

TERMINOLOGY FOR "KINGSHIP AND GOD" IN

BEOWULF

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The poem of Beowulf, at the juncture of history in which it was created, about the year 700 A.D., is regarded by many scholars as an epic celebration of the new religion of Christianity. But it seems to me by virtue of the limitations it imposes on that acceptance to celebrate the passing of the communal, shared experience represented by the polytheistic comitatus society. That was a kind of culture that was shared by many peoples in the past. It is familiar to us from ancient literature such as Homer, the Germania of Tacitus, as well as the accounts of Strabo. Ideally, as well as practically, the comitatus society evolved on a reciprocal arrangement between retainer and king; of unflinching devotion on the part of one and of protection and generosity on the part of the other. (Germ. 14).¹ Courageous leadership and support were paramount for the survival of both, as well as dependence on the mutual exchange of services and, particularly of gifts from booty gained in warfare.

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In order to gain some insight to what degree the comitatus structure formed the social bedrock on which the epic rests, it is most valuable to examine the verbal and literary instances of the concept of kingship within it. The very language itself reveals how it is the contemporary pagan beau ideal of kingship that is celebrated in Beowulf by the hero, by the kings Hrothgar and Hygelac and most of all by the figure of God Himself. This ideal is derived from a warrior culture of very ancient and deeply affecting tradition. It is proclaimed in the very unChristian opening lines which characterize Scyld, the first ruler of the Danes whose name means "Protector," not as "Saviour," but as "Shield," as befits a warrior-king:

What ho! we have heard tell of the grandeur of the imperial kings of the spear-bearing Danes in former days, how those ethelings promoted bravery. Often did Scyld of the Sheaf wrest from harrying bands, from many tribes, their convivial seats; the dread of him fell upon warriors.²

The very terminology for "king" itself affords abundant evidence as to the nature of the comitatus chief. Klaeber in his text of the poem lists some twenty-five different

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terms for "king" and kingship," all of which fall into five categories.³ The first category, comprising ten of the twenty-five terms, denotes the king simply as "prince," "chief of retainers," "lord" or as "leader" pure and simple, in the social hierarchy. These terms are cyning, dryhten, theoden, ealdor, hlaford, frea, fengel, bealdor, brega, and landfruma "prince of the land." Further, four terms apply to "king" as "protector," namely, hleow, leodgybeorgea, as "protector of the people," helm as "cover" or "helmet," and eodor which also means "enclosure" and "precinct." In the third category the king is regarded two times also as "guardian" or "keeper": hyrde, weard, or also ethelweard, "guardian of the land."

As might be expected of a comitatus king, he figures prominently as warchief and army-leader, under four terms: herewisa, frumgar, and hildfruma, literally "battle-spear," for which Klaeber suggests the analogous latin term of primipilus, and lastly, wigena strengel, "chief of warriors." Once, too, is the king termed weorda raeswan (60), "a counselor of the army," a "commander," in other words.

So far then twenty different terms regard the comitatus king as a leader of his people, principally a war-leader as

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well as a militant defender symbolized by helmets, spears and shields. Now, also, when such a king of a comitatus culture conducts his campaigns successfully he functions, understandably, as a "gold-bestowing prince," a "giver of," or "prince of rings," goldwine, goldgyfa, beaga brytta and hringa thengel.

It should not come as a surprise when one considers carefully the numerous actions of Beowulf himself that he functions throughout his very long life precisely within that same strict concept of kingship: he is a war leader and chief of his retainers, the defender of his people like Scyld, that "Shield" of old. To his people he gives whatever treasures he gains in fighting and even at the cost of his life.

While most in that early medieval period were devout followers of Christ and of God as Redeemer, as the bulk of contemporary literature and art amply testify, others, including the epic poet in particular, did not embrace such figures of personal salvation. Instead, they looked to an authoritarian God-King who dwelt on high. Again, it is the internal evidence deriving from the language of his poem,

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the very terminology itself referring to God, which provides the most convincing proof, or so the following demonstrates:

Each of the following terms referring to the Supreme Deity occurs only once in Beowulf: Raedend, "Ruler" or "Provider" (1555); Hyrde, "Protector" of Heaven (931), and Helm, "Protector" in the sense of "helmet" (182); and Demend, meaning "Judge" (181). Only three times is God acknowledged outright as Faeder, "Father" (188, 316, 1609), as Frean, "King," "Lord" (27, 2794), or "Lord of Life," Liffrea (16), or, as "holy," halig (381, 686, 1553). Only four times is He witig, "wise," (685, 1056, 1554, 1841). But, very much in contrast to these protective and paternalistic terms of comparatively limited application, the Supreme Deity fifteen times is termed Waldend, Wealdend or Alwalda, the "Almighty."⁴ Almost as frequently God is Dryhten, "Chief of Retainers," a title deriving from very special secular usage and applied especially to poetry. So too is Cyning, "Prince" or "King," and its compounds, which Marquardt finds to be the most frequent kenning for God in Anglo-Saxon literature.⁵ These sovereign implications of the Anglo-Saxon terminology can be better

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appreciated, moreover, if we contrast them with the commonest terms for "God" in Latin and Greek. These are Dominus and Kyrios; the former represents the "Master" as head of a household, and the latter as "Progenitor" or "Creator," literally paternal and most humanely benevolent conceptions.⁶ Moreover, as the O.E.D. points out, our word "Lord" itself, which denotes the "head of a household," a meaning it took from the latin Dominus, is one that is absent from Beowulf and, indeed, from other Germanic languages.

The conclusion to be drawn from all this terminology in the Epic is that the concept of God in Anglo-Saxon is one of a powerful protector, guardian and sovereign leader. These are precisely the conclusions that Marquardt also came to in examining the most frequent kennings for "God" in the body of other Old English literature, namely, He was the "King of Heaven" concerned primarily with rulership; secondly, He functioned as protector, and, lastly, was the dispenser of devine rewards. In this respect, the analogy between king and God, principally as the "Chief of Retainers," is undoubtedly of the greatest significance. God is regarded by the comitatus

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Anglo-Saxon believer as a transcendent, sacred extension of the terrestrial hierarchy. Just as several of the laws included in the Dooms of King Ine (Cap. 21, 27, 39, 70) make clear that every man, and regardless of his position, must have a lord so that even ecclesiastics and aliens who have no kinsmen or guardian of their own were all under the protection of a king, earl or bishop, so too, that king, earl or bishop must in turn also have over him God, the very Chief of Retainers.

There are, however, other aspects to the Anglo-Saxon concept of God which must also be examined. These too, are not uniquely or even essentially Christian, but reflect very ancient cultural beliefs. Thus God very frequently in the Epic is termed Metod, commonly misinterpreted by translators and critics as "Maker." Now, so far in this analysis of the terms for "God," the concern has been with word-counts which though significant in themselves, obviously afford even more illumination when examined in context. Particularly is this true of the term Metod because it does not function in the text as merely parallel to "God." More precisely, it derives from metan, "to mete out," or "apportion," which refers not to

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status or possessions but to life itself. Thus Metod is used in reference, once, to the beginning of life, and specifically to the birth of Beowulf himself (945), but in other instances, and more importantly, to the termination of life. Thus, as the Controller of the Seasons, Metod brings on the melting of the ice (1609), but more often is the great "Terminator" who metes out the very span of existence itself (2292). Thus, the very first usage of Metod in the Epic (110) is in reference to the banishment of Cain from his people; then several times in reference to the death or doom of Grendel (967, 979, 1778), or departure for eternity (1180). Sometimes it is, conversely, Metod which keeps death from Beowulf and others (1056-7), and, as when Beowulf trusted in Metod, believing that his time had not yet come (670). Most effectively the term occurs in Beowulf's farewell speech to Wiglaf (2814-16):

"Fate (Wyrd) has swept all my kinsmen away to their decreed end (metodscaefte), princes in chivalry. I must after them."

More than any of the other terms for divinity, the word "God" itself in its etymology and usage reinforces the

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Beowulfian image of God as Anglo-Saxon King.⁷ Though etymologically disputed, it suggests two Sanskrit roots meaning "to invoke" and "to pour, offer sacrifice to," so that "God" is something worshipped by libations and sacrifice. Significantly, in the Old Norse and Gothic that term always follows the neuter declension, suggesting an impersonal force, like the Latin numen. Only when Christianity imposes does it become syntactically masculine, like the Latin deus, whose image man himself mirrors, or perhaps, vice versa. Very likely something of that old association with an impersonal, if not quite neuter, quality may well account for the relative remoteness of God in Anglo-Saxon life, as compared to His immediate and vocal intervention in the Judiac, or of Zeus in the Greek. He is as yet hardly openly accepted as the "Father" in his responses or image, or at least so the language of Beowulf demonstrates.

Moreover, the question also arises whether there is a possible relationship, by contamination of the word "God" with "good." Now strictly speaking, these two words do not have the same root origin, but who in Old England was

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knowledgeable enough in etymology to avoid so natural a confusion? In fact, the O.E.D. explicitly informs us that in its early use "good" was often employed when a word of more definite meaning would now be substituted, e.g., as an epithet of "gold" or "silver" = "fine," "pure," or as today we still speak of "goods" meaning "possessions" or "things of quality." "God" thus is readily equated with fine and precious things and, more importantly, as the dispenser of these and more. Just so, Earle points out that the adjective "good," is classed with terms indicating nobility, so that a "Goodman" means "a man of eminence."⁸ Thus, God is not only the Giver of Gold" (3054), He gives status as well (696) and protection to men and to Beowulf especially (12, 318, 925ff). Just so, too, in his protreptic address, Hrothgar speaks of God (1725ff):

...mighty God with his large intelligence dispenses wisdom to mankind, position and prowess--he holds the disposition of all things.

And, of Heremod (1716ff) we recall, God had "with the attractions of strength, with puissance exalted him, promoted him, above all men."

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The world of Beowulf, then, was for comitatus kings who were adapting for themselves the theological resources of Christian belief. Mono-theism was thus ardently pursued as it tended to consolidate mon-archy, the rule of one, and, until for some it became ultimately "Le Dieu et mon droit."

However, the poet of Beowulf and his audience, presumably, were apparently narrower than most Christian believers of their day in what they would or would not accept. By the very nature of their omissions, as for instance to Christ or New Testament scripture, they intimate how closely they still stood by their ancient comitatus traditions which valued the authority of kingship above all else. Thus, Beowulf provides in this respect one of the most forcible examples in all of literature of the argumentum e silentio: what the poet does is acknowledge his belief in God the Father and Chief of Retainers while rejecting, by flatly ignoring, the concept of Christ; he has an overt, though limited faith in the Old Testament, but none in the New so that it is quite understandable how the remark could be made and often cited that there is nothing in the Epic to

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offend a pious Jew. However, the poet was not a Jew, but an instance of a transitional Christian, one with very explicit reservations and who made quite selective choices in adopting his very new faith. Nor is the omission due as Chambers would have it, to a conscious avoidance of dogmatic reference because the poet realized that the characters in his story belonged to the preChristian period. Historical nicety was not the poet's point; but the rejection of pagan polytheism, was. And, as such, he was a monotheist, not a Christian. In this respect, it is Cox who is entirely correct in saying that what was needed at that time by some was monotheism, not redemption.⁹ Apparently, it was possible for this to happen in a limited period in early Christian England and Scandinavia. The historical conditions which made for these choices will be examined more explicitly in a subsequent report.

Beowulf is at least as much a political poem as a religious one. Indeed, there are times when one wonders while reading

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it whether the religion was not embraced the more ardently
by the poet in order to reinforce the State, rather than
for its own sweet sake.

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NOTES

¹H.M. Chadwick, The Heroic Age, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967, 2nd ed.), p. 328, pp. 348ff., pp. 362ff. Fr. Klaeber, ed., Beowulf, (Boston: D.C. Heath and Co., 1950, 3rd ed.), p. lxii. See also vv 1242-50 in which warriors are ever-ready, even in sleep. Dorothy Whitelock, The Beginnings of English Society, (Baltimore: Penguin, 1965, 2nd ed.), Ch. II. Tacitus, Germania, Transl. Maurice Hutton, Loeb ed., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914). Strabo, Geography, IV: 4, 2ff; VII: 1, 2.

²John Earle, transl., The Deeds of Beowulf, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1892). Chadwick, *op. cit.*, pp. 325ff. J.R.R. Tolkien, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," PBA, XXII (1936), 245-295. Reprinted in Lewis E. Nicholson, ed., An Anthology of Beowulf Criticism, (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), pp. 51-104, esp. pp. 91ff.

³Klaeber, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

⁴Ibid., s.v. wealdan or waldend for examples too numerous to list.

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⁵Ibid., Dryhten, Drihten vv. 11. 108, 181, 187, 441, 686, 696, 940, 1398, 1554, 1629, 1779, 1841, 2330, 2796. Ealdor and Hlaford, meaning "Lord," have only secular application in Beowulf, in contrast to Dryhten which Chadwick, op. cit., p. 302 regards as the earlier term, deriving from the title dróttin as used for kings of Sweden. William A. Chaney, The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970), p. 195. William F. Marquardt, Die Altenglischen Kenningar, pp. 270-1.

⁶Dominus, from domus, "house." Kyrios, from Kyeo, Kyo, "to become pregnant." Emile Boissacq, Dict. Étymologique de la Langue Grecque, (Heidelberg, 1950, 4th ed.), s.v. kyros and kyeo.

⁷Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "God." Edward B. Irving Jr., A Reading of Beowulf, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 93, notes, in his excellent study, how God in the epic treatment resembles the German king.

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⁸Earle, op. cit., p. 179, n. to v. 2327.

⁹R.W. Chambers, Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932 3rd ed.), p. 127. Betty S. Cox, The Cruces of Beowulf, (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1971), pp. 19ff.