

THE ONE WHO KNEW, SANG: READING *BEOWULF*'S CREATION SONG IN THE  
CHRISTIAN APOLOGETIC TRADITION

by

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(Under the Direction of Jonathan Evans)

ABSTRACT

In this study, the complex topic of religious and ethnic identity in *Beowulf* is approached through a focused consideration of *Beowulf*'s Creation Song (ll. 90-8) within the context of the patristic and early medieval Christian apologetic tradition. In this reading, the *Beowulf* poet is viewed as an active participant in a broader cultural dialogue about religious and ethnic identity, whose contribution can be better understood when read in conversation with the apologetic tradition's handling of those two identities as they relate to Christian theology of creation and the knowledge and worship of the creator.

INDEX WORDS: apologetics, *Beowulf*, creation, creator, patristics, theology

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## DEDICATION

To Gary Greene and Stephen Glosecki

Ðonne sorg ond slæp somod ætgædre  
 earmne anhogan oft gebindað,  
 þinceð him on mode þæt he his mondryhten  
 clyppe ond cysse, ond on cneo lecce  
 honda ond heafod, swa he hwilum ær  
 in geardagum giefstolas breac.  
 Ðonne onwæcneð eft wineleas guma,  
 gesihð him biforan fealwe wegas,  
 baþian brimfuglas, brædan feþra,  
 hreosan hrim ond snaw, hagle gemenged.

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## INTRODUCTION:

### THE SINGER'S KNOWLEDGE AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

When *Beowulf* was first reintroduced to the world in the early 19th century, scholars sought to locate its position on the map of past and present ethnic identities: it was variously an "Anglo-Saxon epic poem," the "song" of a "Danish seer," and "a picture of German life," and the flag-planting only escalated from there (Shippey 79, 92, 249).<sup>1</sup> Equally central to *Beowulf* studies from the beginning is the poem's religious identity: not only the old argument of pagan vs. Christian, but the nature of both sorts of religious element as well. This debate continues today, though in different terms and with different goals, and this dissertation is a contribution to that long conversation. Specifically, this study suggests a relationship between these two forms of identity in *Beowulf* and the wider Anglo-Saxon culture: namely, that the Christian apologetic tradition provided the Anglo-Saxons with a vision of their ancestors, and that, in dialogue with the apologetic tradition, the *Beowulf* poet modifies that vision—and he does it with a song.

#### 1. Defining Ethnicity

Ethnicity, like all matters of identity, is a complex and weighty subject: "Who are *we*?" and "Who are *they*?" are questions with only contentious answers, and it is necessary to make clear both what is and what is not meant by "ethnicity." This is especially true in relation to

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<sup>1</sup> The scholars cited are the English Sharon Turner (1805), Danish Grímur Thorkelín (1815), and German Wilhem Grimm (early 1840s). For a fuller account of the volatile first century and a half (roughly) of *Beowulf* criticism, see Shippey's introduction to *Beowulf: the Critical Heritage*; Allen Frantzen's *Desire for Origins*, especially chapter three, covers much of the same ground, but with a more overtly critical perspective.

Anglo-Saxon studies and *Beowulf* studies in particular, whose disciplinary histories are so tangled with romantic nationalism. The most obvious example is, of course, the enabling role of German philology and *Liedertheorie* in expansionist and racist politics in Nazi-era Germany:

[*Liedertheorie*] ‘served immensely ambitious cultural purposes,’ in this case that of ‘reconstructing’ a whole national ancestral culture [...], and doing so moreover for a nation which did not as yet exist and whose boundaries have remained in almost constant flux from then to now. As said above, horror at the eventual outcome of this project should not permit one to evade scrutiny of how and why it got started. (Shippey 37)<sup>2</sup>

The Nazis were hardly alone in basing policy on romanticized notions of the "Germanic" past: Allen Frantzen cites Thomas Jefferson, who "believed that Anglo-Saxon social organization was a model for American democracy" and that Bede's Hengst and Horsa would properly represent this ideal on the country's Great Seal (Frantzen 15). Opposite these mythical Saxon brothers was to be the pillar of fire used by Yahweh to guide "the Chosen People into the Promised Land" (Frantzen 16). The two emblems are disquieting in their symbolism, blending racial heritage, divine mandate, and the promise of territorial expansion. These two examples show the need for critical self-awareness among not only Anglo-Saxonists, but all who study the past: we must appreciate the implications of the histories we construct and the relationships we imagine to exist between those histories and ourselves.

Most current discussions of ethnicity begin by distinguishing between ethnicity and race. In fact, "[t]he very term ‘ethnicity’ may have come into fashion as an antidote to the term ‘race’ following the horrors of racist ideology enacted in Nazi Germany" (Johnson 26). Race may be

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<sup>2</sup>This passage begins with a quotation from Frantzen 67.

defined by an actual genetic relationship within a people group, maintained consistently over a span of time. Though a critical element in the birth of modern nationalism, racial theory is no longer highly regarded, and not only for its bloody consequences: because of discontinuities of the archaeological and historical records, claims of consistent genetic identity are difficult if not impossible to prove, so that "[t]ies of blood [...] are not taken seriously by scholars today" (Noble 6).<sup>3</sup> Nor should we see ethnicity as identical with nationality—at least, not in the uncomplicated sense implicit in nationalism, in which the nation is a "given": "a recognizable, historical group of people bound together by both ethnic [i.e. racial] ties and culture" (Noble 5). In nationalist ideology, these readily identifiable nations are invested with inherent political autonomy, and political entities justify their rule through identification with the racially and culturally united nation (Noble 5). However, nationalism's link between present and past "nations" is often as tenuous as racism's assumption of genetic continuity, and just as difficult to demonstrate.

Traditional ethnography would seem to offer a promising, ideologically neutral alternative to the fraught simplifications above. This was the approach of classical authors such as Tacitus, who described the peoples he observed through catalogs of bodily appearance, clothing, language, custom, religion, and weaponry; modern scholars frequently employ similar methods (Pohl 121). However, such empirical features of culture do not consistently define ethnic difference. Tacitus's "flexible handling" of his own criteria led him to count features as definitive in one case, but inconclusive in another: language and culture are sufficient to connect

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<sup>3</sup> Noble reviews the role of continuity (racial and otherwise) in Germanic historiography; Goffart's "Does the distant past impinge on the invasion age Germans?" takes a definite stance against continuity; Geary's "The crisis of European identity" makes clear the political stakes of this subject in the modern world.

the Marsigni and Buri ethnically to the Suebi, but the Peucini are not counted as Germans on the basis of appearance and hygiene, in spite of common culture and language (Pohl 121). Similar problems arise in more recent attempts at ethnic taxonomy, since "none of the features on the various lists [can] be proven to be valid for all ethnic distinctions" (Pohl 122). Ethnographic lists may describe the culture of a particular ethnicity, but they cannot define ethnicity itself.

Instead of seeking ethnicity in empirical cultural features, more recent approaches locate it in a subjective sense of belonging: it is a socially constructed group identity, a type of "imagined community."<sup>4</sup> An individual can form personal relationships with only a restricted number of others; any sense of relationship to those outside that circle can be based only on belief, and is therefore "imagined." The specifics of a group identity may be described as items of faith: "What people ascribe to themselves or identify as distinctive about themselves may or may not be objectively verifiable. It is enough that people believe certain things about themselves" (Noble 8). In his *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Anthony Smith suggests six widely-accepted criteria concerning what beliefs make an ethnic identity, as opposed to other "imagined communities":

[A] collective name; a common myth of descent; a shared history; a distinctive shared culture; an association with a specific territory; and a sense of communal solidarity. (Cited in Johnson 26-7)

This approach to ethnicity, then, views "race" or "nationality" not as synonyms of ethnicity, but as beliefs from which a group identity may be built. To the degree that community members have

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<sup>4</sup> Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* is seminal to this discussion; though his interest is primarily in nationalism, the concept of the "imagined community" is useful in other contexts and is frequently applied more broadly.

invested those features with such a definitive role, the catalogs of ethnographers, too, may list cultural features that help generate a sense of "imagined community." More importantly, this treatment places the locus of ethnicity in the present, not the past; its interest is in the way ethnic identity leads to attitudes and behaviors here and now.

Ethnic identity not only represents "us," however: it also represents "them." The beliefs that give a group its sense of unity may shift, but "[w]hat is important is the way in which a given feature is manipulated to mark off difference between groups" (Johnson 28). This representation of difference cannot happen in isolation: it is a "discursive phenomenon," fashioned within discourse about ourselves and others, employing "markers of difference" to stake out the boundaries (Johnson 28). These markers and borders are not stable, but are constantly shifted and renegotiated in the present:

Ethnicity, then, is constituted in the dynamic ebb and flow of social interaction, from which boundaries are constructed between 'us' and 'them' in particular and changing social situations. (Johnson 28)

Difference, like identity, is not found in the permanent past of distinct groups, but in the present flux of imagining minds.

This study of *Beowulf* will apply the latter approach to ethnic identity. The *Beowulf* poet will be considered as a dynamic participant in the discourse of ethnicity, listening to and responding to past and contemporary representations of identity and difference. Instead of seeking to determine *Beowulf*'s proper category among a presumably stable array of identities, this dissertation will argue that the poet shifts markers and renegotiates borders in order to imagine a different sort of communal past for his *ethne*.

## 2. *Beowulf*, Ethnic Representation, and the Anglo-Saxon Ancestral Past

Questionable political and cultural projects notwithstanding, *Beowulf* scholars since the poem's recovery have focused on ethnicity with good reason: though the poem is a literary survival of the Anglo-Saxon culture in Britain, and written in Old English (albeit of an idiosyncratic and unparalleled dialect), its story is expansively multicultural. The landscape of *Beowulf* is populated by peoples familiar and strange: the Danes, Swedes, and Finns we still know; the Goths, Angles, Franks, and Frisians we remember, if dimly; but who were the Geats, the Gifthas, the Heathobards, the Heathoreams, the Hetware, the Wendels, the Wylfings? Identifying *Beowulf*'s ethnicity is further complicated by the plot: the hero is a Geat from southern Sweden, but the majority of the poem concerns the Danish kingdom of the Scyldings and indeed begins with an account of the Scylding dynasty's founding.

*Beowulf*'s panorama of nations and dynasties reflects a broader interest among Anglo-Saxons in their own past as a people. For, according to their own histories, written and oral, the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes came from the continent originally, from a region near the poem's fictionalized setting. Though often downplayed by clerics—even Bede's account is quite short—this sense of descent created a "[strong] feeling binding Englishmen to their ancestral continental homes" (Hunter 31). While this attachment is manifested in a taste for old songs and stories, it also seems to be motivated by a sense of kinship with continental Germanic peoples: "we are of one blood and one bone," declared Boniface of Wessex, appealing for increased evangelistic work among the still-pagan continental Saxons (Hunter 31).<sup>5</sup> This concern with descent applied

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<sup>5</sup> Though the accuracy of the term "Germanic" may be disputed, I cite it as Bede's: the original Angle, Saxon, and Jute settlers were Germanic tribes (*tribus Germaniae populis*); the region inhabited by contemporary continental Angles and Saxons was still referred to as Germania by Bede, and its inhabitants called *Garmani* by the Britons, which term Bede construes as a corruption of Germania (cited from R. A. B. Mynors's edition; Bede 50, 476).

not only to groups, but also to specific powerful individuals within these groups: kings especially, as well as other nobles. Royal bloodlines were traced through long genealogies, some including figures also mentioned in *Beowulf*: King Æthelwulf of Wessex's genealogies cite Sceaf, Scyld, Beow, and Heremod all as royal ancestors (along with Woden and Noah), while the name Hroðmund (Hroðgar's son in *Beowulf*) appears in the line of King Ælfwald of East Anglia (Garmonsway 118-9; Newton 77). While the poem never directly addresses the insular Anglo-Saxons, *Beowulf*'s subject matter was nonetheless of great interest to Anglo-Saxons for its connection with the ancestral past.

The *Beowulf* poet, then, may be seen not only as representing past ethnicities, but also the past of his own ethnicity. While not properly an *origo gentis* history, *Beowulf* presents a tale of the ancestors before the migration, showing its audience "who we were." At this point, it may be tempting for modern readers to also apply the "we" to ourselves, to use *Beowulf* as raw material for constructing the glorious past of our own ethnicity of choice. This was the project of the romantic nationalists who squabbled over *Beowulf* as a national epic, but it is not the purpose of this study. Nor will *Beowulf*'s tale of the ancestors be used here as a source for writing our own account of "Migration Age" Europe: that is the realm of historians. Instead, *Beowulf* itself will be considered as an attempt at writing history—and "history is a type of literature" (Goffart *Narrators* 17).

This principle—history as literature—is central to Walter Goffart's critique of historians' use of early medieval histories in *The Narrators of Barbarian History*. What Goffart disapproves of is historians' tendency to regard these histories, such as Bede's *Historia* and Jordanes's *Getica*, as quarries:



They have been mined for information and have had their ore sifted through a fine mesh of criticism, so that their evidence, suitably refined, might take its due place in modern narratives. (Goffart *Narrators* 15)

Instead, Goffart proposes that we consider the writers of such histories as real, socially situated persons, not transmitters of more-or-less pure tradition:

Though more often honest and high-minded than not, their endeavors were never innocent; nor should anyone wish them to be. Their portrayals were conscious and deliberate, and worthy of sustained attention for precisely this reason. [...] Just like us, they were time-bound and fully absorbed by responsibilities and preoccupations more immediate than the hypothetical impact they might have on unborn generations. (Goffart *Narrators* 16-7)

In light of this consideration, Goffart calls scholars to the task of close reading, "to grasp each author's work as an artistic whole" (Goffart *Narrators* 17). Goffart's directive is similar to that of J. R. R. Tolkien, who said much the same thing in "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics." According to Tolkien, *Beowulf* had also served as a quarry, and had been criticized for its shortcomings in that regard, because

it was itself and not something that the scholar would have liked better—for example, a heathen heroic lay, a history of Sweden, a manual of Germanic antiquities, or a Nordic *Summa Theologica*. (Tolkien "*Beowulf*" 54)

In his well-known allegory, Tolkien imagines *Beowulf* as a tower, constructed of the stones left from an old ruin; later, the tower is toppled by those trying to study the stones, disgruntled that the builder had not simply reconstructed the ruin. The builder's intention is not considered: the critics do not "troubl[e] to climb the steps," and so miss the fact that "from the top of that tower

the man had been able to look out upon the sea" (Tolkien "*Beowulf*" 55). Tolkien's emphasis is on the literary merit of *Beowulf* as poetry and narrative: the view from the top of the tower is the whole artistic effect the poet meant to achieve. The analogy is also apt when considering *Beowulf* as a history, because the poem's historical vision is also an artistic effect.

Both ethnicity and history, then, will be treated in this dissertation as constructed things, and *Beowulf* itself as an artistic representation of an ancestral past central to the Anglo-Saxons' ethnic identity. The poet is not providing us with the raw materials for our own reconstruction of history: he is himself a builder, inviting us to climb the steps and consider the view we find.

### 3. *Beowulf*, Religious Identity, and Ethnic Representation

Most scholars now agree, with Klaeber, that "[t]he presentation of the story-material in *Beowulf* has been influenced, to a considerable extent, by ideas derived from Christianity" (*Beowulf* xlvi). It was not always so: in 1897, Blackburn regarded *Beowulf* as "essentially a heathen poem," dubbing its Christian elements "Christian coloring," later additions best discarded (Blackburn 1). This perspective was not merely a theological statement, but also a feature of the German approach to Old High German, Old Norse, and Old English literature that dominated the 19th century:

According to Grimm, the history of native poetry, *Dichtkunst*, was drastically altered by "the blighting touch of Christianity," which caused "the freedom of the poetry and its roots in the people" to perish. Followers of Grimm and Lachmann sought to isolate genuine, early, and pagan Germanic culture from later layers of Christian meddling [...]. (Frantzen 70)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The quotation is from Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Grammatik* (1819).

Jacob Grimm's contrast between Christianity and "the people" is noteworthy: apparently "the people" are (to echo Blackburn) "essentially heathen." However, a wealth of studies in the early 20th century led to the widespread rejection of *Beowulf's* "essential heathenism," so that Klaeber in the early 1920s could confidently claim the opposite, that the Christian elements "cannot be explained away as the work of a reviser or later interpolator" (*Beowulf* 1).<sup>7</sup>

Subsequent scholarship pushed beyond mere defense of Christianity's relevance to *Beowulf*, asserting the centrality of the biblical elements: scholars began to see *Beowulf* as pregnant with Christian allegorical and typological significance, derived ultimately from the writings of Church Fathers. Though suggested by Klaeber and anticipated by Marie Padgett Hamilton (among others), this trend accelerated with D. W. Robertson, Jr.'s exploration of the relationship between Augustinian allegories of charity and the theme of *Beowulf*, and is still going today.<sup>8</sup> This approach—often called "patristic exegesis"—asserts that "Latin learning [is] a context for all medieval literature and that vernacular texts [can] not be correctly understood

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<sup>7</sup> Edward Irving, Jr.'s epitaph for this interpolator is humorous enough to bear repeating: "The old Monkish Interpolator who used to be hauled out and execrated by scholars for smearing his despicable Christian Colouring like graffiti over a noble pagan monument has vanished like the ghost he always was" (7).

<sup>8</sup> "We might even feel inclined to recognize the features of the Christian Savior in the destroyer of hellish fiends, the warrior brave and gentle, blameless in thought and deed, the king that dies for his people" (Klaeber *Beowulf* li). "[T]he author of *Beowulf* belonged to a society that was accustomed to allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures"; therefore, "[h]e is not the person to range Grendel and his dam literally among the kinsmen of Cain, as has been assumed" (Hamilton 115). Other examples abound, notably M. B. McNamee's "*Beowulf—An Allegory of Salvation?*", in which a simple equation of Beowulf with Christ is baldly advanced. More recent readings of this sort are more circumspect: David Williams's *Cain and Beowulf: A Study in Secular Allegory* sees Grendel as an embodiment of kin-feud, while Andy Orchard's *Pride and Prodigies* focuses on the image of *superbia* not only in *Beowulf*, but throughout the Nowell Codex.

outside the framework of sacred literature" (Frantzen 79). However, though the contributions of this approach have been important to *Beowulf* studies in general, its typical insistence on allegory and typology can obscure the issue of ethnicity in *Beowulf*: the goal of allegory is to gaze through the surface narrative to theological or moral principles that are figured forth in it, and this penetrating gaze can fail to do justice to the complexity of *Beowulf*'s "surface," including the particulars of ethnic representation.

Instead, a different approach is adopted here: that *Beowulf*'s Christian elements, including the Creation Song, are features of the poet's retrospective view of the pagan ancestors, additions and alterations necessary to recontextualize old traditions within the Christian worldview. This is not a new position: Klaeber, Tolkien, Hamilton, Margaret Goldsmith, Fred Robinson, Edward B. Irving, Jr., and others present variations of it. The differences among these representatives center primarily on the religious identity of the ancestors—are they pagan, Christian, or something else? For Klaeber, the Christian elements are mainly a matter of "tone," as the "pagan atmosphere" is "softened," "purified," and "modernized" by Christianity (*Beowulf* xlix, 135). King Hroðgar is "throughout depicted as a good Christian"; the idol worship described in lines 175-88 is likely either a reference to the Danes backsliding to "their former ways," or else a momentary artistic failure (Klaeber *Beowulf* 135). Tolkien is inconsistent: on one hand he says *Beowulf* is "an historical poem about the pagan past," and though he "knew of God," Beowulf himself is "yet far estranged" from God; on the other hand, "wise Hroðgar, who certainly knew of and often thanked God," is compared to ancient Hebrew kings, "servants of the one God" (*Beowulf* 78, 100, 101, 79). Hamilton sees in the interweaving of biblical and legendary elements "a satisfying dualism, wherein the enlightened Christian might recognize the hand of Providence" in the adventures of a cultural hero; the ancient Danes and Geats are "intelligent

monotheists," who are "loyal to the one true God [...] like the chosen people of the Old Testament" (134, 107). Goldsmith concurs, accepting "the view of Tolkien and others that Hrothgar is modelled largely on the Old Testament patriarchs and kings" (*Mode* 48-9). Robinson, however, rejects this rosy view of the old heroes of *Beowulf*: like Hamilton, he finds a dualism at work, but this layered perspective arouses sympathy and regret, but not satisfaction. His conclusions about the religious identity of Beowulf and company are emphatically negative:

A Christian Anglo-Saxon [...] was not casual or vague-minded about whether a person was Christian or heathen. [...] The vaguely pious heroes of *Beowulf*, then, would not be mistaken for Christians by an Anglo-Saxon audience. [...] [Hroðgar's wisdom] would give him dignity and stature in the listeners' estimation, but it would not mislead them into supposing he was a Christian. They would be regretfully aware that he was musing on matters which were ultimately beyond his understanding, [...] and, like other pagans, he stands beyond the reach of Christ's redemption. (Robinson 29, 30, 33)

Finally, Irving presents a cautious intermediate position: the Christian elements permit the poet to set the story's action within the larger framework of "the great battle between God and his enemies," a framework of which the characters are dimly aware, "though as in a glass darkly" (10). Like Hamilton, Irving sees the hand of providence at work, but mediated through Beowulf:

God is truly felt as a living presence only at those moments when we feel the surges of heroic power in Beowulf. In this special sense the hero is indeed God's agent, for he is the only way we can be aware of God and of how he acts in the world of men we know. (18)

Regarding Beowulf's (and the other characters') final destiny, Irving suggests the poet holds a more open soteriological stance than Robinson's Christian Anglo-Saxon:

Whether the hero is saved or damned occasionally comes into the discussion. The poet tells us in straightforward and unmistakable terms [...] that Beowulf has gone to join the company of the saved. (21)

Irving allows Beowulf his paganism, but asserts Beowulf's salvation on the basis of a perceived theological vagueness in the poet: "All we can be sure of is that the poet, no theologian, knows that an appreciative God has taken this saint of the heroic world off into some safe place with him, call it what you will" (21). This safe place is "created by our faith in the goodness of God and of man in all ages," and kept suitably mysterious to "allow the poet to have it both ways" (Irving 21). For Irving, the poet's Christianity is casually universalist, not doctrinaire or dogmatic, its speculative afterlife shielded from scrutiny "just over the poem's horizon" (21).

The literary critics are not the only ones who have been interested in the religion—and consequent salvation or damnation—of *Beowulf's* cast of continental ancestors. The Anglo-Saxons themselves were also concerned with this question, and not only as a matter for theological speculation: it also had powerful cultural implications. These are illustrated by a frequently-cited example, Alcuin's reference to Ingeld in letter to a bishop he refers to as "Speratus":

Let God's words be read at the Episcopal dinner-table. It is right that a reader should be heard, not a harpist, patristic discourse, not pagan song [*carmina gentilium*]. What has Hiniield [i.e. Ingeld] to do with Christ? The house is narrow and has no room for both. The Heavenly King does not wish to have communion

with pagan and forgotten kings listed name by name: for the eternal King reigns in Heaven, while the forgotten pagan king wails in Hell. (Bullough 124)<sup>9</sup>

This injunction is notable not only for its condemnation of the *carmina gentilium*, but also for what Alcuin declares to be true about some very important figures in the Anglo-Saxon past. Ingeld/*Hinieldus* was the son of the half-legendary King Froda: his story is alluded to in the Old English poem *Widsiþ*, while fuller accounts may be found in *Beowulf* (ll. 2020-69), the Norwegian *Skjoldunga saga* (c. 1200), and Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* (c. 1200) (Garmonsway 241-7). Though details vary between the different sources, Ingeld's story is knit with that of the Danish Scyldings, and so a part of that continental past the Anglo-Saxons regarded as their own. Yet what is important about Ingeld for Alcuin is simple: he is pagan, therefore damned, and best forgotten. To be dismissed along with Ingeld are the "pagan and forgotten kings listed name by name" (*paganis et perditis nominetenus regibus*)—an obscure phrase, possibly referring to regnal lists and genealogies, or to poetic catalogs of legendary kings like *Widsiþ*. Yet a genealogy established a king's right to rule, while the old legends added luster to the king's pedigree. Moreover, the most celebrated story of Ingeld, recounted in *Beowulf*, Saxo Grammaticus, and the *Skjoldunga saga*, was of his revenge on the slayers of his father, Froda, at the instigation of an old but resolutely loyal thane (Starcardus/Starcatherus in the Scandinavian sources). While *Beowulf*'s version focuses regretfully on Ingeld's truce-breaking and the bloody

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<sup>9</sup> "Speratus" has traditionally been associated with Bishop Hygbald, whose see was at the Lindisfarne monastery. Bullough disputes this identification, arguing (somewhat convincingly) that Alcuin's letter was written to the Mercian bishop Unnuona. He is more convincing in his contention that the phrase *in sacerdotali convivio*, often rendered as "in the monastic refectory," refers instead to feasts hosted by a bishop, probably for the entertainment of secular aristocratic guests (Bullough 121-2). This latter conclusion implies that Alcuin's critique of *carmina gentilium* extends beyond a pious concern for strict ecclesiastical orders.

consequences, Saxo's version depicts an enervated Ingeld deluded into betraying his people by a cowardly peace with his father's killers: grey-bearded Starcatherus, through his eloquence, ignites "a blazing fire of resolution" in Ingeld and transforms him into "the grimmest agent of retribution" (194). Thus Ingeld not only embodies the kings of old, but also the code of loyalty that bound kin to kin and king to thane; a dismissal of Ingeld implies a dismissal of the values Ingeld represents.

Readers today may quibble with Alcuin's application of religious labels. Obviously Alcuin issues his verdict on the basis of dogma: Ingeld is damned for being a pagan, and not a Christian. However, though Alcuin characterizes the offensive heroic lays as "pagan songs," they were not (so far as we can tell) religious songs such as hymns or invocations of pagan gods: Ingeld is not, like Woden or Frey, an object of religious veneration, and his pagan identity is a historical accident. These songs were instead, presumably, narrative poems performed for entertainment, a pastime enjoyed across the social spectrum, from cowherds (such as Cædmon) to kings (such as Alfred) (Davis "Ethnic" 123).<sup>10</sup> The poetic arts of Anglo-Saxon England sit squarely in the crosshairs of this critique. Also, the stories Alcuin frowns upon are the sort that Anglo-Saxons turned to for a sense of themselves as historically rooted peoples: stories that functioned as "myths of descent" and "shared history," two of Anthony Smith's defining traits of a distinctively ethnic identity. Alcuin's condemnation of Ingeld places his fellow Anglo-Saxons in an uncomfortable position *vis-à-vis* their own culture and ethnicity.

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<sup>10</sup> While Cædmon is best remembered for his miraculously composed Christian verse, we should recall that his story began with the songs he *couldn't* sing while feasting with his peers.



#### 4. The Creation Song's Neglected Contribution

There is, then, a very old but still lively conversation about the ethnic and religious identities of the Anglo-Saxons, in the midst of which (both then and now) *Beowulf* sits. The question of what *Beowulf* adds to that conversation sparked a debate, itself also now old but lively, and that is the larger question with which this dissertation has to do. In particular, the project here undertaken is to consider more closely the contribution that one passage, the Creation Song (ll. 90-8), makes toward answering that larger question. That song, performed in Heorot, the royal hall of the Scylding Danes, is the first witness in the poem to the religious ideas of the Scyldings themselves:

[...] þær wæs hearpan swēg,  
 swutol sang scopes. Sægde sē þe cūþe  
 frumsceaft fīra feorran reccan,  
 cwæð þæt se Ælmihtiga eorðan worh(te),  
 wlitebeorhtne wang, swā wæter bebūgeð,  
 gesette sigehrēþig sunnan ond mōnan  
 lēoman tō lēohte landbūendum  
 ond gefræt Wade foldan scēatas  
 leomum ond lēafum, lif ēac gesceōp  
 cynna gehwylcum þāra ðe cwice hwyrfaþ. (ll. 89-98)<sup>11</sup>

[...] The harp's sound was there,  
 And the scop's clear song. Then spoke forth the one who knew how  
 To recount mankind's beginning in times far-off,

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<sup>11</sup> The edition of *Beowulf* used in this dissertation is the venerable Klaeber.

And proclaimed that the Almighty made the Earth,  
 A brightly shining plain girded by Ocean,  
 Triumphantly set the sun and moon  
 As lights to shine for the earth-dwellers,  
 And garlanded the world's far corners  
 With leaves and branches, and also created life,  
 Every kind of animate being that moves.<sup>12</sup>

Unlike the earlier passages that speak of God's provision for the Scyldings (ll. 13, 16-7), to which only the audience and the narrator are privy, this song describes what is known to the characters: the singer, whose voice and harp fill the hall, is *sē þe cūþe frumsceaft fīra feorran reccan*—"the one who knew how to recount mankind's beginning in times far-off." Moreover, it is an overtly religious cosmogony, naming a creator, and naming those aspects of the cosmos which the creator made. As an important piece of evidence in the debate about religious identity in *Beowulf*, one might well expect the Creation Song to be the object of serious scrutiny. Unfortunately, though the Creation Song has not been ignored, its contribution tends to be neglected, for two reasons: because the debate tends to focus on another passage, the so-called "pagan excursus" of ll. 175-88; and because the Creation Song's significance is often assumed and so only cursorily treated, with the result that it can seem, in isolation, to be an inconclusive piece of evidence.

The "pagan excursus" of ll. 175-88 has, rightly, been an important focus of the debate about religious identity in *Beowulf*.<sup>13</sup> If the Creation Song seems, on a first reading, to suggest Christian identity, the pagan excursus suggests the precise opposite:

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<sup>12</sup> Unless otherwise stated, translations of Old English are mine.

Hwīlum hīe gehēton æt hærgrafum  
 wīgweorþunga, wordum bādon,  
 þæt him gāstbona gēoce gefremede  
 wið þēodþrēaum. Swylc wæs þēaw hyra,  
 hǣþenra hyht; helle gemundon  
 in mōdsefan, Metod hīe ne cūþon,  
 dǣda Dēmend, ne wiston hīe Drihten God,  
 nē hīe hūru heofena Helm herian ne cūþon,  
 Wuldres Waldend. (ll. 175-183)

At times they [the Danes] promised at heathen shrines  
 Offerings, and begged with speeches  
 That the soul-slayer would given them respite  
 From their national distress. Such was their conduct,  
 A heathen hope; they thought on Hell  
 In their heart; they did not know the Maker well,  
 the Judge of deeds, nor regarded the Lord God,  
 Nor understood fully how to worship the heavenly Defender,  
 the Ruler of glory.

There is certainly tension between the two passages, with the first (seemingly) indicating that the Danes both know and worship the biblical God, and the second (seemingly) declaring that the Danes neither know nor worship the biblical God. So great is this apparent contradiction that Johannes Hoops in his *Kommentar zum Beowulf* (1932) dubs this passage an "unleugbare

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<sup>13</sup> The moniker "pagan excursus" for this passage is Robinson's, here adopted for brevity's sake (10).

Inkonsequenz"—an "undeniable inconsistency"—and, eighty-plus years later, few readers of *Beowulf*, scholarly and otherwise, will disagree with him (quoted in Tolkien "Beowulf" 102).<sup>14</sup> It is unsurprising, then, that the "pagan excursus" has historically gotten a great deal of attention from scholars interested in *Beowulf's* religious element. One would think, however, that since the "pagan excursus" would not *be* an "unleugbare Inkonsequenz" without the tension created by the Creation Song, that the Creation Song would also come under serious scrutiny, but this is not typically the case. One need only compare the number of sentences and pages devoted to the two passages to see the disparity of focus. Klaeber, in his "Christian Elements in *Beowulf*," gives about two pages to the Creation Song (1-3), but roughly twice that many to the "pagan excursus" (16, 18, 31, 53-4). Klaeber's *Beowulf* edition appears to draw closer to parity—six endnotes (twelve sentences) on the Creation Song (131), and five endnotes (fourteen sentences) on the "pagan excursus" (135-6); however, the discussion of the "pagan excursus" is twice as long as that of the Creation Song—a page vs. A half-page. In Tolkien's "Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics," three sentences and a footnote are given to the Creation Song (78, 79, 101), while the "pagan excursus" gets a two-and-a-half page appendix (101-3). Dorothy Whitelock's *The Audience of Beowulf* mentions the Creation Song in four sentences (9, 76, 81), but spends almost three pages wrestling with the "pagan excursus" (77-9). Even Margaret Goldsmith, whose *Mode and Meaning of 'Beowulf'* is still one of the most richly theological readings of *Beowulf* to date,

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<sup>14</sup> Margaret Goldsmith notes the striking confusion this passage creates in a reader: "[T]he *scop's* song of Creation [...] give[s] an impression that the Danes generally reverence their Creator; the flat denial that they knew God therefore comes as a much greater shock than the statement that they turned to idols" (*Mode* 170). This tension led both Tolkien and Dorothy Whitelock to suggest that the pagan excursus is an interpolation—Whitelock dubs this the "commonsense approach"—though both also propose readings that take both passages into account (Tolkien "Beowulf" 101-3; Whitelock 77-9).

only discusses the Creation Song explicitly in seven sentences (44, 52, 107, 114, 170, 175), while her discussion of the "pagan excursus" (which she calls the "Christian excursus") occupies twelve pages (170-82). Of this dissertation's main interlocutors, Fred Robinson's *Beowulf and the Appositive Style* takes the prize for most extensive treatment of the Creation Song—four pages, especially notable given the book's relative brevity (34-7). Of course, Robinson means to show that the Creation Song contradicts the "pagan excursus" not a whit—it is a song that "any pious heathen might sing"—so that even here the "pagan excursus" takes priority (37).

On the other hand, the Creation Song's neglect also seems to stem from its apparent simplicity and transparency. For most of the twentieth century, it seemed to be "unquestionably the authorized Genesis version" of creation: familiar and unremarkable, and so in need of little explanation (Irving 9).<sup>15</sup> Instead, for many critics, it serves as a jumping off point in the search for analogues; it may also be put into service in a thematic reading, as well. In Klaeber's "Christian Elements in *Beowulf*," discussion of the Creation Song is almost exclusively limited to a litany of poetic analogues in Old English and Latin, and the rejection of some proposed analogues (2). Klaeber's endnote on the Creation Song is a concise version of his "Christian Elements" analogue list, while his endnote on the "pagan excursus" deals substantively with the interpretive problems of the passage (*Beowulf* 131, 135). Tolkien, likewise, analyzes the "pagan excursus" at some length in a special appendix, but his single footnote on the Creation Song is a list of analogues ("*Beowulf*" 101-3, 79). Dorothy Whitelock assumes the Creation Song's biblical identity, citing Genesis as the only important analogue, and then immediately moves to a point about theme (76-7). Again to his credit, Fred Robinson's handling of the Creation Song is

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<sup>15</sup> Klaeber concurs: "By far the closest parallel to the song of creation in *Beowulf* is the biblical narrative in Genesis, which may therefore be provisionally regarded as a source" ("Christian" 2).

substantive, neither cursory nor spent merely in the amassing of poetic analogues (34-7). In fact, I attribute the influence of Robinson's take on the Creation Song largely to his insistence that previous scholars had taken too much for granted, which he supported by sustained argument against that mainstream assumption. Since the traditional reading hadn't rested on a foundation of close analysis, it fell easily before Robinson's tempest of objections. Still, Robinson is the exception, not the rule. More often, the Creation Song may aptly be compared to a naughty child's more tractable sibling: it seems to make no trouble, and so gets little attention.

However, to cite an ageless maxim of parental wisdom, it takes two to make a quarrel; likewise, it takes two contradictory statements to make an "unleugbare Inkonsequenz." That conundrum should not be addressed by wrestling only with the "pagan excursus," and we should do as Robinson advises and not take for granted the Creation Song's role in the apparent contradiction. Before the "pagan excursus" can be adequately considered, the "unleugbare Inkonsequenz" untangled, and the religious and ethnic identities in *Beowulf* properly understood, the Creation Song needs to be looked at much more closely. This examination cannot happen in isolation, though: any religious features in *Beowulf* were necessarily drawn from, and in dialogue with, the religious climate in which the poem was composed and read. Of course, that climate is not completely understood, and all reconstructions of it are inevitably limited in scope and application. Since this study of the Creation Song is particularly interested in the relationship between religious and ethnic identity, the context in which the Creation Song will be read is that branch of Christian theology most concerned with establishing the borders of Christianity identity: the apologetic tradition.

## 5. The Apologetic Tradition and Ethnic Representation

The harsh stance of Alcuin and likeminded Anglo-Saxon clergy against "pagan song" is consistent with a tendency prevalent in Christianity from the beginning: the identification of religious practices with specific ethnicities.<sup>16</sup> This may be seen particularly in the writings of the Christian apologists: theologians, often members of the clergy but sometimes laymen, who wrote in defense of the Christian religion. Their apologies focused not only on rebutting accusations against Christianity, but also on attacking traditional Greco-Roman religious practices. Writing in this tradition, the Christian apologists used many of the same strategies and approaches as their predecessors, the Jewish apologists. Unsurprisingly, they also borrowed their terminology of opposition from that tradition:

The Christian concept of pagan was influenced by Jewish tradition that distinguished between Jews and non-Jews. [...] The Greek words *ethne* and *ethnikoi* referring to non-Christians and non-Jews are loan translations from the Hebrew *gôyîm* that refers to other, foreign, nations and tribes, contrasted with Israel, God's chosen people. [...] In the New Testament the word *ethne* refers to pagans as contraposed to God's people and Christians converted from pagans. The Latin words *gentilis*, *gentes* and *22ations* are translations from the Greek *ethne* [...]. (Kahlos 19-20)<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The role of ethnicity in early Christian apologetics has, in recent years, been reconsidered by scholars: two notable recent studies are Maijastina Kahlos's *Debate and Dialogue: Christian and Pagan Cultures c. 360-430* (2007) and Aaron P. Johnson's *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius's Praeparatio Evangelica* (2006).

<sup>17</sup> Alcuin's term *carmina gentilium* reflects this usage of *gentilis*.

In other words, the sociological vocabulary we still use, of *ethnicity* and *nationality*, was tinged from the beginning with theological significance. These blurred denotations could also be exploited rhetorically:

Side by side with the Christian use, *gentilis* appears in the sense of barbarian or native. The word is also used in a deliberately ambiguous manner, linking the non-Christian aspect with the barbarian nature. (Kahlos 20)

In the third and fourth centuries, other terms than these arose in Christian apologetic discourse, terms more overtly ethnic. In Byzantium, *Hellenes* came to mean not simply ethnic Greeks, but also those who embraced the Greek culture and practiced the Greek religion; the verb *hellenizein* meant "to practice pagan rites" (Kahlos 21). In the western Empire, the Latin *pagani*—rustic villagers—began to replace *gentis* and *gentilis* as a generic label for non-Christians, yet it too shaded over into the ethnic: "pagans were labeled as a group on the periphery or even *outside* Roman Christian society, with a nuance of barbarism"—Germanic barbarism, specifically (Kahlos 25).

The Christian apologists' ambiguous terminology was not simply a rhetorical strategy, but instead grew out of their understanding of the relationship between religious and ethnic identities. The *Praeparatio Evangelica* of Eusebius of Caesarea (early fourth century) may be cited as representative: this massive fifteen-book collation of previous works "can rightly be seen as the culmination (though by no means the end) of the apologetic tradition" (Johnson 11).<sup>18</sup> In the *Praeparatio*, ethnicity is treated as the source of religion and culture, not an independent category from the other two:

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<sup>18</sup> The nearest comparable experience to reading the *Praeparatio* is that of reading Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, only without the wry humor lurking behind affected pedantry.



Each ethnicity also possesses a distinctive cluster of religious customs, beliefs, and expressions—a ‘theology’—that is central to the identity of that *ethnos*. [...] Rather than appearing as a category of beliefs that we might label ‘religion,’ these theologies are rooted in the ancient past of the nations and were instituted by the nations’ forefathers. Their repeated practice and embodiment in the regularized social life of a community had become an integral element of each community’s identity as a people. (Johnson 44)

Central to this interdependent conception of ethnicity, religion, and culture is the Christian apologists’ euhemeristic approach to pagan mythology. Euhemerism, named for its originator Euhemerus of Messina, regards the ancient gods as, in reality, historical personages whose great reputation led to their veneration after death: as Clement of Alexandria put it, "Those to whom you bow were once men like yourselves" (Seznec 12). The gods, therefore, are regarded in the *Praeparatio* as the originators of their *ethne*:

As mortal men and women, these individuals were considered the founders of nations and representatives of distinctively national ways of life. They were firmly embedded within a full historical and ethnic context. (Johnson 82)

Once euhemerized, the *Praeparatio* situates myths in an origin narrative of pagan nations, a major theme of which was "the distinctive character (*tropos*) that is portrayed by the figures of the story, and so is representative of the nations of which they are the founders" (Johnson 88).

For Eusebius, this "distinctive character" was an invariably *bad* character, shared by the nation-founding gods and their national followers:

[I]t is an unholy and impious thing to honour with the adorable name of "God" mortals who have long been lying among the dead, and have not even left a

memory of themselves as virtuous men, but have handed down examples of extreme incontinence and wantonness, of cruelty also and insanity, for those who come after them to follow (*Preparation* 74).

Again, though the *Praeparatio* is more systematic than earlier works, nearly every Christian apologist before Eusebius and for centuries thereafter included in his polemic a catalog of gods behaving badly, with similar emphases.

If ethnicity is not a separate identity category from religion, but instead is *rooted in* and *shaped by* religion, then what did the Christian apologists make of the cultures associated with those ethnicities? On this point, the apologists differed. Some, like Justin Martyr (110-165), saw an opportunity for rapprochement between Christianity and the Greek culture through Greek philosophy. For Justin, divine wisdom, the *Logos*, is "the seed of reason [...] implanted in every race of men" (*Second* 191). All true philosophy—Platonic, Stoic, or otherwise—springs from this seed, so that "each man spoke well in proportion to the share he had of the spermatic word [*Logos*], seeing what was related to it" (Justin *Second* 193). Christians still have the advantage over the Greek philosophers, however, for their teacher is the incarnate *Logos*, Jesus Christ (Justin *Second* 193). Others, however, chiefly Tertullian (145-220), passionately argued for a strict separation of Christians from the Greco-Roman culture. Tertullian's *Prescription against Heretics* contains the most famous formulation of this position: after accusing philosophical schools of originating the very Christian heresies his polemic attacked, Tertullian declares,

What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? [...] Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputations after possessing Christ Jesus, no

inquisition after enjoying the gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief.

For this is [our most praiseworthy] faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides. (246)

Tertullian wanted Christians isolated not only from Greek and Roman philosophy, but also from their literature and drama: the epics of Homer and Virgil are simply primers in heathen religion, and theaters are as defiled as the temple of Jupiter, and equally dangerous to Christians (Sandnes 115; Tertullian *Shows* 83-5). Though later Church Fathers, particularly those influenced by the Alexandrian school of Clement (150-215) and Origen (185-251), came to tolerate and even appreciate classical learning, especially philosophy, Tertullian's perspective continued to be represented in the centuries to follow: "What good has posterity derived from reading how Hector fought and Socrates philosophized?" demanded Sulpicius Severus (363-420), while the Christian poet St. Paulinus of Nola (late 300s-early 400s) refused to associate his art with that of pagans—"Hearts dedicated to Christ reject the Latin Muses and exclude Apollo" (Tolkien *Beowulf* 216-7, 214-5).

Tertullian's rejection of Greek philosophy finds a later counterpart in Alcuin's rejection of traditional Anglo-Saxon heroic verse. Indeed, Alcuin echoes Tertullian: "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" expects the same answer as "What has Ingeld to do with Christ?"—that is, nothing whatsoever. Moreover, we may infer that Alcuin condemned the culture of a pagan people for the same reasons that Tertullian and other early apologists did: because he assumed a natural bond between an ethnicity, its culture, and its religion. It was, after all, an integral element of the patristic apologetic against paganism, an apologetic that early medieval theologians adapted for use against pagans of their own age.

This connection between ethnicity and religion may also be readily seen in the Anglo-Saxon homilist Ælfric of Eynsham's sermon "De falsis diis," or "On the False Gods."<sup>19</sup> Ælfric (ca. 955-ca. 1010), the abbot of Eynsham, is little known outside his writings, of which many remain in the surviving corpus of Anglo-Saxon literature. Ælfric's best known homilies are his *Catholic Homilies*, a series of sermons meant to educate listeners on doctrinal orthodoxy and the events of the ecclesiastical calendar. "De falsis diis," though not one of the *Catholic Homilies*, appears to have a similar pedagogical purpose: to explain the origins and errors of pagan religion. In the best known passage of this sermon, Ælfric presents a euhemeristic explanation of the pagan deities, evidently drawn from patristic sources, and his emphasis (like Eusebius's) is on the gods' bad behavior:

[Ð]a hæþenan [...] fengon to wurðianne mislice éntas and men him to godum, þa þe mihtige wæron on woruldlicum gepincðum, and egefulle on life, þeah þe hy [leofodon] fúllice. Án man wæs eardiende on þam flande Creta, Saturnus geháten, swiðlic and wælhreow, swa þæt he abát hys suna, þa þa hí geborene wæron, and unfæderlice macode heora flæsc him to mete. He læfde swaþeah ænne to l[i]fe, þeah þe he abite his gebroðra on ær; se wæs Iouis geháten, hetol and þrymlic. He [afligde] his fæder of þam foresædan iglande, and wolde hine acwellan, gif he him come tó. Se Iouis wæs swa swiðe gál, þæt he on hys swustor gewífode; seo wæs geháten Iuno, swiðe healic gyden. Heora [ge]dohtra wæron Minerua and

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<sup>19</sup> The text of "De falsis diis" used in this translation is the EETS *Homilies of Ælfric: A Supplementary Collection*, edited by John C. Pope.

Uénus. Ða forlæg se fæder ful[l]lice buta, and manega his magan ma[n]lice  
gewemde. (ll. 99-117)<sup>20</sup>

[T]he pagans [...] took for themselves as gods to worship various giants and men, those that were mighty in worldly rank, and awe-inspiring in life, though they lived foully. One man was living in the island Crete, named Saturn, powerful and cruel, such that he devoured his own sons, when they were born, and in an unfatherly manner made their flesh as food for himself. However, he left one to life, though he consumed his brothers at an earlier time; [that son] was named Jove, evil and strong. He expelled his father from the afore-mentioned island, and would have killed him, if he encountered him. This Jove was so very lustful, that he married his own sister; she was named Juno, a very high goddess. Their daughters were Minerva and Venus. Then the father foully had intercourse with both, and many [times] his own kinwomen wickedly defiled.

In spite of their manifest and abominable sins, Ælfric emphasizes that these false god were *mihtige* in *woruldlicum gepincðum*, "mighty in worldly rank"—in other words, rulers of peoples.

These same sinful gods he links to the pagans of his own day, the "Danes":

Ðas mánfullan menn wæron þa mærostan godas þe þa hæþenan wurðodan, and worhton him to godum; ac se sunu wæs swaþeah swiðor gewurðod þonne se fæder wære on heora fulan bigeng[e]. Ðes Iouis is arwurðust ealra þæra goda þe þa hæþenan hæfdon on heora gedwylde; and he hatte Þór betwux sumum þeodum, þone þa Deniscan leoda lufiað swiðost. (ll. 118-25)

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<sup>20</sup> Unlike Klaeber's *Beowulf* with its thorough diacritical marks, the edition of "De falsis diis" used in this dissertation only used the occasional accent mark to signal a long vowel.

These wicked men were the most famous gods that the heathens worshipped, and built them into gods; but the son was nevertheless more worshipped than the father was in their foul religion. This Jove is most honored of all the gods that the heathens have in their heresy; and he is called Thor among some nations, whom the Danish folk love the most.

The Anglo-Saxons were once one of these Thor-worshipping "nations" (*þeodum*) that Ælfric mentions, though he does not acknowledge it; likewise, Ælfric's own people were once among those who honored Odin, whom he interprets as equivalent with the Roman Mercury (ll. 133-40). It was not only their might and authority that attracted people to these gods, however: Ælfric sees the gods' sins as powerful lures in themselves:

Se syrwienda deofol, þe swicað embe mancyn, gebrohte þa hæþenan on þæt healice gedwyld, þæt hi swa fúle menn him fundon to godum, þe þa leahtras lufodan, þe liciað þam deofle, þæt eac heora biggengan heora bysmor lufodan, and ælfremede wurdan fram þam ælmihtigan Gode, se ðe leahtras onscunað, and lufað þa clænnysse. (159-165)

The scheming Devil, who practices deceit with respect to mankind, brought the heathen into that deep heresy, such that they found for themselves men so foul to be gods, those who loved sins, which pleases the Devil; also, their devotees loved their scandals, and were separated from the almighty God, the one who abhors sins, and that loves purity.

Here again we see Ælfric's ideas tracking with Eusebius's, for not only are the false gods rulers of the "nations," but their appalling sins became for those "nations" objects of admiration and models for conduct.

While Ælfric does not explicitly link his account of the wicked false gods to his own people's pre-conversion culture, the associations would have been easily made by a clerical listener, and perhaps the laity as well. In Bede's *Historia*, those Anglo-Saxons sins that most worried the Roman missionary Augustine were precisely those typified Ælfric's Jove/Thor: violence and indiscriminate sexual promiscuity, especially incest. The Anglo-Saxon reputation for violence nearly led Augustine and his companions to abandon their mission without even crossing the Channel: "they became afraid and began to consider returning home [because they] were appalled at the idea of going to a barbarous, fierce, and pagan nation" (Bede *History* 66). Likewise, Augustine's concern with the sexual mores of the Anglo-Saxons is expressed in his correspondence with Gregory the Great, when he inquires which unions, specifically, are prohibited by the church's edicts against incest. While some of Augustine's fears were unfounded—two brothers marrying two sisters is *not* actually incest, says Gregory—the Pope admits that Anglo-Saxon incest is still a problem, for "many among the English [...], while they were still heathen, are said to have contracted these unlawful marriages" (Bede *History* 74). For Anglo-Saxon clerics like Ælfric operating within the categories of the apologetic tradition, the false gods themselves were the vile archetypes for the distinctive cultures of their "nations," and it is easy to see how that template could be laid over the received histories of their own continental ancestors.

## 6. The One Who Knew, Sang

Does the *Beowulf* poet share these assumptions? Is pagan religion and pagan sin the defining trait of the Anglo-Saxons' continental ancestors presented in *Beowulf*? And are they, therefore, damned, and their culture to be censured by their Christian descendants? If not, if the

poet is attempting to circumvent the Alcuins and Ælfrics of the Anglo-Saxon church, then the poet faces a daunting task: confronting the image of his pagan ancestors presented by the Christian apologetic tradition. Yet, this seems to be precisely what the *Beowulf* poet aims at, for in his story of ancient Danes *in geardagum*—in an age which Ælfric regards as lost in idolatry and sick with sin, and whose memory Alcuin would consign to perdition, along with its kings—in this very time and place, the scop in Heorot knows of the creator—knows and sings!

This is the point at which Fred Robinson rightly cautions us against assumptions. What, really, do we see in the Creation Song of the scop's religious knowledge? We might, like so many critics, assume that the theological content of the Creation Song is indubitably Christian, but what would justify that assumption? Such a conclusion would need to be reached through a close analysis of text and through a methodical assessment of the significance assigned to knowledge and worship of the creator in the Christianity of the *Beowulf* poet's own day. This is the task of Part One of this dissertation, "The Song: *Beowulf's* Creation Song and Religious Identity."

Also, we should consider the time and place of the Creation Song, for Christianity has at its center a particular vision of history: a narrative of God's developing relationship with humanity over successive eras, culminating with the Christian era, which is often called "sacred history." Moreover, as we have seen, the apologetic tradition's interpretation of pagan religions is also bound up in a historical narrative, in which the genesis of an *ethne* and its distinctive religion are simultaneous, the work of the national founders who became the national gods. Therefore, locating the Creation Song's performance within this Christian vision of history will help us assess how far the poet's own vision of history aligns with that of Christian



historiography. This is the task of Part Two of this dissertation, "The Stage: The *Geardagas* in the Framework of Sacred History."

Finally, having explored the song and the stage, this study will conclude by calling Heorot's singer out for an encore, alongside a guest performer: Cædmon, Bede's prototypical Christian poet. Though often only considered as analogues, *Beowulf's* Creation Song and Cædmon's Hymn actually function in dramatically different ways within their larger narratives, and those differences have both religious and ethnic connotations. So, in the end, framed by the apologetic tradition's theology of creation and vision of sacred history, and performed alongside another song so similar yet so different, *Beowulf's* Creation Song will be seen as an integral part of a poetic vision at once traditional and radical—a vision in which the ancestors of the poet's own people *knew* and *sang*.

PART ONE

THE SONG:

*BEOWULF'S* CREATION SONG

AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

## CHAPTER 1

*BEOWULF'S CREATION SONG AND THE CRITICS*

While conventional epics in the classical vein begin *in media res*, the *Beowulf* poet chose to start his story at the beginning. And not one beginning only: the prologue and the first two fitts are a litany of beginnings—the origin of the Danish Scylding dynasty (1-63); the inauguration of King Hrothgar's reign in Denmark (64-73); the construction of Heorot, the first main setting (74-85); and Grendel's bloody debut as chief antagonist of the poem's first act (115-125). It seems fitting, then, that the poet includes a song of cosmic origins in the first 100 lines of *Beowulf*:

[...] þær wæs hearpan swēg,  
 swutol sang scopes. Sægde sē þe cūþe  
 frumsceaft fira feorran reccan,  
 cwæð þæt se Ælmihtiga eorðan worh(te),  
 wlitebeorhtne wang, swā wæter bebūgeð,  
 gesette sigehrēþig sunnan ond mōnan  
 lēoman tō lēohte landbūendum  
 ond gefræt Wade foldan scēatas  
 leomum ond lēafum, lif ēac gesceōp  
 cynna gehwylcum þāra ðe cwide hwyrfaþ. (ll. 89-98)

[...] The harp's sound was there,  
 And the scop's clear song. Then spoke forth the one who knew how  
 To recount mankind's beginning in times far-off,  
 And proclaimed that the Almighty made the Earth,

A brightly shining plain girded by Ocean,  
 Triumphantly set the sun and moon  
 As lights to shine for the earth-dwellers,  
 And garlanded the world's far corners  
 With leaves and branches, and also created life,  
 Every kind of animate being that moves.

However, what significance to assign this passage, referred to in this study as the Creation Song, is hardly a settled question. Its importance is indisputable: the Creation Song is one of the main sites of conflict in *Beowulf* pagan-Christian debate, critical to any argument about the religious identity of *Beowulf*'s author, audience, or characters. It is also *Beowulf*'s first major indication of the religious identity of the Danish characters in the poem. It is not, as has been noted, the first reference to God, but it is the first religious utterance of a character within the narrative, not the narrator.<sup>21</sup> However, to use the Creation Song as evidence of the religious identity of the singer and listeners, we must first assess the religious identity of the song itself. Is the song's content religiously distinctive—clearly Christian or clearly pagan—or is it religiously ambiguous, a "generic" cosmogony equally at home in many religions? In Part One of this dissertation, this question will be considered within the illuminating framework of the Christian apologetic tradition and its forceful assertion of the Christian God as sole universal creator. In Chapter One, critical opinion on the Creation Song will be briefly reviewed, with particular attention to the Creation Song's role as a critical piece of evidence in the ongoing conversation about religious

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<sup>21</sup> Scyld Scefing's son Beow(ulf) is born, "whom God sent to comfort the people" (13-4); Beow(ulf) is honored by "the Lord of Life (*Liffreá*), the Ruler of Heaven (*wuldres Waldend*)" (16-7); Scyld, in dying, goes "into the protection of the Lord (*Frēan*)" (27); Hrothgar shares "all that God has given him" (71-2).

identity in *Beowulf*. In Chapter Two, the fundamental role of creation and knowledge of the creator in Christian notions of religious identity will be shown through a diachronic survey of the apologetic tradition. In Chapter Three, one crucial detail of the Creation Song will be examined—its use of the divine epithet *se ælmihtiga*, the almighty—in light of the apologetic functions of related ideas in Christian creeds and catechism. In Chapter Four, the Creation Song's creation narrative itself will be considered in light of the function of such narratives in the apologetic tradition as distinguishing features of true and false religion.

#### The Religious Identity of *Beowulf's* Creation Song: A Brief Scholarly Survey

The importance of the Creation Song to the religious character of *Beowulf* has been long acknowledged, but the Creation Song has received relatively little attention on its own. Instead, the Creation Song is typically treated in an overall discussion of religion in *Beowulf*. Critics across the years have tended to fall into two camps: (1) those who say the Creation Song is distinctively Christian, or at least a reference to the biblical creator; or (2) those who say the Creation Song is religiously ambiguous, referencing a creator deity in the abstract and so applicable to both pagan and Christian religion.

The position of the first camp, the clear Christian identity of the Creation Song, has often been treated as a given. Tolkien assumes without argument that the Almighty the Danes sing of is the biblical creator, and considers the Creation Song a poetic debt to the "Cædmon school" (*"Beowulf"* 101).<sup>22</sup> Dorothy Whitelock sees "reminiscence of the biblical" in the Creation Song, a

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<sup>22</sup> Tolkien is preceded in his assertion of Caedmonian influence by many scholars, notably H. Munro Chadwick (25). Klaeber disagrees ("Christian" 2). Other Christian sources suggested include the Latin *Carmen de resurrectione mortuorum*, spuriously attributed to Tertullian (Grau 156, cited in Klaeber), and the late 8<sup>th</sup> century OHG *Wessobrunner Gebet* (Tolkien "*Beowulf*" 79). Margaret E. Goldsmith extensively compares *Beowulf's* Christian

sign that the poet is openly situating the narrative within Christian cosmology (76). For Charles Donahue, the Danes' "splendid creation hymn, glorifying the Creator" stirs Grendel's ire, precisely because, in it, "God was being glorified as God" ("*Beowulf*" 76). Margaret Goldsmith concurs in this view: "[Grendel's] murderous spite is roused against the Danes both because they are happy and because they are praising the Creator in his works," a spite only possible if the creator in the song is the same *Scyppend* who is said to have exiled Grendel (*Mode* 107).<sup>23</sup> Of course, treating the Creation Song's distinct Christianity as a given hasn't always led to identical conclusions about the poem's religious character. For F. A. Blackburn, the Creation Song has "the most distinctly Christian coloring of the whole poem," and is therefore indubitably an interpolation. For Friedrich Klaeber, the Creation Song was the first of his "christlichen Elemente im *Beowulf*," and evidence that Christianity is "deeply ingrained in the very fabric of the poem" (Blackburn 17, 19; Klaeber "Christian" 1; Klaeber *Beowulf* xlix-li).

This position was largely unchallenged for decades. Suggestions of non-Christian sources for the Creation Song were made early in *Beowulf* scholarship, notably the Old Norse *Voluspa* and the song of Iopas in the first book of Virgil's *Aeneid*, but these comparisons seem to have lost traction in the wake of Klaeber's "die christlichen Elemente im *Beowulf*."<sup>24</sup> After Klaeber, and especially after Tolkien's "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics," the prevailing readings of

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themes, including the Creation Song, to the 6<sup>th</sup> century Latin *Altus Prosator*, attributed to Columba, though she does not make a claim of direct dependence (*Mode* 42-ff.).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Andy Orchard: because of his connection to Cain and Satan, "[t]hat Grendel should have been roused to wrath by Hrothgar's poet singing a song of Creation seems only fitting" (*Critical* 138).

<sup>24</sup> Klaeber was magisterially dismissive of suggestions of pagan Germanic sources, rejecting the *Voluspa* and Sophus Bugge's hypothetical Germanic creation epic out of hand ("Christian" 2). However, Klaeber makes the comparison with Virgil himself in an endnote, though he does not argue for dependence (*Beowulf* 131).

*Beowulf* assumed the Christian/proto-Christian identity of the Creation Song (and the poem's characters). However, Fred C. Robinson's *Beowulf and the Appositive Style* questioned this assumption, focusing particular attention on the Creation Hymn.<sup>25</sup> Robinson begins by arguing that *ælmihtiga* in line 92 is "a polysemous term equally appropriate in pagan and Christian contexts and not [...] a term specifying the Christian Deity," pointing to use of an Old Norse cognate as a pagan divine epithet (35).<sup>26</sup> Therefore, since "*Beowulf* takes place in a heathen realm in a heathen age," we must assume that the Creation Song attributes creation to "a specific Germanic god or to simply 'whatever omnipotent one created the earth'" (37, 35).<sup>27</sup> As for the content of the song, Robinson asserts that "the scop's creation hymn is one that any pious heathen might sing," citing as analogues (in an endnote) the previously mentioned passage of the *Aeneid* and the *Voluspa* (37, 93).

Others have pushed back further against the assumption of the Creation Song's Christian identity, finding in it latent traces of pagan cosmology. Craig R. Davis claims the Creation Song "bears marked similarity to late pagan conceptions of cosmogony," noting that the natural

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<sup>25</sup> The year previous to the publication of Robinson's book, Edward B. Irving, Jr., called on scholars to moderate their sophisticated theological readings of *Beowulf*, asserting that the poet, while certainly Christian, was "no theologian"; nonetheless, Irving views the Creation Song as "unquestionably the authorized Genesis version" (21, 9).

<sup>26</sup> William Whallon's "The Idea of God in *Beowulf*" makes a similar argument for other divine epithets in *Beowulf*, notably *god*, *frea*, *dryhten*, *fæder*, *waldend*, and *alwalda*; he points to Old Norse cognates as evidence for pre-Christian connotations of these words, arguing that post-conversion Anglo-Saxons likely held similar conceptions of divinity to their pre-conversion ancestors (19-20). However, Whallon does not extend his discussion to *ælmihtiga*, and seems to accept the Creation Song, along with "stories of Cain," as "allusions to Genesis" (23).

<sup>27</sup> Roberta Frank seems to support this latter suggestion, reading the Creation Song as reflecting the natural, philosophical religion of "noble pagan monotheists": "The Dane's hymn in Heorot to a single Almighty expresses a Boethian wonder at seeing an invisible God through his creation" ("Sense" 107).

features listed in the Creation Hymn are also prominent in the creation account of Snorri's *Prose Edda* (45-7). He even sees in the *leomum ond lēafum* of line 97 the remains of Yggdrasill, "the sacrificial cult tree, [...] excised from *Beowulf's* account of Creation in all but its trunklessly preserved limbs and leaves extending to the ends of the earth" (47). Laura Morland sees in the performance of the Creation Song a "creation type scene" that was "common to all the Germanic tribes," both Scandinavian and West Germanic (330).<sup>28</sup> She allows that "the West-Germanic texts, all products of a Christian tradition, will necessarily modify any element of the scene that could be perceived as pagan"; however, the *Beowulf* poet is also "suppressing any overtly Christian motifs" in the song as well, since "the listeners to the *scop's* creation song, Hroþgar's thanes, were pagan" (331, 337). Morland's conclusion is then similar to Robinson's, which she cites approvingly: the Creation Song represents a "delicate balance between pagan and Christian world-views," a balance necessitated by tension between the scruples of a Christian audience and "the integrity of [the poet's] picture of pagan life" (337).

These assertions of a religiously ambiguous or latently pagan identity for the Creation Song have met with some rejoinders. In particular, Paul Cavill protests, specifically contra Robinson, that "the *scop's* song of creation is clearly conditioned by the Genesis account":

It would be hard to find or produce a closer approximation to the account of creation in Genesis 1 in eight-and-a-half lines of Old English poetry, and indeed hard to find anything less like the mythological accounts of origins in Eddic and other Germanic poetry, as Klaeber noted. [...] It is clear that the writer was

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<sup>28</sup> Morland's "creation type scene" is a development from Lars Lönnroth's article, "*Igrð fannz æva né upphiminn: A Formula Analysis*"; Lönnroth does not address *Beowulf's* Creation Song, however.



making no attempt to reconstruct a pagan Danish creation song, but was having the Danish scop sing of the creation as the writer believed it really happened. (25)

However, Cavill does not develop these assertions into detailed arguments. Robinson's position remains popular, prominent, and unanswered by a treatment of the Creation Song in similar or greater depth than his own. Providing such a treatment will be the task of Part One of this dissertation.

## CHAPTER 2

### CREATION AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN THE APOLOGETIC TRADITION

In order to appreciate more fully the significance of the Creation Song to questions of religious identity in *Beowulf*, we should read it within the Christian theological discourse most concerned with defining the boundaries of religious identity: the apologetic tradition. Only then can the true weight of the Creation Song's evidential value be felt. This chapter is meant to provide that context: its survey will range from the Jewish and Christian scriptures, through the writings of Greek and Roman Church Fathers, to remnants of the apologetic tradition in early medieval sources, especially those of Anglo-Saxon England. Particular attention will be given to the perennial features that appear consistently throughout the apologetic tradition in its treatment of creation: though various in detail and emphasis, this stream of tradition nonetheless has a powerful and unified common current.

#### 1. Creation apologetic in Judaic scripture

Though the Hebrew scriptures begin with an assertion of Yahweh/Elohim as the universal creator,<sup>29</sup> and though monotheistic polemics against idolatry and pagan worship are a central feature of the Exodus narrative,<sup>30</sup> an explicit linking of two ideas does not appear in the Torah,

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<sup>29</sup> Genesis 1 & 2. The apologetic use of creation narratives will be explored below in Chapter Four.

<sup>30</sup> Exodus 20:1-6. The Decalogue's ban of "other gods" and images is anticipated by Jacob's purge of "foreign gods" from his household in Genesis 35:1-4. The mockery of idolatry in passages like Isaiah 44:9-20 and Psalm 115:4-8 is anticipated by the theft of Laban's "household gods" by his daughter Rachel in Genesis 31:19-55: the impotence of

the traditional "five books of Moses," also called the Pentateuch. The roots of a creation-centered apologetic may be found in the Torah, certainly, but such an apologetic does not appear overtly except in wisdom literature (the *Sifrei Emet*, or "Books of Truth," a division of the *Ketuvim*, or "Writings"), and the prophetic writings (the *Nevi'im*, or "Prophets," which includes books of prophetic utterance as well as Israelite histories). While scores of examples may be named,<sup>31</sup> the essence of the typical Hebrew apologetic may be found in Psalm 96:5: "For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens."<sup>3233</sup> This pair of lines expresses in compact form three central tenets of the psalmist's religion: that Israel's God is superior to the deities of other nations; that the deities of other nations are in fact "worthless idols"; and that Israel's God is the creator. The use of the euphemistic reference makes it clear that Israel's own deity, not a vague or distant creator, is referred to here: the title of reverence, LORD, which in many English translations is used to translate the covenant name YHWH, is in Hebrew tradition the personal name of Israel's God. The claim of Israel's God to sole divine status may seem to be

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idols to act in self-defense or avoid desecration, in contrast to protective intervention of Jacob's God, is an implicit theme of this extended vignette.

<sup>31</sup> Some examples: Isaiah 40:18-31; Isaiah 44; Jeremiah 10. Elijah's confrontation with the priests of Baal in I Kings 18 dramatizes the same prophetic contempt for pagan gods. The themes of these passages are elaborated also in the apocryphal *Wisdom of Solomon* 13-15; this passage shows the continued currency of this line of polemic among pious Hellenistic Jews in the centuries immediately preceding Christianity.

<sup>32</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all English translations of the Bible are from the English Standard Version (2011).

<sup>33</sup>The Psalms may be enumerated differently, depending on whether the numbering is based on the Hebrew Masoretic text or the Greek Septuagint. This psalm is designated Psalm 95 in the Septuagint; the Latin Vulgate, Roman Catholic liturgy and older Roman Catholic translations, and Eastern Orthodox translations follow the Greek numbering. This psalm is designated Psalm 96 in the Masoretic text; translations of the Tanakh, Protestant liturgy and translations, and some more recent Roman Catholic translations follow the Hebrew numbering.

threatened by the reference to "the gods of the peoples." However, the Hebrew word-play between "gods" and what is translated "worthless idols" makes clear that the psalmist refers to these entities as "gods" only ironically: "they are not *ʿlōhîm* ('gods') but *ʿlîlîm* ('nobodies')" (Anderson 683). They are not by nature divine; they are "nothings," the vain imaginings of foolish humanity. Most translators render this as a reference to idols, since the standard Jewish polemic against idols focuses on their uselessness and abject helplessness (cf. Psalm 97:7, Psalm 115:4-8, Isaiah 40:18-20). In contrast to the worthless pagan idols, Israel's God "made the heavens": here the heavens are not only a reference to those created things most often identified with the highest deities—the sun, moon, and stars—but also a synecdoche of the created universe. Therefore, while the gods of other nations are "impotent manmade things, [...] Yahweh is the creator of everything" (Anderson *Psalms* 683). For this reason, the psalmist makes this appeal to the surrounding nations in verse 7: "Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, / ascribe to the LORD glory and strength!" Because Israel's God is the universal creator, all nations should also worship YHWH.

One additional point may be made regarding the later reception of Psalm 96:5 among early Christian writers. While in Hebrew the "gods of the peoples" are *ʿlîlîm* ("nobodies" or "worthless idols"), the Greek Septuagint translates that word as *daimónia* (δαίμόνια) or "demons." This rendering proved to be profoundly influential on the Christian apologetic tradition, particularly since Jerome adopted it in his Vulgate (*dæmonia*, rendered in the Douay-Rheims translation as "devils"). This text is frequently cited by both Greek and Latin church fathers in their discussions of the devilish origins of pagan worship; the two variants were also harmonized frequently by conceptualizing pagan deities as idols inhabited by demonic spirits.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> An example from the Psalms commentary of fifth-century theologian Theodoret of Cyrillus: "While the so-called

## 2. Creation apologetic in Christian scripture

In the Christian canon, the "New Testament," the chief apologetic voice is St. Paul, the so-called "Apostle to the Gentiles." This title, though traditional and claimed by Paul in Romans 11:13, is misleading: the missionary journeys and martyrdoms of other apostles among various "gentile" peoples are recorded in epistles and "acts," both canonical and apocryphal, as well as copious ancient and medieval legendry. Nonetheless, the Paul presented in the canonical Acts of the Apostles is the Christian leader most concerned with converting "gentiles" and integrating them into the Christian fold. As such, his sermons to "gentile" audiences employ a different line of argument than those directed toward religious Jews or ethnically "gentile" proselytes of Judaism: while his sermons to Jewish audiences argue that Jesus of Nazareth is Israel's promised Messiah (Christ, in Greek), his sermons to "gentiles" are standard Jewish polemics against paganism.<sup>35</sup> In this section of the discussion, below, two of these sermons to "gentiles" will be considered: Paul's brief sermon in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 14:15-17) and his more developed discourse at the Athenian Areopagus (Acts 17:22-31).

Paul's sermon in Pisidian Antioch is presented in the narrative as unplanned, improvised under duress. After Paul and his companion Barnabas heal a crippled beggar, the surrounding crowd "lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" (Acts 14:11) This outburst of religious fervor swells, till the priest of Zeus and the crowd try to offer animal sacrifices to the visiting "gods," Zeus (Barnabas) and Hermes

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gods were seen as wicked demons, ours appeared as maker of the heavens" (128).

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Paul's sermons to "gentile" audiences (Acts 14:15-17 and Acts 17:22-31) and his sermon at a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16-31).

(Paul). Appalled by this response and anxious to avert a misunderstanding, Paul, the spokesman of the pair, offers the following explanation for the apostles' mission:

Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness. (Acts 14:15-17)

Here we find, plainly expressed, the sentiments of Psalm 96:5 and other apologetic passages of Jewish scripture. The "living God" that Paul and Barnabas represent is the God who made "the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them." By contrast, the religious rites of the "gentiles," addressed as they are to Zeus and Hermes, are "vain things," empty and worthless, directed at gods who are, presumably, the opposite of "living": dead or nonexistent. This "vain" religion was permitted by the creator among the "gentiles" (ἔθνη, *ethnē*), just as in Psalm 96:5 idolatry is said to reign among "the peoples"; the parallel assertion, that the "living God" is Israel's/Paul's God is left unspoken but implicit.<sup>36</sup>

The Areopagus discourse shares the same foundational assumptions of the sermon in Pisidian Antioch, but fleshes them out more fully. In contrast to the chaos of pious revels in Acts 14, the setting in Acts 17 is civil and intellectual: Paul is invited by Athenians, including

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<sup>36</sup> Also, Paul's declaration of a creator unknown to his audience is an implicit critique of their own cosmogonies: whatever creation stories they know, Paul assumes they are false and foolish. The apologetic function of creation stories is considered below in Chapter Four.

"Epicurean and Stoic philosophers" (Acts 17:18), to address the crowd and explain his religious teachings. Again Paul delivers a speech far different from those he makes in synagogues—a speech designed to appeal to "gentile" listeners:

Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, "To the unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we are indeed his offspring." Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. (Acts 17:22-31)

One immediately noticeable difference between this sermon and that of Pisidian Antioch is that Paul has toned down his anti-pagan rhetoric, though he has not eliminated it entirely. The "men

of Athens" reverence an "unknown god," whom Paul identifies as the "God who made the world and everything in it." This worship is laudable, but only in a limited sense: the Athenians still worship what they do not *know*, and their manner of worship is contrary to reason. Presumably Paul infers from the rites of pagan worship that the Athenians believe that gods "live in temples made by man" and are "served by human hands"—both false opinions, according to Paul. Moreover, in typical Jewish fashion, he finds their idolatry distasteful and irrational: "we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone." As in Antioch, false worship is not merely a local problem, but that of "every nation of mankind"—with the implicit exception, that is, of the Jews, the creator's chosen people.

The Paul of the epistles shares with the Paul of Acts an apologetic focus on God as creator. The epistolary passage at the crux of Paul's creation apologetic, and the pattern for later patristic apologists, is Romans 1:18-25. Two verses prior to this passage, Paul sets forth his "gospel" as "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16).<sup>37</sup> While Paul's claim for Jesus of Nazareth of the role of "anointed one" (Christ) is only explicable within Jewish messianism, Paul nonetheless preaches his gospel to non-Jews: for Paul, Jesus' status as messiah of Israel has implications beyond the Jewish *ethne*. Romans 1:18-25 is the beginning of Paul's extended, three-chapter argument that humans of all nations are in need of "the power of God for salvation," because "all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin" (Rom. 3:9). Paul asserts that all humans have (or had) knowledge of the true God, the creator, but that this true knowledge has been systematically "suppressed," resulting in false religion:

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<sup>37</sup> Paul regularly uses the specific ethnic term "Greek" to designate all non-Jews.



[T]he wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. (Rom. 1:18-25)

The knowledge of the true God here attributed to all "men" appears to derive from two sources. First, God's "eternal power and divine nature" may be seen in "the things that have been made." Here Paul suggests a kind of natural theology: knowledge of God's existence and attributes that may be derived from observation of the natural world. However, a second source of knowledge may be inferred from verse 21: "For although they *knew* God, they *did not honor* him as God" (italics mine). Here Paul shifts from a natural knowledge that "*is plain*" (present tense) to another knowledge possessed in the past ("they *knew*"). This past knowledge, perhaps that of a primal humanity, was lost because it was rejected ("they *did not honor*"). In its place, the "futile"

thinking of "darkened" and "foolish" hearts was substituted: "they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (Rom. 1:21, 25).

While there are common themes between the sermons of the Paul of Acts and the Paul of Romans 1:18-25, there are differences. The sermons in Pisidian Antioch and Athens both seem to present pagan religion as the result of "times of ignorance" in which God "allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways" (Acts 17:30, 14:16). Pagan religion in these sermons is false and irrational, but a revelation from God is needed to bring the ignorant nations to true knowledge of the creator. However, in Romans 1:18-25, pagan religion is itself the result of a sinful "suppression" and "exchange" of past *and* present knowledge of the creator. While not necessarily contradictory, these differences do give the sermons of Acts a distinctly more "friendly" mood than the stentorian, prophetic Epistle to the Romans. These differences of emphasis and mood within the canonical Paul both were influential on the next generation of Christian apologists, the church fathers.

### 3. Creation apologetic in the Church Fathers

In the post-apostolic, patristic era of Christianity, the doctrine of creation remained central to the apologetic traditions. Indeed, a catalogue of apologists and church fathers citing the central points made thus far—the biblical deity as creator and "one true God," and "gentile" deities as created beings—would include every major writer and almost all minor writers.<sup>38</sup> This apologetic use of creation was vital to the orthodox definition of religious identities as "Christian

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<sup>38</sup>Even a list of citations of Psalm 96:5 yields an impressive array of patristic writers: Augustine, Ambrose, Basil of Caesarea, Cyprian of Carthage, Gregory of Nyssa, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Origen, Tertullian, and Theodoret. If allusions to and paraphrases of Psalm 96:5 are included, the list grows exponentially.

leaders elucidated borderlines between the Christian and pagan interpretations of monotheism in stressing the distinction between the Creator God and the created universe" (Kahlos 182). As such, declarations of the Christian God as creator are a critical part of orthodox creeds, while expositions of the creation narrative itself feature prominently in catechesis.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, the border between catechetical/homiletic and polemic presentations of God as Creator is impossible to draw:

[A] favorite theme [of the church fathers] was the six days of creation ("Hexameron"). Yet we cannot tell to what extent its treatment in ecclesiastical circles was determined by an anti-heretical concern. One can only speculate about the matter. Even the predilection of *1 Clement* for God the creator appears to us to have an anti-heretical thrust. [...] The church sensed that it had the task of validating its faith in the God and father of Jesus Christ as creator of the world not only against the demiurge or any other such angelic power, but also against the devil; in this context also belongs the question concerning the origin of man and his special character. (Bauer 147-8)

This ambiguity is inevitable because, in early Christianity, religious identity was Janus-faced, manifesting within the community as creed and catechesis, while looking beyond the community's limits as polemic.

Early Christian apologists kept the doctrine of creation central to their endeavor, in spite of serious differences between apologetic approaches. Two main stances on pagan religion and philosophy dominated early Christian apologetics, "one building on the insights of non-Christians, the other rejecting those 'insights' as fundamentally flawed" (Edwards "Introduction"

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<sup>39</sup> Creeds and catechesis will be considered in greater depth in Chapter Three.

6).<sup>40</sup> Both stances related directly to the doctrine of creation. Apologists of the first group drew on Paul's assertion in Romans 1:20 that God "ha[s] been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made," seeing in it the "possibility of 'natural theology'":

People, just by virtue of being human, 'have a certain degree of knowledge of God and awareness of him, or at least a capacity for such an awareness; and this knowledge or awareness exists anterior to the special revelation of God made through Jesus Christ, through the Church, and through the Bible'. (Edwards "Introduction" 6, citing Barr *Biblical Faith* 1)

Therefore, the doctrine of creation can be used as "common ground" between pagans and Christians, though (apologists argue) Christianity is more consistent with the theological insight both groups share.<sup>41</sup> Apologists of the second group, however, take their cue from the end of Paul's discussion in Romans 1:18-25, in which humanity "exchanged the truth about God for a

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. Rhee: "If establishing a harmony between Christian monotheism and Greek philosophical monotheism is a positive strategy, the Apologists' vehement polemic against popular polytheism and myth forms a negative strategy in the *protreptikos logos*" (61).

<sup>41</sup> Justin Martyr is an apologist of this type, favorably citing in his own *First Apology* Plato's account of creation. Indeed, "Justin's point in *1 Apol.* 59 [is] that the Greek philosophers, and specifically Plato, learned of this idea from the teachings of Moses and therefore their accuracy in the matter comes from [...] divinely revealed truth" (Steenberg 42). Therefore, "Justin does not see any significant inconsistency between the Platonic God and the biblical God [and so] reads the Platonic creation myth in *Timaeus* as parallel to the Genesis account of creation" (Rhee 52). Regarding the "Platonism" of Justin Martyr, Rhee cautions that

the Plato and Plato's texts [cited by apologists are] not necessarily of the original Academy but of this eclectic Middle Platonism already compiled and used by philosophers of the day; the Apologists followed the contemporary interpretation of Plato and his works. (50)

lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator." In this case, the doctrine of creation is a dividing line: pagans do not know the true creator, but instead worship "the creature." This principle undergirds several distinct but connected veins of Christian polemics against pagans: euhemerist accounts of humanized and frequently immoral "gods," satirical mockery of the impotence of idols, and reasoned rebuttals of the worship of natural elements like the sun or moon.<sup>42</sup> In each case, apologists condemned the veneration of "those that by nature are not gods" (Gal. 4:8), emphasizing their status as created beings. As Rhee puts it, the apologists see pagan religions as "foolish and irrational":

How can one worship the created matter rather than the Creator? How can one worship the mortal gods, just as needy, emotional, and vicious as human beings?

How can one worship irrational animals and lifeless images and idols made by human hands? (63)

Unlike irrational pagans, Christians are "worshippers of the True God since they distinguish God from matter and recognize 'the Maker of the universe and the Word proceeding from him as God'" (Rhee 63).<sup>43</sup>

To see a typical example of writing within the patristic apologetic tradition, we may turn to the *Contra Gentes (Against the Nations)* of Athanasius, the fourth century Alexandrian bishop

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<sup>42</sup> Tertullian is an apologist of this type, and all three of the polemic veins named are prominent features of his apologetic writings: *Ad Nationes* argues that "all these gods were once human beings"; *On Idolatry* is a book-length diatribe on image worship; *Ad Nationes* argues against pagans "contending that the elements are gods" (141, 131).

<sup>43</sup> Rhee is citing Athenagoras's *Plea for the Christians*, chapter 4.

and famous advocate of Nicene Christology against Arianism.<sup>44</sup> A contemporary of Constantine and his heirs, Athanasius lived in a Rome poised between its pagan past and later Christian dominance: for that reason, his *Contra Gentes* has both the second-century fervor of a Tertullian and the beginnings of the triumphant pose typical of later writings. We may also see in *Contra Gentes* both the apologetic approaches explained above: creation as both common ground and dividing line. On one hand, God "being good and loving to mankind, and caring for the souls made by Him" sought to provide humanity with a means to know Him: "God by His own Word gave the Universe the Order it has, in order that [...] men might be enabled to know Him at any rate by His works" (Athanasius 22). Citing the movements of heavenly bodies in particular, Athanasius asks rhetorically, "who that sees the circle of heaven and the course of the sun and the moon [...] can resist the conclusion that these are not ordered by themselves, but have a maker distinct from themselves who orders them?" (23). Here there appears to be a possibility of a natural theology leading to knowledge of the true creator. However, Athanasius is adamant that this possibility of true knowledge is, in fact, not realized:

Accordingly, evil is the cause which brings idolatry in its train; for men, having learned to contrive evil, which is no reality in itself, in like manner feigned for themselves as gods beings that had no real existence. Just, then, as though a man had plunged into the deep, and no longer saw the light, nor what appears by light, because his eyes are turned downwards, and the water is all above him; and, perceiving only the things in the deep, thinks that nothing exists beside them, but

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<sup>44</sup> Instances of patristic apologists making use of the doctrine of creation are, as stated earlier, multitudinous. Athanasius has been chosen for his prominence and to fend off the tedious and redundant multiplication of examples. More citations are provided below in illustration of more focused discussion.

that the things he sees are the only true realities; so the men of former time, having lost their reason, and plunged into the lusts and imaginations of carnal things, and forgotten the knowledge and glory of God, their reasoning being dull, or rather following unreason, made gods for themselves of things seen, glorifying the creature rather than the Creator, and deifying the works rather than the Master, God, their Cause and Artificer. (8)

Athanasius's allegory of the diver is telling, particularly because it evokes a similar allegory of knowledge and ignorance: Plato's Allegory of the Cave. This familiar philosophical parable narrates the human mind's journey into true knowledge, moving from temporal appearances (the shadows) to the universal forms (the real source of the shadows). In its ignorance-to-knowledge/shadow-to-reality trajectory, the Allegory of the Cave seems to parallel the common-ground approach to the doctrine of creation, as humans reason from the visible world (effect) to its invisible creator (cause). Athanasius's allegory, though, follows the scenario described by Romans 1:18-25: beginning, presumably, on the surface, the diver has descended till he "no longer saw the light," and has become so accustomed to the shadow and forgetful of the light, that he thinks "the things he sees are the only true realities." This is the dividing-line approach to the doctrine of creation, in which pagans are seen as presently and historically culpable for "unrighteous suppression" of the truth about the true creator. Athanasius narrates the steps of this descent into ignorance with a Tertullian-like contempt:

For now the understanding of mankind leaped asunder from God; and going lower in their ideas and imaginations, they gave the honour due to God first to the heaven and the sun and moon and the stars, thinking them to be not only gods, but also the causes of the other gods lower than themselves. Then, going yet lower in

their dark imaginations, they gave the name of gods to the upper æther and the air and the things in the air. Next, advancing further in evil, they came to celebrate as gods the elements and the principles of which bodies are composed, heat and cold and dryness and wetness. But just as they who have fallen flat creep in the slime like land-snails, so the most impious of mankind, having fallen lower and lower from the idea of God, then set up as gods men, and the forms of men, some still living, others even after their death. Moreover, counselling and imagining worse things still, they transferred the divine and supernatural name of God at last even to stones and stocks, and creeping things both of land and water, and irrational wild beasts, awarding to them every divine honour, and turning from the true and only real God, the Father of Christ. (8)

As an Egyptian, Athanasius is especially condemning of the animal-headed gods of ancient Egypt, which "mix[ed] up the rational with the irrational, and combining things unlike in nature" (8). He also continues the apologetic tradition begun by Justin Martyr and Tertullian of censuring the bad behavior of humanized pagan gods, who were "even of men the most contemptible": Zeus, for instance, "is no god but a man, and a man born of a cannibal father" (10, 9). As explained earlier, the doctrine of creation is still latent in these critiques of paganism: as humans venerate entities ever lower in the natural order—from celestial to elemental, from human to animal, from animate to inanimate—they descend the levels of creation from most god-like to least, embracing both impiety and irrationality as they "glorify the creature rather than the Creator."

In the apologetic writings of church fathers like Athanasius, we may see how the creation theme begun in the scriptures of Judaism and Christianity has been further elaborated into



distinct strands of argument. Furthermore, the patristic apologists name names, applying the generalities of the canonical Paul to specific religions and deities.<sup>45</sup> This latter move in particular helped equip late Roman and early medieval theologians and missionaries as they refined the general framework of the apologetic tradition to meet the specific local paganisms they sought to combat.

#### 4. Creation apologetic in the late Roman empire and early middle ages

As the centralized political power of Rome waned in the west, replaced by many "barbarian" kingdoms, the Church's need for an apologetic counter to paganism again arose. Though the various pagan religions of the Mediterranean world had ultimately been suppressed, the diverse peoples consolidating local power across the fragmenting empire had their own religions. In response, a new "missionary age" began as clerics went out seeking converts among these barbarian nations, and these newly-converted nations in turn sent out their own evangelists.

This early medieval missionary age was preceded, however, by a time of waning Christian influence in regions which had previously been strongly Romanized territories of the empire. Such a region was late Roman Hispania, the Iberian Peninsula, where bishops of the sixth century saw an increasing need to combat paganism (whether latent or recidivist), among the commons and "rustics." To meet this need, Martin, archbishop of Bracara Augusta (later called Braga), composed his epistolary sermon *De correctione rusticorum* (*On the correction of the rustics*):

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<sup>45</sup> In naming names, the fathers are reviving a practice of the Judaic scriptures, in which worship of named gods is frequently decried (cf. 1 Kings 18).

I have received your kind letter, in which you [Bishop Polemius] write me that I should send you something on the origin of idols and their sins, or, if I like, a few selections from the abundant material available, in order to chastise the rustics who are still bound by the old pagan superstition and offer more veneration to demons than to God. (71)

With this as his stated purpose, Martin begins a sample sermon, the first point of which is the assertion of the Christian God as creator:

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, in His celestial habitation He created spiritual creatures, that is, angels, who should stand in His presence and praise Him. One of these, who had been appointed archangel, chief of them all, seeing himself so radiant and glorious, did not pay honor to God his Creator, but said he was equal to Him [...] (72)

Though Martin begins in a catechetical vein by invoking Genesis 1:1, his polemical intent is quickly revealed as he steers his narrative first to the creation of angels and then to the fall of Satan. In describing this "archangel" who "did not pay honor to God his Creator," Martin invokes Romans 1:21: "For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God." By this allusion, Martin lays the grounds for a major theme of his sermon: namely, Satan, the devil, as the archetype and propagator of pagan religion. Martin continues to echo Romans 1 (in this case, Rom. 1:25) when he recounts the rebellion of postdiluvian humanity: "[A]gain men forgot God the Creator of the world and when they had abandoned the Creator they began to worship creatures" (73). These ancient humans "paid homage to the sun, others the moon and stars, others fire, others deep water and springs of water" (73). However, ignorant nature worship quickly devolved into the demonic:

Then the devil or his [demons], seeing that ignorant men had dismissed God their Creator and were mistaking the creatures, began to appear to them in various forms and speak with them and demand of them that they offer sacrifices to them [...] and worship them as God, assuming the names of wicked men who had spent their whole lives in crime and sin [...] (74)

Among these "wicked men," Martin names Jupiter, Mars, Mercury, and Saturn, along with Juno, Minerva, and Venus (74). From this point, Martin proceeds to condemn as demonic such "rustic" practices as leaving sacrifices at crossroads, calling weekdays after the names of gods, and auguries (74, 75-6, 77-8). But Martin has not yet left behind his emphasis on God as creator, for next he declares that "when God saw that wretched men are so deceived by the devil [...] that they forget their Creator [...], He sent His Son [...] to recall them to the worship of the true God" (78). This, then, is the purpose of Christ's advent: to teach humanity "to leave their idols and their wicked works, to desert the power of the devil, and to return to the worship of their Creator" (78). Indeed, so firmly is Martin's counter-pagan polemic rooted in a creation apologetic, that he sees any lapse into pagan superstition as recantation of the true creator: "[Y]ou have given up the sacred incantation, I mean the creed you accepted at baptism, which is: "I believe in God the Father Almighty" (82). While Martin does not here finish the opening declaration of the Apostles Creed, the mnemonic power of credal memorization and recitation ensured that "maker of heaven and earth" would inevitably sound in his reader or hearer's mind, tacitly reinforcing his established theme of creatures' owed allegiance to their creator. As we shall see, not only is Martin's emphasis on the Christian God as creator typical of early medieval apologetics, but also his sermon was influential on later works.

At this point, we turn to the region of early medieval Europe most relevant to this study:

Anglo-Saxon England. England was at both ends of this evangelistic exchange, receiving missionaries from both the Hiberno-Scottish and Roman churches during its conversion, and later sending missionaries back to the continent throughout the Frankish Empire. Anglo-Saxon literature records this history of missionary activity and religious conversion not only in accounts of historical events, but also in the preservation of apologetic arguments. Bede's *Historia*, with its store of conversion-era anecdote and correspondence, is an important witness to Anglo-Saxon apologetics, but hardly the sole witness. Many Anglo-Saxon missionaries were celebrated saints, and accounts of confrontations between these missionary saints and representatives of pagan religion often feature apologetic arguments, as in *The Life of Saint Willibrord*, or at least strongly imply their use, as in *The Life of Saint Boniface*. Record of Anglo-Saxon apologetic argument also survives in polemical homilies and ecclesiastical correspondence, such as Ælfric's "De falsis diis," as well as in the scriptural commentary and scholarly writings of Anglo-Saxon theologians. From all of these sources, we may see how the doctrine of creation played a central role in Anglo-Saxon Christianity's defense of "the faith once delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3).

Arguably Bede's iconic story in the conversion of Anglo-Saxon England is not Augustine of Canterbury's arrival, but the conversion of King Edwin of Northumbria in Book Two. Edwin's conversion does not take place in a single episode, however, but is instead stretched over chapters nine through fourteen of Book Two. One moment in Chapter Thirteen—the counselor's parable of the sparrow, and the subsequent conversion of the pagan priest Coifi—is among the best-known in Bede's *Historia*, and is often told in modern accounts of the Anglo-Saxon conversion (Bede *History* 126-8). This is the appropriate climax to the story of Edwin's conversion, as the zealous Coifi takes on the role of Christ's champion and burns down his own idol-shrine, thus showing the victory of "the true God" over pretender deities. However, the

theological foundation of this scene of victory is presented earlier in Chapter Ten, in a letter from Pope Boniface to King Edwin.<sup>46</sup> Boniface is open in his effort to evangelize Edwin, announcing in the introduction his intent to "impart [...] the Gospel of Christ" and "offer you the medicine of salvation" (Bede *History* 117). Boniface's presentation, typical of such efforts, includes traditional apologetic arguments for the superiority of Christianity alongside traditional polemics against pagan worship. First, he affirms that the true God is the universal creator,

the Divine Majesty, who by His Word alone created and established the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that in them is, has ordained the laws by which they subsist. (Bede *History* 117-8)

Here Genesis 1:1's expression of the created order—"the heavens and the earth"—is evident, though the whole catalog draws more immediately on Paul's address in Pisidian Antioch discussed above (Acts 14:15). In addition to these features of the visible cosmos, God also

formed man after His own image and likeness from the dust of the earth. He has further granted him a most excellent prerogative, placing him above all other creatures in order that he may inherit eternal life by obedience to His commandments. (Bede *History* 118)

Boniface's discussion of the creation of humanity performs the usual apologetic function of assigning humanity's primary fealty to the creator deity, instead of culture-specific gods: the true God, the universal creator, made humans in "His own image and likeness"; he set humans in their rightful place in the natural order, "above all other creatures"; and he imposed the first law, "His

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<sup>46</sup> This letter is presumably one of those found by Bede's contemporary, the priest Nothelm, in "the archives of the holy Roman Church" (Preface).

commandments."<sup>47</sup> That fealty remains all humanity's duty, in spite of ethnic and cultural difference among human populations.

Second, Boniface is emphatic in his identification of the creator deity with the Trinity of orthodox Christian creeds:

This God—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—the undivided Trinity—is adored and worshipped by the human race from east to west, which confesses Him by the faith that brings salvation as Creator of all things and Maker of all men. (Bede *History* 118)

The creator deity, at first referred to as simply, "the Divine Majesty," shows his internal plurality in the creative act itself, for he created "by the counsel of His co-eternal Word in the unity of the Holy Spirit" (Bede *History* 118). Therefore, faith in "the undivided Trinity," defined in creedal language as "belie[f] in God the Father Almighty, and in His Son Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit," is necessary for any who would "inherit eternal life" (Bede *History* 118).

Third, Boniface actively condemns pagan worship, invoking the by-now-familiar Psalm 96:5:

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<sup>47</sup> Also, like Ælfric in "De falsis diis," Boniface emphasizes the deathless bliss that would have been the human state, had "His commandments" been kept: "he may inherit eternal life" (Bede *History* 118). Boniface does not, however, proceed into an account of Adam's sin: it is absent from this letter, save for a single allusion to "original sin" in the letter's conclusion (Bede *History* 119). This oversight seems to be intentional, for it serves the rhetorical function of setting up a later point against idolatry:

Consider, you yourselves, to whom God has given the breath of life, are nobler than these man-made things; for Almighty God has ordered your descent through countless generations from the first man that He created. (Bede *History* 119)

The profound guilt of those who perversely cling to pernicious superstition and idolatrous worship is clearly shown by the damnable example of those they adore.

Of such the Psalmist says: "All the gods of the nations are [demons]; but the Lord made the heavens." (2.10)<sup>48</sup>

Boniface's use of this passage follows in the established Christian apologetic tradition, drawing out of it a polemic against both paganism's idol-worship (following the Hebrew reading) and its demonic background (following the Septuagint reading). The critique of idolatry here is also typical within the apologetic tradition, though graced with the ornate prose style of the period:

How can such objects have power to help you, when they are made for you from perishable materials by the labour of your own subjects and servants? Even their inanimate resemblance to living shapes is due solely to man's craftsmanship.

Unless you move them they cannot move, but are like a stone fixed in its place: they are manufactured, but have no intelligence, being utterly insensible and having no power to hurt or help. We cannot understand how people can be so deluded as to worship as gods objects to which they themselves have given the likeness of a body (Bede *History* 119)

Boniface is raising the usual points in polemic of this sort: idols are powerless because they are products of human craft; because their bodies are only a semblance, incapable of real function; because they are immobile, unthinking, and insensible. Another point—that idols were made by commoners, "subjects and servants"—seems to be Boniface's only innovation, evidently aimed

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<sup>48</sup> While the Latin text reads "Omnes dii gentium daemonia," Sherley-Price's English translation reads "All the gods of the nations are idols," replacing (without notice) the Septuagint-derived Vulgate language with that of the Hebrew Masoretic text.

to leverage the king's sense of social status into a dissatisfaction with pagan worship. But paganism is not merely the ignorant worship of images: it is the "damnable crafts and devices of the Devil," and pagans are in "the evil power of the Devil" (Bede *History* 119). Boniface attributes a spiritual reality to pagan worship—it is not merely imposture and fraud—but that spiritual reality is purely malign in nature. The remedy Boniface recommends is simple: to "[o]verthrow and destroy these artificial gods of your own making" and to "accept the knowledge of your Creator, who breathed into your frame the breath of life, and who sent His only-begotten Son for your redemption, that He might deliver you from original sin and the evil power of the Devil" (Bede *History* 119). These are the instructions that Edwin follows and Coifi memorably enacts, here presented as the reasonable and appropriate response to the traditional Christian apologetic that Pope Boniface presents.<sup>49</sup>

The combination of polemical argument and direct action urged by Pope Boniface seems to have also been the *modus operandi* of Anglo-Saxon missionaries among the pagan Germanic peoples on the continent. This is seen clearly in the *vita* of Willibrord of Northumbria (d. 739), mentor of the more famous Boniface of Wessex. During his missionary journey in the frontier between Frisia and Denmark, Willibrord lands on an island called Fositeland, reckoned holy by the locals as a shrine to their god, Fosite. In addition to its pagan shrines, the island also had two taboos: interfering with the sacred cattle and drawing water from a sacred spring in any manner

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<sup>49</sup> A parallel in Bede's *Historia* to the letter from Boniface to Edwin may be found in the Northumbrian King Oswy's successful attempt to evangelize his friend Sigbert the Little, king of Essex:

Oswy used to reason with [Sigebert] how gods made by man's handiwork could not be gods, and how a god could not be made from a log or block of stone, [but that] God is rather to be understood as a being of boundless majesty, invisible to the human eyes, almighty, everlasting, Creator of heaven and earth and of the human race. (Bede *History* 178)



but reverent silence (Alcuin *Willibrord* 10). Predictably enough, Willibrord has little patience with these restrictions:

He set little store by the superstitious sacredness ascribed to the spot, or by the savage cruelty of the king, who was accustomed to condemn violators of the sacred objects to the most cruel death. Willibrord baptized three persons in the fountain in the name of the Blessed Trinity and gave orders that some of the cattle should be slaughtered as food for his company. (10)

The king, understandably outraged, takes Willibrord and his party captive and demands for the missionary to account for his actions. Instead, he receives a sermon:

With unruffled calmness the preacher of the Gospel replied: "The object of your worship, O King, is not a god but a devil, and he holds you ensnared in rank falsehood in order that he may deliver your soul to eternal fire. For there is no God but one, who created heaven and earth, the seas and all that is in them; and those who worship Him in true faith will possess eternal life. As His servant I call upon you this day to renounce the empty and inveterate errors to which your forebears have given assent and to believe in the one almighty God, our Lord Jesus Christ." (10-1)

The king, though not converted, is sufficiently awed by Willibrord's faith to give him safe-conduct back to the Christian Frankish realm; however, Alcuin's emphasis in this passage is on Willibrord's speech, not its results, as attested by the relative length of his treatment of each element in the account. The elements of this speech are familiar at this point, and need hardly be commented on at length. Nonetheless, Willibrord's defense serves to reinforce the consistency of the Christian apologetic tradition's use of the doctrine of creation even into the early middle ages.

All the elements established in Psalm 96:5 and developed through the apostolic and patristic writers are present here: the true God is the one "who created heaven and earth, the seas and all that is in them"; this true God is identified with the Christian deity, "the one almighty God, our Lord Jesus Christ"; the gods of the nations ("your forebears") are not truly divine, but instead deceptive demonic spirits bent on the entrapment and damnation of human souls.

This account of Willibrord has bearing on our reading of his protégé Boniface's most commonly recounted exploit. Boniface of Wessex (d. 754) is perhaps the best known Anglo-Saxon missionary among the continental Germanic peoples, famous especially for his felling of the Donar Oak, "a certain oak of extraordinary size called by the pagans of olden times the Oak of Jupiter" (Willibald 45-6).<sup>50</sup> This episode is frequently held up as a sort of vigilante mission-

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<sup>50</sup> Donar, the continental German equivalent of the Norse Thor, was equated by the classically-trained clergy with Jupiter/Jove, due apparently to the gods' associations with thunder and lightning. Ælfric's sermon "De falsis diis" makes this standard equation, inferring from it that the Danes are sadly misinformed about their own gods:

Now the Danes say in their heresy that this Jove, whom they call Thor, was the son of Mercury, whom they call Odin; but they do not have the truth, because we read in books, both in heathen [ones] and in Christian [ones], that this evil Jove in truth was Saturn's son, and the books may not be refuted which the ancient heathen wrote thus regarding him; and also in [accounts of] martyrs' passions we find such written. (ll. 141-9)

Interestingly, Book Six of Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* (early thirteenth century) contests this equation:

For the days, called among our countrymen Thors-day or Odins-day, the ancients termed severally the holy day of Jove or of Mercury. If, therefore, according to the distinction implied in the interpretation I have quoted, we take it that Thor is Jove and Odin Mercury, it follows that Jove was the son of Mercury; that is, if the assertion of our countrymen holds, among whom it is told as a matter of common belief, that Thor was Odin's son. Therefore, when the Latins, believing to the contrary effect, declare that Mercury was sprung from Jove, then, if their declaration is to stand,

work: in Robert Fletcher's *The Barbarian Conversion*, Boniface's felling of the Donar Oak is his opening move in a region of "[p]agans 'not yet cleansed'"—a "brave act of public Christian assertion" resulting in immediate, apparently effortless conversions (206). However, Willibald, Boniface's biographer, depicts the felling of the Donar Oak as the culmination of a long evangelistic sojourn among the Hessians typified by doctrinal instruction. We have already seen the evangelistic methods of Willibrord among the pagans, and we may infer that Boniface (as yet still called Winfrith) was trained to emulate his mentor's ministry. After leaving Willibrord in Frisia, Boniface journeys to the Hesse region of Germany, arriving in Amanburch, modern-day Amöneburg: there Boniface converts Amanburch's twin rulers "from the sacrilegious worship of idols," probably with a sermon similar to that Willibrord addressed to the king of Fositeland (42). Boniface then moves his work among the people, "turn[ing] away also from the superstitions of paganism a great multitude [...] by revealing to them the path of right understanding," and leading them "to forsake their horrible and erroneous beliefs" (42). Though the content of this teaching is not spelled out, it almost certainly included (and probably began with) the doctrine of creation and the resultant necessity for humans to worship their creator, not fellow creatures. The result of this initial phase of Boniface's work in Hesse is "many thousands" of baptized converts (42). Here, though it is unstated, is another likely point of instruction on the doctrine of creation, for the rite of baptism was accompanied by the recitation of the Apostles Creed.<sup>51</sup> At this point, Boniface sends a report of his work in Hesse to Pope Gregory II, resulting in a papal summons to Rome. Gregory's concern for sound theological instruction of converts is apparent from his first

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we are driven to consider that Thor was not the same as Jove, and that Odin was also different from Mercury. (364-5)

<sup>51</sup> The connection between baptism and creedal recitation will be explored below in Chapter 1, Part 2.

audience with Boniface, in which he "interrogate[s]" Boniface "on his teaching, on the creed and on the tradition and beliefs of his Church" (43). Willibald is careful to show how seriously Boniface takes this inquiry: pleading his inadequacy in conversational Latin, Boniface asks for permission to compose a "written confession of faith," which (when done) sets forth "pure and uncontaminated truth" in "polished, eloquent, and learned phrases" (43-4). Gregory, after reading the written confession, "[w]ith wise counsel and wholesome doctrine [...] admonishe[s] him to preserve at all times the deposit of the faith and to the best of his ability to preach it vigorously to others" (44). This exhortation, writes Willibald, leads to a day-long conversation in which pope and missionary "discus[s] and debat[e] many other matters of holy religion and the true faith" (44). Finally satisfied, Gregory confers on Boniface "the episcopal dignity" and the name Boniface, and newly-ordained Bishop Boniface returns to his flock in Amanburch with papal letters of commission and commendation (44-5). Upon returning, however, Boniface finds resistance to his mission has grown: while "many Hessians" had "acknowledged the Catholic faith" and "forsook all the profane practices of heathenism," others "refus[e] to accept the pure teachings of the Church in their entirety," instead returning publically or privately to pagan rituals such as "sacrifices to trees and springs," divination, and magical charms (45). It is at this point that Bishop Boniface fells the Donar Oak—after being counseled to do so by those Hessians who remained faithful to Christianity (45). Set in the context of Willibald's full narrative of Boniface's mission in Hesse, and the similar exploit of Willibrord in Fositeland, the felling of the Donar Oak takes on a different significance. These Hessians are not unevangelized pagans, whose introduction to Christianity comes by means of a missionary lumberjack. Instead, they are recidivist pagans, already taught "the path of right understanding" and probably baptized (42). Furthermore, Willibald takes pains to depict Boniface as a doctrinally orthodox minister,

able to teach not only the creedal basics, but also to hold his own in theological disputation with the pope himself. The pagans who watched Boniface take an axe to the Donar Oak, "cursing in their hearts the enemy of the gods," have already for years heard Boniface's teaching of the "pure and uncontaminated truth" about the almighty creator and His Son—heard it and rejected it (46, 44). The felling of the Donar Oak, then, assumes the same function in Boniface's *vita* as Elijah's dramatic confrontation of the priests of Baal in 1 Kings 18: the climactic and miraculous confirmation of a message already preached.<sup>52</sup> The connection between polemical argument and the direct action it motivates is left tacit in the story of Boniface and the Donar Oak, but is still detectable.

The problem of pagan worship was not exclusively a problem for Anglo-Saxon missionaries: in the latter half of the tenth century, incursions of heathen Vikings intensified, threatening Christian England not only with foreign invasion but also with the enticing possibility of apostasy by "going Viking."<sup>53</sup> In this setting, Ælfric of Eynsham (c. 955-c. 1010) composed his sermon against pagan religion, "De falsis diis" ("On the false gods"). This sermon, the most developed work of apologetics in Old English, is a strong witness to the integrity and continuity of the apologetic tradition, even the end of the first millennium *anno domini*. This continuity may be seen not only in its clear use of previous apologetic sources, notably Martin of Braga's *De correctione rusticorum*, but also in its use of arguments and tropes that were, by this point, apologetic commonplaces. Therefore, Ælfric's "De falsis diis" will stand as our last witness in this survey on the use of the doctrine of creation in the apologetic tradition.

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<sup>52</sup> The accounts are further paralleled by the character of the divine intervention: Elijah receives fire from heaven, while Boniface receives "a mighty blast of wind from above" (46).

<sup>53</sup> Wulfstan of York warns of this danger in his *Sermo lupi ad anglos* (297).

While his title announces the "false gods" as the homily's subject, Ælfric's starting point is a declaration of faith in the "one true God," first in Latin, then translated into Old English:

Eala ge gebroðra ða leofostan, þæt godcunde gewrit us tæhte þone biggeng anes soðes Godes, þisum wordum cwepende: An Drihten ís, and án geleafa, and án fulluht; án God and Fæder ealra þinga, se ðe is ofer ealle þing, and þurh ealle þing, and on us eallum. Of þam synd ealle þing, and þurh þone synd ealle þing, and on þam synd ealle þing; sy him wuldor á to worulde, amen. (ll. 6-11)

Lo, all you dearest brethren, the sacred writ shows us the worship of one true God, speaking these words: There is one Lord, and one faith, and one baptism; one God and Father of all things, the one that is over all things, and through all things, and in us all. From the one are all things, and through Him are all things, and in Him are all things; be to Him glory forever and ever, amen.

Scholarly interest in "De falsis diis" most frequently focuses in Ælfric's explanation of the "false gods": Pope points out in his EETS edition that even earlier editions of the sermon "focused attention on Ælfric's treatment of the Græco-Roman gods and his incidental attack on their Danish counterparts," and failed to present this euhemerestic account of pagan deities in its whole homiletic context (667-8). The homilist's first concern, however, is to proclaim the true God, in the form of a creedal declaration. This declaration is drawn from Paul's epistles—Ephesians 4:5-6 in lines 2-4, Romans 11:36 in lines 4-5—but the precise wording of lines 4-5 is not the Vulgate's Latin translation, but Augustine of Hippo's, from the conclusion of his *De Vera Religione* (*Homilies of Ælfric* 677). While Pope suggests that Ælfric "lifted the entire beginning from some Latin sermon of the Augustinian era," the homily's first lines resemble closely *De Vera Religione's* opening:

The way of the good and blessed life is to be founded entirely in the true religion wherein one God is worshipped and acknowledged with purest piety to be the beginning of all existing things, originating, perfecting and containing the universe. (1)

Ælfric's point is the same as Augustine's: the "one true God," the only proper object of human worship, is the one from whom the universe derives its ultimate origin and continued preservation.

Ælfric's "one true God" is by no means the unspecified creator of natural theology, the Aristotelian "first cause": instead, this "one true God" is identical with the God of Christian orthodoxy, as defined by trinitarian conciliar creeds:

Se ælmihtiga Fæder gestrynde ænne Sunu of him sylfum, butan wifes gemánan, and þurh þone Sunu he geworhte ealle gesceafta, gesewenlice and ungesewenlice. Se Sunu is eall swa eald swa se Fæder, for þam þe se Fæder wæs æfre butan anginne, and se Sunu wæs æfre butan anginne of him acen[n]ed, eall swa mihtig swa se Fæder. Se Halga Gast nis na acenned, ac he is þæs Fæder and þæs Sunu willa and lufu, of him bam gelíce, and þurh þone Gast syndon ealle gesceafta geliffæste þe se Fæder gesceop þurh his Sunu, se ðe is his wisdom. Þeos halige þrynnys is án ælmihtig Fæder, and Sunu, and [Halig] Gast; and hy ne synd na þry Godas, ac hy þry syndon án ælmihtig God untodæledlic, for þam þe hym þrym is án gecynd, and án ræd, and án weorc on eallum þingum. (ll. 12-24)

The almighty Father begot one Son from Himself, without a wife's companionship, and through the Son He made all of the created things, seen and unseen. The Son is just as ancient as the Father, because the Father was ever

without beginning, and the Son was ever without beginning begotten from Him, just as mighty as the Father. The Holy Spirit is not begotten, but He is the will and love of the Father and the Son, from them both alike, and through the Spirit all created things are quickened that the Father made through his Son, the one that it His wisdom. The Holy Trinity is one almighty Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit; and they are not three Gods, but they three are one almighty God undivided, because for the three is one essence, and one counsel, and one action in all things.

Though these lines have the look of rote creedal recitations, in them Ælfric balances two concerns: the inner nature of the uncreated Trinity, and the Trinity's role as divine creator. The monotheism of the homily's opening ("one true God," "one Lord," "one God and Father of all things," etc.) could appear to be undercut by the following statements about the divine Son and Spirit, so the homilist insists on the unity of the divine essence, counsel, and action (*ān gecynd, ān ræd, ān weorc*) that makes the Trinity "one almighty God undivided." Moreover, the Son's "origin" in the Father, and the Spirit's "origin" in the Father and Son, could seem to locate the Son and Spirit in the category of created beings: this Ælfric counters with the doctrines of eternal begetting—"the Son was ever without beginning begotten from [the Father]"—and eternal procession—"the Holy Spirit] is the will and love of the Father and the Son, from them both alike."<sup>54</sup> The line between creation and Trinitarian creator is further reinforced when Ælfric assigns the role of creator to all three divine persons: having already declared the "one God and Father of all things," he specifies the Son's role as creative instrument—"through the Son He made all of the created things"—and the Spirit's role as vivifying energy—"through the Spirit all created things are quickened." Thus Ælfric weaves together Christian trinitarian orthodoxy and

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<sup>54</sup>Here Ælfric clearly supports the Western "fileoque" clause to the Nicene Creed.



Christian cosmogony: the trinitarian creator originates the universe in a manner consistent with the divine three-in-one nature, so that not only the plan of creation, but also the agency and power implementing that plan, derives exclusively from an uncreated source.

Having laid this foundation of trinitarian theology, Ælfric narrates the events that gradually led humans to abandon worship of the "one true God," beginning with the Edenic fall. The homilist's use of this familiar story expands on its more usual function as an origin story for human evil and suffering. He begins by enlarging on these themes, dwelling poignantly on the tragic changes to human life in the world in which the primal pair had once been undisputed rulers:

Eft, þa þa he agylt hæfde, and Godes bebod tobræc, þa forleas he þa gesælþa, and on geswincum leofode, swa þæt hine [biton lys] bealdlice and flean, þone þe ær ne dorste se draca furþon hreppan. He moste þa warnian wið wæter and wið fýr, and behealdan wærlice þæt he hearde ne feolle, and mid agenum geswince him ætes tilian; and þa gecyndelican good þe him God on gesceop, he moste þa healdan, gif he hi habban wolde, mid mycelre gymene, swa swa gyt doð þa góódan, þe mid geswinc healdað hi sylfe wið leahtras. (ll. 45-55)

Afterward, when he had sinned, and God's command broken, then he lost that blessing, and lived in trouble, so that the louse bit him boldly and the flea, the one that before the dragon dared not even touch. He had then to take heed with water and with fire, and to take care warily that he suffer no hard fall, and to provide food for himself with proper difficulty; and those natural virtues that God made into him, he had then to keep, if he would have them, with great care, just as yet the good do, that with difficulty keep themselves from sins.

Even the great lights of the heavens are altered adversely by humanity's disobedience: "likewise the sun, and indeed the moon were robbed of their delightful brightness after Adam's sin, not according to [their] proper function" (56-8).

Still, Adam and his descendants have not yet turned away from their creator. This occurs, says Ælfric, in a later generation:

Nu [ne] ræde we on bocum þæt man arærde hæþengylde on eallum þam fyrste ær  
 Noes flode, oðþæt þa entas worhtan þone [wundorlican] stýpel æfter Noés flóde,  
 and hym swa feala gereorda God þar forgeaf swa þæra wyrhtena wæs. Ða þa hi  
 toferdon to fyrleum landum, and mancynn þa weox, þa wurdon hi bepæhte þurh  
 þone ealdan deofol þe Adam ær beswác, swa þæt hi worhton wolice him godas,  
 and þone Scyppend forsawon þe hy gesceop to mannum. (ll. 72-81)

Now we do not read in books that man established idolatry in all the time before Noah's Flood, until the giants built the marvelous tower after Noah's Flood, and so to them there God gave as many languages as there were of builders. When they separated to distant lands, and mankind grew, then they became deceived by the old Devil who previously seduced Adam, so that they wrongly made for themselves gods, and scorned the Creator who made them as humans.

For Ælfric, then, pagan worship is a departure from humanity's primal fealty to its creator. The gods they serve instead are "wrongfully made," and since they are not the creator, they are therefore created beings, which Ælfric catalogues:

Hi namon þa [to] wisdomes þæt hi wurþodon him for godas þa sunnan and þone  
 monan, for heora scinendan beorhtnyse, and him lac offrodan, and forletan heora  
 Scyppend. Sume menn eac sædon be þam scínendum steorrum þæt hi godas

wæron, and wurþodan hy [georne]. Sume hi gelyfdon on fýr for his færlicum bryne, sume eac on wæter, and wurðodan hi [for godas]; sume on þa eorþan, for þon þe heo ealle þing afet. (ll. 82-9)

They then took as wisdom that they should exalt as gods for themselves the sun and the moon, for their shining brightness, and offered sacrifice to them, and forsook their Maker. Some men also claimed regarding the shining stars that they were gods, and eagerly worshipped them. Some, they believed in fire for its sudden burning, some also in water, and worshipped them as gods; some in the earth, because it nourishes all things.

An attentive reader will notice, as Ælfric no doubt hopes his audience will, that this list of created things worshiped by postdiluvian humanity aligns almost precisely with his list of created things altered or made dangerous by the Fall: sun and moon (56, 83), fire (49, 87), water (49, 88), and the earth (51-2, 89). Humans, then, seem first to worship those natural forces that threaten their lives and safety, such as burning fire, drowning water, and the hard, resistant earth; at best, what they worship is a diminished post-lapsarian version of what, pre-Fall, was more beautiful, yet still unworthy of veneration.

The descent of humanity to the worship of created things is the ironic ultimate conclusion of the Fall—the inversion of the natural order—for "the only God is he who made all things for the use of we humans, because of his great goodness" (91-2). For Ælfric, the Christian confession rights that inversion, restoring the creator to his proper place in human esteem: "there is no Creator except the one true God, and we exalt Him with certain belief, speaking aloud and with sincerity of mind that He only is God who made all things" (95-8). While the homily proceeds from line 99 into euhemerized myths, polemic against idolatry, and anecdotes from

scripture and saints' lives, Ælfric's underlying themes of the first 98 lines remain: the "one true God" is the creator of all things; though humans may stray to the worship of created things, their worship is rightly due only to the creator; and this creator is the biblical deity, here presented as the Christian Trinity of the creeds. Thus, Ælfric is still delivering the same message of the psalmist in Psalm 96:5, as filtered through the apostolic and patristic tradition, that the doctrine of creation is a marker of religious identity: "For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens."

## 5. Summary and application

If the doctrine of creation, and the knowledge and worship of the true creator, are important markers of religious identity in the Christian apologetic tradition, then the handling of these matters in *Beowulf's* creation song may be a vital clue to its religious identity. We may not simply assume, however, that because creation and a creator are mentioned, then the creation song must be Christian. It is not enough, in the apologetic tradition, to affirm belief in *a* creator and *a* creation story: that creator must be *the* true God, YHWH (in Judaic scripture) and the holy Trinity (in Christianity), and that creation story must follow *the* Genesis creation narrative; otherwise, the creator and creation story are not those affirmed in the scriptures the Christian apologetic tradition regards as authoritative. Therefore, two questions arise when we come to consider the religious identity of *Beowulf's* creation song: first, what sort of creator deity is featured in the song? and, second, what sort of creation story is told in the song? Chapter Three will take up the first question: we will consider the sole divine appellation in the creation song, *ælmihiga*, in light of the use of "almighty" in creeds and catechism, as well as the impact of that creedal language on the expositions of the creation in the apologetic tradition. In Chapter Four,

we will address the second question, the narrative content of the creation song, within the context of the polemical use, both explicit and implicit, of cosmogonies in Judaic scripture and in Christian apologetics.

## CHAPTER 3

*BEOWULF'S "ÆLMIHTIGA" AND THE ALMIGHTY CREATOR OF THE CREEDS*

The only title used to designate the creator of *Beowulf's* creation song is the substantivized adjective *æلميhtig*, declined as a weak form masculine singular nominative, *se æلميhtiga*. As the creator's only title, *æلميhtig's* denotation and connotations are therefore central to the question at hand, the religious identity of the creation song. Denotation may be addressed quickly. Bosworth and Toller's *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* defines the term through transliteration, "almighty," the equivalent to the Latin *omnipotens*. Both Klaeber's and Mitchell and Robinson's *Beowulf* edition glossaries emphasize *æلميhtig's* function as a personal appellation: Klaeber renders it "Almighty (God)," while Mitchell and Robinson prefer "(the) all-powerful (one)." The connotations of *æلميhtig's* usage are less readily settled. Bosworth and Toller do not directly specify to what or whom the word refers, though the cited examples of usage seem to imply that *æلميhtig* (and its variant spellings) is used most often, perhaps exclusively, of the Christian God. Klaeber's glossary is also reticent on the matter, though his definition of *se æلميhtiga* as "Almighty (*God*)" may be safely taken as a reference to the Christian God.<sup>55</sup> Mitchell and Robinson's glossary also does not address the question of connotation, but their translation "(the) all-powerful (one)" is certainly more guarded than Klaeber's.<sup>56</sup> The connotations of *æلميhtig/se æلميhtiga*, then, is the central point of contention in this chapter, and, as mentioned in Chapter

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<sup>55</sup> While even this term is, in Fred Robinson's estimation, polysemous, it is not in Klaeber's usage.

<sup>56</sup> This is an issue on which Mitchell and Robinson disagree, and thus the apparent guardedness. Mitchell believes *Beowulf's* creation song is "the creation told in Genesis," so that *se æلميhtiga* refers to the biblical creator (*Beowulf* 34). Robinson's view is presented below.

One, the main scholarly contender is Fred Robinson in his *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*. Therefore, before delving into our own investigation of the connotations of *æلميhtig* in light of the apologetic tradition, we should examine Robinson's arguments about *æلميhtig* more closely.

### 1. Fred Robinson: *æلميhtig/se æلميhtiga* as polysemous

Fred Robinson raises the issue of *æلميhtig*'s definition in the context of a larger argument, so a brief summary is needed of both his main thesis and the more immediate point being made. Robinson's *Beowulf and the Appositive Style* begins with the claim that the *Beowulf* poet's uses of apposition are not merely the standard Old English poetic aesthetic of repetition; instead, apposition is often used "to suggest logical relationships without overtly stating them," so that "this suggestive power of apposition becomes a part of the dramatic action" (4). An example of this is the description of Beowulf's retainers in ll. 2596-7: "The comrades, the sons of noblemen, did not stand by him together at all" (Robinson's translation). Robinson reads this as tacit criticism:

Only so much is overtly stated about the cowardly retainers who abandoned Beowulf in his time of need. But implicit are the logical relationships among the apposed elements: "Although sons of noblemen and thus especially obligated to stand firm at the hand of the leader, they did not stand by him together at all." This rendition of the poet's logically reticent paratactic sentence into an elaborately explicit hypotactic version is not entirely arbitrary; it is, I believe, implied in the selection of the two terms in apposition [...]. (4)

This pattern of "logically reticent parataxis" is, Robinson claims, not only found in *Beowulf*'s appositives: "[T]he logically open, implicit quality of apposition is shared by other stylistic

devices in the poem, and in concert these create a reticent, appositive style which is intimately cooperative with the tone and theme of the poem" (5-6). This tone/theme is integral to *Beowulf's* character as "a profoundly retrospective narrative," a story told by a poet acutely aware of the "chasm of time" (and cultural difference) between the characters of his story and his intended audience (7). The poet's problem, as Robinson sees it, is that his characters are all undeniably and irredeemably pagan, and that his Christian audience may be inclined to reject a story drawn from a by-gone era of heathenry. The poet's solution to this problem is also his tone/theme: a "combined admiration and regret" that permits his "devoutly Christian audience" to "admire those [pagan] heroes while remaining fully aware of their hopeless paganism" (11). This tone/theme of "admiration and regret" is achieved by means of "appositive style":

This lofty and challenging theme requires for its expression an appositive style [...] more suggestive than assertive, more oblique than direct. A poet who, in a deeply Christian age, wants to acknowledge his heroes' damnation while insisting on their dignity must find and exercise in his listeners' minds the powers of inference and the ability to entertain two simultaneous points of view that are necessary for the resolution of poignant cultural tensions. [...] [E]ach [ambiguity] makes its contribution toward the creation of a general atmosphere in the poem where such a complex attitude toward a people can be made both understandable and comforting to an Anglo-Saxon audience. (13-4)

Robinson's reading of *Beowulf* as a whole, then, consists of tracing the "two simultaneous points of view" (admiration and regret) through the text, while exploring the poetic devices—apposition, parataxis, narrative juxtaposition, and semantic polysemy—that maintain them in balance.



It is in his discussion of this last device, semantic polysemy, that Robinson addresses the definition of *ælmihtig*, among other titles characters in *Beowulf* use to designate God; his immediate question is whether Hrothgar's "allusions to *Waldend*, *Metod*, and *mihtig God* mark his disquisition unambiguously as the utterance of a Christian" (34). This question raises a topic important to Robinson's claims about *Beowulf's* intentional ambiguity: namely, "the polysemous vocabulary which resulted from the Christianization of Old English poetic diction by Cædmon and his successors," especially "the terms for God" used in this "reformed heroic diction" (34). The polysemous quality of "reformed heroic diction" is a result of the development of post-conversion Anglo-Saxon poetics:

In both languages [Old English and Old Norse] (and presumably in all Germanic languages) the Christianization of the vocabulary was a matter not of displacement of pre-Christian meanings by Christian meanings but rather the extension of pre-Christian meanings to include Christian concepts, and so the words retain at least vestiges of early meanings while assuming new Christian senses. (35)

Thus, Old English words like *god* ("god") or *hālig* ("holy" or "sacred") might be used to refer to the Christian God, without losing their possible use as referents to the earlier pagan deities they'd previously designated. These religious terms, then, retain an air of ambiguity for an Anglo-Saxon audience—an ambiguity which the *Beowulf* poet exploits:

[E]ach time the poet's audience heard a character in the poem utter a Christianized Germanic word for a higher being, they would necessarily have had two apposed meanings in mind: the pre-Christian meaning, which was the only one the pagan

characters could know, and the postconversion meaning which had become dominant by the time of the poet. (37-8)

In this way the dual perspectives, which, according to Robinson, shape the thematic structure of *Beowulf*, are preserved even at the level of theological vocabulary.

*Ælmihtig* is, according to Robinson, one of these polysemous terms for God, though it is not often recognized as such: "Usually scholars take the scop's allusion to "se *Ælmihtiga*" in line 92 as the first time in the poem when a character mentions the Christian God" (34). Robinson blames this assumption on modern *Beowulf* editors' application of modern English orthographic conventions to the Old English text:

[T]here is no authority whatever for the capital letter *Æ*- which forces modern readers to assume that this allusion refers unambiguously to the Christian Deity. Anglo-Saxon scribes did not capitalize the first letter of *nomina sacra* or of any proper names. Ignoring the modern editors' capitalization in "ælmih<sup>ti</sup>ga," we are free to translate line 92, "He said that the all-powerful one created the earth." (34)

Who is "the all-powerful one" to whom the scop refers? The answer to that question is complicated by the etymological history of *ælmih<sup>ti</sup>ga*:

Old English *ælmih<sup>ti</sup>ga* and its cognates in other Germanic languages obviously did not mean "the Christian God" before contact with Christians, who, upon converting any Germanic nation, usually appropriated the word as a term for God the Father (probably because of its similarity in sense to the Christian Latin *omnipotens*). Such adaptation of pre-Christian vocabulary to Christian concepts was a momentous event in the history of each of the Germanic dialects. [...] Once we remove the capital letter from *ælmih<sup>ti</sup>ga* in *Beowulf* 92, it becomes clear that

the word is a polysemous term equally appropriate in pagan and Christian contexts and not, as Hoops and others have assumed, a term specifying the Christian Deity. (34-5)

*Ælmihtig*, like *waldend*, *metod*, and *god*, is therefore an example of "reformed heroic diction," a term for which the audience would "necessarily have had two apposed meanings in mind" (37). While *se ælmihtiga* might lead a Christian audience to think of God the Father Almighty, they would also be conscious of the possibility that *Beowulf's* characters are not making the same reference. Furthermore, according to Robinson, for whom the definite paganism of *Beowulf's* characters is a cardinal point, *Beowulf's* audience would not conclude that the scop refers to the Christian God:

If the speaker is a heathen, as we should expect the scop in Heorot to be, then "se ælmihtiga" would refer to one of the pagan gods: compare "hinn almátki áss" in the heathen oath of the Icelanders referring to Thor. Or, if the scop should be not specifically pagan but rather a pre-Christian man of no very specific religious beliefs (somewhat like the nameless atheling who recounts the sparrow simile in Bede's account of the conversion of Edwin), then "se ælmihtiga" might refer to "the all-powerful being (whoever he might be)." (34)

Thus, the modern reading of *se ælmihtiga* as the Christian God is a profound mistake:

The only interpretation of "se ælmihtiga" that would be logically impossible is the one most commonly held by modern students and scholars of the poem, who assume from editors' capitalization of *Ælmihtiga* that this is an unambiguous reference to the Christian Deity and therefore evidence that the scop in Heorot is a Christian. (37)

Instead, we must keep firmly in mind, Robinson warns, that "*Beowulf* takes place in a heathen realm in a heathen age" (37). It is possible, however, that the poet does not wish us to understand the scop as referring to a specific Germanic deity, but instead the creator deity of natural theology and philosophical speculation:

The *Beowulf* poet would not be the only Germanic Christian who thought his ancestors may have been capable of sensing the existence of a Creator and of directing their piety toward this dimly perceived Creator rather than toward Germanic gods such as Woden, Thunor, and Tiw. (35)

In this reading, the singer of this creation song is "a noble heathen sensing the presence of a supreme being by observing the ordered workings of the natural world," but not in any sense a proper Christian (37).

Again, it must be emphasized how integral to Robinson's construal of *se ælmihtiga* is his overarching vision of *Beowulf* as an artful balance of dueling perspectives on the Anglo-Saxons' ancestral past, in which the tension of conflicting attitudes is present but tacit. It is not only that reading *se ælmihtiga* as polysemy supports his larger thesis, but that to read it otherwise compromises *Beowulf*'s thematic structure:

The assumption that now and again the heathen characters turn Christian and address themselves to the Christian Deity makes a muddle of the poet's artful strategy of using inherent ambiguities in the Christianized Old English vocabulary to present the men of old favorably and yet honestly to a Christian Anglo-Saxon audience. (37)

For Fred Robinson, to misread *se ælmihtiga* is to risk misreading *Beowulf*:

While Robinson's points about *ælmih̄tig*'s etymology are well taken, his assumptions about *se ælmih̄tiga*'s religious connotations may be questioned, and (as a result) his larger conclusions about the creation song's religious identity. Is *se ælmih̄tiga*'s association with the biblical creator, the God of Judaism and Christianity, purely an accident of misapplied capitalization? And would the Christian Anglo-Saxon audience have been conscious of the finely-balanced ambiguity of *se ælmih̄tiga* that Robinson presents? In other words, is there reason to believe that the Anglo-Saxon audience would have, like Robinson's "modern readers," thought that *se ælmih̄tiga* referred first, mainly, even exclusively, to the biblical creator? These questions can be answered by examining the Christian creedal/catechetical and apologetic tradition's treatment of "Almighty" (both as an attribute and a divine title) in relationship to creation and the creator.

## 2. Creation and the Almighty in creeds and the fathers

Creeds and catechesis are justly treated together, since the early creeds, of which the Apostles Creed and Nicene Creed are developments, grew out of the instruction of catechumens: Their roots lie not so much in the Christian's sacramental initiation into the Church as in the catechetical training by which it was preceded. Declaratory creeds, conceived in the setting of their original purpose, were compendious summaries of Christian doctrine compiled for the benefit of converts undergoing instruction. (Kelly 50)

From the second century, churches taught "the rule of faith," which was "an outline summary of Christian teaching, used for catechetical instruction and other purposes," and which was thought to be "ultimately traceable to the Apostles" (Kelly 2). Because catechesis was necessary prior to

baptism, the entry sacrament of Christianity, learning the "rule of faith" was truly an identity-defining process.

The lessons of catechumens began, quite naturally, at the beginning: as Augustine of Hippo's *On the Catechizing of the Uninstructed* states, novices are to be told the full sacred history "from what is written in the text, 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth,' on to the present times of the Church" (285).<sup>57</sup> Unsurprisingly, therefore, the "rules of faith" based on such catechesis began with a declaration of the Christian God as creator, as attested by the second-century ante-Nicene father Irenaeus in his *Against Heresies*:

The Church, though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith: [She believes] in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them [...]. (330)

The rule of truth which we hold, is, that there is one God Almighty, who made all things by His Word, and fashioned and formed, out of that which had no existence, all things which exist. (347)

For the sake of this creed, the "disciple of the Lord" battles heresy, "desiring to put an end to all such [false] doctrines, and to establish the rule of truth in the Church, that there is one Almighty God, who made all things by His Word, both visible and invisible" (426). The apologist Tertullian (ca. 160-ca. 220) declares this same creed in his *Prescription against Heretics* and *On the Veiling of Virgins*:

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<sup>57</sup>The connection between creeds, specifically the Apostles Creed, and catechism was firm for Augustine: he wrote, not one, but three works for novices based around the creed, which he referred to as the "symbol": the *Enchiridion* (or *Handbook*), *A Treatise on Faith and the Creed*, and *Sermon to Catechumens on the Creed*.

Now, with regard to this rule of faith— that we may from this point acknowledge what it is which we defend— it is, you must know, that which prescribes the belief that there is one only God, and that He is none other than the Creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through His own Word, first of all sent forth. (*Prescription 249*)

The rule of faith, indeed, is altogether one, alone immoveable and irreformable; the rule, to wit, of believing in one only God omnipotent, the Creator of the universe [...]. (*Veiling 27*)

The centrality of such creeds was further reinforced by the second ecumenical council, the Council of Constantinople (AD 381), which modified an existing traditional creed by adding the theological formulations of that council and the previous, the Council of Nicea (AD 325). This creed contains the familiar first clause, "We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible." Thus the Christian God's status as universal creator was ecumenically affirmed as the first distinctive doctrine of the orthodox Christian religion, from which to dissent meant exclusion from the Church. The simpler proto-Apostles Creed "rules of faith" also continued to be used as declarations before baptism and during the mass, as the faithful reinforced their commitment to membership in the confessing community; surviving evidence indicates that these creeds, too, affirmed faith in the almighty creator.<sup>58</sup>

Creeds are especially important to the question of *se ælmihtiga* and *Beowulf's* creation song, for it was the creeds that first associated verbally "God (the Father) Almighty" with "maker of heaven and earth." The word "Almighty" (the Hebrew *shaddai* and the Greek *pantokrator*,

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<sup>58</sup> See Leith 18-9, 24-5.

translated in the Vulgate by the Latin *omnipotens*) appears throughout the Christian canon, especially in Job, the Psalms, and Revelation. The phrase "Maker/creator of heaven and earth," though less widespread, is nonetheless also well-attested (e.g. Gen. 14:19, Ps. 115:15, Ps. 121:2). Yet nowhere in the Christian canon are the two titles combined: certainly God's creative abilities are seen as evidences of his power, especially in the Psalms; and a few passages use the title "Almighty" in a context that also describes creative acts (Job 33:4, Jer. 10:16, Jer. 31:35, Amos 4:13); but in the Bible one cannot find the precise combination "God Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." Nonetheless, even as early a writer as Irenaeus (cited above) in the late second century could claim that "throughout the whole world" Christians confessed "this faith" in "God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth" (330). It is impossible to determine conclusively how the two titles came to be associated with one another during the early generations of Christianity—yet they did, and their association led later Christian thinkers into fruitful theological reflection, as God's almightiness became strongly linked with his creative work.<sup>59</sup>

This link of almightiness and creation may be seen in two primary ways, resulting from semantic polysemy in the Greek word *pantokrator*, translated in English as "almighty." Derived from a combination of *pan* ("all") and *kratos* ("strength"), *pantokrator* may be literally translated

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<sup>59</sup> Traditionally, the Apostles' Creed was claimed to be authored by the apostles themselves, each of the Twelve submitting a clause; this is, however, is very unlikely, particularly since the precise form now used, the "Textus Receptus" of the Apostles' Creed, is not attested earlier than the late sixth or seventh centuries (Leith 22, 24). Leith regards the authorship of early creeds to have a "communal character":

Some creeds, such as the Apostles' Creed, are wholly anonymous. They simply grew out of the life of the Church. Even the great creeds of Nicaea and Chalcedon were not so much produced as they were amended and collected from the creedal store of the Church (4).



as "the all-powerful one." The emphasis here is ability to act, or (in simple terms) what God *can* do. In connection with creation, this sense of *pantokrator* depicts God's creative activity as derived from and characterized by boundless ability. However, *pantokrator* can also connote "the one who holds power over all things"; here the emphasis is not mere ability, but also rulership—what God in fact does, by virtue of his sovereign reign over the universe. This sense of *pantokrator*, in regards to creation, stresses the authority over all things which God derives from his status as universal creator: he rules all because he made all.

While the Greek fathers seem to focus more on the second connotation of *pantokrator*, and the Latin fathers tend to focus on the first (perhaps because it more closely matches the connotations of their Latin equivalent, *omnipotens*), many Greek and Latin fathers acknowledge both senses of *pantokrator* in their discussions of God as creator. For example, Irenaeus, writing in Greek, begins his *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* with an exposition of the nature of "the eternal and perpetual God":

[The] everlasting and continuing [is] God; and [He] is over all things that are made, and all things are put under Him; and all the things that are put under Him are made His own; for God is not ruler and Lord over the things of another, but over His own; and all things are God's; and therefore God is Almighty, and all things are of God. (72-3)

This is a clear example of *pantokrator* in the second sense explained above: "all the things that are put under Him"—that which he has authority over—"are made His own," so that his all-ruling status is premised upon his creative act. However, a few paragraphs later, Irenaeus also seems to view *pantokrator* in the first sense as well:

[B]y the Spirit the Father is called Most High and Almighty and Lord of hosts; that we may learn concerning God that He it is who is creator of heaven and earth and all the world, and maker of angels and men, and Lord of all, through whom all things exist and by whom all things are sustained. (44)

In this passage, "Almighty" (*pantokrator*) is a divine title that, for Irenaeus, implies that God is "Maker of heaven and earth"—that God is *pantokrator* means that God is creator. While not so explicitly stated here as in later writers, Irenaeus seems to connect the act or ability of creation with "almightiness": only one possessing all power *could* create the universe, ergo the Almighty must be necessarily also the creator.

Augustine of Hippo, on the other hand, is a prominent example of associating *pantokrator/omnipotens* with creation as an act of might. In particular, Augustine saw the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* as logically necessary because of God's "almightiness." The renowned African father was not the first to make this connection—Theophilus of Antioch, a late second century writer, has that honor—but Augustine's emphasis on this point doubtless had a major role in transforming it into a theological commonplace.<sup>60</sup> Augustine's argument (cited here from his *Treatise on Faith and the Creed*) was aimed specially at those who asserted the co-existence with God of an eternal, uncreated matter, which from God drew the raw material of creation. This, he argues, is a tacit denial of God's "almightiness":

For certain parties have attempted to gain acceptance for the opinion that God the Father is not Almighty [*omnipotens*]: not that they have been bold enough expressly to affirm this, but in their traditions they are convicted of entertaining

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<sup>60</sup> From Theophilus of Antioch's *To Autolycus*: "But *the power of God* is shown in this, that, first of all, *He creates out of nothing*, according to His will, the things that are made." (99, italics mine).

and crediting such a notion. For when they affirm that there is a nature which God Almighty did not create, but of which at the same time He fashioned this world, which they admit to have been disposed in beauty, they thereby deny that God is almighty, to the effect of not believing that He could have created the world without employing, for the purpose of its construction, another nature, which had been in existence previously, and which He Himself had not made. (*Creed 322*)

Therefore, to affirm God's "almightiness," one must necessarily also affirm that God created the world out of nothing, by a sheer act of divine fiat:

[I]f indeed they do allow God, the Maker of the world, to be almighty, it becomes matter of course that they must also acknowledge that He made out of nothing the things which He did make. For, granting that He is almighty, there cannot exist anything of which He should not be the Creator. (*Creed 322*)

This point—the connection between omnipotence and creation *ex nihilo*—is made in several of Augustine's works, and seems to have been one of his pet topics in discourses on the doctrine of creation. It is not difficult to guess why: as a former Manichaean, Augustine focused much of his scholarly energies on combatting the doctrines he previously embraced.<sup>61</sup> In particular,

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<sup>61</sup> Augustine's anti-Manichaean writings include *On the Morals of the Catholic Church and on the Morals of the Manichaeans*, *On Two Souls*, *Against the Manichaeans*, *Disputation Against Fortunatus the Manichaean*, *Against the Epistle of Manichaeus Called Fundamental*, *Reply to Faustus the Manichaean*, *Concerning the Nature of Good Against the Manichaeans*. Two books address the doctrine of creation as their central subject, presenting Catholic interpretations of Genesis against Manichaean interpretations: *Two Books on Genesis Against the Manichaeans*, and the unfinished *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis*. Excurses against Manichaean doctrine also occur in the *Confessions*, the *City of God*, and others. Possidius's *Life of Saint Augustine* includes accounts of the bishop's many debates with representatives of the Manichaean cause—for example, his debate with the Manichaean "elect" Felix—

Augustine opposed the Manichaean cosmogony, in which physical matter is a facet of the eternal evil power, opposed to the spiritual substance of the eternal good power. We may readily see the attraction for Augustine in the argument that creation *ex nihilo*, which he maintained against the Manichaean doctrine of eternally-existing matter, was a logical consequence of the creedal affirmation of God as "Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth."

The developmental chain we see at work here is circular, not linear: as God's "almightiness" and creative work became ever more strongly linked through catechesis to creed to polemical doctrine, so this link became part of creed-based catechesis itself. We have already seen Augustine's argument from omnipotence to creation *ex nihilo* above, but here it is relevant to recall that the cited passages are drawn from his *Treatise on Faith and the Creed*, written for "beginners and sucklings" in the Christian faith—catechumens whose memorization of the creed is accompanied by instruction in its tenets (321). Augustine's other works on creed-based catechesis contain similar expositions, in chapters 9-12 of the *Enchiridion*, and chapter 18 of *On the Catechising of the Uninstructed*. These works were all important in their own day and after, and were significant influences on medieval catechism in the Latin-speaking West.

To reinforce this link between creedal language and polemical exposition in catechesis, we will consider Augustine's protégée, Quodvultdeus of Carthage, whose *Creedal Sermons* were delivered to catechumens and recorded as curriculum for catechists. Each sermon follows the outline of the creed, but explores the implications of the creedal tenets differently.

Quodvultdeus's creedal exposition in his first homily begins thus:

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as well as an amusing anecdote in which Augustine, diverting from his sermon outline, pursues a diatribe against "the errors of the Manichaeans," and so fails to complete the original sermon's argument (48, 47).

Believe firmly in God the Father omnipotent. We believe in an all-powerful God who, although making all things, has not been made; and, therefore, he is all-powerful, because everything he made he made from nothing. [...] Indeed, *this is what it means to be omnipotent, that not only the end product itself but even its matter is found to exist from him who had no beginning to his existence* [...]. (28, italics mine)

Quodvultdeus's opening remarks on the creed need not be unpacked: this is Augustine's argument, framed as simple declarations. But Quodvultdeus is not only concerned with defining what omnipotence is, but also what it is not, and (most importantly) who hasn't a claim to that title:

Surely, from the standpoint of a given power, an angel or a human can be called powerful, but can either be called omnipotent? A king or emperor can be called powerful, because he can do whatever he wills. But no one who is rational would dare call himself omnipotent [...]. For in what sense will he dare to call omnipotent one whom he sees wanting to live to the full a life with death standing at its end? If he is omnipotent, he will not die [...]. Therefore, no one will make bold to call any creature whatsoever omnipotent, whether celestial or terrestrial, save only the Trinity: the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. (28)

Omnipotence, therefore, is directly connected to God's innate possession of uncreated being, as well as his ability to create *ex nihilo*: "[T]he Unmade made what had been made; the Uncreated created creation" (28). For Quodvultdeus, the possession of self-existence and the ability to cause existence by fiat are what it means to be almighty. Having laid this foundation, Quodvultdeus

can then, in his second homily, show how the first tenet of the creed forbids the worship of other gods:

Beloved, [...] let us not believe that God is the sun nor king of heaven [i.e. Jupiter], nor in the sea, nor its king, Neptune, or someone else, whom vanity rather than truth fashioned, nor in the earth and Pluto. Rather, let us believe in God the almighty Father, creator of the universe, king of the heavens. *For he who willed to make everything from nothing rules what he made.* (54, italics mine)

The Greco-Roman deities, therefore, have no proper claim to the title of Almighty, even on their own terms: in mythological theogonies like Hesiod's, their origin followed the origin of the realms they purportedly rule, so they are not eternal and self-existent, nor are they credited with creating their own domains. Moreover, by alluding to the tripartite division of the cosmos, and the mythical assignment of those divisions to Saturn's three sons, Quodvultdeus seems tacitly to argue that these gods haven't the right to even the political definition of the Greek *pantokrator*: if each of Saturn's sons rules only a third of the cosmos, then none of them can properly claim to be "all-ruling." Of course, Quodvultdeus does not believe such mythological "vanities," following instead the euhemerist tack typical of the church fathers: these gods "are not good deities but evil names; even their own literature proclaims the fact that they were mortal men" (54). Thus, the gods are even less qualified to be called omnipotent, for they are subject to death, being in actuality only human. Again, for the purposes of this study, it is important to keep in mind the audience of Quodvultdeus's homilies, the catechumens. While creed-based catechesis later came to be associated mainly with children, Quodvultdeus's catechumens were probably adults, those curious about Christianity and often well-versed in the teachings of Christianity's religious and philosophical rivals. Creed-based catechesis, therefore, was not merely rote memorization of the

creed, but also argument for the creedal tenets, both apologetic and polemical. Specifically, it means that "almighty" would have signified more to Quodvultdeus's catechumens than just another of many divine epithets: it carried a freight of connotative meaning, including teachings on God's being, the creation of the universe, and the falsity of pagan religion.

### 3. The Almighty Creator of the creeds in Anglo-Saxon England

While the catechetical process in Anglo-Saxon England is not so well documented as that of Augustine's Roman Carthage, there is direct evidence of creed-based catechetical teaching, including teaching of the doctrine of creation that continues the stream of patristic thought traced in the previous section. That evidence includes creeds and instructions on creed-based catechesis, and theological works on creation and the Genesis creation narrative. A review of these texts will prepare us to appreciate the more indirect evidence provided by poetic and homiletic vocabulary to the widespread use of *ælmih̄tig* (in its various forms) as a designation peculiar to the biblical creator.

Though Bede's account of the conversion of the English does not specifically mention Augustine of Canterbury's use of creeds in his mission, we may assume that the creed is included when Bede says "they preached the word of life"; probably, instruction in the creed also preceded the baptisms which Bede records (*History* 70). Also, Augustine and his followers gathered "to say Mass," and recitation of the creed in communion liturgy required congregational participation (*History* 71). Certainly, in Bede's own day, the creed was a vital part of the instruction of both laity and clergy, and Bede was particularly concerned that such instruction took place in the vernacular:

I consider it above every other thing important, that you should endeavour to implant deeply in the memory of all men the Catholic faith which is contained in the Apostles' Creed, and the Lord's Prayer as it is taught us in the Holy Gospel. And, indeed, there is no doubt that those who have studied the Latin language will be found to know these well; but the vulgar, that is, those who know only their own language, must be made to say them and repeat them over and over again in their own tongue. This must be done not only in the case of laymen, who are still in the life of the world, but with the clergy or monks, who are without a knowledge of the Latin tongue. For thus every congregation of the faithful will learn in what manner they ought to show their faith, and with what steadfastness of belief they should arm and fortify themselves against the assaults of unclean spirits [...]. (*Biographical* 141)

For this purpose, Bede "often [gave] English translations of both these, namely, the Creed and the Lord's Prayer, to uneducated priests," and recommends, on the advice of "the holy prelate Ambrose" that the laity be taught to "repeat the words of the Creed every morning early, and so fortify themselves as by a spiritual antidote against [...] the malignant cunning of the Devil" (*Biographical* 141-2). While Bede's Old English creed has not survived to the present in his own works, there are extant Old English translations of both the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed.<sup>62</sup> Examples of both of these were appended by Ælfric of Eynsham to his *Catholic Homilies*, along with an exhortation to the clergy that these creeds be taught to the laity:

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<sup>62</sup> These include the poetic Creed in Junius 121. It is not cited here because it is a poetic expansion of the Apostle's Creed that, nonetheless, in its additions adds little of interest in this study (Dobbie 78-80).



Every Christian man shall know his Pater noster and his Creed. With the Pater noster he shall pray and with the Creed he shall confirm his belief. The teacher shall say to the laymen the sense of the Pater noster and of the Creed that they may know what they pray for to God and how they shall believe in God. (605)

How, then, following Bede and Ælfric's advice, did the Anglo-Saxon laity "show their faith," as Bede puts it, in their own language? By declaring

Ic gelyfe on God, Fæder Ælmihtigne, Scyppend heofenan and eorðan. [...]

Ic gelyfe on ænne God, Fæder Ælmihtigne, Wyrccend heofenan and eorðan, and ealra gesewnlīca ðinga and ungesewenlicra. (*Ælfric Catholic* 596)

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. [...]

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and all things seen and unseen.

Here we may see, from the *Læssa* Creed (the Shorter, or Apostles', Creed) and the *Mæssa* Creed (the Mass, or Nicene, Creed), the now-familiar doctrinal content of the creed's first tenet, clothed in Anglo-Saxon vocabulary. Probably it was in a translated creed such as these that *Deus Pater Omnipotens* first became God the Father Almighty.

When the first vernacular Old English creed was translated is unknown, but there is indirect evidence in Bede's *Historia* that such translations were used prior to Bede. The first hint is in Book 2, chapter 22, when the Northumbrian King Oswy tries to convert King Sigbert of Essex, with the following argument:

[G]ods made by man's handiwork could not be gods, and [...] a god could not be made from a log or block of stone, [but] God is rather to be understood as a being

of boundless majesty, invisible to the human eyes, almighty, everlasting, Creator of heaven and earth and of the human race. (Bede *History* 178)

The traces of creedal content of Oswy's argument come mainly in the last few lines, where "almighty" is proximal to "Creator of heaven and earth"; that "eternal" comes between the two more strictly creedal expressions may reflect catechesis like that modeled by Quodvultdeus, in which omnipotence and eternity are two manifestations of divine self-existence. The hint of a vernacular creed is in the fact of the conversation itself, since it is unlikely that two Anglo-Saxon rulers, one as yet unconverted, would converse in Latin and not their own shared native language. Oswy uses both creedal language and a stock polemic argument against idolatry, both typical features of catechesis; his readiness to employ both in what is probably a vernacular conversation suggest that Oswy's catechism was also done in the vernacular. A stronger hint at a vernacular creed, however, is Caedmon's Hymn. Caedmon is, in Bede's account "follow[ing] a secular occupation" at the time of his miraculous acquisition of poetic ability; he is also a cowherd, a commoner, and illiterate (*History* 251). Caedmon is, in other words, precisely the sort of person that needs creedal catechism in the vernacular—and the fact that, when called upon to "Sing about the Creation of all things," he concludes his song with the divine epithet *ælmih̄tig*, suggests that his Old English theological vocabulary has been shaped by such vernacular instruction (Bede *History* 251).<sup>63</sup>

Beyond the hint in Oswy's conversation with Sigbert, there are more explicit examples of creed-based teaching about creation in the tradition of Augustine and Quodvultdeus. Indeed, in Bede's *On Genesis*, his reliance on Augustine is explicit, and he seems particularly awed by the

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<sup>63</sup> Bede's Latin translation of Caedmon's Hymn makes the link between "almightiness" and creation even more plain, concluding *omnipotens creavit*.

sheer volume of Augustine's writing on the creation: he cites first Augustine's *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis*, then "two others written especially against the Manicheans," and finally notes that "this same primordial act of creation" is discussed in the *Confessions* and "here and there in his other works" (65-6). We should be unsurprised, then, when Bede opens his commentary on Genesis with a distillation of Augustinian teaching on creation, eternity, and omnipotence:

By introducing the creation of the world in the first sentence, Holy Scripture appropriately displays at once the eternity and omnipotence of God the creator. For by asserting that God created the world at the beginning of time, Scripture signifies that he indeed existed eternally before time. And when it tells that he created heaven and earth in the very beginning of time, by such great swiftness of work it declares that he, for whom to have willed is to have done, is omnipotent.

(68)

We have already seen how Quodvultdeus connects God's eternality with his omnipotence, and, though Bede does not trace the links between the two as explicitly as Quodvultdeus, that Bede so closely relates them in his exposition suggests that such links undergird his stated teaching. Certainly he is explicit on one point that should, by now, be familiar: namely, that the character of the creative act—here the "great swiftness" of divine fiat—shows God to be omnipotent. Bede does not, in contrast to Augustine and Quodvultdeus, point to creation *ex nihilo* as the trait characteristic of an omnipotent creative act; Bede does, however, along with Augustine and Quodvultdeus, deny that God made use of uncreated matter in creation, and so tacitly affirms

creation *ex nihilo*.<sup>64</sup> Still, Bede's emphasis on God's "great swiftness" in creation, in contrast to human building projects which "progres[s] slowly," points to divine creativity's independence from the resources upon which human creativity depends (68). Both Augustine and Bede agree that "God[']s ability to complete his work is unlimited," and that unlimited (creative) ability is the definition of omnipotence (68).

Where Bede is implicit in his agreement with the Augustinian tradition on omnipotence, eternity, and creation, Ælfric of Eynsham is explicit in his Old English homily *On the Catholic Faith*. Indeed, the homily cites "wise Augustine" in its opening paragraph, referring to his "exposition of the Holy Trinity" (*Catholic* 275). *On the Catholic Faith* is a creedal exposition, beginning with the exhortation that "every Christian man should by right know both his Pater noster and his Creed"; the homily is concerned primarily with the character of the Christian deity, and the bulk of it is an exposition of Trinitarian theology, following especially the model of "wise Augustine." However, the sermon's first major topic is God's status as creator, and here, too, Ælfric seems to follow "wise Augustine":

There is one Creator of all things, visible and invisible; and we should all believe in him, for he is true and God alone Almighty [*āna Ælmihtig*], who never either began or had beginning; but he is himself beginning, and he to all creatures gave

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<sup>64</sup> Bede argues against those who would read the "deep" of Genesis 1:2 as God's uncreated source material for creation:

Nor is it correct to believe that the waters were made other than by God, because although Scripture does not say it openly here, nevertheless it signifies it openly when it makes known that they were illuminated by God and set in order at his command. And also the Psalm plainly says, *and let the waters that are above the heavens praise the name of the Lord. For he spoke, and they were made.* (70)

beginning and origin, that they might be, and that they might have their own nature, so as it seemed good to the divine dispensation. [...] Now, brethren, ye may understand, if ye will, that there are two things: one is the Creator, the other is the creature. He is the Creator who created and made all things of naught. That is a creature which the true Creator created. These are, first, heaven, and the angels which dwell in heaven; and then this earth with all those which inhabit it, and sea with all those that swim in it. Now all these things are named by one name, creature. They were not always existing, but God created them. The creatures are many. The Creator, who created them all, is one, who alone is Almighty God [*Ælmihtig God*]. He was ever, and ever he will continue in himself and through himself. If he had begun and had origin, without doubt he could not be Almighty God [*Ælmihtig God*]; for the creature that began and is created, has no divinity; therefore every substance that is not God is a creature; and that which is not a creature is God. (*Catholic 1 275-6*)

Here are the Augustinian arguments about creation *ex nihilo* and omnipotence, as well as the interrelatedness of omnipotence and eternity, expressed not in polished syntactic Latin, but in plain-spoken paratactic Old English. These same ideas, so clearly expressed in *On the Catholic Faith*, are also present, though not always so openly, in Ælfric's other writings on Genesis: the introduction to his *Heptateuch*, and in the Old English *Hexameron*. In both, God's omnipotence is shown by his creative acts: "[T]he Almighty Creator [*ælmihtiga Scippend*] manifested himself by the great work which he wrought in the beginning"; "[H]e made manifest his power [*mihta*] by the creation [*gesceafta*]" (*Heptateuch 16; Exameron 36*). Both also contrast the temporality of creation with the eternity of the omnipotent creator:

This world was not at first, but God himself made it, who was ever without beginning in his great glory and majesty as mighty [*mihtig*] as now he is.

(*Heptateuch* 16)

Here you may hear that the heaven did not exist formerly, before the almighty worker [*æلميhtiga wyrhta*] made it in the beginning, and all the earth, by his great skill. But he himself, who so mightily [*mihtiglice*] made such skill, was ever a creator without beginning [*unbegunnen scyppend*]. (*Hexameron* 36)

Indeed, for Ælfric God's omnipotence is so closely tied to his role as creator that, when he translates the Latin "In principio creavit Deus coelum et terram," he renders it as "God æلميhtig gesceop ærest on anginne heofenan and eorðan"—"In the beginning, *God almighty* first created heaven and earth" (*Hexameron* 35, trans. and italics mine). The force of creedal diction, augmented by creed-based expositions of Genesis, led Ælfric to insert an "almighty" where there wasn't one.

Even in homilies not preached on the topic of creation or creedal exposition, Ælfric continually connects God's "almightiness" with his role as creator. As he tells biblical narratives, Ælfric often reinforces the identity of the God in the story with the creator of Genesis 1: for instance, it was the Almighty Creator who descended on Sinai to deliver the law to Moses, and Jesus Christ calmed the seas and changed water into wine by virtue of being the Almighty Creator (*Catholic* 2 196, 378, 72). The Almighty Creator performs wonders on behalf of saints, who reign in heaven with him (*Catholic* 2 188, 132). The Almighty Creator governs the destinies of men, even determining the fates of human rulers, like the king of Northumbria (*Catholic* 1 110, *Catholic* 2 146). In recounting the story of Gregory the Great and the English slaves, Ælfric

has Gregory declare that the English will sing "Alleluia!" to the Almighty Creator, not simply "God the Creator" as in Bede (*Catholic* 2 122).

Beyond these examples, we may also consider the sheer number of times Ælfric refers to God as *Ælmihtig*: 175 instances in the *Catholic Homilies*, more than almost any other divine epithet, including *God* (80), *Drihten* (147), *Scyppend* (61), *Thrynesse* (28), *Hælend* (135), *Iesus* (26), *Fæder* (163), and *Halga Gast* (52). Only *Crist* excels *Ælmihtig* as Ælfric's favorite divine name, with over 450 instances.<sup>65</sup> Ælfric is not the only Old English homilist with a fondness for *Ælmihtig*: in the nineteen Blickling Homilies, *Ælmihtig* is used twenty-four times, in four of which God is also referred to as *Scyppend* in the same line (*Blickling* 37). Beyond Old English homilies, *Ælmihtig* (and its variants) are also strongly attested in the Anglo-Saxon poetic corpus, with 160 instances (*Concordance* 21-2, 49, 246-7). The strength of this last piece of evidence is not only that every single instance of *Ælmihtig* in Old English poetry is a reference to the Christian God, with the possible exception of its one occurrence in *Beowulf*: in at least 80 of *Ælmihtig*'s uses in Old English poetry, the "Almighty" is also, in the immediate context, affirmed to be the creator of Genesis 1 and 2.

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<sup>65</sup> Malcolm Godden's glossary to the *Catholic Homilies* is the only Old English glossary or dictionary I've found that defines *aelmihtig* as an "epithet for God or gods." However, the only instance of *aelmihtig* that applies to "gods" in the plural is the assertion in "On the Catholic Faith" that "ne sind ðry Ælmihtige Godas" ("there are not three almighty gods"), in context an affirmation of the substantial unity of the divine persons within the Holy Trinity (*Catholic* 1 276). Even the only instance of *aelmihtig* in reference to "gods" is a statement defining the orthodox understanding of the Christian Trinity's nature and persons.

#### 4. Answering Fred Robinson: *æلميhtig/se æلميhtiga* as distinctively Christian

We are now, in light of the discussion above, able to return to Fred Robinson's arguments and assertions about the polysemous connotations of *æلميhtig/se æلميhtiga*. First, according to Robinson, the association between *se æلميhtiga* and the biblical creator is an accident of orthography, "[b]ut there is no authority whatever for the capital letter *Æ*- which forces modern readers to assume that this allusion refers unambiguously to the Christian Deity" (34). With the capital *Æ*- removed, *se æلميhtiga* is rendered, says Robinson, religiously neutral. Second, Robinson has claimed of *Beowulf* that when "the poet's audience heard a character in the poem utter a Christianized Germanic word for a higher being, they would necessarily have had two apposed meanings in mind"—the pre-conversion (pagan) meaning and the post-conversion (Christian) meaning (37-8). How "necessarily" true this statement is, of course, is not liable to demonstration, but we may consider the likelihood of its truth in the case of *æلميhtig/se æلميhtiga*. These two claims lead us to ask a question raised earlier: "Is there reason to believe that the Anglo-Saxon audience would have, like Robinson's 'modern readers,' thought that *se æلميhtiga* referred first, mainly, even exclusively, to the biblical creator?" I contend that our survey of the connections between divine omnipotence and creation in Christian thought, both patristic and Anglo-Saxon, allows us to answer this question with "Very probably, yes!"

First, if modern readers assume that *se æلميhtiga* refers "unambiguously" to the Christian God, it is for good reasons, far stronger than mere orthographic convention—reasons which were shared by Christian Anglo-Saxons. Not only is "almighty/*æلميhtig*" the traditional English translation of a common divine title in the Bible: it is also the standard English translation of the first adjective chosen to describe the Christian God in the Apostles' Creed, and has been for, apparently, nearly fifteen centuries. The Apostles Creed has been used in England and throughout



western Europe in catechesis, in liturgy, in baptism, for over a millennium and half. Moreover, within the Augustine-influenced theology of late classical and early medieval western Europe, we find a nexus of interconnected beliefs about omnipotence, creation *ex nihilo*, and divine eternality and self-existence, woven from reflection on the creedal association of omnipotence and creation, then turned to apologetic and polemical uses. This dogmatic nexus was integrated into standard catechesis and the tradition of commentary on Genesis, and so reached and found fertile ground in the theological schools of Anglo-Saxon England. From there it was dispensed to the laity as creedal instruction in homily and, arguably, Caedmonian poetry, the witness to the latter being the common poetic association of *æelmihtig* with the creator. While Robinson is correct to point out the inapplicability of modern capitalization to Old English poetry, that point is largely irrelevant: Robinson needs a better argument than that to claim *Beowulf* as (apparently) the only religiously-neutral usage of *se æelmihtiga* in the literary corpus of Old English. Perhaps another such usage exists, but it is not in the poetic record or the extant homiletic tradition; that Robinson cites an Old Icelandic text as his justification for inferring the polysemy of an Old English word, suggests that he has not been successful in locating the evidence of usage he needs in Old English sources (34).<sup>66</sup> At any rate, Robinson has not done justice to the wealth of evidence for the Christian connotations of *se æelmihtiga* in Anglo-Saxon England.

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<sup>66</sup> Robinson admits that even his Old Icelandic evidence is not so clear: "Assumptions about Germanic pagan vocabulary based on Old Icelandic are of course problematic, especially in light of Walter Baetke's 'Christlicher [*sic*] Lehngut in der Sagareligion,'" writes Robinson in an endnote. His endnote does not, however, indicate why his evidence is "problematic," namely, (1) that Old Icelandic texts which speak of pre-conversion religion are all themselves of post-conversion composition, and (2) that the post-conversion composition of Old Icelandic texts suggests the possibility of the application of Christian language to pre-conversion religion.

Second, while Robinson's point about the Germanic (and therefore pre-conversion) origin of *ælmih̄tig* may stand unchallenged, it is not enough to support his inference that the Christian audience of *Beowulf* would be conscious of a carefully-balanced religious ambiguity in the term. There is (apparently) no example in the extant Old English corpus that suggests that *ælmih̄tig* was ever used with any but Christian connotations. It seems, then, that Robinson is claiming his imagined Anglo-Saxon audience would have been "necessarily" aware of a word-usage never attested, and that this "necessary" (but unattested) word-usage would also "necessarily" counterbalance the semantic force of the (apparently) universally-attested word-usage. Robinson's argument is, even without further critique than this, not very strong. But further critique is needed, for we are not merely discussing word-usage based on the number of attestations. "Almighty"—whether *pantokrator*, *omnipotens*, or *ælmih̄tig*—is not only used, in the manner of the creeds, as a title or descriptor for the Christian God: it is also, and more importantly, a term the connotations of which were discussed, debated, and dogmatically defined. What "almighty" meant about the Christian God was considered crucially important, and its connotations within Christian theology were so delineated as to remove the applicability of the term to any of the Christian God's pagan rivals. The most basic point about the term "almighty"—the core message of Irenaeus, Augustine, Quodvultdeus, Bede, and Ælfric—is that only the Christian God has any right to be called "almighty," a right he holds by virtue of being the eternal creator of all things. In light of this, Robinson's claim of carefully-balanced polysemy is even less believable, because Christian discourse on God's "almightiness"—including the extant Anglo-Saxon discourse—was intent on deliberately and dogmatically denying the term's religious ambiguity. Robinson's arguments about *ælmih̄tig* are not only outweighed by the sheer mass of attested word-usage: the balance is also tipped by the momentum of apologetic and

polemic arguments whose force was ever aimed at tilting the scale in favor of the Christian God, the biblical creator.

## CHAPTER 4

*BEOWULF'S* CREATION SONG AMONG THE COMPETING COSMOGONIES

As the scholarly survey of Chapter One indicates, *Beowulf's* Creation Song has commonly been taken as a cosmogonic account within the biblical tradition. In 1911, Klaeber asserted that its "closest parallel" is "the biblical narrative in Genesis," and most scholars on record about this question openly or tacitly concur with Klaeber's judgment ("Christian" 2). Not all agree on the point, however: some (such as Fred Robinson) view the Creation Song as studiously neutral in its religious content, while others (such as Craig Davis and Laura Morland) see elements of pagan origin myths in the Creation Song. Like the connotations of *ælmihstig/se ælmihtiga*, therefore, the character of the Creation Song's cosmogonic narrative is controversial, and so must be examined closely to identify the religious affinity of the song overall. Again, this study will consider the Creation Song within the context of the apologetic tradition, after presenting the arguments of Robinson, Davis, and Morland.

## 1. Fred Robinson, Craig Davis, and Laura Morland: A Creation Song for Pious Heathen?

We have seen already, in Chapter One, that Robinson views "the scop's creation hymn" as "one that any pious heathen might sing" (37). The parallels Robinson cites to support this claim are drawn from both classical and Germanic sources: the Old English *Meters of Boethius*, in which Homer is said to have "often and frequently praised the brightness of the sun"; the *Aeneid*, in which "the minstrel Iopas sings of the creation of man and animals and sun and moon in terms

similar to [...] *Beowulf*"; and the cosmogony in the Old Norse *Vǫluspá* (93).<sup>67</sup> Robinson does not view the Creation Hymn as overtly pagan, though: it could also be the work of "a noble heathen sensing the presence of a supreme being by observing the ordered workings of the natural world but without any real knowledge of Christianity" (37). In Robinson's mind, then, the Creation Hymn is either a work of unaided natural theology ("the scop's intuition"), or else a sanitized pagan creation myth: which option is correct "cannot be determined with certainty," making this another instance of the careful ambiguity Robinson sees throughout *Beowulf* (36-7).

Craig Davis and Laura Morland make more of the Germanic parallels than does Robinson. Davis sees in the Creation Song "marked similarity to late pagan conceptions of cosmogony," citing verbal parallels from Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda:

The old Norse gods girdled a disc-shaped earth with the Ocean, an idea embedded in Snorri's use of the term *heimskringla* 'the disc of the world.' They then fixed in their courses the heavenly bodies [...] 'to give light to both heaven above and earth beneath.' [...] The lands grown over with vegetation and trees, the latter of which is dominated by the great ash Yggdrassill [...] The gods also gave to the ancestors of the races of men [...] 'breath and life ... intelligence and movement' (46)

Davis finds in the *leomum ond lēafum* of *Beowulf*'s Creation Song the remains of Yggdrasil, "the sacrificial cult tree, [...] excised from *Beowulf*'s account of Creation in all but its trunklessly preserved limbs and leaves extending to the ends of the earth" (47). Morland reads the Creation Song as an instance of a "type-scene," common to early Germanic literatures, which was "for any

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<sup>67</sup> Robinson quotes from "Meter 30" of the *Meters of Boethius* without translation: "[Hwæt, se Omerus] oft and gelome / þære sunnan wlite swiðe herede" (Krapp 202).

Germanic poet of [Cædmon's] era, as much a part of the creation story as the story itself" (351). In this type scene, which Morland adopts from Lars Lönnroth, a "mythical sage," famed for his travels, is asked to explain the origin of the world, which explanation is typified by the formulaic division of the world into earth and heaven and by the listing of other parts of the natural order such as sun, moon, trees, etc. (326).<sup>68</sup> Morland identifies the singer of the Creation Hymn as a "vestige of the image of the traveler," the one "who knew how [...] to recall from afar" the story of creation (335).<sup>69</sup> The earth-heaven formula is not preserved in *Beowulf*, however, which Morland sees as a necessary compromise to achieve the poet's "delicate balance between the pagan and Christian world-views":

Had the *Beowulf*-poet allowed his *scop* to declare the heaven was created before the earth, as it is stated in the book of *Genesis*, he would have violated the order of the pagan cosmogony. If he were to adhere to the order of events as depicted in *Vǫluspá*, in which earth is created before heaven, he would have violated the sensibilities of his Christian audience. [...] [T]he *Beowulf*-poet finessed the matter beautifully: he simply omitted "heaven" altogether. (337)

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<sup>68</sup> Morland's "creation type scene" is a development from Lars Lönnroth's article, "*Igrð fannz æva né upphiminn: A Formula Analysis*"; Lönnroth does not address *Beowulf*'s Creation Song, however.

<sup>69</sup> Morland reads *feorran reccan* in *Beowulf* 91 as "to recall from afar," differing with Klaeber's gloss "to recall far back (in time)"; she points to the use of *feorran* in the rest of *Beowulf* as a reference to spatial distance not time, concluding that Klaeber's gloss was "simply an attempt to make sense" of difficult diction, a difficulty removed if the scop is seen as an instance of this archetypal travelling sage (335). Morland's argument on this point is persuasive, but not really critical to determining the religious identity of the Creation Song's narrative content.

Morland, then, is like Davis in detecting a traditional pagan narrative underlying the Creation Song, but, like Robinson, views the resulting cosmogony as religiously ambiguous, not necessarily or exclusively pagan.

Robinson, Davis, and Morland cite different aspects of the Creation Song in their arguments, but generally agree in seeing the Creation Song as *not* typically Christian or biblical. Certainly each sees Christianity as playing a role in the Creation Song's final narrative shape, but that role is primarily one of excision, pruning away the elements of a traditional pagan creation myth that would most offend a Christian audience. Nonetheless, Robinson and Morland both contend, and Davis would likely agree, that the remaining pagan elements in the Creation Song are prominent enough to cast the song's religious identity in doubt—that *Beowulf's* audience, though not offended, would still have regarded the Creation Song as possibly, even probably, *not* the Genesis 1 cosmogony.

This conclusion requires a questionable assumption, however: that the Creation Song, in fact, has no distinctively Christian or biblical elements. For Robinson, it seems that the only arguably Christian element in the Creation Song is its reference to "the almighty," an identification he rejects. Other narrative aspects of the Creation Song are, in Robinson's view, neutral and equivalent to the pagan analogues he cites. Neither Davis or Morland argue the point in detail: Davis is concerned more with suggesting pagan cosmogonic parallels to the Creation Song than disputing Christian parallels, while Morland addresses the matter with an approving citation of Robinson.<sup>70</sup> There is, instead, only the assumption, more or less tacit, that the Creation

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<sup>70</sup> Not that either scholar can really be faulted for this: Davis is, after all, discussing these matters in a book entitled *Beowulf and the Demise of Germanic Legend in England*, while Morland is arguing for a refined definition of a formulaic type-scene. Neither has made the dispute of the Creation Song's Christian identity so central to their main argument as Robinson.

Song lacks distinctively Christian elements. This assumption relies, in my view, on an anemic appreciation of historic Christian perceptions of the uniqueness of their creation story. These perceptions were rooted in the Genesis cosmogony itself, and came to full flower in the Christian apologetic tradition, where they remained an oft-recurring feature through centuries of polemic argument. We will explore these perceptions below, then consider anew whether the Creation Song is truly lacking in distinctively Christian elements.

## 2. Genesis 1 and Competing Cosmogonies in the Ancient Near East

Seeking religious distinctiveness in creation stories may seem strange to current readers familiar with the methodologies of comparative mythology. For a Joseph Campbell or a Claude Lévi-Strauss, what's interesting in creation myths is their commonalities, which point to broadly applicable anthropological insights. When they are viewed as growing from commonly human traits, creation stories are reminders of the ties that bind *homo sapiens* across cultural boundaries.

Such an approach to cosmogonies would have seemed exceedingly strange in the ancient Near East, the broad cultural context in which the Hebrew scriptures were written. In the ancient Near East, cosmogonies were competitive, even within—*especially* within—individual cultures. Ancient Egyptian religion is the classic example, boasting at least four distinct cosmogonies, each centered on a different sacred city: in Hermopolis, priests told of a family of eight gods (the Ogdoad) and the hatching of the cosmic egg; Heliopolis attributed creation to the sun-god Ra (in his primordial form, Atum), chief of the nine gods (the Ennead); Thebes held up the sky-god Amon as the hidden power behind the Ogdoad; and, in Memphis, it was Ptah who made the world, using both the Ogdoad and the Ennead as his instruments (Wright 14-6). These creation stories were not merely the result of disparate traditions: they arose from sharp religious rivalries



between cultic centers along the Nile, each vying for the supremacy of their patron deity. Memphis, in particular, seems to have made its grab for preeminence through a sophisticated cosmogonic synthesis, whereby "[r]ival institutions based on a differing mythology could thus be circumvented, overshadowed, or even supplanted" (Lesko 96). That the Memphite cosmogony is attested only in a single source suggests that this narrative power-play ultimately failed (Lesko 95).

Even the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, once viewed as *the* Mesopotamian creation myth, was but one among a range of competitors, and it makes its own narrative power-play:

In Mesopotamia myths had been long been used to undergird the authority of sanctuaries and the hegemony of the individual city-states. [...] The most blatant example is the "creation myth" *Enuma elish* [*sic*], a specifically Babylonian version of the Semitic Combat Myth in which the patron deity of Babylon defeated the watery chaos dragon en route to becoming the divine sovereign of heaven and earth. The myth patently was composed to justify Babylon's rise from a previously insignificant city to hegemony over the whole of Mesopotamia. Somewhat earlier the Akkadian myth of Anzu, upon which *Enuma elish* is partially patterned, has attempted to stake out a similar claim for the city of Girsu in central Mesopotamia by having its patron deity Ninurta defeat the demonic Anzu after the older gods proved unequal to the task. (Batto 25)

*Enuma Elish* also displaces earlier myths of the creation of humanity: whereas the earlier *Atrahasis* has the god Enki fashion the first man from clay, in *Enuma Elish*, Enki is "merely carrying out the designs of Marduk, the mastermind of the plan" (Batto 26). Humans thus owe ultimate allegiance to Marduk, who commissioned their making. It was "[b]y such strategy the

author sought to establish *Enuma elish* as the ultimate theological statement," though he was far from the only priestly storyteller bent on such ultimacy (Batto 26).

It is in light of this competition in ancient Near Eastern religions, then, that we should take up the question of the Genesis cosmogony's distinctiveness, rather than reading it through the synthesis of comparative mythology. This shift of paradigm follows a trend in biblical studies away from older understandings of the relationship between the Hebrew scriptures and other ancient Near Eastern texts. That relationship was once understood mainly as literary dependence: after the discovery and translation of the Gilgamesh Epic and *Enuma Elish* in the 1870s, many scholars viewed Genesis as derivative of these Mesopotamian mythological texts, arguing that "there was nothing in the Old Testament that was not but a pale reflection of Babylonian ideas" (Hasel 81). However, as studies of Babylonian civilization revealed that its own "cultural and religious situation [was] not only multi-layered but also extremely complex and diverse," the need to allow for similar complexity in the relationship of Babylonian religion to other religions became clear:

C. Westermann has pointed out that it is a methodological necessity to consider religio-historical parallels against the totality of the phenomenological conception of the works in which such parallels appear. This means that single parallel terms and motifs must not be torn out of the religio-cultural moorings and treated in isolation from the total conception of the context in which they are found. (Hasel 81)

One result of this more nuanced consideration of Genesis's relationship to other Near Eastern mythological texts was a growing appreciation for the apologetic tenor of the book, and many scholars, notably Yehezkel Kaufmann, came to see Genesis as "part of the biblical polemic

against paganism" (Sarna 3).<sup>71</sup> In Genesis, this polemic first develops as an implicit intertextual dialogue between the Genesis creation narrative and the mythological cosmogonies of the various peoples with whom the ancient Hebrews interacted. Three points of the Genesis creation polemic are especially relevant to our discussion of distinctively Christian cosmogony: 1) the character of the creator deity, 2) the character of the creative act, and 3) the character of the created cosmos.

It is typically the first task of a creation story to define the character of the creator. In most mythological cosmogonies, there is a "theogony telling of the birth of gods"; these gods arise from "a primordial realm which harbors the seeds of all being" (Kaufmann 24). For example, in *Enuma Elish*,

[O]nly the waters of chaos—Apsu and Tiamat, male and female—were present at first. These "mingled their waters" and begot successive generations of the gods. Tiamat then tries to destroy her offspring, but Marduk, the head of the pantheon, overcomes her, kills her, and creates the world out of her corpse. (Kaufmann 25)

These features—a primordial realm, a theogony, and "a creation of a cosmos out of the primordial stuff"—embody, in Kaufmann's view, the "fundamental idea" of pagan religion, "that there exists a realm of being prior to the gods and above them, upon which the gods depend, and whose decrees they must obey" (21). This is also the necessary precondition for myth, as Kaufmann defines it:

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<sup>71</sup> Yehezkel Kaufmann's *Religion of Israel*, its first volume published in Hebrew in 1937, pioneered this position; his ideas did not get wide recognition until his *Religion of Israel* series was translated into English and published in abridged form in 1960. Kaufmann's reading of Genesis as apologetic was further developed by Nahum Sarna and has since gained widespread currency among biblical scholars.

Myth is the tale of the life of the gods. In myth the gods appear not only as actors, but as acted upon. At the heart of myth is the tension between the gods and other forces that shape their destinies. Myth describes the unfolding destiny of the gods, giving expression to the idea that besides the will of the gods there are other, independent forces that wholly or in part determine their destinies. (22)

Genesis 1:2 also alludes to these primordial "waters of chaos": "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters." Here, "the deep" is the Hebrew *tehôm*, a word linguistically related to, though not derived from, the Babylonian *Tiamat*.<sup>72</sup> This connection was not lost on scholars after the discovery of *Enuma Elish*:

Since H. Gunkel in 1895 argued that the term *tehôm*, "deep, primeval ocean, sea," in Gen. 1:2 contains vestiges of Babylonian mythology, many Old Testament scholars have followed his supposition that there is a direct relationship between *tehôm* and *Tiamat*, the female monster of the Babylonian national epic *Enuma Elish*. (Hasel 82)

However, as Gerhard Hasel argues, "the deep" in Genesis 1 plays a starkly different role from that of Tiamat in *Enuma Elish*:

In Gen. 1 *tehôm* is clearly inanimate, a part of the cosmos, not the foe of God, but simply one section of the created world. It does not offer any resistance to God's creative activity. [...] To suggest that there is in Gen. 1:2 the remnant of a latent

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<sup>72</sup>"There is a growing consensus of scholarly opinion that *tehôm* derives from a Common Semitic root from which also cognate Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Arabic terms derive. [...] [*T*] *tehôm* is philologically and morphologically not dependent on *Tiamat*" (Hasel 82).

conflict between a chaos monster and a creator god is to read into it from mythology. To the contrary, the author of the Hebrew creation account uses the term *tehôm* in a "depersonalized" and "non-mythical" sense. *Tehôm* is nothing else but a passive, powerless, inanimate element in God's creation. (Hasel 83-4)

In fact, because "the author of Gen. 1 rejected explicitly contemporary mythological notions" of the term *tehôm*, his use of it is arguably "not only non-mythical in content but antimythical in purpose" (Hasel 85). Certainly Genesis 1's use of *tehôm* is "antimythical" according to Kaufmann's definition of myth: Tiamat is the primordial chaos that precedes the gods and is their mother; in Genesis 1, *tehôm* is preceded by a deity for whom no origin is given.

So, then, this "mythological" aspect of pagan cosmogonies—theogony—is one that the Genesis creation story rejects:

The store of biblical legends lacks the fundamental myth of paganism: the theogony. All theogonic motifs are similarly absent. Israel's god has no pedigree, fathers no generations; he neither inherits nor bequeaths his authority. He does not die and is not resurrected. He has no sexual qualities or desires and shows no need of or dependence upon powers outside himself. (Kaufmann 60-1)

The apparent narrative simplicity of the Genesis creation account—lacking, as it does, a complex theogony—may suggest to current readers that it is a stripped-down version of a typical creation myth, a "generic" cosmogony. Only in conversation with other creation stories does this simplicity become a distinguishing trait:

The supreme characteristic of the Mesopotamian cosmogony is that it is embedded in a mythological matrix. On the other hand, the outstanding peculiarity of the biblical account is the complete absence of mythology in the

classical pagan sense of the term. The religion of Israel is essentially non-mythological, there being no suggestion of any theo-biography. (Sarna 9)

If there is no "theo-biography," what remains to define the character of the Genesis creator? If the Genesis cosmogony contains no theogony, then its creator deity simply *is*, as a necessary precondition of all other existence:

[Genesis] has no notion of the birth of God and no biography of God. It does not even begin with a statement about the existence of God. [...] To the Bible, God's existence is as self-evident as is life itself. (Sarna 10)

Without origin, without explanation, the God of Genesis stands in stark contrast to the chaos-born deities of *Enuma Elish*.

If the Genesis creation story is notable for its lack of complex theogony, it is also notable for its lack of typical creative acts. The first clear contrast between Genesis and the contemporary pagan cosmologies is in the role of sex in cosmogony. In the religions of the peoples surrounding the Hebrews, "creation is always expressed in terms of procreation":

Apparently, paganism was unable to conceive of any primal creative force other than in terms of sex. It will be remembered that in *Enuma Elish*, Apsu and Tiamat represent respectively the male and female powers which, through the "commingling of their waters" gave birth to the first generation of gods. The sex element existed before the cosmos came into being and all the gods were themselves creatures of sex. (Sarna 12)

Yet in the Genesis cosmogony, "no female deity exists or is involved in producing the cosmos and humanity," which "is unique among ancient creation stories that treat of deities having

personality" (Tsumura "Genesis" 32). This lack of a female consort may be viewed as another critique of pagan religion, especially when linked to the later creation of human gender:

When, in fact, Genesis (1:27; 5:2) informs us that "male and female He created them," that God Himself created sexual differentiation, it is more than likely that we are dealing with an intended protest against such pagan notions. (Sarna 13)

Conflict is another common feature of pagan cosmogonies, as the cosmos is formed in a struggle of opposed forces: the combat of Marduk and Tiamat, already described, is a case in point. Such battles may also be necessary to secure the rule of the sovereign deity, as when Baal subdues the dragon Tannin, the crooked serpent Lotan, and other sea monsters in the Canaanite Baal-Anath Cycle (Hasel 86). The victory of Israel's God over various serpent-like creatures, notably Leviathan and Rahab, has been pointed to as a parallel to the battles of Marduk and Tiamat or Baal and the sea monsters.<sup>73</sup> However, "YHWH is never represented as winning dominion from any other god":

There is no biblical parallel to pagan myths relating the defeat of older gods (or demonic powers) by younger; no other gods are present in primordial times.

YHWH's battles with primeval monsters, to which poetical allusion is occasionally made, are not struggles between gods for world dominion. YHWH's battles with Rahab, the dragon, Leviathan, the sea, the fleeing serpent, etc. are hardly illuminated by reference to the myth of Marduk's defeat of Tiamat and his

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<sup>73</sup>References to God's combat with Leviathan: Psalm 74:14; Isaiah 27:1. References to God's combat with the serpent Rahab: Job 9:13; Job 26:12; Psalm 89:10; Isaiah 51:9. Hasel cites H. Gunkel's *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit* (Göttingen, 1895) as the first developed argument of a link between these passages and the monster combats of Marduk and Baal. This perspective was dominant in biblical studies during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and remains a commonplace in popular works on Genesis.

subsequent seizure of supreme power. [...] There is no hint, however, that YHWH's defeat of Rahab, the dragon, etc. was the beginning of his rule, nor are his antagonists portrayed as primordial or divine beings coeval with him. They are all mentioned explicitly at one time or another as creatures of and subject to YHWH (Gen. 1:21; Amos 9:3; Pss. 104:26; 148:7). (Kaufmann 62)

Indeed, the only sea monsters in the Genesis creation story are created by God on the fifth day, and are not mentioned again: "So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm" (Genesis 1:21a). Hasel points to this as another implicit argument against other cosmogonies: "God's effortless creation of the large aquatic creatures appears as a deliberate attempt to contradict the notion of creation in terms of a struggle as contained in the pagan battle myth" (87). Thus, in the act of creation, the Genesis cosmogony depicts neither partnership nor opposition, but instead "the absolute subordination of all creation to the supreme Creator" (Sarna 9).<sup>74</sup>

Finally, it is worth noting the character of certain prominent features of the cosmos itself in Genesis and rival cosmogonies. As Hasel points out, the worship of the sun, moon, and stars was common in the Near East: the Sumerians, Egyptians, Hittites, Akkadians, and Canaanites all

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<sup>74</sup> David Tsumura makes a similar point:

It is true that in the Mesopotamian and Canaanite pantheons certain deities such as Marduk, Ea, and El were called "the creator (or the lord) of heaven and earth," but in the Old Testament theology, when Yahweh-Elohim is represented as the creator of heaven and earth (e.g. Gen 1:1; 14:22), the author is saying not only that he is incomparable in relation to other gods but also that, as the actual creator, he is the only god who can truly be called a god; that is, he is God. (*Creation* 140)



venerated these heavenly bodies, often as the chief or founding deities of pantheons (88). Again, the Genesis creation story stands apart:

Against the background of the widespread astral worship the creation and function of the luminaries in Gen. 1:14-18 appears in a new light. [...] In the Biblical presentation the creatureliness of all creation, also that of sun, moon, and stars, remains the fundamental and determining characteristic. (Hasel 89)

While the sun, moon, and stars in other religions are divine beings, in the Genesis cosmogony "[t]hey share in the creatureliness of all creation and have no autonomous divine quality" (Hasel 89). Here we find another implicit contrast with an apologetic function: if the sun, moon, and stars are creatures of Israel's God, those among the neighboring peoples who worship these astral bodies are worshipping mere creatures.

An examination of the implicit apologetic and polemic in the Genesis creation story is helpful in this study for two reasons. First, it shows that the Genesis cosmogony is, in its stark account of a God-without-biography who makes a world by mere fiat, in fact distinct from rival cosmogonies in its very plainness. It is not merely a dull, featureless outline summary of more lively contemporary cosmogonic myths: the Genesis creation story's "solemn and majestic simplicity" is its trademark, and may be seen as a purposeful response to other cosmogonies (Sarna 10). Second, while the intertextual relationships that reveal the apologetic purpose of Genesis 1 and 2 were probably unknown to later generations of Jews and Christians, apologists of both religions continued to read the Genesis story against the cosmogonies of rival religions. On one hand, this seems an intuitive move for an apologist to make; on the other hand, perhaps it feels intuitive because the Genesis creation story was designed to function in this way from its

inception. All origin stories are told beside and against other origin stories, and the Genesis cosmogony is no exception.

### 3. Competing Cosmogonies in Early Christianity

There are no overt examples of this competitive cosmogonic apologetic in the canonical New Testament, but there are possible allusions to such arguments. Interestingly enough, earlier commentators seemed more inclined to see these passages as allusions to non-Christian cosmogonies than later commentators. The opening line of the Gospel of John identifies the Word (the *Logos*) with the divine creator "in the beginning," a verbal echo of Genesis 1:1. While recent commentators more often connect this reference to the phrase "Word of God" in the canonical Hebrew scriptures, rendered as *logos* in the Greek Septuagint, it has also been understood as a reference and response to the role of the *logos spermatikos* in Stoic cosmology; Justin Martyr seems to take it in this sense, as witnessed by his use of the term in chapter thirteen of his *Second Apology*. The epistle of 1 Timothy censures undefined "myths and endless genealogies": again, more recent commentators tend to see in this a condemnation of esoteric rabbinic interpretations of the Pentateuch.<sup>75</sup> However, two prominent church fathers and apologists, Irenaeus and Tertullian, both connect "myths and endless genealogies" with the Gnostic cosmogonies, with their "endless genealogies" of emanating *aeons*, while a third, John

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<sup>75</sup> Kittel provides a typical, though more fulsome, example of this reading:

They represent a Gnostic [or esoteric] Judaism which uses the Law (of the OT) to spread ascetic demands ("Halachot") and speculative doctrines ("Haggadot"). [...] [T]hey are the genealogies of men. G. Kittel has shown that the Rabbis had a lively interest in both their own genealogies and those of others, but especially those taken from the OT, and that these played a role in the debates between the Jews and the Jewish Christians. ("γενεά")

Chrysostom, detected in the phrase an allusion to "the Greeks" for "they enumerated their Gods" (*Against* 315; *Prescription* 259; *I Timothy* 410). While the patristic applications of these passages are not necessarily more apt readings than those proposed more recently, it is significant to this discussion that post-apostolic theologians so readily turned these particular apostolic texts to these particular polemical uses.

It is, after all, not surprising that church fathers like Irenaeus and Chrysostom would see arguments against non-Christian cosmologies in the New Testament writers. Their cultural context was awash with rival cosmologies, whether from philosophical schools, mainstream Roman cults, classical literature, mystery religions, or Gnostic sects—and the church fathers felt an urgent call to confront all of them. We have already noted the specific response made by Augustine and others to cosmogonies that presented uncreated matter as eternally existing alongside the deity.<sup>76</sup> Similar arguments are taken up in the course of many sorts of rhetorical project: polemics targeted at religions for which cosmogony was a major element (Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* and Gnosticism); broad-based responses to many non-Christian ideologies (Hippolytus's *Refutation of All Heresies*); and exegetical or homiletic works on the Genesis creation story itself (Basil's *Hexameron*). Yet, in all this variety, we can still perceive the distinctive counterpoint of the Genesis cosmogony, with its emphasis on the character of the creator deity, the character of the creative act, and the character of the created cosmos.

The patristic writers are more insistently explicit than the Genesis account in affirming a creator without a theogony. We have already noted the link made by the fathers between God's omnipotence and his eternal self-existence.<sup>77</sup> We may also expect, then, the fathers to combat the

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<sup>76</sup> See Chapter Three.

<sup>77</sup> See Chapter Three.

theogonies of Christianity's rivals, and in this they do not disappoint. Hesiod, and to a lesser degree Homer, stand as the most prominent theo-biographers of the ancient Greeks, and so are two of the patristic writers' favorite targets.<sup>78</sup> Theophilus of Antioch, a second-century apologist, in his *To Autolycus*, takes both to task for their reliance on sexual reproduction as a mechanism for theogony. Homer, for instance, is quoted as calling Oceanus, "Father of Gods," and his wife Tethys, "their mother [...] who bare the gods," and "from whom all rivers spring, and every sea" (95).<sup>79</sup> This is foolishness, according to Theophilus:

In saying [this], however, [Homer] does not present God to us. For who does not know that the ocean is water? But if water, then not God. God indeed, if He is the

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<sup>78</sup> Though Irenaeus writes to refute various sects commonly called "Gnostic," he also attacks literary theogonies like Hesiod's as the source of Gnostic theories of divine emanation:

These men (the [Valentinian] heretics), adopting this fable as their own, have ranged their opinions round it, as if by a sort of natural process, changing only the names of the things referred to, and setting forth the very same beginning of the generation of all things, and their production. In place of Night and Silence they substitute Bythus and Sige; instead of Chaos, they put Nous; and for Love (by whom, says the comic poet, all other things were set in order) they have brought forward the Word; while for the primary and greatest gods they have formed the Æons; and in place of the secondary gods, they tell us of that creation by their mother which is outside of the Pleroma, calling it the second Ogdoad. They proclaim to us, like the writer referred to, that from this (Ogdoad) came the creation of the world and the formation of man, maintaining that they alone are acquainted with these ineffable and unknown mysteries. Those things which are everywhere acted in the theatres by comedians with the clearest voices they transfer to their own system, teaching them undoubtedly through means of the same arguments, and merely changing the names. (*Against* 376)

<sup>79</sup> This seems to be a reference to *Iliad* 14.201, in which Hera describes her visit to "Oceanus (from whom all we gods proceed) and mother Tethys" (*Iliad* 219).

creator of all things, as He certainly is, is the creator both of the water and of the seas. (95)

Theophilus does not merely reject the notion that God had parents: he appeals to God's status as universal creator to demonstrate the absurdity of Homer's water-based theogony. God is "creator both of the water and the seas"—how, then, can the personified, sexualized seas be his parents? Theophilus finds Hesiod's account of the gods' origin to be even sillier, for "though he said that the world was created, he showed no inclination to tell us by whom it was created" (95). Instead, Hesiod gives his readers gods "later born than the world," and, therefore, not its creators (95). Moreover, Hesiod describes how "Saturn was assailed in war by his own son Jupiter," who "by might o'ercame, / And 'mong th' immortals ruled with justice wise" (95). This last Theophilus does not even critique: to this early Christian writer, whose God is *pantokrator*, the absurdity of Hesiod's theomachy is obvious on its face.<sup>80</sup> Theophilus will have none of these "later born" gods, winning through combat their ruling status over a world they did not make:

[T]he utterances of [...] poets have an appearance of trustworthiness, on account of the beauty of their diction; but their discourse is proved to be foolish and idle, because the multitude of their nonsensical frivolities is very great; and not a stray morsel of truth is found in them. (99)

Theophilus's treatment of Homer and Hesiod is instructive for this study not only as an example of patristic polemics: it also parallels the engagement of Genesis 1 with its rivals, especially *Enuma Elish*. God's precedence over "the deep" (*tehôm*) counters the generation of primal gods

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<sup>80</sup> Justin Martyr faults Hesiod's "driveling theogony" for a similar tale of the previous generation of Titans: "[T]hey say that Chronos, the son of Ouranos, in the beginning slew his father, and possessed himself of his rule" (*Discourse* 271).

from the seas (Apsu and Tiamat/Oceanus and Tethys). God's effortless authority over his creation counters the *Chaoskampf* motif (Tiamat vs. Marduk/Saturn vs. Jupiter). The competitive features of the Genesis cosmogony, which underlie Theophilus's polemic, still appear to be in working order in *To Autolytus*, even after their original Near Eastern targets are long gone.

The fathers were also tenacious advocates of the biblical creator as one who makes by fiat, without resort to the means commonly described in rival cosmogonies. Therefore, we find, as we might expect, critique of mythological cosmogonies like Hesiod's *Theogony*, again from Theophilus of Antioch:

Moreover, his [Hesiod's] human, and mean, and very weak conception, so far as regards God, is discovered in his beginning to relate the creation of all things from the earthly things here below. For man, being below, begins to build from the earth, and cannot in order make the roof, unless he has first laid the foundation. But the power of God is shown in this, that, first of all, He creates out of nothing, according to His will, the things that are made. (99)

What lies behind this passage appears to be a very literal reading of Genesis 1:1: if "in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," then he must have created the heavens first, then the earth. In the *Theogony*, however, Gaia, the earth, is the first entity generated by Chaos, with Aether, the upper air, arriving in a later generation. So, then, we find Theophilus condemning Hesiod not only for an overly anthropomorphic cosmogony—in which the world must be built from "the ground up," so to speak, like a house—but also for presenting the creative acts in the wrong order.

The poets of mythology were not the only non-Christian thinkers whose cosmogonies were condemned by the fathers. Philosophers also proposed origin stories that called for

Christian responses, especially Plato, but the pre-Socratics as well. Athanasius faults Plato for his too-human notion of creation, for he claimed "that God has made the world out of matter previously existing and without beginning" (*Incarnation 37*):

But in so saying they know not that they are investing God with weakness. For if He is not Himself the cause of the material, but makes things only of previously existing material, He proves to be weak, because unable to produce anything He makes without the material; just as it is without doubt a weakness of the carpenter not to be able to make anything required without his timber. For [...] had not the material existed, God would not have made anything. And how could He in that case be called Maker and Artificer, if He owes His ability to make to some other source—namely, to the material? So that if this be so, God will be on their theory a Mechanic only, and not a Creator out of nothing; if, that is, He works at existing material, but is not Himself the cause of the material. For He could not in any sense be called Creator unless He is Creator of the material of which the things created have in their turn been made. (*Incarnation 37*)

Basil of Caesarea, on the other hand, takes on the pre-Socratics in the first homily of his *Hexameron*. He finds their debates over the primal origins of matter, attempts at a less supernatural cosmogony, to be "frivolities": "let them refute each other, and, without disquieting ourselves about essence, let us say with Moses 'God created the heavens and the earth'" (58). We may also note, as a final example, Irenaeus's confrontation of the Gnostics, whose cosmogony owed much to the Platonic notion of the demiurge. This element of Gnostic cosmogony is precisely what Irenaeus rejects:

Those, moreover, who say that the world was formed by angels, or by any other maker of it, contrary to the will of Him who is the Supreme Father, err first of all in this very point, that they maintain that angels formed such and so mighty a creation, contrary to the will of the Most High God. [...] Whom, therefore, shall we believe as to the creation of the world—these heretics who have been mentioned that prate so foolishly and inconsistently on the subject, or the disciples of the Lord, and Moses, who was both a faithful servant of God and a prophet? He at first narrated the formation of the world in these words: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth,” and all other things in succession; but neither gods nor angels [had any share in the work]. (*Against* 361)

All of these features of more philosophical cosmogonies—uncaused matter, sub-divine creative agents, and naturalistic origin theories—are rejected by the fathers, in favor of the divine, *ex nihilo* creation they see in the Genesis cosmogony.

Finally, the patristic writers zealously defend the distinction between creator and creature found in the Genesis cosmogony. We have already seen Theophilus's dismissal of Oceanus and Tethys as merely water, and therefore the obedient creations of God. In Chapter Two, we also noted the fathers generally condemn the worship of nature; however, the Genesis cosmogony could also be read against such deification of natural features in a specific way. Theophilus of Antioch again provides our example, as he points out the folly of venerating stars on the basis of the order of events in Genesis 1:

On the fourth day the luminaries were made; because God, who possesses foreknowledge, knew the follies of the vain philosophers, that they were going to say, that the things which grow on the earth are produced from the heavenly



bodies, so as to exclude God. In order, therefore, that the truth might be obvious, the plants and seeds were produced prior to the heavenly bodies, for what is posterior cannot produce that which is prior. (100)

For Theophilus, the order of the Six Day's Work is all he needs to dismiss star worship and theories of stellar influence.

It is worth noting that Theophilus does not merely turn the sequence of creation to apologetic purposes: he also declares that God created the world in this manner, and had it recorded thus in sacred writ, precisely to counter the arguments of his future rivals. Basil of Caesarea makes the same point throughout his *Hexameron*.<sup>81</sup> The readiness of Theophilus and others to argue from fine details of the Genesis cosmogony indicates their belief not only in the scriptures, but also that God acts purposefully to distinguish himself from other deities. In the fathers' view, God is his own first apologist, and it is the apologist's duty to discover the argument inherent in divine acts.

#### 4. Competing Cosmogonies in Anglo-Saxon England

Unlike the ancient cultures surrounding the Jews and the classical cultures in which the earliest Christians mingled, the pre-conversion Anglo-Saxons did not produce extensive written records of their religious beliefs. Also, since the earliest Roman evangelists sought to convert a

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<sup>81</sup> An example from Homily 1:

Among those who have imagined that the world co-existed with God from all eternity, many have denied that it was created by God, but say that it exists spontaneously, as the shadow of this power. God, they say, is the cause of it, but an involuntary cause, as the body is the cause of the shadow and the flame is the cause of the brightness. It is to correct this error that the prophet states, with so much precision, "In the beginning God created." (56)

largely illiterate audience, their responses to Anglo-Saxon paganism were not formal written apologies; therefore, the invaluable patristic witness to contemporary pagan religions has no counterpart in Anglo-Saxon Christian letters. Finally, within a century of Augustine of Canterbury's arrival in England, Christianity had gained such ascendancy that, in some regions at least, the remnants of pagan practice were the objects of legal suppression, not apologetic engagement.<sup>82</sup> For these reasons, Anglo-Saxon England's surviving literary corpus gives few examples of Christian engagement with non-Christian cosmogonies. These few, however, are sufficient to show that the apologetic trajectory set by the fathers in this matter was not forgotten.

Anglo-Saxon Christian writers affirmed Genesis's God-without-biography, declaring with Ælfric that "the Father was ever without beginning," and that "the Son was ever without beginning begotten from Him" ("Falsis" ll. 12-ff.). This divine eternity sits squarely in opposition to any mythological notion of theogony: Ælfric is careful to state, in the fashion typical of Trinitarian expositions, that the Son's "begottenness" is neither temporal nor after the pattern of biological reproduction, so that the Father can eternally generate the Son "without a wife's companionship" ("Falsis" ll. 12-ff.). The gods of pagans are not eternal, however, as is seen by their reliance on biological patterns of reproduction. For this reason, Bishop Daniel of Winchester (d. 745), in a letter to Boniface of Wessex, advises the Anglo-Saxon missionary to refute the pagans by pointing out the absurdity of their theogonies:

Do not begin by arguing with them about the genealogies of their false gods.

Accept their statement that they were begotten by other gods through the

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<sup>82</sup> The Laws of Wihtred of Kent, issued in 695, decreed that those caught "sacrificing to devils" were to be flogged (if slaves) or forfeit their goods (if free) (Crossley-Holland 24-5, 27). Beyond this acknowledgement that pagan worship did (or could) continue, the Laws of Wihtred are unhelpful for forming any clear notion of what pagan worship was like.

intercourse of male and female and then you will be able to prove that, as these gods and goddesses did not exist before, and were born like men, they must be men and not gods. When they have been forced to admit that their gods had a beginning, since they were begotten by others, they should be asked whether the world had a beginning or was always in existence. There is no doubt that before the universe was created there was no place in which these created gods could have subsisted or dwelt. [...] If they maintain that the universe had no beginning, [...] ask them, Who ruled it? How did the gods bring under their sway a universe that existed before them? Whence or by whom or when was the first god or goddess begotten? (Talbot 76)

This series of questions is, of course, rhetorical, and Daniel assumes that the pagans will have no adequate answers to them. The relationship between deity and cosmos is especially important in this passage. Daniel cannot imagine these generations of gods existing before the cosmos, because temporally and spatially finite gods need a place in which to exist; therefore, these gods-with-biography cannot be the creators of the cosmos. It is equally absurd, on the other hand, that these gods-with-biography should rule an uncreated cosmos, for how would they gain control over it? They cannot, then, be the sovereigns of the cosmos either. It is apparent that Christian theology, especially Augustinian theology, underlies these arguments, for they assume that a deity would need to possess eternal self-existence in order to be both creator and sovereign ruler of all things. This is the same standard the fathers used to reject theogonies like Hesiod's.

There also survives from Anglo-Saxon England an instance of Genesis pitted against a pagan origin story, this time in order to assert the creator's rightful relationship

to the creation. Aldhelm (d. 709) was rightly esteemed for his classical scholarship, especially his eloquent Latin verse. His fondness for riddles, however, was at least as Anglo-Saxon as it was Roman. Several of his Latin riddles contain references to classical mythology, but none with the same polemic tone as Riddle 79, about the sun and moon:

The foul offspring of Saturn, namely Jupiter—whom the songs of poets picture as mighty—did not produce us, nor was Latona our mother on Delos; I am not called Cynthia and my brother is not Apollo. Rather, the ruler of high Olympus, Who now resides in His heavenly citadel on high, produced us. We divide up the four-part world with a mutual law: we rule the nocturnal hours and the limits of days.  
(87)

This riddle consists in nothing less than a confrontation between Genesis and Greco-Roman mythology: its solution requires the reader to know both stories of the sun and moon's origin, and to know which story to accept and which to reject. Aldhelm denies generally the notion of biologically reproduced gods in this riddle; he also denies the mythological view of the heavenly bodies as personified deities. Instead, both sun and moon are creations of "the ruler of high Olympus"—the Christian God, here depicted as the real "heavenly" sovereign, in opposition to the "foul" impostor, Jupiter. Moreover, their function as heavenly lights is that specified in Genesis, "to separate the day from the night," and "be for signs, and for seasons, and for days and years" (Genesis 1:14).

Though Aldhelm does not acknowledge it, his riddle also counters the role of the sun and moon that apparently prevailed in Anglo-Saxon paganism, in which the sun and moon

were venerated.<sup>83</sup> Perhaps the learned bishop meant to aim his riddle closer to home, as well as at his stated classical targets. Whatever the case, it is clear that Aldhelm sees Genesis in competition with other cosmogonies in defining the relationship between creator and creation, and it is clear that Aldhelm thinks Genesis wins.

Again, the Christian writers of Anglo-Saxon England do not provide us with anything near the mass of patristic evidence on this topic. There are, though, reasons that explain this scarcity of evidence: the pagan Anglo-Saxons were mostly illiterate, so there was no need to respond to their beliefs in writing—and by the time literacy had spread, the need for a response to specific pagan beliefs had passed.<sup>84</sup> Nonetheless, there is sufficient evidence to show that Anglo-Saxon Christians saw their cosmogony in competition with the cosmogonies of pagans, and that faith in the true creator went hand in hand with faith in the true creation story.

#### 5. Answering Robinson, Davis, and Morland:

##### *Beowulf's* Creation Song as a Competing Cosmogony

Having considered the role of creation stories in the apologetic tradition, we are now in a better position to discern whether "the scop's creation hymn is one that any pious heathen might sing" (Robinson 37). As we have seen, much in the Genesis cosmogony that, to modern eyes,

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<sup>83</sup> Brian Branston finds evidence for such worship in the Metrical Charms: "[T]he *Charms* reflect religious ideas which appear to be older than the worship of personalized gods, I mean the worship by our ancestors of Sun, Moon and Earth" (50). Branston also cites the laws instituted by Canute against moon-worship (51).

<sup>84</sup> This statement omits from consideration the tenth century anti-pagan polemics of Wulfstan and Ælfric, since the target of their condemnation is an intrusion of contemporary Norse paganism, not a renaissance of centuries-dead Anglo-Saxon paganism.

might seem unremarkable or religiously neutral has long been regarded by Christians as distinctive elements of the true creation story. These distinctive elements were earlier summed up under three headings: 1) the character of the creator deity, 2) the character of the creative act, and 3) the character of the created cosmos. So, to find how a catechized Anglo-Saxon Christian might have viewed *Beowulf's* Creation Song, we should read it in light of this three-point rubric.

We have already considered the implications of the Creation Song's use of *se ælmihtiga* as a divine epithet; in light of that alone, we would be justified in concluding that the character of the song's creator deity follows the pattern set by the Genesis cosmogony. However, more features may be noted—features defined by what *isn't* in the song, in contrast what is in the analogues cited by Robinson and others. Though Robinson cites the cosmogony found in the Old Norse *Völuspá* as similar to the Creation Song, the scop and the sibyl disagree on their theology (93). The song begins without any account for the solitary Almighty's origin, declaring in line 90 only that "se ælmihtiga eorðan worhte"—"the Almighty made the earth." In the *Völuspá*, on the other hand, those who "made Midgard" are "Bur's sons" (*Elder* 1). Already we see not only the contrast between monotheism and polytheism, but also between a deity with no apparent beginning and a multiplicity of creators designated as another being's offspring. This also holds true of Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*, cited as an analogue by Craig Davis (46). In the *Prose Edda*, though the All-Father "created heaven and earth and the sky and all that is in them," before the creation "he was with the frost ogres" (31-2). These were the offspring of "the old frost ogre Ymir," himself the spontaneous product of the mingling of warmth and frost in the Ginnungagap, the void between the two primal worlds of ice and fire, Niflheim and Muspell (32-3). Moreover, the All-Father is not descended from Ymir, but from Buri, the first human-like giant, who was licked free of the ice in Ginnungagap by Auðhumla, the ancient cow born from the thawing frost

(34). Even then, All-Father is not the son of Buri, but his grandson—one of three sons born to Bor, son of Buri, and Bestla, daughter of yet another giant (34). The All-Father, here named as Óðin, is the brother of Vili and Vé; this Óðin, declares the *Prose Edda*, "in association with his brothers, is the ruler of heaven and earth" (34). The difference between the Creation Song and the *Prose Edda* on this point could not be more stark: indeed, the effect Snorri creates is almost comical, as the one he had designated earlier as universal creator is gradually removed from the true origin of the cosmos, each story element increasing the distance further and further. This is precisely the sort of mythological absurdity that Bishop Daniel encouraged Boniface to refute—and *Beowulf's* Creation Song is free from any hint of it.

What of the character of the creative act itself? First, we have noted how the cosmogonic rivals of Genesis tended to favor craftsmanship and sexual reproduction as paradigms for the creative act. This is the case in Snorri's *Prose Edda*, in which the divine sons of Bor construct the world from the fragments of dead Ymir:

They took Ymir and carried him into the middle of the Ginnungagap, and made the world from him: from his blood the sea and lakes, from his flesh the earth, from his bones the mountains; [...] They also took his skull and made the sky from it and set it over the earth with its four sides, and under each corner they put a dwarf. (35)

There is no hint of such a pre-creation battle in the Creation Song, nor any reference to any preexisting material from which the Almighty could create the world. It might be suggested that the verbs used to denote the Almighty's creative actions are those associated with craftsmanship, and so not indicative of creation by fiat. Certainly the verb *wyrcean*, present in line 92 of the Creation Song in its preterite form *worhte*, is the one from which we derive such modern words

as "work," "wrought," and "wright," all associated with ordinary human labor with ordinary tools and materials. However, as staunch a defender of *ex nihilo* creation as Ælfric of Eynsham does not hesitate to say that "He geworhte heofonas and eorðan and ealle gesceafta butan antimbre"—"He [God] wrought heaven and earth and all things without matter" (*Catholic I* 236-7). Clearly Ælfric does not see *worhte* as in any way implying the use of preexisting materials. The verb *settan*, in line 94 as *gesette* and usually rendered as "set" or "set up," also seems to imply an anthropomorphic view of creation, suggesting the spatial relocation of an object, the erection of something previously not in a raised position—in this case, the sun and moon. Yet this is one of the closer parallels to the Genesis 1 account, in which "God set them [the sun and moon] in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth" (1:17). What the ESV (and many other English translations) renders as "set," the Latin Vulgate translates as *posuit*, from *pono*, which in this context seems to denote "to set up, erect, build."<sup>85</sup> Since the Bible of Anglo-Saxons was the Latin Vulgate and translations thereof, it is probable that the more literal senses of *pono* colored Anglo-Saxon readings of the verse. In any case, *settan* is also used by Ælfric to describe the creation of sun, moon, and stars: "The Almighty Creator placed [*gesette*] the sun, and the moon, and the stars" (*Catholic I* 98-9). This suggests that the English word "set" was chosen to render the Latin *pono* at an early date, and that the modern English versions are following in this long tradition of translation. This construction imagery, then, was already present in the Genesis cosmogony, and the *Beowulf* poet's chosen word for rendering this imagery in the vernacular was, it seems, the usual one. The diction of creative acts in the Creation Song does not contradict the notion of an *ex nihilo* creation by fiat, and, in the case of *settan*, seems even to echo the Genesis creation story's vocabulary.

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<sup>85</sup> This definition is from F. P. Leverett's *Latin Lexicon* (Philadelphia: Peter Reilly, 1931).



Though Robinson and Davis cite no alleged analogues in which sexual reproduction is the mode of creation, it is worth noting that the only surviving allusion to an Anglo-Saxon cosmogony is of this type. This allusion is found in the Old English metrical charm entitled "For Unfruitful Land" in Dobbie's edition, in which two references are made to Mother Earth:

Erce! Erce! Erce! Mother of Earth [*eorþan modor*]!  
 May the Ruler of all [*alwalda*], the everlasting Lord [*ece drihten*],  
 grant you fields sprouting and shooting, [...]  
 Hale may you be, earth, mother of mortals [*folde, fira modor*]!  
 Grow pregnant in the embrace of God,  
 filled with food for mortal's use. (Bradley 547)<sup>86</sup>

At the back of this charm seems to lie a cosmogony like Hesiod's, in which maternal Gaia brings forth all things from her fruitful womb. The role assigned to God—the Christian God, apparently, from the diction used and also the admixture of Christian elements into the whole charm—is that of an impregnator, like Uranus, the sky god consort of Gaia. Has *Beowulf's* Creation Song any hints of a cosmogony of this sort? Emphatically not! In the Creation Song, it is the Almighty who wrought earth (*eorðan worhte*), so that the earth is his creature, not his partner (l. 92). Moreover, it is the Almighty who adorned (*gefrætwaðe*) the expanse of earth (*foldan scēatas*) with branches and leaves: the creation of plant life is not depicted as the result of intercourse with a consort, but instead the unilateral beautification of a passive landscape. *Beowulf's* Creation Song may, then, be set in opposition to the sexualized creation imagined by the metrical charm "For Unfruitful Land." Again, the Creation Song appears to function as a competitive Christian cosmogony, and not merely a hymn "any pious heathen might sing."

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<sup>86</sup> The Old English text is on pages 116-8 of Dobbie's *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*.

Finally, the character of the created cosmos in *Beowulf's* Creation Song follows the pattern set by the Genesis cosmogony. This pattern is not the litany of created things merely, as Robinson, Davis, and Morland seem to assume. On this level, there are close parallels between the Creation Song and the previously-cited Scandinavian analogues, but that should be expected. Yes, Snorri's *Prose Edda* and the *Völuspá* both contain accounts of the fashioning of earth, ocean, sun, moon, plants, and living creatures, and so does the Creation Song—but so does Genesis as well, and practically every other creation story that has to account for the same end result, the planet all humans inhabit. We should expect linguistic similarities between the Scandinavian analogues and the Creation Song: Old Norse and Old English are, after all, both Germanic languages with cognate vocabulary for many elements of the natural world. We also expect poetic similarities resulting from deeply-rooted figures of speech and idiomatic expressions. I suggest, however, that these connections would not have been very significant to *Beowulf's* Christian audience, because their catechesis would have pointed them to other elements as the distinguishing features of the true creation story. The critical point here, again, is not *what* was made, but its relationship to the creator. In the Creation Song, the Almighty wrought the earth: it is not his spouse, a coeval partner, the ancient belief hinted at by the metrical charm "For Unfruitful Land." In the Creation Song, the Almighty triumphantly set the sun and moon in place: they are not gods, as the pagan Anglo-Saxons believed, nor are they ruled by eponymous demigods, as in Snorri's *Prose Edda* (37-8). In the Creation Song, the Almighty adorned the earth with plants: he does not dwell in a cosmos upheld and connected by a giant ash tree, as in Snorri's *Prose Edda* (42-3). Finally, in the Creation Song, the Almighty creates all living, moving creatures: he is not the grandson of a being freed from ice and nursed by a cow, as in Snorri's *Prose Edda* (34). The Creation Song, as spare as it is, is clear on the

relationship between the creator and the creatures: he alone makes them and on him they depend for their being, for he alone is the Almighty.

Setting *Beowulf's* Creation Song alongside other cosmogonies does not diminish, but instead emphasizes, its unique features. It is not enough to argue that the Creation Song is one "any pious heathen might sing" on the basis of *se ælmihtiga's* supposed ambiguity and of similar creation catalogs (Robinson 37, 93). Nor are the only things that separate the Creation Song from Snorri's *Prose Edda* and the *Völuspá* the "excision" of the World Tree and the omission of heaven's creation (Davis 47, Morland 337). The simplicity of the Creation Song, like the simplicity of the Genesis cosmogony, may be mistaken by a modern reader for a lack of distinctiveness; it is this simplicity, however, that *is* its distinctiveness. Like Genesis, the Creation Song takes the creator's existence for granted, and does not attempt to explain it in humanly explicable terms. Like Genesis, the Creation Song recounts the Almighty's creative acts as simple, without recourse to human craft and without human reliance on material resources or cooperative sexual partners. And, like Genesis, the Creation Song shows the creator-creature distinction as absolute, neither investing creatures with deity nor imputing to the deity dependence on the creatures. These are the features the apologetic tradition saw, in the Genesis cosmogony, as the hallmarks of the true creation story, and then upheld against the origin myths of all rival religions. Far from a creation song "any pious heathen might sing," *Beowulf's* Creation Song may be read as a *carmen contra paganos*—a song sung against the heathen.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> The *Carmen contra paganos* (ca. 380) is an anonymous poetic diatribe against pagan worship (Kahlos 45).

## PART ONE CONCLUSION

While the discussion thus far has shed light on the religious identity of the Creation Song itself, we are not yet fully prepared to define the religious identity of the Creation Song's singer and audience. It is not enough for us merely to say that the singer/audience has knowledge of the true creator. As the overview of creation in the apologetic tradition in Chapter Two shows, the knowledge of the true creator is an important feature of that tradition's "history of religion": this knowledge was possessed by primal humanity, suppressed or lost by most peoples during the postdiluvian rise of false religion, preserved among the Hebrews, and restored to all nations by Christianity. For that reason, mere possession of knowledge of the true creator is a hallmark, not of a single group, but of multiple groups, with different groups possessing that knowledge in different eras. Before we can classify the Creation Song's singer/audience among these groups, we must ask, "In which era should we understand the *Beowulf* narrative, and the performance of this song, to take place?" To answer this question, we must turn again to the apologetic tradition, to see where in its framework of sacred history we may find the stage of the Creation Song's singer.

PART TWO

THE STAGE:

THE *GEARDAGAS* IN THE  
FRAMEWORK OF SACRED HISTORY

## CHAPTER 5

THE *GEARDAGAS* AND THE CRITICS

"We have heard of the Spear-Danes's might in bygone days!" With these words, the *Beowulf* poet ushers listeners into a tale not merely in yesterday or the last generation, but in the deep past, *in geardagum*. This immersion in the past is one of *Beowulf's* most pervasive features: it is, as Robinson evocatively describes it, "a profoundly retrospective narrative" (7). Even Tolkien, as much as he deplores what he regards as Old Historicism's abuse of *Beowulf*, nonetheless describes it as "an historical poem about the pagan past" by "a learned man writing of old time" ("*Beowulf*" 78). But what sort of past would the poet have us understand the *geardagas* to be? That is, *when* are these events happening relative to the poet's present, and relative to other events in the poet's knowledge of the past? And if *Beowulf* is "an historical poem," *what* kind of history is the poet writing, with what guiding principles and interests?

Finding the *Geardagas*: A Brief Scholarly Survey

The *when* question has a widely-accepted answer. Though the dating of *Beowulf's* composition is perennially debated, the dating of *Beowulf's* narrative setting has been presumed settled for nearly two hundred years. In his 1820 Danish translation of *Beowulf*, the first translation into a modern language, N. F. S. Grundtvig noted similarities between Hygelac's fatal raid into Frisian territory (mentioned four times in *Beowulf*) and that of a Chlochilaicus

mentioned in Gregory of Tours *Historia Francorum* (lxi).<sup>88</sup> With this identification made, Hygelac's raid became, as Klaeber puts it, "[the] only one of the events mentioned in the poem [...] which we can positively claim as real history" (*Beowulf* xxx). And not only that—Hygelac's "really historical" raid became the warrant for a particular view of *Beowulf*'s historical quality overall:

[T]his very fact that the *Beowulf* narrative is fully confirmed by the unquestioned accounts of early chroniclers, coupled with the comparative nearness of the poem to the time of the events recounted, raises into probability the belief that we are dealing in the main with fairly authentic narrative. It is certainly not too much to say that our Anglo-Saxon epos is to be considered the oldest literary source of Scandinavian history. (Klaeber *Beowulf* xxx)

In other words, that the military expedition of Chlochilaicus can be assigned a date—about 520 AD—led scholars after Grundtvig to infer that that the *Beowulf* poet is attempting to create a historically consistent vision of a particular sixth-century period in northern European history.<sup>89</sup> An answer to the *when* question led to an answer to the *what* question.

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<sup>88</sup> Hygelac's raid is referenced in *Beowulf* lines 1202 ff., 2354 ff., 2501 ff., and 2913 ff. Because of the inaccessibility of Grundtvig's text, Grundtvig is cited from Klaeber (*Beowulf* xxix). If Tinker's critical bibliography of *Beowulf* translations is a reliable witness, the reception of Grundtvig's translation was mixed: while Grundtvig "was the first to understand the story of *Beowulf*," making plain several obscure points, especially in the side narratives, Tinker feels his translation "departs so far from the text of *Beowulf* that [...] it can lay no claim to historic or poetic fidelity" (23, 27-8).

<sup>89</sup> Klaeber's estimate is "about A.D. 521" (*Beowulf* xxxix). Orchard gives the generally accepted median date of 520, while Bjork and Obermeier more cautiously cite the range of 515-530 (*Critical* 98; 17).

That inference, with more or less qualification, remains a widespread assumption in *Beowulf* studies. It is often simply stated as fact, with Robinson serving as a convenient example: "The action of the poem is set in the fifth and sixth centuries [...] The events recounted conform in outline and in some detail with what we know of the history of pagan Germania" (6). Perhaps more authoritative in the eyes of students, the current Norton Critical Edition of *Beowulf* includes the Chlochilaicus passage from Gregory as a document of historical context (93). Moreover, both the current and the previous Norton Critical Editions of *Beowulf*—that is, both the Heaney and Donaldson translations—include Roberta Frank's "The *Beowulf* Poet's Sense of History" in their select anthology of scholarship.<sup>90</sup> Students turning to Frank to understand *Beowulf*'s "sense of history" will find *Beowulf* described as a "reconstruction of a northern heroic age" and "an internally consistent picture of Scandinavian society around A.D. 500" (168).

However, some critics are less confident in this characterization of *Beowulf*'s historical vision. Tolkien, though considering Grundtvig's Hygelac/Chlochilaicus identification "a discovery of cardinal importance," nonetheless denies that the *Beowulf* poet was attempting "literal historical fidelity" (*Beowulf* 43; "*Beowulf*" 78). Orchard, while citing Chlochilaicus's expedition as important for dating the setting and composition of *Beowulf*, concedes that "the *Beowulf*-poet seems unconcerned about precisely dating the events of his poem" (*Critical* 98). Even Frank refers to the *Beowulf* poet's purported reconstruction as an "illusion of historical truth," though she is confident that the "illusion" is meant to represent the sixth century (168). John Niles is more cautious:

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<sup>90</sup> Citations from Frank's article are from the Heaney's Norton *Beowulf*. It may be found in Donaldson's Norton *Beowulf* on pages 98-111.



It is worth stressing that no date is part of the fabric of the poem itself. In the poem, the past is the past. The narrative action takes place "in geardagum" (in days of old), not in the kind of history that is the creation of annalists and chroniclers. (225)

For Niles, the phrase *in geardagum* itself implies a vision of the past unlike precise, modernist historicism; therefore, they decry how scholars post-Grundtvig arranged "a network of events known only from *Beowulf* [...] into an absolute chronology," dubbing this endeavor "historicist fallacies" (225).<sup>91</sup>

One scholar in particular, John Vickrey, has undertaken to confront this historicist view in his tellingly-named *Beowulf and the Illusion of History* (2009). Vickrey's aim is to contest not only the view that "[*Beowulf's*] minor episodes by and large reflected historical incidents," but also "that the minor episodes entail nothing of the fabulous and monstrous":

Broadly, I posit that certain of its minor episodes, like the Grendelkin stories, include motifs characteristic of the "Bear's Son" folktale, and are no more exempt than are its major episodes from the presence of monsters. More narrowly, I posit that these minor episodes entail monsters either as full-fledged such beings or as relicts of such beings in the poet's source or sources. (16)

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<sup>91</sup> Klaeber in particular is censured for this unwarranted sort of reconstruction:

Klaeber is so driven by a sense of chronological exactitude that he even invents a character who is found necessary on temporal grounds. This is Hygelac's 'first wife,' whom Klaeber introduces into Geatish history because of his belief that the wife that the poet does attribute to Hygelac, Hygd, must have been too young to have been the mother of the [Geatish] princess [mentioned in another allusion]. (Niles 225)

The so-called Finn Episode and Hygelac's Frisian raid are the two episodes under Vickrey's scrutiny. While his treatment of the Finn Episode is well worth reading—he concludes that "the *eotens* of the Finn episode are literal giants"—what is more relevant here is Vickrey's examination of Hygelac's raid, and the role of the champion Dæghrefn in particular (16). Vickrey concludes that Dæghrefn is a "relict" of the extant *Beowulf's* source material in which Dæghrefn was a giant or other human-like monster, so that his slaying is one more instance of Beowulf's characteristic heroism, "the quintessential marvel, the killing of a monster" (149). However, what was originally yet another monster fight has been obscured by its integration into what has been identified as a historical event, Hygelac/Chlochilaicus's military expedition: "The historicity of Hygelac [...] has helped to occult the monstrosity of Dæghrefn" (156). Hygelac's raid in *Beowulf*, then, is not simply a historical episode, but one in which folklore and history are intermingled, perhaps by the poet himself, perhaps by "accretions" of folklore motifs onto historically-based legends (16). Perhaps Hygelac's Frisian raid was included not as a chronological marker, but because "the reputation of the Frisians as a fierce people" made them "a plausible host for the quondam monster Dæghrefn," further interweaving the legend of Beowulf together with that of the (more or less) historical Hygelac (156).

Returning to the *when* question, we ought to ask whether, in light of the critique above, *Beowulf's* historical setting, the *geardagas*, ought to be seen as "an internally consistent picture of Scandinavian society around A.D. 500" (Frank 168). First, as Orchard and Niles all point out, no explicit date is mentioned in the poem, and the poet appears "unconcerned" to provide that kind of historical data, an odd omission unless his goal is "not the kind of history [created by] annalists and chroniclers" (Orchard 98; Niles 225). Second, the early sixth-century date derives almost exclusively from Grundtvig's Hygelac/Chlochilaicus identification, and Vickrey has

given us good reason to question whether the allusions to Hygelac's raid can sustain that weight. Without disputing the historical background of Hygelac's raid itself, Vickrey finds in the allusions to it in *Beowulf* mingled elements of folklore and history, and suggests that the historical element was added to anchor Beowulf's legendary adventures in the milieu of Hygelac, not to assign Beowulf's exploits a specific range of dates.

To these two points, I add my own. It seems to me misguided to begin building *Beowulf's* historical setting from a collation of allusions, the first of which is over a thousand lines into a three-thousand line poem. First, such an endeavor assumes that *Beowulf's* strong narrative chronology can be readily converted to annalistic chronology, an assumption Tolkien and others warn us against. Perhaps the historical vision the poet wants to create finds other frames of reference more important than mere dates. Second, if we are to seek historical cues from the *Beowulf* poet, we ought to seek them at the beginning, as the stage is being set, not incidentally. Perhaps in focusing on Hygelac's raid, critics have overlooked or undervalued elements from *Beowulf's* opening fitts that can also be read as historical cues.

To put it another way, I suggest that the historical vision of *Beowulf* can be better appreciated if we revisit the questions raised at the start of the chapter: "*when* are these events happening?" and "*what* kind of history is the poet writing?" The two questions are, in fact, crucially, if not clearly, related: the answer to *what* can determine the ways that *when* is answered. If one assumes that the poet's kind of history is that of medieval annals, events filed neatly into an enumerated series of years, then finding a dateable event answers the *when* question. But if the poet's kind of history is, for instance, more like that of Scandinavian sagas, the *when* question will be answered largely by reference to genealogies, especially royal lineages. The question to answer first, then, is *what*, not *when*. Here too, as with the issue of

religious identity, I believe the Christian apologetic tradition can provide an illuminating context, for the apologetic tradition developed and perpetuated ways of framing history that proved quite influential into the Middle Ages and beyond. If we read *Beowulf's* introductory fitts in light of the apologetic tradition's historical vision—its guiding principles and interests—and with attention to the elements that tradition uses to frame its historical narrative, we may find a very different view of the *geardagas* come into focus.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE FRAMEWORK OF HISTORY IN THE APOLOGETIC TRADITION

Historiographical literature, in a variety of forms, appears to be as old as civilization itself. From monument inscriptions to dynastic catalogs to oral recitations of genealogy, human cultures manifest the desire to preserve the memory of persons and deeds past. Yet there is always space for invention, and the first centuries of Christianity saw the rise of three such innovations: namely, a chronological apologetic, which argued for Christianity on the basis of historical priority; the concept of sacred history, especially embodied in the Six Ages scheme of world history; and the Christian world chronicle, which synthesized the histories of all cultures into a unified narrative. These innovations, which rose out of the apologetic tradition, powerfully shaped the historiography of late Roman and medieval Christendom.

#### 1. Too New, Too Late: Pagan Critique, Chronological Apologetic, and Sacred History

Early Christianity, unlike most other religions of the Roman empire of the time, staked its most distinctive doctrines on events in the fairly recent past: "it was the events of history, and the actions of individuals within that history, which above all justified the claims of Christianity" (Williams "Time" 281). Specifically, they insisted on the historical character of Jesus of Nazareth and the historical reality of his words and deeds, including (and especially) his death, burial, and resurrection.<sup>92</sup> This insistence on the historicity of Jesus' death and resurrection drew

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<sup>92</sup> Ignatius of Antioch's insistent words in his early second-century Epistle to the Trallians are typical:

Stop your ears, therefore, when any one speaks to you at variance with Jesus Christ, who was descended from David, and was also of Mary; who was truly born, and did eat and drink. He was

criticism from its religious opponents. However, these criticisms were aimed not only at the factuality of Christian claims, but also at their recentness. Arguments of the first sort were addressed by appeals to eyewitness testimony.<sup>93</sup> Arguments finding fault with the recentness of Christianity were more complicated to counter. These fell under two main headings: objections to the *newness* of Christianity and objections to the *lateness* of Christianity.

These two objections were related but distinct. The objection to *newness* was a potent argument in the Rome of early Christianity, in which religion was part of the customs of the ancestors, handed down from the earliest days of Rome.<sup>94</sup> The religions of the Greeks and Egyptians also traced their venerable origins back into legendary history. In this company, Christians were perceived as gauche Johnny-come-latelies. In the face of this criticism, Christians felt an "increasing need [...] to show that their religion was not a discordant novelty

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truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate; He was truly crucified, and [truly] died, in the sight of beings in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth. He was also truly raised from the dead, His Father quickening Him, even as after the same manner His Father will so raise up us who believe in Him by Christ Jesus, apart from whom we do not possess the true life. (70)

<sup>93</sup> Paul's assertion of the eyewitness confirmation of Jesus' resurrection is the most emphatic in the New Testament canon:

[Jesus] was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and [...] he appeared to Cephas [i.e. Simon Peter], then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep [i.e. died]. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (1 Cor. 15:4-9)

<sup>94</sup> The continued force of appeals to the customs of the ancestors (*mos maiorum*), even in the late fourth-early fifth centuries, may be seen in Augustine's treatment of the Roman cult's founding by Numa Pompilius in Book Three of *City of God*.

but did in fact possess a respectable antiquity" (Croke "Origins" 122). The second objection, to *lateness*, questioned not only Christianity's *bona fides*, but also its core tenet. The philosopher Porphyry makes this argument in his *Adversus Christianos*:

If Christ says he is the way, the grace, and the truth, and claims that only in himself can believing souls find a way to God, what did the people who lived in the many centuries before Christ do [...]? What became of the innumerable souls, who can in no way be faulted, if he in whom they were supposed to believe had not yet appeared among mankind? [...] Why did he who is called the Savior hide himself for so many ages? (qtd. in Wilken 162)<sup>95</sup>

Porphyry's reasoning here is potentially devastating to the Christian claim that "there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" than "the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth" (Acts 4:12, 10). To Christianity's critics, the savior's lateness implied that the Christian God was careless or forgetful of humanity at large—an insinuation that Christian apologists were compelled to refute.

The objection to newness was fairly simple to counter: apologists argued that Christianity was indeed ancient through its roots in the Jewish religion. This tack not only permitted apologists to "absorb the Old Testament as the precursor to God's plan," but also to "[take] over the firmly established arguments for the priority of Hebrew history over that of the Greeks" (Croke "Origins" 122). In the centuries before Christianity's arrival, the close contact between Jews and Greeks in the Hellenized Near East led to wrangling over the superiority of their respective cultures, frequently conceived in terms of chronological priority:

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<sup>95</sup> No full copies of Porphyry's *Adversus Christianos* have survived to this day; its only remains are quotations from Christian apologies written in response.

The issue at stake now—and the implications for the history of philosophy and culture were profound—was how the chronology of Greek history meshed with that of the Hebrews. Did Moses steal ideas from Plato or vice-versa? (Croke "Origins" 118)

The task of "meshing" the histories of Greeks and Hebrews was accomplished by comparing and syncing up the chronologies of different cultures: the Egyptian chronology of Manetho, the Babylonian chronology of Berossus, the Hebrew chronology, and the diverse chronologies of the Greek city-states (Croke "Origins" 118-20). Synchronisms—events appearing in the records of multiple cultures—made this possible. These synchronisms were often found in lists of rulers and other important figures:

There was a great variety of such local records throughout the ancient world and these lists of kings, civic officials, and competition winners provided, by their potential synthesis, the framework for a more elaborate and comprehensive chronological record of the past. (Croke "Origins" 117)

By this means, Jewish apologists were able to argue that Moses was not only older than Plato, and even Homer, but "lived before the Trojan War, and was in fact a contemporary of Cecrops, the first king of Athens, or even Inachus, the ancestor of the Argive kings" (Droge 1-2). In this way, Christian apologists, by adopting the chronological arguments of Jewish apologists, could "vindicate the claims of the biblical revelation to greater antiquity and thus to priority over the wisdom of the Greeks" (Markus 3).

The objection to lateness required a more complex answer. "Lateness" is a comparative term, meaningful only in broader context of relationships over time. Therefore, Christian apologists responded to this objection by presenting a different way of thinking about the human



past. This reconceptualization of the past was grounded on the belief that God is the creator and ruler of the universe, including history itself. Early Christians believed that God, as ruler of history, ordains events to accomplish his aims in the world, whether righteous judgment, merciful forbearance, benevolent provision, or gracious salvation. According to the authoritative testimony of the apostles and prophets, God "works all things according to the counsel of his will," "changes times and seasons," "removes kings and sets up kings," and "does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth," because "none can stay his hand" (Eph. 1:11, Dan. 2:21, Dan. 4:35). God's control over events in the world, often referred to as *divine providence*, profoundly shaped the ways early Christians thought about human history, leading them to see divine intent and agency in every occurrence:

The vilest and least significant of things as well as the destinies of nations; the crimes of men no less than their finest achievements are in the hands of the Lord of history. In them all he is at work, though his purposes remain inscrutable.

(Markus 11)

For this reason, early Christian historians, "with [their] heightened awareness of the past and of the role of Divine Providence," refused to acknowledge "classical notions of 'Fate' or 'Fortune' as causal factors in history" (Croke "Historiography" 5). Behind history lie the purposes of the omnipotent and omniscient God.

However, though all events are shaped by providence, the divine role in history is most clearly seen in *sacred history*, which R. A. Markus defines as "the biblical narrative of God's saving work among his chosen people, the promise and preparation in the Old Testament and the fulfillment in the New" (9). Though early Christians regarded all history as the outworking of divine providence, nonetheless sacred history was a "privileged strand of history" and "a matter

of faith" (Markus 9). Sacred history, then, is the central historical plotline: the framework within events may be judged as late, early, or right on time. Which events form the structure of sacred history? Markus's definition cites "the biblical narrative of God's saving work among his chosen people," yet this narrative is not self-evident (9). Even assuming the traditional canon of scripture, the variety of narratives and literary genres in it do not appear to have an obvious central plot.<sup>96</sup> The second half of Markus's definition points toward the answer: the narrative of sacred history is one of "the promise and preparation in the Old Testament and the fulfillment in the New" (9). Thus, Hebrew scripture was interpreted in light of apostolic teaching, which treated the coming of Jesus as the fulfillment of ancient covenants and oracles. These prophecies were not merely of the clearly predictive sort, as when the Gospel of Matthew cites the prophet Micah as foreseeing the birth of the Christ in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:5-6; Mic. 5:2). They were also seen in foreshadowing (i.e., typological) correspondences between Old Testament narratives and aspects of the life and deeds of Jesus: for instance, Paul sees Jesus as fulfilling a parallel role to that of the first man Adam, while Peter sees in Jesus a similarity to Noah's ark (Rom 5:12-21; 1 Pet 3:19-22). Christ, then, is the central and unifying theme of sacred history, the hermeneutical lodestar for tracing the "privileged strand of history" even through the biblical narrative itself.

Examples of this Christocentric tracing of the strand of sacred history may be found throughout the patristic writers, though perhaps the most-developed earlier attempt is Irenaeus's

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<sup>96</sup> In fact, in this matter we *may* safely assume the traditional canon, since the deuterocanonical books (i.e. the Apocrypha), and even the pseudigraphical books like 1 Enoch and Jubilees, were clearly intended to be incorporated into the historical framework of the canonical books: the apocryphal chapters of Daniel, for example, are meant to fit neatly into the events of the existing canonical text, while 1 Enoch provides an expanded account of a character only tangentially mentioned in the early chapters of Genesis. Even non-canonical books assume the overall chronology of the canonical books.

*Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* (late second century). This "manual of essentials" is presented as an epitome of "the body of the truth" that "the Elders, the disciples of the Apostles, have handed down to us"—a received tradition of theology and scripture interpretation (Irenaeus *Demonstration* 69, 72). In it, Irenaeus presents a selective synopsis of Hebrew scripture: creation, Adam's fall, Cain's murder of Abel, Noah's deluge, the Tower of Babel, God's promise to Abraham, the Exodus, and the Mosaic Law, concluding with brief mentions of the Davidic dynasty and the many Hebrew prophets. This synopsis is not for its own sake, however: it sets up an exhaustive presentation of Christ as the climactic completion of the biblical narrative:

He gloriously achieved our redemption, and fulfilled the promise of the fathers, and abolished the old disobedience [i.e. Adam's fall]. The Son of God became Son of David and Son of Abraham; perfecting and summing up this in Himself, that He might make us to possess life. (Irenaeus *Demonstration* 103)

For Irenaeus, Christ is not only the fulfillment of promises made to a specific historical nation by its patron deity: he is the end of all history, and his redemption is not only for the descendants of Abraham, but for all of Adam's mortal offspring. And, as the end of all history, Christ's coming was not late, but the climactic moment to which all previous eras led.

Synopses of sacred history like Irenaeus's became codified into a framework of "main epochs" which "from the foundation of the world the whole time is [...] traced," each epoch defined by a major divine intervention (Theophilus 3.28).<sup>97</sup> This method of schematizing history

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<sup>97</sup> Second-century apologist Theophilus of Antioch divides the eras thus in his *To Autolytus*:

From the creation of the world to the deluge were 2242 years. And from the deluge to the time when Abraham our forefather begat a son, 1036 years. And from Isaac, Abraham's son, to the time when the people dwelt with Moses in the desert, 660 years. And from the death of Moses and the rule of Joshua the son of Nun, to the death of the patriarch David, 498 years. And from the death

found its most definitive formulation in Augustine of Hippo's *Six Ages of the World*, in which "[t]he significant divisions in human history are [...] the turning-points in the sacred history"

(Markus 17):

Of these ages the first is from the beginning of the human race, that is, from Adam, who was the first man that was made, down to Noah [...]. Then the second extends from that period on to Abraham, who was called the father indeed of all nations [...] [T]he third age extends from Abraham on to David the king; the fourth from David on to that captivity whereby the people of God passed over into Babylonia; and the fifth from that transmigration down to the advent of our Lord Jesus Christ. With His coming the sixth age has entered on its process [...].

(*Catechising* 307)

Through Augustine's influence, the Six Ages formula became part of late classical and medieval historiography. The fifth book of Isidore's *Etymologiae*, for example, features the Six Ages as part of its discussion of units of time—the age is, in fact, the largest unit. In Anglo-Saxon England, Bede, following Isidore and Augustine, presents the Six Ages as the culmination of his chronographic work *The Reckoning of Time*, explaining the duration and definitive events of each age (157-8). What began as a Christocentric structuring of the overarching narrative of Hebrew scripture had become a key concept in the chronographic knowledge of the Middle Ages, and, in a way, the most important method of telling time.

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of David and the reign of Solomon to the sojourning of the people in the land of Babylon, 518 years 6 months 10 days. And from the government of Cyrus to the death of the Emperor Aurelius Verus, 744 years. All the years from the creation of the world amount to a total of 5698 years, and the odd months and days. (120)

## 2. The Origin and Development of the Christian World Chronicle

In the Roman world of Christianity's infancy, historians' interests were typically close to home: "The Greeks and Romans for the most part regarded writing about and explaining the past as a literary activity which usually concentrated on near-contemporary wars and politics" (Croke "Historiography" 1). For that reason, historians were expected to rely on eye-witness testimony (their own or others) and to possess the necessary political or military experience to interpret data properly (Croke "Historiography" 1). Emphasizing "immediate political upheavals" meant that, typically, "[a]ny broader, more gradual change in the progression of human history was overlooked, or even deliberately ignored":

The Greeks and Romans, of course, were well aware of the passage of time and its effects; and antecedent events could be divided into 'history' (which stretched back as far as could be known) and 'myth' (which covered all that happened before that). Classical and classicizing historians thus focused their attention on the events of the recent past. (Williams "Time" 281)

This narrow scope did not suit the purposes of Christian writers, however, who "focused less on understanding the contingent events of history than on its overall design" (Williams "Time" 281). This "overall design" was both theological and historical, a "cosmic drama" that "played out on the level of history":

[I]t was a defining feature of Christianity that the claims it made were not only transcendental but also, importantly, historical. It mattered for Christianity that Christ had been born at a specific historical moment, just as it mattered for Judaism—and ultimately to Christianity too—that the Jewish patriarchs had

historically encountered and made covenants with their God. (Williams "Time" 280)

Those "specific historical moments" were part of "a whole new concept and range of history": "The past was now important because it had a theological meaning and to understand it fully one had to appreciate the totality of human history from Adam to the present-day" (Croke "Historiography" 2). Moreover, the problem of mutual understanding arose between biblically-trained Christians and those who were classically educated in discussions of the past:

The need to make room for Abraham and Moses and the rest among Ninus, Hercules and the less remote figures of ancient history became more strongly felt as the contacts between Christianity and pagan culture grew more extensive.

(Markus 3)

Because "the Christianization of the Roman world made new demands on the presentation and interpretations of the past," Christian writers of the fourth century developed a new kind of historiography: the Christian world chronicle (Croke "Origins" 116).

The roots of the Christian world chronicle lie, of course, in the Pentateuch and other Hebrew sacred writings that tell the story of the ancient Israelites. Moreover, attempts to compare and integrate Hebrew chronology with those of other nations were made as early as the early third century B.C. by the Egyptian priest Manetho, and were, as was discussed above, a staple of Jewish apologetic writings in the two centuries before Christ (Croke "Origins" 118). The chief polemical target of these Jewish apologists was the Greeks, so "by the first century A.D. in the time of Josephus the comparative chronology of Greek and Hebrew history had long been well established" (Croke "Origins" 118). In addition to this chronographic foundation, which Christian apologists coopted for their own chronological apologetic, "[t]he broad outlines

of a Christian picture of world history had already been laid out by Christian theologians of the second and third centuries, by writers such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria and Origen" (Chesnut 67). What remained to be done was an incorporation of a comparative chronology with Christianity's sweeping vision of sacred history.

Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 340) was the man for that job, "the first to establish the format and style of the Christian world chronicle" (Croke "Origins" 120). In his *Chronicle* (c. 325), Eusebius presented a "completely synchronic world history," integrating the chronological records of Egyptians, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans, "in which these times are arranged side-by-side from a fixed starting point" (Croke *Christian* 198). The impact of Eusebius's *Chronicle* was tremendous. Brian Croke, a leading authority on late classical historiography, is unreserved in his assessment that "the *Chronicle* of Eusebius of Caesarea must rank as one of the most influential books of all time":

It provided a model for universal history and a format which located contemporary times firmly within the perspective of God's plan for mankind. As such it was continually copied, adapted, translated and continued from the earliest and its span and annalistic layout became the pattern for chronicle writing in the middle ages in both the Greek East and Latin West. (*Christian* 195)

While in the eastern empire Eusebius's *Chronicle* was preserved in Greek, and endlessly recapitulated by Byzantine chroniclers, the west came to know the *Chronicle* through Jerome's Latin translation (c. 380), which he "judiciously augmented for a Latin audience and continued to his own day" (Croke "Origins" 125). Jerome's *Chronicle* in turn was the foundation for future western chroniclers (Croke "Origins" 116). Eusebius's parallel columns of dates became not only

"the most popular mode of recording the past for a Christian public": it was the new way to imagine the world's past, "the full story of God's people on earth" (Croke "Origins" 127).

It should be emphasized here how firmly rooted Eusebius's *Chronicle* is in the apologetic tradition. Eusebius was strongly interested in the Christian apologetic tradition preceding his own day, and his *Preparation for the Gospel* is a massive anthology of earlier apologetic works, some of which only survive as quotations in Eusebius. We should be unsurprised, then, to find that Eusebius's *Chronicle* did not merely contain apologetic elements—it *was* an apologetic. In fact, the chronological argument from Christianity's historical priority is, according to Croke, "probably the most important element in explaining the nature and purpose of Eusebius's chronicle": it is the argument, both implicit and explicit, behind Eusebius's parallel columns of years (Croke "Origins" 120). Thus, for Eusebius, as for earlier Christian apologists, the creation of a unified chronology of the world was not itself the main goal, though the impact of the world chronicle's synthesis of history was immense:

Their concern had been, in the first place, to vindicate the claims of the biblical revelation to greater antiquity and thus to priority over the wisdom of the Greeks. In catering to this whim, they did, nevertheless, perform a task of wider significance. Their work made it possible to trace the contours of the biblical landscape on a historical map familiar to educated Romans. They thus introduced the pagan convert to Christianity to a redemptive history for which the history he learnt in school had no place; and at the same time they provided their Christian readers with a framework, derived from the redemptive history [...] into which they could fit other historical information [...]. (Markus 3)



Moreover, Eusebius's *Chronicle*'s underlying structure is sacred history's "overall pattern and design" and its "overall historical sweep [that] extended back to the very creation of the world" (Chesnut 66). That "overall pattern" is established by the pivotal moments in a succession of historical periods:

The history of the world [...] appeared to him as a sequence of stages: it had begun with a cosmic Fall into the world of history and temporality, then had come an era of superstition and savagery (broken only by the appearance of the Old Testament patriarchs), next had come the age dominated by the figure of Moses, and finally the period that began with the nearly simultaneous appearance of Christ and Augustus (the foundation of Church and Empire). (Chesnut 66)

Thus, Augustine's Six Ages formula only foregrounded the kind of sacred-historical structure that was already implicit in the Christian world chronicle. To tell the whole history of the world, Eusebius's *Chronicle* had to treat both the sacred and secular, and in this endeavor the sacred lent shape to the secular.

Eusebius's *Chronicle* was not only influential on chronicle or annalistic writing proper, but on Christian historiography generally. Sulpicius (or Sulpitius) Severus (d. 420), a Gallic aristocrat and hagiographer of Martin of Tours, "engage[d] with the chronographical tradition of Eusebius and Jerome" in his *Chronicle*, sometimes called the *Sacred History* (c. 405), though with important formal differences:

Sulpicius offers in place of a table of dates and events a connected (if rather condensed) narrative account. He thus followed the earlier chronographers in bringing together the classical and Christian pasts; but instead of preserving them

independent and intact [...] he set out to integrate them into a single story.

(Williams "Time" 283)

Though "something of a hybrid," a fusion of biblical and classical historical sources, Sulpicius's "presentation of the past is firmly Christian and is founded above all on the Christian scriptures" (Williams "Time" 283). Also, it was to Jerome's version of the *Chronicle* that Sulpicius's contemporary, Ambrose of Milan, directed his protégé Augustine on chronological matters. Thus the world chronology of Eusebius, via Jerome, came to undergird the argument and historical vision of Augustine's *City of God*, begun after the Visigoth sacking of Rome in 410 and completed around 426 (Croke "Origins" 126). The *Chronicle* then served as a major source for Augustine's disciple Paulus Orosius, whose *Seven Books of History against the Pagans* (c. 416) aimed, "starting with the Creation," to "trac[e] the history of mankind to the present day" (Merrills 46). Sulpicius, Augustine, and Orosius, each quite different from the other in their approach to recording and analyzing history, nonetheless perpetuated the overall historical vision of Eusebius's *Chronicle* and helped it spread beyond the chronicle form into Christian thinking about history more generally.

While the influence of Eusebius's *Chronicle*, and the Christian historiography of Sulpicius, Augustine, and Orosius, was pervasive in post-Roman Europe, it is useful at this point to highlight some significant heirs of that tradition, who also stand as links in the chain between the fourth-century Byzantium of Eusebius and the Anglo-Saxon England of the *Beowulf* poet. One great task of these heirs of Eusebius was the integration of yet more historical traditions into the Christian world chronology: namely, those of the "barbarian" peoples whose military and political ascendancy so reshaped the social structures of western Europe:

Long before these various nations had penetrated the Roman Empire they had established an heroic oral tradition which they passed on from one generation to the next. With their conversion to Christianity they too acquired a new history as part of God's people. When they came under the spell of Rome they also felt the need to acquire a more respectable past and relate it to that of the Romans [...].

(Croke "Historiography" 8-9)

These historiographical demands were met by the Christian world chronicle and the Christian historiography founded on it. For instance, in Ostrogoth-ruled Italy, when "the Goths wanted to know about their own exclusive history and [...] to see how it fitted into [Roman history]," Cassiodorus (c. 485-585) produced both a chronicle which integrated the line of Gothic rulers and a twelve-book *Gothic History* (Croke "Historiography" 9).<sup>98</sup> Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636) also produced works in both veins: a chronicle in the Eusebian style, the *Chronica Maiora*, and a history, the *Historia de Regibus Gothorum, Vandalorum, et Suevorum*. Though in name a history of the "Gothic, Vandal, and Suevi kings," Isidore's *Historia* begins with biblical events, the descent of the Goths from Noah, and weaves his "barbarian" history into both Roman and ecclesiastical timelines. In this same era, in Gaul, Gregory of Tours (c. 538-594) wrote his *Decem Libri Historiarum*. Though often called the *Historia Francorum*, "it is not a history of the Franks but of Gaul in the fifth and sixth centuries in the context of world history" (Croke "Historiography" 9). Indeed, Gregory "based the first part of his history on the Bible and the *Chronicles* of Jerome and Sulpicius Severus" (Croke "Historiography" 8). Through scholars such

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<sup>98</sup> Michael Klaassen has recently published a study of the lesser-known of Cassiodorus's historical works, the *Chronica*:

Klaassen, Michael. *Cassiodorus' Chronica: Text, Chronography, and Sources*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania, 2010. Print.

as Isidore and Gregory, the late classical and early medieval West established patterns for twisting the strands of the biblical, Roman, and "barbarian" pasts into a unified thread of history.

Meanwhile, in the British Isles, Jerome's translation and continuation of Eusebius "provided the backbone of the earliest Irish annals" (Croke "Origins" 116). Chronicle traditions were also established among the British and the Scottish, later representatives of which still show their roots in Eusebius and his heirs: Nennius's ninth-century *Historia Brittonum*, for instance, cites among his sources "the chronicles of the sacred fathers, Isidore, Hieronymus [Jerome], Prosper, [and] Eusebius," while the tenth-century Scottish *Pictish Chronicle* cites Isidore's (erroneous) classical/biblical origin story for the Pictish people. Among the Anglo-Saxons, the two best representatives of this tradition are the Venerable Bede and the chronicler Æthelweard. In addition to his better-known *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede (672-735) also wrote a dedicated work of chronography and chronology, *The Reckoning of Time*, which includes a Christian world chronicle as its fifth part. Bede's preface acknowledges Eusebius, Jerome, and Augustine as respected sources in this endeavor; he also frequently cites Isidore as an authority (Bede *Reckoning* 3, lxxx). The aristocrat Æthelweard (d. 998), apparently discontent with the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's less-complete integration with the biblical past, produced a Latin version of the chronicle that "employ[s] the annalists from the beginning of the world" (1). Though he does not name "the annalists" he uses, Æthelweard's epitome of biblical chronology is squarely in the Eusebian tradition (1-2). Thus the apologetic tradition's historiographical legacy was passed down to the intellectual context of the *Beowulf* poet.

### 3. The Apologetic Tradition and *Beowulf's* Historical Vision

Given the lasting and widespread influence of the apologetic tradition's historiographical legacy, not only in western Europe, but even in Anglo-Saxon England itself, it is reasonable to ask whether *Beowulf's* own peculiar vision of the past might not bear traces of that influence. At the very least, the *Beowulf* poet shares two interests with the apologetic tradition's treatment of world history: first, the integration of historiographical traditions; and second, the rule of divine providence in all history. The historiographical integration is apparent in the casting of Cain as the forefather of Grendel, in allusions to the giants "whom the flood slew," and (as I have argued) a creation song drawn from the Genesis account, all in a poem about long-ago Germanic peoples on the shores of the North Sea (ll. 1261-7; ll. 1688-93; ll. 90-8). The poet's affirmation of divine providence is also apparent from the beginning of the poem: Beow<sup>99</sup>, the heir of Scyld, was sent by God "for the people's comfort," and to Beow "the Ruler of Glory gave worldly honor"—both demonstrations of the later maxim, "The truth is well-known that mighty God has ruled mankind always" (ll. 13-4, 16-7; ll. 700-2). But if there were any further connection between *Beowulf's* vision of the past and the apologetic tradition, what form might we expect it to take? Clearly *Beowulf* is not composed according to the formal conventions of Eusebius's *Chronicle*. However, influence may consist not merely in formal resemblance, but also in the underlying principles by which an integration of sacred and secular history is constructed. It is in this less formal way that *Beowulf* may be related to the apologetic tradition's historiographical legacy.

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<sup>99</sup> Though the text of *Beowulf* assigns this character the name "Beowulf," I accept as reasonable the emendation to "Beow" on the basis of comparison with Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies. This emendation also aids in clarity, making its adoption here practical.

I see two points within the apologetic tradition's historiographical legacy that may be connected to *Beowulf's* historical vision. The first point of connection is in the episodic nature of sacred history itself. Though the Christian world chronicle is interested in the pasts of all nations, its core structure is the unified narrative of sacred history; and though it is interested in chronology by many forms of reckoning, its most important way of telling time is by epoch-marking events. From this perspective, the proximity of an Assyrian king to the life of Abraham is more significant than the precise dates of his reign, while the synchronism of Augustus with the birth of Christ is vastly more significant than any of his political or military triumphs. The second point of connection is in the use of historical synchronisms as chronological point-of-contact. By means of such synchronisms, the apologetic tradition links biblical chronology to that of other nations, and this linking of histories permits anyone, whether Christian, pagan Roman, or non-Roman barbarian, to find his or her own strand in the single past and relate it to the pasts of others. However, this linking through synchronisms is always in service of an apologetic aim: namely, to establish the priority of biblical religion to all its religious rivals. That, for example, in Eusebius's *Chronicle* the patriarch Joseph is an older contemporary of Prometheus not only relates the Hebrew past to the Greek, but also undercuts the claims of Greek mythology to Prometheus's status as creator and civilizer of humanity.

It should be clear how these two points of connection could be helpful in reading *Beowulf* within the apologetic tradition. If *Beowulf* were to provide hints to the *geardagas'* relation to the epoch-marking events of sacred history, those hints would seem immensely important to audiences viewing history through the Christian world chronicle. Also, if *Beowulf* were to include chronological clues making possible such synchronisms, audiences trained by the Christian world chronicle would find them noteworthy; if those synchronisms also suggested

apologetic arguments, such audiences would likely recognize those arguments. In the next chapter, I will explore these two points of connection as they relate to *Beowulf*, and the ways they may contribute to a new understanding of *Beowulf's* vision of the *geardagas*.

## CHAPTER 7

FRAMING THE *GEARDAGAS* WITH CREATION

As we have seen, in the historiographical legacy of the apologetic tradition, "[t]he significant divisions in human history are [...] the turning-points in the sacred history" (Markus 17). After Augustine, the Six Ages schema in particular became the prevalent method for delineating historical periods. The Six Ages are defined as follows:

The First Age, from creation to the deluge

The Second Age, from the deluge to Abraham

The Third Age, from Abraham to King David

The Fourth Age, from King David to the Babylonian exile

The Fifth Age, from the Babylonian exile to Christ

The Sixth Age, from Christ to the end of the world

Moreover, we have noted that two epoch-marking events in the Six Ages schema are also two of the biblical events mentioned in *Beowulf*, creation and the deluge. If we read *Beowulf's* allusions to these events in light of their significance within sacred-historical frameworks such as Augustine's Six Ages, what effect would that reading have on our reconstruction of the *Beowulf* poet's historical vision?

### 1. Creation, the Deluge, and "Old Testament Atmosphere" in *Beowulf* Scholarship

First, it should be observed that the allusions to creation and the deluge in *Beowulf* have not typically been read this way in *Beowulf* scholarship historically. Naturally, those critics who



have preferred to deal with a hypothetical pre-Christian *Beowulf*, one with the "Christian coloring" removed, do not assign much weight to these allusions.<sup>100</sup> Also, for those who view "the Christianity of the epic as naïve and rudimentary," the creation and deluge allusions may only indicate that these stories stuck in the imagination of a partially-catechized, half-converted poet (Whallon "Christianity" 85).<sup>101</sup> Critics attuned to theological approaches to *Beowulf* invest the creation and deluge allusions with more significance, though often that significance is thematic or metaphorical. Klaeber calls their meaning "obvious": "the Flood cautions against resisting God's will, and the Creation passage elaborates the theme, 'the world belongs to the Lord!'" ("Christian" 51). Similarly, for Marie Padgett Hamilton, the Creation Song sets the stage for an exploration of divine providence, "the conception of God as having governed all races of mankind since creation, and as bestowing all favors [...] that men enjoy"; the deluge, then, represents divine justice in such governance (107). Alvin Lee finds in the scene of the Creation Song a grouping of parallel creative acts:

This is a signature passage for the poem, involving three creators or shapers and three kinds of creation: the Almighty fashioning the order of the world and all living things; Hrothgar by his word-power bringing into existence and naming the greatest of hall-dwellings; the scop, whose clear song is the associative linking of the other two shapings. (143)

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<sup>100</sup> "Christian coloring" is F. A. Blackburn's phrase from his essay, "The Christian Coloring of *Beowulf*" (1897). To Blackburn, *Beowulf* is "essentially a heathen poem" that "once existed as a whole without the Christian allusions" (1, 21).

<sup>101</sup> In Whallon's view, the poet's Christianity has provided him a different deity to worship, but not fundamentally changed the tenor of his religious conceptions: "Without violence to the text one may find *Beowulf* Christian though replete with heathen carry-overs; one may equally well find it heathen with Christian additions" ("Christianity" 89).

The deluge is also paralleled by Grendel's assault: "Even as the primal Creation was led inexorably towards the Judgment of the Flood-waters, so [...] Hrothgar's new creations are assailed by postdiluvian evil and must be rescued, again and again" (Lee 189-90). This "War against the Creation"<sup>102</sup> is what Tolkien saw as the theme of *Beowulf*: "Man alien in a hostile world, engaged in a struggle he cannot win while the world lasts, is assured that his foes are the foes also of Dryhten [God], that his courage noble in itself is also the highest loyalty" ("*Beowulf*" 78). For Tolkien, then, the Creation Song, and the ire it draws from Grendel, the spawn of Cain and Flood-struck giants, are this theme of cosmic conflict in microcosm ("*Beowulf*" 78-9). These theologically-informed readings are insightful in their interactions with the doctrinal content of the sacred-historical events of creation and flood. However, the chronographic function of these events in sacred and universal history is not considered when questions are asked about the poem's setting.

This is not to say, of course, that the matter of locating the *Beowulf* setting in sacred history has not been raised at all. However, because critics have long considered the chronology of *Beowulf*'s setting as established by the Hygelac/Chlochilaicus identification, they locate the setting of *Beowulf* in the Sixth Age, after the first advent of Christ. This assumption has remained largely unquestioned, yet it has a profound effect on one's reading of religion in *Beowulf*, because patristic and medieval theologians identified knowledge and worship of the creator with multiple groups in the course of sacred history. Margaret Goldsmith is one of the few prominent *Beowulf* critics to give this issue deliberate consideration:

I suppose that the poet numbered [Beowulf] among the *justi* [the righteous], but to put him in this company is not necessarily to put him with the saints in heaven,

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<sup>102</sup> This is the title of Lee's fifth chapter in *Gold-Hall and Earth-Dragon: Beowulf as Metaphor* (1998).

for the *justi* of the Old Testament, such as Job [...], became the Devil's prisoners after death, until the day when Christ himself descended to release them. If Beowulf, like Job, had lived on earth before that day, his soul could have been set free with those of the patriarchs, but we do not know for certain whether or not the poet believed his hero lived before Christ. Some fairly simple computation from the genealogical tables of the royal houses could have shown that Beowulf lived long after the Incarnation, but there is no knowing whether he was chronologically-minded, or whether the question occurred to him at all. (*Mode* 179-80)<sup>103</sup>

We may not know "whether or not the poet believed his hero lived before Christ," but Goldsmith's next sentence following this passage takes a negative answer for granted: "For a heathen hero who lived after the resurrection of Christ, what hope was there?" (*Mode* 180) I will dispute this assumption, but nonetheless Goldsmith has framed the issue accurately: Beowulf's location in sacred history matters, especially in relation to the first advent of Christ.

At this point, it is relevant to note that, although they are not necessarily grappling with the matter of Beowulf's location in sacred history, some still have detected an aura of earlier ages—what Klaeber calls "the Old Testament atmosphere" of *Beowulf* (*Beowulf* cx). Tolkien claims "Hrothgar is consistently portrayed as a wise and noble monotheist, modeled largely [...] on the Old Testament patriarchs and kings":

In the *folces hyrde* of the Danes we have much of the shepherd patriarchs and kings of Israel, servants of the one God [...] We have in fact a Christian English

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<sup>103</sup> In fact, on the basis of "fairly simple computation from the genealogical tables of the royal houses," I will come to the opposite conclusion from Goldsmith's.

conception of a noble chief before Christianity, who could lapse (as could Israel) in times of temptation into idolatry. ("*Beowulf*" 97, 79)

Marie Padgett Hamilton concurs: "Except for temporary apostasy under great stress, [the Danes under Hrothgar] are loyal to the one true God [...] like the chosen people of the Old Testament" (107). Margaret Goldsmith agrees with Tolkien that "Hrothgar is modeled largely on the Old Testament patriarchs and kings," stressing that the Old Testament heroes "were known to [the poet] not merely as great men of the past, but as moral exemplars, and also as symbolic persons who embodied some truth about God's dealings with mankind" (*Mode* 48-9). Arthur Brodeur attributes this "Old Testament atmosphere" to the poet's need to present his sympathetic characters as neither strictly heathen nor strictly Christian: it is "necessary to present both Danes and Geats as Abraham and his descendants were presented in the Old Testament":

It was essential that they retain the sympathy of his hearers; therefore, once the early admission of their paganism had been made, they must speak and act as Abraham or Isaac might have done. Grendel and his dam bear the full onus of all that is blackest in heathenism, in which indeed they had their roots; Hrothgar must appear as 'the noble monotheist.' (219)

We should note that this "Old Testament atmosphere" is, for these critics, just that: an atmosphere, an artful veneer, not a feature of the historical context. Also, though Tolkien, Hamilton, and Goldsmith present the "noble monotheism" of Hrothgar as (from the poet's perspective) a possibility for the Danes and Geats, Brodeur sees this veneer as a tactful concealment of their true pagan state. Of these scholars, only one (Goldsmith) considers the possibility of an actual "Old Testament" historical context for *Beowulf*, and she dismisses it.

Whether that possibility is worth pursuing may be questioned. Yet, as we will see, it is a possibility that can be warranted from the text of *Beowulf* when we read it within the illuminating context of the apologetic tradition's legacy of historiography, in both the Christian world chronicle and its late classical and early medieval heirs. In this chapter and the next, we will consider in particular Christian historiography's Six Ages schema and the ways *Beowulf*'s allusions to the sacred-historical framework can be read within that schema.

## 2. Creation in Christian Historiography

As was observed above, *Beowulf* scholars have engaged fruitfully with the theological themes of creation and flood in *Beowulf*. However, as our exploration of the apologetic tradition's historiographical legacy in the previous section indicates, Christian historians in the tradition of Eusebius were perfectly comfortable with integrating theological themes into their chronicles and histories. Indeed, they saw this integration as the exposition of the theological import already latent in history. This theological reading of history is possible because of divine providence: God's purposive rule over the events of history. For this reason, the fact that allusions to creation and the deluge in *Beowulf* have been amenable to theological readings does not negate that possibility that they are also important features of historical context.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> These ways of reading the scriptural allusions in *Beowulf* have sometimes been treated as mutually exclusive. Hamilton contends that, because the *Beowulf* poet is "intent upon the inner significance of his narrative" and "accustomed to allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures," he is therefore "not the person to range Grendel and his dam literally among the kinsmen of Cain" (115). However, Augustine of Hippo, Hamilton's own main theological source, would not concur with this argument. In Book 15 of *City of God*, he argues that the historical reality and allegorical (i.e. theological) meaning of events recorded in scripture go hand-in-hand: "[W]e must rather believe that

It should come as no surprise, then, for us to find that references to creation in Christian historiography serve to make a claim, at once historical and theological: namely, that God is the sovereign lord and provident ruler of the world. This is, indeed, the reason Eusebius gives for Moses beginning the Torah with a creation account:

Having made his whole narrative begin with the universal Cause and Creator of things visible and invisible, [Moses] shows that [God] is the Lawgiver of the constitution of the universe, and establishes Him as king of the world, as of one great city. He teaches us therefore at the outset to regard Him as the real Author and Ruler not only of the laws which he is himself about to ordain presently for men, but also of the laws of universal nature. (*Preparation* 313)

Eusebius saw himself as following Moses' lead by integrating sacred and secular strands of history, and Eusebius's successors regarded that pattern as the proper way to write universal history. Orosius, in his influential *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*, decries the classical historians who "wish it to be believed in their blind opinion that the origin of the world and the creation of mankind were without beginning" (5). Lacking a historical cosmogony, these classical histories become accounts merely of the wars of human kingdoms, a misery apparently purposeless and perpetual. Instead, Orosius declares that "the world and man are directed by a divine providence, which as it is good, so also it is just," a fact established if one begins with "the fashioning and adornment of this world" when "God had made [humankind] upright and immaculate" (6, 20). Beginning histories with creation did not merely assert God's ancient sovereignty, but also his sovereignty over all human history up to the present day, which was

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there was a wise purpose in their being committed to memory and to writing, and that *they did happen*, and *have a significance*, and that this significance has a prophetic reference to the church" (308).

"deliberately placed in the shadow of a reconstruction of biblical history which starts at the very beginning" (Williams "Time" 284).<sup>105</sup> By starting with creation, these Christian historians established history not as a tale of kings, but of the King of kings, whose "kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion endures from generation to generation" (Daniel 4:3).

This continued sovereignty is made especially evident in the three roles creation plays in Isidore of Seville's *Chronica Maiora*: first, as the zero-point for the enumeration of years; second, as half the frame of all history; and third, as the founding event of the first of six ages.<sup>106</sup> Like other histories in the Eusebian tradition, the *Chronica Maiora* begins with creation: in his effort to provide "a summary of the times," Isidore starts "the total of these times from the Creation of the world."<sup>107</sup> Thus, each major event in the timeline is assigned a date, the years separating it from the creation of the world: the deluge, 2242 years after creation; Abraham's birth, 3284 years after creation; the life of Prometheus, 3688 years after creation; the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, 5228 years after creation; the reign of Swinthila, Visigoth king of Spain, 5827 years after creation. Creation is not merely a convenient zero-point for the enumeration of years, though. The effect of counting up from creation is, as Michael Stuart Williams put it in the quotation above, to set all history that follows "in the shadow of a reconstruction of biblical

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<sup>105</sup> The reference applies specifically to Sulpicius Severus, but the principle is general in the Eusebian tradition of historiography.

<sup>106</sup> These same points could be made about many other Christian world chronicles, including Bede's chronicle in *The Reckoning of Time*.

<sup>107</sup> The translation of Isidore's *Chronica Maiora* I rely on is hosted by *e-Spania* ([www.e-spania.revues.org](http://www.e-spania.revues.org)), an French online journal, devoted to interdisciplinary studies of medieval and modern Spain (a "revue interdisciplinaire d'études hispaniques médiévales et modernes"). This translation is by Sam Koon and Jamie Wood, and is based on Martins edition.

history which starts at the very beginning" ("Time" 284). However, there is, in the *Chronica Maiora*, not only creation's shadow striding behind human history, but also a shadow rising to meet it—the shadow of the world's end:

The remaining time of the world is not ascertainable by human investigation. For Lord Jesus forestalled every question concerning this matter when he said: "it is not for you to know the times or the moments which the Father has placed in accordance with his own authority" [...] Therefore everyone should think about his passing over [...] [f]or when each person departs from the world, then that is the end of the world for him.

In this way Isidore reminds his readers that history's clock will not count up forever: as it had a beginning, so it will have an end. Moreover, thinking about the cosmic eschaton ought also to put readers in mind of their own eschatons, personal death, the analogue of the world's end, as personal birth is the analogue of its beginning. All of history is framed by this solemn meditation on temporality, with creation as half the frame. Finally, just as Isidore marks the beginning and end of the historical narrative with creation, so also creation marks the opening scene of the Six Ages. Creation, then, marks not only the definite zero-point of time, and the definite beginning counterpart to the definite (but unknown) end: it marks the start of the first chapter of a definite plotline whose other chapters may be known and located in history. The creator's sovereign design in history is visible, the *Chronica Maiora* asserts, in particular factual events—events as real as Roman Caesars and Visigothic kings, who are themselves caught up in the colossal cosmic narrative these events reveal. At creation, the curtain is drawn and the first act begun, and what follows is all part of the play.



However, not all the characters are aware of the grand drama in which their own scenes exist. The apologetic tradition, drawing on St. Paul, primarily describes this lack of knowledge as ignorance of the creator. As we noted in Chapter Two and elsewhere, which people or groups know the creator changes in sacred history depending on the era. This knowledge of the creator can be tracked through the Six Ages schema in a pattern of "narrowing" and "widening." In the First Age, from Adam to Noah, knowledge of the creator was at its widest, for even those who did not honor or obey the creator nonetheless knew of him. From Noah to Abraham, the Second Age, this knowledge narrowed as postdiluvian humanity divided into nations with their own distinctive religions. It narrowed yet further in the Third Age as Abraham's descendants grew to a great nation, so that, by the time of Moses, little memory of the creator was preserved outside the Hebrew people. By the time of the Davidic kingdom, the beginning of the Fourth Age, knowledge of the creator was exclusively associated with Israel. This association continued until the Sixth Age, when the coming of Christ signaled a new outreach toward the *gentiles*, a widening-out of knowledge of the creator. Therefore, for someone watching the drama of sacred history, noting which characters show awareness of the creator—memories of the first act—provides a clue to which act is currently underway.

There are complications to this pattern of narrowing and widening, however, due to conspicuous lacunae in the canonical sources for the narrative of sacred history. Most notably, the focus in Genesis shifts from all humanity in Gen. 11, to a single character in Gen. 12 (Abraham). Between the Tower of Babel account (Gen. 11:1-9) and the new focus on Abraham (Gen. 12:1), there is just a genealogy without substantial narrative (Gen. 11:10-32).<sup>108</sup> No further

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<sup>108</sup> Sulpicius Severus assumes this meant the intervening period was simply dull: "till the time of Abraham, their genealogy presented nothing very remarkable or worthy of record" (72).

comment is made about humanity as a whole or cultures at large, only those incidental encounters that the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have with the various peoples they meet in their wanderings. In other words, there is no canonical witness to the extent of the narrowing of knowledge we observe in the Second and Third Ages. Some, like Eusebius, appear to have assumed it to be absolute: "to the Hebrew race alone was entrusted the full initiation into the knowledge of God the Maker and Artificer of the universe, and of true piety towards Him" (*Preparation* 34). If this assumption is accepted, then the silence of Genesis and later books on this issue is condemning and dismissive: nothing is said because there is nothing good to say.

However, there were two important figures that complicated that simplistic absolutism: Melchizedek and Job. Melchizedek, who encounters Abraham, is "king of Salem" (a Canaanite city) and "priest of God Most High" (Gen. 14:18). He is notable here not only for the hieratic position he assumes toward Abraham, blessing him and accepting offerings from him, but also for the doctrinal content of his blessing: "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth!" (Gen. 14:19-20).<sup>109</sup> The authenticity of Melchizedek's piety is never in doubt in the apologetic tradition: as Chrysostom affirms in his fifth homily on Romans, Melchizedek is one of "them that adored God, that obeyed the law of nature, that strictly kept all things [...] which contribute to piety" (363). Also of importance to this study is the fact that Melchizedek could not be ignored or marginalized: the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Christian canon cites Melchizedek as a "type" of Christ, because "without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever" (Heb. 7:3). As a result, Melchizedek, a relatively obscure character in Genesis, became a significant part of Christianity's developing theology of the person of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>109</sup> Citation is from the Douay-Rheims Bible, an English translation of the Latin Vulgate.

Job was likewise difficult to ignore: he had, after all, an entire book of the Hebrew scriptures named after him, and had as well the status of a proverbial moral exemplar.<sup>110</sup> Still, he is enigmatic. The setting of the book of Job is strangely abstracted from the central thread of narrative in the Hebrew scriptures. Job did not live in the central geographic location of most Hebrew scripture, the land of Canaan. Instead, he lived in the "land of Uz," probably located in Edom, which lay to the southeast of Canaan, toward the Arabian Desert.<sup>111</sup> His cultural setting is likewise unusual: there are no mentions of other major biblical characters, and there seems to be no established cult of worship: Job sacrifices independently on behalf of his family (Job 1:5). As a result, there has been considerable debate in the biblical commentary tradition regarding the date of Job's narrative. However, it was generally accepted, first, that Job was pious and holy, and, second, that Job's piety and holiness existed in a time and place where they were unexpected. As Gregory puts it in his immensely popular commentary on Job, the *Moralia*,

It is for this reason that we are told where the holy man dwelt, that the meritoriousness of his virtue might be expressed; for who knows not that Uz is a land of the Gentiles? And the Gentile world came under the dominion of wickedness, in the same proportion that its eyes were shut to the knowledge of its Creator. Let us be told then where he dwelt, that this circumstance may be reckoned to his praise, that he was good among bad men. (32)

Therefore, Job was not only an exception to the general "narrowing" in the Six Ages, but he was famous *as an exception*, for knowing the creator in a time when such knowledge was rare.

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<sup>110</sup> "You have heard of the patience of Job" (James 5:11).

<sup>111</sup> Christian commentators sometimes connected Job with an Edomite king named Jobab (Gen. 36:33-34). This is the identification accepted by Gregory the Great, the main commentator on Job for this dissertation's period of interest.

While Eusebius found such exceptions as Melchizedek and Job not enough warrant to disrupt his tidy and absolute understanding of history, Augustine of Hippo appreciated the difference that Melchizedek and Job could make. In his *City of God*, Book Eighteen, Augustine takes up the question currently under investigation: were there citizens of the City of Heaven (the elect) outside of the Hebrew race and before Christianity? Citing Job, Augustine's answer to the question is affirmative:

I think the Jews themselves dare contend that no one has belonged to God except the Israelites [...]. For in very deed there was no other people who were specially called the people of God; but they cannot deny that there have been certain men even of other nations who belonged, not by earthly but heavenly fellowship, to the true Israelites, the citizens of the country that is above. Because, if they deny this, they can be most easily confuted by the case of the holy and wonderful man Job, who was neither a native nor a proselyte, that is, a stranger joining the people of Israel, but, being bred of the Idumean race [i.e. Edomite], arose there and died there too, and who is so praised by the divine oracle, that no man of his times is put on a level with him as regards justice and piety. (390)

Not only does Augustine cite Job as the chief exception, but he regards Job's as God's sanction for speculation about other exceptions:

I doubt not it was divinely provided, that from this one case we might know that among other nations also there might be men pertaining to the spiritual Jerusalem who have lived according to God and have pleased Him. (390)

In other words, Job's place in the canon is not only to teach the explicit theological and moral lessons of his book, but also to caution us against an improperly ethnocentric reading of

scripture. For Augustine, Job's significance is *not* that he is the solitary light in an otherwise-dark Gentile world: he is the light that informs us there might have been other lights in other places, forgotten by history but not by God.

Creation, then, serves several structuring functions in the dramatic narrative of sacred history: it is the zero-point from which all time is measured; it is half the narrative frame, the counterpart to the eschaton; it is the opening scene of the first act, in a drama of several acts. Moreover, as character knowledge, it can also serve as a marker for which act is being performed at the moment, because which characters are privy to that knowledge changes from act to act. However, this last function is not without significant exceptions—exceptions significant in themselves, but also significant to this study.

### 3. Creation in *Beowulf*

When we turn to *Beowulf*, we find that the poet connects God's roles as creator and sovereign very early in the story. Klaeber describes this link succinctly when he states that "the Creation passage elaborates the theme, 'the world belongs to the Lord!'" ("Christian" 51). It is not the Creation Song alone that makes this connection, though. Were that so, we might say that the Creation Song only referenced the theological theme; however, only eight lines after the Creation Song ends, the poet introduces the creator again as the one who exiled Grendel:

[...]      fīfelcynnes eard  
wonsǣlī wer      weardode hwīle,  
siþðan him Scyppend      forscrifen hǣfde  
in Cāines cynne. (104-7)  
[...] in the monster realm

That unhappy man dwelt awhile,  
 After the Creator had judged him  
 Among Cain's kin.

The creator (*scyppend*), then, is not merely alluded to by the characters' song, but a character in his own right. The poet is not content, moreover, to locate the creator's activity in the world's making only: instead, the creator is active in the poet's story, meting out judgment on Grendel.<sup>112</sup> Grendel's animosity toward the Scylding Danes seems indeed to rise in response to his condemnation by the creator: his exiled state leads him to envy the Dane's communal joy, and his enmity with the creator leads him to resent the Dane's praise of his divine judge. Therefore, the creator's actions serve to instigate the plotline of *Beowulf*: as in the Eusebian histories, the first act, both causally and dramatically, is the creator's.

While the themes of creation and sovereignty are linked explicitly in the passage discussed above, I believe the twined strands of creation and sovereignty can also be traced throughout *Beowulf*'s Danish adventures. One way to see this is to follow the thread of the poet's use of the divine epithet *metod*. That epithet is something of a mystery: derived from the verb *metan*, "to measure," *metod* means literally something like "the measurer," but its uses are exclusively metaphorical, poetic, philosophical, and religious. According to Bosworth and Toller's Old English dictionary, though "[t]he earlier meaning of the word in heathen times may have been *fate, destiny, death*," after conversion it was "generally an epithet of the Deity." Its older connection with destiny seems to have remained into the post-conversion era, as witnessed

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<sup>112</sup> If the creator is identified with the "god" of line 13, this is his second clear action in the story, the first being his provision of an heir to Scyld Scefing. The Danes' Creation Song serves to disambiguate the identity of "god" in line 13, showing him to be the biblical creator. The continued gracious disposition of this deity toward the Danes strengthens that initial identification.

by the poetic compound *metodgesceaft/metodsceaft* ("decree of fate, death"), but *metod* took on other implications as well. Among these implications is the association between the title *metod* and God's status as creator. This association can perhaps be traced to Cædmon's Hymn, in which to sing of creation is to praise *meotodes meahthe*, the might of *metod*. For that reason, translators have rendered *metod* not only generically as "God" or "Lord," but also in ways that capture these implications of creation and sovereignty: "Maker," "Creator," "Ordainer," and "Ruler."<sup>113</sup> Indeed, Hall's *Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* includes "Creator" among its definitions for *metod*. The association between *metod* and creation has been disputed, however. Klaeber cites James Walter Rankin, who "argues against reading *metod* as 'creator' [...] instead equating it simply with *deus* [God]"; Klaeber also dismisses Bede's Latin gloss of *meotodes meahthe* as *potentiam Creatoris* "since only a free Latin paraphrase was intended" ("Christian" 9).<sup>114</sup> Whallon focuses exclusively on the link between *metod* and *wyrd* (fate), which he claims "could not have been much affected by any missionary in England" ("Idea" 19-20, 23). Opinion on rendering *metod* is, with good reason, divided.

Yet I would argue that the link between *metod* and God's roles as creator and sovereign can be made, if not from its lexical denotation, at least from within the text of *Beowulf* itself. The first use of *metod* in *Beowulf* is in line 110, the conclusion of the passage discussed above, in which the creator condemns Grendel:

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<sup>113</sup> Translations of *metod* in ll. 110 and 1778: "Ordainer" in both lines (Bradley 414, 458); "Creator" in both lines (Crossley-Holland 76, 118); "Ruler" in both lines (Donaldson 5, 31); "Lord" in l. 110, "God" in l. 1778 (Gordon 3, 32); "Almighty" in l. 110, "God" in l. 1778 (Heaney 6, 46); "God" in both lines (Kennedy 6, 58); "Maker" in l. 110, "Creator" in l. 1778 (Liuzza 56, 107); "Almighty" in l. 110, "God" in l. 1778 (Raffel 26, 78).

<sup>114</sup> One might well ask whether Bede, as a poet in Latin and Old English, might not be more sensitive to the multivalence of *metod* than Klaeber.

[...] þone cwealm gewræc  
 ēce Drihten, þæs þe hē Ābel slōg;  
 ne gefeah hē þære fāhðe, ac hē hine feor forwræc,  
 Metod for þȳ māne, mancynne fram. (107-10)

[...] [He] avenged that murder,  
 The eternal Lord did, in which [Cain] slew Abel;  
 [Cain] did not enjoy that feud; rather he banished him,  
 The Maker did, for that crime, far from mankind.

In this context, it is clear that *metod* is not merely an abstract principle of fate or destiny, but a personal entity exercising sovereign authority, in this case judicial authority. In line 109, the masculine personal pronoun *hē* is used with *metod* as its grammatical antecedent, marking *metod* in this passage as a personal entity, not an abstract principle. Also, *metod* in this passage is one of three epithets applied to what is apparently the same person: *scyppend*, "creator" (106); *ēce drihten*, "eternal Lord" (108); and *metod* (110).<sup>115</sup> The single identity of this person is reinforced by the judicial verbs associated with each epithet: *scyppend forscrifen hæfde*, "creator had condemned" (106); *ēce Drihten gewræc*, "eternal Lord punished" (107-8); *metod forwræc*, "metod banished" (109-10). However we may best translate *metod* in this passage, it is clear that the poet sees *metod* as identical to the creator and the eternal Lord, who is the sovereign judge of Cain and his offspring, including Grendel. Since this same entity is called *scyppend* ("creator"), we may also identify him with the *æelmihtiga* ("almighty") of line 92, who *eorðan worhte* ("made the earth"). *Metod*, then, is not only the entity who sovereignly judged Cain and his offspring,

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<sup>115</sup> It is worth noting that the divine epithets in this 19-line stretch of *Beowulf* are all found in Cædmon's Hymn: *æelmihtiga* (92; 9), *scyppend* (106; 6), *ēce drihten* (108; 4, 8), *metod* (110; 2).



but also the entity whose creative acts were celebrated in the Creation Song itself. The epithet *metod* may not explicitly denote "creator" and "sovereign," but in this passage of *Beowulf*, *metod* is the sovereign creator.

If we follow the thread of *metod* from this beginning, we find that most other uses of *metod* in *Beowulf* fit this pattern. *Metod* is seen to exercise sovereign rule over creation, including evil beings: Grendel cannot claim victims unless *metod* wills it (705-7); Beowulf cannot hold Grendel in Heorot against the will of *metod* (967); *metod* will judge the dead soul of Grendel (979); *metod* ruled over humanity in the past, as he (again the personal pronoun) still does (1057-8); *metod* determines the changes of seasons and their natural effects, including the thawing seas (1607-11). *Metod* also intervenes in the created order by granting gifts to humanity: Beowulf's great strength is a gift of *metod* (670); Beowulf's birth is itself a gift from the ancient *metod* to his mother (942-6); Hrothgar thanks *metod* that he has lived to see Grendel's defeat, presumably because he regards that defeat as a gift of *metod* (1778-81). While some of these instances of *metod* may be read in isolation as impersonal fate or destiny, it seems improper to do so after the poet's explicit identification of *metod* with the creator in line 110. Considered together, the thread of *metod* in these passages weaves the image of a divine maker actively ruling in the ongoing story of his creation—in short, a sovereign creator like the God of Isidore's *Chronica Maiora*.

Certainly *Beowulf* includes other assertions of divine providence and sovereign power, so my focus on *metod* may seem narrow. Indeed, as Hamilton puts it, the *Beowulf* poet "delight[s] to observe that the Christian deity always had ruled mankind," and so presents "God's provident care as the deciding factor in various turns of events in the narrative" (112). Beyond the passages cited above that contain the epithet *metod*, we find the sweeping claims that mighty God (*mihtig*

*god*) rules the race of mankind (*manna cynes*) and that God's judgment (*dōm godes*) rules each man's deeds (*dǣdum gumena gehwylcum*) (700-2; 2858-9). Also, we find the strong statement that Beowulf's climactic battle with Grendel's mother hinges upon the decree of holy God (*hālig god*), the wise Lord (*wītig drihten*) and Ruler of heaven (*rodera rǣdend*) (1553-6).

However, I suggest that *metod* merits special consideration, for reasons given by Marie Padgett Hamilton in her essay, "The Religious Principle in *Beowulf*." Hamilton sees in Old English poetry a tendency for common, even "off-hand," references to divine grace and determinative sovereignty, suggesting a particular affinity and familiarity with Augustinian views of divine providence (110-1).<sup>116</sup> This apparent poetic assimilation of Augustinianism, she proposes, may reflect the role Augustine's ideas played in transforming the religious and philosophical notions of pagan Anglo-Saxons:

The Augustinian emphasis on predestination and grace may, indeed, have served a special need of the Germanic converts by easing for them the ascent from pagan fatalism to the Christian belief in Divine Providence. (111)

The pre-conversion Anglo-Saxon concept of destiny, poetically expressed in words like *metod* and *wyrd*, found both complementary and contrasting elements in Augustinianism: the complementary element was the determinative character of predestination, but the contrasting element was the benevolent character of grace. Thus, Hamilton contends, Augustinianism may have "eased" the Anglo-Saxons' conceptual transition between paganism and Christianity regarding this important metaphysical point—not as a middle term between the two, but as a

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<sup>116</sup> For examples of these "common" references, see Hamilton's long footnote 21 in "The Religious Principle in *Beowulf*" (110-1).

presentation of the "Christian belief in Divine Providence" that was both similar to, and attractively different from, their pre-conversion belief.

Hamilton's hypothesis is suggestive, not only because it points to the strongly Augustinian character of Anglo-Saxon Christianity—which is beyond dispute—but also because it points to the wider cultural impact of Augustinianism. Hamilton proposes that "Augustinian categories [...] doubtless became part of cultured men's equipment for analyzing experience and judging conduct in life or legend"—both tasks that extended beyond the church or cloister and into the domain of poets (112). Meditations on the inevitability of fate and its inexorable vicissitudes are the stock in trade of gnomic and heroic poets, so the widespread adoption of "Augustinian categories" by "cultured men" would have its impact on such poetic meditations. Hamilton provides good reason to question Whallon's assertion that the Anglo-Saxon concept of fate (*metod* or *wyrd*) "could not have been much affected by any missionary in England"—indeed, if Hamilton's description of the intellectual climate of Anglo-Saxon England is accurate, it could hardly have been unaffected ("Idea" 19-20, 23).

It is in this context, I suggest, that we ought to read the *Beowulf* poet's use of the epithet *metod*. It reflects not only conventional poetic usage, as in the reference to death *metodsceaft/metodgesceaft*, but also a thoughtful reconsideration of the role and character of human action in relationship to fate or destiny. Hamilton posits that this reconsideration took place on a cultural level, which is probable. I suggest that we can locate the *Beowulf* poet's use of *metod* within this cultural dialogue, with *metod*'s meaning determined not simply by its traditional formulaic associations, but also by the traits which the poet chooses (or does not choose) to associate with *metod* in the poem as a whole. Considered from this perspective, the poet's unambiguous identification of *metod* as the divine creator and judge takes on the tenor of

an argument—a pointed assertion of divine providence in opposition to "pagan fatalism." Two characteristics of the redefinition of *metod* are especially prominent. First, that Grendel will be judged by *metod* after his death implies a principle of justice and law in *metod's* decree that contrasts with the inscrutable caprices of fate (l. 979). Second, that *metod* bequeaths gifts to humanity imparts to *metod* a gracious character in contrast to fate's cold relentlessness (ll. 670, 942-6). This recharacterization of *metod*—which, importantly, begins by linking *metod* with the creator's continued rule of his creation—is one subtle but significant way the *Beowulf* poet sets his story within Christianity's sacred-historical framework. "Yes," the *Beowulf* poet declares to his Anglo-Saxon reader, "*metod* still rules all humanity as he always has—but he isn't your grandfather's *metod*."

In these ways, then, we see the creation of the world, the inaugural event of the First Age and all ages to follow, serving to frame the *geardagas* of the poet's tale in precisely the ways it frames the chronicles and histories of the Eusebian tradition. In *Beowulf*, the declaration of God as creator is not merely a creedal commonplace. Just as Isidore's *Chronica Maiora* begins with creation, and so locates the deeds of both Romans and Goths within sacred history, so also *Beowulf's* references to creation and creator serve to anchor the glory of Danish princes in a narrative that began and continues under the rule of *Ealdmetod*, the Ancient Maker of worlds and fates. Hamilton, explaining of the cultural influence of Augustinianism in Anglo-Saxon England, concludes that

the unifying principle in Augustine's view of history—the conception of Divine Providence as ruling all peoples from the beginning and as bestowing gifts and graces—supplied a key to understanding the past of the Germanic tribes, as well as that of the Hebrews or the pagan nations [...]. (112)

After examining the references to creation and creator in *Beowulf* in light of the function of creation in Eusebian histories, we may infer that the *Beowulf* poet avails himself of that key.

One final consideration remains: as we saw in the previous section, creation can also provide a clue to historical context based on which characters know of creation and the biblical creator. We have also seen that, in *Beowulf*, knowledge of the biblical creator is possessed by some characters, the scop in Heorot in particular. In the creator's capacity as *metod*, he is also recognized by Hrothgar (l. 1778-81) and Beowulf (l. 670). For the vision of sacred history embodied in the Eusebian historiography, this knowledge poses a problem: who are these folk, that they have such knowledge? These characters are not Hebrews, nor are they Christians. Certainly, it is possible that the poet is simply unconcerned with the problem this knowledge creates, but the poet's level of engagement with biblical lore and theological categories suggests that carelessness on this point is unlikely. However, as we have seen, the canonical texts themselves recognized the existence of exceptional figures like Melchizedek and Job, and a theologian as influential as Augustine of Hippo considered these two exceptions as sufficient warrant to speculate about more exceptions unrecorded in scripture. These exceptions tend to be associated with a particular "window" of time, though, in the Second and Third Ages—and the fact that some characters in *Beowulf* possess knowledge of the biblical creator seems inadequate warrant to relocate the *geardagas* of *Beowulf* to so remote a period. Before we consider such a move, we will need to see if more warrant may be found.

CHAPTER EIGHT:  
FRAMING THE *GEARDAGAS* WITH THE DELUGE

If creation in Christian historiography has at once both historical and theological significance, certainly too does the deluge—the great flood which destroyed all humanity save Noah and his family, kept safe in the ark. In Book 15 of *City of God*, Augustine insists that the deluge be read in both ways:

No one ought to imagine, however, that [...] we are to look here solely for a reliable historical record without allegorical meaning, or, conversely, that those events [concerning the deluge] are entirely unhistorical, and the language purely symbolical [...]. (645)<sup>117</sup>

The deluge was, in short, a matter for both history and theology, and those two approaches could not be mutually exclusive in their exercise.

### 1. The Deluge in Christian Historiography

First, for the ancient Christian theologians, as in the Jewish rabbinic tradition before them, the deluge narrative illustrates the doctrines of divine judgment and mercy: judgment upon the wicked and mercy upon the righteous. As such, the deluge embodies a paradigmatic precedent of divine action within history, and, for theologians like Augustine, presents "a

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<sup>117</sup> Indeed, Augustine uses as much space in this section on answering practical objections to the historical factuality of the Genesis deluge account as he does on suggesting symbolic, theological readings of that account.

prophetic picture of the Church," the sacred-historical fulfillment of that paradigm (*City* 648). From a sacred-historical perspective, in which the theology of Christ and the Church is paramount, the focus in the deluge narrative is mercy, symbolized by Noah's ark. For historians in the Eusebian tradition, however, whose task is interpreting the secular threads of history, the judgment aspect of the deluge narrative is more important: it enables them to trace historical evils back to their primal roots and to discern the divine justice underlying historical calamities.

Second, the deluge was historically important because it provided a chronological point-of-contact for harmonizing and comparing historical traditions. Christian historians knew well enough that other cultures than the Hebrews also had stories of ancient floods, some with close parallels to the Genesis account. Their responses to this knowledge tended toward one or both of the following: treating the flood stories as equivalent to the historical Genesis deluge, thus enabling Christian historians to synchronize chronologies; or else treating the flood stories as garbled, inaccurate versions of the Genesis deluge, thus enabling Christian historians to privilege the Hebrew historiographical tradition over other historiographical traditions.

Both of these uses of the deluge in Christian historiography— as a paradigmatic precedent, and as a chronological point-of-contact —can provide us with useful interpretive lenses for reading *Beowulf's* allusions to the deluge. In the two sections below, we will consider these historiographical uses of the deluge in turn, exploring them in more detail in the Eusebian tradition and applying them to our reading of *Beowulf*.

## 2. The Deluge as a Paradigmatic Precedent

For Christian historians of the first centuries *anno domini*, divine judgment was a vital element in their theological interpretation of history. They weren't the only ones in the Roman

empire who understood historical and current events in light of divine intervention, however. The question those early Christian historians had to answer was not *whether* God intervened in history, but *whose* god(s) and *why*. For instance, was the Visigoths' sacking of Rome in 410 the judgment of the ancestral Roman gods, in response to rise of Christianity, or the judgment of the Christian God, in response to Rome's moral corruption? Augustine of Hippo took all of twenty-two books in his *City of God* to deliver his answer to that question, and the masterwork that resulted shaped Christian historiography for centuries to come. Addressing this theological and historical question had far-reaching implications because it was, in specific, the problem of evil: where do wickedness and suffering, both past and present, come from? For Christian historians, the answer lay in the books of sacred history, the inspired scriptures. Augustine's disciple Orosius writes that a historian who wishes to account for "the beginning of man's wretchedness" must start "from the beginning of man's sin," for "we are taught that sin and the punishment of sin began with the very first man" (5, 6). Historians without access to the biblical records of antiquity must "begin with the middle period" for "they never recall early times," and therefore may only "describ[e] nothing but wars and calamities"—an endless cycle without perceptible beginning or cause (Orosius 6). A Christian historian, however, will not be so blind: he will, claims Orosius, perceive that "such evils which existed then, just as they do now to a certain extent, are undoubtedly either manifest sins or the hidden punishments of sins" (6). In other words, the historical answers to the problem of evil are perceptible only to those whose historical perspective has been informed by the biblical narratives—those who view all history through the theological lens of sacred history. It should be no surprise, then, to find that Christian historians turned to the deluge narrative for insight on in the history of sin and punishment.



The first insight Christian historians found in the deluge narrative was in its identification of the primal roots of evil in human society. While many Christian theologians turned to the Fall of Adam and Eve as an explanation of human sin in general terms, their historians found the origin of the evils that plague communities and civilizations in later events: the murder of Abel by Cain in Genesis 4, and the rise of wicked giants in Genesis 6.<sup>118</sup> While these narratives may not seem so tightly connected in the biblical text, a link between them seems to be implied through the recurring theme of murder. The first occurrence is the murder of Abel by Cain—the original homicide, which showed that violence between humans is ultimately fratricidal. Later, after the deluge subsides, murder is mentioned again, when God establishes a covenant with Noah, Noah's descendants, and "every living creature," promising that "never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth" (Gen. 9: 11-12, ESV).<sup>119</sup> Among the commands God gives to Noah

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<sup>118</sup> The Fall of Adam and Eve is found in Gen 3. While a strong emphasis on the effects of Adam's disobedience on later humanity is (rightly) seen as an Augustinian distinctive, it was not original to Augustine of Hippo. We may see Eusebius as stating that less-emphatic affirmation of the Fall in his *Church History*:

For immediately in the beginning, after his original life of blessedness, the first man despised the command of God, and fell into this mortal and perishable state, and exchanged his former divinely inspired luxury for this curse-laden earth. His descendants having filled our earth, showed themselves much worse [...] (84)

<sup>119</sup> The Noahic Covenant was one of several agreements between God and humanity recorded in the Hebrew canon; to the Church Fathers, these covenants marked paradigm shifts in God's dealings with humanity and advances in God's progressive self-revelation. Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* is a good early witness to this notion:

[F]our principal covenants [were] given to the human race: one, prior to the deluge, under Adam; the second, that after the deluge, under Noah; the third, the giving of the law, under Moses; the fourth, that which renovates man, and sums up all things in itself by means of the Gospel, raising and bearing men upon its wings into the heavenly kingdom. (429)

after the deluge, he decrees that "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image" (Gen. 9:6, ESV). The implication of this command seems to be that, of the sins that provoked the deluge, murder is one of especial interest to the divine judge, who sees in it an affront to "his own image" in humanity. Later Jewish and Christian commentary of Genesis made this implication explicit: Cain's act came to be seen as the precedent for every subspecies of human violence, and Cain himself as the patriarch of the wicked society. Cain's establishment of a wicked society led to an even more dramatic corruption of humanity: the "sons of God" cohabiting with the "daughters of men," and the rise of the mysterious Nephilim, the "giants in the earth." As a result, "the earth was filled with violence" as Cain's murder grew into a culture of wholesale slaughter dominated by "mighty" and "renowned" giants (Gen. 6:11, 4). Thus, in these homicidal acts—of Cain and the giants—Christian historians found the fountainhead of social evils, and this extremity of human sin led both to divine justice (the deluge itself) and a new form of human justice, capital punishment, which was instituted by the Noahic Covenant.

Christian historians were not the first to trace the roots of social evil to Cain, of course. In his *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, presents Cain as a primeval kingpin, a pioneer of crime:

And when Cain had traveled over many countries, he, with his wife, built a city, named Nod, which is a place so called, and there he settled his abode; where also he had children. However, he did not accept of his punishment in order to amendment, but to increase his wickedness; for he only aimed to procure everything that was for his own bodily pleasure, though it obliged him to be injurious to his neighbors. He augmented his household substance with much

wealth, by rapine and violence; he excited his [companions] to procure pleasures and spoils by robbery, and became a great leader of men into wicked courses. (31)

In Josephus's account, Cain was not merely acquisitive, but was "the author of measures and weights," the very standards by which exchange can be made and wealth quantified, and by this means "he changed the world into cunning craftiness" (*Antiquities* 56). Cain "built a city, and fortified it with walls," thus encoding his fear of retributive violence into architecture itself (*Antiquities* 56). Cain's evil is built into the framework of the community he constructs, and his descendants show themselves exemplary citizens of Cain's city:

[T]he posterity of Cain became exceeding wicked, every one successively dying, one after another, more wicked than the former. They were intolerable in war, and vehement in robberies; and if anyone were slow to murder people, yet was he bold in his profligate behavior, in acting unjustly, and doing injuries for gain.

(*Antiquities* 32)

The historical purpose of Josephus must be kept in view here. For Josephus, the story of Cain was no mere legend, but part of "our [i.e. the Jews] antiquities," written by the prophet and legislator Moses, and so "preserved [...] from those indecent fables which others [i.e. the Greek poets] have framed" (*Antiquities* 27, 28). Josephus is not presenting the Cain story as a merely symbolic parable of the ills of human society. The import of the Cain narrative in Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* is not merely moral, but also explanatory. By attributing to Cain, the primal murderer, the invention of human civilization, represented by commerce and civil engineering, Josephus is tracing social evil to its source.

For Christian writers, even centuries after Josephus, Cain's historical relationship to social evil was a commonplace. In his catechetical lecture on repentance, Cyril of Jerusalem calls

Cain "the inventor of evils, the first author of murders," but does not develop these epithets beyond an allusion to Abel (9). Presumably even a catechumen could be expected to understand the story behind those unexplained plurals, "evils" and "murders." According to Sulpicius Severus's *Sacred History*, Cain "stained the first age of the world," but, like Cyril, he does not elaborate (72). Theophilus's *To Autolycus* states, of Cain's murder of Abel, that "thus did death get a beginning in this world, to find its way into every race of man, even to this day," so that all human death is a continuation of the sequence begun by Cain (105). Gregory of Tours, in his *Ten Books of Histories*, presents Abel's murder as the first step in humanity's descent into utter corruption, declaring that "[f]rom that moment onwards the entire human race never ceased to commit one execrable crime after another" (70). Cain's role as founder of civilization was not forgotten, however. Theophilus attributes the building of the first city to Cain:

Cain also himself had a son, whose name was Enoch; and he built a city, which he called by the name of his son, Enoch. From that time was there made a beginning of the building of cities, and this before the flood; not as Homer falsely says: "Not yet had men a city built." (106)<sup>120</sup>

Isidore's *Chronica* also asserts that "Cain first founded a city before the Flood," and Isidore's assessment of that first city is laconic but clear when he states that Cain "filled [it] only with the multitude of his descendants."

The most extensive and influential treatment of Cain as patriarch of the wicked society may be found, of course, in Augustine of Hippo's *City of God*. Indeed, one might expect this

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<sup>120</sup> Theophilus's dig against Homer's inaccuracy on the point of the origin of cities is typical; the translator, Marcus Dods, notes (in Homer's defense) that this quotation from the *Iliad* (Book 20, l. 216) only refers to Troy itself, not cities as a category (106).

discussion of Cain and his kin to begin, and even end, with Augustine's contribution. Augustine's part in this conversation has been delayed for two reasons. The first reason is to show that Cain's role as patriarch of the wicked society is (like the Fall of Adam) not *only* an Augustinian distinctive, but a stable element of Genesis-derived histories both before *City of God* (Josephus, Theophilus of Antioch, Cyril of Jerusalem) and after it (Sulpicius Severus, Gregory of Tours, and Isidore of Seville). Focusing first (or only) on Augustine might obscure both the wide currency of this idea and its strongly historicist (not merely allegorical) tenor. The second reason is simply that the Cain material in *City of God* has been connected with *Beowulf* before in *Beowulf* scholarship, notably by Marie Padgett Hamilton and D. W. Robertson, Jr. The emphasis of these treatments, though, tends to focus on the allegorical aspects of Augustine's comments on Cain, even to the exclusion of historical aspects, as in Hamilton:

The quality of the *Beowulf*-poet, as well as the currency of the tradition that Cain was spiritual father of the reprobate, makes it unlikely that Grendel was identified with the race of Cain with any save figural intent. (120)<sup>121</sup>

When Hamilton refers to "the tradition that Cain was spiritual father of the reprobate," she cites a tradition largely shaped and disseminated by Cain's role in *City of God*, in which "Cain belonged to the city of men"—i.e., "those who live according to man," who are "predestined [...] to suffer eternal punishment with the devil" (284). Certainly Augustine reads Cain and his role in the

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<sup>121</sup> Robertson's interpretation is the same:

Figuratively, the generation of Cain is simply the generation of the unjust to which all those governed by cupidity belong. They are monsters because they have distorted or destroyed the Image of God within themselves. [...] Thus Grendel is a type of the militant heretic or worldly man, and his dwelling is appropriately in the waters opposite of those which spring from the Rock of Christ. (184)

biblical narrative allegorically, and Hamilton is right to see Cain as carrying with him those Augustinian theological implications whenever he shows up in a text of Western Christendom post-*City of God*. However, in *City of God*, Cain's relationship to later evils is not merely allegorical or figural. As was already shown, specifically regarding the deluge, Augustine does not regard allegorical significance and historical reality to be mutually exclusive traits. In fact, later in Book 15 of *City of God*, after he has already set up Cain as the "spiritual father of the reprobate," Augustine proceeds in chapters eight through sixteen to defend the historical plausibility of the Cain story, answering objections about population size, antediluvian longevity, and the identity of Cain's wife (289-98). More importantly, in the case of Cain's murder of Abel, Augustine even describes the relationship between its significance and its historicity in ways that extend beyond what is usually meant by allegory. Comparing Cain's murder of Abel with the Roman story of Romulus and Remus, Augustine sees more than mere similarity:

[W]e cannot be surprised that this first specimen, or, as the Greeks say, archetype of crime, should, long afterwards, find a corresponding crime at the foundation of that city which was destined to reign over so many nations, and be the head of this earthly city of which we speak. (*City* 286)

Cain's murder of Abel is called a "specimen" of murder, pointing to its factuality, and an "archetype" of murder, pointing to its relationship to the category of murder as a whole: it is a definitive example, a pattern-setting case, of murder. It is, in short, a paradigmatic precedent, and its connection to crimes of its ilk verges on the causal, just as the first dog would be not only the model but also the progenitor of the whole canine tribe. We should not, therefore, "be surprised" to find that Romulus's crime bears a familial resemblance to Cain's, not only in its fratricidal

nature, but also in its association with the founding of a city: Cain's crime is the ancestor of Romulus's, not only figuratively, but historically and even metaphysically.

Cain is not the only primal root of social evils in the Christian historiographical tradition: as was mentioned earlier, these historians also cite the antediluvian giants as originators of destructive vices and abuses. Here too we find Josephus providing a precedent, for along with his account of the corruption of humanity by Cain and his posterity, he also presents the "sons of God" and the giants (the Nephilim) of Genesis 6 as the influences that raised antediluvian wickedness to its ultimate height. Showing his familiarity with the interpretive tradition of Genesis 6 most closely associated with the Book of Enoch and other pseudipigraphal writings, Josephus identifies the "sons of God" as angels:

For many angels of God accompanied with women, and begat sons that proved unjust, and despisers of all that was good, on account of the confidence they had in their own strength; for the tradition is, that these men did what resembled the acts of those whom the Grecians call giants. (58)

These semi-angelic giants were, like Cain, "slaves to their own wicked pleasures," and so violent that righteous Noah "was afraid they would kill him" (58). Their evil was such that God determined "to destroy the whole race of mankind, and to make another race that should be pure from wickedness" (58). The enormity of their deeds is perhaps best captured by Josephus's elliptical reference to "those whom the Grecians call giants": in other words, these sons of angels opposed God so vehemently that they were the historical reality underlying the Greek myths of the Titans who opposed Zeus. The deluge was a proportionate retribution for crimes so "Titanic."

Josephus's account is similar in most respects to that found in many, though not all, Christian writers. While some theologians, notably Augustine of Hippo, opposed these "fables"

of semi-angelic giants, Josephus's understanding of Genesis 6 was shared by many Christian writers before Augustine (such as Eusebius of Caesarea) and by his respected contemporaries (such as Sulpicius Severus).<sup>122</sup> Though this tradition was widespread, the witness of these two Christian historians is particularly relevant to this discussion. Eusebius, in Book Five of his *Preparation for the Gospel*, cites Plutarch, who regarded "the deeds of Giants and Titans celebrated in song among the Greeks" to be the work of daemons (205). Eusebius suggests that these Greek tales find their basis "in the Sacred Scripture concerning the giants before the Flood and [...] their [angelic] progenitors," and that Plutarch's daemons

are those giants, and that their spirits have been deified by the subsequent generations of men, and that their battles, and their quarrels among themselves, and their wars are the subjects of these legends that are told as of gods.

(*Preparation* 205)<sup>123</sup>

Eusebius returns to this notion in his *Church History* in his description of antediluvian humanity:

They gave themselves wholly over to all kinds of profanity, now seducing one another, now slaying one another, now eating human flesh, and now daring to wage war with the Gods and to undertake those battles of the giants celebrated by all; now planning to fortify earth against heaven, and in the madness of ungoverned pride to prepare an attack upon the very God of all. (84)

It was "[o]n account of these things," writes Eusebius, that "the all-seeing God sent down upon them floods and conflagrations [...] as if to check some terrible and obstinate disease of souls

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<sup>122</sup> Augustine addresses the interpretation of Gen. 6:1-2, 4 in *City of God* Book 15, ch. 22-23.

<sup>123</sup> Later in Book Seven of *Preparation for the Gospel*, Eusebius refers again to the "great foulness and darkness of indescribable wickedness had overtaken the whole human race," namely, "the giants" who "were carrying on with ungodly and impious efforts their wars with God which are still so celebrated" (331-2).



with more severe punishments" (84). Sulpicius Severus, in his *Sacred History*, tells a similar story:

When by this time the human race had increased to a great multitude, certain angels, whose habitation was in heaven, were captivated by the appearance of some beautiful virgins, and cherished illicit desires after them, so much so, that falling beneath their own proper nature and origin, they left the higher regions of which they were inhabitants, and allied themselves in earthly marriages. These angels gradually spreading wicked habits, corrupted the human family, and from their alliance giants are said to have sprung, for the mixture with them of beings of a different nature, as a matter of course, gave birth to monsters. (71)

The result of this abomination is the same in *Sacred History* as it is in Eusebius's account: "God being offended by these things, and especially by the wickedness of mankind, which had gone beyond measure, had determined to destroy the whole human race" (72). That destruction is, of course, the deluge.

It should be noted that even writers who did not explicitly adopt the semi-angelic giants interpretation still commonly spoke of the deluge as a judgment on the giants. Thus Jerome could, in his personal correspondence, toss off an allusion to "the ungodliness of the giants [which] brought in its train the shipwreck of the whole world" (11). Thus Cyril of Jerusalem could, in his *Catechetical Lectures*, include in a catalog of famous transgressions "[t]he giants [who] sinned" so exceedingly that "the flood was to come upon them" (9). Even Vincent of Lérins, a Gallic monk writing in the mid-400s, who rejected the semi-angelic giants interpretation, laid the responsibility for the deluge at the giants' feet:

From these sons of Seth then and daughters of Cain, as we have said, there were born still worse children who became mighty hunters, violent and most fierce men who were termed giants by reason of the size of their bodies and their cruelty and wickedness. For these first began to harass their neighbors and to practice pillaging among men, getting their living rather by rapine than by being contented with the sweat and labor of toil, and their wickedness increased to such a pitch that the world could only be purified by the flood and deluge. (384)

This last quotation is particularly relevant to this discussion, for it shows how the sins of Cain's kin and the sins of the giants were commonly linked: the "daughters of men" were "daughters of Cain," and regardless of one's opinion about their mysterious consorts, they were the mothers of the giants. This link between Cain's and the giants is also assumed by Ælfric, in his thumbnail sketch of sacred history in his introduction to the *Heptateuch*:

Cain [...] acwealde his broðor, Abel gehaten, unscildigne mannan for his agenum andan, þe he hæfde to him. Caines ofspring, þe him of com, siððan eall wearð adrenced in þam deopan flode [...]. (23)

Cain killed his brother, who was named Abel, an innocent man, because of his own resentment which he had toward [Abel]. Cain's offspring, those who descended from him, were all drowned later in the deep flood.

Certainly Ælfric knows that the deluge is associated with the giants—his later rendering of the first verses of Genesis 6 shows that. However, for Ælfric, these characters (Cain and the giants) and events (Abel's murder and the deluge) are so closely associated that they collapse into one another, so that the giants' destruction is the climactic conclusion to Cain's story. Ultimately Cain and the giants did not provide two causes for the deluge but one: the sins of the giants were the

sin of Cain writ very large, as a single murder was amplified into a culture of marauding and tyranny.

If Christian writers traced the roots of sin back to Cain and the giants, it should not be surprising that these writers also saw in the deluge a paradigmatic precedent for acts of divine judgment in history. After all, if the sins typical of Cain and the giants, particularly their sins of violence, were in fact the original precursors of those same sins to which human societies are still prone, might not these same societies undergo similar calamities as judgments? As Irenaeus warns his readers in *Against Heresies*, the God who governs the universe now is "one and the same Lord who in the times of Noah brought the deluge because of man's disobedience" (515). The interpretive power of the deluge paradigm was recognized by Christian historians, particularly Orosius. For Orosius, whose task was to present "systematically and briefly" an account of historical calamities, the deluge is one of two "principal" events that set the pattern of misery for future human history: namely, "the transgression of the first man" and the "destruction of the whole human race [...] when with the whole world covered there was but a single expanse of sky and sea" (21). Though Orosius discusses the deluge only briefly, the deluge story's theme of divine judgment becomes a recurrent *leitmotif* throughout all seven books, and all history plays out in a flood-swept landscape of "distant mountains scabrous with shellfish and snails" and "hollowed out by water" (21). In such a world and such a history, divine judgment becomes not a prodigy, but an expectation.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> This expectation of judgment according to the deluge paradigm seems to underlie the Jewish historian Josephus's observation in his *Wars of the Jews* that

had the Romans made any longer delay in coming against these villains [the Judean insurrectionists defeated by Titus in AD 70], [...] the city would either have been swallowed up by

It is also useful to note, for this study, that the connection between the deluge and murder is preserved in some specific applications of the deluge paradigm. We have already seen how Genesis, by recounting God's decree of death on murderers following the deluge, implicitly links the deluge to Cain's murder and the giants' violence. We have also seen how various writers focus on murderous violence in all its varieties as they recount the sins of the giants (war, pillaging, cannibalism, etc.). In Eusebius's historical works, we find that allusions to the deluge seem to develop from this connection with murderous violence. In particular, Eusebius is fond of alluding to the judgment of the giants when recounting the downfall of the "tyrants" (Maxentius, Maximinus, and later Licinius) whom Constantine the Great conquered in the consolidation of his empire. For Eusebius, Constantine was "the destroyer of those God-defying giants of the earth who made raised their impious arms against [God], the supreme King of all" (*Life* 483). In Eusebius's oration in praise of Constantine, he asks, in reference to the emperor's defeated foes, "Where is the giant race whose arms were turned against heaven itself; the hissings of those serpents whose tongues were pointed with impious words against the Almighty King?" (593). Eusebius's answer to that rhetorical question is given succinctly in his *Church History*: the opponents of Constantine "waged war like the giants against God," so "they died in this way," perishing like the giants under a martial flood of divine retribution (374). In making this connection between the "tyrants" and the giants, Eusebius is not only making reference to their status as rebels against Constantine, who is (according to Eusebius) God's designated choice for emperor. In his *Church History*, he also condemns them as "enemies of religion" who committed "violence against Christ" and "join[ed] battle with the God of the universe" by persecuting

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the ground opening upon them, or been overflowed by water [...] for it had brought forth a generation of men much more atheistical than were those that suffered such punishments. (737)

Christians (367, 384). Of Licinius, for whom Eusebius reserved particular censure, it is reported that he ordered the destruction and confiscation of churches, stripped professed Christians of military rank and civil office, and even plotted the assassination of bishops, whose "bodies [were] cut into many pieces with the sword" and "thrown into the depths of the sea as food for fishes" (*Church* 385-6). With accounts like these, Eusebius depicts Constantine's enemies as the latter-day successors of the "God-defying giants," whose despotic reigns fill the earth with violence, and whose defeats recapitulate the flood by which "all tyranny [is] purged away" (*Church* 387).

### 3. Deluge as Paradigmatic Precedent in *Beowulf*

Most *Beowulf* scholars acknowledge the importance of the traditional deluge narrative, which incorporates Cain and the giants, to the overall theme of *Beowulf*, largely due to the impact of Tolkien's landmark 1936 lecture, "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics." For Tolkien, *Beowulf*'s connection between the Scandinavian giants of Anglo-Saxon tradition and the gigantic Cain-kin of Christian tradition was "the precise point at which an imagination, pondering old and new, was kindled," where "new Scripture and old tradition touched and ignited" ("*Beowulf*" 78).<sup>125</sup> At this point in the history of *Beowulf* studies, merely to survey the scholarship that elaborates and applies the symbolic, allegorical, and typological meanings of these connected biblical narratives to *Beowulf* would be in itself the work of a dissertation.<sup>126</sup> For

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<sup>125</sup> This suggestion of Tolkien's will be considered in the next section, below.

<sup>126</sup> Oliver Emerson's venerable "Legends of Cain, Especially in Old and Middle English" (1906) is often cited on this point. Also tremendously helpful are Nicolas Kiessling's "Grendel: A New Aspect" (1968), R. E. Kaske's "*Beowulf* and the Book of Enoch" (1971), and Ruth Mellinkoff's two-part "Cain's Monstrous Progeny in *Beowulf*" (1979, 1981).

the purposes of this study, we will restrict our consideration to the significances highlighted in the survey above, as they are connected to the perspective of *Beowulf's* narrator and to the perspectives of the characters themselves.

First, *Beowulf's* narrator seems to share with Christian historians an interest in explaining historical evil by recourse to sacred history, utilizing Cain and the giants for this purpose. As we have seen, there is a strong tradition, outlined above, which treats Cain and the giants not only as simply historical or simply allegorical, but as figures who bear both a typical (paradigmatic) and historical (precedent) relationship to later events and societies that verges on causation. Cain is not merely, in this Christian historiographical tradition, simply a well-known murderer who can therefore symbolize murder in the abstract—he is the world-changing inventor of homicide. The antediluvian giants, likewise, are not simply exempla of judgment-provoking violence and oppression: they were the prototypes of tyrants, and their dimly-remembered deeds, yet preserved in pagan song, served to inspire their latter-day admirers to sin and idolatry. Turning to *Beowulf*, we find that Cain and the giants have a similar relationship to the society of the Danes. Not only are the Danes haunted by the literal descendant of Cain and the giants, himself a murderous giant, but also their social order is marred by patterns of evil established by Cain and the giants. This connection may be seen early in the poem, when the narrator first announces the threatening presence of Grendel immediately after he predicts the destruction of Heorot:

[...] ne wæs hit lenge þā gēn

þæt se ecghete      āþumswēoran

æfter wælnīðe      wæcnan scolde.

Ða se ellengæst      earfoðlice

þrāge geþolode, sē þe in þystrum bād (ll. 83-7)

[...] the day had not come yet  
 When the edged hate of sworn kin  
 Would waken after bloody strife.  
 At this time, a certain mighty being painfully  
 Suffered the while, one who waited in the dark.

This passage continues into two passages by now familiar: the performance in Heorot of the Creation Song (90-8), and the recounting of Grendel's Cainite and giantish lineage that follows (102-114). Now, the narrator's allusion to the eventual destruction of Heorot, juxtaposed as it is with the more imminent threat of Grendel, may be read simply as ominous foreshadowing. Certainly there is a thematic connection between the kin-slaying in Heorot's future and the Cainite monster in its present. However, the link between these dark moments in Heorot's history is stronger if read in light of the typical uses to which the Christian historiographical tradition put the Genesis narratives of antediluvian sin. Considered in that context, Heorot's disastrous present and future are both shown to be real Cainite legacies, whether through the indirect human line of social evil or the direct monstrous line of the giant-kin. The narrator's introduction of Cain and the giants becomes, in this reading, not simply thematic, but explanatory in the Orosian mode: the historical tribulations of the Scylding line have their true origin in the primeval past, in "the beginning of man's sin," which only sacred history may reveal (Orosius 6). Only those with the historical insight of sacred scripture can see in present darkness the long shadow of old sins, and the narrator possesses that insight.

Second, I would argue that *Beowulf's* narrator is not the only one in the poem with this insight: certain characters also appear to be aware of living in a world shaped by these sacred-historical events. No explicit statement is made to that effect, however. We know that the Danes

know of the creation, for they sing of it, but do they know of the deluge? Perhaps not. The allusions to the deluge in *Beowulf* discussed above are not made by the Danish scop or any other character, but by the narrator directly to the audience. Moreover, the poet implies that Grendel's true lineage is a mystery to the Danes: "they do not know of a father" (*nō hīe fæder cunnon*) for Grendel, which suggests that his descent from Cain is unknown to them (l. 1355). However, there is one moment when a character is presented directly with an artifact of the deluge: namely, when Beowulf gives Hrothgar the hilt of the ancient giantish sword (*ealdsweord eotenisc*) he has found in the den of Grendel's mother (l. 1558):

Da wæs gylden hilt      gamelum rince,  
 hārum hildfruman,      on hand gyfen,  
 enta ærgeweorc [...]

Hrōðgār maðelode—      hylt scēawode,  
 ealde lāfe,      on ðāem wæs ōr writen  
 fyrngewinnes,      syðþan flōd ofslōh,  
 gifen gēotende,      gīganta cyn  
 frēcne gefērdon (ll. 1677-9, 1687-91)

Then the gold hilt to the old warrior,  
 The hoary war-lord, was given,  
 That giantish artifact [...]  
 Hrothgar spoke—he examined the hilt  
 Of that old relic, on which was written the start  
 Of the ancient war, when the flood slew,  
 The whelming waters, the giant-kin—



They fared terribly.

It is at this point that the deep past of sacred history impinges most directly and materially on the poem's characters, in the form of an ancient relic (*ealde lāfe*), inscribed (*writen*) with the story of "the giants who strove against God," in the hands of Heorot's sagely king. What is unclear, however, is whether Hrothgar understands, to the degree that the reader does, the import of what he holds.

Some *Beowulf* scholars infer a negative answer to this question. Fred Robinson, in fact, cites this passage as witness to the "poignant limitation" of Hrothgar's religious knowledge:

The poet shows Hrothgar gazing long at the sword hilt with the biblical account of the Deluge engraved upon it. Poet and audience know exactly what the flood that slew the giant race was and whence it came, but Hrothgar does not. Since he has no biblical knowledge, his gaze is a blind gaze. [...] [W]ith Hrothgar, we admire all the more the partial understanding he achieved, since we know that he, unlike us, did not share knowledge with a higher power [...]. (33-4)

Though Hrothgar has "a kind of natural, universal wisdom," he is "deprived of revelation": therefore, we should not be "mis[led] into supposing he was a Christian," though we may grant him "dignity and stature" (33). Likewise, Edward B. Irving, Jr., asserts that

Hrothgar does *not* see, even though he holds it in his hands and looks at it, the story of God's use of the flood to punish the ancient giant-race that is written or pictured on the sword-hilt Beowulf brings back from the mere. At least he makes no comment on it; it seems a message to us over his head, so to speak. If Hrothgar had ever heard of Cain or of the biblical giants, then would have been the time to

say so, but, as the king told us earlier, the Danes do not know who Grendel's father may have been, or even if he had one. (10)

The two arguments are similar, though with different articulated bases. For Robinson, the crucial point is deductive: Hrothgar cannot possibly understand the meaning of the hilt's inscription because he "has no biblical knowledge," "did not share knowledge with a higher power," and is "deprived of revelation." Without access to the scriptural account of the deluge, true knowledge of the deluge, like all tenets of true Christianity, is inaccessible to the wise heathen Hrothgar. This is but a particular instance of Robinson's larger point: namely, that *Beowulf's* characters are necessarily pagan and damned, since they lack the special revelation of Christianity. For Irving, on the other hand, Hrothgar's ignorance is derived inductively, from the evidence of the text: we may infer that Hrothgar "does *not* see" because he "makes no comment," and this "would have been the time" for such a comment. Irving's is an argument from silence, of the classic "dog that didn't bark" variety.

I dispute these readings: Robinson's deductive argument is not so necessary as he supposes, while Irving's inductive argument is based on a silent dog that may actually be barking in a different key than he expects. Robinson's argument is, like many in his *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*, founded on this syllogism:

Those without the Christian revelation are pagan and damned.

*Beowulf's* characters are without the Christian revelation.

Ergo, *Beowulf's* characters are pagan and damned.

While formally sound, Robinson's syllogism is not valid: his first premise is too absolute. As we have seen, the apologetic tradition has categories for people who, from their place in the unfolding of sacred history, are without the full revelation of Christianity, yet who still know and

worship the true creator, and so are not pagan and damned (Melchizedek and Job). Moreover, in this specific case of knowledge of the deluge, we have seen that the Eusebian tradition acknowledges that many cultures have flood-stories which correspond, to greater and lesser degrees, to that found in scripture. While some Christian writers are more positive about these flood-story analogues than others, the general assumption was that knowledge of the flood was retained among the world's peoples, albeit often in a grossly-corrupted form. Therefore, to dismiss, *prima facie*, the possibility that the Danes *in geardagum* preserved a more-or-less authentic flood-story, is to take a stance of hard-nosed exclusivism beyond even the famously hard-nosed Tertullian, Hippolytus, and Eusebius.

Irving's argument is more complicated to deal with, because it is based on his assumption about what is narratively appropriate. This argument too we may analyze as a syllogism:

If Hrothgar understood the hilt's inscription, he would say so.

Hrothgar does not say so.

Ergo, Hrothgar does not understand the hilt's inscription.

Yet, ought we to expect Hrothgar to state openly his understanding of the hilt's inscription? This scene is not, after all, set in a courtroom during a rigorous cross-examination, and Hrothgar is under no compulsion to answer the question directly. (In fact, the question is not asked of Hrothgar at all.) Moreover, what narrative purpose would be served by Hrothgar's repetition of the narrator's explanation of the hilt? For Hrothgar to recapitulate the hilt's backstory at this point would be redundant. Finally, why cannot Irving's objection be reversed? If Hrothgar does *not* understand the hilt's inscription, this is the time for him (or the narrator) to say so; he does not say so; ergo, Hrothgar understands. I would contend that this objection is stronger than Irving's,

especially since Hrothgar admits his ignorance of Cain's paternity: if Hrothgar is not reticent about his ignorance in the one case, why would he be in the other?

A response to Irving can be founded on stronger evidence than conjectures about narrative appropriateness, however: namely, on what Hrothgar does, in fact, say after studying the hilt's inscription. Irving bases his argument on silence, but what he reckons as silence or sound is defined by what he expects to hear. What is needed, then, is an adjustment of expectations. If the Danish king does not explicitly state whether or not he understands the story inscribed on that *eotenic* relic, does his speech imply such understanding indirectly? Arguably it does, for Hrothgar's discourse explores the same moral lessons that Christian historians found in the larger deluge narrative: namely, the inevitability of judgment for bloodshed and oppression, and the need, especially for those in authority, to beware succumbing to that temptation and so incur a similar judgment. However, instead of simply retelling the story of the giants, which the narrator had just finished, Hrothgar applies this moral lesson to his own kingdom's history, with the cautionary tale of King Heremod:<sup>127</sup>

ne gewēox hē him tō willan,      ac tō wælfealle  
ond tō dēaðcwalum      Deniga lēodum;  
brēat bolgenmōd      bēodgenēatas,  
eaxlgesteallan,      oþþæt hē āna hwearf,  
mære þēoden,      mondrēamum from. (ll. 1711-1715)

[Heremod] did not grow to [the Danes'] pleasure, but to their pain

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<sup>127</sup> Heremod was previously mentioned in *Beowulf* following the scop's song about Sigemund the dragon-slayer (ll. 898-915). The earlier allusion is less specific than Hrothgar's, and does not depict the ancient Danish king as tyrant or murderer. It presents Heremod in vaguely (but still negatively) as a "great sorrow" (*aldorceare*) which caused his people to "often mourn" (*oft bemearn*) (ll. 906, 907).

And the slaughter of the Danish folk;  
 All in a rage, he killed his vassals at table,  
 Men who had fought at his side, until he wandered alone,  
 That famed king, away from joyful company.

Hrothgar means this tale to be instructive to young Beowulf, concluding with a sagely "Let this be a lesson to you!"<sup>128</sup>

The link between this tale and the narrator's deluge account lies in Hrothgar's inspiration for the lesson: it seems little suited to the occasion, unless Hrothgar understands the sword-hilt's tale of Flood-struck giants as do the narrator and the Christian historians of the Eusebian tradition. Read that way, Heremod's violent treatment of his own sworn companions evokes at once the murder of Cain and the tyranny of the giants. Those he kills are his closest companions, those with whom he stood shoulder to shoulder in battle (*eaxlgesteallan*); this suggests the intimacy of the warrior fraternity, and makes Heremod's act fratricide. Yet Heremod is also a renowned king (*mære þēoden*), and his victims are his own Danish people (*Deniga lēodum*). The terms in these epithets, *þēod* (the root of *þēoden*) and *lēod*, both point to the corporate community of a people, with implications of both polity and ethnicity; Heremod's killings, therefore, are not merely criminal murders, but also political tyranny and a threat to Danish society as a whole. It is the doom of Heremod that completes the similitude, however: for his crimes, Heremod was exiled, so that he "wandered alone [...] away from joyful company" (*mondrēam*), which fate he "endured without joy" (*drēamlēas gebād*) (ll. 1714-5, 1720). Heremod's exile recalls the exiles both of Cain and of Grendel himself: Cain, whom the creator "banished [...] far from mankind," and Grendel, who is excluded from the joy (*drēam*) of the

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<sup>128</sup> "Ðū þē lār be þon" (1722).

Danes in Heorot (ll. 109-10, 99). In other words, Heremod committed the heinous sins of Cain and the giants, and then came his reckoning, also in the biblical mode. Thus, as Hrothgar beholds Grendel's bloody head<sup>129</sup> and the giant-sword's bladeless hilt, fragments spared from the wrack of God's judgment, he is naturally reminded of an old tale of Danish wickedness and punishment. Then, wise with many winters (*wintrum frōd*), the sage-king of the Danes extracts the moral pith of his story for Beowulf's education: "Guard yourself against mortal sin, beloved Beowulf, best of men, and choose the highest good!" (ll. 1758-1759).

This is not a new lesson to Beowulf, however. It is, in fact, the same moral principle he invokes in his condemnation of Unferth:

[...] ðū þīnum brōðrum      tō banan wurde,  
 hēafodmægum;      þæs þū in helle scealt  
 werhðo drēogan,      þēah þīn wit duge. (ll. 587-9)

[...] You became your own brother's bane,  
 Your kinsman: for that, in hell you must  
 Undergo torment, regardless of your cunning.

Murder, especially fratricide, is, in Beowulf's mind, worthy of the most severe judgment. There is some question about that judgment's location, though: as Roy Liuzza points out, "The word 'hell' is not in the manuscript, but it is attested by one of the early transcriptions" (71, footnote). As an alternative, Bruce Mitchell and Fred Robinson's student edition of *Beowulf* suggests the reading *healle* ("hall") instead of *helle* ("hell") (Liuzza 71, footnote). Interestingly enough, both readings align Beowulf's declaration with contemporary readings of the homicide prohibition in the Noahic Covenant: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for

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<sup>129</sup> *hafelan heorodrēorigne* (l. 1780).

God made man in his own image" (Gen. 9:6, ESV). Genesis 9:6 is commonly read as an allusion to capital punishment for homicide. Bede accepts this reading as literal (and quite sensible) meaning of the text: "It is easy to understand how God requires the life of man at the hand of man, seeking vengeance on the one who has sinned" (*On Genesis* 206).<sup>130</sup> If we follow Mitchell and Robinson's reading of line 588 of *Beowulf*, *healle* instead of *helle*, then Beowulf may be read as alluding to the judicial execution of murderers: the assertion that Unferth must be punished "in the hall" suggests that the matter is legal and in accordance with social order. If, however, we adopt the traditional reading of line 588, *helle* instead of *healle*, Beowulf will still find Bede on his side, with the Anglo-Saxon theologian still citing Genesis 9:6 as his proof text:

[W]hoever sheds blood, that is, whoever kills a man by any kind of death, his blood will be shed because he loses his eternal life by sinning, for the soul that sins, the same shall die. [...] [A]ll who kill a man unjustly, the same also perish in their soul by the killing. [...] [W]e were created in the image of our Creator as far as concerns the essence of the breath of life, [so that] we should fear to destroy the same image that is in us by sinning. (*On Genesis* 206-207)

For Bede, to take the temporal life of another's body is to lose the eternal life of one's soul. To lose eternal life is to succumb to eternal death—the "second death" of John's Apocalypse, or eternal fire.<sup>131</sup> Thus, while Beowulf's words don't explicitly allude to Cain's fratricide or the Noahic Covenant's prohibition on homicide, his own moral values and concerns align with those

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<sup>130</sup> Often Beowulf's statement to Hrothgar in ll. 1384-5 ("Better it is for one to avenge his friend than mourn too much!") has been taken as an irredeemably heathen utterance "quite incompatible with the ethos of the New Testament" (Klaeber "Christian" 55). However, Bede's comment of Genesis 9:6 leads me to think that the Anglo-Saxon theologian might have found the Geat's sentiment "easy to understand."

<sup>131</sup> "Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:14).

of the deluge narrative as a paradigm of sin and judgment, in ways which Bede (and arguably other Christian Anglo-Saxons) would recognize.

The larger point of these two examples is borne out by, and may also help clarify, a third: namely, Beowulf's concern with violating the *ealde riht*, or "old law." After the dragon burns Beowulf's royal hall, the old king is struck by an uncommon moment of wavering moral uncertainty:

[...] þæt ðām gōdan wæs  
 hrēow on hreðre,      hygesorga mǣst;  
 wēnde se wīsa      þæt hē wealdende  
 ofer ealde riht,      ēcean dryhtne,  
 bitre gebulge. (ll. 2327-31)

[...] That [event] was to the good one  
 A grief in his soul, the worst of all heart-sorrows;  
 That wise one reckoned that he the Ruler,  
 The eternal Lord, regarding the old law,  
 Had provoked sorely.

What, exactly, that "old law" might be is a matter of some speculation. Klaeber opines, somewhat vaguely, that "perhaps" *ealde riht* "should be interpreted in a specifically Christian sense" (*Christian* 17). Tolkien asserts, with greater assurance, that "this hardly seems to be the case": Beowulf's fear is "a heathen and unchristian fear—of an inscrutable power" ("*Beowulf*" 100). Proposing what seems a third way between Klaeber and Tolkien, Charles Donahue views *ealde riht* as "a traditional moral code" that is nonetheless "divinely sanctioned," consisting in "the traditional precepts of Germanic morality" ("*Beowulf*" 275). Of the scholars who've



discussed this point, I most favor Margaret Goldsmith, whose attention to the "Old Testament atmosphere" of *Beowulf* has already been noted (see 7.A. above). Goldsmith, I think rightly, equates *ealde riht* not with Christian morality or traditional Germanic morality, but instead with "God's law as the men of old understood it" (*Christian* 17; *Mode* 154). *Ealde riht* must be understood, Goldsmith points out, within the sacred-historical framework of God's progressive revelation of himself and his will:

St. Paul distinguishes periods of time during which mankind was governed by these different aspects of God's law: before Moses there was no written law for God's people, so there are three stages in the development of the law—natural, Mosaic, and Christian. One might add that for the Gentile nations ignorant of the law of Moses, the stages are effectively reduced to two, the time of natural law and the time of Christian law [...]. (*Mode* 154)

Goldsmith sees "natural law" illustrated in Cain's murder of Abel, in which "the eternal law is epitomized in the proper relationships Cain rejects—love towards God and his brother man" (*Mode* 150-1). Goldsmith also sees this same moral principle of "natural law" in *Beowulf*, in which "the story of Cain [...] provid[es] a paradigm for the evil characters in the story" (*Mode* 151). This reading works well, but I think it can be pushed further. Goldsmith confines her discussion to the simple Pauline schema (derived the early chapters of Romans), elucidated by Augustine's emphasis on the role of *caritas* in natural and revealed law, and so concludes that Beowulf's *ealde riht* is simply a conscience-level awareness of his responsibility to love God and his "brother man" (*Mode* 154). However, if this line of thinking is continued in light of the close connections between Cain, the giants, and the deluge in Christian historiography, we may find a firmer and more specific candidate for Beowulf's *ealde riht*: namely, the homicide prohibition in

the Noahic Covenant, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image" (Gen. 9:6). This command was given, not to any distinct ethnicity or religion, but to Noah and all his descendants (Gen. 9:8-9). Therefore, the Church Fathers and their early medieval successors, including the *Beowulf* poet, had canonical warrant for supposing that ancient humanity, after the deluge, had an *ealde riht* that was more substantial and specific than conscience.

If, as the points above suggest, not only the narrator, but also the characters of *Beowulf* show understanding of the ways Cain, the giants, and the deluge have shaped the moral realities of the *geardagas*, we may be justified in characterizing the *geardagas* as having a distinctively postdiluvian atmosphere. Not simply an "Old Testament atmosphere"—no hint of Abraham, Israel, Moses, or any other Hebrew patriarch, king, or prophet figures at all in *Beowulf*. By contrast, the *geardagas* seem to be preoccupied with the theological and moral concerns traditionally associated with the larger deluge narrative: violence, especially kin-slaying and tyranny, and the divine edict of judgment—even cataclysmic judgment—on persons and societies guilty of such sins. These observations provide one sort of answer to the question we asked in Chapter Five: *when* are the *geardagas* in relation to the poet's present and his understanding of the past? If we follow the lead of the cues of creation and flood early in the poem, and interpret those cues in light of their significances in the apologetic tradition's historiographical legacy, the answer we might offer is this: the *geardagas* come sometime in sacred history after the deluge, but at what *precise* time remains to be addressed.

#### 4. The Deluge as a Chronological Point-of-Contact

As was noted earlier, Christians were well aware of the fact that many cultures had legends of widely-destructive floods similar to the Genesis account of Noah's deluge. Indeed, some opponents of Christianity (notably Celsus) cited this similarity as they accused Jews and Christians of mythological plagiarism. Thus the deluge presented the Christian historians with both an opportunity and a challenge: the opportunity to integrate further secular and sacred history, and the challenge of vindicating scripture's veracity.

Integration seems to have been the earlier move. The Jewish historian Josephus, whose *Jewish Antiquities* was an important source for Christian historians, takes this move for granted when, after telling of Noah's deluge, he remarks that "all the writers of barbarian histories make mention of this flood" (*Jewish* 61). The second-century apologist Justin Martyr, in his *Second Apology*, considers the deluge story to be common ground between himself and his Roman audience, so that he can casually mention "[him] who is by us called Noah, and by you Deucalion," referring to the most prominent Greek flood legend (190). Justin's contemporary, the North African Tertullian, assumes that "the rains of the bygone year" would lead the people to recall "the deluge [...] which in ancient times overtook human unbelief and wickedness"—an assumption he can only make by granting a link between Noah's deluge and pagan flood stories ("Scapula" 106). Indeed, Tertullian, usually quite hostile to pagan writers, in one place cites the Sibyl, "who was the true prophetess of truth," when she dates the reign of Saturn to "the tenth generation of men, after the flood had overwhelmed the former race" (*Ad Nationes* 142). The identity of Noah's deluge and the Sibyl's flood is, again, assumed.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Eusebius shows a similar high regard for the Erythraean Sibyl, "who herself assures us that she lived in the sixth generation after the flood" (*Church History* 574).

The Christian historian who examines the issue of comparative flood-stories most thoroughly is Eusebius of Caesarea himself, in his *Chronicle*. Unlike many Christian writers of the generations before and after him, Eusebius interacts with flood stories of the ancient Near East. Eusebius, citing the Babylonian Berosus, the Greek Alexander Polyhistor, and the Chaldean Abydenus, notes that "there is considerable agreement between the Hebrew scriptures and the accounts of the Assyrians,<sup>133</sup> and the story which is told by them about the flood."<sup>134</sup> From Berosus and Alexander Polyhistor, Eusebius quotes the tale of Xisuthrus, "in whose reign the first great flood occurred, the flood which Moses mentions":

Cronus [...] approached [Xisuthrus] in his sleep, and said that [...] the human race would be destroyed by a flood. Cronus ordered him [...] to build a boat and embark on it with his close friends; to load the boat with food and drink, and to put on board every kind of bird and four-footed creature; and then, when all the preparations were complete, to sail away. When he asked where he should sail, Cronus replied, "To the gods, to pray that good things may happen to men." Xisuthrus did as he had been told. [...] When the flood had come, and soon afterwards stopped, Xisuthrus sent out some of the birds. But they could not find any food or anywhere to rest, and so they returned to the boat. A few days later,

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<sup>133</sup> Here Eusebius uses the term "Assyrian" to refer without distinction to the Chaldeans, Babylonians, and Assyrians, as representing a Mesopotamian historical tradition distinct from the Hebrews, Persians, Egyptians, and Greeks.

<sup>134</sup> The translation of Eusebius's *Chronicle* I rely on is hosted by *The Tertullian Project* ([www.tertullian.org](http://www.tertullian.org)), an online library of patristic editions and translations, many difficult to acquire in print editions or unavailable in accessible translations. This translation is by Andrew Smith, and is based on the Schoene-Petermann edition of the Latin text of Eusebius.

Xisuthrus sent out the birds again, and this time they returned to the boat with mud on their feet. The third time that he sent out the birds, they no longer returned to the boat. Xisuthrus realised that some land had appeared. He removed part of the sides of the boat, and saw that it had come to rest on a mountain. He disembarked with his wife and daughter and the helmsman, and kissed the ground. [...] A small part of the boat, which came to rest in Armenia, can still be found in the mountains of the Cordyaei in Armenia.

From Abydenus, Eusebius cites what is clearly a version of the same tale, though the hero's name is spelled "Sisuthrus," not "Xisuthrus." Eusebius concludes this passage by drawing attention to the similarities between each story and the Genesis deluge account:

I think that it will be obvious to everyone that what Abydenus says about the flood is similar to the story of the Hebrews, and uses the same form of words. That these historians, whether they are Greeks or Chaldeans, give Noah a different name, and call him Sisuthrus, is hardly surprising. Nor is it surprising that, as is their custom, they refer to gods rather than God, and talk about birds in general without mentioning a dove.

Eusebius, then, regards the accounts of Berossus, Alexander Polyhistor, and Abydenus as substantially accurate stories of the same historical flood which Genesis describes; the differences between the accounts he treats as "hardly surprising" artifacts of transmission and cultural adaptation.

The historical value these flood-story analogues hold for Eusebius is two-fold. On a more basic level, they help confirm the veracity of the Genesis account, not only by their similarity, but also by their insistence that the landing place of Xisuthrus/Sisuthrus/Noah in Armenia

continued to be known.<sup>135</sup> However, these analogues are also valuable as synchronisms for the purpose of aligning Chaldean chronologies with Hebrew chronology, as part of the *Chronicle's* schema of universal history. For Eusebius, this chronological use of the flood-story analogues is important, and he presents them in the midst of an account of "the chronology of the Chaldaeans, and what they have recorded about their ancestors." In Chaldean chronology, the flood serves to divide the Chaldean regnal list into antediluvian and postdiluvian kings. The Chaldeans, Eusebius writes, "list ten kings of the Assyrians [...] from Alorus, the first king, until Xisuthrus, in whose reign the first great flood occurred, the flood which Moses mentions." Here Eusebius sees a parallel with Genesis, for "[i]n the Hebrew scriptures also, Moses declares that there were ten generations before the flood." Eusebius finds a discrepancy between his Chaldean and Hebrew chronologies, however: while "Hebrew history assigns about 2,000 years to these ten generations," the Chaldean regnal list "says that the ten generations lasted for 120 *sars*, which is the equivalent of 430,000 years." Eusebius attempts briefly to resolve this discrepancy, first scoffing ("Such a length of time is clearly supernatural, and is not worthy of belief!"), then suggesting that "*sars* are not measured in years, but in some very small period of time." However, he seems not to be satisfied with the tack, and so turns to another which he regards as more definitive:

The reader who is keen to know the truth can easily understand, from what we have already said, that Xisuthrus is the same as the man who is called Noah by the Hebrews, in whose time the great flood occurred.

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<sup>135</sup> Eusebius cites Alexander Polyhistor and Abydenus on this topic, with Alexander being the most explicit:

A small part of the boat, which came to rest in Armenia, can still be found in the mountains of the Cordyaei in Armenia. Some people scrape off the asphalt, which covers the boat, and use it to ward off diseases, like an amulet.

Following this assertion, Eusebius presents the flood-stories of Berosus, Alexander Polyhistor, and Abydenus discussed above. The flow of his argument is clear enough: though chronological discrepancy between the Chaldean and Hebrew timelines makes their synchronization difficult, the firm identification of the Chaldean Xisuthrus with the Hebrew Noah, proven by the similarity of their flood-stories, makes such synchronization necessary. For Eusebius, the chronometrical problem of converting Chaldean *sars* into Hebrew years becomes, in the face of the strongly similar flood-stories, merely another unimportant and "hardly surprising" cultural difference, like the changing of names.

Sometimes, though, differences between flood-stories were just too significant to resolve. Theophilus of Antioch, while conceding that Noah "is called by some Deucalion," nonetheless castigates the Greeks for their "miserable, and very profane and senseless" accounts of the flood (106, 116).<sup>136</sup> Though Theophilus seems to assume that Deucalion's flood is the same as Noah's, he finds the Greek tales to be hopelessly garbled: they claim that the flood "extended not over the whole earth, but only over the plains," and that Deucalion repopulated the world by "[flinging]

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<sup>136</sup> Christian writers were not the only ones to take this tack on flood-stories. The pagan apologist Celsus argued for the falsity of the Genesis deluge account on the basis of its divergence from the Deucalion legend. Origen quotes Celsus in his rebuttal, *Against Celsus*:

They speak, in the next place, of a deluge, and of a monstrous ark, having within it all things, and of a dove and a crow as messengers, falsifying and recklessly altering the story of Deucalion; not expecting, I suppose, that these things would come to light, but imagining that they were inventing stories merely for young children. (516)

Origen's rejoinder cites "the antiquity of Moses" relative to Celsus's Greek writers, and mocks Celsus for showing skepticism toward the Hebrew scripture while readily accepting "the Theogonies of the Greeks, and the stories about the twelve gods" (501, 517).

stones behind him, and that men were produced from the stones" (116). Moses, Theophilus asserts, is a more trustworthy guide:

Moses, our prophet and the servant of God, in giving an account of the genesis of the world, related in what manner the flood came upon the earth, telling us, besides, how the details of the flood came about, and relating no fable of Pyrrha nor of Deucalion or Clymenus; nor, forsooth, that only the plains were submerged, and that those only who escaped to the mountains were saved. (116)

Hippolytus (ca. 170-236), in his *Refutation of All Heresies*, rejects the Greek legends because "the inundations which took place in the age of Ogyges and Deucalion prevailed only in the localities where these dwelt," while Noah's deluge was world-wide (149). Like Theophilus, Hippolytus sees these divergent details as signs of the Greek historical tradition's corruption—a corruption to the verge of forgetfulness, so that Hippolytus declares that "neither Egyptians, nor Chaldeans, nor Greeks recollect" that "there occurred a flood throughout the entire world" (149).

Lactantius (ca.260-330) makes a similar (but more nuanced) point in his *Divine Institutes*:

It is agreed by all that the deluge took place for the destruction of wickedness, and for its removal from the earth. Now, both philosophers and poets, and writers of ancient history, assert the same, and in this they especially agree with the language of the prophets. [...] But it is plain that they have corrupted this also, [...] since they were ignorant both at what time the flood happened on the earth, and who it was that deserved on account of his righteousness to be saved when the human race perished, and how and with whom he was saved: all of which are taught by the inspired writings. (59)



Lactantius strikes a balance between the ready acceptance of Justin Martyr and the hard-nosed exclusivism of Hippolytus: on one hand, the Greek flood-stories can be appealed to as common ground, pointing to a real historical event; on the other hand, their many differences with the Genesis deluge account mark them as artifacts of a "corrupted" and "ignorant" historical tradition, its corruption measured by its divergence from the "inspired writings." Lactantius presents this contrast as a tacit invitation to the Greek intellectuals, the lovers of "philosophers and poets," offering them a more accurate and ancient source of knowledge. Hippolytus is not tacit: "Therefore ye Greeks, Egyptians, Chaldeans, and the entire race of men, become adepts in this doctrine, and learn from us, who are the friends of God" (150).

Though Lactantius can treat differences relative to "what time the flood happened" as acceptable variation, such chronological discrepancies later proved unacceptable. In his *Chronicle*, Eusebius readily identifies the Genesis deluge with ancient Near Eastern flood-stories, but his commitment to chronological precision prevents him from doing the same with the Greek flood-stories:

The description of the flood, which is recorded by the Hebrews, is very different from the stories of the Greeks, which they tell about the flood at the time of Deucalion. [The Genesis deluge] happened a long time before Ogyges and the equally large flood, which is said by the Greeks to have happened in the time of Ogyges. In all, the flood which is described by the Hebrews happened 1,200 years before the time of Ogyges, which in its turn happened 250 years before Deucalion's flood.

Eusebius derives these relative dates by correlating Greek records of the Olympiads, as well as the regnal lists of the different Greek city-states, with Hebrew chronology. Unlike his more

tentative handling of antediluvian Chaldean chronology, Eusebius's work with Greek chronology is more assured: it is simply a matter of counting backward through the years. This rejection of the identification of Deucalion or Ogyges with Noah on chronological grounds appears to have become fairly standard, due largely to the nigh-universal adoption of Eusebian chronology as the basis for Christian history writing. In *City of God*, Augustine ranks the floods of Ogyges and Deucalion among the many natural catastrophes that befell the ancient Greeks, cursorily denying their identity with "that greatest [flood] from which no man escaped except those who could get into the ark, for neither Greek nor Latin history knew of it" (365). To substantiate this claim, Augustine cites "our writers of chronicles—first Eusebius, and afterwards Jerome" (365). Orosius, in his *Seven Books of History against the Pagans*, merely includes Deucalion and Ogyges in his annal of catastrophes without any reference to Noah at all, and Isidore's *Chronica Maiora* follows suit. Eusebius's chronological argument had severed the old association between Deucalion and Noah.

But not utterly, it seems. If we seek texts touching on this issue in Anglo-Saxon England, our search will turn up little: the historians of the Anglo-Saxons, whether Bede, Æthelweard, or the unnamed chroniclers, typically only engage with classical history to the degree that it impinges upon either ecclesiastical history or the history of Britain. Of Rome they say somewhat, within the circuit of their interests; of Greece, they say hardly anything at all. The curious mind of King Alfred the Great was not so circumscribed by practicality, however, and his delight in the mythological lore of the Greeks is evident in his Old English translations of Orosius's history and Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. And so it is in King Alfred's Orosius that we find perhaps the only reference to Deucalion in the extant Old English corpus:

Eight hundred winters and ten years before the building of Rome, Amphictyon the king reigned in Athens, a city of the Greeks. He was the third king that reigned after Cecrops, who was the first king of that city. In the time of this Amphictyon, there was so great a flood over all the world—though most in Thessaly, a Grecian city, about the mountains, called Parnassus, where King Deucalion reigned—that almost all the people perished. King Deucalion received all those that fled to him in ships to the mountains, and fed them there. Of this Deucalion, it was said as a proverb that he was the parent of mankind, as Noah was. (66-7)

This lone Anglo-Saxon witness to Deucalion links him to Noah, and so is evidence of a wider knowledge of this association among the Anglo-Saxon literati. Certainly it is evidence for this knowledge after the book's production, for Alfred commissioned his Orosius for broad distribution, and the documentary evidence indicates that his aim was fulfilled. However, it is also evidence for a known association between Deucalion and Noah before Alfred's Orosius, for the comment about Noah is Alfred's own contribution. Orosius, following Augustine, rejects the identification of Deucalion with Noah, and so omits any reference to Noah in his account of Deucalion's flood. Alfred, however, inserts Noah into the Deucalion story—an odd choice, if he had no previous awareness of such an association. Perhaps Alfred simply arrived at this association on his own, as is apparently the case with many of his helpful comments in his Orosius.<sup>137</sup> However, Alfred refers to this association as a piece of received wisdom: it is "said as a proverb" (67). That Alfred classifies the association of Deucalion and Noah as proverbial

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<sup>137</sup> Alfred's helpful comments are often incorrect, resulting from faulty translations or incorrect inferences: for instance, he informs his readers that the Minotaur was "half man and half lion," when Orosius had only said that the Minotaur was a man-beast; Alfred apparently reasons (wrongly) that the Minotaur's beast-half must be carnivorous (70).

suggests that he has not merely found it in a single source, but in many—enough for him to regard it as a commonplace maxim. Therefore, in Anglo-Saxon England, probably before Alfred's Orosius, and certainly after it, the association of Deucalion and Noah was known, and perhaps widely known—and with that association came the possibility of relating historical traditions, with flood-stories as a chronological point-of-contact.

### 5. Deluge as Chronological Point-of-Contact in *Beowulf*

In the previous section, we considered the *when* of the *geardagas* in light of the deluge narrative's function as a paradigmatic precedent, and our answer was that the *geardagas* are postdiluvian, with their moral situations and concerns profoundly shaped by the events of the traditional deluge narrative. Our answer was not, however, chronologically precise. Now, equipped with the Eusebian technique of synchronism, we will consider two potential chronological points-of-contact with the deluge narrative in *Beowulf*: first, Cain's giant-kin, and, second, *Beowulf's* genealogy of the Scylding kings.

The importance of Cain's giant-kin as a cross-traditional point-of-contact is made by Tolkien, when he asserts that the point where "new Scripture and old tradition touched and ignited" was in the connection of "the undoubtedly scriptural Cain" with "*eotenas* [giants] and *ylfe* [elves]" (78). More precisely, that point was "the giants and their war with God," which is the middle term between the primeval Cain and the present-time Grendel (Tolkien "*Beowulf*" 77). The first allusion to these giants is early in the poem, when Grendel is introduced:

[...] fifelcynnes eard  
 wonsǣlī wer      weardode hwīle,  
 siþðan him scyppend      forscriften hæfde

in Cāines cynne. þone cwealm gewræc  
 ēce drihten, þæs þe hē Ābel slōg;  
 ne gefeah hē þære fāhðe, ac hē hine feor forwræc,  
 metod for þȳ māne, mancynne fram.  
 þanon untȳdras ealle onwōcon,  
 eotenas ond ylfe ond orcneas,  
 swylce gīgantas, þā wið gode wunnon  
 lange þrāge; hē him ðæs lēan forgeald. (104-14)

[...] in the monster realm

That unhappy man dwelt awhile,

After the Creator had judged him

Among Cain's kin. [He] avenged that murder,

The eternal Lord did, in which [Cain] slew Abel;

[Cain] did not enjoy that feud; rather he banished him,

The Maker did, for that crime, far from mankind.

From that one sprang all monsters,

Giants and elves and orcs,<sup>138</sup>

And also those giants who strove against God

For a long time—he gave them a recompense for that.

The "recompense" of these "giants who strove against God" is explained later, after the defeat of Grendel's mother:

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<sup>138</sup> Taking a cue from the suggested derivation of *orcneas* from Orcus, Roman god of death, Liuzza renders this word "the living dead" (56).

[...] flōd ofslōh,  
 gifen gēotende,      gīganta cyn  
 frēcne gefērdon;      þæt wæs fremde þēod  
 ēcean dryhtne;      him þæs endelēan  
 þurh wāteres wylm      waldend sealde. (1689-93)

[...] the flood slew,  
 The whelming waters, the giant-kin—  
 They fared terribly; that was a people estranged  
 From the eternal Lord; a final recompense  
 The Ruler dealt them through the whelming waters.

The point-of-contact between "new Scripture and old tradition" is, therefore, at least indirectly the larger Genesis deluge narrative, though, as Tolkien rightly states, the direct point-of-contact is "the giants who strove against God."

While this point-of-contact between "new Scripture and old tradition" is in the identification of scriptural giants with traditional giants, their mere "giantishness" is not a sufficient explanation for the connection. If the poet only wanted biblical giants to warrant his own ogres, he could have found them in many well-known passages: the "sons of Anak," "a people great and tall," who terrified the Israelite spies Moses sent into Canaan (Deut. 9:2); King Og of Bashan, who opposed the Israelite conquest of Canaan, and whose bed was over thirteen feet long (Deut. 3:11); the giants of Gath, including the famous Goliath, whom King David and his "mighty men" subdued (1 Sam. 17; 1 Chron. 20). No, what makes "the giants who strove against God" (113-114) ideal for the poet's purpose is precisely their feud with heaven, for that is the essential point-of-contact between the "new Scripture and old tradition." The "old tradition"

of Scandinavian mythology tells of gods "besieged" by giants—gods whose "battle is with the monsters and the outer darkness" and who "gather heroes for the last defense" (Tolkien 77). The "new Scripture" describes the Genesis deluge, which was meant, as the Old English *Genesis* poem puts it, "to impose a punishment on the renegades [...], the giant sons displeasing to God, the huge wicked wreckers, abhorrent to the Lord" (Bradley 42). As Tolkien observes, these "are precisely the elements which bear upon [*Beowulf's*] theme":

Man alien in a hostile world, engaged in a struggle he cannot win while the world lasts, is assured that his foes are the foes also of Dryhten [God], that his courage noble in itself is also the highest loyalty: so said thyle [poet] and clerk. (78)

By implicitly linking these two narratives of "the giants who strove against the gods/God," the *Beowulf* poet can present his tale within a context of cosmic conflict suitable to the topics of his traditional matter and the imaginations of his Christian audience.

However, though Tolkien focuses on theme, it should not be forgotten that the Genesis deluge is not presented in *Beowulf* as merely a thematic analogue to the events in the story. Narrative apposition, to use Fred Robinson's term, is certainly a favorite technique of the *Beowulf* poet, and readers do well to note the thematic resonances between the central and peripheral narratives. Often this narrative apposition is created by stories told by characters within the story, as when Beowulf's victory over Grendel is juxtaposed with a song about Sigemund's victory over the dragon (875-97). The allusions to the Genesis deluge are not simply stories told by a scop in Hrothgar's court, however: they are part of the narrator's account of Grendel's origin, and so an earlier act in a plot the poet enters *in media res*. The thematic resonances are certainly there, but they do not arise merely from similitude, but from historical foreshadowing: the same God who exiled Cain and drowned the giants also directs his wrath at

Grendel, whom he judges by means of Beowulf's valor. The Beowulf story has been connected to sacred history, and so integrated into a "Eusebian" universal history, with the Flood-struck giants as the chronological point-of-contact.

While the importance of the giants in *Beowulf* is, thanks to Tolkien, widely acknowledged, the possibility of another chronological point-of-contact with the deluge is not: the Scylding genealogy in the "prologue" and the beginning of *fitt* one (ll. 1-63). As was discussed in Chapter Six, chronological records, especially genealogies, were important to chronographers like Eusebius because "these lists [...] provided, by their potential synthesis, the framework for a more elaborate and comprehensive chronological record of the past" (Croke "Origins" 117). Given the typical use of genealogies in Christian historiography's universal history endeavor, and given that the *Beowulf* poet has demonstrated in other ways a desire to integrate his story of the *geardagas* into the framework of sacred history, we should consider the possibility that the poet's account of the Scylding lineage signals other efforts at historical integration. However, what possible connections could be made between the Scylding lineage and the deluge? There is no mention of the deluge, and the presentation of Hrothgar's ancestry seems fairly straightforward: first mentioned is the conqueror Scyld Scefing (l. 4), followed by his son Beowulf, often glossed as "Beow" (l. 18); Beowulf's son is Healfdene (l. 57), who became the father of three sons—King Hrothgar, and his brothers Heorogar and Halga—and an unnamed daughter (ll.61-2). One generation (or more) back from Scyld may also be inferred from his epithet "Scefing": "son/descendant of Sheaf/Scef" (Bruce 19).<sup>139</sup> If we look only at the genealogy in *Beowulf* as it stands in the text, there seems little warrant for the reading I suggest.

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<sup>139</sup> Alexander Bruce notes that "early scholars [...] defended the latter translation ['Scyld with the sheaf'], arguing that at some stage 'Scefing' had been erroneously read as 'son of Sheaf' instead of 'with the sheaf'" (19). This reading



The poem does not instruct its audience to confine their attention to the text, however: in fact, it pointedly acknowledges outside material in the opening lines: "We have heard of the glory of the Spear-Danes' kings in days long ago" (ll. 1-2). If "we"—the poet and audience—"have heard" of these ancient Danish kings, then the poet clearly expects the audience to situate its hearing of his tale in relation to the tales of the Scylding lineage it already knows: the poet must "count on the co-operation of his audience, for it has had to supply most of the picture itself, from his hints [i.e. allusions to the traditional Scylding matter]" (Whitelock 36).<sup>140</sup> Thus, the poet can expect the audience not only to understand off-hand references to presumably-familiar characters, but also to appreciate the peculiar handling of matter more central to the story, especially that having to do with the Scylding lineage. Unfortunately, we are not the poet's audience, so we do not know what accounts of Scylding lineage they had heard—but we can make some informed guesses.

The first potential association the audience might have had is that most evidently relevant to *Beowulf's* narrative: namely, that the Scylding lineage is the ancestry of a major character, the Danish king Hrothgar. We may ask, then, whether the Scylding lineage reported in *Beowulf*

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"assumes that only one tradition existed, one that featured only Scyld"—an assumption Bruce shows to be far from warranted (19-29).

<sup>140</sup> In this vein, Whitelock also maintains that

it is clear that a story identical in its main outlines with what we can learn from the Scandinavian sources, much later though these are, must have been familiar to the poet's hearers. [...] Unless the poet could count on his audience's previous knowledge, not only would much of what he had to say have lost all significance, but he would surely have been running the risk of interruption. Someone would have dared to ask: 'What deeds of treachery did the Scyldings perform, and when?' or: 'What was all the fuss at Finnsburg about?' (37)

presents Hrothgar's ancestry in a familiar or unfamiliar way. Unfortunately, outside a mention of Hrothgar and his nephew Hrothulf in the Old English poem "Wīdsīð," Hrothgar's family connections are not attested in Anglo-Saxon literature. Hrothgar is known, though, in medieval Scandinavian literature, under various cognate names: Ro, Roas, Roe, and Hróar (Garmonsway 127-41).<sup>141</sup> This Ro is the son of Dan/Haldanus/Halfdanus/Hálfðan (Garmonsway 128-41).<sup>142</sup> Thus far the Scandinavian parallels seem fairly close to *Beowulf's* account of Hrothgar, son of Healfdene, but once we move beyond Dan, significant differences emerge. After this point, there is variation in the different Scandinavian genealogies, but they generally agree that eventually, in as few as one generation and as many as thirteen, that Dan/Healfdene and Ro/Hrothgar are descended from Skiold/Scyld, of whose name there are also many variations. Nonetheless, though there are significant differences, especially in the number of generations between Dan/Healfdene and Skiold/Scyld, the general contours remain fairly congruent between *Beowulf* and the Scandinavian material up to this point.

In the generation beyond Skiold/Scyld, however, a crucial difference emerges, for many Scandinavian sources (some relatively early) name the father of Skiold/Scyld as Odin himself.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Sources for "Ro": *Leire Chronicle* (ca. 1170), *Annales Ryenses* (ca. 1290). Sources for "Roas": *Skjoldunga Saga* (ca. 1200). Sources for "Roe": Saxo Grammaticus, *Danish History* (ca. 1200). Sources for "Hróar": *Langfeðgatal* (ca. 1100), *Hrólfs saga kraka* (ca. 1400).

<sup>142</sup> Sources for "Dan": *Leire Chronicle* (ca. 1170). Sources for "Haldanus": Sven Aageson, *Brief History of the Kings of Denmark* (ca. 1187). Sources for "Halfdanus": *Skjoldunga Saga* (ca. 1200), Saxo Grammaticus, *Danish History* (ca. 1200), *Annales Ryenses* (ca. 1290). Sources for "Hálfðan": *Langfeðgatal* (ca. 1100), *Hrólfs saga kraka* (ca. 1400).

<sup>143</sup> Interestingly enough, there is another Scyld figure in these same Icelandic genealogies, one who *is* descended from a Scef figure. Generations before Skioldr, son of Oden, the *Langfeðgatal* names a "Scealdna," and his ancestor in the fifth degree is "Seskef or Sescéf" (Garmonsway 120). Snorri, like the *Langfeðgatal*, presents an earlier

According to the twelfth-century Icelandic genealogy *Langfeðgatal*, the father of "Skioldr [was] Oden," and Snorri Sturlusson (ca. 1220) declares that "Skjöldr was the name of Óðinn's son, from whom the Skjöldungs are descended: he [...] was ruler in those lands which are now called Denmark" (Garmonsway 122). This tracing of the Skjöldung dynasty back to Odin reflects the common practice among various Germanic peoples, including the Anglo-Saxons, of reckoning Odin among their illustrious ancestors. Bede names "Woden" as the great-great-grandfather of Hengist and Horsa, and further testifies that from "Woden[']s stock sprang the royal houses of many provinces"; the Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies bear out that assertion (*Ecclesiastical* 56). That Woden/Odin was also worshipped as a deity is often acknowledged by Anglo-Saxon sources, but a distinction is made between Woden the historical king and the pagan god Woden, as when Æthelweard's *Chronicle* connects the two Wodens through a euhemeristic account:

Woden [was] king of a multitude of the barbarians [*barbarorum*]. The heathen [*increduli*] northern peoples are overwhelmed in so great a seduction that they worship [him] as a god to the present day, that is to say the Danes, Norwegians and also the Svebi [...]. (9)

So, the Icelandic sources cited above link Skiold/Scyld to Odin, a connection that the Anglo-Saxons probably would not have rejected, but interpreted in a euhemeristic sense, treating Woden simply as a prominent historical king whose fame lent luster to a royal pedigree. And, yet, *Beowulf* links Scyld to Scef, not Odin. What might this imply?

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"Skjaldun whom we call Skjöldr," the fifth-degree descendant of "Seskef" (Garmonsway 120). However, this Scealdna/Skjaldun and Seskef are not relevant to this discussion because it is fairly certain that they were drawn by Icelandic genealogists, not from their own lore, but from the very Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies that will be discussed shortly. See Alexander Bruce's discussion of the influence of Anglo-Saxon regnal lists on Icelandic genealogies in chapter 5, "Scyld and Scef in Icelandic Sources" (55-62).

First, this might imply that the *Beowulf* poet does not know of a father-son relationship between Odin and Scyld. After all, these figures are not connected in this way in the extant Anglo-Saxon sources. However, these sources, beyond *Beowulf*, consist entirely of royal genealogies (as in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*) or snippets of royal genealogies in histories (as in Bede), none of which are directly concerned with the Scylding line described in *Beowulf*. In the extant Old English corpus, only *Beowulf* gives a genealogy of the Danish kings in its story because only *Beowulf* tells the story at all. Nonetheless, the audience the poem invokes with its opening lines is a knowledgeable audience, one which will find much in the tale that is familiar. Therefore, the silence of *Beowulf* on a point may just as likely point to knowledge as to ignorance—knowledge that is shared and therefore may be left unspoken. Moreover, Odinic ancestry is a category Anglo-Saxons would understand; it was, after all, something they understood about not only their own kings, but also the kings of many peoples. Odin and Scyld's identification as father and son could not have been, for the *Beowulf* poet, unknown because it was categorically unthinkable: it was quite thinkable, and even commonplace.

Second, this might imply an anti-pagan agenda in *Beowulf*: the poet might have omitted Odin out of particular animus, or as part of a pattern of suppressing references to pagan deities generally. Given the poet's emphatic Christianity, this hypothesis seems not unlikely. However, as we have seen, other Anglo-Saxon writers like Bede and Æthelweard, also devout Christians, felt no compunction in assigning Odinic ancestry to their own kings. By applying the interpretive technique of euhemerism, these writers rendered the god of slaughter and magic into a perfectly respectable forefather for Christian kings. Given the *Beowulf* poet's ready willingness to transform his traditional subject matter in order to incorporate it into a Christian view of reality

(as when he explains his monsters by reference to Cain), there seems little reason to suppose he would balk at Bede and Æthelweard's euhemerized Woden.

I will now suggest a third possible implication, and, in so doing, take up again the Christian historiographical tradition's use of genealogies as a chronological point-of-contact. As I stated above, the Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies do not record the lineage of the Danish Scylding dynasty, nor do they present the eponymous founder of that line as son of Odin. Nonetheless, some of them do include both Scyld and Odin/Woden, but not in the relationship the Scandinavian sources present. First, let us consider one of the earliest of these genealogies, the late ninth-century genealogy of King Alfred presented by his biographer, Asser:

King Alfred was the son of King Æthelwulf, the son of Ecgberht, the son of Ealhmund, the son of Eafa, the son of Eoppa, the son of Ingild [...] the so[n] of Cenred, the son of Ceolwold, the son of Cutha, the son of Cuthwine, the son of Ceawlin, the son of Cynric, the son of Creoda, the son of Cerdic, the son of Elesa, the son of Gewis, [...] the son of Brand, the son of Baeldaeg, the son of Woden, the son of Frithuwald, the son of Frealaf, the son of Frithuwulf, the son of Finn, [the son of] Godwulf, the son of Geat [...] the son of Tetwa, the son of Beaw, the son of Sceldwa, the son of Heremod, the son of Itermon, the son of Hathra, the son of Hwala, the son of Bedwig, the son of Seth,<sup>144</sup> the son of Noah [...] (Bruce 102-3)

Here we find Woden in his euhemerized form, standing some nineteen generations before King Alfred himself. Yet, even further back, we find a Scyld figure, here "Sceldwa," standing twenty-eight generations before King Alfred, and only seven generation after Noah himself. If there is

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<sup>144</sup> Liuzza emends "Seth" to read "Shem" (162).

doubt about the identification of Sceldwa with *Beowulf's* Scyld, that is cleared up by observing that Sceldwa's son, "Beaw," corresponds to Scyld's son, Beowulf; also, that Sceldwa is preceded by Heremod also fits well with *Beowulf's* depiction of Heremod as a previous Danish king, before Scyld's rise to power. Therefore, if the *Beowulf* poet is following a chronology similar to Asser's, his Scyld is not a son or descendant of Woden because Woden is, in fact, his descendant.

Yet Scyld/Sceldwa, Beowulf/Beaw, and Heremod are not the only ancient Danes that appear in the Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies: we also find Scyld's mysterious ancestor, Scef. *Æthelweard's Chronicle* includes a genealogy of *Æthelwulf* that is, on most points, similar to Asser's, but with significant differences. Woden is still a descendant of Scyld, but Scyld is the son of Scef, who

arrived with one light ship in the island of the sea which is called Skaney, with arms all round him. He was a very young boy, and unknown to the people of that land, but he was received by them, and they guarded him with diligent attention as one who belonged to them, and elected him king. (Bruce 92)

Another source, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, presents in its four major variant texts a genealogy for Alfred and his father *Æthelwulf* which, similar to Asser's and *Æthelweard's*, preserves the multi-generational priority of the Scyld figure over Woden (Bruce 96-9).<sup>145</sup> One interesting difference, though, is that the descent of the Scyld figure from Noah is not through "Seth," as Asser's genealogy has it, but through "Hrathra" in the A-Text, or "Scef" in B-, C-, and D- (Bruce 96-9). In each of the four texts, this son of Noah is said to have been "born in Noah's ark," and so (presumably) was not counted among Noah's three sons named in Genesis: Shem,

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<sup>145</sup> The variant spellings of Scyld in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*: Sceldwea, A-Text; Scyldwa, B-Text; Scealdwa, C-Text; Scealdhwa, D-Text.

Ham, and Japheth (Bruce 96-9). Traditions about an unknown fourth son of Noah may be found in Christian and Jewish apocryphal texts, and probably provided warrant for Anglo-Saxon speculations in that direction:

[T]he Anglo-Saxon apparently found it easy to connect this already recognized fourth son of Noah with their own cultural hero Scef; after all, Scef (or his son Scyld) was, according to a variety of records and traditions (such as *Beowulf* and Æthelweard's *Chronicle*), brought by a boat over the water, just as the son of Noah would have been. (Bruce 38).

By identifying Scef with the apocryphal fourth son of Noah, the genealogists made Scef "the crucial link to the Judeo-Christian tradition" (Bruce 38).

At this point, let us review our observations and draw some inferences. Our first observation is that the poet's narrative sources were, apparently, closely aligned with the surviving Scandinavian sources; at any rate, the Scandinavian sources are of great help in filling in the allusive gaps in the *Beowulf* narrative, and it is reasonable to assume that *Beowulf's* audience relied on a similar fund of tales for that same purpose as they listened or read. In the surviving Scandinavian sources, the eponymous founder of the Skjöldung dynasty is a son of Odin; therefore, possessing a tradition quite similar to the surviving Scandinavian sources, the poet and audience of *Beowulf* were probably aware of that association. From this first observation, we may infer that, in *Beowulf*, it is significant that Scyld is not the son of Woden, so that the effect of this difference ought to be considered.

Our second observation is that, in Anglo-Saxon England, from the late ninth century, there were genealogies that presented Scyld, not as Odin's son, but as his ancestor. In five of these genealogies, Scyld is the son (or near descendant) of a son of Noah; in four, he is the son of

Sceaf; and in three, this Sceaf is the son of Noah. What may we infer from this second observation? First, regarding Odin's descent from Scyld, R. W. Chambers is certainly correct to say that this relationship cannot "go back to heathen time," for "[t]hose who believed in Woden as a god can hardly have believed at the same time that he was a descendant of the Danish king Scyld" (320). Second, to quote Alexander Bruce, this reversal of descent and integration with the deluge narrative must reflect "the Anglo-Saxons' simultaneous effort to acknowledge their Germanic past even as they linked that past and themselves to the Judeo-Christian family" (37).

The question we may now raise, in response to these inferences, is whether the *Beowulf* poet is making a move relative to Scyld and Woden similar to that made by the Anglo-Saxon genealogies, and for similar reasons. It is, of course, impossible to answer this question unequivocally, but I think we can draw some conclusions with varying degrees of certainty. First, at the very least, we may say that the Scylding genealogy of *Beowulf* is presented without reference to Woden, when such a reference is probably expected. Yet, in *Beowulf*, the Scylding genealogy *is* presented in reference to the Christian God, who blesses Scyld and his son Beowulf (ll. 13, 16-7, 27). This contrast may be read with a polemical tenor: while Woden was widely regarded as the "stock" from whom "the royal race of many provinces" grew and flourished, it is God who established the Scyldings, first by providing the foundling Scyld to a kingless people, later by providing Scyld with a worthy heir.

Second, by connecting the Danish Scyldings to Sceaf, an impression of greater antiquity is created than was associated with Woden. While Asser's genealogy and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* genealogies connect Sceaf to Noah, Æthelweard's *Chronicle* does not. Thus, while Asser and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*'s connections to Noah may be chalked up to King Alfred's desire to "claim descent from both great Germanic heroes and important biblical figures," the



same cannot be said of Æthelweard's *Chronicle*, which does not tie Æthelwulf's lineage to biblical patriarchs, but instead tells a story of Scef probably as old and traditional as *Beowulf's* sources (Bruce 36). Nonetheless, Æthelweard's *Chronicle* sets Scyld and Scef "deep in the genealogy," to use Bruce's phrase, just as Asser and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* do (36). It seems that, for Æthelweard, Scef is a figure of great antiquity, beyond even that of Woden, and that without any obvious attempt to tie in biblical genealogies at all. To the degree that this equation of Scef with great antiquity is actually derived from traditional sources, it may be an assumption the *Beowulf* poet had as well. This conclusion also suggests an implicit apologetic argument: Woden, whom the heathen worshipped as Odin and to whom they attributed rule over the created world, was in fact just a man, and a fairly recent man at that. Also, if *Beowulf* was written in conversation with genealogies like Æthelweard's, one question about the Danes can be answered: they cannot be Odin worshippers, for he hasn't even been born yet.

Third, if *Beowulf* was written during or after the reign of King Alfred, we may readily conclude that the poet would equate Scyld's ancestor Scef with the Scef of the royal genealogies, and so understand him to be the son of Noah. If this were the case, dating the *geardagas* becomes simplicity itself, because there is now a clear chronological point-of-contact between the traditions, such as would delight an obsessive chronographer like Eusebius. At this point, we should recall Goldsmith's comment on the *Beowulf's* historical setting:

Some fairly simple computation from the genealogical tables of the royal houses could have shown that Beowulf lived long after the Incarnation, but there is no knowing whether he was chronologically-minded, or whether the question occurred to him at all. (*Mode* 179-80)

If one uses Scandinavian royal genealogies, Goldsmith is correct: but we have already seen that *Beowulf's* genealogy of the Scyldings differs from the Scandinavian genealogies on the very important point of Odinic ancestry. If one uses Asser, on the other hand, the answer is different: Scyld is in the seventh generation after Noah, Beowulf the eighth, Healfdene the ninth, and Hrothgar the tenth. If we compare this result to genealogies in Genesis, we find that Hrothgar is in the same generation from Noah as Abraham himself.<sup>146</sup> Admittedly, to conclude that the poet intended this connection when he wrote requires a number of assumptions, most importantly the date of *Beowulf's* authorship. However, that assumption isn't necessary for us to conclude that some Anglo-Saxons probably made this connection when they read *Beowulf*. After all, even if *Beowulf* was written before King Alfred's reign, it was probably read or heard after it. What did those readers and listeners, who brought to their *Beowulf* experience knowledge of royal genealogies like Asser's, think of *Beowulf's* historical setting? If the question occurred to them at all—and why wouldn't it?—they would probably conclude that these events happened late in the Second Age or early in the Third, long before not only the Incarnation, the defining event of the Sixth Age, but also the Babylonian exile (the Fifth Age), the rise of King David (the Fourth Age), and Sinai and the Exodus (major landmarks of the middle Third Age). If this were the case, the *geardagas* would be very long ago indeed, and the Scylding Danes contemporaries of the pre-Mosaic Hebrew patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

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<sup>146</sup> Noah, Shem, Arpachsad, Shelah, Eber, Peleg, Reu, Serug, Nahor, Terah, Abraham (Gen. 11:10-26).

## PART TWO CONCLUSION

What, then, is the historical stage on which *Beowulf's* Creation Song is sung? By exploring the functions of creation and the deluge in the apologetic tradition's historiographical legacy, we are equipped to read the prominent creation and deluge references early in *Beowulf* as important cues pointing to its historical context. We also see how following those cues as we read further in *Beowulf* reveals a coherent presentation of theological themes and arguments important within the apologetic tradition. By following the cue of creation, we find that the Creation Song's stage is a world made and providentially governed by a sovereign creator, who orders the fates of all people and the histories of all nations; however, this theological foundation does not move Christian thinkers like Eusebius and the *Beowulf* poet toward doctrinal abstraction, but toward an expansive and inclusive vision of universal history, in which the historical traditions of all peoples can be integrated together in a harmoniously diverse whole. We also find that certain characters show knowledge of their creator, and in so doing provide a tantalizing (but inconclusive) hint about their location in sacred history. By following the cue of the deluge, we find that the Creation Song's stage is a world profoundly scarred by evil, in which old sins cast long shadows and the sins of the present are the flowering of deep roots; nonetheless, the creator still acts in judgment, punishing the wicked and preserving the good, so that memories of this divine justice remain among all peoples, teaching them wisdom and pointing them toward the past where answers lie. Finally, and notably, *Beowulf's* Scylding genealogy may provide us with a clue for situating the Creation Song's stage more precisely in relationship to events sacred and secular: if Scef is the son of Noah, then Hrothgar is a contemporary of Abraham. This suggestion is tenuous, however. Still, *Beowulf's* Scylding

genealogy shows the influence of Christianity, distancing the Scylding Danes from Odin in their origins, and probably positioning them before Odin in history. In short, in our search for the Creation Song's stage, we find a world that is not only tinged with "Old Testament atmosphere," but with postdiluvian atmosphere: *Beowulf's* story is framed in reference to events of the First and Second Ages of sacred history, with no other frame of reference provided. More importantly, *Beowulf's* characters live as denizens of the Second Age, vexed by the legacy of Cain and the giants, revering the almighty creator and judge, and striving to live justly in light of the lessons the deluge taught. And, with those observations made, we are ready to take up again the question of the religious identity of Creation Song's singer and audience.

## CONCLUSION:

### THE SINGER'S ENCORE

An old Zen koan is often quoted: "When the snowy heron stands in the snow, the colors are not the same" (Miura 105). While the fuller meaning of this koan is, in Zen Buddhism, complex and (ultimately) inexpressible, its mundane significance is fairly clear: often the most informative comparisons are between things perceived as quite similar. Such, I believe, is the case with *Beowulf's* Creation Song. In this study, we have ranged far into the apologetic tradition that shaped the theologically-derived categories of religious and ethnic identity among Christian Anglo-Saxons. Connections to that tradition have been made with the song's doctrinal content and its stage's sacred-historical framework, and these connections have been, I hope, informative. However, their full import is best appreciated, particularly their effect on *Beowulf's* depiction of the singer's ethnicity, when they are considered alongside another Anglo-Saxon author's use of the same apologetic tradition in handling quite similar subject matter. In this conclusion, we will examine the Caedmon narrative within its historical and thematic context in Bede's *Historia*, and see how both Bede and the *Beowulf* poet tied the praise of the creator to religious and ethnic identity, but with radically different results.

#### 1. Hearing Caedmon in Context: Praise and Pagans in Bede's *Historia*

Current readers of Bede's *Historia* may be irked at his frequent insertion of seemingly random narrative excurses. For instance, after narrating King Oswald of Bernicia's military

campaign against Cadwalla, Bede tells a series of miracle tales associated with a cross Oswald planted in a battlefield (*History* 142-4). Bede assures his readers that this particular rabbit-trail is "not irrelevant," but a reader accustomed to modern histories may not be convinced (*History* 143). However, to one who views history as Bede does, such excurses show the connections between events past and present that transcend ordinary causality. Bede's notion of history is, like that of the apologetic tradition, centered on sacred history, in which the developing historical narrative is shaped not only by sequential human actions, but also by divine providence and intervention, prophecy and fulfillment, and patterns of type and antitype. Therefore, the miracles of Oswald's cross are not an irrelevance, but a confirmation of righteous Oswald's continued activity of saintly intercession in Bede's present day, as well as a present-day witness to Oswald's character in life, which the reader will continue to read with awareness of Oswald's trajectory toward sainthood.<sup>147</sup> Therefore, as we come to the story of Caedmon, we should not see it as a random, albeit interesting, narrative sidetrack, but instead expect it to connect to other portions of the *Historia* in ways that highlight the theological side of Bede's historical vision.

Before turning to Bede's *Historia*, though, we should equip for this exploration with some of Bede's explicit theology from his commentary, *On Genesis*. Like many in the Christian apologetic tradition, Bede saw a close connection between language, ethnicity, and religion, and his biblical warrant for that was the usual one: the Genesis 11 narrative of Babel, in which "the LORD confused the language of all the earth" (Gen. 11:9). At Babel, says Bede, "[l]anguage was deservedly cast into confusion, because it had wickedly combined into impious speech," and therefore led to community-encompassing evil (*Genesis* 231). However, divided by their

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<sup>147</sup> Bede later declares this purpose explicitly in Chapter Ten: "Oswald's great devotion and faith in God was made evident by the miracles that took place after his death" (*History* 156).

languages, the once-united human race "were soon not only separated from each other but driven further from their Creator because of their words and deeds of pride" (Bede *Genesis* 233). The result, Bede declares, was not only linguistic diversity ("cast into confusion") and hence ethnic diversity ("separated from each other"), but also religious diversity:

[W]ho are the builders of Babylon but the instigators of heresies, who either institute the worship of the divine contrary to the Truth or assail the acknowledged faith of the Truth with wicked deeds and words? (*Genesis* 233)

After making these points, Bede moves from this grim moment in the Second Age to the light of the Sixth Age, in which God enacted a reversal of Babel at Jerusalem, "the city of truth":

[T]he city of truth has both a name and a condition quite contrary to [Babel]; for it is called Jerusalem, that is, "vision of peace," where the Lord, seeing in the spirit the assemblage of the faithful and the humble, sent the grace of the Holy Spirit to confer on them the knowledge of all languages, so that, imbued with these, they might summon all the peoples speaking different languages to the construction with one accord of that holy city, that is, the Church of Christ; and so that they who had humbly applied their hearing to the truth might sublimely open their mouths to preach the knowledge of the truth to the whole world. (231)

This is a reference to the "day of Pentecost" in Acts 2, during which the apostles of Christ were "all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues [*glossolalia*]" (Acts 2:4a):

Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing [the apostles] speak in his own language. And they were amazed [...], saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And

how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native tongue? [...] [W]e hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." (Acts 2:5-8, 11b)

In this event, "when languages were united by the grace of the Holy Spirit," Bede also sees the divisions of ethnicity and religion begin to heal: "[t]he faithful understood even the speech of all the foreigners who had come, and in one bond of love and faith they all praised the same God and Lord" (*Genesis* 233). That Bede means to include ethnic identity as a factor in this Pentecost reversal is clear from his identification of the apostles' audience simply as "foreigners," while Acts specifies that they are Jews who live outside Judea and speak their regional vernacular. Thus, for Bede, while Babel divided humanity linguistically, ethnically, and religiously, Pentecost began the healing of that divide so that "all the peoples speaking different languages" might join "the construction with one accord of that holy city, that is, the Church of Christ" (*Genesis* 231). And, which is significant, what enabled this healing of division was not the reunification of language (and hence of ethnicity), but "tongues"—*glossolalia*—the divinely-conferred gift to speak "the mighty works of God" across linguistic barriers.<sup>148</sup>

When we return to Bede's *Historia*, we find that same three-fold association of language, ethnicity, and religion early in Book One, when Germanus of Auxerre leads the Britons against marauding barbarians in the so-called "Alleluia Battle." According to Bede, "the Saxons and the Picts joined forces and made war on the Britons" during the period that Bishop Germanus of Auxerre and Bishop Lupus of Troyes were in Britain to combat the Pelagian heresy (*History* 62).

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<sup>148</sup> Bede's interest in Christian unity across linguistic barriers is evident in the first chapter of his *Historia*:

At the present time there are in Britain, in harmony with the five books of the divine law, five languages and four nations—English, British, Scots, and Picts. Each of these have their own language; but all are united in the study of God's truth by the fifth—Latin—which has become a common medium through the study of the scriptures. (38)



Because the Britons "feared that their strength was unequal to the challenge, they called on the saintly bishops [Germanus and Lupus] for help," with the result that "[u]nder these apostolic leaders, Christ himself commanded" (*History* 62). After a time of spiritual preparation, which included Lenten and Easter observance, instruction, and baptism, the bishop-led British army confronted the Saxons and Picts on Germanus's chosen ground:

By now the main body of [the Briton's] remorseless enemies was approaching, watched by those whom [Germanus] had placed in ambush. Suddenly Germanus, raising the standard, called upon them all to join him in a mighty shout. While the enemy advanced confidently, expecting to take the Britons unawares, the bishops three times shouted, "Alleluia!" The whole army joined in the shout, until the surrounding hills echoed with the sound. The enemy column panicked, thinking that the very rocks and sky were falling on them, and were so terrified that they could not run fast enough. Throwing away their weapons in headlong flight, they were well content to escape naked, while many in their hasty flight were drowned in a river which they tried to cross. So the innocent British army saw its defeat avenged, and became an inactive spectator of the victory granted to it. The scattered spoils were collected, and the Christian forces rejoiced in the triumph of heaven. So the bishops overcame the enemy without bloodshed, winning a victory by faith and not by force. (*History* 63)

Here the contrast between the Britons and the Saxon and Pict allies is marked. On one hand, the Britons are "under apostolic leaders," "innocent," and "Christian"; shortly before this passage, Bede describes them as "[s]trong in faith and fresh from the waters of Baptism" (*History* 62-3).

On the other hand, not only are the Saxons and Picts "remorseless,"<sup>149</sup> but also, and more importantly, they do not understand the "Alleluia!" shout (Bede *History* 63). *Alleluia* is the Latin transliteration of the Hebrew phrase *Hallelu jah*, which means "praise Yahweh" or "praise the LORD" ("Hallelujah"). It appears in the Jewish scriptures, especially in the Psalms, and was adopted by early Christians in its untranslated form.<sup>150</sup> Indeed, the tradition throughout church history has been to transliterate *Hallelujah* instead of translating it, making it one of a select few Christian terms that Christians of different eras and cultures pronounce the same way.<sup>151</sup> Therefore, because they do not understand the "Alleluia!" shout, the Saxons and Picts show that they are excluded from the unity of the Christian faith, which can unite even across linguistic barriers in praise of God. Even worse, the Saxons and Picts are "terrified" by the "Alleluia!" shout—not only is it unintelligible, but it is perceived as a supernatural threat: the Saxons and Picts believe "that the very rocks and sky were falling on them" (Bede *History* 63). Here Bede invokes apocalyptic imagery:

The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated

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<sup>149</sup> Five chapters before this story, Bede describes the depredations of the Anglo-Saxons against the Britons: they are "pagans," "heathen conquerors," who slaughter the British populace wholesale, including "priests [...] at the altar" and bishops (*History* 57).

<sup>150</sup> It appears in the Book of Revelation is the Greek transliteration *allelouia* (Rev. 19:1, 3, 4, 6).

<sup>151</sup> "'Hallelujah!,' like 'Amen,' has practically become a universal word" ("Hallelujah").

on the throne [i.e. God the Father], and from the wrath of the Lamb [i.e. Christ],  
for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" (Rev. 6:14-17)

This allusion is only half metaphorical, for while the world-ending *Dies Irae* had not yet come, nonetheless the Saxons and Picts met their deaths through "the triumph of heaven," and, as Isidore comments in his *Chronicon*, "when each person departs from the world, then that is the end of the world for him." Thus are the Saxons and Picts excluded from the community of praise and under God's wrath.

Bede's story does not end there, however, for, as he assures his reader two chapters later, "God in his goodness did not utterly abandon the people whom he had chosen"—that is, the English (*History* 66). The remainder of Book One is spent in recounting Augustine of Canterbury's mission to Britain under the orders and aegis of the Roman pontiff, Gregory the Great. Gregory is important in this section as the commissioner and adviser of Augustine's efforts, but his reasons for sending missionaries to the Anglo-Saxons of Britain are not explored until Chapter One of Book Two. Here, after reporting Gregory's death, Bede declares that "fuller mention" of Gregory is needed "since it was through his zeal that our English nation was brought from the bondage of Satan to the Faith of Christ, and we may rightly term him our own apostle" (*History* 94). After eulogizing Gregory's personal, pontifical, and scholarly accomplishments, Bede turns to his greatest interest: Gregory's role in the evangelization of "our English nation." This Bede introduces with a quote on the topic from Gregory's *Moralia*, a quote including some familiar elements: "The tongue of Britain, which formerly knew only the utterance of barbarity, has some time since begun to cry the Hebrew *Alleluia* to the praise of God" (*History* 98). Here again we find the three-fold association of language, ethnicity, and religion, and again it is joined to the notion of praise. In this same passage, Bede develops these ideas with the familiar story of

Gregory's encounter with English slave boys in the Roman marketplace. Upon noticing these ethnically distinctive but unknown boys, Gregory inquires about their origin:

"They come from the island of Britain," he was told, "where all the people have this appearance." He then asked whether the islanders were Christians, or whether they were still ignorant heathens. "They are pagans," he was informed. "Alas!" said Gregory with a heartfelt sigh: "how sad that such bright-faced folk are still in the grasp of the Author of darkness, and that such graceful features conceal minds void of God's grace! What is the name of this race?" "They are called Angles," he was told. "That is appropriate," he said, "for they have angelic faces, and it is right that they should become joint-heirs with the angels in heaven. And what is the name of the province from which they have been brought?" "Deira," was the answer. "Good. They shall indeed be rescued *de ira*—from wrath—and called to the mercy of Christ. And what is the name of their king?" "Aelle," he was told. "Then," said Gregory, making play on the name, "it is right that their land should echo the praise of God our creator in the word *Alleluia*." (*History* 99-100)

This story is well-known, perhaps best for its charm and Gregory's engaging display of wit. However, it also develops an array of ideas already in play in Bede's *Historia*. First, the pagan identity of these Angles is emphasized: they are "in the grasp of the Author of darkness," their "minds void of God's grace," and they are under God's wrath (*ira*). This religious identity is as important and definitive of these Angles as their distinctive features. Second, Gregory desires to change that religious identity, and he visualizes that possibility by reconfiguring their linguistic and ethnic identities. Naturally each of the terms used to identify these slave boys represents their linguistic identity: they are words from their language. However, these terms also represent

their ethnic identity in a culture where the borders between ethnic, national, and political categories were indistinct: not only their "race" (Angle) marked their *ethne*, but also their "province" (Deira) and their king (Aelle), for one's *pēod* and *pēodan* often implied one's lineage. Gregory, by means of puns, transforms each of these: their "race" changes from Angle to angel; the "province" from which they were removed changes from the geographical Deira to the theological state of perdition; and their "king" changes from Aelle to God as they declare, "Praise the LORD!" Third, Gregory's puns, coupled with his use of the word "Alleluia," point us toward a significance of language in this passage beyond mere witticism. We have already seen how "Alleluia" represents for Gregory the shift from "the utterance of barbarity" to that concord of praise that unites Christians across all other borders of identity. Gregory's puns push this idea further: not only is Gregory punning, he is doing so across four languages—Old English (Angle, Deira, Aelle), Greek (angel), Latin (*de ira*), and Hebrew (*Alleluia*). Moreover, the occasion of these puns is profoundly important to Bede: this is first step of "our own apostle" towards the evangelization of "our English nation" (*History* 94). I suggest that we find here Bede's theology of Babel and Pentecost, recapitulated in the history of his own people. Gregory's puns are not simply word-play but *glossolalia*, prophetic utterances that breach the language barrier, and make possible for the Anglo-Saxons the reversal of Babel and the coming of Pentecost, to the end that they may "praise God our Creator" (*History* 100).

These two stories from Bede's *Historia* lead us to our third and final one, the story of the poet Caedmon. In Book Four, Chapter Twenty-Four, Bede shifts his focus from the Abbess Hild, a prominent figure at the time, to a seemingly-unimportant brother in monastery of Streanaeshalch. Like the other two stories above, Caedmon's story is well-known; it also shares with them a common interest in praise and its relationship to linguistic, ethnic, and religious

identity. For Bede, Caedmon's significance lay not only in his composition of "religious and devotional songs" on scriptural themes, but also in the fact that these songs were "in his own English tongue" (*History* 250). Caedmon was the best, not because of his superior training in poetry, but because he "received it as a free gift from God" (Bede *Historia* 251). The occasion of this gift was remarkable, for Caedmon was usually a shy, retiring man who avoided public singing: in fact, it was after such an evasion, as he napped in the stable that served as his retreat, that he dreamed:

Suddenly in a dream he saw a man standing beside him who called him by name. "Caedmon," he said, "sing me a song." "I don't know how to sing," he replied. "It is because I cannot sing that I left the feast and came here." The man who addressed him then said: "But you shall sing to me." "What should I sing about?" he replied. "Sing about the Creation of all things," the other answered. And Caedmon immediately began to sing verses in praise of God the Creator that he had never heard before [...] (Bede *History* 251)

Some points should be noted. First, Caedmon's poetic gift originates from a vision during sleep, a typical occasion for prophetic messages both in Christian scripture and extra-biblical Christian tradition (such as saints' lives). Second, the one Caedmon encounters in his vision issues a command, which Caedmon feels utterly unable to follow. This pattern of command and inability is also found in biblical accounts of prophetic "calls," notably those of Moses and Jeremiah (Ex. 40:10-12; Jer. 1:4-10).<sup>152</sup> Third, and also like the prophetic "calls" of Moses and Jeremiah, the one who commands the incapable

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<sup>152</sup> Moses' complaint is that "I am not eloquent, [...] but I am slow of speech and of tongue" (Ex. 4:10), while Jeremiah feels inadequate to the task because "I do not know how to speak, because I am only a youth" (Jer. 1:6).

messenger provides the ability to obey the command: God promises Moses that "I will be with your mouth and teach you what to speak" (Ex. 4:12), and assures Jeremiah that "I have put my words in your mouth" (Jer. 1:9). Similarly, when Caedmon obeys the insistent dream visitor, he "began to sing verses [...] that he had never heard before." The Caedmon story, then, echoes biblical tropes connected to God's appointment of a new prophetic messenger.

If Caedmon is being depicted in this text as a prophet, then one might well expect his message to be of tremendous importance. However, what follows is Bede's Latin translation of Caedmon's Hymn, which gives the Old English poem's "general sense": Bede apologizes for the imprecision, since "verses, however masterly, cannot be translated literally from one language to another without losing much of their beauty and dignity" (*History* 251). Bede's choice at this point—to translate rather than transcribe—may seem strange. If the song is an inspired utterance, should it not be transmitted accurately? And, if a translation cannot be done without loss of "beauty and dignity," why not simply include the poem in its original language? Certainly not from any distaste on Bede's part for vernacular poetry, for Bede composed his own verse in Old English, even on his death-bed (*History* 19). One explanation suggests itself, however, one anchored in the current discussion: perhaps Bede does not transcribe Caedmon's Hymn in Old English because, in this text, the specifics of vernacular prosody are not what most interest him. What interests him is not precisely *what* Caedmon sings, but *that* Caedmon sings.

In considering this last point, we can now tie the threads of this section together: for Bede, it is important *that* Caedmon sings because Caedmon is an Englishman praising his creator in English. Consider Bede's account of the "Alleluia Battle": in it the unconverted Saxons, Bede's own people, are barbarians, wicked, under the wrath of God, not knowing their creator nor able

to praise him. In fact, they run when he is praised, because the language of God's praise is so alien it seems a threat. However, in the story of Gregory and the English slaves, Gregory (and Bede through Gregory) looks forward to a day when these angel-faced English will be brought to worship the creator: to show that he is the apostle to the English, he has a Pentecost moment, showing by means of *glossalia* that the gulf between these barbarians and their creator can be bridged. In the story of Caedmon, then, we see Gregory's prophecy at last fulfilled as an English poet praises his Creator in his own language. Caedmon's poetry is not the result of schooling or natural talent, but is "a free gift from God": by divine enablement and divine command, the biblical apostles in Acts spoke of the "mighty works of God" in languages they did not know; now Caedmon, by a similar divine enablement and divine command, sings of *Meotodes meahte and his modgeþanc* in his own language. If we connect these threads in Bede's *Historia* with his *On Genesis*, the arc of this plot extends farther back even than long-ago battles between Britons and Saxons, for the English had been cut off from God since Babel. Now, however, through the apostolic ministry of Gregory, the Pentecost reversal of Babel's separation was extended to the English; by it, the English were restored to God, and their ethnicity and language, once only a marker of linguistic, ethnic, and religious exclusion, has been ennobled: they join the company of angels and turn their own language to the heavenly praise of their almighty creator.

## 2. Hearing the Singer in Heorot: Praise and the Ancestors in *Beowulf*

Finally, we return to *Beowulf*, and, one last time, ask Hrothgar's scop to take the stage and sing his Creation Song, with echoes of Caedmon still in our ears:

[...] Sægde sē þe cūþe

frumsceaft fīra feorran reccan,



cwæð þæt se Ælmihtiga eorðan worh(te),  
 wlitebeorhtne wang, swā wæter bebūgeð,  
 gesette sigehrēþig sunnan ond mōnan  
 lēoman tō lēohte landbūendum  
 ond gefræt Wade foldan scēatas  
 leomum ond lēafum, lif ēac gesceōp  
 cynna gehwylcum þāra ðe cwide hwyrfaþ. (ll. 90-98)

[...] Then spoke forth the one who knew how  
 To recount mankind's beginning in times far-off,  
 And proclaimed that the Almighty made the Earth,  
 A brightly shining plain girded by Ocean,  
 Triumphantly set the sun and moon  
 As lights to shine for the earth-dwellers,  
 And garlanded the world's far corners  
 With leaves and branches, and also created life,  
 Every kind of animate being that moves.

Now, let us review some observations about the content of the Creation Song itself, then consider the question, as we did with Caedmon, of the importance of the fact *that* the scop sings.

Our review of the substance of *Beowulf's* Creation Song, the focus of Part One of this dissertation, is limited here to one conclusion, that *Beowulf's* Creation song is indubitably biblical in its theological content; it is not, *contra* Fred Robinson, a song "any pious heathen might sing" (37). This conclusion has been argued at length on the basis of two arguments. First, that the use of the title *se ælmihtiga*, "the Almighty," in line 92 to designate the creator deity is

*not* religiously ambiguous within the Anglo-Saxon context: the Christian apologetic tradition, particularly as manifest in the creeds and in catechism, forcefully denied the attribution of almightiness (omnipotence) to any but the Christian God, and the existing corpus of Old English poetry and homily shows that *æلميhtig* and its cognates were used in conformance with that polemical point. Second, the cosmogony recounted in the Creation Song is *not* a generic creation myth, unmarked by any traits distinctively Christian or otherwise: its simplicity, like that of the Genesis cosmogony, is its distinctive trait, for it pointedly avoids the common traits of other creation myths—theogony, polytheism, cosmogony by construction or procreation, and the attribution of divine status to created things. Read within the Christian apologetic tradition, *Beowulf's* Creation Song is shown to be not bland and indefinite, but stark in its assertion of the elements of the biblical cosmogony that the apologists themselves saw as definitive.

So, *Beowulf's* Creation Song is a biblical cosmogony. That is *what* Hrothgar's scop sings. Now, what does it mean *that* Hrothgar's scop sings this song? It is on this point that Bede's Caedmon story becomes a helpful backdrop—a snowbank over which our snowy heron of Heorot can spread his wings and show his own color. For the Caedmon story, with its emphasis on Caedmon's inability to compose and perform song, highlights the clear assertion in *Beowulf* of the ability of Hrothgar's scop:

[...] Sægde sē þe cūþe

frumsceaft fīra feorran reccan (ll. 90-1)

[...] Then spoke forth the one who knew how

To recount mankind's beginning in times far-off

The scop "knew how to recount" (*cūþe reccan*) the origins of humanity and the world through the creative action of the Almighty (*se æلميhtiga*). This bland statement bears witness to a

critical fact: namely, that the scop knew the creation story itself, which is implied by the infinitive *reccan*, "to tell, to narrate" (Hall). He is not just "expressing a Boethian wonder at seeing an invisible God through his creation"; he is telling a story he knows (Frank 107). This is, after all the work of scop: to know the stories of his people, both the engaging stories they wish to hear, and the important stories that give their culture shape and identity. The scop in Heorot *knows* this creation story, and it is a biblical creation story.

To say such a thing of the Anglo-Saxons' distant ancestors is unimaginable in Bede's historical vision. The farthest Bede goes into his people's past is Woden, the great-great-grandfather of Hengist and Horsa, reckoned a god by his heathen descendants (*History* 56). But the *Beowulf* poet goes further back, and on this point also the apologetic tradition is helpful. As we found in Part Two of this dissertation, *Beowulf's* early allusions to creation and the deluge may be read, within the context of Christian historiography in the Eusebian tradition, as clues to the historical setting of the *Beowulf* narrative.

First in Part Two, we saw that the allusions to creation, most notably the Creation Song itself, confirm that these stories of long-ago Danish kings happen in a world under the Almighty's provident care. Moreover, true knowledge of creation is itself an important distinctive in sacred history, for it was associated with different people groups in the Six Ages: such knowledge was universal in the First Age; restricted to isolated communities in the Second Age; consolidated in the Jewish nation in the Third Age, where it remained in the Fourth and Fifth Ages; and announced through Christianity to all peoples in the Sixth Age. The Scylding Danes are not Jews or Christians, yet they have true knowledge of creation; therefore, the only ages available (without theological difficulty) are the Second or early Third Ages.

Second in Part Two, we saw that the allusions to the deluge, in association with Cain and the giants, provided specific explanations for important situations in *Beowulf*. The links between Cain, the giants, and the deluge established a kind of paradigmatic precedent for understanding the roles of sin and judgment in human history. In *Beowulf*, this paradigmatic precedent not only explained the presence of Grendel, but also gave an account of the ancient origins of the human evils that plague the Scylding community. The paradigmatic precedent also stressed the necessity of human justice in the face of the real possibility of catastrophic divine judgment: a society that would not constrain its own evil could reckon on destruction. In this study, the paradigmatic precedent of the deluge not only helps readers to understand the story's theological underpinnings, but also to recognize that certain characters are themselves aware of these same theological underpinnings. In other words, we are presented again with evidence of significant knowledge among *Beowulf*'s characters, knowledge that was associated with particular peoples and eras in the Six Ages.

Finally, Part Two showed us how the deluge could function as a means for integrating different historical traditions together, through chronological synchronisms. Using this method of the Eusebian chronographical tradition, we saw how the giants connected the chronologies of *Beowulf* and the Bible in the deep past, while the Scylding royal genealogy suggested connections closer to the narrative's present day. In particular, we saw how *Beowulf*'s Scylding genealogy seems to disassociate the Danish royal house from Odin, the father of Skiold in the Icelandic sources, while linking Hrothgar's family to the more ancient figure of Scef. The effect of this link was to push the *Beowulf* narrative into the far-distant past, beyond even the rise of Odin himself. Finally, we saw that, if *Beowulf* were written and read during or after the reign of Alfred the Great, the Scylding genealogy would appear to connect the Scylding Danes to Noah

himself via an apocryphal son of Noah, Scaef, who appears in Anglo-Saxon royal genealogies associated with Alfred. If this synchronism was used to calculate the date of *Beowulf's* setting, then Hrothgar's reign would have been before or during the life of the Hebrew patriarch Abraham: in other words, in the Second or early Third Age.

The differences now with Bede are stark. For Bede, whose theology of religion and ethnicity roots both in the Tower of Babel event, the divergence of humanity into different peoples, languages, and religions is simultaneous, and the links between those categories are definitive. *Beowulf*, on the other hand, shows the Scylding Danes as a distinct people, presumably with a distinct language, and therefore post-Babel in sacred history. Nonetheless, the Scylding Danes, in the person of their scop, are shown to know and praise the creator. Therefore, in contrast to Bede, the *Beowulf* poet does *not* treat the categories of religion and ethnicity as inextricably associated.

Nonetheless, Bede and the *Beowulf* poet do not work with completely opposed categories: the *Beowulf* poet may present the ancestors differently than Bede, but his presentation is not utterly divergent from the apologetic tradition that shapes Bede's assumptions. If the arguments this dissertation has developed thus far are correct, the poet's decision to connect the *geardagas* of his people's celebrated heroes with the earlier ages of sacred history is strategic. While the Anglo-Saxons had to acknowledge heathen ancestors in the Christian era, the Sixth Age, the biblical event cited as the origins of ethnicity (the Tower of Babel) occurred in the Second Age, when remnants of ancient piety yet existed, and which continued to be mentioned in the biblical narrative until the Exodus in the Third Age. Therefore, even if Hengist and Horsa, and Woden before them, were all pagan, could there not have been some yet-more-ancient ancestors of the Anglo-Saxons who were not pagan? Certainly Melchizedek and Job pointed to

the possibility of true piety outside the Hebrew race and religion, and Augustine himself had conceded that "among other nations also there might be men pertaining to the spiritual Jerusalem who have lived according to God and have pleased Him" (*City* 390). While the general tendency of the apologetic tradition is toward Bede's position, nonetheless these other possibilities were on occasion acknowledged and could by no means be suppressed, not with such prominent figures as Melchizedek and Job to serve as reminders. In the apologetic tradition, there seems to only be one sacred-historical niche that pious Anglo-Saxon ancestors could occupy, and if we read *Beowulf's* historical vision in light of the apologetic tradition, it looks as if the poet places his Scylding Danes in that niche.

I argue, to conclude, that the poet's purpose in all this is reclamation. If the Christian Anglo-Saxons accepted the notion that ethnicity and religion are inextricably linked, as taught by Bede, what conclusion could they come to but that of Alcuin, who would suppress not only the ancestors' religion, but also their very memory as preserved in their songs (*carmina gentilium*)? However, for the *Beowulf* poet, who manifestly loves the tales of *geardagum*, such suppression is undesirable. Moreover, it is unnecessary, for a different past may be imagined for the ancestors—an imagined past in harmony with the new faith of Christianity, yet still with room for a biblical piety older than Christianity. The memories of such ancestors could be respected and celebrated by Christian Anglo-Saxons without censure or regretful pity: as Bede could hold up Gregory as "our own apostle," so the *Beowulf* poet could lead his audience to hold up Hrothgar and Beowulf as "our own patriarchs." Thus, if the scop in Heorot knows his creator and sings, so also does the poet's Christian audience know and sing—and they sing together.

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