# The Messiah in Middlegard: The Pastoral Mission of Early Medieval North Sea Germanic Christian Literature

by

Michael Cucurullo

Submitted to the Department of Literature
School of Humanities
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York

May 2021

Sponsor: Paul Megna

Second Reader: Lee Schlessinger

# I. Theosis: Introduction

What does an animal need to do to stay alive? It needs to eat; an animal that doesn't eat is a dead animal. But, there might be things in the environment that are poisonous to it; an animal that eats everything is also a dead animal. So when an animal finds itself in an unfamiliar environment, it has to figure out quickly what it can and can't eat. The Christian Church is, in many ways, like a living thing. So when she finds herself in an unfamiliar environment she has to figure out quickly what she can and can't incorporate into her faith.

This project explores several works of literature composed in Northern Europe during the early Middle Ages, at a time when previously pagan, Germanic tribes were in the process of converting to Christianity. The three works that I explore each accomplish pastoral work in a variety of ways: *The Heliand* tells the story of Christ in terms recognizable to its previously pagan, Germanic audience; *Beowulf* imbues a traditional Germanic warrior narrative with Christian allegorical significance; and *The Dream of the Rood* offers an extra-Biblical perspective on Biblical events by giving a distinctly heroic voice and quality to the cross that bore Christ during the crucifixion. Importantly, these texts are not designed to be evangelical (i.e., to convert readers to Christianity), but instead to be pastoral (i.e., to help readers understand Church doctrine and adhere to Christian ethics in their day-to-day lives). Taken together, these texts are representative of a wider cultural program to save newly Christian souls.

St Athanasius, in his writings against the Arian heresies, wrote that "God was made man that man might be made God." To explain fully what that means would be to write an entire separate paper on theosis, but in a nutshell: when the Second Person of the Trinity became human, He allowed us to become partakers of the divine nature. Rather than corrupting His

divinity, His becoming man cleansed our humanity. And, in a strangely analogous way, the Church did the same thing in Northern Europe. In depicting Christ as a warrior-king, rather than changing what it meant to be Christ, they changed what it meant to be a warrior-king; in making Christianity Germanic, they made the Germanics Christian.

# II. The Chieftain of Mankind: The Heliand

While *Beowulf* is practically a household name and *The Dream of the Rood* is familiar to anyone who's taken a course in early English literature, the *Heliand*, by contrast, is unknown to most in the English-speaking world. Written in the early 9th century by an anonymous poet-monk, the *Heliand* not only translates the Christian gospel into Old Saxon but reimagines the story as if it had taken place in 9th century Saxony. The author primarily draws from Tatian's gospel harmony, the *Diatessaron*, and Hrabanus Maurus' *Commentary on Matthew* but the *Heliand*'s Judea is very different: a snowy, wooded land, full of hill-forts and mead halls, warrior-kings and treasure hoards, where the Son of God is hanged from a tree in the sinister fog of the cold North Sea.

## II.I. As Long as He Held Power: Critiquing His Contemporaries

The text was written shortly after Charlemagne conquered Saxony and appointed Franks to rule the land in his stead. The insult of being ruled by a foreigner without ties to the people is reflected in his description of Herod:

> In Jerusalem, Herod was chosen to be king over the Jewish people. Caesar, ruling the empire from the hill-fort Rome, placed him there - among the warrior-companions - even though Herod did not belong by clan to the noble and well-born descendants of Israel. He

> did not come from their kinsmen[1]. It was only thanks to Caesar in hill-fort Rome, who ruled the empire, that the descendants of Israel, those fighting men renowned for their toughness, had to obey him (*Heliand* 5).

Instead of the chieftain ruling through kinship ties, Herod is appointed from without by Caesar, just as the Frankish legates were appointed by Charlemagne. Likewise, despite the author's own steadfast Christian faith, he protested Charlemagne's violent, forced conversion of the Saxons, albeit in an even more subtle manner:

> There is nothing like [the Gospel] in words anywhere in this world! Nothing can ever glorify the Ruler, our dear Chieftain, more! Nor is there anything that can better fell every evil creature or work of wickedness, nor better withstand the hatred and aggression of enemies (*Heliand* 4).

Through his glorification of the Gospel as a weapon against evil, the *Heliand's* author is decrying the use of violence instead of the much more powerful words of the evangelists. But whatever he thinks of the Franks' methods, he doesn't take the Saxons' side absolutely. The word 'fell', Old Saxon 'fellie', alludes to "felling a tree"; whether the hanging of sacrifices from trees to Woden or the oak of Donar, trees were sacred to the Saxons. Thus, the Gospel is a powerful weapon for the evangelist to tear down the sacred groves by convincing the people to no longer worship at them rather than with an axe. The author is *not* objecting to the conversion of pagans but rather objecting to the methods used by some of his fellow Christians. And just because a great injustice is being done to them does not mean their own sins can be ignored.

---

[1] Incidentally, a fascinating historical reference that shows how well-read the Heliand's author is. Herod the Great was a Nabatean by ethnicity, who came to rule Judea because of his father's allegiance to Rome; none of which is recorded in the Gospels.

The Saxons practiced infanticide; unwanted children would be abandoned in the wilderness and left to die from exposure. Although there are no primary sources that attest to this among Saxons, the Anglo-Saxons,[2] Scandinavians,[3] and the Frisians certainly did, from which we can infer that the practice existed in Saxony. Due to their geographic proximity, the Frisians are probably the closest in terms of the specifics of the practice. The most vivid depiction of which comes from the life of St. Ludger, the 8th century Frisian missionary. St. Ludger's great-grandmother, angered that another female child was born in the family, ordered the death of his mother. "Section six of the *Vita Liudgeri* narrates that the men sent by [Ludger's] great-grandmother wished to 'snatch that daughter now born from the mother's lap and kill her before she drank her mother's milk; because such was the custom of pagans, that if they wanted to kill a son or a daughter, they would be killed before [eating] earthly food'" (Harrison 209). The two most important things to glean from this is how Continental infanticide differed from the Insular and Nordic practices: firstly, the decision was not made by the mothers themselves, and second, the practice was not done for desperate economic reasons.[4]

The *Heliand* makes a notable departure from its sources in its depiction of the Slaughter of the Innocents. The *Diatessaron*, much like the original Gospels, is predictably terse:

---

[2] "There is evidence strongly suggesting that pagan Anglo-Saxons traditionally killed, or exposed, unwanted children and that this custom persisted until at least the late seventh century, possibly longer: the Penitential attributed to Theodore imposes penances for the homicide of children by women, the slaying of children by poor women, and the killing of children who have not been baptized." (Dunn 90)

[3] "Child exposure and infanticide is more thoroughly attested in Scandinavia. The twelfth-century chronicler Ari Thorgilsson relates the events of an early tenth-century Althing, during which a law-speaker announced: 'that all people should be Christian, and that those in this country who had not yet been baptized should receive baptism; but the old laws should stand as regards to the exposure of children' (Grønlie 2006, 9). It took direct intervention from Olaf II some seventeen years later to overturn this ruling and permanently outlaw child abandonment (Pentikäinen 1968, 69). Regarding child abandonment practices in other parts of Scandinavia, Clover (1988) observes, 'it is clear that the Icelanders were hardly alone in the practice.' Among several other contemporary examples, she cites Swedish provincial laws and restrictions put in place by the Church to 'define and set penalties for child-murder' (Clover 1988, 104)." (Harrison 208-209)

[4] St. Ludger's family was part of the Frisian aristocracy.

> Then Herod, seeing that he had been deceived by the Magi, was extremely angry and, sending, [i.e., sending orders] he killed all the boys, who were in Bethlehem and in all its territory, from the age of two years and under, according to the time that he had found out from the Magi. Then it was fulfilled, that which had been spoken through the Prophet Jeremiah, saying: A voice has been heard in Rama, much weeping and wailing; Rachel weeping for her children, and she cannot be consoled, because they are not (qtd. In Harrison 207).

The *Heliand*, by contrast, elaborates quite a bit.

> Then Herod sent a strict command throughout his kingdom, ordering his warriors, as king of the people, to march. He gave the order that by the strength of their hand they were to decapitate the boys around Bethlehem, as many as had been born there who had reached two years of age. The king's warrior-companions did this horrible deed. Many a man was to die there in his childhood, innocent of any sin. Never before or since has there been a more tragic departure of young persons, a more miserable death. The women were crying, the many mothers who saw their infants killed. Nor were they able to help them. Even if she held her own boy, little and loveable, tightly in her arms, the child still had to give up its life - in front of the mother. They saw nothing evil, they saw nothing wrong, the ones who carried out this outrageous crime. With the weapon's edge, they did an enormous work of evil, cutting down many a man in his infancy. The mothers were weeping over the violent deaths of their young children. Sorrow was in Bethlehem, the loudest of lamentations - even if you cut their hearts in two with a sword, nothing more painful could ever happen to them in this world, the many women, the brides of

> Bethlehem. They saw their children in front of them, men in their childhood, violently killed, lying in blood on their laps. (*Heliand* 28)

What's striking is not only the degree to which the violence is elaborated, but the evil ascribed to the soldiers and the sorrow of the mothers.

In the original Old Saxon, the soldiers are referred to using the word *'uuamscaðon'*. It is a compound word, composed of "*uuam*" meaning "crime" and "*scaðo*" meaning "evil-doer." In its singular form, "*uuamscaðo*," it always refers to Satan in every single instance in the Old Saxon corpus. The *Heliand* uses the term similarly, referring to Satan twice and in most other instances referring to devils and other supernatural evils. To use this term then to refer to Herod's soldiers is putting them on par with the most sinister of all evils in the world. Yet, the soldiers "saw nothing evil, they saw nothing wrong" with their actions. The *Heliand*'s author is focusing on, not just the violence being inflicted, but the soldier's perception of it; for Herod's soldiers, the massacre is perfectly justified. This forces the audience to consider what they believe to be perfectly fine might actually be brutal and evil. "Thus, labeling Herod's warriors as *uuamscaðon* while also explaining that these men did not care about the cruelty of their actions would have held an obvious message for the Saxons—social acceptance or simple ignorance of infanticide did not excuse their actions in the sight of God" (Harrison 212).

Also of note is one of the strange ways the *Heliand* has of referring to the innocents in the passage. "Many a man was to die there in his childhood… cutting down many a man in his infancy… men in their childhood, violently killed..." This is, indeed, a bizarre way of referring to children. But, perhaps, the *Heliand*-author had a good reason for it. As mentioned earlier, the victims of Germanic infanticide were killed shortly after their birth, either before eating or before

being named. The fact that there is a very specific limit on when the Saxons would have thought it licit to end the child's life shows that they must have imagined there to be some substantial difference to the infant before and after this moment; that it is at this moment that the child gains personhood and it becomes a crime to murder them. If this is the case, the *Heliand*-author's "men in their childhood" is a powerful technique to change the audience's way of thinking; one has to imagine the newborn infant, not as the dumb, screaming creature they may appear to be but as a person with the potenial to become a rational adult, a future brother-in-arms. By drawing a parallel between a scriptural event and contemporary culture, the *Heliand* is able to affect much more than a change in faith.

## God's Spell: Miracles and Magic

The Germanic religious mindset is quite different from the one native to the Biblical tradition; their gods were mortal and relatively weak, having more in common with Greek heroes than the gods of the Mediterranean and Near East. Instead, they placed more emphasis on the power inherent in performative speech and things: magic, spells, runes, curses, talismans, and fetishes. Even the gods used magical trinkets rather than any power inherent in themselves.

In this environment, the *Heliand* poet might have seen it as necessary to stress the "magic" nature of certain acts, words, and objects in order to help people understand that they're powerful things. The most famous example of this would probably be the *heliðhelm*, Satan's magic helmet:

> [Pilate's Wife] was very worried, she was frightened by the visions that were coming to her in broad daylight. They were the doings of the Deceiver who was invisible, hidden by a magic helmet (*Heliand* 180).

The helmet which can turn its wearer invisible turns up again in Germanic literature as the *Tarnhelm*[5] worn by Alberich the dwarf, but this it's earliest appearance, although it does have the *Aïdos Kynein* as a predecessor in Classical myth.

More striking, though, is the *Heliand*-author's description of the Eucharist in the "last mead-hall feast with the warrior companions":

> "Believe Me clearly," He said, "that this is My body and also My blood. I here give both of them to you to eat and drink. This is what I will give and pour out on earth. With My body I will free you to come to God's kingdom, to eternal life in heaven's light. Always remember to continue to do what I am doing at this supper, tell the story of it to many men, This body and blood is [*mahtig thing*]: with it you will give honor to your Chieftain. It is a holy image: keep it in order to remember Me, so that the sons of men will do it after you and preserve it in this world, and thus everyone all over this middle world will know what I am doing out of love to give honor to the Lord" (*Heliand* 153).

The phrase '*mahtig thing'* is significant; '*mahtig'* means strong but also powerful in a magical sense. It's etymological equivalent in Modern English would be 'mighty'. More intriguingly, it lacks an indefinite article; "literally the line - from the standpoint of Modern German usage of the indefinite article with personal nouns - may imply that having power is all that the object is about, that having power is of the essence of the object" ("Magic" 388). This language locates the Eucharist in the framework of Germanic power-objects; without it, the power and divinity inherent in the miracle of transubstantiation may have been lost on the audience.

---

[5] The Tarnhelm's Old English equivalent would be 'Dernhelm' which is the name Éowyn uses when she disguises herself as a man in *Lord of the Rings*. This has no bearing on the paper, just thought I'd share.

The story of the wedding feast at Cana is also made more magical through the addition of an element of secrecy and verbal and somatic components to the miracle.

> Six stone vats were standing there empty. God's mighty child gave his orders very quietly so that a lot of people would not know for sure how he said it with his words. He told those who were pouring to fill the vats there with clear water, and then he blessed it with his fingers, with his own hands-he worked it into wine! Then he ordered it poured into a drinking vessel, drawn off with a pitcher, and then speaking to a servant, he told him to give it to the most important person at the wedding, to put it right into the hands of the one who had the most authority over these people after the host (*Heliand* 68-9).

By contrast, the Gospel account simply describes the jars being filled with water and then when they are poured, the jars are found to be filled with wine; as far as anyone can tell, Christ does nothing. But in the *Heliand*, He whispers magic words and works the water into wine with His hands.

Similarly, the Lord's Prayer is described almost as a spell; when the disciples ask Christ how they should pray, the *Heliand* poet renders it:

> "Our good Lord... we need your gracious help in order to carry out your will and we also need your own words, Best of all born, to teach us, your followers, how to pray-just as John, the good baptist, teaches his people with words every day, how they are to speak to the ruling God. Do this for your own followers-teach us the secret runes" (*Heliand* 54).

This language distinguishes prayer from what could be mistaken for well-intentioned hopes and wishes, and into the realm of things with true, world-affecting power. Just as Woden gifted mankind the runes, so too does Christ gift us even stronger ones.

The importance of all of this is to reinforce the idea that Christianity has power. The gods of the Germanic world are not intrinsically powerful; Woden used the same magic humans could use. The very concept of a miracle is foreign to this mindset. In order to get across the idea that prayer can work and that the Eucharist is the actual Body and Blood with the power to change fate itself, it is necessary to explain prayer as a magic spell and the Blessed Sacrament as a ritual which turns the bread and wine into pure might.

But the language of the Lord's Prayer itself is tweaked to accommodate early Germanic belief structures as well. The fifth line of the prayer, in Koine Greek, is "*tón árton hēmôn tón epioúsion dós hēmîn sḗmeron*", normally translated into Modern English as "give us this day our daily bread." This line is notoriously difficult to translate; the word "*epioúsion*" appears only *twice in the entirety of Greek literature*, the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Matthew, both in the context of the Lord's Prayer. While usually translated as "daily" among English speaking Christians, a more accurate translation would be "supersubstantial" or "superessential", the former coined by St. Jerome in the Vulgate and the latter in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*; the point being, what Christ is trying to say is so specific that the Gospel authors had to invent a word to represent it. The word "*árton*" simply means "bread" but the question is, in this context, what does it mean for God to provide us with "supersubstantial bread"? The traditional understanding is that the "supersubstantial bread" has a wide range of meanings; it is the nourishment that is necessary for life, the Holy Scripture, the constancy of Christ's presence with us, and the Eucharist, the Bread of Life. In light of this, it is highly unusual that the *Heliand*-author chooses to substitute "*árton*" with "*râd*" rather than "*brôd*". The Old Saxon word "*râd*" means something along the lines of counsel, further defined by the *Heliand*-author as "*thîna hêlaga helpa*", "Your holy help". You could argue that support is encapsulated in the

original meaning of the line - but not the other way around; rendering "supersubstantial bread" simply as "*râd*" strips it of its symbolic resonance. The *Heliand*-author must have had a particular reason for making this change then.

To understand the significance of "*râd*", one can look to the word's other uses in the *Heliand*. Pontius Pilate is referred to as "*râdgeƀo*", counsel-giver; Herod held "*râdburdeon*", 'authority' but literally 'counsel-burden'. "To be a leader meant being a giver of râd to one's followers" (Cathey 164). Christ would, therefore, have to provide good counsel, in order to be seen as a legitimate king. But the *Heliand*-author goes even further than that. Christ is described as the provider of "*langsamoron râd*", eternal counsel. This eternal counsel is a most radical notion for Saxon society: to love one's enemies.

> "Now I say to you truthfully, with greater fullness for the people, that you are to love your enemies in your feelings, just as you love your family relatives, in God's name. Do a great deal of good for them, extend friendly loyalty to them with a clear mind - love versus their hatred. This is [*langsamoron râd*] for every man, this is how a person's feelings against his enemy should be directed" (*Heliand* 50).

# III. A Comfort Sent by God: Beowulf

*Beowulf* needs little introduction. But the story seems to have more in common with pagan heroic epics than with Christian works. What's more, the most obvious Christian elements in *Beowulf*, such as the narrator's direct references to the Bible and the characters' vague references to "God", feel superficial at best. However, a deeper reading indicates that the story is inseparably tied with Christian doctrine.

## III.I. Cain's Clan: Grendel and His Mother

In his third Catechetical Lecture, St. Cyril of Jerusalem teaches on the subject of baptism. And in this discussion, his allegory becomes very Beowulfian:

> The Dragon was in the waters, according to Job, he *who receiveth Jordan in his mouth*: whereas then He was to crush the *heads of the Dragon*, He descended, and in the waters bound the mighty one, that we might receive power to *tread upon serpents and scorpions*. It was no common monster, but a terrible one. *No ship of fishers could bear one scale of his tail: before him ran destruction,* wasting those that encountered him. Life then encountered him, that henceforth the mouth of death might be closed, that we the saved might all say, *O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?* By Baptism, the sting of death is destroyed. Thou descendeth into the water bearing sins, but the invocation of grace having sealed thy soul, allows not that thou shouldest henceforth be swallowed up by the fearful Dragon. Dead in sins thou wentest down, quickened in righteousness thou comest up (Cyril 30-1).

Based on this alone, one can already see the parallels in Beowulf: the hero descends into the water to do battle with the monster. It is highly likely that similar imagery was in the mind of the *Beowulf*-poet; he makes the parallels even stronger with some of his descriptions. While *The* Dragon doesn't show up until later in *Beowulf*, St. Cyril's draconic imagery still shows up in the fight with Grendel's mother:

> ...The water was infested
>
> with all kinds of reptiles. There were writhing sea-dragons

and monsters slouching on slopes by the cliff,

serpents and wild things such as those that often

surface at dawn to roam the sail-road

and doom the voyage (Greenblatt 73-4).

St. Cyril writes, “Thou descendeth into the water bearing sins”. Beowulf descends bearing Hrunting, a pagan-forged magic blade:

The decorated blade came down ringing

And singing on her head. But he soon found

His battle-torch extinguished: the shining blade

Refused to bite. It spared her and failed

The man in his need (Greenblatt 75).

Hrunting, for all its promise, shatters. The worldly symbols of power and strength fail in the face of true evil. But in the baptismal font of the lake, Beowulf finds a new weapon:

Then he saw a blade that boded well,

A sword in her armory, an ancient heirloom

From the days of the giants, an ideal weapon,

One that any warrior would envy,

But so huge and heavy in itself

Only Beowulf could wield it in battle (Greenblatt 76).

Perhaps the blade is meant to be God's grace acquired by Beowulf as the baptized Christian. But the fact that the weapon is linked to the giants, the bastard offspring of humans and fallen angels, would give us pause to grant it such illustrious symbolism. So, instead, let us return to St. Cyril and read about how the Christian relates to Christ in baptism:

> ...*for if thou wert planted together in the likeness of the Saviour's death, thou shalt be counted worthy of His resurrection also*. For as Jesus took on Him the world's sins, and died, that having been the death of sin, He might raise thee up in righteousness, so thou also, by descending into the water, and in some sense being in the waters buried, as He was in the rock, are raised again, to walk in newness of life (Pusey 31).

And so we see the Christian, in baptism, is joined to Christ and his Resurrection. It may well be that with this idea in mind, the *Beowulf*-poet makes Beowulf a *type* of Christ.

The Roman rhetorician Quintilian in his work, the *Institutio Oratoria*, defines and describes different tropes and figures. Above all others, he holds the most important to be the *figura*. Quintilian defines *figura* as a hidden allusion, implying something without saying it explicitly. The early Christian writer, Tertullian, reworked the *figura* to unite the Old and New Testaments: events in the Old Testament were prophetic *figurae* of events in the New Testament. By Jesus' own example, the *Nehushtan*, the brass serpent, is a *figura* of Christ being crucified. St. Augustine of Hippo widens Tertulian's terminology into a fourfold method of exegesis that would predominate Western Christian theology throughout the Middle Ages. The Latin term *figura*, translated into Greek becomes *typos*, which is the root of typology, which is Augustine's term for resonances between the two Testaments.

So, Beowulf's descent into the mere is a *type* of the Harrowing of Hell, Christ's descent into death to save the righteous who died before the Crucifixion. The mere where Grendel and his mother make their lair is described in ways that parallel the Scripture passages which discuss the Infernal. A handful of times, the Apocalypse of John refers to the "fiery lake", the second death which befalls unrepentant sinners. While often imagined as a lake made of fire, like a pit of lava in a volcano, this is more of an interpretation than something explicitly called out in the text. Grendel's mere could just as easily be described as a "fiery lake": "At night there, something uncanny happens: the water burns" (Greenblatt 72).

Beowulf is in the mere for hours and when they see blood in the water, the Danes assume that he is dead and leave. Only Beowulf's loyal Geats remain, waiting for him to return, seemingly hopeless:

> Immediately the counselors keeping a lookout
>
> with hrothgar, watching the lake water,
>
> saw a heave-up and surge of waves
>
> and blood in the backwash. They bowed gray heads,
>
> spoke in their sage, experienced way
>
> about the good warrior, how they never again
>
> expected to see that prince returning
>
> in triumph to their king. It was clear to many
>
> that the wolf of the deep had destroyed him forever.

> The ninth hour of the day arrived.
>
> the brave Shieldings abandoned the cliff-top
>
> and the king went home; but sick at heart,
>
> staring at the mere, the strangers held on.
>
> They wished, without hope, to behold their lord,
>
> Beowulf himself (Greenblatt 77).

This is almost an exact retelling of Luke's account of Christ's death, right down to the time that it happened:

> ...darkness came over the whole land until [the ninth hour[6]], for the sun stopped shining… Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last… When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away. But all those who knew him, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things (Luke 23: 44-9).

In the ninth hour of the day, both Christ and Beowulf appear to have lost their battle against evil, and all except their closest followers abandon them. But in both cases, it only appears to be a loss. In Beowulf's case, the blood that appeared on the surface was, in fact, Grendel's, and in His case, it was death that met its end on the cross, even if it seemed like the opposite.

---

[6] The NIV translates this as "three in the afternoon" but that is how we would refer to the time. The Greek literally reads "*enatēn hōras*" meaning "ninth hour", as most people in the ancient world reckoned a day as beginning at sunrise.

So, returning to the case of the giant's blade, if that is Beowulf's weapon and Beowulf is a *type* of Christ, what would Christ's weapon be? Luckily, medieval artists already have us covered. In the Archiepiscopal Chapel in Ravenna, there is a mosaic of Christ dressed in Imperial armor with the Cross slung over His shoulder as a weapon (see *figure 1*). There is also what are known as the *Arma Christi*, literally the "weapons of Christ", which were every single thing that was even vaguely involved in Christ's death, right down to the ladder they used to remove His body from the Cross (see *figure 2*). And while this motif only becomes really popular in the later Middle Ages, it can be found as early as the Utrecht Psalter, which would be roughly contemporary with *Beowulf* (see *figure 3*). Therefore, just as God brings the greatest good in history out of implements designed exclusively for evil, so too does Beowulf use a weapon made and owned by monsters to slay a monster.

## III.II. An Old Harrower of the Dark: The Dragon

Beowulf's battle with the Dragon is a much more straightforward allegory for the Crucifixion. When Jesus is arrested, his followers desert him; Peter's betrayal being the most famous. Likewise, Beowulf is abandoned by (almost) all his men when he needs them most.

> No help or backing was to be had then
>
> From his high-born comrades; that hand-picked troop
>
> Broke ranks and ran for their lives
>
> To the safety of the wood. (Greenblatt 97)

Beowulf succeeds in slaying the dragon, sacrificing himself to do so in the process. This obviously mirrors Christ's death on the Cross. At Beowulf's funeral, the text explicitly mentions his "twelve warriors," which immediately calls to mind Christ's twelve disciples.

> Then twelve warriors rode around the tomb,
>
> Chieftain's sons, champions in battle,
>
> All of them distraught, chanting in dirges,
>
> Mourning his loss as a man and a king.
>
> They extolled his heroic exploits
>
> And gave thanks for his greatness; which was the proper thing,
>
> For a man should praise a prince whom he holds dear
>
> And cherish his memory when that moment comes
>
> When he has to be convoyed from his bodily home (Greenblatt 109)

The Dragon, as well, was historically used as a symbol of the Devil. Now, while, Beowulf defeats the Dragon in the end, the monster's introduction contains many slips from the past tense into the present tense; the implication being that the Dragon is in some way still out there (emphasis mine):

> ...People on the farms
>
> ***are*** in dread of him. He ***is*** drive to hunt out
>
> hoards under ground, to guard heathen gold

through age-long vigils, though to little avail. (Greenblatt 94)

The Crucifixion is Christ's victory over sin and death. But despite that people still sin and people still die. Likewise, the dragon may have been killed by Beowulf, but it is still out there somehow.

# IV. No Criminal's Gallows: The Dream of the Rood

In southwest Scotland on the north side of the Solway Firth sits the village of Ruthwell. Sometime in the early 8th century, an 18-foot tall stone cross was erected in the center of the village church, reaching up to the roof beams and possibly being a support for them (see *figure 4*). On its east and west faces, it is decorated with relief carvings of scenes from the life of Christ; on its north and south sides, the reliefs are of vines, branches, and leaves with all manner of beast and bird amongst them. Encircling the intertwined natural creatures, on a shape resembling a priest's stole, are lines from *The Dream of the Rood* carved in fuþorc runes.

The poem shows up in full in a manuscript of Old English religious poems and sermons called the Vercelli Book, so named for it being found in the eponymous city in northern Italy, most likely brought there by Cardinal Guala Bicchieri who served as the Papal nuncio to England during the reign of King John and Henry III. In the poem, a Dreamer sees a vision of the Holy Cross, the titular "Rood", in the form of a tree covered in gold and gemstones and dripping with blood, who speaks and relates the Crucifixion from its perspective as it suffers alongside Christ.

## IV.I. The Corpse of the Lord: An Unshakable Christology

The Crucifixion is the great confluence of all Christianity's paradoxes, which the Church refuses to compromise on, one way or the other. Jesus is both fully God and fully man without mixing, mingling, or confusion and, as a consequence, the Crucifixion is, at once, the moment of maximum human suffering and maximum divine triumph. This is all the more reason then to applaud the poet of *The Dream of the Rood* for being able to remarkably balance these natures.

In the late fourth century, two Christological heresies emerged: Monophysitism and Nestorianism. Following the refutation of the Arian heresy at the First Council of Nicaea, where Christ was firmly established to be God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father, and not simply the most perfect of the Father's creatures raised to the status of God, debate began about how precisely His divinity was related to his humanity. The Monophysites argued that Christ's human nature would surely have been overwhelmed by the sheer infinity of the divine, like a drop of wine in the ocean, and as such was not substantially human. Nestorianism was sort of the opposite; they stressed His humanity to an extreme degree. They held that the Second Person of the Trinity was united with the human being named Jesus of Nazareth but that they remained separate persons, like a more extreme version of the experience of the Prophets. The Nestorians, famously, objected to the Virgin Mary being called *Theotokos*, the Mother of God. In theory, the Councils of Ephesus ended the dispute, declaring Christ perfectly divine and perfectly man in a hypostatic union, but in practice it took three more ecumenical councils, finally coming to a close[7] in 681 with the Third Council of Constantinople.

[7] If you can call two schisms, later resurgence of Adoptionism in Spain, and continuing debate among even modern theologians a 'close'.

But while Christological theories were hotly debated, soteriological theories coexisted even when they seemed to conflict. One of the most common was the ransom theory. It was articulated like this: by sinning, humanity sold itself to the devil, who is more or less synonymous with death, but when he tried to claim Christ, who had no sin, the devil overplayed his hand and violated his end of the deal meaning the contract was rendered null and void. Gregory of Nyssa, in his commentary on Job, illustrated this theory with the image of Jesus being the bait used by God to catch the Leviathan. On the other hand, there was the sacrificial view of atonement, that God, being perfectly just, could not simply ignore mankind's sin, and so, in order to be able to forgive us, sends Christ to suffer the consequences of sin in our stead. This theory has its roots in the *korbanot*, the Jewish animal sacrifices made for the forgiveness of sins. In the ransom theory, divine triumph is emphasized while sacrificial theory emphasizes human suffering. Most works of art in the Middle Ages keep these two emphases separate. The suffering of Christ is usually highlighted in depictions of the Crucifixion while His triumph is usually reserved for the Harrowing of Hell. This tracks with the Church's eventual preference for the satisfaction theory of redemption; the sacrifice is primary and the defeat of the devil is secondary. But the *Rood* poet manages to maintain both of them together in the Crucifixion.

When considering the ransom theory as the primary form of atonement, the Crucifixion becomes a battle and Christ, a warrior. In *The Dream of the Rood,* Christ is an active participant in the Crucifixion:

> [...] I saw the lord of mankind
>
> coming with great haste so that he might climb up on me...
>
> ...Then this young man stripped himself - that was God Almighty -

Strong and courageous; he climbed up on the high gallows,

brave in the sight of many, as he set out to redeem mankind.

Here, the Crucifixion is a moment of voluntary, divine victory. He strips and ascends the cross at speed of his own accord. While very different from the later medieval tradition of the suffering, exhausted Jesus being tortured and executed, the heroic warrior-king Christ is not a uniquely Anglo-Saxon invention.

The cross already being in place and Christ advancing towards it isn't as out of step with the gospel narrative and Church tradition at that time as one might believe. It is easy to forget that the synoptic gospels do not record Jesus carrying the cross Himself; only in John's gospel does it happen. The synoptic gospels say that it was carried by Simon of Cyrene and, in early medieval art, it was more common to find Simon carrying the cross than Jesus. The discrepancy is reconciled by inferring that Christ carried it at first but then the soldiers got Simon to carry it instead.[8] But the natural inference of this reconciliation, that Christ was too exhausted to continue doesn't occur until later in the Middle Ages, and so the *Rood* poet's description, while unusual when imagining the Crucifixion from a historical and naturalistic perspective, is perfectly in line with a patristic analogical understanding of the event.

The same goes for the stripping of His clothes. The gospels do not describe the actual action; they merely remark on the soldiers casting lots for them after they've already been removed. While it is almost certain that He was stripped, the image of Christ voluntarily undressing was fairly common. In Greco-Roman art, the hero fought nude, so Christ's nudity

[8] We have no reason to believe this isn't the case and that John's depiction is a later invention. Plutarch records that "Each criminal who goes to execution must carry his own cross on his back" so it would be reasonable to infer that Jesus also carried His.

was not considered shameful but rather a symbol of His power and triumph. And from a more Biblical perspective, Jesus' status as the "New Adam" is deepened; Adam, having brought sin and death into the world, clothed himself, but Christ, defeating sin and death, strips Himself.

The most difficult part of the Crucifixion to tackle, however, is the moment of Christ's death. G.K. Chesterton refers to it as "a matter more dark and awful than it is easy to discuss… which the greatest saints and thinkers have justly feared to approach" (Chesterton 130). It was a fairly common view that Jesus' cry, "*əlahí əlahí ləmáh šəvaqtáni*"[9], was the voice of the human body when the Godhead departed it. "Such a conclusion was dangerously near to the Apollinarian heresy (that in Christ the place of the rational soul was taken by the Divinity), but the alternative, which seemed to involve the theologically impossible statement that God could die, and that it was the dead body of God which was removed from the Cross, was not immediately acceptable, and it is little wonder that Christian writers faltered before a so apparently incomprehensible paradox" (Woolf 148). But there was also an insistence that Christ chose the moment He died calling out, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. (New International Version, Luke 23:46)" The *Rood*-poet sidesteps the issue and never mentions the moment of His death itself. Instead, he simply speaks of Christ, having died, as a warrior resting after a battle: "and he rested there for a while, / spent after that great struggle" (Greenblatt 35).

But as masterful as his treatment of the triumphant warrior Christ, even more impressive is how the *Rood*-poet is able to communicate the great suffering associated with the event by switching to the Cross's perspective; the Cross is his stand-in for the human will of Christ. He

[9] While the phrase means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" it is unclear whether Christ is legitimately in a moment of doubt and isolation or if He is quoting Psalm 22 with the implication that the rest of the psalm, which takes a much more hopeful and praiseworthy turn later on, follows. In defense of the latter, it's unlikely someone so knowledgeable about Scripture would be unaware of what He was alluding to. But, in defense of the former, He does say it in Aramaic rather than Hebrew.

first does this through the symbolism with which the Cross is described in its glorious appearance:

> [...] That bright tree was
>
> covered with gold; gemstones gleamed
>
> fairly fashioned down to its foot, yet another five were standing
>
> high up on the crossbeam [...]
>
> That tree was triumphant and I tarnished by sin,
>
> begrimed with evil. [...]
>
> Yet I could see signs of ancient strife:
>
> beneath that gold it had begun
>
> bleeding on the right side. (Greenblatt 34)

The five gemstones represent the Five Precious Wounds, those from the nails in Jesus' hands and feet and the final one in his side where he was pierced by the Roman soldier, Longinus. This side wound is also referenced in lines 18-20, the "signs of ancient strife… bleeding on the right[10] side." But the contrast that the Dreamer makes between himself and the Cross is also significant; the Cross is "triumphant" but he is "tarnished by sin". That the Cross, which is in theory an inanimate object, is contrasted with a human being who is "begrimed with evil" makes clear that it is not merely the physical cross.

[10] Interestingly, the Gospel of John never clarifies which side the spear pierces, but almost every single artistic depiction of the event places the wound on Christ's right.

While Christ, representing His divine nature, remains heroic and triumphant, the Cross endures the suffering associated with His human nature. But the Cross is characterized as a mighty warrior in its own right in the form of a loyal retainer of Christ; it mentions multiple times its ability to stop the Crucifixion but it restrains itself so as to obey Christ's orders. This tracks with how the Church responded to the Monothelite heresy, the belief that Christ, even if He had two natures, divine and human, He still only had one will; Christ had two wills but there was no conflict since the human will conformed itself voluntarily to the divine will. So, the Cross remains strong and endures the pain, despite its reluctance, just as Christ's humanity did (emphasis mine):

> He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet ***not my will, but yours be done***." An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. (Luke 22:41-44)

In this way, the *Dream of the Rood* is able to move the reader emotionally without getting bogged down in difficult theological discussions of will and nature. "The real emotional intensity of Christ's agony is thus communicated without the reasonable and insoluble bewilderment arising of how impassibility and passibility could co-exist in one consciousness" (Woolf 149).

## IV.II. That Victory-Tree: Glimmers of Yggdrasil

In the absence of any comprehensive primary sources on Anglo-Saxon pagan beliefs, I'm going to refer instead to the Prose and Poetic Eddas of the Nordic tradition. Obviously, this has its own pitfalls; they are from a distinct, if related, tradition and were written 200 years after Iceland's Christianization. Nevertheless, it's all I have to go on.

In Snorri Sturluson's *Poetic Edda* is a poem called the *Hávamál*, a collection of sayings supposedly from the god Woden (Odin) himself. In stanza 138, he relates the story of his own sacrifice:

> I know that I hung
>
> on a wind-battered tree
>
> nine long nights,
>
> pierced by a spear
>
> and given to Odin,
>
> myself to myself,
>
> on that tree
>
> whose roots grow in a place
>
> no one has ever seen (Crawford 42)

The "wind-battered tree" is Yggdrasil.[11] The similarities here between Woden and Jesus jump out, as presumably they did as well to Anglo-Saxon audiences. Christ's crucifixion was a sacrifice made to God on behalf of mankind's sins, but since Jesus is also God, this was, as Woden would say, a sacrifice of Himself to Himself. Combined with the fact that both were pierced by a spear, Woden can easily be seen as a *type* of Christ.

[11] Inferred from its possible etymology: *Ygg-* derives from "Yggr", another name for Odin, while *drasill* means "horse." The tree's name is therefore "Odin's Horse" which when compared to an Old Norse euphemism for gallows, "horse of the hanged", implies that this is the tree he was hanged from.

The language in the *Dream of the Rood* indicates that the poet was drawing on this same folkloric imagery. The Rood-poet uses the word "gallows" quite often to describe the cross; a word which is evocative more of hanging then crucifixion, thus tying him to Woden, the "Rope-Rider and Hanged-God."

There is also an echo of the story of Bældæg (Baldr) in the poem. In the *Prose Edda*, when Balder is slain through Loki's trickery, his brother Hermod goes to Hel to request his release from land of the dead:

> But Hel answered that a test would be made to see whether Baldr was as well loved as some say: "If all things in the world, alive or dead, weep for him, then he will be allowed to return to the Æsir. If anyone speaks against him or refuses to cry, then he will remain with Hel" (Byock 90).

Everything weeps for Balder except Thökk[12], the giantess, dooming him to remain dead. The *Rood*-poet alludes to this at the death of Christ, saying:

> [...] All Creation wept,
>
> Mourning the king's fall: Christ was on the cross (Greenblatt 35)

The distinction in the *Rood*, however, is that "All Creation" *does* weep for Jesus, anticipating his resurrection. Even further, Jesus Christ performs the Harrowing of Hell during his three days in the tomb, freeing the virtuous dead from Hell and granting them eternal life. Not only has Christ returned from the dead, but he brought back Bældæg with him.

---

[12] Actually Loki in disguise

But even more poignant is that the “cross” is described as a tree. The Cross itself explains that it was once a tree that was cut down to be used as a cross, but here in its afterlife it's alive once again. The Ruthwell Cross makes this allusion more apparent. Up and along its north and south sides are images of swirling vines and plants with various animals residing in the cross and eating it’s leaves. At its top, a carving of an eagle looks down upon the cross, which serves both as a symbol of St. John the Evangelist and of the unnamed eagle at the top of Yggdrasill.

The notion of the Cross trembling and struggling to remain standing exists nowhere else in the Christian tradition, yet the Rood-poet mentions it twice (emphasis mine):

> Then I did not dare act against the Lord’s word
>
> Bow down or fall to pieces when i felt the surface
>
> Of the earth ***trembling***. [...]
>
> I ***trembled*** when the man embraced me; I dared not bow down to earth,
>
> Stoop to the surface of the ground, but I had to ***stand*** fast (Greenblatt 35)

But these two lines directly mirror a line in the *Voluspa* in the *Poetic Edda* (again, emphasis mine):

> The old tree sighs
>
> when the giant shakes it—
>
> Yggdrasil still ***stands***,
>
> but it ***trembles*** (Crawford 14).

While the gospels do recount an earthquake of sorts, the notion of the cross itself trembling is unique to the *Rood*.

The Cross in the *Rood* is also described, strangely, as a psychopomp carrying souls to Heaven or as a passageway leading there:

> And on this earth each soul that longs
>
> To exist with its savior forevermore
>
> Must seek His kingdom through that cross.
>
> [...] my protection
>
> Depends on the rood. [...
>
> ...] and I look forward
>
> Constantly toward that time the Lord's rood
>
> Which I beheld beforehere on the earth
>
> Shall fetch me away from this fleeting life
>
> And bring me then where bliss is eternal (Greenblatt 36-7)

The Cross is given so much importance here as a saviour and protector that it almost overshadows Christ in function. This could be an echo of Yggdrasil's importance as a protector; the *Eddas* relate that, at Ragnarok, Surt's fire will destroy the worlds and burn the leaves of Yggdrasil:

> Flames scorch

the leaves of Yggdrasil,

a great bonfire

reaches to the highest clouds (Crawford 12)

But two humans survive Ragnarok by hiding within the tree and drinking its dew:

Life and Pulsing-with-Life[13]

will survive; they will hide

in Hoddmimir's forest.[14]

They will eat

the morning dew,

and renew the human race (Crawford 57)

The Cross is therefore absorbing the protective attributes of Yggdrasil. But as G. Ronald Murphy points out in *Tree of Salvation*, this is actually a reversal of the Germanic tradition as instead of the physical Cross, it is the *Sign* of the Cross; humanity isn't protected by the tree from without but by the tree from within. "This is a beautiful transformation of the image of the tree/cross from being an external 'mund,' an exterior protection into which one can flee, to the image of having the feelings of the rood within, an internal protection… This humble gesture, both personal and ancient, made with the hand, an external cross but spiritually internal, may have been in the poet's mind" (149).

[13] Both are names in this context: Lif and Lifthrasir

[14] "Hoddmimir's forest" is generally agreed upon as being an epithet for Yggdrasil

# V. Twilight of the Gods: Conclusion

The goal of the authors of these works, undoubtedly all ordained clergy, was not to blend the belief systems together; it was to radically change their cultures from the inside out. By challenging and converting central concepts in Germanic culture, the culture itself becomes Christian without the physical trappings of Latin, Greek, or Jewish culture. The *Heliand* recontextualizes the Gospel narrative into the culture of Saxony but also draws comparisons to the contemporary political landscape so as to critique those elements of the culture which find themselves in opposition to the Chrisitan message. *Beowulf* weaves a Germanic hero story into an allegory of the Christian experience. And *The Dream of the Rood* presents a mystical vision of the Crucifixion with the imagery of Northern paganism while remaining theologically orthodox. Through this, the Christian faith, even in its strangest and complex places, becomes familiar and accessible.

But this is not, all together, a unique instance in Christian history. Time and time again, the Church assimilated its antagonists while retaining its own identity, just as Aaron's rod devoured the rods of the sorcerers of Egypt. In an essay on this very topic of assimilation, St. John Henry Newman talks about the idea that there are "seeds of truth" that have grown in every faith and philosophy:

> What man is amid the brute creation, such is the Church among the schools of the world; and as Adam gave names to the animals about him, so has the Church from the first looked round upon the earth, noting and visiting the doctrines she found there. She began in Chaldea, and then sojourned among the Canaanites, and went down into Egypt, and thence passed into Arabia, till she rested in her own land. Next she encountered the

> merchants of Tyre, and the wisdom of the East country, and the luxury of Sheba. Then she was carried away to Babylon, and wandered to the schools of Greece. And wherever she went, in trouble or in triumph, still she was a living spirit, the mind and voice of the Most High; "sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them and asking them questions;" claiming to herself what they said rightly, correcting their errors, supplying their defects, completing their beginnings, expanding their surmises, and thus gradually by means of them enlarging the range and refining the sense of her own teaching. So far then from her creed being of doubtful credit because it resembles foreign theologies, we even hold that one special way in which Providence has imparted divine knowledge to us has been by enabling her to draw and collect it together out of the world, and, in this sense, as in others, to suck the milk of the Gentiles and to suck the breast of kings. (Newman 231)

In the Skog Church in Sweden, there was an altar tapestry depicting a stave church (see *figure 5*). Inside, we can see a priest confecting the Eucharist and the church bells being rung. Outside, a whole crowd of people are arriving, dismounting their horses and entering the church. But on the left end of the tapestry, three figures are leaving: one missing an eye, one wielding a hammer, and one with bright eyes holding a sheaf of wheat; Odin, Thor, and Freyr (see *figure 6*). They aren't being chased out like demons being hunted into the woods; they are leaving peacefully and contentedly, perhaps because they know their job is done here. Through their mythic tales, the old gods imbued their people with virtue, however imperfectly, and gave them a promise: a promise that when the twilight of the gods came, they would find salvation in a tree.


Figure 1. Christ treading on the beasts, Archiepiscopal Chapel, Ravenna

Figure 2. Wayside cross depicting the *Arma Christi* in Bavaria

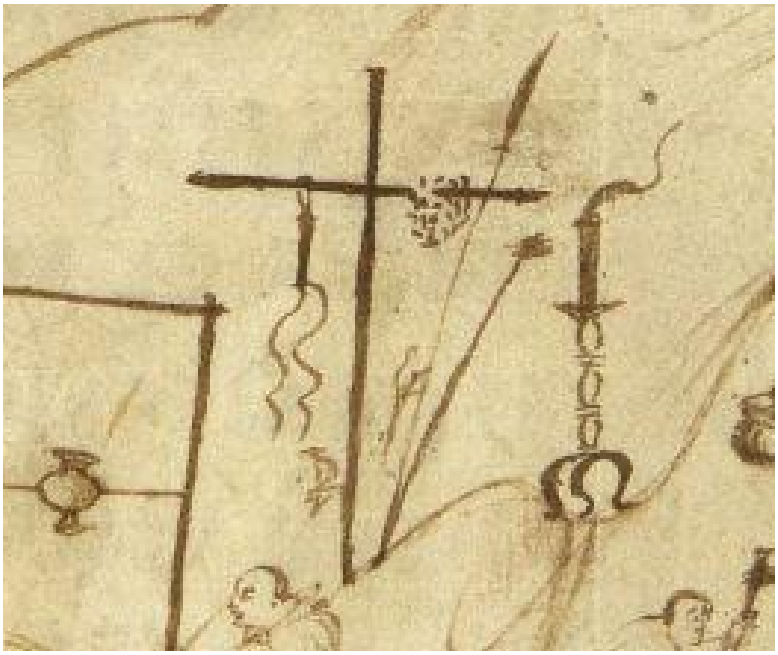

Figure 3. Detail from the Utrecht Psalter

Figure 4. Ruthwell Cross

Figure 5. Detail from the Skog Tapestry

Figure 6. Detail from the Skog Tapestry

# Works Cited


Auerbach, Erich. *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*. University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Cabaniss, Allen. "'Beowulf' and the Liturgy." *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, vol. 54, no. 2, 1955, pp. 195–201.

Chesterton, G. K. *Orthodoxy*. 1908. Barnes & Noble, 2007

Crawford, Jackson. *The Poetic Edda: Stories of the Norse Gods and Heroes*. Hackett Publishing Company, 2015.

Greenblatt, Stephen, editor. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature.* 10th ed. Vol. A. W.W. Norton & Company, 2012.

Harrison, Perry Neil. "Historical Infanticide and the 'Massacre of the Innocents' in the Old Saxon Heliand." *Neophilologus*, vol. 102, no. 2, Apr. 2018, pp. 203–215.

McNamee, M. B. "'Beowulf': An Allegory of Salvation?" *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, vol. 59, no. 2, 1960, pp. 190–207.

Murphy, G. Ronald. "Magic in the 'Heliand.'" *Monatshefte*, vol. 83, no. 4, 1991, pp. 386–397.

---. *The Heliand: The Saxon Gospel.* Oxford University Press, 1992.

---. *Tree of Salvation: Yggdrasil and the Cross in the North*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

Newman, John Henry. *Essay, Critical and Historical*. vol. 2, Longmans, Green, and Co., London, 1907.

*The Holy Bible*, New International Version. Grand Rapids: Zondervan House, 2011.

Pusey E. B., et al., editors. *The Catechetical Lectures of St. Cyril, Archbishop of Jerusalem*. Oxford, 1838.