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# The warrior kings and their giants: a comparative study of Beowulf and King David

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THE WARRIOR KINGS AND THEIR GIANTS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF BEOWULF AND KING DAVID

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A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree

Master of Arts

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By

Fred McFarland

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MASTER'S THESIS

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## Introduction

The Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* has received a phenomenal amount of scholarly attention over the past few centuries. A major contribution to the poem's appeal has been the idiosyncrasies that surround it. There is neither author nor title assigned to the poem, though it is known by scholars as *Beowulf*, reflecting the central hero of the story. Even the approximate time of the poem's production, which ranges from seven hundred to eleven hundred years of the medieval period, continues to generate debates. The missing lines and singed edges of the manuscript as a result of a fire at a British library in 1731 (Prescott I) has also invoked a fair share of criticism concerning certain sections of the poem. But despite these oddities, one of the most contentious debates touches upon the combination of Christian and pagan elements within the poem.

In 1815, Grímur Thorkelín, an Icelandic-Danish scholar, published the first full edition of *Beowulf* with his controversial explanation concerning its Christian and pagan features. Following Thorkelín's commentary on this issue, a large number of critics have weighed in on the discussion. To explain the pluralistic nature of the poem, some early northern European scholars adopted the idea that *Beowulf* was once a Scandinavian manuscript imported to Wessex and eventually translated into Old English by a Christian, possibly King Alfred. However, later scholars viewed the poem as an Anglo-Saxon pagan work from a Scandinavian oral tradition that was later tampered with by a monk who added Christian ideas to make the poem appear Christian. Irrespective of these previous surveys, other scholars noted these Christian and pagan features as intentionally and strategically placed by a Christian poet.

In regard to these twists and turns of *Beowulf* criticism during the last few centuries, I will show why the latter assessment, which maintains the Christianity of the author, is more feasible when explaining the patchwork of Christian and pagan ideas within the poem, especially

when taking into account the Old Testament scriptures. Pertinent studies have indicated that some of the challenging paradoxes of the poem are better understood when comparing the culture of the newly converted Anglo-Saxons to the religious environment of the Israelites of the Old Testament scriptures. The intent of this study is to examine the previous scholarship that endorses this Old Testament perspective and the parallels between Beowulf, the King of Geatland, with David, the King of Israel, in order to sharpen the understanding of the dualistic nature of the poem.

Preceding this analogy between the Anglo-Saxons and the Israelites will be an exposition of the three scholarly trends that have transpired over the few past centuries. This overview will demonstrate the flow of scholarship that has shifted from the opinion that *Beowulf* was originally a pagan manuscript modified by a Christian scribe to the current view that the poem was produced by a Christian author. This brief outline will also show, particularly in the twentieth century, how more scholars began to discover Biblical parallels from the New Testament and the Old Testament within the poem. To maintain their claim concerning the poem's Christian authorship, some scholars have presented fascinating discoveries to show why the poet amalgamated Christian and pagan elements. Through ecclesiastical history and archeology, research has demonstrated unique correlations between the religious pluralism that existed among the Anglo-Saxons, possibly during the composing of *Beowulf*, and the Christian-pagan elements in the poem. These cultural similarities may demonstrate the intentions of the poet in fully reflecting the temporary religious condition of his Anglo-Saxon society.

The rapid conversion of the Anglo-Saxons during the seventh and eighth centuries may be responsible for some of the features of paganism remaining within this culture of these new converts, especially those features connected with war. The *Beowulf* poet was likely aware that the teachings of Jesus and the apostles of the New Testament would not endorse the attributes

of warfare described in the poem: warring against the enemy, vengeance against the foe, and battle fame. Hence, with this understanding, the poet tactically incorporated Old Testament allusions into his poem. As a Christian poet, or possibly a missionary, he would understand how the war-like propensities of the Anglo-Saxons would have a nexus with the violent world of the Israelites. Some critics have asserted that the poet may have been acutely aware of the similar war like characteristics of the Anglo-Saxons and the Hebrews and strategically crafted his poem with certain war ethics that overlapped both. Thus, some scholars have concluded that some of the more challenging passages of *Beowulf* may be more clearly interpreted if the critics are mindful of the similarities shared by both cultures.

Specifically, scholars have discovered certain correlations shared by war heroes of the Hebrew Scriptures, such as Moses and David, and Beowulf. Although some have pointed out many parallels between Beowulf and King David, there appears to be no further analysis as to how these correlations may help clear up some of the apparent incongruities within the poem. Considering the evidence that substantiates the Anglo-Saxons' admiration for the warrior King David, scholars should also take this into account in their examination of the more challenging parts of *Beowulf*. Therefore, these two factors, the Beowulf-David parallels and Anglo-Saxons' affinity for the military prowess of David, demonstrate the importance of implementing certain parts of the Davidic story as a tool to help interpret difficult passages in *Beowulf*.

## Chapter 1

### From Scribal Interpolator to Christian Author

Any *Beowulf* scholar is familiar with the tremendous interest this poem has generated for the last two centuries. The various translations produced globally demonstrate the poem's widespread influence. Currently, *Beowulf* has been translated into many different languages. Marijane Osborne states that Botkine produced "[t]he first partial but scholarly prose translation into French" in 1877 (349). In 1896, Simons completed the first Dutch translation of *Beowulf* in iambic pentameter, and in 1921, Rytter produced the first Norwegian translation. The first Japanese translation was published by Kuriyagawa in 1931, and the first translation of *Beowulf* in Spanish was by Vallve in 1934 (349-350). The first appearance of a Portuguese translation featured "in an anonymous Brazilian comic book" in 1955. Incredibly, the Old English poem was also translated into Arabic by Wahba in 1964. It is interesting to note that the global attention the poem continues to elicit can be traced back to the early *Beowulf* pioneer scholars of the 1800s. In 1805, Sharon Turner was the first known scholar to translate certain passages of the poem into English prose, and the Icelandic-Danish scholar, Grimur Thorkelin, produced his Latin translation of the poem in 1815 (343-344). In this early nineteenth century, researchers, such as Thorkelin, became particularly attracted to the pagan attributes of *Beowulf*, which eventually ignited the global attention the poem would receive.

During this early period of *Beowulf* criticism, Northern European scholars assessed the manuscript as an original work of Scandinavian authorship of the early medieval period and tended to emphasize the pagan elements while discrediting the Christian elements within the Anglo-Saxon poem (Irving 181). Robert Bjork and Taylor Corse discuss the preface of Thorkelin's *Beowulf* translation in which Thorkelin hypothesizes the Christianizing of the poem. He assumes

that the poem was originally produced in Scandinavia and somehow “found its way to England” where it was possibly translated by King Alfred in the ninth century. Thorkelin attributes the Christian substance that “crept” into the poem to the Anglo-Saxon king and enumerates several of the supposed Alfredian additions: “the brothers Abel and Cain and his descendants,” the “giants . . . destroyed by the flood,” and the narrator’s “lament about the Danes’ ignorance of God.” Thorkelin feels that these Christian modifications are slight and have little effect upon the manuscript’s Scandinavian elements. Similar arguments have been raised concerning these Christian and pagan components of the poem.

The same year of Thorkelin’s publication, a Danish historian likewise discounted the Christian aspects of the poem. Peter Müller, the Danish Professor of Theology at the University of Copenhagen, admires the Scandinavian characteristics of *Beowulf*, which he argues originally came from a Nordic poem. He states, “[t]his heroic poem is of northern origin” and “it reports at length on the glorious exploits of unknown Danish and Swedish kings” (83). Then, after generously praising the Scandinavian sections in *Beowulf*, Müller lists what he refers to as the “Christian concepts” interspersed within the Anglo-Saxon poem, such as “expressions about the righteous God,” “punishment for the wicked, reward for the good,” and “references to evil spirits” (85). Following this list, he states that this current poem is “merely an Anglo-Saxon adaptation of an old Scandinavian heroic poem.” In other words, what Müller identifies as heroic is the “old Scandinavian” poem, but he feels that the Christianized Anglo-Saxon version is simply an “adaptation.” His distinction minimizes the Christian characteristics of the poem in its Anglo-Saxon form while promoting its pagan characteristics, which Müller believes stems from an original Scandinavian poem.

Although later nineteenth-century scholars of *Beowulf* did not all perpetuate the views of Thorkelin and Müller, who claimed that the current form of *Beowulf* is a supposed Anglo-

Saxon translation derived from an original Scandinavian manuscript, they continued to minimize the Christian elements within the Anglo-Saxon poem. In 1877, Bernhard ten Brink published his critique on *Beowulf* and was less adamant than Thorkelin and Müller about the possibility of an original Nordic manuscript being translated by a Christian into an Old English poem.

Nevertheless, ten Brink does assert that *Beowulf* is derived from Scandinavian folklore, and its vitality was maintained by the Angles of England. To support this view, ten Brink traces the name of Beowulf to the god-like hero, Beowa, whom the scholar perceives as “Frea,” the Norse god (376). This interpretation of Beowulf’s name exemplifies how ten Brink highlights the pagan aspects of the poem in order to demonstrate the real power of the original Nordic tradition, which he feels was stunted by a Christian interpolator. Then ten Brink, in reference to the *Beowulf* narrator’s description of Grendel, proceeds to delineate how certain Christian interferences enfeebled the poem. He points to the unusual association of Grendel and elves with the descendants of Cain (378) and believes this Christian filler is incompatible with the original Grendel story-line. To ten Brink, these Christian interferences muddle the original pagan context of the poem and impede the ranking of the poem with other heroic epics, such as Homer’s *Iliad*.

Similar negative sentiments about the Christianization of the poem continued to be expressed up to the end of the nineteenth century. One controversial article of this period stirred up *Beowulf* critics by suggesting the Anglo-Saxon poem was tainted by aggressive ecclesiasts. In the year 1897, “The Christian Coloring in the *Beowulf*” by F. A. Blackburn was published. As did Thorkelin, Müller, and ten Brink, Blackburn marginalized the Christian elements of *Beowulf*, but the scholar is less supportive of the view that claims *Beowulf* was first produced in Denmark and later somehow transported to England where it was translated by a Christian. Blackburn believes the Anglo-Saxon poem is basically pagan with added “Christian

reflections and allusions” to make the poem appear more Christian (1). He argues that deliberate insertions were placed within the poem, possibly by a Christian monk or monks, but does not find any credible evidence that the “poem was composed by a Christian.” One of several points that Blackburn makes is the lack of New Testament doctrine in *Beowulf*. Expounding upon this issue, Blackburn supplies a list of missing New Testament theology: there are no references “to Christ, to the cross, to the virgin, or the saints . . . or to the scriptures, to prophecy, or to miracles” (12). Without the presence of such New Testament doctrines, Blackburn finds it problematic to assume the Anglo-Saxon poem was produced by a Christian poet. Hence, from Blackburn’s analysis, the Christian allusions of *Beowulf* are considered to be mere monkish tampering rather than legitimate Christian authorship.

However, not all negative critiques on the poem directly homed in on the Christian aspects, but, nonetheless, they still had a way of marginalizing these elements. At the turn of the century, in 1903, William Payton Ker also railed against *Beowulf* but for different reasons. Unlike Blackburn’s analysis, Ker’s does not cover any of the Christian and pagan elements. Ker appears preoccupied with the poem’s dramatic monster fights, which he believes overshadow some of the historical allusions of the story. This disproportion, Ker concludes, makes the poem too simple. But it is these battle scenes between Beowulf and the monsters that feature most of the poem’s Christian elements; therefore, by devaluing the monster scenes, Ker, perhaps inadvertently, also belittles the Christian elements. When comparing Beowulf with mythological characters, Hercules and Theseus, Ker finds more substance in the Grecian heroes. Unlike the Scandinavian King, who “has nothing else to do” but fight monsters, “there are other things in the lives of Hercules and Theseus besides the killing of the Hydra or of Procrustes” (Ker 510). He also argues that one of the poet’s greatest mistakes is neglecting a serious treatment of the historical sections of the poem by making the monster scenes the focal point. Some scholars felt

that Ker's blunt comments against the poet's emphasis on the monster fights was also an attack against the Christian allusions within the poem since these scholars viewed the battles between Beowulf and his adversaries as inextricably connected with the protagonist's victories against the powers of evil.

Taking in these comments, resonating among leading scholars that tended to minimize the poem's Christian aspects, one *Beowulf* critic from the early twenty-century felt it was his calling to take on these challenging criticisms. J. R. R. Tolkien, in 1936, in the "The Monsters and the Critics," defended the Anglo-Saxon poem against some of the more flagrant insults from scholars. Even though Tolkien primarily directs his rebuttal at W.P. Ker's unflattering commentary on the poem, he compiles a short list of some of the other scholarly criticisms: "*Beowulf* is a half-baked native epic the development of which was killed by Latin learning," "it is feeble and incompetent as a narrative," "it is a string of pagan lays edited by monks," and "it is the work of a learned but inaccurate Christian antiquarian" (8). Contrary to this general consensus in regards to the poem's inferiority, Tolkien borrowed some commentary from the British historical scholar, R.W. Chambers, to demonstrate what Tolkien believed exemplified the poet's craftsmanship.

From an excerpt of Chambers' *Beowulf and the Heroic Age*, Tolkien shows a comparison between the poet's clear identification of Beowulf's violent combatants with the "powers of evil" in contrast to Homer's monsters in the *Odyssey*, which seem to be less nefarious. For example, Tolkien refers to Chambers' juxtaposition of the struggle between Odysseus and Cyclops, the son of Poseidon, with Beowulf's graphic encounters with evil monsters (19). In this excerpt, Chambers shows Poseidon's reluctance to forgive Odysseus after the warrior severely wounds the eye of Cyclops (19). Tolkien shows how Chambers suggests there is a certain obscuring of Cyclops' evilness when Odysseus offends the god, Poseidon, an obscuring that is

not present in *Beowulf* (20). Chambers' conclusion, presented by Tolkien, states that contrary to the Odysseus scenario, the monsters which Beowulf must fight are clearly evil because they are against God, and the protagonist is exhibited by the poet as "almost a Christian knight." Even though Tolkien does not reiterate Chamber's exposition of the clear demarcation between the forces of good and the powers of evil present in *Beowulf*, he does accentuate the poet's skill and consistency in portraying the monsters as the powers of evil.

One example presented by Tolkien shows the poet's designation of ungodly qualities to Grendel by connecting his lineage to Cain, who was cursed by God. In this respect, "Grendel is not only under this inherited curse, but [is] also himself sinful" (Tolkien 34). Tolkien views this description of Grendel as a reflection of the poet's artistic ability to blend the "crude material" from a previous oral tradition with Christian elements (29). In the poet's consistent depiction of Beowulf's foes as evil, Tolkien sees the poem's religious characteristics, not as mere interpolations, but a fusion of Christian and pagan elements that authenticates Christian authorship of the poem. Despite Tolkien's admiration for the Christian poet's innovative approach, the scholar does not see any portion of *Beowulf* as allegorical. Commenting on the fire-drake battle, Tolkien states, "it was not yet the breastplate of righteousness, nor the shield of faith, for the quenching of all the fiery darts of the wicked" (Tolkien 23). The spiritual language quoted from Tolkien is a reference to Apostle Paul's letter to the church of Ephesus (23). Writing to this church, Paul reminds them what it means to be a soldier of the cross. The apostle encourages them to take "the shield of faith, wherewith you may be able to extinguish all the fiery darts of the most wicked one" (Ephesian 6:16). Tolkien refers to this metaphorical discourse presented by the apostle, but he does not apply this figurative language to the last fight scene in *Beowulf*. Tolkien disregards the allegorical approach in interpreting the dragon scene and pictures the poet simply endeavoring to depict the elegiac mood of Anglo-

Saxon history in its pre-Christian state. Although it appears that Tolkien had no intentions of connecting Paul's allegorical message with *Beowulf*, his brief mention of the New Testament writings may have spurred on a number of New Testament exegeses.

During the 1960s, a number of scholars proceeded to give their varying Christian interpretations of the poem. In 1962, William Whalon gave his own interpretation of the Christian context of *Beowulf* and focused on Hrothgar's didactic speech. In "The Christianity of 'Beowulf,'" Whalon associates the speech with the writings of the Apostle Paul to the Ephesians. The scholar points out a correlation between Hrothgar's warning about the "bitter arrow" from the "wicked demon" that strikes one who is full of "arrogance," and apostle Paul's admonition to church members to be aware of the devil's "fiery darts" in the sixth chapter of Ephesians (82; *Beowulf* ll. 1741, 1747)<sup>1</sup>. Analogous with Whalon's New Testament interpretation, Margaret E. Goldsmith, in "The Christian Perspective in *Beowulf*" (1962), also marked the spiritual implications within the discourse of Hrothgar. In her article, Goldsmith suggests that this lengthy presentation delivered by Hrothgar to Beowulf is a sermon (83). She views this homily from the Danish monarch as a forewarning against the dangers of spiritual lethargy, a concept also found in the letter to the Ephesians.

In addition to making these Christian parallels from Paul's writings to *Beowulf*, some scholars have perceived Beowulf as a Christ-like figure. During the same year the monographs of Whalon and Goldsmith appeared, McNamee's "An Allegory of Salvation" was published. McNamee considers Beowulf to be a figure of Christ himself and describes the poem as a salvific allegory produced by a Christian author (191). In one particular scene, McNamee juxtaposes Christ's betrayal at the crucifixion in the Gospels and Beowulf's betrayal in the dragon battle scene. He notes how ten of Christ's disciples completely abandoned the Savior and were absent during the crucifixion scene, with the exception of the apostle John. He then explains how the

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<sup>1</sup> *Beowulf* citations will be taken from Howell D. Chickering's *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition*, 2006.

scene in which the ten retainers left Beowulf behind, with the exception of Wiglaf, echoes the disciples' desertion of Christ (McNamee 203-204). McNamee also views Beowulf's plunge into the watery abyss in pursuit of Grendel's mother as a possible "allegorization of Christ's descent into hell," and "Beowulf's victorious ascent from the mere" as a possible "allegorization of Christ's triumphant resurrection" (199). McNamee then shows a key reference to this messianic resemblance in the narrator's expression, the "ninth hour" (204; *Beowulf* l. 1600), which is a term located in the Gospel of Luke and pertains to the time Jesus expired on the cross (Luke 23:44). Howell Chickering, in 1977, delineated some of the past debates over the "ninth-hour" wording in the narration of *Beowulf*. After carefully weighing out the arguments, he appears to be more inclined to interpret the narrator's expression as an intentional overlay of Christ's crucifixion scene from the Gospel of Luke (Chickering 338).

While *Beowulf* scholars have discovered apparent connections with the New Testament in the poem during the twentieth century, especially after Tolkien's monograph, other scholars have discerned stronger Old Testament influences besides the more obvious allusions to Creation, Cain, and the Noachian flood. For example, a survey of previous scholarship shows an interest in the Hebrew characters of the Old Testament. In his comparison between Moses and Beowulf, in 1988, Gernot Wieland lists some general attributes of Beowulf he feels are analogous with the characteristics of the Hebrew patriarch. Then Wieland focuses on the Anglo-Saxon expression, "*mannum mildest*" [sic], which describes the gentleness of the Geatish King (87; *Beowulf* l. 3181). Moreover, Wieland shows how this same expression is used to describe Moses in the Anglo-Saxon poem *Exodus*, a poem that reflects the Biblical account of Israel's deliverance under the leadership of Moses. Wieland espouses the possibility of the poet of *Beowulf* borrowing *mannum mildest* from *Exodus* and then applying it to his own Scandinavian hero. It was this discovery of *mannum mildest* in both *Beowulf* and *Exodus* that

Wieland claims led him into finding more parallels between Beowulf and Moses (89).

The strong man, Samson, is another Hebrew character that some researchers suggest correlates with Beowulf. A few years before Tolkien presented “The Monsters and the Critics,” Arthur E. Du Bois’ “The Unity of *Beowulf*” was published in 1934. At the beginning of the monograph, Du Bois pinpoints the poet’s description of Beowulf’s incredible strength of thirty men. But Du Bois only alludes to the similar calculated strength of Samson and gives no specific references to Old Testament passages (375-376). However, Andy Orchard, in “A Critical Companion to *Beowulf*” (2003), develops a closer correlation between the strength of Beowulf and Samson with the number thirty. Orchard first notes the narrator’s specific calculation of the strength of Beowulf, who has “the strength of thirty / in his mighty hand-grip” (*Beowulf* ll. 380-381). Then Orchard compares Beowulf’s strength with that of Samson, who kills thirty men at Ashkelon (Judges 14:19). He interprets the figure thirty as “a broad parallel” that is associated with Beowulf and Samson of the Old Testament scriptures (Orchard, *A Critical* 145).

Orchard’s parallels between certain Hebrew characters and Beowulf also include Moses and David. Orchard correlates the lone-child traveler from the Scylding line, drifting along the sea (*Beowulf* ll. 45-46), with the story of Moses, who was found as an infant traveling along the Nile River in a basket (Orchard, *A Critical* 145). Among these parallels presented by Orchard between the characteristics of Beowulf and Old Testament heroes, his most detailed comparisons feature the attributes of Beowulf and King David. Of course, these parallels primarily center on their heroic battles against menacing giants. In his analysis, Orchard points out how both King Hrothgar and King Saul suffer from the continuous invasiveness of their enemy giants (ll. 128-134; I Samuel 17:10-11, 16). Another comparison by Orchard shows that both Beowulf and David are offered rich rewards as a result of battling their adversaries (ll. 384-385; I Samuel 17:16, 25). Orchard also notes how Beowulf provides his past experiences

grappling with other creatures to demonstrate that he is quite capable of fighting Grendel, and David does the same before King Saul before battling Goliath (ll. 544-606; I Samuel 17:35-37). Also, another Orchard parallel shows how both heroic combatants decapitate their foes with their enemies' swords (ll. 1557-1558, 1588-1590; I Samuel 17:51).

This array of Christian correlations between the Bible and the poem, discovered by *Beowulf* critics in the last hundred years, correspond with the shift in opinion regarding the Christian context of the poem. The opinion that once supported the poem's Christian elements as intentional insertions by Christian copyists has been minimized by a broadening stream of thought that currently supports the poem's Christian authorship. This latter analysis also assessed the Christian and pagan aspects of the poem as a deliberate fusion by the Christian poet. Therefore, the arguments by earlier critics that claimed Christian intrusions, monkish interferences, or a bit of Christian touch up in a perfectly pagan poem were no longer acceptable, according to more recent scholarship. Frederick Klaeber was one of the first scholars in the early twentieth century to discredit the "earlier criticism" which surmised that portions of *Beowulf* were derived from a "supposed original pagan poem" (lxvii). Klaeber describes the poet as less concerned with an accurate account of the pagan past than with "depicting a version of the pagan past" that "could have had ethical value for the members of his Christian community" (lxix). On this basis, he believes the poet avoided developing characters that would overtly express the Virgin Mary, Jesus, or the apostles, or any feature of New Testament theology, such as redemption. Klaeber asserts the poet formed his narrative in a way that demonstrated his characters' virtuous conduct and heroism that resembled the "patriarchs of Old Testament history," attributes that his audience could identify with.

As more *Beowulf* publications continued to appear during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a number of recent scholars appeared intent on establishing the Christianity of the

*Beowulf* poet. In 1959, Arthur Brodeur exemplifies this gradual shift by referring to the poem as “essentially a Christian epic” (183). Larry Benson, in “The Pagan Coloring of *Beowulf*,” originally published in 1967, addresses some of the earlier *Beowulf* criticism that viewed the poem as basically pagan. Benson sharply argues that the “old theory that *Beowulf* is an essentially pagan work only slightly colored with the Christianity of a later scribe has now been dead for many years, and critics today generally agree that the poem is the unified work of a Christian author” (15). Benson clearly disagrees with previous nineteenth century scholarship which viewed the Christian elements as inferior and in opposition to the Scandinavian aspects of *Beowulf*. Furthermore, by describing the poem as a “unified work of a Christian author,” Benson implies that it was the poet’s purpose to blend both Christian and pagan elements in his work, a position that other renowned *Beowulf* scholars support.

Ogilvy and Baker’s review of mainstream *Beowulf* scholarship was published during the latter part of the twentieth century. Their survey listed some of the experts who opposed Blackburn’s position. After their brief synopsis of scholarship, they note how the “growing acceptance of a close awareness of Christian doctrines in the poet and his audience seems to be linked with an assumption by the critics of a single work by a single poet . . .” (Ogilvy and Baker 169). Likewise, editors Alfred David and James Simpson of the *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, in 2006, make their contribution to the discussion of the Christian origin of the poet of *Beowulf*. In their estimation, “[i]t is now widely believed that *Beowulf* is the work of a single poet who was a Christian and that his poem reflects well-established Christian tradition” (David and Simpson 30).

With more scholars accepting the poem’s Christian authorship, some turned to the violent world of Old Testament scriptures, and its relationship with the warlike culture of the Anglo-Saxons, in order to explain the poem’s lack of obvious New Testament allusions. Betty

Cox, in "The Cruces of *Beowulf*" (1971), claims that an Anglo-Saxon civilization, deeply rooted in violence, would influence a Christian poet to implement into his poem themes from ancient Judaic writings that dealt with judgment and war (21). She shows an example of this influence by referring to a bishop's preference for certain Old Testament books, such as Job and Psalms, that dealt with war and other violent events (Cox 22). Cox asserts that, due to the Anglo-Saxons' warlike nature, it would be more reasonable to investigate *Beowulf* in light of Old Testament themes instead of New Testament theology. Frederick Rebsamen, in his *Beowulf: A Verse Translation*, also addresses the quandary that occurs when scholars conclude that *Beowulf* was produced by a Christian author in spite of the absence of New Testament theology. From Rebsamen's perspective, a way to possibly resolve this issue is to consider the poet's ability to recognize the spirituality of his recently converted audience who were "strongly aware of their pagan past" (xv). Thus, Rebsamen suggests, the poet, cognizant of the level of spirituality of his Anglo-Saxon audience, did not overwhelm them with New Testament theology but interlaced Old Testament themes in the poem, which were more compatible with their spiritual condition.

Certain scholars also found that an investigation of the similarities between the harsh environment of the Anglo-Saxons and the barbarous aspects of ancient Israel gave an interpretative framework in which to understand the authorial blending of the Christian and pagan elements in *Beowulf*. Christopher Cain suggests that in *Beowulf*, "the poet deliberately parallels the pagan Germanic past" of his audience with the Hebrew Scriptures, and in doing so, he is able to introduce basic Christian principles to his audience (228). Cain believes many difficulties would have occurred if the poet were more inclined to use allusions in the poem that were more New Testament oriented. Cain expounds upon this argument by touching on the issue of *Beowulf*'s boastfulness; though this may appear incongruous with the tenets of the Gospels, it becomes less problematic when comparing his boasting to the harsh and violent

accounts of characters from the “pre-Christian world of the Old Testament” (233-234, 238).

In examining the concept of hand-to-hand combat in *Beowulf*, Morton Bloomfield mentions the paradox that occurs when endeavoring to develop such a pagan theme in a supposedly Christian poem. Bloomfield shows, conversely, how dueling with an enemy would be acceptable from an Old Testament perspective. To affirm his point, he then describes Hrothgar’s acknowledgment of Beowulf’s victory to both “the wisdom of God and the courage of Beowulf,” a scenario that was typical in the Old Testament (Bloomfield 546, 552). Bloomfield later shows how several Christian Germanic tribes throughout Europe validated their military exploits against their opponents by referring to “the battle of David and Goliath” from the Old Testament (552). Bloomfield’s analysis contributes insightful historical evidence that may resolve some of the paradoxes that scholars encounter as a result of the comingling of Christian and pagan elements by the *Beowulf* poet. Perhaps Bloomfield’s historical point concerning King David of the Old Testament may give another important clue that could assist scholars’ interpretations of some of the more complex areas where these Christian and pagan components are present.

Contrary to the scholarship of the nineteenth century, current discussions among some of the most prestigious *Beowulf* scholars affirm the poet’s Christianity and support the idea that the poet intentionally and strategically blended both Christian and pagan elements in accordance with the warlike nature of his Anglo-Saxon audience. Therefore, if previous scholars felt that *Beowulf* was designed to reflect the harsh and violent world of the Anglo-Saxons, similar to the civilization of Israel, then perhaps a comparison between the Old Testament and the controversial sections of the poem would help shed light on some of the apparent inconsistencies. Furthermore, in this comparative study of the Old Testament Scriptures and *Beowulf*, an investigation of several parallels between the Judaic King David of the Hebrew

Scriptures and the Geatish King Beowulf of the Anglo-Saxon poem will also be considered in interpreting the poem. But before engaging in this comparative analysis, it is pertinent to first examine how Christian-pagan elements may have been part of the poet's Germanic religious war culture. By observing the coexistence of these elements in the world of the Anglo-Saxons, and how the poet represented the spiritual essence of this society in *Beowulf*, one may be able to determine why the poet arranged his poem with so many allusions and parallels from the Old Testament rather than the New Testament.

## Chapter 2

### The Blending of Two Worlds on the Battlefield

Amazingly, in the early twentieth century, archeological findings of Anglo-Saxon England show a religious blending of Christian and pagan elements and appear to echo a similar fusion of these elements in *Beowulf*. In 1939, at the Sutton Hoo burial grounds in England, “expressions of pagan symbolism along with some clearly Christian artefacts” were excavated (314). The discovery included an interesting pair of silver spoons, engraved with the Greek names Paul and Saul. C. L. Wrenn suggests these spoons were “a baptismal gift” for an “East-Anglian King symbolizing his passing” from paganism to Christianity and also a commemoration of a similar experience of the apostle Paul on his way to Damascus “by which the Jew Saul became the Christian St. Paul” (314). Conversely, several of the items also discovered, such as the shield decorations, and a stag ornament above a scepter, are linked to the Nordic god Woden (315). The clear religious diversity expressed in this archeological discovery, Wrenn states, is similar to “the pagan sentiment and Christian thinking” in *Beowulf* (314). This parallel between the mixture of religious artifacts discovered at the Sutton Hoo burial site and the blend of Christian and pagan aspects of *Beowulf* would certainly make the poem less suspect of monkish interpolations.

The intriguing artifacts discovered at Benty Grange, England are also a unique reflection of *Beowulf*. Ruth Staver recounts an archeological discovery in 1848 of a warrior’s helmet, which has a boar emblem affixed at its crest (151). This boar figure is included in the narrator’s description of the battle helmets of Beowulf and his retainers as they first march on Danish soil (*Beowulf* l. 303). The boar had a significant meaning in Germanic and Scandinavian cultures. It has been noted by Dorothy Whitelock that the boar emblem was an integral part of the Freyr

rituals in Scandinavia and believed to be a symbol of protection in Germanic warfare (*The Beginnings* 21). Spears lists other Christian, Anglo-Saxon literature that has also featured the boar symbol. Commenting on Cynewulf's poem, *Elene*, Spears remarks that while Constantine is given a heavenly vision of a Christian cross, convincing him to battle for the faith, the boar helmet of Constantine is described (195). Cynewulf's syncretization of the pagan boar and the cross symbol illustrates the poet's familiarity at least with some of the pagan beliefs of England from their Germanic past. It would not be out of the ordinary for the *Beowulf* poet to incorporate a pagan symbol into his poem if by chance the poet was aware of some of the pagan aspects of the Germanic and Scandinavian civilizations. Similar evidence that illustrates a cultural blending of the Christian and pagan religions among Anglo-Saxons also includes a fully intact helmet excavated in York that dated from the eighth century (C. Hill 304). According to Hill, the helmet contains a Christian inscription and also displays pagan ornamentation on the nose and eyebrows. In spite of apparent contradictions between the Christian and pagan cultures, these archeological findings demonstrate that Anglo-Saxon culture, at one time, consisted of both these elements. The pattern of fusion excavated at certain burial sites is also recognizable in *Beowulf*.

What may appear to be unacceptable by today's Christian standards may not have been so anomalous during the apex of Christian missionary work among the Anglo-Saxons. Larry Benson explains the apparent contradictions in *Beowulf* presented by scholars when analyzing the mixture of Christian and pagan elements and believes these interpretations may rest on how these elements are perceived from biased attitudes toward pagandom. From his viewpoint, Roman missionaries were not as hostile toward pagans as some critics assert, and he states that "the dominant attitude of Christian Englishmen toward the Germanic pagans was one of interest, sympathy, and occasionally even admiration" (Benson 36). Benson further suggests

that this understanding may “shed considerable light on the problems raised by the pagan elements in the poem, revealing artistry where we thought we detected blunders” (37).

Perhaps, in this sense, the presence of Christian and pagan elements should not be described as modifications made by some meddling, monkish interpolator, but an intentional blending by a Christian poet, who meticulously fused these elements and reflected the diverse nature of his own society. But if this was the religious environment in which he lived, how did it become so dualistic in the first place? The missionary methods implemented by the Church of Rome made a large contribution to the rapidity with which the Anglo-Saxons embraced at least certain facets of Christianity. Moreover, Rome’s endeavors, during the seventh and eighth centuries, to win pagans to the faith also helped facilitate a Christian-pagan tone among their proselytes. And it is these primary factors that make the Old Testament scriptures a useful implement in understanding several of the Christian and pagan characteristics in *Beowulf*. An analysis of these characteristics of this poem through the lens of the Old Testament will be conducted in the latter portion of this thesis.

Religious historians have noted the ease in which the Anglo-Saxons were converted despite their previous pagan practices. The historian John Godfrey in *The Church in Anglo-Saxon England*, delineates some of the heathen customs of the Anglo-Saxons of the pre-Christian era during the fifth and sixth centuries (62). Godfrey’s list includes “animal sacrifices,” “erection of temples and shrines,” and the production of “images and altars” to Woden and other Teutonic gods (65). However, in spite of these old religious practices, the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity went relatively smoothly, and for the most part, peacefully with the exception of the resistance among the inhabitants of Essex (Godfrey 65; Staver 153). In 596, Pope Gregory was the first to make a significant missionary contribution to Old England. The pope dispatched monks from Rome to evangelize England with Augustine as one of the leading

missionaries (Latourette 89-90). One recorded missionary campaign holds Augustine responsible for ten thousand converts; however, it is quite possible that a significant number of recorded conversions such as this were gained by fiat (Godfrey 77). According to Latourette, during the lifetime of Monk Theodore of Tarsus, Archbishop of Canterbury, (602-690), "many of the Anglo-Saxons were converted and a hierarchy was organized" (90). This virtual establishment of the Christian faith in Anglo-Saxon England in less than a century was quite rapid indeed. Surely, there had to be some significant reasons why the Anglo-Saxons, who were entrenched in their Germanic religion, were converted to Christianity with such ease.

An explanation of this rapid transition into the Christian faith may rest upon the striking parallels between the pagan customs and those of the Christian faith. Interestingly enough, some of these pagan customs were utilized by the Roman Church to point would-be proselytes to certain aspects of Christianity. In doing so, missionaries made it possible for those still clinging to some past traditions of the old Germanic faith to absorb the very rudiments of Christianity "without disrupting many basic" previous pagan practices (Chaney 209). An example of such parallelism can be observed in Anglo-Saxon poetry. In the poem *Christ* the poet applies the pagan concept *wergild* to the Christian concept of redemption, denoting how Jesus paid the ultimate man price for the sins of the world (Cox 16). Another practice among Anglo-Saxons was the code of *comitatus* which stressed the bond between the lord and his retainers and had "certain very binding obligations" (Ogilvy and Baker 97). According to the Latin historian Tacitus, this code of conduct emphasized the "protection and generosity on the part of the" lord, which included an adequate supply of food and gifts (Greenfield and Calder 134; Godfrey 62). In return, the retainer reciprocated their lord's generosity by vowing to remain loyal to him, even "to the death" (Ogilvy and Baker 97). Lilla, a thane of King Edwin, remarkably epitomized this code of ethics by interposing "his own body to receive the stroke" from a sword that was meant

for his king (Bede 2.ix). *Comitatus* “remained a basic principle of society throughout the entire Anglo-Saxon period” (Godfrey 62). *Comitatus* was so influential throughout England that St. Boniface’s loyalty toward his pope was compared to a thane’s devotion toward his king, and the “principle came to be sublimated by countless Saxons into a noble devotion to Christ” (Godfrey 62). Through these examples, it becomes clear that certain Christian aspects could easily be presented within the framework of paganism.

The poet of *Beowulf*, in tune with this code of ethics, appears to have crafted a clear model of *comitatus* in the dragon scene where Wiglaf remains devoted to his king in the heat of battle while the other thanes escape to the woods running for their lives. As Wiglaf witnesses the agony of the king, engulfed by the flames, the faithful “shield-bearer” remembers the vow made to his lord:

I recall the time, when taking the mead / in the great hall, we promised our  
chief / who gave us these rings, these very armlets, / that we would repay him  
for these war-helmets, / tempered edges, if he ever needed us. (ll. 2633-2637)

Wiglaf, in this scene, describes two significant elements that make up the *comitatus* principle: Beowulf’s generosity demonstrated by his consistent gift-giving toward his thanes, and Wiglaf’s resolution to keep his vow of loyalty and service by defending his king to the death. It would not be odd for a Christian poet to give an example of the *comitatus* principle in a particular scene, considering the fact that this Germanic custom was adapted by Catholic missionaries as a sign of Christian loyalty to Christ.

Though the Catholic missionaries advantageously used certain pagan customs to give Anglo-Saxons an understanding of New Testament theology such as redemption (Cox 16), it would make more sense to consider the close association some of these pagan principles had with the principles of the Hebrew Scriptures. Cox notes the similarities between the tribal-like

cultures of the Anglo-Saxons and the Jews and shows why “*comitatus* found easy nexus with the God” of the “Old Testament” (21). When examining the relationship between Judaic Kings and their mighty men of the Hebrew Scriptures, scholars may perceive an example of the *comitatus* principle. In his most trying combat, King David almost loses his life to the Philistine giant Ishbibenob until Abisai, one of the king’s gallant warriors, courageously intervenes and slays the giant (II Samuel 21:16-17). Abisai’s valiant maneuver to save his king, even if it meant risking his own life, would certainly connect with at least one aspect of *comitatus* previously described. Observing the war-like natures between the Anglo-Saxons and Judaism, one could see how *comitatus* might be adaptable to the warriors of Judah.

Warring against the enemies of God is one of the important themes throughout *Beowulf*, and a theme peppered throughout the Old Testament. It was a particular motif the Anglo-Saxons could have identified with while embracing the new faith. Whitelock notes the civil wars that often broke out between the West Saxons, Mercians, and Britons, and how the *Beowulf* poet “spoke of battle to men who knew what these things meant” (*The Audience* 87). In *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History*, an example is given of Oswald, king of Northumbria in 634 C.E. (*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* 27), who erected a wooden cross on the battle field before his violent engagement with King Cadwallon (Bede iii.2). The eighth-century Catholic monk, Adamnan, refers to a prayer by the king in preparation for the war. According to Adamnan, some portions of Oswald’s appeal to God were taken from the first chapter of the book of Joshua, a chapter that features God’s promise of victory to the Israelites (i.1). It is interesting to note that even though King Oswald demonstrates his devotion to Christianity by erecting a cross, the king’s thoughts were focused on Ancient Israel’s success under the leadership of God. With feuds, wars, and other violent activities taking place among the Germanic tribes, such people would be more inclined to follow a sort of God that favored striking David’s “adversaries” and breaking

“the teeth of sinners,” over a Christ who admonished his followers to turn the other cheek when their adversaries first struck the “right cheek” (Psalm 3:7; Matthew 5:39). If the *Beowulf* poet was familiar with the similar war-like nature of his Anglo-Saxon audience and the Jews of the Old Testament, it would not be too difficult to imagine the poet carefully blending together specific pagan traditions and Old Testament allusions that could easily be connected to warfare.

An interesting blend of Old Testament and pagan attributes appear in the Old English poem *Exodus* where Moses, the leader of the Israelites, is depicted as a Germanic hero in armor instead of the garments of a desert sojourner (Wieland 86). It is not a coincidence that the poet chose a story from the Hebrew Scriptures instead of a story from the New Testament. According to Cain, “[t]he Old Testament is the source for about one-third of the extant poetry” of Anglo-Saxon literature (238), and *Exodus* is certainly indicative of this tendency. What is more fascinating about *Exodus* is that Moses is suited up with Germanic war attire instead of a desert garment. It would appear as though the poet composed his story to appeal to an audience that was familiar with war. This also may explain why the Christian poet of *Beowulf* amalgamated Old Testament allusions with violent epic battles rather than allusions from the New Testament. Instead of attempting to understand the poem’s pagan aspects within the perimeters of the New Testament, scholars might gain clearer understanding by investigating these aspects in relation to the war characteristics that are analogous to the Anglo-Saxons and Judaism.

A warrior’s courage in battle is a vital principle that may be observed particularly in the *Beowulf* fights and among Hebrew skirmishes as well. When violently grappling with Grendel’s mother, *Beowulf* shows tremendous bravery as he engages in heavy combat. As the fight continues in the antagonist’s lair, *Beowulf* draws his sword and takes a full swing and discovers its uselessness in the battle. But *Beowulf*, despite the failure of his trusty sword, still remains “resolute” and “not slow in courage” (*Beowulf* l. 1529). These key expressions highlight the

intrepidity of the Geatish warrior, even when circumstances make the hero's victory unlikely. One of the primary features of the Old Testament heroes and the Israelites was their indefatigable disposition despite the almost insurmountable circumstances: Caleb believed Israel could gain victory against the giants of Canaan (Numbers 13:30); Gideon and three hundred Israelites were willing to battle the Midianites and the Amalekites, whose immense armies were compared to grasshoppers in a valley (Judges 7:7, 12); and the young shepherd David accepted the challenge to fight against Goliath the giant (I Samuel 17:32). This is a characteristic that must have been admired by Anglo-Saxons whose "prime occupation" was "warrior-ship" (Cox 21). King Oswald's prayer for war courage, in his reference to God's discussion with Joshua, attests to the significant connection war courage has across both cultures (Adamnan 1.i). This same type of courage also displayed in Beowulf's heroic battles is a characteristic that has common ground with Old Testament patriarchs and kings. Also, taking into consideration that Beowulf was not just fighting any foe, but adversaries of God (*Beowulf* ll. 1682-1683), a reader familiar with the scriptures might even detect a somewhat Old Testament feel from these scenes.

God's intervention in the battles of courageous warriors is another aspect evident in fight scenes of both Beowulf and Hebrew characters. This biblical characteristic can be observed in Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother. When she vigorously stabs Beowulf with her large knife, the warrior's death appears inevitable; however, her efforts are in vain because his chain mail is impenetrable (ll. 1545-1549). At the end of this suspenseful moment, the narrator credits a "holy God" for controlling the battle (ll. 1553-1554). In this episode, two ideas are combined by the poet: the intrepidity of Beowulf (as mentioned earlier) and God's intervention in warfare. What is significant in Beowulf's violent engagement is his lack of complete autonomy from the divine. Beowulf is courageous, but the "mighty Lord" intervenes when necessary (l. 1554). This

collaboration is an important factor in Old Testament stories. When an apprehensive king of Israel is overwhelmed by the incredible odds of defeating the king of Chanaan, Deborah, a judge of Israel, fearlessly accompanies the king in leading out the nation of Israel to battle (Judges 4:3-9). Obeying the command of Deborah to strike against the chariots of Chanaan, Israel and their king observe God's hand working against the opposing nation (Judges 4:15). This collaborative effort between God and his courageous followers is also illustrated in Jonathon's fight against twenty Philistines. After the violent affair is over, the narrator assures the reader that victory was given through the miraculous power of God (I Samuel 14:15). Although the New Testament contains many instances of courageous followers overcoming obstacles through God's power, the human-divine partnership portrayed in the Old Testament corresponds much closer with the collaboration demonstrated between Beowulf and God. The key difference is that the Old Testament connects this collaboration in the context of war and the New Testament does not.

In addition to the Catholic missionaries borrowing the Germanic concepts *wergild* and *comitatus* to make Christianity more appealing to Anglo-Saxons, there is historical evidence that reveals other approaches adopted by missionaries. Although some missionaries allowed certain pagan customs, not all the ecclesiasts felt the same way. At times, leaders of the church demonstrated intolerance for pagan practices. Pope Boniface, in his letter to King Edwin of Northumbria, pointedly rebuked pagans who invested their time in "pernicious superstitions of idolatrous worship" and viewed it as an enslavement by the "devil's fetters" (Bede ii.10). Then the pope condemns the king's own personal interest in this religion by calling him delusional, and implores the king "to hate idols and idol worship." The Church's disdain for idolatry is portrayed in *Beowulf*. After Grendel continues his vicious attacks against the Danes, the narrator describes King Hrothgar's surviving men as desperately preparing "war-idol offerings" and saying "old words aloud" in hopes of eliciting a response from their god (*Beowulf* l. 176). In

response to their idolatry, the narrator belligerently states “that the great soul-slayer might bring some comfort / in their country’s disaster. Such was their custom, / the hope of the heathen . . .” (ll. 177-179). In this episode, it appears as though the narrator’s statement is a sardonic poke at the futility of idol worship. This derogatory comment appears to echo the sentiments of Pope Gregory who strongly advises King Ethelbert to destroy the heathen temples dedicated to idolatrous practices (Godfrey 79).

But contrary to this staunch position against idolatry presented by the poet, there remain elements within the poem that some scholars feel are inconsistent with Christianity. For example, Klaeber suggests that the funeral pyre presented at the beginning of *Beowulf* is “conspicuously pagan” (Klaeber lxxi). However, Klaeber is not clear as to what constitutes a Christian funeral, but he could be referring to funeral practices that pertain to “unfurnished inhumation,” in contrast to cremation burials accompanied with certain possessions of the deceased (C. Hill 298). Even though, in some cases, archeological excavations have revealed cremated bones and personal possessions at Christian burial sites, “after the seventh century, Anglo-Saxons did not cremate their dead” (299). The practice of buried grave goods was also abandoned as Christianity became more influential (Hines 381). Perhaps a clergyman, such as Alcuin, the librarian and schoolmaster of York minster, who vehemently scorned other churchmen for listening to lyrics about heroic pagan kings, would have little tolerance for funeral pyres (Cain 229; O’ Donoghue viii). Regardless of the negative sentiments that may have occurred toward funeral pyres, Klaeber points out the manner in which the narrator of *Beowulf* refers to this ceremony with unusual solemnity rather than condescension (lxxi). This perceived contradiction between the *Beowulf* narrator’s almost reverent disposition toward Scyld’s funeral pyre and condemnation of idolatry would appear less discordant if scholars consider the nonthreatening approach missionaries implemented to rapidly convert a pagan community to

the Christian faith. It should be remembered that a newly converted society would not reflect the same maturity level as a society seasoned in the Christian faith.

In order to win over Anglo-Saxons, the church had to adopt a certain strategy that would not condone idolatry and yet would maintain enough flexibility to allow particular pagan customs to remain intact. Godfrey states that Rome's missionary success was not due to an "uprooting" of the old pagan religion (66). Instead of completely excoriating the pagan religion, the missionaries would progressively wean the pagans off their former belief system. Pope Gregory became the chief facilitator of this methodical maneuver. However, it took some reconsideration on the part of the Pope to concede to a more amiable method of managing pagandom. In spite of Pope Gregory's foreboding letter to King Ethelbert, strongly advising him to demolish pagan temples before the end of the world approaches (79-80), the pope dispatched a second letter to the Abbot Mellitus during the same year, 601 C.E. While "en route to Britain with a band of missionaries," Gregory shows an apparent change of heart, or possibly a change in strategy (Niederer 176). In this subsequent letter, the pope gives the injunction for the missionaries not to destroy the temples but only the heathen images within the temples and to sprinkle the interior of the temples "with holy water" and to furnish them "with altars and relics" (cited by Godfrey 80).

Historical examples demonstrate the church's compliance with the pope's wishes to merely convert pagan temples into houses of Christian worship. A temple that was said to be that of King Ethelbert was cleansed by Augustine and devoted to the martyr St. Pancras. Godfrey states that adaptations "of heathen temples as Christian churches was a noteworthy characteristic of the Roman mission in England" (78). Godfrey also shows how even the Pantheon of Rome was dedicated to "All Saints," which shows the clergy's adherence to the pope's recommendation. Looking beyond this missionary tactic, one might even imagine the

possibility of a certain degree of respect for their neighboring pagans by the missionaries, a sensitivity to their new converts' religious past. In Pope Gregory's second letter, he requests that the "English should not be deprived too ruthlessly of the memorials of their old religion" (cited by Godfrey 64). In addition to adapting the heathen temples as places of Christian worship, Pope Gregory also calls for the modification of pagan sacrifices. Instead of pagans slaughtering cattle to devils, this ritual would be adapted by the church as Christian sacrifices representing "the festivals of martyrs" (Godfrey 80). To some extent, this adaptation to particular pagan customs by Roman missionaries appears to be reflected in *Beowulf*: the wearing of boar helmets that was a symbol of the Freyr rituals, the *comitatus* principle, and the funeral pyres.

Although less rigid maneuvers were adopted by missionaries, whether for sympathetic or strategic purposes, or both, these methods may have contributed to the practice of mixing both Christian and pagan features into worship or relapses back into paganism altogether. Among the kings converted to their new faith, King Rædwald of East Anglia in the seventh century demonstrates this dualistic form of worship. Bede records Rædwald "serving both Christ and pagan gods" by erecting "one altar for the Christian sacrifice and another small altar on which to offer victims to devils" (ii. 15-16). In other cases, kings and princes completely reverted back to paganism. After the bishop Mellitus baptized many Anglo-Saxons into the Christian faith, including King Sabert of the East Saxons in the early seventh century, the king's sons later renounced their faith after his death and "granted liberty to the people to serve idols" (Wilkinson 176). Similar relapses into idol worship among kings and citizens was not uncommon during the early phase of the Anglo-Saxons' Christian experience. If Latourette is correct in his claim that "the faith was adopted by a people as a whole at the instance of the secular ruler," then inevitably occurrences of some turning away from Christianity would be expected (89). This is the religious world that perhaps the poet of *Beowulf* recognized while crafting his poem, a

culture where change from one religion to the next is experienced “by fiat rather than personal conviction” (Hume 18). In these social conditions, it may not be so unusual for the *Beowulf* poet to riddle his poem with certain pagan burial rites while condemning more flagrant idolatrous practices. This ability to reflect intolerance for idolatry and yet feature a particular pagan custom, which may have still remained a part of his Anglo-Saxon community, shows the innovative ability of the poet.

Despite the numerous arguments that expose the inconsistencies within *Beowulf*, some of these paradoxes may be understood if the Christian and pagan elements of the poem, which reflect the religious culture of the Anglo-Saxons, are considered within the framework of the Old Testament scriptures. Earlier in this essay, some common values of the pagan Anglo-Saxons and the Hebrews of the Old Testament were examined. It was also noted that most of these similar values shared by both cultures were inextricably linked with war. These similarities previously examined were *comitatus*, battle courage, and collaboration between God and his warriors in combat. Being aware of his warlike environs, the poet may have conscientiously blended heroic principles in certain scenes that were compatible with the war culture of his audience. By examining *Beowulf* in light of these cross-cultural similarities between the Anglo-Saxons and the Israelites, critics would be able to have a clearer interpretation of the quandaries in the poem due to the presence of Christian and pagan elements.

A particular scene worth exploring a second time is the backsliding of the Danes after Grendel brutally attacks the residents at the mead hall for “twelve winters” (*Beowulf* l. 147). Howell Chickering shows the apparent conflict that surfaces when the narrator presents the Danes, prior to these attacks, as devout Christians praising God’s creation in song, only to portray them as idolaters in a later scene (288). The puzzling nature of these contradictory scenes increases when the narrator states the Danes “knew not the Lord” (*Beowulf* l. 180).

Because of the supposed incongruity of these passages, F. A. Blackburn views the narrator's condemnation of this heathen rite as a clumsy attempt to Christianize a pagan poem (16).

According to Blackburn's hypothesis, a bit of editing of the pagan poem by a "pious reviser" would be the explanation for this contradiction, but another option might be worth investigating (13-14). The narrator's remarks, which follow the line in discussion, should also be included when interpreting this episode: "knew not how to worship our Protector above, / the King of Glory. . . . who in violent affliction has to trust his soul / in the fire's embrace . . ." (*Beowulf* ll. 182, 184). The Old English word for "knew," in line 181, is *witan*, or in the plural sense, *wiston*, which can also be translated to "understand" (Baker 382). Using this word may slightly change the meaning of this discourse when coupled with some of the other ideas in this section. The narration in *Beowulf* may not be conveying the idea that the Danes had no knowledge of God, but that they did not understand how to worship God as the "Protector above" when under "violent affliction."

It is also important to recognize that from a Biblical sense the idea of knowing not the Lord did not always apply to a person or group that was oblivious to the existence of God. In fact, at times, this expression applied to those who strayed away from the faith. When a generation of Israelites began worshipping the pagan deity Baal, the narrator states that this generation "knew not the Lord" (Judges 2:10). Obviously, this scene does not refer to a group that was unaware of God's existence because the narrator states that they departed from "the God of their fathers" (verse 12). The narration clearly shows this next generation of Israelites, who "knew not the Lord," strayed away from the faith. Another incident that broadens this idea of knowing not the lord involves the two sons of the high priest Eli who turned away from their priestly positions. Before the story is told of their apostasy, the author refers to Eli's sons as "not knowing the Lord" (1 Samuel 2:12). It would be preposterous to conclude that these sons were

not aware of God since their father was an important religious official. If the supposed interpolator of *Beowulf* was a monk, as Blackburn assumes, then it is very probable that he had a broader biblical understanding of the phrase “they knew not the Lord.”

Other scholars have also interpreted this idolatrous scene as the Danes’ relapsing into paganism rather than a mere blunder on the part of the poet. Kevin Crossley-Holland, author of *The Penguin Books of Norse Myths* and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, translates lines 181-182 as “the judge of all actions, / was neglected by them; / truly they did not know how to praise the Protector of Heaven . . .” By using this term “neglected,” Crossley-Holland does not view the Danes’ idolatry as a sign of their lack of knowledge of God, but a neglect or a disregard for the “judge of all actions” (8). In other words, instead of turning to their heavenly “Protector above,” the Danes relapsed into pagan sacrifices during their intense trial. Alfred David and James Simpson, medieval specialists and editors of *The Norton Anthology: English Literature*, interpret the Danes’ sacrifice and prayers to idols as a “backsliding” situation (30). They also compare the Danes’ idolatrous behavior with “the children of Israel” who “sometimes lapsed into idolatry.” Goldsmith’s analysis views the Danes’ idol worship as a “falling-away from the true God” (79). This “falling-away” from Christianity was a reality, according to historical records, at a time when the Christian faith was relatively new in early medieval England.

Similar to the records of ancient Israel, there are historical accounts of Anglo-Saxons giving up the Christian faith and returning to their pagan religion. A particular account was previously discussed concerning King Sabert’s sons. Bede first reassures his readers of Sabert’s conversion after the king’s death (ii.5). Then Bede shares the immediate restoration of idolatrous practices by Sabert’s sons. Although it may be difficult to say whether his sons were really attracted to Christianity in the first place, they did return the “kingdom to paganism” and “expelled the Gregorian missionaries” (Yorke 48). There were also occasions recorded of

kingdoms reverting to paganism when under turmoil, similar to the Danes' situation in *Beowulf*. Dorothy Whitelock discusses restorative measures designed to win back Essex in 665 to Christianity "after a relapse into paganism in the time of plague" (Whitelock *Beginnings* 24). Bede recalls a time when a plague fell upon the neighboring towns of Lindisfarne, and people in the surrounding towns returned to "the false remedies of idolatry" and "enchantments" (iv.27). In response to this situation, Bishop Cuthbert quite frequently left his monastery to visit these towns in hopes of leading them back to the faith. While the Christian poet integrated this curious pagan ritual scene after Grendel's gruesome invasions, the poet may have been cognizant of the spiritual slumps among the new Anglo-Saxon converts.

Accompanying the list of supposed poetic manipulations is also Grendel's heritage, which is identified with his progenitor Cain. More specifically, Blackburn claims that a monk rearranged the introduction of Grendel by inserting a biblical allusion referring to Cain for his Christian audience, and by doing so, the interpolator "blunders badly" by making a pagan poem nonsensical ((Blackburn 18; *Beowulf* ll. 102-114). Then Blackburn assumes that by excising the Christian allusion, he is revealing the intent of the original pagan author (18-19). However, *Beowulf* does not stand alone as the only Anglo-Saxon poem that contains Christian and pagan elements. In reference to the Christian poems prior to the Norman Conquest, Chaney states that almost all Anglo-Saxon poems, including those with obvious Christian themes, contained some aspects of paganism (200). Chaney gives an example of a gnomic poem which has a sense of "neo-polytheism" that syncretizes both Woden of Scandinavia and the Lord of Israel (199). Likewise, the story line in the Anglo-Saxon charm, "Wið færstice," features a warrior battling against a group of mystical women. The story is interlaced with a "curious fusion of pagan folkloric elements and Christian ideas" (T. Hill 163). These examples of Anglo-Saxon poetry clearly show that *Beowulf* is not the only Old English poem that features a mixture of Christian

and pagan tradition.

Not all poems, however, that contained a blending of Christian and pagan elements were composed in Old English. The Latin poem, *Life of Guthlac*, produced by Felix in the eighth century also featured God's human instrument fighting against his adversaries. In some areas of the poem, Felix demonstrates some patchwork of Christian and pagan elements in his characterizations of monster demons as descents of Cain. Commenting on the foes of Guthlac, Whitelock discusses the parallels between Felix's poem and *Beowulf*. In both poems, the enemies of Christians reside in the "marshes" which "are the abodes of monsters" and the "evil broods are sprung from Cain" (Whitelock *Audience* 80). Therefore, unlike other poetic amalgams, *Life of Guthlac* specifically alludes to Cain as the progenitor of all evil spirits. This biblical emphasis on the evilness of Guthlac's enemies shows a careful distinction between the powers of good and evil. This same demarcation in *Beowulf* is noted by Tolkien (20). Even Bede was so inclined to draw a clear line between Christian and pagan kings who engaged in battle. While Bede ascribes saintly attributes to King Edwin, the historian describes King Penda of Mercia as a "most warlike man" and "more cruel than a pagan" (ii.17, 20). After these claims, Bede assures his reader that Penda was an "idolater" (ii.20). Bede's clear distinction of those on God's side and those against God within the context of war correlates with *Beowulf* and other Christian poetry. To make this distinction clear in their works in Old Testament terms, poets sharpened their rhetoric by designating heavenly language to their heroic characters while ascribing certain pejorative ideology to their villainous characters.

Some scholars may continue to view Grendel's ancestral link with Cain as a clumsy interpolation, but it may be just as easy to see this connection as a fusion within the context of war where both pagan and Christian worlds meet. Being a powerful war leader was a big concern for kings who desired to preserve their kingdoms (Yorke 16). Pagan burials also indicate

that weapons symbolized status. In different localities of England, archeologists have excavated Anglo-Saxon swords and spearheads from rivers and graves (Hines 381). Consequently, this war climate made it necessary for those in combat to look up toward a divine entity for battle security, and Woden, the god of war, became this deity of necessity (Yorke 16). Christian missionaries understood the Anglo-Saxon kings' war connection with Woden, and these zealous proselytizers knew by "fusing the ideals of the church and the war band" there would be greater interest in Christianity (175). To accelerate this interest, Bishop Daniels advised Boniface to demonstrate the superiority of the Christian God over Woden, stressing how Christian nations were the most "prosperous in the known world" (174). Of course, the best way to tap into the war psyche of Anglo-Saxon leaders was to recount some of the Old Testament battles. With this backdrop, it is not difficult to imagine the Beowulf poet developing a Scandinavian hero who "as God's instrument" battles God's enemies, an "Old-Testament concept" that was "familiar in Anglo-Saxon religious literature" (Puhvel 98). Godden states that the "Old Testament was the major influence on Old English literature" and "was the source for about a third of the extant poetry . . ." (206). Klaeber feels that Grendel's depiction as a descendent of Cain, warring against God's people, may have been a strategy to educate Anglo-Saxon listeners on the continuation of the cosmic conflict on earth which began in the days of Genesis (lxxi).

When examining the allusions of Cain and the wicked giants in relation to Grendel, there are some bits of early medieval folklore among Christians that would fit in nicely with a poet's spiritual recasting of a pagan story. Although Benson suggests the basic story of *Beowulf* may have originated from a Scandinavian oral tradition (21), there is no way to clearly differentiate every aspect of the poem as to what is a derivative of Scandinavian folklore and what is not. First, a brief examination of Grendel's abode should be considered in light of local church tradition which may have depicted the moors as an abode of evil giants and sinners. In Bede's

*Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, a group of heretics accompanied by evil spirits began spreading deceptive ideas throughout Britain, but a band of faithful bishops came to squelch the sedition. When miraculous healings took place as a result of the prayers of these bishops, Bede states the heretics were “banished . . . into the marchland, so that the country might be rid of them and they might be rid of their error” (i.21). The editors of Bede’s work, Colgrave and Mynors, point out that the Latin word Bede uses for “marchland” is *mediterranea*, which means “the land between two adjoining territories, the traditional no-man’s-land haunted by monsters and evil men, as for example, the monster Grendel in *Beowulf*” (66). If Bede understood that evil men and spirits dwelled in the dark moors of Anglo-Saxon England, then there is a strong possibility that Christian poets were also privy to this tale. Under this circumstance, it would perhaps be natural for the *Beowulf* poet and other Christian contemporaries to assign the origin of their evil monsters to the infamous murderer Cain whose abode lies in the swamplands. The marchland enemies of *Beowulf* and Guthlac may actually have some deep seated roots in ecclesiastical history which was overlooked by earlier critics.

Something else to consider is that although legends of giant foes were told among Scandinavian cultures, the Anglo-Saxon Christians also had some of their own that possibly influenced the poet of *Beowulf*. Whitelock cites a gnomic poem, which comments on the ruins of the prodigious work of Roman architecture in Bath: as the poet contemplates these monolithic structures, he states, “Cities are visible from afar, the cunning work of giants, [and] the wondrous fortifications in stone,” which “the Creator of men laid waste . . . the old works of the giants” (cited in *The Beginnings* 16-17). This destruction of the “old works” of “giants” may be an allusion to the flood, an allusion that is more vivid in *Beowulf* (ll. 1689-1690). Whitelock suggests, as some Christian poets beheld the remnants of such splendor, they may have moralized away the superior capabilities of their predecessors by attributing this ingenuity to

the decadent work of evil giants (17). In *Beowulf*'s death scene, which occurs within the immense dragon cave, the narrator attributes the "stonework" of the dragon's lair to "giants," which seems as though the poet has been reading from gnomic poetry (*Beowulf* ll. 2717-2718). This description of the giants' architecture could be a rehashing of church folklore. In a Christian context, it was probably natural for Anglo-Saxon poets to view anything that they felt pertained to giants, or for that matter, the legendary giants themselves, as somehow connected to the giants from the flood of Genesis.

The decadent-giant tales of Bath and biblical exegesis may have given the *Beowulf* poet opportunity to link Grendel with the giants of Genesis and ultimately with Cain. In *Beowulf*, the poet introduces the giant troll by associating him with the giants destroyed in the Noachian flood who "fought against God" (l. 113). As he continues to disclose the giant's lineage, the poet meticulously reveals that Grendel and the wicked giants' ancestral roots rest in Cain (ll. 102-114). In her survey of Nordic sagas, Kathryn Hume marks the association of Grendel with Cain as an interesting distinction from other Nordic monster sagas where the monsters "lack roots" (Hume 11). The giant troll's ancestral link to Cain may have its place in monastic commentary. In Bede's exegetical study of Genesis chapter four, the historian claims the giants, who lived contemporaneously with Moses and David, were descendants of Cain (cited by Orchard, *Pride* 78). Bede's claims coupled with Christian folklore concerning the biblical origin of giants, could explain why Grendel's lineage is associated with Cain. Perhaps the Grendel story is a hybridity of Scandinavian and Christian folklore, which would truly make the poet's story unique from other Nordic sagas about giants. According to Hume, "[f]or supernatural beings to be effective in stories, they must be part of a tradition the audience knows and to which it is conditioned to respond" (15). If Hume's reasoning is accurate, then the *Beowulf* audience could have been faintly aware of the Scandinavian and Christian traditions regarding wicked giants.

The poet's entwining of monster trolls with the giants of the Noachian flood and the ancestral link with Cain should direct critics' attention to the Old Testament when attempting to analyze the Christian-pagan elements within *Beowulf*. Admittedly, there are some interesting sections of the poem that appear to correlate with certain episodes of the Gospels, but the more obvious parallels and biblical allusions are from the Old Testament. Blackburn, though in a derogatory sense, pointed out the lack of New Testament allusions in the poem in contrast to the allusions from the Old Testament. Due to this imbalance, Blackburn sarcastically states that these allusions placed within the poem "might all have been written by Moses and David as easily as an English monk" (12). In his reference to these Hebrew characters, Blackburn inadvertently has given a key for interpreting some of the questionable sections of *Beowulf* where the reader will find Christian ideas fused with pagan concepts. Over the course of this thesis, history, through archeology, ecclesiastical events, and other early medieval poetry, in relationship to the Hebrew Scriptures, has stressed why the Old Testament is an adequate tool to use in understanding *Beowulf*. However, scholars may find this implement sharpened when examining the supposed inconsistent episodes of the Geatish king's life with certain aspects of the King David story. Stories of man's epic battles with evil giants is a theme that runs through Scandinavia and Judaism, and scholars note many parallels between *Beowulf* and the most popular biblical account of a youthful shepherd and his gigantic opponent Goliath.

## Chapter 3

## Enter the Warrior Kings

Before analyzing some of the debated sections of *Beowulf*, the important role King David's warrior-king persona played in the lives of kings during the medieval period should be considered. The "Nine Worthies" was a celebrated list of historical kings by Jacques de Longuyon in his *Les Voeux du paon* in 1312 (Huson 8). This famous repertoire includes Alexander the Great, the emperor Charlemagne, King Arthur, and King David. Historical evidence also points to an earlier time in medievalism when the Judaic hero was in the hearts of Christians. From the ninth century to the eleventh century, Christian authors shared their admiration for the "military exploits of Old Testament leaders . . . like David" through their "[h]omiletic and hagiographical literature" and exemplified him as the quintessential model of the kingly hero (Halbrook 268-269). For example, Halbrook refers to Wipo, the court chaplain of King Conrad II of the German Saxons. Wipo's biography of the king in 1046 entitled, *Gesta Chuonradi*, depicts Old Testament and secular "exemplars of kingly and heroic behavior" (Halbrook 269). It is no coincidence that Conrad II was granted an imperial crown, which on one side featured King David as "the symbol of justice" (Beimenbetov 48). The Roman clergy also possessed a certain partiality toward David, which eventually flowed into Anglo-Saxon England.

David was the chief composer of the book of Psalms, and it was the warfare elements of this Davidic poetry that aroused the interests of Anglo-Saxons. In the sixth century, the Roman monk and statesman, Flavius Cassiodorus, produced a well-known commentary on the book of Psalms, and other biblical works. Later, these works were exported to England where they likely arrived at Wearmouth-Jarrow in the Kingdom of Northumbria (Halporn 388 -389). Cassiodorus' commentary was eventually translated into Old English in the eighth Century, and in this

particular version, an image of David is clearly visible inside the codex, which portrays the Hebrew king as a conqueror, holding a spear in his left hand while standing on a serpent (Hawkes 326). This translation may have been the very one Bede read from since he was a monk of the Wearmouth-Jarrow monastery about the time Cassiodorus' work was translated (Ray 59). Bede preferred David's book of *Psalms* because of its "warlike element of the faith and the power of God" (Cox 22). This fond attachment to David's war poetry was also manifested by the court. King Alfred, who was certainly no stranger to the hardships of war, also had an affinity for *Psalms*. Greenfield and Calder conclude that a specific section of *Psalms* appealed to Alfred because it "was especially appropriate to his own circumstances, for they contain King David's lamentations in the face of oppression by hostile foreigners and his declaration of the need for learning and faith in God" (54). The influence King David's war poetry had upon the church and the court of Anglo-Saxon England is evident through these historical examples. If the *Beowulf* poet was indeed a Christian, it would be difficult not to envision him being privy to this interest in King David. A fascinating fact concerning all the Old Testament parallels discovered in *Beowulf* is that most of these parallels associate with the characteristics of David.

Although most of the *Beowulf*-David parallels were listed in chapter one, several others are worth mentioning. In "Beowulf, Samson, David and Christ," Sylvia Horowitz states that before battling their giants, David and Beowulf, though for different reasons, both unexpectedly lay down their swords and armor for the battle (Horowitz 19; I Samuel 17:39; *Beowulf* ll. 671-673). After decapitating Goliath, David takes the giant's head back to Jerusalem as evidence of victory (I Samuel 17:54). Beowulf, after decapitating Grendel, also presents his head before the Danes as a symbol of victory (*Beowulf* ll. 1646-1647). One more interesting correlation between David and Beowulf is connected with the number five and giants. As Beowulf reminisces about his military exploits before Hrothgar, the Geatish warrior describes one battle where he

“crushed down” a tribe of five giants (ll. 420-421). In the Old Testament, the author of Chronicles enumerates a series of conquests against a clan of four giants, including the father, and if the brother Goliath is included, the total is five (I Chronicles 20:4-8). Although scholars will never know what exactly the *Beowulf* poet was contemplating when carefully arranging his poem, it is interesting to note the numerous correlations that emerge between Beowulf and David when particular features of their battles against giants are juxtaposed.

Taking into account the Anglo-Saxons’ warlike spirit, and their ecclesiastical history that reveals their admiration for King David and his Hebraic war poetry, *Beowulf* scholars might be able to interpret some of the more difficult passages in the poem, dealing with particular pagan themes that seem incongruous with the Christian ethics of the New Testament. For example, the subject of revenge in *Beowulf* poses a problem for scholars who endeavor to establish the poem’s Christian authorship. To some critics, it hardly seems sensible to consider Beowulf even remotely connected to the Christian God of the Bible when the protagonist himself endorses revenge against his enemies (*Beowulf* l. 1169). Irrespective of Beowulf’s affirmation of revenge, Ruth Staver claims that the narrator’s position of neutrality on vengeance implies disfavor (160). According to Staver, this implied rebuke reflects the “teachings of Jesus” on this subject. Although most of the narration does not appear to condone Beowulf’s predilection toward vengeance, the narrator is not completely silent. When Beowulf approaches the body of Grendel to decapitate him, the narrator states, “A full reward / for such sinful crimes the fierce champion / paid him back . . .” (*Beowulf* ll. 1583-1585). The narrator’s emphasis on Beowulf’s vengeance upon Grendel is clearly described by the phrases “a full reward” and “paid him back.”

Even though Staver overlooked this key passage on revenge, the critic is correct in stating that revenge was not something Jesus supported (160). A few New Testament verses demonstrate this point. When the apostle Peter aggressively raised his sword to defend Jesus

against his opponents, Jesus stated, “Put up again thy sword into its place: for all that take the sword shall perish with the sword” (Matthew 26:52). The evangelist Paul also advises church members desiring vengeance over their adversaries not to take the matter into their own hands but to leave the situation under God’s discretion (Romans 12:19). Once again, Paul specifically writing to the Jews emphasizes that God is the ultimate avenger: “For we know him that hath said, Vengeance belongeth to me [God], and I will repay” (Hebrews 10:30). In the light of these New Testament scriptures, Staver’s argument is understandable, but when examining vengeance through the lens of the Old Testament, the Christian poet’s use of revenge is justifiable.

When understanding the bellicose nature of the nation of Israel, exhibited throughout the Old Testament, scholars should not be amazed to discover a biblical endorsement of revenge, which can be observed in the violent life of David. The brutal episodes of Judaic life even startled the Roman monk Augustine who decided that allegorizing the Old Testament would avoid obvious contradictions between the Old and New Testaments (Chaney 231). On one occasion, a monk intentionally mistranslated a psalm from David that discussed revenge to make it appear more Christian (Staver 155). Maybe it was a particular section of David’s war poem that the monk detested: “The high praise of God shall be in their mouth: and two-edged swords in their hands . . . To execute vengeance upon the nations, chastisements among the people . . .” (Psalm 149:6-7). In this psalm, there is a sense of God’s divine hand in helping his followers carry out heavenly judgments upon other nations. It is easy to recognize that David’s affirmation of vengeance is completely in line with Beowulf’s sentiments on this subject, who deeply feels God granted him vengeance against the monsters’ assaults (*Beowulf* ll. 1661-1669). When reviewing the theme of revenge in *Beowulf* in connection with the Old Testament, especially through Davidic poetry, the revenge elements in the poem appear to correlate to

the religious mores of the Bible.

The composer of *Beowulf* was probably also knowledgeable about how his Anglo-Saxon audience would respond to an Old Testament God that supported vengeance if the Divine was included in the victory. The poet's references to a number of feuds in *Beowulf*, particularly those revolving around avenging one's kingdom against fearful monsters, surely reflects the Anglo-Saxons' awareness of feud vengeance (Hyams 5). As an indicator of this sort of revenge mentality, Hyams includes an incident involving the royal court of Cynewulf and Cyneheard, recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in 755 (6). Some of these avengers claimed victory through God's aid (9). Moreover, there were also monastic warriors who had no qualms neither battling intruders on their premises, nor praying for victory to their God (Staver 155). Other Germanic Christians similarly deemed their triumphant battles as God's judgments and used the story of David and Goliath to justify their violent engagements (Bloomfield 552). Within this context of war and revenge, *Beowulf's* disposition toward vengeance is harmonious, not only with King David's attitude toward revenge, but also with the sentiments of certain Anglo-Saxons and other Germanic tribes.

The poet's frequent use of the pagan expression *wyrd* or fate is another contentious point among *Beowulf* scholars when discussing the poet's Christian affiliation. *Wyrd* was an integral part of the Anglo-Saxons' pagan religion. Some scholars describe this term as the "inescapable decree of the day" of a warrior's death in battle; however, Anglo-Saxon scholars are not in agreement when defining what *wyrd* exactly means (Staver 152-153). Some view *wyrd* as an ominous and unstoppable, "enigmatic force" that was "always ageless and above the gods" (Rebsamen xvi; Staver 153). In "Heroic Ideology and the Children's *Beowulf*," Anna Smol describes how translators have portrayed "*Wyrd*" as some kind of goddess (93). Blackburn asserts that passages in *Beowulf*, which refer to "*Wyrd* as the controller of the destiny of men,"

exemplify the poem's "heathen tone" (14).

On the other hand, some critics disagree with the personification of *wyrd* and understand this term as simply what will come to pass and believe this interpretation does not conflict with Christianity (Chickering 269). Klaeber defines *wyrd* as denoting death or a particular point in time when one's number is up, but he does not associate it with any pagan deity (lxxv). This interpretation of *wyrd* indicates that *wyrd* is not some separate entity or force that contends with God, but a circumstance that God works with and has full control of concomitant with the lives of warriors. Klaeber gives an example through Hrothgar (lxxv). Thankful for the Danish Kingdom's deliverance from the attacks of Grendel, Hrothgar states that the monster "would have killed more / had not wise god and Beowulf's courage / changed that fate" (*Beowulf* ll.1055-1057). The Old English word used here for fate is *wyrd*. This instance clearly shows how God and *wyrd* are not at odds with each other, but *wyrd* is something God controls. Hrothgar's God has the divine foresight to intervene and change the fate of men. This interpretation of *wyrd* as a determinacy that can be manipulated by God complies with Chickering's analysis, which views this pagan term as a concept that can easily be worked in with the biblical concept of "God's Providence" (269). This understanding of the blending of *wyrd* and providence together is not exclusive to *Beowulf* but is a feature in other Christian Anglo-Saxon poems (Hamilton 325).

Some scholars may feel that, when analyzing passages in *Beowulf*, providence should not be considered since the narrator does not mention this Christian doctrine. However, surprisingly enough, providence is not specifically discussed in the Old Testament. Nevertheless, God's timely intervention in the lives of his followers can be readily observed in the Bible. Some of the most significant Old Testament examples are given in the battles of King David. A scene from the Old Testament, mentioned previously, involves an intense struggle between Israel and

the Philistines. While engaged in the heat of combat, a seasoned King David nearly loses his life when a giant prepares to finish him off with a final battle stroke (II Samuel 21:15-17). But God's providential hand intervenes as King David's faithful comrade, Abishai, smites the Philistine. A similar event transpires in the dragon episode of *Beowulf*. The aged Geatish King loses his life to the dragon but not without God granting him vengeance against the fire-drake with the initial blow coming from Wiglaf (*Beowulf* ll. 2874-2879). After the dragon is defeated, Wiglaf gives a scathing rebuke to Beowulf's cowardly retainers, and then he plainly proclaims that "God granted" the victory and Beowulf avenged "himself" (ll. 2874-2875). Although the word "providence" is not specifically discussed in this discourse, it is certainly implied in the words of Wiglaf.

Some may wonder why the poet would conclude this heroic epic with Beowulf's death; this situation appears as though *wyrd* has overmastered God's providential hand in this event. To help answer this apparent quandary, it is important to investigate Beowulf's previous fight with Grendel's mother. In the retelling of his battle before Hrothgar, Beowulf acknowledges God's foresight when he describes how the fight had been "decided against" him until "God saved," him, and the outcome was in his favor (ll. 1656-1658). Beowulf's description of the fight being "decided against" him could very well be an allusion to *wyrd* or fate. Under the power of fate, Beowulf's death was inevitable until "God" intervened and gave him the victory. Once again, it appears that the poet is intentionally demonstrating, through the Hebrew doctrine of providence, that God is in control. Beowulf's death may seem to slip away from the idea presented above, but another perspective could view God's allowance of fate to claim his grey-haired champion as an opportunity to embellish Beowulf's heroism. The poet's purpose in this scenario might very well be to dramatically accentuate the protagonist's self-abnegation and motives, demonstrated in his praises to God in procuring the dragon's treasure for his

people (*Beowulf* ll. 2794-2801; Chickering 271). Analyzing *wyrd* in this manner, as a circumstance that God allows in order to ultimately uphold Beowulf's Christian-like virtues, would reflect that God "is in charge" (Rebsamen xvi).

Early in *Beowulf*, the poet establishes the Christian tone by introducing God's providential leadings through the unexpected arrival of the Geatish warrior. Comparing the timely arrivals of both Beowulf and David before engaging in combat elucidates this Hebrew doctrine. Before the fight with Goliath, David's appearance at the battle "is seen as heaven-sent" and "his offer to help" defeat Goliath is accepted by King Saul (Orchard, *A Critical* 144; I Samuel 17:35-37). So too, before the fight with Grendel, Beowulf's arrival at Heorot is seen as God inspired, and "his offer to help" defeat Grendel is accepted by King Hrothgar (*Beowulf* ll. 381-384). Silvia Horowitz, in "*Beowulf*, Samson, David and Christ," affirms Orchard's conclusion that both kings accepted these offers to fight the menacing giants because they felt Beowulf and David were "especially chosen by God" (19). The way in which the *Beowulf* poet sets up the warrior's sudden and timely arrival to defend the honor of the Danish kingdom appears to be closely associated with the circumstances surrounding David just before battling Goliath. By juxtaposing both events, it appears as though Beowulf's entry into the story, as a God-sent defender of Hrothgar's Danes, has been arranged to resemble a rough form of Christianity of the Old Testament where David providentially came on the scene to battle against Israel's giant foe, as Orchard and Horowitz pointed out. Through this collaboration between God and his instrumentality, connected to the theme of war, it can be seen that the poet was more particular about setting up his story within the framework of the Old Testament.

A closer view of this combination of the Divine and the superhuman against the forces of evil also gives a better understanding how *wyrd* (fate) is controlled. Arthur Brodeur marks an interesting distinction between the alliances of Nordic gods and their human vessels in

comparison with the alliance of God and Beowulf. “In the Norse myth,” Brodeur claims, “the gods cannot defend themselves without the help of their heroes,” but “the situation is reversed” with Beowulf: the protagonist cannot conquer his foes without the assistance of God (188). To support this assertion, Brodeur briefly contrasts Odin’s use of Eirik to fight monsters in *Eiriksmal* with Beowulf’s divine gift of supernatural strength to combat predators (*Beowulf* ll. 1270-1271). Unlike the relationship between Odin and Eirik, Beowulf is dependent upon God for his power (Chaney 235); thus, being a recipient of God’s gift, Beowulf becomes an instrument of God in cleansing Heorot from Grendel’s attacks when God decides on an appropriate time to do so. It appears that only on the battlefield can this Divine-human collaboration be seen as a powerful force placed in the poem to control *wyrd*.

In revisiting some more particularities of two monster scenes aforementioned, a reader may observe the subordination of *wyrd* when under the management of Divine-human collaboration. Before Beowulf battles Grendel, Hrothgar describes the death of his men by stating that “fate swept them” away, but the lamenting king concludes that God could just as “easily stop” Grendel’s “mad deeds” through the might of Beowulf (ll. 381-383, 477-479). In this scene, the poet appears to demonstrate how God, in his providential leadings, works with his chosen vessel to destabilize fate. However, just when the reader may think that fate is single-handedly stymied through the raw power of Beowulf, the poet, in the next battle, reminds his audience that God and his instrument are in this together. When Beowulf courageously journeys down to the depths of Grendel’s lair, the hero’s supernatural strength alone cannot deliver him from the clutches of Grendel’s dam (ll. 1541-1544). At this point, it appears as though Beowulf will not be able to avoid his fate when she jumps on his chest and begins viciously stabbing him (ll. 1545-1549). But the situation quickly changes as the outraged troll is unable to penetrate Beowulf’s “war-shirt” of iron meshing, which enables the Geatish warrior to rally and utilize his

great strength to decapitate his powerful opponent (l. 1566). Commenting on Beowulf's recovery, the narrator states that "holy God [has] controlled the fight" (1553-1554), and yet, it is the protagonist himself that delivers the death blow to his hostile adversary. Therefore, in this grueling match, the poet reveals how *wyrd* is an element that can be controlled by divine providence in connection with the human instrument. When critics analyze the pagan term *wyrd* in *Beowulf* as a concept that can easily be managed through God's providence, the two elements do not appear so inconsistent when placed together within the poem.

Beowulf's glory seeking is another issue that ignites lively criticism among *Beowulf* scholars. When examining the Christian attributes in *Beowulf*, critics point to the protagonist's pride and desire for fame riddled in sundry scenes of the poem. In "The Christian Perspective," Margaret Goldsmith ethically evaluates Beowulf's "disastrous pride" as his greatest nemesis (74). Goldsmith also strongly emphasizes her view of Beowulf's unchristian-like conduct in the fire-drake episode: "He is enticed by thought of the treasure and the fame that will accrue to him if he wins it" (cited by Ogilvy and Baker 175). Though Goldsmith does not directly refer to the last line of *Beowulf*, where the narrator describes the deceased warrior as "most eager for fame," her comment on his motives for combating the dragon certainly hints at it (ll. 3182). And it is this line that has become a tremendous challenge for critics who wish to portray Beowulf as a God-fearing warrior; in fact, some have gone to the extreme of translating the final line in a way that gives it a more positive meaning (Smol 94). In her story book version of the poem, H.E. Marshall translates the last line as "he was most worthy of praise" (Chapter X). But this arrangement of the passage is wishful thinking. The Old English expression that describes Beowulf's fame seeking is *lofgeornost*, which is a compound word. The first part, *lof*, is equivalent to "praise," and *geornost* means "eager" or "earnest"; therefore, the compound word literally means eager praise or one eager for praise (Baker 319-320, 338). Indeed,

Beowulf's bent toward acclamation does appear to undercut his Christian disposition, so perhaps a review of this term in a secular sense should be considered before attempting to examine it within a Christian context.

When *lofgeornost* is examined within the framework of Nordic folklore, this expression could be understood as Beowulf's zealousness to please the gods of war. Taking into consideration the poem's Scandinavian background, it would be easy to assume that the poet may have had some familiarity with this custom, especially when some scholars have postulated *Beowulf* deriving from an oral Scandinavian tradition (Benson 21). The religious practice of *lofgeornost*, in the Nordic tradition, meant admission into the celestial realm of the gods of Asgard, known as Valhalla, centered on the glory a warrior accumulated in earthly combat (Puhvel 42-43). Therefore, in this secular setting, Beowulf's glorious achievements in battle would be harmonious with this Nordic practice. This belief in the "heroic other world of the dead" was also embedded in the culture of the West Germanic nations (42). Some of these *Beowulf* scenes may be references to this Scandinavian and Germanic practice. Before battling Grendel's mother, Beowulf states "let him who may / win fame before death. That is the best / memorial for a man after he is gone" (*Beowulf* ll. 1387-1389). Beowulf claims that one of his primary goals in life is to procure fame in battle. This short speech may very well be a resonation of a pagan practice, but this should not alarm those scholars who wish to maintain Beowulf's Christian integrity.

Although it may seem contradictory to present Beowulf as a godly hero who has a penchant for glory, there has been a suggestion that the heroic value of Beowulf's fame may have a closer connection with Christianity than some scholars have concluded (Orchard, *Pride* 54-57). Orchard demonstrates how one's eagerness for glory has been presented in Old English poems as a character flaw in a Christian sense, and in other poems, in a more positive light (54-

55). To show the difficulty a critic may encounter when strictly viewing a warrior's eagerness for glory as a purely pagan mindset, Orchard refers to a certain accolade given by Bede to the king of Northumbria (56). Before he describes the vast amount of real estate King Ethelfrid gained through his military achievements, Bede claims that King Ethelfrid was ignorant of the Christian faith but confirms the king's worthiness and states he was "ambitious of glory" (i.34). Then the monk compares Ethelfrid's greatness with the beginning of King Saul's reign in Israel. Chickering also takes into account the significance of Bede's commentary on King Ethelfrid when considering *lofgeornost* (268). Bede's uncanny praise of Ethelfrid's victories in connection with the king's ambitions for glory should not be overlooked. Even more stunning is the ecclesiastical historian's interesting parallel between Judaic history and the time in which he lived, and perhaps this is a clue to gaining some clarity on the matter.

A brief review of some facets of King David's violent life may shed some light on this complex issue. On his return from battling the Philistines, David is greeted by a group of singing women in the presence of King Saul. When the women sing, they praise Saul for slaying his "thousands" while David receives praise for slaying his "ten thousands" (I Samuel 18:7-8). Several years later, when King David and his men won a decisive battle against the Philistines, the record states that "the name of David became famous in all countries" (I Chronicles 14:16-17). In addition to the praises given to David for his heroic acts of war, there are his thirty mighty men who also share similar attributes. The first three mighty men in the second book of Samuel are catalogued specifically for their achievements in battle. The first valiant man on the list is Jesbaham who slew "eight hundred men at one onset" (II Samuel 23:8). The next two mighty men mentioned are Eleazar and Semma who both single handedly defeated Philistines (II Samuel 23:9-12). Notice when the narrator carefully describes the deeds of these war heroes, he does not speak of the combatants' kindness or alms giving; instead, he reports the victory

achieved in battle. After the narrator discusses the war engagements of these three top men of David's infantry, Abisai is the next man listed among the thirty. One of the noblest acts of Abisai is the slaughtering of three hundred men with a spear (II Samuel 23: 18). It is interesting how the narrator primarily designates the military status of the greatest mighty men according to the number of men killed in battle. For example, Jesbaham, who defeated eight hundred men, occupies the first position, while Abisai, who slew three hundred men, ranks number four. Thus, these Davidic episodes of war and the ranking of his famous warriors, based on their superhuman feats in combat, have a close association with the harsh world of Beowulf.

However, irrespective of this similarity between Beowulf and King David and his compatriots, Beowulf's boasting and eagerness for fame does not completely fit the Bible standard: "Let not the girded boast himself as the ungirded" (I Kings 20:11 ). On the other hand, if the proud warrior was to give God the credit, then the victor's boast would no longer be judged as iniquitous (Psalm 44:8). This sort of sanctified boasting may be what the *Beowulf* poet was endeavoring to incorporate in some of the battle episodes. When in combat, Beowulf, though confident in his abilities, did not hesitate to include God in his triumphs against his enemies. Brodeur reminds critics of this point by referring to the narration just before Grendel's move on Heorot: "And the Geatish man / trusted completely in his proud strength / and the favor of God" (194; *Beowulf* ll. 669-670). Realizing his victory is not contingent on his brute strength alone, Beowulf remains in harmony with God's will. Also, as Bloomfield examines the dialogues between Beowulf and Hrothgar, before and after the Grendel battle, he concludes that ultimately both characters acknowledge the victory as God's though Beowulf physically pummeled the frightful troll (546). A selected passage by Bloomfield refers to Hrothgar's thankfulness for God's "might" in terminating the monster's horrific hauntings of Heorot (*Beowulf* l. 940). Likewise, Beowulf gives credit to the power of God if he should gain "war-glory"

against the giant (l.685-686). Possibly, the poet, having previously established Beowulf's acknowledgement of God's ultimate power, did not feel it necessary to reiterate this concept again at the conclusion of the poem. Beowulf's eagerness for fame was not a problem if the Geatish king understood that his victories were impossible without trusting in the wisdom of a "mighty God," a spiritual concept that was significant in the lives of Kings and warriors of the Old Testament (l. 685).

A more detailed look at the last battle in *Beowulf* and the commentary from critics, concerning Beowulf's alleged obsession for the dragons' hoard (Chickering 276-277), presents yet another problem with his saintly character. Goldsmith gives one of the most stinging criticisms against scholars who present Beowulf as the quintessential Christian warrior. As Goldsmith shares her analysis of the dragon-hoard episode, she assumes Beowulf lost his spiritual footing by allowing his pride to get the best of him (84). She traces back to Hrothgar's homiletic speech to Beowulf, warning the troll-slayer not to succumb to "a high-born heart" (Goldsmith 86; *Beowulf* l. 1729). When Beowulf, fifty years later, decides to procure the dragon's treasure, Goldsmith assesses this move as covetous and a complete disregard of Hrothgar's counsel. At this point, Goldsmith claims that Beowulf "has aligned himself with the sons of Cain" (87). Though Goldsmith's harsh scrutiny of Beowulf's Christian virtues appears credible, there are some sections of the poem that appear to contradict her viewpoint. Before expiring from his dragon wound, Beowulf gives careful instructions to Wiglaf on how to use the gold for "the country's needs" (*Beowulf* l. 2801). In this final scene, Beowulf's desire "to restock the public treasury" does not appear "avarice" (Marshall 12). Marshall also notes that "nowhere" in the poem "does Beowulf demand any treasure to be buried with him." Although this rebuttal is certainly worthy of consideration, a deeper issue is at the heart of Goldsmith's argument.

The depiction of Beowulf as a symbol of the Savior by certain scholars is the primary contributor to this debate over Beowulf's Christian scruples. However, if the Geatish King's moral character is juxtaposed with the war ethics of Old Testament heroes, the argument against his spirituality becomes less problematic. The scholarly emphasis placed on Beowulf as a Messianic figure (McNamee 195; O'Donoghue ix) is a Christian interpretation of the poem that does not sit well with Goldsmith. According to Klaeber, certain descriptions of Beowulf's "gentle virtues" classify him as a "Christian savior" (lxx). Such Christian portrayals of the Scandinavian warrior move Goldsmith to vehemently protest against these heavenly depictions. In her estimation, Beowulf's backsliding condition at the end of the poem more than disqualifies him as an archetype of the Savior (88). But the underlying problem is not Beowulf's so-called unscrupulous behavior in the final battle scene; it is the ethical standard by which his actions are measured. Portraying Beowulf as a Christ-like figure puts a lofty expectation on his moral character. However, when his spirituality is measured by Old Testament standards, and specifically compared with the piety of King David, there is certainly room for moral imperfections.

When comparing the spiritual fortitudes of both Christ and David, the Bible record shows a vast difference between them. Jesus was considered blameless after overcoming various temptations during his ministry (John 19:30; Hebrews 4:15). On the contrary, David's devotion to his maker was tainted with several instances of debauchery. For example, while Uriah, one of David's most powerful and loyal mighty men, is engaged in combat, David succumbs to his lustful desires toward Uriah's wife Bathsheba (II Samuel 11:1-5). Then, receiving news concerning her pregnancy, David sets up a trap for Uriah, and one of the king's most valiant men is murdered (II Samuel 11:14-17). This contrast between Christ's moral conduct and David's demonstrates why Beowulf's scrupulous integrity would be considered

more virtuous when analyzed from the moral perspective of the Old Testament. On the other hand, sizing Beowulf up as a Christ-like figure could be misunderstood and would make this comparison rather difficult.

In review of King David's iniquitous escapades, any shortcomings that scholars might assume Beowulf has committed are really minimal compared to the immoral acts of the Judean king. Amazingly enough, in the New Testament, the author of the book of Hebrews assures the reader of King David's salvation (Hebrews 11:32). Filing David among the faithful may seem unusual to some, but this might reveal an interesting way in which God takes into account one's spirituality. Quite possibly, instead of God solely focusing on one's specific trespasses and good deeds, he might consider the general tenor of one's life. Could this method of judgment be alluded to in *Beowulf*? At the end of his life, Beowulf introspectively takes inventory on his past moral disposition:

“At home I waited / what the years brought me, held my own well, / sought no  
intrigue; not often I swore / deceitful oaths! Sick with my death-wound / I can  
take joy in all these things; / the Ruler of men need not blame me / for murder  
of kin, once life is gone / has left my body.” (*Beowulf* ll. 2737-2743)

This short speech before Wiglaf does not sound like the cries of a lost man, but the last words of a confident king, satisfied in his moral life. Even if Beowulf is guilty of the crime of avarice, as Goldsmith asserts, would not the healfdane be judged on the goodness of a lifetime rather than an occasional misdeed? Perhaps critics are being too pedantic when squabbling over the salvation of Beowulf, or relying too heavily on the Christ-like figure motif. Nevertheless, despite these arguments over the nature of Beowulf's Christian mores, analyzing the morality of Beowulf, particularly in reference to David's life, puts fewer constraints on the Geatish King's moral character.

One final analysis of an assumed idiosyncrasy pertaining to Beowulf's character is the puzzling marginalization of Beowulf as a youth by his superiors. There are actually two sections of the poem where this theme may be found. In the introduction, Scyld Scefing is described as a "waif" and "helpless," who eventually develops into a powerful king and terrifies opposing warriors (*Beowulf* ll. 6-11). In the last section of the poem, this theme is again applied to Beowulf. After recounting Beowulf's God-given strength, the narrator reminisces about a time when his youthful years "seemed sluggish" to his superiors (ll. 2182-2184). This unusual passage in *Beowulf* is what Ogilvy and Baker label as the "ugly-duckling theme" and feel that this narration makes no contribution to the story (90). They also contend that there is no logical explanation for this apparent digression. However, despite this theme's peculiarity, it is interesting to discover this similar motif in the beginning of David's unglamorous life as a youth before he slays the Philistine giant.

Some Beowulf critics have taken note of this similar characteristic shared by both heroes. At the inception of the David story, the lowly shepherd boy was the least likely of potential candidates to be anointed as king (I Samuel 16:6-11). A repeat of this situation occurs when David traverses to Israel's military camp of Shochoh with rations. After observing Goliath's railing rebukes against Israel, David declares the necessity of exterminating the giant. In turn, David's older brother, Eliab, promptly censures David and states that his place is with "those few sheep in the wilderness" (I Samuel 17:28). But akin to Beowulf's story, when the Geatish hero's unexpected arrival turns out to be deliverance for the Danes, David's sudden appearance at the battle becomes Israel's salvation. Other scholars have noted these parallels surrounding Beowulf and King David, especially their unfruitful beginnings, and their rise to kingship (Horowitz 19; King 560). As mentioned earlier, this underdog theme is woven twice into the poem, but surprisingly enough, this theme is also mentioned twice by the author of first Samuel.

Presently, it is difficult to establish whether this particular characteristic of the story of King David was intentionally or inadvertently interspersed with other pieces of folklore within *Beowulf*. Notwithstanding, a better comprehension of this difficult passage in *Beowulf*, and those which consist of a Christian and pagan nature, may be attained through an analysis of the poem in relation to the Hebrew scriptures and the King David story in particular.

With the general agreement among current scholars that *Beowulf*, as we have it today, was the work of patristic influence, critics have examined various methods to adequately interpret passages where Christian and pagan elements are present. Because these pagan features are inextricably connected to Beowulf's warfare throughout the poem, and New Testament theology disapproves of such violence, it has been suggested that an examination of these features should be considered within the context of the Hebrew scriptures. Furthermore, the Israelites' preoccupation with war also corresponds with the violent tribal culture of the Anglo-Saxons, a culture that possibly the poet was endeavoring to reflect. Taking this into consideration, scholars may assess Beowulf's Christian-like virtues as an Old Testament warrior, such as King David. When comparing the characteristics of Beowulf and King David, some of the apparent complexities of the poem become more easily understood from a biblical perspective. Although scholars may never fully come to a sound conclusion as to exactly what the poet was thinking while fusing the Christian and pagan elements, perhaps continued research in this area will provide further understanding on this point.

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