the fore: *he* strips, *he* climbs (through his will, though not by his own hands), and through this emphasis of agency, the notoriety of public shame is revealed to be a ‘holy renown.’ This metaphorical device goes beyond the basic exigency of presenting an image acceptable to a warrior, and reveals the deeper meaning of the crucifixion: Christ is victorious, as is the tragic warlord—faithful to his retainers even unto a humiliating death. The resurrection, therefore, implies that Christ has *fulfilled*, much like an Old Testament prophecy, the warlord archetype: what should be mournful elegiac is turned to bright, commemorative verse.

⁴⁰ Mitchell, 35.

⁴¹ Ibid., 129.

⁴² Ibid., 130.

The figurative language of the ‘holy warband’ is not limited in usage to the circle of Christ-and-disciples, however. The entire heavenly host of angels is seen as *halge here-feðan*, “holy martial bands,” in The Day of Judgment, just as the archaic ‘warlord’ image was expanded to idealize Byrhtnoth in Maldon.⁴³ Elsewhere, individual believers are seen as ‘thanes’ of Christ: The Legend of St. Guthlac describes its humble, ascetic hero as a member of a warband,

...the blessed champion; [who,] bold in war,
had himself girded zealously with ghostly weapons...⁴⁴

As with Andreas, above, the battle is internalized, metaphorically described in culturally potent terms. By culturally informed interpretation, Christian teaching on spiritual conflict was illustrated by poets in a naturally communicative and edifying manner.

Battle is one part of the life of the ideal Old English warrior, and comfort is the other: here we see another way culture was Christianized for illustrative purposes. In the poetry, ‘gold-giving lord’ is a stock phrase used to describe a warband leader: as in Beowulf, this figure bestows honor and wealth on his battle-tested thanes while all partake of poetry, music, and mead.⁴⁵ Likewise, St. Guthlac relies on the Lord—who “rewards” his “champions”⁴⁶—and likewise, the “blessed company” in The Day of Judgment “shall thank [God] for their enjoyments and delights,” received “through mercy.”⁴⁷ God is portrayed as the archetypal ‘gold-giver’ in an ironic scene in Andreas

⁴³ Codex Exoniensis, trans. Benjamin Thorpe (London: The Society of Antiquaries, 1842), 63.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 112. I have restored this translation to the original language’s two-half-line format for ease of reading.

⁴⁵ Beowulf, 31-32. Mead is a sort of wine made with honey.

⁴⁶ Codex Exoniensis, 107.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 77.

also, beginning where the apostle says to a sea-captain (who is actually the “Lord of princes”),

‘I should like to entreat you, though I could give you little in the way of rings and precious adornments, to carry us in this tall ship, the lofty, beak-prowed vessel across the whale’s domain....’⁴⁸

The irony in this particular passage depends on the thane offering gold to his disguised lord in the context of multiple references to the trappings of lordship.⁴⁹ It is a poignant, Shakespearean sort of twist that would have been very close to home for the audience, much like when Henry goes into his camp dressed as a common soldier. The archetype is used as a novel sort of parable, subliming the cultural ideal into heavenly realms. Christ and his Church are the surpassing realities behind the sign of the warlord and his warband.

Consequently, in a reinterpretation of culture, the earthly occupations of warrior and lord are altered in the poetry by this Christian outlook—the professions, always valued, are now *sanctified* by these prior metaphorical associations. Though inferior to ‘things signified,’ this subordination to sublime truth implies superiority in a world consisting of diverse symbols. Thus the poems On the Various Fortunes of Men and On the Endowments and Pursuits of Men laud the honorable skills of combat, music, poetry, generalship, and even of high mead-tolerance—all the diverse elements of ideal warband life—as gifts from God.⁵⁰ In fact, in these two works we see the entire culture as a divine gift to be celebrated. Similarly, the protagonist of The Legend of St. Juliana refers to

⁴⁸ Bradley, 118-19. Bradley’s translation is in prose.

⁴⁹ See also *ibid.*, 121.

⁵⁰ Codex Exoniensis, 295, 297, 299. esp. 331-3.

God as “the delight of warriors,”⁵¹ one who favors the honorable and aids them in war. Boasting before battle, a common theme in Old English battle-poetry,⁵² is Christianized in Beowulf as an invocation to the God of battle, being at once a submission to judgment and a challenge to false gods, a point to be developed fully in Chapter 2.⁵³ Thus the Christianization of the warband ideal did not mean a complete emphasis on the metaphysical via metaphor—it also imparted a metaphysical aspect to the day-to-day business of being a warrior or lord. This duality is exemplified in the Blessed Soul’s address to its corpse, which describes the honor gained by the body’s submission to its earthly lord:

...Ah, my lord!

That I might thee with me conduct,

...thou didst fast on earth, and me didst fill

with God’s body, spirit’s drink...

Thou bowedst thyself before men, and rais’d me to joy eternal...

...[W]e may then ourselves together afterwards enjoy [heaven],

and in heaven be high-exalted. We need not be uneasy

at the Lord’s coming...

...but we may

at the doom there, in our deeds exult;

...I know that thou wast, in the world’s kingdom

⁵¹ Ibid., 271.

⁵² See Mitchell, 31.

⁵³ Beowulf, 16. The character Beowulf is not explicitly Christian, as the poem is deliberately archaic in form; Howe, in Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), proposes that Beowulf is intended as a pre-Christian figure, a sort of Hebrew. The effect is still Christianizing, but in a deeper way.

exalted nobly...⁵⁴

It is implicit, of course, that the soul and body, by serving God in a similar, though spiritual way, have joined an eternal warband after the temporal image's passing. Service to an earthly lord is elevated because of its inferior metaphorical relationship to that which is signified.

Both halves of the dialogue between religion and culture are present in this trope, this family of figures: warband imagery is used to interpret Christian teaching, and the warband itself is reinterpreted in Christian terms as a glorious calling. This is a clear expression of English ethnic ideation, a visualization of culture sublimed into higher meaning, though it is only one facet of the overall visualization of ethnicity within a Christian framework. Yet the elevation of the warband ideal is central to the instances of ethnic ideation to follow, as these all elevate various aspects of the warband experience.

⁵⁴ Codex Exoniensis, 377. I have restored this translation to the original language's two-half-line format for ease of reading.

Chapter 2: Inexorable Fate

Old English poetry views the warband experience as intrinsically ironic, and this sets up a culturally specific existential issue that is drawn upon in Christianizing tropes. In the ultimate fulfillment of warriors' companionship, the delights of the mead-hall often lie shattered about the field of combat. Those left mourn their loss alone:

Where has the horse gone? Where the man? Where the giver of gold?
 Where is the feasting-place? And where are the pleasures of the hall?
 I mourn the gleaming cup, the warrior in his corselet...
 The savage ash-spears, avid for slaughter.
 Have claimed all the warriors—inexorable fate!⁵⁵

The specific Old English notion of fate, *wyrd*,⁵⁶ is the essence of the irony. Fate, given the unpredictable, often meaningless outcome of battle, is to the warrior much more a monistic force than anything that can be appeased. It is the sword of time, which cuts down the good and evil alike, "inexorable fate." Before a poetically depicted battle, ravens gather, the imagery of fate⁵⁷—death is imminent in one band or the other, and possibly in both, such that fate only "spare[s] an undoomed man" rather than 'brings victory.' At the same time, paradoxically, there is a place for courage, presumably because those who run from a fated combat are only slain more maliciously.⁵⁸ As such, the 'formal boast' before a fight is of tremendous importance, signifying a willingness to confront fate, as does Byrhtnoth's boast to the Viking raiders in The Battle of Maldon⁵⁹:

Resentful and resolute, he shouted his reply:

⁵⁵ Mitchell, 111 (from The Wanderer).

⁵⁶ Subsequently, 'fate' will carry only the sense of *wyrd*.

⁵⁷ Cf. Judith, The Wanderer, The Battle of Maldon, etc.

⁵⁸ i.e., rather than preventing fate. Beowulf, 20.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 29-31.

[‘]...It would be much to our shame
 If you took our tribute and embarked without battle...
 No! You’ll not get your treasure so easily.
 The spear’s point and the sword’s edge, savage battle-play,
 Must first teach us that we have to yield tribute.”⁶⁰

It is important to note that this “noble earl” does not boast a control of fate, only the “resolution” to deal the Vikings their share of death. He releases his horse, displaying for his men his intent; they follow, equally resolute. Yet fate would have it that Byrhtnoth is cut down in the fray, and a miscommunication then leaves his warband outnumbered on the field, where they are killed to a man. In this tragic world, this fatalistic society, where is the Christian God of justice and righteousness?

In answering this existential question, the apologist-poet of Beowulf does not dispute the irony of the warrior’s life; instead, he takes it to its extreme, to construct metaphorically a theodicy for the warband society. Beowulf tells of a legendary warrior, three boasts, three epic battles with monsters, and a final tragedy; that is, the hero Beowulf is the most flawless representation of the heroic ideal in all old English poetry, which makes sense in apologetic terms, for his is the ultimate tragedy to explain. The Beowulf poet’s answer to this problem reflects again the dialogue between religion and culture: the warband-associated notion of fate is given a higher meaning and fulfillment in Christianity. *Wyrd* (‘fate’), postulated in response to the inexplicable events and outcomes of battles that led alternately to bitter exile or great renown, was Christianized to interpret basic points of theodicy: fate permits a hero’s strength to work God’s justice,

⁶⁰ Mitchell, 31.

but the transitory nature of man's strength means that this ideal is only fulfilled in Christ. There was also a parallel reinterpretation of the fate ideal along Christian lines.⁶¹

Beowulf's first two battles are entirely successful, delivering a foreign people from the superhuman fiend Grendel and his equally monstrous mother; therein we see illustrated how fate works God's justice through a hero's strength. Beowulf, at this point a journeying warrior, arrives at a critical moment, for many warriors have already fallen in the attempt to defend their lord's mead-hall from Grendel (or else their courage has not been up to the task)⁶²—thus, Beowulf is without equal in courage and strength. Prior to the first battle, he makes his first boast, denying the use of weapons:

...I shall grapple with this fiend
hand-to-hand; and he whom death takes off
must resign himself to the judgment of God.

...Fate goes ever as it must!⁶³

Beowulf, eager for fame, sets up a situation where he is without advantage, so that his courage, his resignation to fate, may be obvious: he never “boast[s]” of “deeds with a shining sword in battle,”⁶⁴ but of this resignation, with the psalmist:

Some boast of chariots, and some of horses; but we boast of the name of
the LORD our God.⁶⁵

Fate is thus accepted as the right judgment of God—a shockingly bold statement by the Beowulf poet, given what we have seen about the bitter fate of Maldon's warriors. But

⁶¹ See the Appendix on Beowulf for a discussion of Christian meaning in Beowulf. Some disagreement still survives over whether the poem is a superficial redaction of a pagan poem by a Christian, or whether it has a Christian design and unified meaning.

⁶² Beowulf, 17, 21.

⁶³ Ibid., 16.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 20.

⁶⁵ Psalm 20:7 (RSV).

we see that this gritty resignation brings about a coup; in fact, the secret of Grendel's power has been a "spell / against every kind of weapon."⁶⁶ Beowulf's strength is in his arms, and he tears Grendel apart.⁶⁷ A similar twist of fate (i.e., the will of God) occurs in the second battle,⁶⁸ in which Beowulf's sword, given to him for the combat by the coward Unferth, proves useless. Beowulf, continuing in resignation, "trusts in his own strength, the might of his hand," and by Providence finds a sword so heavy only he can lift it—which ends the business quickly.⁶⁹ The sword of a coward was of no avail; thus, in both battles, fate is seen to be the instrument of God's justice through the strength of a hero. This is all reminiscent of the biblical hero-king David, who said likewise,

This God--his way is perfect...

He trains my hands for war, so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze.⁷⁰

The crux of the poet's argument is Beowulf's third battle, in which this greatest of warriors courageously resigns himself to fate again,⁷¹ yet is killed by his monstrous foe. This is the ultimate ironic fate, much more so than that of the less-superhuman warriors in Maldon, and it presents the ultimate existential problem, the awful fate of even the best human life. The answer is given in that, in this sense, Beowulf is a Christ-type, signifying the divine economy of grace by which this problem is overcome. Beowulf has

⁶⁶ Beowulf, 27.

⁶⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, 51, which names "the might of his hand" as the primary characteristic of Beowulf's strength.

⁶⁸ It is in the outcomes of these first two battles that the criticisms of Beowulf as essentially a limited redaction of a pagan work begin to appear absurd. Blackburn in 1897 wrote that "fate" could be substituted for "God" in any instance in the poem (Blackburn, "Christian Coloring," in Lewis E. Nicholson, ed., An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1963), and yet here is plain that Fate is subordinated to the unchanging, omnipotent will of God. By 1946 Blackburn's view was no longer dogmatic, as evidenced by Mary Hamilton's easy statement in "The Religious Principle": "The conclusion that he [the poet] regarded 'fate' as subordinate to the Divine will, is, of course, the only theory that would be consistent with the poet's frequent reference to God's protecting care of the Geats and Danes" (in Nicholson, cited above). This care, of course, is accomplished through God's protecting care of Beowulf (see also the Appendix on Beowulf).

⁶⁹ Beowulf, 51-2.

⁷⁰ Psalm 18:30, 34 (RSV) (excerpts).

⁷¹ Beowulf, 84.

led a life of obedience, is endowed with miraculous powers, and is abandoned by his warband in the final battle.⁷² Furthermore, the archetypal embodiment of evil,⁷³ the dragon, which has power over his people, is destroyed by the sacrifice of his life. The difference between Beowulf and Christ is that Beowulf stays dead, and can no longer intercede: although the dragon is dead, slain Beowulf's people are now lordless, and can expect to be conquered and exiled.⁷⁴ As with any figure, the point at which the metaphor breaks down is the point of movement into the thing signified: the implication is that Christ has fulfilled this imperfect type through the resurrection. To illustrate, it is as though the 'noble lord' ethos is a type of the Mosaic law. It has similar qualities, though it is unwritten, in being beyond the capacity of man to fulfill perfectly, though not of Christ.⁷⁵ Although there are no New Testament references in all of Beowulf, this only adds to the likelihood of this interpretation. The Christianity of the author—even if only a redactor—cannot be in doubt,⁷⁶ and it is telling that its only biblical references are pre-Mosaic: Beowulf prefigures Christ just as the heroes of the Old Testament do. The warband ideal of fate is Christianized by offering a culturally relevant answer to the questions raised by fate: although God does justice through man's strength, man's

⁷² Beowulf, 94.

⁷³ Cf. O'Donoghue, note 75, in *ibid.*, 120.

⁷⁴ Beowulf, 104.

⁷⁵ Cf. Romans 2:13-15 with 3:9-10, noting the logical implications drawn upon by the poet: (2:13-15): "For it is not the hearers of the [Mosaic] law who are righteous before God, but the *doers of the law* who will be justified. When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness...." (3:9-10): "...both Jews and Greeks [i.e., all non-Jews], are under the power of sin as it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; *no one does good*, not even one.'" (Quotations taken from the RSV, my italics.)

⁷⁶ See for instance O'Donoghue, in Beowulf, ix. Even if the 'author' is a redactor, the Beowulf poem that survives is understood to have a depth and unity that preclude the idea of an insignificantly modified pagan text. See also the Appendix on Beowulf.

transitory nature allows for evil to go unchecked, and while it is admirable to resign oneself to fate like Beowulf, only the warrior Christ can conquer the bitter irony of death.

A major effect of this Christianization, of Christ answering the problems raised by the pre-conversion ideal of fate, was a reinterpretation of fate in battle. For the warrior, irony remains in the world, but it is a happy irony, as Christ has removed the bitterness of its finality. Thus, in Maldon, the dying Byrhtnoth's prayer is that Christ would fight his spiritual battle, negating the transitory victories of evil in the world:

O Guardian of the people, let me praise and thank You
 For all the real joys I received in this world.
 Now, gracious Lord, as never before,
 I need Your grace,
 That my soul may set out on its journey to You...⁷⁷

Maldon is nonetheless ironic in tone, for it depicts the bitter uncertainty of warfare, but its irony is not the hopeless irony attributed to pagan existence in Beowulf. Bernard Huppé's commentary on the above prayer cannot be improved upon:

This dying speech is far from the "purely heroic." There is no lament over past glory, no sorrow over defeat....The speech is inappropriate to a dying Hector or a dying Siegfried. It is appropriate to a Christian martyr. The spirit of Byrhtnoth's dying speech...reflects the beginning of [Old English] poetry. It has the same all-consuming faith which animates the poetry of Caedmon.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Mitchell, 34. *As never before* highlights his transitory nature due to original sin, and his exile. These points will be discussed in the following two chapters, on 'transitoriness' and 'exile.'

⁷⁸ Huppé, 238.

Likewise, in The Seafarer and The Wanderer, though the speakers are doomed to an ironic existence by “inexorable fate,” security is afforded by God’s sacrifice.⁷⁹ Fate, *wyrd*, the cultural ideal, was reinterpreted by Christianity, just as it was used to interpret and illustrate scripture itself. Thus, in the same way ethnic ideation was demonstrated in the figurative Christianization of warbands, it is similarly seen in this derived trope via interpretation and reinterpretation.

⁷⁹ Mitchell, 108, 118.

Chapter 3: Man in Exile

If “inexorable fate” implies that mankind’s most fundamental losses are to him irrecoverable, then exile is the condition of this irrecoverable loss on a personal level. As a notion inextricably related to ‘warband thought,’ and as a philosophical perspective equally influenced thereby, exile was subjected to a parallel Christianization, and its transformation is apparent in the poetic sources. Exile, at a fundamental level in the poetry, means expulsion from one’s warband, a group—even the sole group, for a warrior—that offers companionship, security, and a vigorous sense of direction and purpose. Understood this way, it is an obvious thematic paradigm for the poetic exploration of despair and other existential issues, though the subject matter is often derived from literal exile and its traditional causes. As implied in The Wanderer, fate can work exile by a lord’s death in battle:

...I covered my gold-friend

With dark clods of earth...

In utter dejection, I journeyed far and wide...⁸⁰

This lordlessness is similar to the tragic end of Beowulf’s people, as we saw previously. More commonly in the poetry, exile is imposed from within the warband. Expulsion can be deserved, obviously, as in the Gnomic Verses (“Exile for a cruel man”⁸¹), or as for the husband of the mournful speaker in The Wife’s Lament, one’s own kith and kin, the trusted fellow-warriors, might conspire “separation, so that [one] should live / most wretchedly...”⁸² In either case, there is inherent in exile much painful irony concerning

⁸⁰ Mitchell, 109.

⁸¹ Codex Exoniensis, 343.

⁸² Mitchell, Bruce, ed., The Battle of Maldon and Other Old English Poems, trans. K. Crossley-Holland (London: Macmillan, 1965), 83.

expectations and reality: bonds are broken in the most dear places of the heart, bonds formed by battle or birth. This specific quality imparts to exile a certain universality that allows for expanded use, in that exile may be applied metaphorically to non-traditional situations. A wife, for instance, may speak of her exiled husband in terms that imply her own exile of sorts through poetic conventions. The Wife's Lament is so similar, in this manner, to other descriptions of exile, that it was formerly considered a redaction of a standard (i.e., a warrior's) exile narrative.⁸³ These standard conventions of exile poetry are best exemplified in The Wanderer: to be banished is to "mourn all one's afflictions alone," to dream of bygone security at the feet of the "gift-lord" only to wake to nature's fury on the open sea, the "ways of exile."⁸⁴ Or else to be wasting away in a marshland forest, as for the unhappy exile of whom his lover speaks in Wulf:

Wulf is on one island, I on another;

Marshes imprison that island...⁸⁵

Even nature conspires to produce a dark discontent and a stifling entrapment; this is an important point to which I will return when speaking of Christianization. However, the true wretchedness of the exile is not to know his fate. We must note in Wulf the parallel, though metaphorical, exile of the lover, and this forms the truly bitter core of the poem:

My thoughts journeyed far to join my Wulf;

When rain slapped the earth and I sat apart weeping,

When the brave warrior wound his arms around me,

I was filled with delight, yet also with despair...

⁸³ Mitchell, 88 (introduction to the translation). See Codex Exoniensis, 441 for an example of the spurious "Exile's Complaint."

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 108-110.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

Wulf, my Wulf, my yearnings for you
 And your infrequent visits have made me ill;
 I am sick from love, not of starvation.⁸⁶

It calls to mind Kierkegaard's nearly identical illustration in The Sickness Unto Death:

A young girl despairs of love, [but] this despair is not declared. No, she despairs over herself. This self of hers, which if it had become 'his' beloved, she would have been rid of, or lost, in the most blissful manner[,]...has become...a loathsome void, a despicable reminder. [J]ust try saying to such a girl, "You are eating yourself up," and you will hear her reply, 'Oh, no! The pain is that I just can't.'⁸⁷

Thus, exile may be seen as a past event, but also as a future-oriented process that threatens permanent exile, a process which possibly may be reversed by finding a new lord, as The Wanderer relates,⁸⁸ or which may result in a terrible fate, a dejected, isolated death, an ultimate separation. Certainty would be an end to wretchedness, but exile is the condition of uncertainty. Kierkegaard is not speaking of a girl or women in general, really, but of Man; and neither is Old English poetry—in its more complex, Christianized forms—speaking primarily of warbands and exile. As a result of this inherent metaphorical possibility, the cultural ideal of exile, fundamental to the concept of the warband, took its place in tropes used to interpret separation from God (due to original

⁸⁶ Mitchell, 79. It is indeed a beautiful turn of phrase for the poet to use the comparison to starvation in such a manner: the speaker compares her own suffering to starvation, ironically drawing a comparison of her state to exile: her 'Wulf' is starving in actuality, yet her own 'starvation,' like her figurative 'exile,' is *worse than actual exile!* This is a non-Christian example of 'things signified' being much greater than 'that which signifies.' It is an amazing coincidence that Augustine's thought is so similar, and the conversion surely magnified this type of trope by the resulting confluence.

⁸⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death, trans. and with an introduction by Alistair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1989), 50.

⁸⁸ Mitchell, 109.

sin) and Christian eschatology. Furthermore, the propitiatory 'exile' of Christ caused a reinterpretation of the cultural ideal itself, one which called for both secular and monastic imitation of this 'new exile.' Exile, thus incorporated thematically into the tropes of Christianization, illustrates the dialogue between religion and culture, and further hints at the origins of ethnic ideation.

In the poetry, there exist both simple and more nuanced instances of warband-exile used to illustrate Christian teaching. At a basic level, the fall of man results in an exile, a separation from fellowship with the warband of God, which results in wanderings, enmity, and uncertainty—the human condition, in other words. This is apparent from The Phoenix, in which the redeemed are assured that they will suffer neither

...old age nor misery, nor the narrow [*enge*] death,
 nor loss of life, nor the coming of enemy,
 nor sin nor strife, nor painful exile,
 ...nor care nor sleep, nor grievous sickness,
 nor winter's darts, nor dread of tempests,
 rough under heaven, nor the hard frost
 with cold chill icicles striketh any.

There hail nor rime on the land descend.⁸⁹

The Phoenix is a semi-translation and Christian reworking of a Roman poem from years earlier, but it reflects a very Anglo-Saxon sentiment, and this clearly motivated the

⁸⁹ Codex Exoniensis, 201. I have restored this translation to the original language's two-half-line format for ease of reading.

editor's choice. Compare the description of exile in The Seafarer, an original Old English poem:

...I often turned
 the hard [*nearo*] night-shift, standing at the boat's stern
 while it struck about by the cliffs. Pinched by cold
 were my feet, bound in frost,
 gripped by cold, and, when thus, sorrowful cares
 raged hot about my heart; the hunger within tore
 the spirit of sea-weariness. Thus, he knows not,
 who makes himself a home on fairest land,
 how I, with wretched cares, to the ice-cold sea
 am accustomed to my obligation to be exiled
 ...hung about with icicles; hail-storms flew.⁹⁰

Nearo and *enge*, bracketed above, are roughly synonymous, implying confinement, danger, and cruelty; the similar descriptions that follow both instances parallel the cultural ideal of exile: bitter care, weariness, and nature's wrath. The author of The Phoenix has manipulated the old Latin poem to illustrate Christian teaching, but his selection is directed to the hearts of his Anglo-Saxon readers. The Beowulf poet, similarly, describes Cain as one "the Creator sent...into exile"; more importantly, the conditions of exile are adopted in the poem, as the monster Grendel, "the seed of Cain" is portrayed as a solitary, wretched wanderer through marshy wasteland and woods. This

⁹⁰ Alexander W. Furches, "The Seafarer: A New Translation" (unpublished paper, Vanderbilt University, 2003), 3. I developed the views laid out here on the figurative, riddling, parable-like nature of OE poetry in the commentary to my translation of The Seafarer in 2003. Although another translation would prove the point just as well (since I have not included any of the heavily disputed passages), I have chosen to use my own in places where its language fits that of my present argument.

deserves explication: the very reason Grendel attacks the society of men so viciously is that he endures “frustration” at the “din of merry-making.”⁹¹ In an intensely psychological illustration, the poet creates a grotesque masque of fallenness: the notion that estrangement from the divine breeds hatred for men as well is directly out of Genesis.⁹² Just as important is the Christianization of exile poetry’s nature-motifs: fallen nature joins in the self-destructive, hateful wrath of fallen man.⁹³

In a more complex turn, *undeserved* exile may be found in a further Christianization, a device that implies the “future” implications of exile. As darkness and nature’s tumult fall on the crucifixion in The Dream of the Rood, we see the perfect warrior, Christ, possessed of unflinching “courage and resolve” in battle,⁹⁴ subjected to the ultimate insult by conspiracy within his own warband, as it were. Christ is sent into undeserved exile to redeem mankind from the deserved exile described above. In the shared context of exile, The Seafarer’s weary recollection that “no protector / could console the cheerless man”⁹⁵ bears a striking resemblance to “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?”⁹⁶ Following this, the redeemed Christian life is seen as a journey back from exile: that is, the “seafarer” still “tread[s] the paths of exile,” but with the sure hope of “mercy in heaven.”⁹⁷ The Seafarer was quoted earlier as an example of straightforward exile poetry, but it is in itself also a Christianization: a homily follows the narrative, and Christian theodicy is illustrated in the speaker’s surprising acceptance of

⁹¹ Beowulf, 4.

⁹² Cf. Genesis 6:11-12: “And God said to Noah, ‘I have determined to make an end of all flesh: for the earth is filled with violence through them...’” (RSV).

⁹³ Cf. Ibid., 3:17-18: “To Adam he said, ‘...cursed is the ground because of you: ...thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you...’” (RSV). Also cf. 1:30, which implies that only *after* the fall do animals kill each other for food.

⁹⁴ Mitchell, 129.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 117.

⁹⁶ Mark 15:34 (RSV), quoting Psalm 22:1.

⁹⁷ Mitchell, 118-19.

the journey's pains. This argument in The Seafarer follows the 'uncertainty' motif of exile: even the comfortable man is confronted with his life's exile-journey as he ages,⁹⁸ and, thus, the renouncement of worldly hope is not quite so illogical given a return to favor with the gold-giving Lord. To bring culture's illustration of doctrine full circle, The Phoenix portrays the once-exiled Christ dwelling in a "wood...wonderously fair," in which

The groves are with produce hung,
with beauteous fruits; there wane not
...the renovated fruit,

...through the Holy's might

brightest of groves!

...there a holy fragrance

rests o'er the pleasant land that shall not be changed...⁹⁹

It is the restoration of Eden to a surpassing glory—at once biblical, and also a hope-filled, culturally-directed answer to the well-understood pains of the exile. This is to be contrasted with the wasteland in which we earlier observed Grendel running about; anyone who has walked on moors knows the 'fragrance' of wet peat! In an extension of this contrast, A Supplication portrays the unredeemed in permanent exile.¹⁰⁰

The Christianization of exile is at its most advanced in the reinterpretation of actual exile-like situations according to the "new exile" of the imitation of Christ; as in the two previous chapters, a metaphorical interpretation calls for a reinterpretation of the

⁹⁸ Mitchell, 119.

⁹⁹ Codex Exoniensis, 202-3. I have restored this translation to the original language's two-half-line format for ease of reading.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 455.

illustrative concept. This cultural reaction is dual: to the protagonist in Guthlac, Christ's exile calls for monastic imitation, while the speaker of The Seafarer takes the more metaphysical interpretation, arguing that exile reveals the true nature of existence. In Guthlac, the saint's ascetic 'exile' leads to the perspective that the journey is no exile at all, in the end.¹⁰¹ As was the design of early medieval asceticism, the physical imitation of exile thus leads to an understanding of Christ's exile. Some have taken an identical interpretation of The Seafarer, arguing that it is told by an actual seafaring ascetic seeking to physically imitate exile in the same manner as St. Guthlac was seen to do.¹⁰² There are a few known instances of this sort of asceticism in the British Isles during the Dark Ages, one being St. Brendan and his monks, who perhaps wandered to the New World before Erik the Red, and another being the two Scots who showed up at King Alfred's court in 8th C Wessex.¹⁰³ However, this interpretation of The Seafarer is untenable, given the obvious metaphorical nature of the entire poem, made clear in the homily that ends the poem:

Come, now! We consider always our own town,
and then think of how we arrived there;
and, likewise, we aspire that we might be allowed,
then, into eternal happiness...¹⁰⁴

The use of seafaring as a metaphor for the exile of every Christian life, rather than as an instance of specifically ascetic imitation, is readily apparent. That is, the second

¹⁰¹ Codex Exoniensis, 114, 167.

¹⁰² Mitchell, 115.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁰⁴ Furches, 9.

interpretation of Christian 'new exile,' as in The Seafarer, consists in an internal change of perspective, such that a believer likens himself to a foreigner wishing to travel home.

Thus the 'exilic' tropes in Old English poetry are seen to be Christianizing, in the sense of representing a two-way dialogue between religion and culture. The ever-present threat of exile, a powerful image in warband society, is used to illustrate via tropes the propitiatory exile of Christ, and this same image is reversed to give new meaning to actual exile-like situations. This is precisely the same process seen in previous chapters, which reflects the ethnic ideation of English society at large, and points to the 'metaphorical' origins of the English ethnogenesis.

Chapter 4: *þis Læne Lif*¹⁰⁵

The description of the ‘new exile’ in the previous chapter as a spiritual journey verges on the ‘journey’ metaphor that is so important to this chapter, on ‘this transitory life,’ the result of exile. ‘Transitoriness’ was the physical stamp of exile’s uncertainty upon actual life, encompassing both the growing loss of worldly meaning and the itinerancy accompanying warband-exile. Bruce Mitchell observes that scholars of Old English literature “sometimes talk as if [the transitoriness of life] were an idea peculiar to Germanic or Anglo-Saxon paganism,” when it is in fact a nearly universal theme in world literature, due to the commonality of life’s impermanence and uncertainty. Yet there is in the poetry a peculiar English flavoring to this: *þis læne lif*, ‘this transitory life,’ is “brought home with special force” to the exiled warrior.¹⁰⁶ Thus, while it is quite unremarkable that The Ruin tells the ironic story of a carefully planned, lively city falling to “fate, inexorable,” the interest is in the details and framing. The ruined city spoken of was a warband warrior’s delight, replete with mead-halls, “thunderous... martial clamour,” and proud men decked out in armor and gold¹⁰⁷: these are all the joys imparted by a good lord, and all the objects of longing for the lordless man. Mitchell notes the similarity of The Ruin to The Wanderer in this descriptive respect.¹⁰⁸ The Wanderer at one point uses the description of a ruined city to bring out the exiled speaker’s own personal transitoriness, advising that

A wise man must fathom how frightening it will be

When all the riches of the world stand waste,

¹⁰⁵ ‘This transitory life,’ a stock phrase in OE poetry.

¹⁰⁶ Mitchell, 17 (introduction).

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 69-70 (this is from the poem, not Mitchell’s argument).

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 17 (introduction).

As now in diverse places in this middle-earth
 Old walls stand, tugged at by winds
 And hung with hoar-frost, buildings in decay.¹⁰⁹

It requires no leap of logic to explain the similarity of language between the two poems, even though The Ruin is not directly speaking of exile. The pathos of transitoriness, in a warband culture, was most clearly, most archetypically, experienced from the perspective of the exile, and the poetic exile becomes perceptive of the all-encompassing transitoriness in the world around him. As such, it was the natural figure for a warband society to use in translating Christian doctrine on present existential issues. The life and world of God-exiled man are passing into nothing, and he is constantly confronted with the irony of his strivings. The dialogue of ethnic ideation in the poetry has again a second aspect, since the transitoriness experienced by exiles is reinterpreted in this new Christian light: the Christian life, also a journey, is ironically at ease with a transitory life, due to the gain of spiritual meaning.

In the Christian interpretation of transitoriness, all God-exiled men (i.e., all men) feel bitterness of heart just like the warband-exile, and a consideration of one's surroundings can only lead to a painful reminder of the passing nature of existence. The Seafarer's speaker observes that "this dead life / Ephemeral here on earth" inevitably ends in illness, age, or battle.¹¹⁰ This second instance corresponds exactly to The Ruin's description of a noble warband's end: decay, plague, and war put an end to the best of plans.¹¹¹ Thus, in The Seafarer, when man considers these things—the deaths of friends

¹⁰⁹ Mitchell, 111 (this is from the poem, not Mitchell's argument).

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 118.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 69-70.

and his own impending death—“Grey-haired, he mourns.”¹¹² Likewise, the postscript of Exodus bluntly comments that

This present happiness is an ephemeral one, corrupted by sins, one
afforded to us exiles, a time of waiting for miserable men.¹¹³

There is, again, in this Christianization of the exile’s unique perspective on life, a Kierkegaardian existentialism, in that this “misery” (despair) cannot be avoided, but is only truly recognized in life by those who understand the wrath of God directed at sinful man; the joy of worldly men becomes a type of despair from this perspective, like the ‘last cigarette’ of a man in front of a firing squad. The Old English kenning¹¹⁴ *middangeard*, often translated “middle-earth,” sums up this worldview in The Seafarer, implying that existence is merely a shadow, the intersection of pre-existence and death.¹¹⁵ Even if one has “such a gracious lord” (The Seafarer)¹¹⁶ as Beowulf, there is no cure for anxiety, in the end: Beowulf’s great strength is enough to destroy his greatest foe, but only at the price of his life. The dragon is then replaced by countless other enemies who enslave his lordless people.¹¹⁷ The analogy is to all mankind, asserting that passing and decay overtake the greatest of striving. ‘Falleness’ in man and nature is the result of the banishment from Eden, just as ‘this transitory life’ is the stamp of exile. To know the transitoriness of exile is to understand the passing of all things, and that

It avails not the soul guilty of sin
for a ransom—gold, rather than the fear of God—

¹¹² Mitchell, 119.

¹¹³ Bradley, 64.

¹¹⁴ A kenning is a literary device, often ironic, in which two simple nouns are put together to form a nuanced, metaphorical compound noun.

¹¹⁵ Mitchell, 119.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 119.

¹¹⁷ Beowulf, 104.

when he earlier hides it while he lives.¹¹⁸

The second aspect of Christianization is to confront this existential issue—the passing of all things—and herein lies the second aspect of the dialogue. The Christian experiences transitoriness, but one might say there is an emphasis on the root “transit-”: the Christian life is a journey out of exile, and though it retains much bitterness until the exile is ended, the passing of the world serves as a foil to eternal joy, increasing faith. Thus there is a reinterpretation of the exile’s experience of transitoriness, in the wake of its use as an illustrative metaphor. The exile-journey motif is exemplified by The Seafarer, summed up in the argument that a perilous sea-journey with a happy end is better than a land-loving existence with only a passing security. The Seafarer experiences the “sea-weary” transitoriness of an exile, but his response is to burn for the “joys of the Lord” all the more. The kenning *hranrad* (“whale-road”), as used in the poem, implies at once that the ‘seafarer’ has chosen a perilous life alien to that of men, but as a route to something better than the marshy island of exile where men believe they belong; this image is one of peculiar peace in an atmosphere of transitoriness.¹¹⁹ This trope also figures largely in Guthlac, though in the case of the saint, only death is represented by the metaphorical journey, and not all of life;¹²⁰ for the speaker, however, who wishes to imitate the saint, the metaphor is similar to that of The Seafarer.¹²¹ Juliana, contrastingly, offers a scene where the murderer Heliseus drowns at sea as a fugitive exile; he is described in hell as a *permanent* exile, bereft of companionship and a

¹¹⁸ Furches, 7-8 (from The Seafarer).

¹¹⁹ Mitchell, 119.

¹²⁰ Codex Exoniensis, 164, 182.

¹²¹ Ibid., 184.

lord's gifts—a bitter irony.¹²² The comparison is made implicitly with the Christian life, which conversely offers a *happy* irony: security in peril, life from death. In The Dream of the Rood we see most clearly the essence of this inexplicable hope in the midst of transitoriness, that is, the 'transitory' journey from exile:

Then in wonder and joy I worshipped the Cross

Most willingly, although I was alone

With my own poor company. My soul was

Inspired to prepare for a journey...

...I have not

Many friends of influence here on earth; they have journeyed on

...Now I look day by day

For the time when that Cross

...Will fetch me away from this fleeting life

And lift me to the home of happiness...¹²³

This is the essence of the Christian reinterpretation of the exile's sense of transitoriness, which accompanies the use of transitoriness to interpret Christian doctrine. This dialogue in Old English poetry between religion and culture argues for the same ethnic ideation in society: culture was unified under a higher meaning, creating the English people.

¹²² Codex Exoniensis, 283.

¹²³ Mitchell, 131-2.

Chapter 5: *Lof Lifgendra, Lastworda Betsi*¹²⁴

Renown (Old English *lof*) had specific connotations for the English, and it was through this framework that the cultural ideal was Christianized. Taken generally, the concept, like transitoriness, is a near-universal concept, far from limited to Northern Europe in the Dark Ages. The Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh, for instance, is without a doubt the oldest literature extant from any culture, and renown is a primary focus.

Eternal youth (figuratively, the end of transitoriness) proves elusive for the eponymous protagonist, so he contents himself with the lasting fame earned by building a great wall about his city. The Old English poetic tradition contains the English version of this ideal. For a city-state culture like that of early Mesopotamia, renown was built with mud-brick; for a warband culture, renown was won by courageous deeds of arms, and was sung by poets of the oral tradition. Widsith considers this point from a poet's perspective, giving a fantastic list of gold-lords the poet has served, each one of whom

...desires to exalt his heroic standing until everything passes away
life and light together. This man deserves glory; he will keep his lofty and
secure renown here below the heavens.¹²⁵

The wandering poet at once entertains with songs of past and legendary heroes, and composes new works for his current employer. In this way the gold-giver may see himself as acceding to a pantheon of worthies, whose fame outlived 'this transitory life.' Bruce Mitchell names The Battle of Brunaburh as an ideal example of this type of 'new work': it is "the work of an Anglo-Saxon publicity man."¹²⁶ Perhaps elegiac works such as Maldon should be seen as part of the genre: although it is not the will of the dead hero

¹²⁴ "...the praise of the living, the best of fame" (from The Seafarer).

¹²⁵ Bradley, 340.

¹²⁶ Mitchell, 41.

that brought these into existence. the intent to preserve renown is similar. Renown, fame for noble deeds, was the non-religious palliative for the passing of the good life. The first aspect of this class of Christianizing tropes is the acceptance of this notion as good in itself, but ironically inadequate. Thus the cultural ideal is used as a method for interpreting Christian belief. The second part of the dialogue is the reinterpretation of the cultural ideal through the precepts of religion; here, this takes the form of an assertion that the greatest fame was to be gained by holy deeds, remembered eternally by God.

The poetic Christianization of fame first involves the concept's use as a metaphor to interpret Christianity in terms appropriate to a warband society. Although selfish fame is rejected, a 'holy *lof*, 'the Christian interpretation of fame, is seen as the fulfillment of a warrior's hope for eternal fame. The Christianization of 'fate' in Beowulf has already been explored, and its intentionally 'ancient' style has been revealed as the core of its homiletic intent, along these same lines. Beowulf also deals with renown, to a lesser extent, and the type of renown therein is the pre-Christian concept acceptable to the Christian poet. It is thus connected to the courage spoken of previously: in the combat with Grendel's mother, Beowulf's decision to continue the fight hand-to-hand after his sword proves useless receives the following authorial commentary:

So must any man [decide]

who hopes to gain long-lasting fame

in battle; he must risk his life, regardless.¹²⁷

That is, Beowulf's resignation to the fated outcome of the battle is the key to great renown. This implies that there is a fame that is not long-lasting, earned by those who pick and choose their fights rather than acting with courageous resignation. As is clear

¹²⁷ Beowulf, 51.

from the final line of the epilogue, Beowulf is constructed as the man “most eager for fame,” unsatisfied with this inferior renown.¹²⁸ As such, Beowulf is finally satisfied after his third, fateful battle. Dying, he gazes on the mound of gold won from the dragon, who lies dead nearby: it is a fitting gift to his people, bought with his life. This is the best fame, the type sought by Gilgamesh and alluded to earlier, in a speech by the old king Hrothgar, an exhortation against gold-hoarding materialism:

What had long contented [a rich lord] now seems insufficient...
 Arm yourself, dear Beowulf, best of men,
 against such diseased thinking; always swallow pride;
 remember, renowned warrior, what is more worthwhile,
 gain everlasting.¹²⁹

Only the generous, the ideal gold-giving lords, those who “swallow pride” and give freely, will gain everlasting renown. Thus, Beowulf’s soul goes “to meet the judgment of righteous men.”¹³⁰ As referred to earlier, Beowulf is intentionally set in a ‘pre-Mosaic’ era by biblical references, and so without knowledge of Christ, his humility is “reckoned to him as righteousness,” prefiguring faith in Christ, as did Abraham’s.¹³¹ Beowulf sets up a biblically-derived metaphor for the fulfilled renown to be found in the New Testament: taking into account theology, it is this final fulfillment that allows the pre-figured *lof* to be fully effectual, as it is in Beowulf.

Other poetic sources are more direct, though less grand in scale, bolstering the reading of ‘holy *lof*’ in Beowulf. In Exodus, Moses tells the Israelites that

¹²⁸ Beowulf, 105, 46.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 58.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 93.

¹³¹ James 2:23 (excerpt) (RSV). See also the Appendix on Beowulf

...if [they] keep [God's] holy precepts [they] shall hence overrun each one of [their] enemies and occupy a victorious realm among the oceans, and the banquet halls of warriors. Great shall be [their] glory (*blæd*).¹³²

The warband imagery hints at a Christianization of renown paralleling that in Beowulf, but there is clearer evidence in the word *blæd*. This word is used many times in Beowulf, describing the wide-spread worldly fame of a legendary Danish warrior, that of the thanes around Hrothgar's table, and that of Beowulf.¹³³ The Exodus poet makes the same point as the Beowulf poet about the pre-figured renown of Christ, a standard Christian interpretation of the Old Testament. In Exodus, the Christianization is more simplistic, merely an image-laden rendition of the Israelites as warband warriors, whereas Beowulf uses Scandinavian legend, as well as warband culture itself, as 'Old Testament' figures to be fulfilled in Christ. The post-New Testament response to Christ's fulfillment of 'renown' is clearly imitation: in Andreas, the disciples are described with battle-imagery, "men of renown in the earth."¹³⁴ In this interpretation of religion through culture, the new renown sought encompasses the old, but has no lasting bitterness due to Christ's winning of true renown. This is still an illustration, as the battle-imagery of the apostles is just imagery; they are engaged in different activities than Beowulf.

But, to assume that the Christianization of pagan *lof* brought an unbalanced emphasis on spiritual warfare (as opposed to actual warfare) can be misleading, for if there was a warband-interpretation of the Bible via the ideal of renown, there was also a biblical reinterpretation of this warband ideal. As in Maldon, the opportunity to seek

¹³² Bradley, 65.

¹³³ Beowulf (original text), Lines 18, 1013, and 1703, respectively. Taken from "The Labyrinth: Resources for Medieval Studies" (Georgetown University, 2002), <http://labyrinth.georgetown.edu>. These examples are not all-inclusive.

¹³⁴ Bradley, 110.

renown has not been entirely restricted to the spiritual realm, although (as a Christian) Byrhtnoth understands the concept of grace, whereas the pre-figure Beowulf does not.¹³⁵ Grace is the imparting of the eternal renown earned by the warlord Christ in the battle of the Cross, as in The Dream of the Rood¹³⁶; faith is following in imitation, though relying on Christ as the only one deserving of fame, whether as a pre-figure (OT, Beowulf) or as a Christian (NT, Andreas). Therefore, there is, in the poetry, a Christian acceptance of worldly renown both as a prefigure and also as an added blessing to those who follow Christ as warband warriors, or as monks, as in The Seafarer:

...The best of posthumous fame
 Is to achieve great deeds on the earth
 Against the malice of fiends, against the devil,
 So that the children of men may honour a man's name
 And his fame at last may live with the angels
 For ever and ever, in the joy of life eternal...¹³⁷

These lines succinctly sum up the Christianization of the pre-Christian ideal of *lof* in Old English poetry: the only eternal fame has been won by Christ, and those who take faith in this will not only receive it, but are called to participate in it by imitation, winning acceptable earthly fame as a way of illustrating the renown won by Christ. Thus there is in the poetic idealization of fame both culture's interpretation of religion and religion's reinterpretation of culture, the dialogue of ethnic ideation.

¹³⁵ Mitchell, 34.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 119. Part of this excerpt forms the title of this chapter.

Conclusion

The tropes of Christianization present in Old English poetry argue for a model of English ethnic ideation based on a dialogue between culture and religion. In the poetry, Christian doctrine is interpreted and explained with metaphors appropriate to pre-conversion, Germanic warband-culture; also, there is a reciprocal reinterpretation of certain cultural attributes, according to their new metaphorical meaning. The most meaningful aspects of culture common to the Germanic tribes in Britain were clustered around the cultural ideal of the warband, but were not unifying until the Christian conversion. The conversion unified the tribes in terms of shared religion, which allowed for a common dialogue between religion and culture. Through this, shared culture took on religious systematization and meaning, and became the representation of a unity in heaven—a hierarchy of metaphor in which all cultural ideals figured the same sublime truth. The dialogue in the poetry is the expression of the ethnic ideation in society, through which ‘cultural ideals’ were transformed into ‘ethnic ideals.’ This was the ethnogenesis of the English.

This argument is not intended for any other people group, though it is surely the case that the ethnogeneses of many peoples had to do with the interaction of religion and culture. In the generalizing of an ethnogenesis theory to many cultures, a neat formula may be created, but it will no longer say anything useful or insightful. There were specific conditions in Britain that caused the English ethnogenesis to happen as it did, and if one condition had been different, perhaps nothing would have occurred. Christianity, for instance, cannot be generalized to ‘religion.’ Without the hierarchic unity of its theology, wouldn’t a dialogue have been much too factionalized? Or without

Christianity's historic acceptance of 'spoiling the Egyptians,' that is, utilizing aspects of pre-Christian culture in post-conversion times, would a conversion have resulted in a new meaning for culture? Also, pre-conversion society had as a primary form of entertainment the telling of complex poetic riddles—would a society without such a background in metaphor have interpreted Christianity through cultural metaphor? It is unlikely; in fact, it is unlikely that the ethnogenesis would have occurred at all, much less in the same way. Because of this, the only way to shed light on the specifics of a given ethnogenesis (if it is even possible) is to investigate internally, as through the poetry here, interpreting the evidence in a culturally appropriate manner.

It is worth noting that this observation suggests a 'third way' resolution to the conflict between Walter Goffart and Herwig Wolfram mentioned in the Introduction. The 'ethnoformative' process I describe in England seems similar to the theories of Wolfram, but I believe it stops short of this. Goffart is correct about the need to contextualize interpretations of literature, and his criticisms of Wolfram are well-founded. But Goffart is misguided in suggesting that barbarians were not affected by the past—he ignores the larger part of human experience, including the vast majority of religious traditions, not to mention the theology of Augustine. The real problem is found in readings of myth *not founded on contextualization*. What if a reading of myth in poetry is developed based on contemporary thought and practice, and is based on the extended exegesis of the large part of a body of literature? The Anglo-Saxon poets were not merely "the narrators of barbarian history," as Goffart would have it; 'mythopoeia' was fundamentally *their business*. Myth must be contextualized in history, but history does well to be colored by an understanding of contemporary motivations, conscious and

unconscious. This ‘third way’ has already been illustrated in the above by the productive synthesis of ideas from Patrick Wormald and Nicholas Howe, as outlined in the introduction and examined in the text.

Nicholas Howe’s argument, for instance, in Migration and Mythmaking,¹³⁸ is limited by his reliance on something similar to the ‘*origo et religio*’ hypothesis of Herwig Wolfram: Howe takes as a given that the English ethnogenesis proceeded from the interaction of religion and migration myth, missing the possibility of interaction between religion and more important aspects of culture. As seen in the poetry, warband ideals were the cornerstones of English society, while a migration myth is never specifically referenced. Howe’s argument is valid, but the richness of interaction between Christianity and the warband-ideals pushes the idealization of migration myth to a secondary causal position in the English ethnogenesis.

Patrick Wormald as well, relies on an internationally generalizing theory and thus misses the opportunity to expand his investigation. Though his article on the English ethnogenesis¹³⁹ pins down Christianity as the root cause and disproves the theories of political unification, he follows Richard Wenskus’s ethnogenesis theory in proposing that the Church operated as distributor of ethnic propaganda for purposes of power.¹⁴⁰ Beyond Amory’s proof of the frailty of ethnic propaganda,¹⁴¹ it is clear from this investigation that ethnic ideation did not always favor Church policy, nor did it always correspond to the monastic orthodoxy of the time. This calls to mind the debate over the

¹³⁸ Howe, Migration and Mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England.

¹³⁹ Wormald, “Bede, Beowulf, and the Origins of the *Gens Anglorum*.”

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁴¹ Amory, People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy, 489-554.

East Anglian king Rædwald's¹⁴² religion sparked by the magnificent archeological finds at the Sutton Hoo burial, which seems likely to be his. It has been argued that Rædwald is not the man buried there: he was a Christian, and Christians don't try to take their treasures to heaven.¹⁴³ True, it is not how most monks were buried,¹⁴⁴ but the author of Beowulf, probably a clergyman (given the theological complexity), certainly praises his protagonist's rich burial. I might argue that, since Rædwald indeed was a bit of a non-committal Christian (to say the least),¹⁴⁵ his religion was a type of 'learning' Christianity, which still had the training wheels of literal pagan symbolism. Or perhaps he was situated across the middle of the ethnogenesis in time and place.¹⁴⁶ Similarly, the spiritual equivalence of professions, powerfully implied by The Seafarer, as discussed in Chapter 4, does not fit in with the monastic ideal of medieval times. But the fact that asceticism is exalted in other poems argues for a more nuanced view of ethnogenesis as an organic process, one which can take on semi-contradictory aspects (such as the symbolic glorification of gold-hoards and warfare), rather than as an imposed order. Ethnicity is not an orderly construct that can be made to the specifications of those in power.

¹⁴² Died c. 616-627. See James Campbell, "Sutton Hoo," in James Campbell, ed., The Anglo-Saxons (London: Phaidon, 1982), 32-3.

¹⁴³ This information comes from Ian Wood, via a module he taught at Leeds University in 2001-2002. Arguing along the same lines, Prof. Wood made the point that nothing in the Bible specifically prohibits such a burial.

¹⁴⁴ I say 'most monks,' due to the find of St. Cuthbert's body, which was buried with a relatively rich treasure. The treasure consists of, most notably, a gold pectoral cross inlaid with gems, an ivory comb, a silver-plated traveling altar, and a fine gospel-book (James Campbell, "The Tomb of St. Cuthbert," in Campbell, 80-81).

¹⁴⁵ Bede, Ecclesiastical History of the English People, ed. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 189-91. Bede writes that Raedwald, under his wife's influence, sponsored both pagan and Christian rituals after his 'conversion.'

¹⁴⁶ If it were possible to date more of the poems, it would be interesting to investigate the development of symbolism in Old English poetry. It is possible that such a literal Augustinian interpretation of pagan culture as Rædwald's formed a bridge between the conversion era and later eras, and became less important once memories of pagan culture were thoroughly supplanted with the new English culture.

The English ethnicity, however, after its conception, surely had something to do with the *establishment* of political power. Alfred drew on the idea of Englishness, speaking on behalf of the “English” people in his treaty with the Viking warlord Guthrum.¹⁴⁷ Likewise, as Alfred’s sons pushed back the Vikings and politically unified England, it was surely the pre-existence of ethnic ideology that made such unity last. The Vikings’ paganism, contrasted with the Christian basis of Englishness, surely solidified kingship over the course of unification. If the English ethnogenesis occurred as laid out above, was political power in fact established by the interaction of ethnicity and the war against the *pagani*¹⁴⁸? Questions of political unification must be reconsidered with further research both inside and outside the Old English poetic corpus.

¹⁴⁷ S. Keynes and M. Lapidge, eds., *Alfred the Great* (London: Penguin, 1983), 171.

¹⁴⁸ *Pagani*, ‘pagans,’ is the word used by Asser, in his biography of King Alfred, for the Danish invaders. This has much implication for the possible argument suggested here, although such a possibility is glossed over by Keynes and Lapidge, who translate *pagani* as ‘Vikings’ (in *ibid.*, 67-110).

Appendix on Beowulf: Is A Christian Interpretation Reasonable?

Since before F. A. Blackburn's 1897 article "Christian Coloring,"¹⁴⁹ there had been debate over the Christian implications of Beowulf; some held a Christian interpretation to be valid, and some did not. After Blackburn's article, the debate grew more heated. Blackburn, upon a linguistic analysis of the poem, concluded that a Christian redactor had "colored" an original pagan-era poem with Christian trimmings, but that this did not have any import as regards the poem's narrative structure or meaning. H. M. Chadwick agreed with this analysis, as he found the Christian elements to be simplistic and devoid of influence in the narrative.¹⁵⁰ Friedrich Klaeber (1912), however, argued persuasively that the Christian elements are not interpolations into a pre-existing text, and that a Christian composed the whole. Following this, Blackburn's view was more or less abandoned in its original form. Yet Klaeber could be said to have held to a theory of 'coloration' as well, as he rejected the idea that Beowulf contains any sort of allegory, and instead maintained that the author was merely inspired by his Christianity in telling a heroic tale of pagan times.¹⁵¹

The 'coloration' theory has held influence in more recent times, as well, for instance in Mary Parker's Beowulf and Christianity (1987), in which the author argues that, while Beowulf is much more than Blackburn's "pagan poem inexpertly covered with a veneer of Christianity," Christian religion "has little or no overt part in the moral stance of the poem."¹⁵² A slightly more tempered view is that of Michael Cherniss, who allows that large passages in the poem have "a more profound type of Christianity," but

¹⁴⁹ Blackburn, 1.

¹⁵⁰ Qtd. in Michael Cherniss, Ingeld and Christ, (The Hague: Mouton, 1972), 126.

¹⁵¹ Ibid. 127, 129.

¹⁵² Mary Parker, Beowulf and Christianity. (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), 201.

sees the narrative structure as determined more by pre-Christian authorship and intent than by Christian influence or editing—in other words, ‘colored,’ and incapable of a Christian hermeneutical (i.e. symbolic) interpretation, which would imply authorial intent to create a symbolic work.¹⁵³ Thus the overall tone of the above school of thought could be called *anti-allegorical*, or *pro-coloration*, with regard to its view of Christian meaning in Beowulf.¹⁵⁴ That is, although Blackburn’s total rejection of Christian meaning is outmoded, these authors maintain that the poem’s structure and narrative owe their meaning to a pre-Christian heroic ethic, and that the poem’s Christianity is limited to coloration, however learned or deep.

It cannot be denied that Beowulf takes place in the world of pagan heroism, and that Christian author/redactor drew upon legend or tradition in creating his Old English verse—the poem is thoroughly Scandinavian in character, holding more externalities in common with the sagas¹⁵⁵ than with an Old English Christian poem like The Dream of the Rood. Still, this insight does not exclude a comprehensive, authorially intended Christian meaning. A fundamental oversight of the anti-allegorical position, has, in my opinion, been adequately demonstrated by research into the compositional and hermeneutical techniques of the place and time: namely, that an absence of allegory does not indicate an absence of unified Christian meaning. Conversely, in fact, the failure of allegorical interpretation points to a reasonable, historically informed interpretation.

¹⁵³ Cherniss, ch. VI, esp. 134.

¹⁵⁴ There are other authors, as well, who fall into this category: cf. Rogers’ “Beowulf’s Three Great Fights” in Nicholson, ed.. Also cf. Friedrich Klaeber, and W. W. Lawrence, the latter summarizing the general point in maintaining that, “though ever present, the Christianity is all on the surface. The real vitality of the epic lies in its paganism” (qtd. in Cherniss, 126-7).

¹⁵⁵ Cf. Cherniss, 121. Or consider Siegfried’s tale, ending with the Beowulf-like dragon combat.

It must be mentioned first that Beowulf is, as pro-coloration authors maintain, *not* allegory, and will not bear coherent allegorical interpretation: its characters are not representations, and the heroic narrative is not a contrivance devoid of meaning outside of complex theology (as in the Divine Comedy or Pilgrim's Progress). Although such notable scholars as J. R. R. Tolkien and Dorothy Whitelock have argued for a Christian allegorical interpretation,¹⁵⁶ and although the poem's complexity adds to the attractiveness of such an approach, allegorical interpretations are most often wildly different. As John Halverson has pointed out, "an allegory must have some coherence if it is to work"¹⁵⁷; that is, a true allegory could not be so obscure. Some have argued for Christian "typology," in which various events in the narrative are held to be disconnected metaphorical lessons. Yet this places mistaken emphasis on Christian meaning, since the unifying factor is the heroic narrative: this is more accurately viewed as coloration.¹⁵⁸

Beowulf is not allegorical, it is figurative. The difficulties in finding a Christian allegory in the poem spring from the fact that Beowulf is not meant to "represent" Christ (as in an allegory), but to *prefigure* Christ: the model is the Old Testament's relation to the New. The figure is a reality in itself, and thus is self-standing; but it signifies a more perfect reality. In this way, not all of the figure's features correspond precisely to the thing signified; in fact, the failure of precise correspondence is the primary point of argument, as it is exactly this aspect which signifies something more perfect. Chapter 2 (above) is structured along these lines, and its argument can be summarized by the following parallel analogies:

¹⁵⁶ J. R. R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics." in Nicholson. Lewis E., ed., An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1963).

¹⁵⁷ Cherniss, 130.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 131.

David : Christ :: the Hebrews : the Church

Beowulf : Christ :: Germanic ancestors : English people

That is, although David does not save his people, his life is, in Christian theology, commonly held to foreshadow Christ's life, in which these things did occur.¹⁵⁹ Similarly, Beowulf sacrifices his life to destroy an evil that holds his people captive, but without lasting effect. This noble failure prefigures a sacrifice with lasting effect. The Epistle to the Hebrews exemplifies this theology of figurative relationships:

¹⁵⁹ I must add an additional piece of evidence for this interpretation, which I think striking, but which I could not find room for in the chapters above (and which does not apply here, as it does not deal directly with the salvation of a people).

Beowulf, in a flashback to Beowulf's youth while describing his reign as king of the Geats (in his later years), relates that

He had been despised
for a long while, for the Geats saw no spark
of bravery in him, nor did their king deem him
worthy of much attention on the mead bench;
people thought that he was a sluggard,
a feeble princeling. How fate changed,
changed completely for that glorious man! (Beowulf, 73)

Similarly, when the prophet Samuel is told by God to anoint a new king for Israel, expectations are shattered:

...he looked on Eli'ab and thought, "Surely the LORD'S anointed is before him."
But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his
stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD sees not as man sees; man looks on
the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7, RSV)

The king, David, is the youngest, still tending the sheep (16:10)—not even considered by his father for the 'lineup' of possible kings placed before Samuel. David, as discussed in the above, is commonly interpreted as a Christ-figure. One justification is that Isaiah 53, perhaps the most well-known of the Old Testament messianic prophecies, famously teaches that the Christ will be "despised and rejected," as David was, prior to a glorious change:

Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been
revealed? For *he grew up before him like a young plant*, and like a root out of dry
ground; he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we
should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and
acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, *and
we esteemed him not*. ...when he makes himself an offering for sin [i.e. through his
death, in verse 8]...the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand...therefore I will
divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because
he poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the
sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. (1-3, 10, 12, RSV, italics mine)

The evidence speaks for itself, I believe. The above passage in Beowulf cannot be interpreted as simple 'coloration' lacking implication for the narrative. The correspondence of Beowulf to David (and therefore, figuratively, Christ) is certain in my mind.

For since the [Mosaic] law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices which are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who draw near.¹⁶⁰

But Christ,

by a single offering...has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.¹⁶¹

The ease with which Beowulf is interpreted along these lines, as in Chapter 2, further emphasizes the reasonableness of this 'figurative' analysis.

A figurative analysis of Beowulf is also a better historical fit than an allegorical analysis. Much of the Christian heritage of figurative hermeneutics has been shaped by Augustine of Hippo, the early-5th century author of The City of God. Bernard Huppé demonstrates extensively that Augustine's teachings were very current in Anglo-Saxon England.¹⁶² Furthermore, Huppé sheds light on the implications of Augustine's teachings for Old English poetry: what was good in pagan literature was to be 'pillaged' by the Church, just as the ancient Hebrews had made off with the treasures of the Egyptians, and not the idols.¹⁶³ This implies *precisely* the same relationship as that in the above analogies. In a letter sent from Pope Gregory to Augustine (the 6th century missionary to the proto-English), it is clear that this doctrine of "spoiling the Egyptians" was one of the founding characteristics of the English conversion:

The idol temples of that race should by no means be destroyed, but only the idols in them. [...] For if the shrines are well built, it is essential that

¹⁶⁰ Hebrews 8:11 (RSV).

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 8:14.

¹⁶² Huppé, Doctrine and Poetry: Augustine's Influence on Old English Poetry.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 4-6.

they be changed from the worship of devils to the service of the true
God.¹⁶⁴

Beowulf, interpreted along these lines, becomes more obviously a part of Old English religious lyric, in which centuries of pre-Christian ‘riddling’ tradition blended with the Christian tradition of teaching in parables. Old English riddles that survive utilize descriptions of the ordinary to figure a higher meaning—a shield obscurely described as a warrior, for instance, has more to say about the bitter agonies of combat than the shield’s physical nature, even though the “point” of the riddle is to describe a shield. The formula becomes a vehicle for insight. Beowulf is much the same: the heroic adventure is a device to figure a higher truth in an edifying way. It has been suggested that much Old English religious poetry—The Whale and The Panther in particular¹⁶⁵—derives its metaphorical structure from the riddling tradition, and here, Beowulf is again very closely related. The ‘carnal,’ such as ‘the whale,’ or Beowulf’s physical combats, is used to figure the ‘spiritual,’ to use the Augustinian terminology that would have been popular at the time.¹⁶⁶

A figurative interpretation of Beowulf answers the objections of the pro-colorists, who hold that allegorical explanation is inadequate, and those of the allegorists, who rightly observe too much complex religious thought in the poem to allow for a simple-

¹⁶⁴ Bede, 107.

¹⁶⁵ Ruth Wehlau, The Riddle of Creation: Metaphor Structures in Old English Poetry (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 10-11. The Seafarer, as well, draws on the riddling tradition to set up its homily’s symbolic interpretation, a point I argue in the notes to my translation of the poem (Furches, 2).

¹⁶⁶ As seen in On Christian Teaching. Cf. Huppé, 12-20. For a similar argument with a different tack, see Mary Padgett Hamilton, “The Religious Principle in Beowulf,” in Lewis E. Nicholson, ed., An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1963). Dr. Hamilton sees Augustine’s influence as creating in Beowulf a view of the past “in the light of eternity.” In this way, in the poem, an early English audience “might recognize the hand of Providence and illustrations of the doctrine of grace.” She relates this principle to fate (129), as I have done with the principle of ‘signs and things signified.’ I must add that my conclusions were independent of hers on this matter. I feel, however, that such a confluence of conclusions, each based on a different Augustinian principle, argues powerfully for a ‘figurative’ interpretation of Beowulf.

minded author. As well, Beowulf-as-figure aligns the poem with common themes and expository techniques in Old English poetry and intellectual history. With most preaching of the day being expository, is it not fair to assume that any audience of the time would have been more than prepared to interpret the poem as Augustine would have? This last point calls to mind the basic notion of the English ethnogenesis in the above chapters, for the theological and doctrinal thought processes that came attached to the Christian conversion prepared the proto-English to interpret all aspects of their warband culture in a similar way.

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