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**Christian Culture and Germanic Tradition in Old English Literature:  
A Syncretic Approach to Reconciling Faith and Culture**

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By

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**Christian Culture and Germanic Tradition in Old English Literature:  
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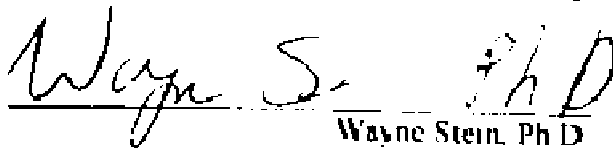
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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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TITLE: Christian Contextualization in Old English Literature: A Syncretic Approach to Reconciling Faith and Culture

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Many conservative or “traditional” Christians today contend that some modern churches, in an effort to engage with contemporary culture, adapt the values and practices of the secular world to too great a degree in order to seem relevant to contemporary audiences. We do, however, live in a particular place and time, one defined by a multitude of interlocking cultural contexts, and a degree of application or contextualization of Christian scripture, theology, and worship style may be inevitable to promote a greater understanding or awareness of faith. This thesis proposes that this debate constitutes a particularly significant point of intersection between Old English literature and today’s culture.

Many Old English texts engage Anglo-Saxon culture by combining a Germanic heroic vernacular tradition with the Christian tradition. This thesis analyzes the strategies by which Old English authors engage in syncretism, and it discusses its implications for and effects on Anglo-Saxon readers. Special attention is paid to the ways in which Anglo-Saxon writers voice, integrate, and fuse their religious ideas with the specific culture around them in order to demonstrate that the syncretic practices of the first English Christians, in a culture still filled with *pre*-Christian beliefs, practices, and images, anticipate (and might in fact have something to contribute to) the responses, equally syncretic but expressed using different materials, of contemporary Christian authors to an increasingly *post*-Christian cultural milieu.

*Christian Culture and Germanic Tradition in Old English Literature:*

*A Syncretic Approach to Reconciling Faith and Culture*

## Chapter 1 – Introduction

Critics and translators have prized *The Seafarer*, an anonymous eighth or ninth century Old English poem, because of its moving and personal portrayal of one man's loneliness and spiritual yearning, but few have noted its syncretic fusion of Germanic-heroic and Christian traditions and the insight it provides into the practice of contextualization for future generations. Told from the perspective of an old seafarer, the poem first describes the bleak and bitter rigors of life on the wintry sea. The seafarer has endured "smashing surf" (6) and has been "cast in icy bands" (9), as men on land enjoy the company of kinsmen (16) while drinking mead (22). Landsmen are able to experience the comfort and support of the community of warriors celebrated in old Germanic literature and therefore cannot comprehend the seafarer's feelings of exile. Detachment and hardship cause the thoughts of his heart to be troubled (33b-34a), but it is this deprivation experienced through exile that moves him to ruminate on material transience. As his spirit returns after departing over the sea in an ultimately successful search for the Christian God, he explains, "Thus the joys of God / Are fervent with life, where life itself / Fades quickly into the earth" (64b-66a). In the remainder of the poem, the seafarer praises "the Father of Glory" (123) and aspires to the static immortality of heaven, arguing that earthly happiness will not endure (67) and that earthly treasure cannot bring redemption (97-99).

As a whole, *The Seafarer* explores the tension of living as a Christian in a secular world. "Secular" is a modern concept, but it is used here for the sake of explication to a contemporary audience. The poem initially suggests that a Christian

worldview can be achieved only by means of desocialization and disengagement from culture; it is through the seafarer's realization of his exile status that he comes to ache for heaven. Indeed, the seafarer's words about eternity communicate that the material values of the Germanic-heroic world are neither absolute nor universal. Peter Orton perceives this insight at the midpoint of the poem: "whether it is possible for men to live Christian lives within society, or if ascetic withdrawal is the only route to everlasting life" (374). Because of this explicit message, *The Seafarer* has often been interpreted as coming from a monastic perspective, one that strictly condemns secular life and its ideals, but Orton argues that the second half of the poem offers a less radical alternative to the wholesale rejection of secular culture.

The speaker knows that secular tradition and culture inevitably pull on us, which is why he does not call for the abandonment of the old pagan funerary customs—such as burying grave-goods with the dead—that are described in lines 97-102 and 113-116. Rather than encouraging their suppression, the speaker attempts to put these secular traditions into the proper perspective, measuring them against the depth of God's mastery and eternal nature to make them seem ephemeral—but not unimportant. He explicitly incorporates heroic values, encouraging believers to combat "the devil with brave deeds" (76). Orton argues that "the effect is to put traditional and Christian ideas about immortality into a continuum, so that the differences between them seem not so radical, more a matter of scale and perspective than fundamental opposition" (375). Through its subtle negotiation of differing traditions, *The Seafarer* offers a reasonable, pragmatic, and *syncretic* solution for the Christian who naturally feels an attachment to traditional—in this case, pre-Christian—cultural values and practices.



Caught between apparently conflicting Christian and Germanic-heroic ideologies, the typical Anglo-Saxon may often have experienced a crisis of self-definition. *The Seafarer* hopes to resolve this crisis by blending medieval religious and heroic traditions into a unified cultural continuum. By entwining both cultural threads, the poem contextualizes Christianity for its audience, and Orton points out that the poem “would have struck a strong chord in the minds of the early Christian (or nominally Christian) laity of Anglo-Saxon England, and might well have been composed with them in mind” (376). In this respect, the poetic narrative of *The Seafarer* is certainly an integral contribution to the Anglo-Saxon religious mindset.

This thesis analyzes the strategies by which Old English authors engage in syncretism, and it discusses its implications for and effects on Anglo-Saxon readers. Special attention is paid to the ways in which Anglo-Saxon writers voice, integrate, and fuse their religious ideas with the specific culture around them in order to demonstrate that the syncretic practices of the first English Christians, in a culture still filled with *pre-Christian* beliefs, practices, and images, anticipate (and might in fact have something to contribute to) the responses, equally syncretic but expressed using different materials, of contemporary Christian authors to an increasingly *post-Christian* cultural milieu.

Medieval culture was, like our own, multifaceted. *The Seafarer* and other Anglo-Saxon texts demonstrate that a major feature of Old English literature is the fusion of Germanic pre-Christian and heroic society with Roman Christianity (Godden lx). Aldhelm, Bede, and other Anglo-Saxon monks and nuns had a fondness for the old Germanic songs. In 797, the Northumbrian scholar and ecclesiastic Alcuin censured the monks of Lindisfarne for enjoying the stories about the old pagan kings. Writing to their bishop Hygebald, he first stressed that the

heathen kings were now in hell, and second, he argued that “in the refectory, the Bible should be read: the lector heard, not the harper: patristic sermons rather than pagan songs. For what has Ingeld to do with Christ?” (qtd. in Alexander 4). Ingeld was a familiar hero celebrated in several lyrics written down by Christian scribes about “pagan” heroes and adventures such as *Widsith* and *Beowulf*.

The hierarchy of the medieval church at this time primarily consisted of the social and economic elite, and this fact had a particular effect on the literary culture of the Old English church. As Patrick Wormald explains: “To sing, or to write, of its warrior prototypes came as naturally to them as to live in the style to which, as noblemen, they were accustomed. Aristocratic infiltration of the church meant the idioms of heroic poetry passed into the medium of religious verse” (10). Enjoyment of heroic poetry was not limited only to elite clerics, and Alcuin’s admonition suggests that monastic life mirrored the culture at large. The famous monk and cowherd Cædmon was clearly not an aristocrat, but the lyrics in his “Hymn” blend Germanic-heroic diction with Christian themes. For example, the word he uses for the Lord God, “dryhten,” is also used in texts such as *Beowulf* to mean “lord of a warband” (Wormald 10).

Narrative has always been significant, because it is a connecting point between past and present. For the ancient Israelites, story was a container of God’s presence. They told stories from their oral tradition to keep God fresh and close to their lives. Story can lose its power, meaning, or gravity when it appears only to concern remote events that have no bearing on current culture (Bell, *Velvet Elvis* 59-60). The culture of Jesus and the early church has little in common with today’s culture, and parts of the Christian story as told in scripture—Jesus’ parables, for example—may seem irrelevant or strange to some of today’s readers and hearers.

It may have already been so in much of Western and Northern Europe, including the old Germanic homelands, especially in England and Scandinavia.

The Old English poetic treatment of Christian themes reflects the Anglo-Saxons' distinctive historical contexts and needs. They certainly have a motivation to contextualize Christianity: the Semitic, Eastern Mediterranean, Roman, and Celtic images of Christ and myriad stories and practices were not as palatable or accessible to Anglo-Saxon audiences, because these images were so alien (in some cases, antithetical) to their familiar Germanic culture. Through Old English literature, we see that scripture retained significance for the Anglo-Saxons, because the writers employ methods of contextualization to bring the ancient stories acutely close to early medieval England. They use methods of contextualization to enter into the story and rewrite it from an Anglo-Saxon perspective. We still grapple with the tension between religious purpose and secular presentation today, and examining Old English syncretic practices can perhaps enhance our understanding of our own contemporary syncretic expressions.

We analyze texts such as *The Seafarer*, because one particular intent of literary studies is to defamiliarize what may seem completely natural to us in our own cultural setting in order to accentuate that "our way of life is neither natural nor inevitable." By highlighting alterity between ourselves and seemingly distant cultures, the evident cultural differences that arise can offer new perspectives on our current ideas and attitudes. The study of the Anglo-Saxon people and of the Old English literary period, an era of English history that extends from the end of Roman occupation of Britain in the fourth century to the Norman Conquest in 1066, is especially rewarding given how very different early medieval culture was from the culture of today's world (Fulk 1). Although the themes of Old English literature may

seem culturally quite removed from our contemporary interests, Old English literature certainly is capable of cultural work in the present. Despite its distance, close and thoughtful reading reveals that many underlying concerns present in Old English literature are similar to our own, and this dual sense of sameness and alterity can provide meaningful insight and meditation for modern issues (Liuzza xi).

The current question within American Christian circles of whether churches should attempt to be relevant constitutes a particularly significant point of intersection between Old English literature and today's culture. Many conservative or "traditional" Christians contend that some modern churches, in an effort to engage with contemporary culture, adapt the values and practices of the secular world to too great a degree in order to seem relevant to contemporary audiences. These critics express concern, for example, when secular film clips are integrated into sermons or when worship services look more like rock concerts. Christian bookstores are packed with texts that employ contextualization. The recently published volume *The Dude Abides: The Gospel According to the Coen Brothers* by Cathleen Falsani, for example, attempts to pull spiritual truths for Christian readers out of films including *Fargo*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Big Lebowski*. The book *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film* by Robert K. Johnston is part of the "Engaging Culture" series, which is designed "to help Christians respond to our contemporary culture" and "explore particular cultural expressions with regards to God's presence in the world today and help readers become better involved in sympathetic dialogue and active discipleship." Ivy Beckwith's book *Postmodern Children's Ministry* claims to be suited for the twenty-first century by offering "a vision that meets children—preteens and younger—where they are and gives them the tools to sustain their faith into adulthood."

Perhaps some caution of contextualization is warranted, but we also live in a particular place and time, one defined by a multitude of interlocking cultural contexts, and a degree of application or contextualization of Christian scripture, theology, and worship style may be inevitable to promote a greater understanding or awareness of faith. People have always had difficulty explaining God, “when God is bigger than our words, our brains, our worldviews, and our imaginations” (Bell, *Velvet Elvis* 23). As Moses explains in Deuteronomy 4.12, when the Israelites encountered God, they “heard the sound of words but saw no form.” The ineffability of the Godhead has often compelled cultures to translate God into familiar, intelligible terms. Our culturally constructed image of the divine and theological contexts have been revisited, rethought, reworked, and repainted through the centuries—including in Anglo-Saxon England.

Considering that a great deal of Old English literature combines a heroic vernacular tradition with the Christian tradition, as “Cædmon’s Hymn” does, we also must grapple with Alcuin’s question, *Quid Hinieldus cum Christo?* The combination of Christian and pre-Christian heroic elements sometimes seems to be odd and difficult to modern readers, who must carefully negotiate this syncretism in the interpretation of Old English texts. A similar kind of syncretism underlies the current relevancy debate in the Church, and we too must decide “what to make of the strange tension between a story whose reason for existence is religious, and a narrative version of it which constantly reminds us of secular values and a different tradition” (Alexander 162). Study of this defining tension between religious purpose and secular presentation in ostensibly religious literature can provide insight into the debate in which we are embroiled today, because Old English poetry demonstrates that there is no “one size fits all” presentation of the Christian message. Old English

religious literature also demonstrates that adapting and contextualizing Christianity to culture or vice versa is nothing new—it has been happening for over fifteen hundred years. Representations of Christ and of Christian concepts such as the nature of faith and the redemption have evolved among various Christian societies to fit each different culture, and Old English texts manifest this practice in various ways. They often portray Christ or the saints as hero-warriors in the Germanic tradition, for example, because that image was culturally authoritative, as the Anglo-Saxon heritage idealized military prowess and the achievements of illustrious warriors.

Anglo-Saxon writers do not paraphrase scripture directly but instead reflect on and contextualize Christian theology for their particular audience (Raw 242). To a significant degree, Christianity as the Anglo-Saxons encountered it was already marked and molded by Roman imperial or Irish cultures. Anglo-Saxon Christianity is an adaptation of an adaptation, produced by syncretic practices inscribed palimpsestically one upon the other. Texts discussed in this thesis—*Beowulf*, “Cædmon’s Hymn,” *The Dream of the Rood*, *Judith*, *Guthlac A*, *Guthlac B*, and *The Wanderer*—reveal that contextualization is natural; as literary critic Raymond Williams reminds us, all writers are embedded in specific, concrete relations, and all are writing in responses to real situations (Davis 124). This, in turn, makes it seemingly impossible to avoid some degree of syncretism in any creative process. The aim of syncretism in Old English literature is to communicate a clearer notion of the fullness and subtlety of Christianity by using the familiar—in this case, the Germanic-heroic tradition—to foster a clearer understanding of Christian spirituality and early medieval theology among the common people (Woolf, “Doctrinal Influences” 48). The Anglo-Saxon experience of the gospel is refracted through the Latin language, Roman and Continental perspectives on Christianity, and the

continuing cultural authority of the Germanic-heroic mode. In Old English literature, religion enters into a dialogue with secular culture and participates in an exchange that attempts to bring spiritual clarity by appropriating a Germanic-heroic background for Christian narrative (Alexander 5).

Today, the Christian tradition continues to face a new set of questions concerning its relationship—and relevance—to historically Christian cultures. Fortunately, Old English syncretic practices provide a model for how to contextualize the *communication* of the Christian message rather than its *content*. A fresh analysis of Anglo-Saxon syncretism can shape the way we proceed with our future contextualizations and the ways we can successfully engage culture. Old English texts demonstrate the extent to which contextualization is useful and necessary. Indeed, each example of syncretism in the following Old English texts—such as the portrayal of Christ as a warrior-hero in *The Dream of the Rood*—informs, influences, and can contribute to an effective syncretic practice in the present day.

## Chapter 2 – Old English History and Culture

A brief sketch of Old English history and culture provides a valuable context for understanding the formation, qualities, and nuances of the Anglo-Saxons' syncretic practice. Today, we only have a fraction of the original corpus of Old English literature, and we use these few texts as "the customary landmarks by which we navigate through Anglo-Saxon culture" (Liuzza xii). Although we cannot completely reconstruct their original contexts, the works are integral to our understanding of an Anglo-Saxon world that has long since disappeared. From the scraps of randomly preserved sections in copies of already copied manuscripts, with the originals missing and unknown, we must attempt to reconstruct a complex and fluid cultural matrix. These textual traces, along with archeological artifacts, offer small glimpses into an otherwise hidden culture, and they themselves actively contributed to that culture's formation and development (Liuzza xii).

Although we only have a relatively small sample, many modern scholars, including Stanley Greenfield and Daniel Calder, consider Old English prose and poetry to be the vernacular literary triumph of Western Europe during the early Middle Ages. Other peoples, such as those from the Germanic and Celtic nations, contributed significantly to high art during this period, and the early medieval pan-European Latin literature and the Byzantine-Greek literature of the eastern Mediterranean are equal in scope, value, and richness to Anglo-Saxon literature; but the Anglo-Saxons' ability to masterfully work in the vernacular in a litany of genres proves them nearly matchless (Greenfield 1).



The history of England is packed with invasions, conversions, and all sorts of other influential interactions. The Romans conquered the Britons in the first century BC and established a province that lasted about 400 years. As Christianity spread through the empire during the late imperial period, it made its way to Britain, already having taken root in independent Ireland. Although the Germanic Angle, Saxon, and Jute tribes who invaded in the fifth century after the Roman occupation returned the island to paganism, the original Roman and Romano-Celtic Christianity influenced later Anglo-Saxon syncretism to a degree. It was the reintroduction of Christianity over a century later, however, that had an immediate impact and produced a new syncretic culture.

The Vikings and Danes invaded in the ninth century, but Alfred the Great, king of the West Saxons, was able to prevent their conquest and push them back to the North and East Midlands. A power struggle ensued during the eleventh century, until the last Anglo-Saxon king, Harold Godwinson, was defeated by the Norman invaders at the Battle of Hastings (1066). Contact with the Vikings was particularly significant because of its linguistic, cultural, and religious impact on Anglo-Saxon culture. Speakers of a closely related Germanic language, the Vikings' religious practices recalled and may have reawakened pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon practices. The Sutton Hoo ship burial site found near Woodbridge, Suffolk, for example, testifies to the Anglo-Saxons' syncretic attempt to revive some pagan Germanic traditions while retaining their Christian faith.

Throughout their 600 year history, interaction and assimilation with other cultures fashioned the inhabitants of early medieval England into the people now collectively known as the Anglo-Saxons. We refer to their language and period as Old English, and during their age that lasted from the Germanic invasions in 449 AD

to the Norman Conquest in 1066, they developed a culture and form of literary expression that is still worth studying today, partly because of the ways its issues mirror those of modern society.

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Patrick Wormald, commenting on Old English culture during the first decades following the conquest of Roman Britain, writes, “Archaeology... testifies to a sharp economic decline in the quality of life once sustained by the Roman province; and, by the sixth century, to the emergence of a warrior culture, whose men were buried with weapons of war, and women with rich jewellery that illustrated its profits” (2). The invaders, a rugged and brutal people, transformed the society in their new land by imposing their Germanic-heroic mindset. They possessed a fondness for adventurous sea travel and war, treasured ships and swords, and reveled in the fame and glory that came with battle (Grebanier 6). Although relatively agrarian and pacific compared to their Viking cousins, and despite the fact that these overarching militaristic values slowly waned as society evolved, the martial impulse was nevertheless an integral part of the Anglo-Saxon heritage. The eighth-century invasions of the Vikings and Danes also kept the notion of fierce warfare prevalent in their consciousness (O’Keeffe 115).

Because nothing was written down by the Anglo-Saxons prior to the Christian conversion, we must assume that, given the nature of Anglo-Saxon verse *after* the conversion, this tradition contributed to a principally Germanic-heroic style of verse *before* the conversion (Fulk 33). Although the introduction of Christianity transformed society to a degree, the Anglo-Saxon warrior attitude was not

abandoned. The Old English work *Beowulf* and the archeological excavation of the Sutton Hoo ship burial site are indicative of the continued centrality of the heroic ideal in the Anglo-Saxon world. Other early poems such as *Widsith*, *Deor*, and *Finnsburgh* are also evidence of a culture enamored with the heroic values of courage, strength, and honor. These texts and artifacts attest to the staying power of a pagan past that lingered despite the influx of a new ideology (Alexander 24).

Again, all surviving Old English heroic poetry was written down after the conversion, and thus it was assuredly influenced or transformed on some level by the Christian worldview. A look at the Icelandic sagas that feature the yet unconverted Icelanders perhaps reveals a clearer, more accurate image of pre-Christian Germanic traditions and the Germanic forms that early medieval Christianity could take. Although these texts were also written down in the Christian era, the Christian redaction of the Icelandic texts seems to have been less extreme. *Njal's Saga*, for example, describes the conversion of Iceland and communicates a great deal about the pagan society as the missionaries encountered it. Violence, the warrior mentality, and the importance of clan are all pervasive characteristics in Icelandic society that are mirrored in Germanic-influenced Anglo-Saxon culture and literature. Gudleif, an Icelander who accompanies the missionary St. Thangbrand, is described as "an extremely brave and formidable warrior" (217). Pagan chieftains and their clans frequently band together to fight the advance of Christianity, although they are unsuccessful and are often speared or have their arms hacked off at the shoulder by Christians (including Thangbrand) (221). One chapter of the saga describes a berserk, a kind of highly valued Icelandic warrior famous for his ability to ignore pain and fight with maniacal intensity (222). While we can learn something

from Bede concerning the pre-Christian Germanic-heroic mode, Icelandic sagas such as *Njal's* may provide a clearer picture of the archaic Germanic-heroic culture.

The first-century work *Germania* by the Latin historian Tacitus also provides a helpful background of the Old English period, because it describes many of the traditions of the original Germanic peoples that were carried on in Anglo-Saxon culture. As society evolved, we cannot be sure of the preservation of these traditions in everyday Anglo-Saxon life, but Old English heroic verse features them prominently. The old Germanic obligation to exact vengeance, for example, was always relevant in Anglo-Saxon society, because until the Norman Conquest, the act of kindred—the duty of a family to avenge a kinsman's death—was the only provision under Anglo-Saxon law for handling murders (Fulk 4). The Anglo-Saxon term *wergild* refers to the financial arrangement made in order to avert blood vengeance. In the Old English poem *The Dream of the Rood*, Christ's death is similarly presented as a payment that takes the place of mankind's death.

This system is also confirmed and described in *Njal's Saga* when Amundi the Blind demands compensation from Lyting of Samstead for the death of his father. When Lyting initially refuses, Amundi promises, "If my eyes were blest with sight, I would get full compensation for my father or else take blood vengeance" (226). He quickly gains sight and praises God, taking it as a sign that the act of vengeance is willed by God. Amundi's syncretic beliefs come to a head when he subsequently buries an axe in Lyting's skull. Although Amundi is again blinded after the kill, *Njal* confirms his action as just and even "foreordained" (227).

Another tradition, the code of *comitatus*, was mentioned as early as AD 98 by Tacitus and as late as the tenth-century Old English work *The Battle of Maldon*, a poem describing an Anglo-Saxon military defeat in 991 (Lapidge 135). Involving the

reciprocal relationship between a lord and his thanes, *comitatus* was a system of mutual obligation in which the lord was expected to provide protection and generous rewards in return for his thanes' loyalty and service. *Comitatus* stood at the core of the Anglo-Saxon notion of clan.

These unique qualities of archaic Germanic society circumscribe the characterization of the hero-warrior in Old English poetry. The word *hero* and its derivations encompass a wide range of meanings, and our word in English comes from the Latin *hero*, which itself comes from the Greek *heros*. The Old English analogue of *hero* is generally accepted to be *hæleð*. The Old English notion of *hero*, however, differs from the Latin and Greek sense, as they both associate *hero* with a humanized god or a human who is deified and worshiped after death. The Old English concept of *hero*, on the other hand, involves a different set of qualities. Guy Bourquin sketches them and provides an example of a corresponding Old English word: courage, vigor, fortitude—*ellen*; perseverance, tenacity, undauntedness—*anhydig*; glory, fame, merit, honor—*mærðu*; sagacity—*freagleaw*; ardor, zeal—*georn*; humility—*eaðmod*; sincerity, truth—*hreðerlocan*; protection—*ærfæst*; usefulness, worth, availability—*duguð*; perfection—*halig*; warlike qualities—*herfeld*; generosity, courage—*liðe* (3-4).

Commenting on Anglo-Saxon literature as a whole, Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe writes, "The ethos of heroic life pervades Old English literature, marking its conventions, imagery, and values" (107). The most prominent feature of that life, she argues, is the *comitatus* code, because this vital relationship binds nearly everything else together. Another important facet of the Old English hero is his often elegiac attitude, stemming from the experience of defeat in battle or the loss of clan. Romantic love, an overarching topic of Middle English literature, is markedly absent

(Greenblatt 6). The conventions of Germanic-heroic life not only pervade Old English literature, but they find new syncretic application that relevantly communicates a Christian worldview.

\* \* \* \* \*

Before Christian and Germanic-heroic traditions could be blended, the Anglo-Saxons first had to be converted to Christianity. When Bede introduces the heroes of his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (finished in 731), we meet the missionaries sent to the Anglo-Saxons by Pope Gregory I (c. 540-604) beginning in 595. Bede's story of the conversion of Edwin of Northumbria is a crucial narrative that succinctly relates the spiritual climate of Anglo-Saxon England around the time Christianity was first introduced. In 627 at York, Edwin held a *witenagemot*, a meeting of his council, to debate whether to accept Christianity. His chief priest reasoned that the old pagan religion had never seemed particularly fruitful, and thus Edwin should at least entertain the idea of this new faith. Another counselor concurred, offering one of the most famous speeches in Old English literature:

Your Majesty, when we compare the present life of man on earth with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting-hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter's day with your thanes and counsellors. In the midst there is a comforting fire to warm the hall; outside, the storms of winter rain or snow are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the wintry world from which he came. Even so, man appears on earth for a little while; but of what went before this life or of what follows, we know nothing. Therefore, if this new teaching has brought any more certain knowledge, it seems only right that we should follow it. (127)

These words helped convince Edwin to convert, but they also provide insight into the life conditions and mindset in Anglo-Saxon England and suggest reasons why Christianity had such an appeal. It is perhaps a shrewd rhetorical move by Bede, but the common feelings of brevity, uncertainty, and isolation were certainly prevalent in the reality of the early Middle Ages and in the heroic world of *Beowulf*. These issues did not simply go away with the conversion to Christianity, and thus the reason for syncretism is obvious. The synthesis of old Germanic pessimism with Christian theology as it was elaborated in the early Middle Ages is found, for example, in Old English poems such as *The Seafarer* and *The Wanderer*, both of which emphasize the importance of Christian faith in the face of hardship.

\* \* \* \* \*

Although we know little about pre-Conversion Anglo-Saxon culture, we do know that a religious fervor eventually swept through England (Grebanier 13). Retaining the conventions of their Germanic forbears, the Anglo-Saxons absorbed and adapted the Christian theology and Latin tradition of their missionaries as the Edwin episode from Bede's *History* illustrates, and this absorption and adaptation carried over into the literature (Greenfield 1). While Christianity brought about major changes in Anglo-Saxon society, the new Christian culture did not replace the old culture; rather they blended to create a new cultural fusion. Instead of serving as a comprehensive substitute, Christian teaching "transformed the perspectives of the heroic world," and this interrelationship demonstrates an accommodating stance that the heroic and Christian ways of life were not entirely incompatible (Alexander 25).

As missionaries charged the Anglo-Saxon cultural landscape with new themes and ideas, the coupling of pagan ideals with scriptural notions began to dominate the literature. The amalgamation of these distinct cultural threads may seem a little strange, and R.M. Liuzza explains that this peculiarity moved early scholars to assume that most Old English poetry “could be separated in layers of ‘pagan’ and ‘Christian’ composition, an early core of secular (usually heroic) values and a later shell of homiletic interpolation” (xxv). More recent critics such as Liuzza, however, hold that secular and Christian ideals are pervasively and thoroughly intertwined throughout Old English literature in a way that resists such facile attempts to disentangle them, and that the religious impact on Anglo-Saxon vernacular verse is extensive and profound.

Several factors contributed to this cultural fusion. Alexander, offering one explanation, points out the natural affection the Northumbrian ecclesiastics in their isolated monasteries would have had toward the songs of their heritage, “just as many an ex-Christian joins in hymn-singing at Christmas” (4). Such appreciation for their Germanic roots despite the incongruity of traditional stories in a Christian setting is likely responsible for the preservation in the monastic scriptoria of culturally synthesized texts like *Beowulf*. Although pre-conversion poetry was enjoyed, it received less attention than more explicitly syncretic texts in the scriptorium, because its social context was oral rather than literary. The presence of heroic themes in the monasteries through popular song makes literary comingling, such as the rewriting of Biblical narratives and commentaries in the heroic vein, seemingly inevitable (Alexander 4).

Pre-Christian traditions survived in part because Pope Gregory did not exclude them but actually encouraged a degree of syncretism. Bede writes that the



fourth month was called Eostremonath, because during that time festivals were held for the goddess Eostre. Alexander explains that Gregory “advised Augustine not to deprive the people of their customary sacrifices of oxen, and to let the old festivals be celebrated on appropriate days as religious feasts” (5). Although he initially encouraged King Ethelbert of Kent to destroy the pagan temples, Gregory later advised Augustine to leave them intact instead, converting them into churches and supplanting the idols with relics (Alexander 6). This follows the similar Roman rededication practice, evidenced in the conversion of the Pantheon to a Christian church, for example. Gregory’s policy of gently weaning the Anglo-Saxons from their pagan beliefs was effective, and he allowed other pagan customs to be Christianized as well. Fountains and wells could be dedicated to the Virgin Mary rather than to the pagan gods as had typically been done. Gods and elves were reinterpreted to an extent as angels and devils. Hammer of Thor amulets were replaced by cruciform amulets. The Germanic funerary custom of grave-goods was banned, but graveside gifts earmarked for the Church were accepted instead (Niles 130). Many gospelbooks, such as the famous Lindisfarne Gospels, were adorned in ways similar to the way weapons and jewelry had been decorated for the warrior elite (Wormald 4).

This climate of adaptation and syncretism was mirrored by similar practices in the composition of Old English literature. Donald G. Scragg asserts that the “success of poets in adapting traditional forms to serve a variety of Christian purposes, from biblical paraphrase to hymns to the Virgin, testifies to the flexibility of poetic diction and imagery” (66). Pre-Christian traditions and practices were neither ignored nor attacked but rather reinvented and transformed through Christian modification and interpolation. Pagan gods and customs are even yoked into the

Christian worldview, as in the case of Woden, the ancestral figure claimed by the Kentish, Northumbrian, Mercian, and West Saxon kings, who was placed in the lineage of Noah. The Germanic heritage was not rejected but rather assimilated, and John D. Niles argues that this practice constituted a welcoming of pre-Christian traditions into the family, instead of pushing them away (135). This climate of accommodation not only facilitated Gregory's plan of conversion, but also produced a new literary tradition distinct from both earlier Germanic-heroic literature and contemporary continental Christian literature.

Through the transformation of the Germanic mode and the subsequent syntheses of Christian and Germanic-heroic elements in paraphrases of biblical and saints' narratives, Old English literature developed a unique notion of the Christian hero (Lapidge 135-36). Scripture is surprisingly "well suited to heroic treatment," and recognizing this, Anglo-Saxon writers readily applied their native diction and motifs to Christian stories (Fulk 110). The Christianized warrior (or warriorized Christian) emerges as a common character in Old English verse. Isaiah 59:17—*Indutus est institia ut lorica, / Et galea salutis in capite eius; / Indutus est vestimentis ultionis, / Et opertus est quasi pallio zeli*<sup>1</sup>—offers a precedent for this conceptual fusion, as it depicts a divine warrior-redeemer figure who brings justice and vengeance (Woolf "Doctrinal Influences" 38).

The Christian warrior is not an uncommon image in Christian traditions, as some biblical narratives have quite militant features. Discussing the reasons for which the Anglo-Saxons accepted a new faith, Wormald notes that the "Old Testament was the story of another tribal people with a special relationship to the

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<sup>1</sup> From the Vulgate text the Anglo-Saxons would have known. "He puts on justice as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation upon his head: he put on the garments of vengeance, and was clad with zeal as with a cloak."

God of Battles" (7). Christian history also demonstrates that faith has not always been an impetus for peace but was often a pretext for wars of conquest. In the fourth century, the emperor Constantine claimed to have looked up at the sun and to have seen an image of the cross inscribed with the words "In this sign conquer." After emblazoning his army's standards with the Chi Rho monogram of Christ's name, he was victorious. Despite the militaristic facets of Christian history, nothing indicates that Augustine's mission was anything but peaceful (Alexander 25-26). This contrasts with an episode in *Njal's Saga* that recounts an experience of Thangbrand. At one point while evangelizing, Thangbrand encounters a farmer who refuses to convert and instead challenges him to a duel. Rather than taking a shield to defend himself, Thangbrand uses a crucifix to kill the stubborn pagan. The saga relates several other violent tales involving Thangbrand, including his use of a crucifix to disarm a berserk and subsequently kill him with his own sword (218). Although Augustine's mission was a peaceful one, we see syncretism in that evangelism and armed heroism often overlapped in the medieval Germanic world.

Less than a century after Augustine's nonviolent mission, King Oswald of Northumbria conquered the Briton Cadwalla by the sign of the cross at the Battle of Heavenfield, perhaps patterning his victory after Constantine's experience. The Christian King Edwin of Northumbria also always had a Christian standard carried before him wherever he went, and Bede attributes his successful reign to his faith. Although a ubiquitous motif in Old English literature, the conflation of Christian and heroic imagery is not necessarily unique to the Anglo-Saxon imagination. The figure of the *miles Christi*, for example, is observable in some Mediterranean visual art, such as the mosaic at Archiepiscopal Chapel in Ravenna, Italy. It depicts Christ in Roman military style, crushing the head of a snake and with his cross slung over his

shoulder like a weapon. Overall, it serves to represent Christ as a triumphant and conquering hero (Woolf, "Doctrinal Influences" 38). The Anglo-Saxons may or may not have been familiar with the *miles Christi* theme, but images in the same warrior mode are present in both literary and visual texts, such as the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Crosses, and the image is more pervasive in Anglo-Saxon culture than in its contemporary Mediterranean literature and culture.

Regardless of influence, Old English writers consciously applied these martial motifs for their Anglo-Saxon spiritual purposes, and scholars have been intrigued by their syncretic efforts, arguing, for example, that Anglo-Saxon saints' lives manifest not just Christian themes in heroic dressing or disguise but typological constructs that represent the highest end of medieval hagiography (Greenfield 158). Looking at Old English literature as a whole, Alexander asserts that "this natural perspective for a Christian historian suggests that if paganism and Christianity are incompatible, heroism and Christendom are not" (27). In reading and interpreting Old English poetry, it is nearly impossible to separate the heroic from the Christian, because the two work together to constitute a cohesive, syncretic theological and conceptual worldview. As the Anglo-Saxons adapted to the ethical and esthetic values of Christianity, they simultaneously adapted Christianity to their heroic patterns (Greenblatt 6).

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Old English literature is extremely important in tracing not only the development of Anglo-Saxon culture but also in understanding the cultural roots of the English-speaking world (Godden ix). James W. Earl argues that the "Germanic

culture of England was profoundly (if unusually) Christianized, and the Christianity of England was profoundly Germanized” (89). Although Christianity was introduced and significantly altered Anglo-Saxon society, Old English poetics conserved the form and the tropes solidified in the former heroic age. While the content of the poetry altered slightly as a result of Christian influence, the overarching style and tone largely remained the same. Whereas Old English poetry absorbed Christian concepts, Old English prose was largely absorbed by Christian concepts and influenced by Latin prose style. In prose, for example, Aelfric skillfully fashions neologisms to express theological ideas new to the Anglo-Saxon people (Alexander 222). The poetry, on the other hand, is most effective when it paints Christian narrative in the heroic mode.

The following chapters will focus on the ways Christ and the saints are recast in the style and tradition of the pagan Germanic hero through imagery and poetic style, in order to demonstrate how Old English forms of syncretism anticipate contemporary forms of syncretism. This fusion of Anglo-Saxon and Latin rhetorical strategies, George Hardin Brown argues, yielded an Old English poetic structure that was “remarkably suited to represent Christian mysteries in their beauty and paradox” (26). It is impossible to understand this fusion without attending to both its Latin Christian concepts and its native heroic foundations.

Circumstances of conversion fell into place to make this marriage possible, but the primary incentive was the fact that Anglo-Saxon paganism represented not only a religious impulse but an entire way of life. That heritage encompassed a collective set of hopes, fears, values, ethics, memories, ideas, and means of expression. Such an entrenched foundation of culture insured that the old ways would not be forgotten upon conversion. Niles points out that the “great challenge

facing the authors of this period was to find ways of integrating this Germanic heritage with the worship of Christ and with the whole intellectual order that derived from Mediterranean lands” (140). Old English literature is the product of this tension, and scholarship over the centuries has struggled to grasp its intricacies. In turn, the Anglo-Saxons’ syncretic enterprise has deeply influenced the ways English-speaking peoples have subsequently thought about, interacted with, and lived out their faith. Considering the hope for syncretic practices to express a meaningful and relevant Christian worldview, the partly pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon moment and the partly post-Christian present seem to share a close correlation.

Chapter 3 – *Beowulf* and “Cædmon’s Hymn”

Although *Beowulf*'s origins and plot elements are rooted in folktales and legends rather than heroic stories, the unknown Anglo-Saxon scribe who compiled *Beowulf* transformed the poem's namesake into an epic-like hero who resembles the ancient Achilles or Aeneas (Lapidge 136). The work itself is more of a pseudo-epic, given that it is much shorter in length than traditional Greek or Roman epics. The very Anglo-Saxon conception, progression, and storyline of *Beowulf* deviate from classical narrative notions such as Aristotle's beginning, middle, and end and encompass “contrasts and digressions, chronological leaps, and the failure to maintain a simple story line” (Robinson, “Beowulf” 159). Indeed, when reading *Beowulf*, we must open ourselves to a text that is similar to but also very different from classical Graeco-Roman heroic poems. Its Germanic-heroic complexion consistently shines through.

While questions remain about its dating and intended audience, *Beowulf* was not completed in the final form we have today at least until the eighth century (although some scholars assign it to various later dates). Its compiler is unknown, but the majority of scholars surmise it to have been a monk or priest, and they therefore read of the poem against the projected background of an ecclesiastical setting. The finished product that we now possess was likely originally two separate texts—one featuring Grendel and his mother and the other featuring the dragon—that were combined by a later Anglo-Saxon editor. Literacy made it possible to preserve poetry, and because literacy came with Christianity, all Old English literature is mediated through a Christian filter (Grebanier 12-13). While we can

assume that Beowulf existed as a character in old Germanic song, the only text we have is in the post-conversion Cotton Vitellius A. xv. Manuscript, dated around the turn of the first millennium. Although it was assuredly written by a Christian compiler or compilers who gathered the raw materials from Germanic tradition, the nature of any Christian alterations made to the Beowulf story is still debated. The major syncretic questions involve “the extent to which Christianity permeates the poem, the poet’s relative debts to the art of the Germanic scop and Latin Christian letters, and the validity of Christian allegorical or mythic interpretations” (Lapidge 136). Despite these puzzles and perhaps partly because of them, *Beowulf* is considered by modern scholars to be the preeminent Anglo-Saxon literary achievement.

The events *Beowulf* describes occur in the early part of the sixth century. Neither the hero nor setting is English (Grebanier 13). The people are Scandinavian, including Danes, Swedes, Franks, Frisians, and Geatas. The settings are Scandinavia and northern Germany. Although it seems ironic that England’s earliest sustained heroic narrative is written in traditional Germanic style and does not involve any characters who are English, *Beowulf’s* Anglo-Saxon audience probably still felt close to their Germanic heritage that carried over into their new home (Robinson, “Beowulf” 143).

Involving both Christian and Germanic qualities, *Beowulf* is representative of many aspects of Old English literature. It portrays the conventions of Germanic culture before conversion, but the composite manuscript version completed by an Anglo-Saxon Christian editor exposes the interweaving of Christian and pre-Christian elements that was in fact a major purpose of producing the text. The compiler lived in a world of Christian people whose roots and some of whose societal conventions were not derived from Christianity. Some Anglo-Saxon



teachers (including Alcuin) argued that the Anglo-Saxons' ancestors and their pagan religion should be disregarded because their errant ways resulted from their ignorance of Christianity. Although they were beyond salvation, however, they were not beyond memory for the Anglo-Saxons, despite the Christian teachers' best efforts to erase the lingering traces of paganism.

The Anglo-Saxons were hesitant to forget their pre-Christian traditions, because they were proud of their roots and of the forefathers who had found fame throughout Europe for their dauntless fortitude and heroic actions (Robinson, "Beowulf" 151). The opening line of *Beowulf* attests to this high regard: "We have heard of the glory of the Spear-Danes / in the old days, the kings of tribes - / how noble princes showed great courage!" (1-3). Other characters in the text frequently laud Beowulf for his courage and prowess in his triumphs over adversaries, but the narrator also voices a sense of discomfort with the people's paganism. He laments,

At times they prepared sacrifice in the temples,  
 war-idol offerings, said old words aloud,  
 that the great soul-slayer might bring them some comfort  
 in their country's disaster. Such was their custom,  
 the hope of the heathen; they remembered Hell  
 in their deepest thoughts. They knew not the Lord,  
 the Judge of our deeds, were ignorant of God,  
 knew not how to worship our Protector above,  
 the King of Glory. Woe unto him  
 who in violent affliction has to thrust his soul  
 in the fire's embrace, expects no help,  
 no change in his fate! Well is it with him  
 who after his death-day is allowed to seek  
 the Father's welcome, ask His protection! (175-188)

It is clear the *Beowulf* scribe is acutely conscious of the tension between those who reject the old ways and those who still have affection for them. Boldly engaging the challenge, the verses he writes seem to be a way of working towards a syncretic medium—one that pays homage to the heroic past without sacrificing the integrity

and legitimacy of Christianity. Although he communicates the admirable and sometimes even exemplary traits of his pagan ancestors, he assiduously discourages any appreciation for their paganism (Robinson, "Beowulf" 150). In his lecture "*Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics*," J.R.R. Tolkien argues that the scribe was not "so simple or so confused that he muddled Christianity with Germanic paganism," but that he rather "drew or attempted to draw distinctions, and to represent moods and attitudes of characters conceived dramatically as living in a noble but heathen past" (40). Indeed, the compiler hopes to take the best of both worlds as he splices them together to create something new, beautiful, and relevant for a Christian Anglo-Saxon audience.

The poet takes elements from the Germanic ancestral folk traditions and legends and casts them in a new mold, giving them a sense of spiritual meaning and significance they otherwise would not have possessed for a Christian audience. Niles argues that *Beowulf* is in fact "more noble than barbaric... recalling the character of the Christian Savior" (138). Indeed, the poet seems to walk the tightrope of syncretism carefully, endowing heroic deeds with some qualities of a good Christian (Fulk 2). Other contextualization elements are interspersed throughout the poem to give it thorough yet subtle syncretic undertones.

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Scholars value *Beowulf* especially because of its particularly clear and focused representation of the heroic ethos characteristic of Old English heroic literature. It helps to define the Anglo-Saxon heroic style and informs us of the conventions of warrior poetry, allowing readers to understand the model that

underlies other Anglo-Saxon religious poems that cast their Christian characters in the same heroic mode.

The setting of *Beowulf* is indicative of the Germanic tradition, as it depicts a more primitive time “when the mightiest warrior was the hero of his tribe and aroused the feasting fighters in the mead hall with his strident lay” (Grebanier 13). Beowulf is such a hero and comes from his native Geatland to resolve the monstrous afflictions of the Danish king Hrothgar. He makes the journey to Jutland with fourteen of his thanes, and the text frequently exhibits this conventional heroic bond between a lord and his retainers. The poem displays this reciprocal relationship in several instances, as when a lord rewards loyal service with gifts. The narrator describes and praises this practice:

He received them well,    promised reward  
once they were home,    and fulfilled it thus:  
the king of the Geats,    the son of Hrethel,  
once they returned    to the land of their people,  
paid Wulf and Eofor    with immense treasure –  
one hundred thousand    in land and rings.  
No man on earth    had cause to reproach him  
since they had earned    their glory in battle.  
And he gave to Eofor    his only daughter  
a grace in the home,    a pledge of friendship. (2989-98)

In contrast, when a thane fails in his obligation, he loses his possessions and brings disgrace on his family (Fulk 193-194). In other Old English religious poems, the saints are depicted as heroes but are also seen as the retainers of Christ. Their loyal devotion to their Savior, imagined in terms of a thane’s loyalty to his lord, provides a model that the Anglo-Saxon audience is encouraged to follow, and the syncretic method, which draws upon culturally familiar concepts and practices, facilitates the instructional work of those texts.

Although Anglo-Saxon society was slowly moving away from its pre-Christian Germanic conventions, these conventions remained relevant, and recalling the heroic world was especially useful in mustering opposition to the Viking invaders. The pagan elements evidenced in the Sutton Hoo ship burial even suggest that contact with the not-yet Christian Vikings prompted affectionate memories of pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon beliefs and practices. Again, there is a level of conflict between the heroic and Christian ideologies; Stephen Greenblatt points out that the *Beowulf* poet “looks back on that ancient world with admiration for the courage of which it was capable and at the same time with elegiac sympathy for its inevitable doom” (5). The Anglo-Saxon poet endows his warriors with honorable qualities and venerable deeds but reveals his reticence and misgivings by injecting an underlying tone of melancholy that undercuts the celebration and appreciation for times past (Robinson, “Beowulf” 152).

This complex and delicate balance is achieved primarily by prophesying disasters that will befall the heroes and effectively counterbalances their otherwise lofty praise and admiration. After Beowulf receives the golden torque as treasure for defeating Grendel, for example, we immediately learn that it will later be lost when the Geats battle the Frisians:

This collar-ring traveled on Hygelac's breast  
 on his final voyage, nephew of Swerting,  
 when under the standard he defended his treasure,  
 spoils of the kill; fate took him off  
 that time he sought trouble, stirred up a feud,  
 a fight with the Frisians, in his pride and daring.  
 He wore those gold wires, rarest gem-stones,  
 across the cup of waves, a mighty prince.  
 He fell beneath his shield. Into Frankish hands  
 came his life, body-gold, and the great ringed collar;  
 lesser warriors rifled the corpses  
 after the battle-harvest. Dead Geats  
 filled the field. (1202-1214a)

Elsewhere, just after Heorot is built, we are told that it will later be burned— Beowulf's defeat of Grendel, which saves the hall, is undercut before we are even told the story of that defeat. At the end of the poem, Beowulf wins treasure for his people when he defeats the dragon, but we learn that his retainers bury it with him and that the nation soon faces certain defeat at the hands of its enemies (Robinson, "Beowulf" 152).

While the poem contains hints and premonitions of earthly loss, a deeper sense of gloom perpetually hangs over the poem. Despite Beowulf's paradigmatic status as a warrior and hero, he inevitably is damned and thus falls short in the Christian perspective (Lapidge 140). Fred C. Robinson explains that the poet uses "the simple device of placing his heroic narrative in the lost world of Germanic paganism, thereby lending a dark grandeur and heroic meaning to deeds which, had they been performed by devout Christians in a Christian setting, would have been merely exemplary" (Robinson, "God, Death, and Loyalty" 432). The subtle yet fateful sense that the full cast of characters lacks access to eternal hope through Christian revelation casts an ominous shadow over the majestic exploits, brilliance, or glory of the heroic age. Although the Anglo-Saxons' ancestors are lent dignity and respect, the poet does not compromise Christian truth (Robinson, "Beowulf" 152).

A level of Christian teaching is also introduced through the hero's battles. The *Beowulf* compiler rarely attempts to communicate Christian theological content explicitly in the poem, but rather alludes to overarching Christian concepts suited to his Anglo-Saxon audience. Beowulf, for example, does not fight people but monsters, who embody evil. Monsters are symbols of the iniquity and depravity that disrupts God's creation. Grendel and his mother are rooted primarily in the old

folklore, and many of their descriptive terms, such as *eoten*, *thyrs*, and *ylfe*, are taken straight from Germanic demonology, but the monsters also have a correlation with the demons of the Christian tradition and are associated with hell (Niles 138). They are called *feond mancynnes*, “foes of mankind” (164), and are described by other terms usually reserved for Satan. As Robinson observes: “There seems to be a double perspective maintained in such characterization: to the pagan Germanic characters in the poem, Grendel is a monster out of pagan Germanic mythology; to the Christian poet and his Christian audience, the creature is known to be in truth a manifestation of evil as it is rightly understood by Christians” (Robinson, “Beowulf” 149). The poet even places the monsters into the lineage of Cain, connecting them to the very origin of murder. After Beowulf dispatches Grendel and his mother and returns back through their mere, the waters are miraculously *eal gefælsod*, “entirely cleansed” (1620), as if through some sort of exorcism (Niles 138). Throughout *Beowulf*, the poet achieves an effective literary synthesis of the Germanic and Christian traditions. It is an excellent representation of the heroic ethos that would have been so close to the Anglo-Saxon heart and mind, but the Christian compiler also reinvents that heroic past by adapting and subtly altering the original folkloric material.

    Syncretic reconditioning of this sort in *Beowulf* and other Old English poems allowed the Anglo-Saxons to refashion their spiritual identity to fit their specific time and place (Niles 137). Niles explains the purpose behind this mixture: “The *Beowulf*-poet’s decorous accounts of funerals may have been part of a general effort to portray the old Germanic way of life in elevated tones, with the aim of integrating the best of pagan values into a Christian worldview” (134). Through this acknowledgement of the nobler heroic ideals, qualified by subtle but overarching

Christian themes, Anglo-Saxon poets made the old Germanic heritage safer for appreciation. Syncretic poems like *Beowulf* represent the Anglo-Saxon attempt to redeem elements of their ancestral culture.

The compiler accentuates and alludes to his Christian faith, but the poem's characters are not Christians, as it would be anachronistic for them to possess such knowledge (Robinson, "Beowulf" 151). The product of a significant process of integration, *Beowulf* is the sketch of a pre-Christian society from a Christian perspective (Trahern 161). Discussing the poem's social significance, Niles argues that "the great importance of *Beowulf* for its contemporary audience would have been its mediating role in relation to the early history and culture of the Germanic peoples" (137). *Beowulf* was thus a major piece of the puzzle for a society looking to salvage its roots and make them consistent with its new faith. This resolution of discordant ideologies is negotiated through shrewd and meticulous decisions and carefully chosen emphases throughout the poem. Considering that today's contextualization efforts attempt to apply post-Christian materials to Christian ideology, *Beowulf* provides an important model that can teach us about the intricacies, issues, and methods of cultural/religious syncretism.

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The brief poem "Cædmon's Hymn" is another significant example of the synthesis of Germanic-heroic and Christian motifs in Old English literature. Composed sometime between 658 and 680, it is probably the earliest Old English poem that we possess. It originated in the oral tradition, and its story is mediated to us by Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History*. Bede tells us that the poem was composed

by Cædmon, an illiterate cowherd from Whitby who was miraculously given the gift of song and who subsequently founded a school of Christian poetry. The majority of songs during Cædmon's day came from the secular Germanic heritage, and Greenblatt points out that "Cædmon's inspiration... was to apply the meter and language of such songs, presumably including pagan heroic verse, to Christian themes" (24). Indeed, most scholars believe Cædmon to be the first to convert the inherited Germanic-heroic tradition for Christian application (Scragg 55).

In his introduction to the "Hymn," Bede explains the nature of Cædmon's poetry: "Whatever he learned of holy Scripture with the aid of interpreters, he quickly turned into the sweetest and most moving poetry in his own language, that is to say English" (25). We see here Bede's acknowledgement of syncretic contextualization. Even before Cædmon explicitly brings in heroic elements, he has already contextualized the Bible by translating its narrative into the language of the Anglo-Saxon people. Although worthy of analysis in its own right, the "Hymn" is an important indicator of the assimilative method by which Christian concepts were incorporated into a Germanic context.

The syncretism of "Cædmon's Hymn" is most evident in the application of epithets from heroic contexts to religious concepts. The poem describes the creation story, and Cædmon's use of heroic appellations to refer to God is well suited to a narrative that has power and glory at its core. The kennings used to describe God, for example, are borrowed from heroic vocabulary. The poet first designates God as *heofonrices Weard*, "Guardian of heaven's kingdom" (1), and then as *moncynnes Weard*, "guardian of mankind," a few lines later (7). This is similar to the way the *Beowulf* scribe refers to Hrothgar—*beahhorda weard*,



“guardian of the ring treasure” (921). It also recalls the typical heroic kenning reserved for kings—*folces hyrde*, “guardian of the people” (Scragg 66).

Cædmon was certainly an early exemplar of the practice of adapting heroic verse form and diction for Christian use. Bede relates that while others followed in the same syncretic mode, none was more successful than Cædmon. The texts discussed in the next sections demonstrate a greater syncretic complexity than the “Hymn,” but the integration of Christian concepts into the Germanic milieu had its inception in an uneducated cowherd’s vision of God.

Chapter 4 – *The Dream of the Rood*

John's representation of Christ in the fifth chapter of Revelation provides an image of what it means to overcome and to conquer. Verse five states that "the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed," drawing titles for Christ from Genesis 49 and Isaiah 11 in order to evoke a very militaristic picture of the Savior. This is precisely the kind of Messiah the Jews anticipated, a fighter-king who would lead them to victory over their enemies. At the time Christ was born, for example, some Jewish people would have expected the Messiah to liberate them from the oppressive Roman occupation. In the sixth verse, however, John makes an interesting and crucial distinction. He has previously been told about the triumphant Savior, but here he looks and instead sees a lamb that has been slain. He hears of a lion but sees a lamb—they are one and the same. Mike Erre offers an explanation of this puzzling discrepancy: "Revelation 5 presents us with a new symbol of conquest and overcoming: sacrificial death. Jesus conquered not by force but by death, not by violence but by martyrdom" (142). This is a particularly difficult concept: through suffering and defeat, Christ ultimately triumphs; to conquer, the lion must become the lamb; and death by crucifixion leads to an unbreakable kingdom. Despite its complexity, the challenging imagery resonated with Anglo-Saxon Christians, and *The Dream of the Rood* explores and offers a syncretic resolution of this paradox.

In this poem, which cannot be dated with any certainty, the narrator not only tells of a dream in which Christ's cross comes to him to describe the passion, but he also reveals his newfound redemption as a result of hearing this story. The genre is

dream-vision, and its use of two speakers, the dreamer and the cross, is an especially creative technique for this period. Isolated and melancholic at the outset, the narrator is a typical exile figure in Old English literature. The plight of the cross—its sorrow at being transformed from a tree into an instrument of torture, its anguish over losing its lord Christ, and finally its description of Christ's conquest—has a “suggestive relevance to the condition of the sad, lonely, sin-stained Dreamer,” who, again, resembles an archetypal Old English character (Greenblatt 27). As in *Beowulf*, *Rood* makes over the truths of Christianity to speak compellingly to an Anglo-Saxon audience as a syncretic offering.

The poem survives in the tenth-century Vercelli Book, but some of its lines are also carved in the runic border of the eighteen-foot tall stone Ruthwell Cross erected at Dumfriesshire in Northumbria in the early eighth century (Scragg 57). These two presentations of the poems are separated by approximately 250 years and eventually by 1000 miles, indicating not only how complex the life-history of an Old English text can be but also how widespread and enduring was the influence of this poem (Alexander 177). Its overall mood and diction seem to indicate a connection to the poetic school of Cynewulf rather than that of Cædmon, but the early date of the Ruthwell Cross suggests a more immediate connection with Cædmon's school of biblical poetry (Woolf, “Doctrinal Influences” 48).

Christ's death has received much attention in various syncretic art forms, but its heroic treatment in *The Dream of the Rood* is an unusual example. Similar to *Beowulf* in its blending of Christian and warrior culture, the poem frequently employs the vocabulary of warfare to describe the crucifixion events. Barbara C. Raw explains the central heroic elements: “The picture of Christ willingly mounting the cross has all the heroic qualities of secular writing. The cross itself is portrayed as

the retainer forced to acquiesce in the death of its lord. Heaven is God's banqueting hall where the devout Christian will feast and receive treasure in the company of his friends" (240). The three dramatic metaphors of the cross as Christ's thane, Christ as a hero-warrior, and the narrator's loss of clan but hope in Christ would have assuredly captured the attention and engaged the emotions of a battle-trying people, pulling them not only into its drama but also into its consequences and meaning. The poem would have excited them and stirred their minds, but the poem's goals are far more complex than that (Leiter 96). The subject matter of *Rood*, as we will see, was especially conspicuous during the Old English period.

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The cross was a conspicuous symbol and topic not only in the New Testament and early Christian writings but also throughout medieval culture and folklore. From literature to music to art and architecture, it was a dominant presence in the Middle Ages. Anglo-Saxon England was no exception. Alcuin encouraged believers to make the sign of the cross every morning, Aelfric argues for its veneration in one of his homilies, and prayer to the cross was also a common practice. In 883 and in 885, Pope Marinus sent Alfred pieces of the True Cross, a relic with assumed powers (McEntire 393-395). At both the literal and symbolic levels, the cross of Christ flooded Anglo-Saxon society, and it was therefore natural for the Anglo-Saxons to write about the cross.

In the first chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul asserts, "We preach Christ crucified... the power of God." As the cross became such a pervasive symbol in subsequent centuries, Cyril of Jerusalem wrote that the world had become

filled with fragments of the cross. In Old English literature and its appropriation of the cross, we see a clear fulfillment of a statement made by Cyril's contemporary, Athanasius of Alexandria: "The power of the cross of Christ has filled the world" (qtd. in Pelikan 108).

Medieval culture transformed the cross into a weapon against all forms of evil. Medieval saints' lives are filled with accounts of the power of the cross, which is viewed as a container of the power of God (97). The cross was interpreted not only as a symbol of the redemption of mankind but also as a symbolic weapon against the devil and even mortal enemies. After Constantine's triumph at Milvian Bridge, Eusebius referred to it as "the victory-granting cross" (99). The cross became a popular military insignium evoked as a source of protection and blessing in battle. Later in the eleventh century, it was the central symbol of the Crusades: "To take the cross' meant to go off on a crusade" (99).

The cross was thought to contain power, because it was the device used to accomplish the greatest victory of all time: the cosmic triumph of Christ over the devil. In *The Orthodox Faith*, John of Damascus explains this association: "The word of the cross is called the power of God, because the might of God, that is, his victory over death, has been revealed to us through it" (100). Gustaf Aulen uses the term *Christus Victor* in his controversial book of the same name to refer to the atonement theory that describes the cross as the symbol of God's invasion of enemy territory and the "wondrous battle" through which Christ makes redemption possible for mankind (100).

The New Testament does not mention the use of the cross in any kind of warfare, spiritual or otherwise, but the notion appears almost immediately in early Christian history. Liuzza argues that the idea reached Britain quite early in the

medieval period (395). St. Thangbrand in *Njal's Saga*, for example, is described as killing heathen warriors in battle using a crucifix as a sword. Regardless of its theological strengths or weaknesses, Jarislov Pelikan asserts that “this theory of atonement had the advantage, in relation to the art and music of the Middle Ages, of being able to connect the cross with the resurrection as two parts of a single action” (101). This appropriation of the cross is an example of the syncretic propensity to use extra-biblical concepts and traditions to elucidate certain theologies. Old English literature did not originate the idea of the cross as a kind of weapon, but texts such as *The Dream of the Rood* clearly demonstrate that the Anglo-Saxons used the warrior metaphor to convey Christian teaching within the framework of their distinctive heroic tradition.

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*The Dream of the Rood* is much more than a simple biblical paraphrase composed in native style—it is rooted firmly in the early medieval theological context. Woolf argues that the poet “must have been steeped in the doctrine of the church, and thus gave to his treatment of the Crucifixion the full richness and subtlety of its theological significance” (“Doctrinal Influences” 48). Indeed, the influences of the church on the poet must have been profound. Not only does he incorporate aspects of his culture's heroic tradition into the poem, but he also incorporates his period's distinctive doctrinal ideas as well, particularly the theology concerning views on the nature of Christ and the interpretation of redemption ( 29).

During the time the poem was composed, the doctrine of Western Christianity focused on both the divine supremacy and the human suffering of Christ. In terms of

these two elements, the crucifixion was a fruitful paradox, because it juxtaposes in the same moment the complex tension of Christ's divinity and victory with his humanity and suffering (35). *The Dream of the Rood* masterfully brings these two concepts together in a poetic form that effectively communicates this theology. "The poet's treatment of Christ as warrior is good," Woolf argues, "but his real brilliance is in his emphasis on Christ's human nature" (43). This is a difficult paradox to explain or comprehend, but here, through the pairing of Germanic conventions and early medieval church doctrine, it is illuminatingly expressed from a fresh perspective.

The poet elucidates this tension by depicting Christ as a young, omnipotent hero who chooses to be broken and endure suffering for a specific purpose (Raw 239). By showing Christ heroically ascending the cross while enduring human torment, the poem successfully reconciles the Christological disputes of the seventh and eighth centuries concerning Christ's dual nature as both divine and human. At one point in the poem, the cross identifies itself with Mary as both are elected to be God-bearers: *Hwæt, me þa geweorðode wuldres ealdor / ofer holmwudu, heofonrices weard! / Swylce swa he his modor eac, Marian sylfe, / ælmihtig god for ealle men / geweorðode ofer eall wifa cynn*<sup>2</sup> (90-94). Strong names for God—including *wuldres Ealdor*, "Prince of Glory"; *heofonrices Weard*, "heaven's King"; and *ælmihtig God*, "almighty God"—highlight the divine power that still resides in the human form of the savior (Irving 111). In this way, *Rood* foregrounds the way Christ achieves divine victory through human defeat. The poem's contextually dramatized presentation of the complex idea of Christ's dual nature is clearer and more forceful

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<sup>2</sup> "Listen! The Father of glory has honored me / Past any forest tree, the Lord / Himself – as He honored His mother, Mary, / Made her, loveliest and best of women, / For every man to bow to and worship."

to a lay audience than a more nuanced theological discussion would have been. (Woolf, "Doctrinal Influences" 30).

Christ's voluntary embrace of his death was emphasized in doctrine at this time, and the poet describes several heroic actions of Christ to illustrate his willing consent. His bold speed, his stripping himself, and his willful mounting of the cross all suggest his free choice and confidence in his triumph (39). The warrior metaphor effectively communicates several Christian paradoxes in addition to Christ's dual nature and his deliberate choice of a horrific death: the narrator sees himself as a sinner, but he is given this divine vision; the cross is seen as beautiful but also an instrument of torture; the cross is called the "tree of triumph," but the disciples believe the crucifixion is a defeat; and the crucifixion is represented as a symbol not of the end but rather of a new beginning. The poet clearly gets a great deal of mileage out of his syncretic depiction of the crucifixion in terms of the Germanic-heroic tradition.

Another doctrine—"the devil's rights"—was used by the church at this time to describe the way the redemption worked. It was superseded by Anselm's "satisfaction theory" which argues that God's offended holiness from man's sin could only be satisfied by the sacrifice of Christ. In "the devil's rights" theory, however, Christ paid man's debt and thereby won back for man the rights that were lost to Satan when sin entered the world through Adam and Eve's disobedience. The battle metaphor in *Rood* is especially relevant, because this doctrine specifically portrayed redemption as a conquest of the devil (Woolf, "Christ the Lover-Knight" 99-100). Through the cross, Christ is waging a war against Satan for the souls of men. The depiction of the crucifixion in terms of hero-warrior imagery in *Rood* provides a clearer and more concrete understanding of the doctrine. The metaphor of the



Christian as hero or warrior is not unique to *The Dream of the Rood*, but the poem carves out its own unique and nuanced niche through its fusion of specifically Germanic-heroic details with particular interpretations of early medieval church doctrine.

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The cross itself plays a major role in contextualizing the crucifixion story in *Rood*. A popular genre of literature for the Anglo-Saxons was the riddle, and the rood speaks in riddle fashion when delivering its history of growing as a tree and then being felled, made into a cross, and fixed on a hill to be used for execution:

It was long ago (but I won't forget)  
 When they came to the forest and cut me down,  
 Pulled me out of the earth./  
Ruthless enemies took me  
 And made me a mocking show,/ forced me to hold their thieves.  
 They swung me up on their shoulders,/ planted me into a hill,  
 Set me deep and straight. (28-33a)

The rood is never referred to as the cross until it names itself in heroic style when transformed from a tree into the cross of Christ: "I was reared as a cross" (44).

Edward Irving argues that this scene "reminds us of how, at the appropriate stage in his advance into Denmark to take on the task of fighting the monster Grendel, another riddling heroic figure proclaims his identity: '*Beowulf is min nama*' (*Beowulf* 343)" (Irving 104). As is the case with other similarities between *Rood* and *Beowulf*, the rood's speech is rooted heavily in the heroic mode. The line that begins "It was long ago (but I won't forget)" is formulaic in the Germanic tradition of heroic poetry. It recalls the beginning of Beowulf's lengthy speech before he sets out to battle the

dragon. Recollecting the past, he states, “Many times in my youth I faced battle-rushes, / saw many wars; I remember it all” (2426-27). This affiliation with the hero Beowulf may appear to set up the rood as a heroic character, but its narrative suggests a surprising degree of passivity. Lines 30-33 feature verbs at the beginning of the verses in order to accentuate the fact that the violent actions are done *to* the rood. The verbs—*astyred*, *genamon*, *geworhton*, *heton*, *bæron*, and *gefæstnodon*—also evoke the arrest, flagellation, and crowning with thorns of the passive or victimized Christ (Irving 106). Indeed, one could draw a connection between “passive” and “passion,” which have a common Latin root—“to suffer.”

In the poem, however, Christ clearly exerts the heroic will at this point. As Christ approaches, the rood observes him “boldly rushing to climb upon me” (34). At this point, the reader senses that the rood’s inaction is no longer an expression of passivity but rather a purposeful willing of fitting inaction. Although the rood regrets its role in the crucifixion, it must remain resolutely still as Christ dies. Irving explains the rood’s heroic task: “To the extent (a large extent) that he partakes of the role of hero, he must now endure the hardest fate a hero can suffer: to be blocked completely from taking any actions” (106). Action is paramount to the hero’s function and being. It is central to his character. At the beginning of *Beowulf*, for example, Hrothgar fumes with rage, because he is helpless to prevent Grendel’s destructive raids on his hall. In his warrior culture, inaction is not an acceptable option for him. Unable to bear Grendel’s depredations any longer, he solicits the help of Beowulf to slay the monster.

The *Rood* poet not only endows the cross with human qualities but also makes him part of a *comitatus*. Whereas Christ is the active hero of the narrative, the rood becomes one of his retainers. Although desiring to battle Christ’s enemies,

the cross must remain loyal by acquiescing to his death. Afterwards, the rood suffers the miseries of an exile who has lost his lord. With respect to the rood's thane-like situation, the poem borrows a great deal from the native verse tradition (Fulk 144). The *Rood* poet adapts the tradition, however, in order to interpolate Christian concepts into the narrative. Rather than exhibiting only the facets of Germanic heroism, the rood now experiences the "new Christian heroism of the martyr" (Irving 107). The poet also uses the heroic thane/lord relationship of the rood to Christ as an effective spiritual example for his Anglo-Saxon audience. Robinson explains the poet's syncretic strategy, arguing that this relationship suggests "that it was not merely love, but rather that unique combination of loyalty and affection which Anglo-Saxons felt for their chosen leaders that seems to bind the Christian to his Lord" ("God, Death, and Loyalty" 436).

The adaptation of Christianity to the Germanic mode in *Rood* finds intriguing expression in the story of the cross. Contextualization distinguishes the narrative from its biblical source, but the poet does not seek to tell the story as it is documented in the gospels. Instead, he is interested in communicating overarching implications and ideas about the crucifixion. Explaining the poet's technique and message, Irving argues that "making the figure of the Rood represent chiefly the passive suffering human dimension of Christ allows the actual character of Christ who appears in the poem to be one of pure heroic will, in part human courage but chiefly God's intense will to save mankind" (Irving 108). Overall, the poem augments what has been written, and to accomplish this effectively in his culture, the poet works within the heroic tradition.

Christ as a hero-warrior is, after the rood, the central dramatic metaphor in the poem. The poet explicitly refers to Christ in martial terms, as the rood describes him as *geong haeleð*, “young warrior” (39). Later, he is given heroic qualities such as “determined and brave” (40). Pagan Germanic songs featured hero-warriors as the subjects of their narratives, and portraying Christ in a similar manner would have made sense to an Anglo-Saxon audience.

When Christ is brought to his place of execution, the rood explains, “The young Hero, God Himself, threw off His garments, / Determined and brave” (39-40a). The practice of stripping oneself before battle is a heroic convention—although not necessarily a prominent *Germanic*-heroic convention. It is, however, also demonstrated when Beowulf strips off his armor before meeting Grendel. Woolf compares this scene in *Rood* with a scene in the *Aeneid* in which Entellus similarly strips himself. Virgil’s work is not necessarily a source, but it demonstrates, as does *Beowulf*, the heroic conventions borrowed by the *Rood* poet to achieve contextualization of Christian concepts. Christ then willingly mounts the cross, an image that Woolf deems “the climax of the description of the Crucifixion in heroic terms” (41).

The mosaics of San Apollinare Nuovo, a basilica church dedicated in 504, feature the hands of Christ outstretched in a way that communicates this sense of willing sacrifice and self-offering. Because it was doctrinally important to display the voluntary nature of the crucifixion, the *Rood* poet echoes this tradition, enhancing the volition and heroic attitude of Christ towards his execution (Woolf, “Doctrinal Influences” 40). Christ’s actions of stripping himself and mounting the cross communicate that he freely wills his own death, and Woolf argues that his willing

embrace of death is “an admirable symbol of the young hero’s divine nature as Christ” (“Doctrinal Influences” 42). By presenting the crucifixion in martial terms, the poet secures Christ’s heroic reputation, which was traditionally achieved by facing death stoutheartedly in battle.

After Christ’s suffering and death are finished, the *hilderincas*, “warriors” (61b)—Christ’s disciples—come to their lord. As this *comitatus* gathers around the site, the rood explains that Christ is dead: “They set down the weary-limbed God, stood and watched His head, / Beholding Heaven’s King as He lay in a quiet sleep, / Exhausted with hardship and pain” (63-65a). Although the rood unwillingly assisted in the death of his lord, he now bends to aid the other retainers in taking down the body (Alexander 183). As when Beowulf’s thanes congregate around his burning corpse, the “little band” (69b) here sings funeral songs: “then they sang / A dirge, miserable in the dusk” (67b-68a). Thinking it is a defeat, the rood expresses that “we crosses went on weeping” (71). Triumph, however, soon replaces any notion of loss.

The line *weop eal gesceaft, / cwiðdon cyninges fyll*, “The creation wept, / Bewailed His death” (55b-56a) is especially significant, because the word *fyll*, “fall” or “death” or “destruction,” hints that this poem is much more than a battle narrative—it has deep spiritual implications. Taken in its literal sense, *fyll* refers to the sin, disobedience, and fall of Adam. Connecting the crucifixion to the fall of mankind in Eden, this Old English word signals the implications of the hero-Christ’s death to the Anglo-Saxon audience (Leiter 98). The poet makes the connotation more explicit later in the narrative when he writes, “This is that glorious wood / On which almighty God has suffered / Agony for mankind’s millions of sins / And for Adam’s ancient fall” (97b-100). Christ suffers for Adam’s sins, and he suffers for the Anglo-Saxons’ sins.

He must do this in order to reverse the curse enacted by the fall, as he wages war to redeem fallen mankind, who are in the clutches of the enemy, Satan (Leiter 99).

The Gospel of Matthew—“Even as the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (20.28)—provides a source text for the Old English contextualization of the redemption. To describe Christ’s action, the poet shrewdly uses the term *lysan* which can mean “redeem” but also “ransom” (41), creating a martial metaphor that alludes to the reward demanded by the enemy for captives. In *Rood*, Christ is seen as a ransom, which enhances the Anglo-Saxon understanding of his sacrifice. This metaphor also has connections to the Anglo-Saxon practice of *wergild*, as Christ offers himself as the payment to settle the debt that man by himself could not satisfy. In his discussion of *Rood*, Leiter argues that the poem “seems to contain a vivid metaphor of war, capture, execution, and apparent death that leads paradoxically to a purgation and transformation of the protagonist of the metaphorical drama” (107). Christ’s death as a hero-warrior is an effective adaptation to the Germanic tradition, but the purgation and transformation mentioned by Leiter make the contextualization come full circle—the poem contains the essential personal spiritual implications of the crucifixion.

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The final dramatic metaphor of *Rood* involves the image and descriptions of the risen Christ. The poem has presented the cross as a retainer of Christ and Christ himself as the young hero who faces combat and death, but in the third section, the poet extends the battle metaphor. While the warrior-hero-Christ has succumbed to defeat at the hands of *strange feondas*, “ruthless enemies” (30b), he

has achieved cosmic victory. Surging back from defeat to inaugurate a new kind of triumph, Christ “rose / As God to save all men with His greatness” (101b-2). The poet then alludes to Christ’s Harrowing of Hell, an event not unlike the conquest of an enemy’s fortification or hall. Storming into enemy territory, Christ opens the gates in heroic fashion and leads the captives out of exile and into his “homeland” (156b). Irving explains the implications for the dreamer: “That same young hero Rood once saw hastening fearlessly towards his execution is now the young king assuming his birthright in his own kingdom and sharing that birthright in his own kingdom and sharing that birthright in glory with his ecstatic followers” (Irving 112). In this syncretic image, believers become retainers of Christ, invited into his hall to celebrate the triumph. Creating this image of redemption in terms familiar from the Germanic-heroic tradition makes it more vivid to the Anglo-Saxon imagination. Like the dreamer, Anglo-Saxon readers know that they too can join Christ *to symle*, “at the feast,” (141a) of victory.

Though the dreamer has lost his clan at the beginning of the poem, he now has a new hope in Christ. He perceives heaven as the great banquet hall of his lord, the hero who conquered death and devil, and the poem ends with a fitting resolution. It would seem that a centuries-old religion based in an Eastern tradition could not translate directly to a Western, pagan, Germanic, and heroic setting, but syncretic poems such as *The Dream of the Rood* demonstrate that certain Christian narratives such as Christ’s Ascension can be mediated to a Germanic audience through well-constructed contextualization.

Artistic representations of Christ's death were ubiquitous throughout the Middle Ages, but *The Dream of the Rood* possesses a "special intensity" that captures the reader's imagination through syncretic metaphors (Irving 101). Its dramatic battle metaphors contribute to the specific Anglo-Saxon contextualization of *Rood*, but this fusion has goals far beyond a surface-level paraphrase of the crucifixion—it embodies doctrinal concepts in order to enhance its audience's theological understanding. The cultural significance of the poem is certainly profound, integrating themes found in the structure and rituals of both church and lay culture in early medieval England (Pelikan 108). It demonstrates that spiritual concepts do not have to be explained only abstractly but can also be communicated through "feelings about ideas as they are acted out in dramatic time" (Irving 108). The poem does not lead the reader to understanding through ideological discourse; the reader understands experientially, sharing in suffering and suspense as the dreamer and rood do.

The multiple narrative angles coalesce into a narrative filled with spiritual and psychological richness, and for the dreamer the crucifixion story presented in these terms becomes "one profound drama of self-transcendence" (Leiter 118). The vision catalyzes a sacred transformation, moving the dreamer from sin-stained to sanctified. In the same way, the poem's massive emotional power connects the Anglo-Saxon reader to Christ, because "the imagery illuminates, with its literal meanings and subtle connotations, the significance to all men of the Dreamer's transformational experience" (Leiter 108). Though the core message of the poem is universal, *Rood* is a conversion story contextualized to meet specific cultural needs. It is relevant not only to the dreamer but the world of Old English literature as a whole.



Our syncretic practices today seem to follow in the same theoretical vein of contextualization. We increasingly seem to need examples of contextualization, because we sometimes seem unsure about how to proceed with visual representations of Christianity in a post-Christian cultural milieu. Protestant churches have removed images of Christ in favor of the symbol of the cross, but now the symbol of the cross is disappearing altogether from modern non-denominational churches. We are becoming less explicit, seeming to desire a new form of images that are relevant to both the church and unchurched so that the message stays fresh and does not become monotonous because of familiarity nor strange because of cultural disparity. Popular culture has the wide capability to provide new images for us through the less explicit images of Christ figures. The twenty-first-century film adaptations of C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-56) and J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55) have moved those narratives firmly into the realm of today's popular culture. Aslan is a Christ figure in *Narnia*, because he offers to die in place of Edmund and then rises from the dead to defeat the White Witch. Gandalf is a Christ figure in *The Lord of the Rings*, because he dies as a result of battling the balrog to save the fellowship but rises three days later as a more powerful incarnation. In the film version of *The Two Towers*, Gandalf's "resurrection appearance" strongly resembles conventional images of the risen Christ.

In many respects, the syncretism of *The Dream of the Rood* has a similar goal in mind—attempting to connect powerfully with a broad lay audience. *Rood*, along with icons such as *Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings*, teaches us that culture is a useful tool to disseminate the Christian message. We should not be afraid of engaging culture, because these examples demonstrate that we can change the

outer wrapper of Christ to fit different cultures without changing his metaphysical character or what his death on the cross means.

Chapter 5 – *Judith*, St. Guthlac, and *The Wanderer*

*Beowulf* and *The Dream of the Rood* demonstrate the Anglo-Saxon propensity to contextualize Christianity in the heroic mode, and much of the rest of the Old English literary corpus displays similar applications of syncretism. After Cædmon, England experienced an eruption of religious literary zeal, resulting in a thorough fusion of the Christian and heroic vernacular traditions in Old English poetry. Fulk explains the shape this syncretism takes: “This [heroic/Christian blend] is true of *Beowulf*, but also of biblical narrative and saints’ lives, in which patriarchs and saints are recast as God’s heroic champions, and Christ’s apostles play the role of his comitatus” (5). The Anglo-Saxon poets often transform biblical figures in the Germanic mode, working through the tension between the Christian and heroic traditions. *Judith*, *Guthlac A*, *Guthlac B*, and *The Wanderer* reflect this mixture and cast further light on the syncretic process that informs *The Dream of the Rood*. *Judith* and the Guthlac texts are similar to *Rood* in syncretic intricacy, while *The Wanderer* is a dream vision and elegy—both genres with which *Rood* engages. Like *Rood*, these texts demonstrate the uses to which religious and cultural syncretism was put and the wide extent to which we can effectively exercise creativity and complexity in our present-day syncretic practices. Serving as analogies, they exemplify how to engage culture and reveal that contextualization methods can take various forms.

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A work of the late Anglo-Saxon period, *Judith* was composed in the tenth century, around the same time that an Old English prose translation of the Heptateuch was compiled. The prose translations of the story of Judith are essentially faithful to the biblical text, but this poetic rendition is much freer. Explaining the variation, Greenblatt observes that the poetry takes “liberties with the narrative and style of the biblical sources, reshaping narratives and placing the stories within a recognizably Germanic cultural setting” (100). The poem we now refer to as *Judith* is part of this syncretic tradition, a loose paraphrase of the Bible in poetic form.

Judith was an attractive literary character for the Anglo-Saxons, because her story automatically casts her in the heroic mode. In the hands of an Old English poet, she is recast more specifically in the *Germanic*-heroic mode. While the violent aspects of her narrative lead to its natural incorporation in the tradition of the Anglo-Saxon warrior heritage, it is quite unconventional in Old English poetry for a woman to be portrayed as both warrior and hero. It is thus a unique Anglo-Saxon text.

Judith’s story takes place around 586 BC during the attacks undertaken by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar against the Hebrew town of Bethulia. The poem begins after Judith, a pious Israelite woman, has been in the enemy camp for four days. The poet endows her with the heroic qualities of courage and wit, both of which are essential traits of male hero-warriors in Old English poetry. She is also *golde gefrætewod*, “adorned with gold,” (171)—just as the male retainers are (328). Her status as a heroine-warrior is mentioned throughout the poem, but the reader senses that her most useful resource is her faith in God. In the first lines of the poem, for example, we find that Judith has divine protection because of her perpetual and complete trust in the Almighty (6-7). The Christian didacticism of the

poem is frequent, exemplified, for example, after Judith prays for victory over the enemy general Holofernes: “Then the judge of us all, in highest / Heaven, filled her with perfect courage – as all men find / When they come to Him, seeking His help with knowing hearts / And true belief” (94-97). The poet contextualizes the biblical narrative by using the traditional formulas and heroic diction of Anglo-Saxon verse in order to provide his Anglo-Saxon audience with a compelling model for faith and loyalty to God. Similar to the *Rood* poet, the *Judith* poet employs syncretism—in this case, fusing a biblical narrative with Germanic-heroic conventions—because he desires to make spiritual truths seem more relevant and applicable to his people, who are far removed from the original context of ancient Israelite culture. In the process of placing people of faith in a Germanic setting, the poet communicates that an Anglo-Saxon can be one of God’s people too.

The story’s climax involves Judith beheading the general Holofernes, after which the poet explains, “Then Judith had won fame, earned glory / In war, granted her by God, Lord / Of Heaven, victory sent from on high” (122-124). She wins revenge for her people, and her heroism is tied to violent action. In Germanic-heroic culture, heroic identity is also directly associated with the glory of battle. Perhaps most important, the poet and Judith both continually credit God for victory (124,185-186, and 197-198). The end of the poem explains that Judith’s glory is two-fold: she has attained glory on earth because of her courage in battle, and she has attained glory in heaven because of her faith in God (341-345).

With the enemy’s leader dead, she becomes a leader of warriors, encouraging the other retainers to hasten to battle and promising them glory and honor in the conflict (195-198). In the ensuing combat, the poem adapts the scriptural story to portray the battle in high heroic style, complete with swords,

shields, helmets, and the Anglo-Saxon “beasts of battle” convention (199-323a). The description of battle in *Judith*—“Wolf, deep in the wood, exulted / And the bloodthirsty raven, both of them knowing / That men meant to spread a feast / For their empty bellies. And behind them flew / The damp-feathered eagle, dark and hungry / For human meat, singing a war song / Through his horny beak” (205-212)—is strikingly similar to the description of battles in *Beowulf*: “no harp music will wake the warriors, / but the black raven above doomed men / shall tell the eagle how he fared at meat / when the wolf he stripped the bodies” (3024-3027). The *Judith* poet employs the “beasts of battle” convention as one of many ways to involve the Germanic-heroic tradition, but he also invokes explicit Christian themes throughout the poem to contextualize the work for his Anglo-Saxon audience.

In this syncretic text, faith is seamlessly incorporated in the warlike Germanic-heroic mode, and Greenfield argues that the poem “reflects the earlier glorification of religious heroism of both the Cædmonian and the Cynewulfian schools” (223). The fact that Judith is a hero-warrior is important to the poem, but the fact that she is a hero-warrior *of the Lord* is essential. The setting of the Judith narrative is also pre-Christian, just as the Germanic tradition is pre-Christian, but the poet anachronistically incorporates “the Saviour” at various points in the text to demonstrate that Christ is not confined only to the culture or to the time he inhabited while on earth—he is transcendent. Overall, the poet teaches his audience who are living between two separate traditions—Germanic and Christian—that those traditions can be combined into a cohesive lifestyle.

In a broader context of Anglo-Saxon literature, Old English translations of the Judith narrative sought to do more than contextualize religious concepts. Ælfric’s tenth-century translation of the Judith story was intended to inspire and steel the

Anglo-Saxon's courage in their defense of their territory against the invading Vikings (Greenblatt 100). Judith's heroism in the face of her enemies is certainly an apt analogy. We cannot know with certainty the motivations of the *Judith* poet, but we do know, as Greenblatt asserts, that the poet "has freely reshaped the biblical source and set the narrative within terms intelligible to an Anglo-Saxon audience" (101). Indeed, it seems similar to *Rood* in that it is not an exact rendition of a biblical narrative, but rather a complex, syncretic text meant to contextualize Christian concepts for the first English Christians.

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Germanic folklore remained an integral part of Anglo-Saxon life, as its echoes in texts such as *Beowulf* show. After the conversion, the Church propagated its own version of "folk" stories through narratives in the saints' lives genre. Two examples of this genre include the Old English poems *Guthlac A* and *Guthlac B*. Both focus on Guthlac, a well-known native hero-warrior who converts to Christianity and puts on the armor of God. He does not give up his life of fighting but rather turns to battling spiritual enemies. The source of the poems is likely the earlier Old English prose narrative the *Life of St. Guthlac*, translated from the Latin version written by Felix of Crowland. The *Life* involves Guthlac's combat against demons in the East Anglian wilderness. Felix describes Guthlac as God's champion and employs imagery reminiscent of *Beowulf* to describe the saint's encounters with devils. Heroic vocabulary that echoes *The Dream of the Rood* also permeates the text (Clemoes 31).

Similar to the *Life*, *Guthlac A* mainly deals with the saint's attempts to expel devils from the Crowland wastes. Guthlac is not introduced until line 95, because the poem's prologue sets the warrior's story within a Christian context. Lines 1-29 describe an angel who meets heaven-bound souls, discusses the splendor that awaits them, and explains that those who subdue "accursed spirits" and "teach and perform Christ's law... and uprear his praise" are welcomed into "God's possession" (22-29). Lines 30-92 contrast those who value only this fleeting life with those who put their trust in heaven. The poem is similar to *The Wanderer* in its syncretic juxtaposition of the transience and difficulty of the earthly world to the eternal glory of the heavenly world.

Guthlac is threatened both physically and rhetorically by the devils throughout the poem. Tactics employed against Guthlac include the temptation of vainglory and a vision of corruption in the monasteries (412-420). The poet explains, however, that Guthlac, the "champion" (438), focuses on heaven so that "the Enemy's hand at the uttermost end should hurt him not" (343-345). Later, the devils bring him to the gates of hell and threaten torture and damnation (557-568), but "God's warrior" (569) again resists and is rescued by St. Bartholomew. He is described as *sigehreðig*, "triumphant" (732), and then is escorted to heaven by angels.

The Latin *Guthlac* portrays the saint as a warrior of God fitted with St. Paul's spiritual armor, but this image occurs only in an isolated passage. In *Guthlac A*, however, titles for Guthlac such as *Christes cempa*, "warrior of Christ," and *eadig oretta*, "blessed champion," are used consistently throughout the poem (Woolf 235). The terms used for Guthlac and the fact that he is presented as a victor enhance the reader's sense of these spiritual encounters as heroic battles, and Woolf argues that "Guthlac's heroic life... is given a vaster and cosmic significance" by being set in the



context of conflict between a saint and devils (236). Through this syncretism, the poet emphasizes the tension between “the virtuous individual vs. the sinful crowd, earthly transient joys vs. heavenly permanent ones” and provides his Anglo-Saxon audience with a relevant role model who displays “Holy Living” (Greenfield 177).

*Guthlac B* differs considerably from *Guthlac A* in its focus on “Holy Dying” instead of “Holy Living” and on sin and redemption instead of saintly apotheosis (Greenfield 177). The major part of the poem consists of a dialogue between the dying Guthlac and his servant (who is named Beccel in the *Life*), in which Guthlac assures his servant that there is no reason for distress, because he has lived a holy life and will soon reach heaven. This eternal hope, however, is set within an elegiac background. Alexander points out that in Old English literature, the themes of brevity and isolation are found not only in the pre-Christian heroic world of *Beowulf* but also in the heroic lives of hermits, missionaries, and martyrs (7). Guthlac himself acknowledges that death burdens the spirit, and the bleak complexion of the third-person narrative and the pleas of the servant make the poem’s tone feel closer to the second half of *Beowulf* than any other Old English poem. Woolf rightly asserts that summary or quotation of the poem is insufficient to communicate the elegiac tone; reading the text—especially the words and thoughts of Beccel near the end—is the most effective way to perceive the poem’s subtle and nuanced depiction of sadness (237).

The beginning of the poem describes Adam and Eve’s fall and expulsion from Eden in order to explain why this warrior and the rest of mankind find themselves in a world of transience and must die: “sin-wrack women and men must be punished for their great sin, a God-guilty grief through soul-parting, for these profound faults. Death crowded in upon the kindred of men—our enemy tyrannized us throughout

our world" (34-46a). The last line has a hint of battle imagery, and Guthlac's death is also described in martial terms. Death is personified and stings Guthlac with *wælstælum*, "death-darts" (1286), but the greater victory belongs to Guthlac. He is strengthened by the Eucharist, and his spirit departs "beautified by its deeds into the joy of glory" (1304).

The most significant elegiac element comes from the fact that the poem does not end with Guthlac being gloriously welcomed into heaven; rather, upon Guthlac's death, Beccel is without a lord and assumes the role of the melancholy retainer. He resembles other exiles in Old English poetry, and he speaks the poem's final lines: *lc sceal sarigferð, / heanmod hweorfan, hyge drusendne*, "Sad at heart I must go away, grieving and with mournful spirit" (1378b-1379). There is Christian nuance here, despite the poem not ending in a joyous depiction of faith in Christ. Beccel is sorrowful, because he is unredeemed and thus lacks proper understanding and perspective (Greenfield 179). The beginning of the poem communicates the fall that has separated man from God, and the contrast between Guthlac and Beccel at the end of the poem demonstrates the effects of the redemption.

*Guthlac B* is a critical Old English poem, because it reveals that the Germanic elegiac attitude toward earthly transience and the Christian assurance of the power of the resurrection are not poetically irreconcilable. Woolf argues that the syncretism of the poem demonstrates that these ideas "did not need to be kept separate lest they should diminish or obscure each other, but could be combined in such a way that each served to make the other more poignant" (238). Although there may be little common ground among the Guthlac texts in terms of content, sources, structures, diction, and syntactic patterns, each demonstrates a complex syncretic fusion of the Germanic-heroic vernacular and Christian traditions. This confluence of

the heroic life and the Christian life, as demonstrated in the various accounts of Guthlac's life, makes the saint an ideal role model for the Anglo-Saxon audience, as the narratives' fusion of Christian and Germanic-heroic elements renders spiritual principles more tangible and relevant for a believer far removed from the original cultural setting of the faith.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Old English poem *The Wanderer* provides a useful analogy to *The Dream of the Rood*, because both employ Germanic/Christian syncretism and feature speakers who express an elegiac mood—the “earth-walker” in *The Wanderer* and the dreamer and cross in *Rood*. An elegy concerns itself with the fullest expression of a particular mood, usually melancholy, and is often about facing devastating loss. *The Wanderer* is such a poem, depicting a warrior who has spent his entire life serving his lord but has now lost everyone and is alone in a hostile world.

In *The Wanderer's* moving picture of despondency and desolation, we see the importance of the *comitatus* code. The Wanderer finds himself cold and alone, reflecting on the life he once enjoyed and the pain of his current circumstance:

He only knows who needs his lord  
As I do, eager for long-missing aid;  
He only knows who never sleeps  
Without the deepest dreams of longing.  
Sometimes it seems I see my lord,  
Kiss and embrace him, bend my hands  
And head to his knee, kneeling as though  
He still sat enthroned, ruling his thanes.  
And I open my eyes, embracing the air,  
And see the sea birds bathe, spreading  
Their white-feathered wings, watch the frost

And the hail and the snow (37-49).

Even while sleeping, the wanderer envisions and hopes for the life of a retainer. He has no future and lacks a role, companions or kin, prospects of treasure, and a hope of vengeance after death (O'Keefe 107). He then elaborates the theme on a broader scale, shifting the focus from himself to all people in a world wracked by war and time. Pointing out that "already the wreckage is there," the wanderer suggests that the lot of humanity in this life is harsh and bitter (75). He characterizes life as subject to the Germanic concept of *wyrd*—the Old English word for "fate" that is a common theme in Anglo-Saxon literature.

The *Wanderer* poet, however, transforms this pagan concept so that it can be incorporated into a Christian worldview. When the wanderer remarks on the ruins, he relates that it is the work of *ælda scyppend*, "Creator of men (85)," but also the work of *wyrd seo mære*, "Fate the mighty" (100). *Wyrd* is often personified in Old English literature, but it is not a pagan god. It is rather a poetic term for a timeless, universal concept. The poet uses it in a new context by adding Christian matter to the concept, creating a useful analogy for his Anglo-Saxon audience. By combining God and fate into one concept, what was once pagan by association becomes Christian. Other Old English writers found this reimagining of *wyrd* helpful as well. Half of the appearances of *wyrd* in Old English literature occur in the context of the Old Testament patriarchs or Christian saints (Fell 162-163). Although *The Wanderer's* use of the term is a marriage of pagan and Christian contexts, the result is decidedly Christian.

The poet also incorporates the Germanic concept of *ubi sunt* into the poem but responds to it through a Christian worldview. After searching for what had previously constituted meaning in his life, the wanderer comes up empty and

explains, *Her bið feoh læne, her bið freond læne, / her bið mon læne, her bið mæg læne*, which shows us that property, friends, men, and kinsman are all transcient.

This observation is typical of Germanic pagan literature. The Icelandic poem *Hávamál*, for example, presents a similar assessment in a pagan context: *Deyr fé, / deyja frændr, / deyr sjálfir it sama*, “cattle die, kin die, one’s self dies.” *Hávamál* then notes that that one’s reputation is the only thing that does not die. It explains what is important by distinguishing the permanent from the transient, but both are human-centered. Christine Fell argues that the Old English *Wanderer* and the Old Icelandic *Hávamál* “are linked by thought, vocabulary and alliteration, and the motif may come from common Germanic stock, but in spite of superficial similarities there is a significant difference” (175). That difference is that *The Wanderer’s* answer to transience is Christian-oriented rather than human-centered.

Like the dreamer and cross in *Rood*, the wanderer finds solace in the eternal life that the Christian faith offers. While *Rood* focuses on Christ, *The Wanderer* focuses on God the Father. The poem ends with the common Old English directive to look past earthly transience and hope for heaven, and the poet notes the only certainty for his Anglo-Saxon audience: “It’s good to find your grace / In God, the heavenly rock where rests our every hope” (114b-115). Although the wanderer rejects the material world, the values of the Germanic-heroic life such as the bond found in clan, gift-giving, feasting, and other aspects of the warrior lifestyle, although still valued, are put in proper perspective.

A passage in *Beowulf* also reflects this elegiac attitude. In what has been called “The lay of the last survivor,” the poet describes the sadness of a warrior who has buried the treasure-hoard and who believes himself to be the only remaining member of his clan: “No harp-joy, / play of song-wood – no good hawk / swings

through the hall, nor the swift roan / stamps in the courtyard” (2262b-2265a). It is significant that there is no suggestion of eternal blessing to offset mortal loss. *The Wanderer*, therefore, stands as an antithesis to the elegiac attitude in *Beowulf*. The poet does not discount loss nor the elegiac attitude but points out that it is not the end—there is *more*.

The poet transforms the entire perspective of the elegiac attitude by suggesting that when the circumstances of this world grow dark, we can look to the eternal world of heaven (Fell 182). *The Dream of the Rood* also expresses a similar hope in heaven despite misery and loss, as the dreamer explains, “No mighty patrons / Shelter me here; they’ve melted in shadows, / Gone from the joys of this world, sought the glorious King / And live in Heaven, now, with Him, / Live in His glory” (131-135). The cultural theme of elegy is crucial to both *The Wanderer* and *Rood*, and both poets masterfully incorporate a Christian outlook for their Anglo-Saxon audience. Greenblatt applauds the syncretism in *The Wanderer*, arguing that in the poem “Christian and heroic ideals are poignantly blended” (6). Perhaps modern writers can emulate this poignancy, because *The Wanderer* demonstrates that syncretism does not mean that Christianity has to bend to culture—culture can be bent to Christianity. In this and other Old English poems, we see that Christians can transform and employ cultural modes to achieve an effective form of contextualization.

## Chapter 6 – Conclusion

Examining syncretism in Old English texts is, of course, important, because it reveals a great deal about the beliefs, myths, anxieties, and perspectives of Anglo-Saxon society (Godden lx). The texts also remind us, however, that literature does not merely represent culture but also has a hand and perhaps even an important role in creating it. Liuzza points out that “we are not simply looking through these texts at individuals and society, but at the texts for signs of the work they once did in the culture that used them” (xiii). In the same way, our present-day syncretic practices help to shape our religious environment and the ways in which believers engage and interact with non-Christian culture. Contemporary contextualizations are important contributions to the Christian conversation as it continues to unfold. Paying attention to past methods of contextualization—the fusion of Germanic-heroic and Christian traditions, for example—reveals that the aims of the past and the aims of the present are often quite similar. Rob Bell argues that it is “a beautiful thing to learn from the journey of others,” and “whenever someone has tapped into the deep stream of the historic Christian faith... we should celebrate this and study it and learn from them and ask questions and wrestle with how to apply what they’ve encountered in their context to our context” (*Jesus Wants to Save Christians* 158-159). Bell is certainly correct, and when we learn something in our context, we must be able to articulate it in our context. Old English syncretism and present-day syncretism share this moment of intersection.

One of the most critical ideas we can take from the study of syncretism in Old English literature is that present-day syncretism does not exist in a vacuum. The

Anglo-Saxon texts we have examined demonstrate that syncretism and contextualization are a long tradition in the Christian faith. Even scripture suggests that contextualizing is important in communicating to particular audiences. St. Paul meets people at their level and with their cultural context in mind. He quotes the Old Testament when speaking with Jews, and he quotes Greek philosophers when speaking with Greeks. Acts 17.28 demonstrates one example: “‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’” St. Paul takes pre-Christian ideas and traditions from those philosophers whom the Greeks considered authoritative and applies them to Christianity to ensure his message makes sense and seems relevant (Erre 164). Old English texts such as *The Dream of the Rood* are not so different. *Rood* also takes pre-Christian tradition and applies it to Christianity in order make the message of Christ seem relevant. Both St. Paul and *Rood* engage the cultures of new believers from outside of any Judeo-Christian tradition.

The Old English texts discussed in this thesis reveal a particular moment in the tradition of Christian syncretism. Contextualization is neither an ancient nor recent phenomenon. It is constant and inevitably manifests itself in every culture. Elsewhere in scripture, we see that the lordship of Christ challenged the lordship of Caesar in the Roman Empire. A popular motto was used to remind people of Caesar’s power: “There is no other name under heaven by which men can be saved than that of Caesar.” As a response, the early church began using the motto, “There is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved than that of Jesus” (Acts 4.12). The Empire’s political propaganda was well known, and the church employed the language of an anti-Christian ideology to communicate a belief that Christ was the King of Kings (Pelikan 162-163).



Other examples of syncretism do not have the same religious goals as the book of Acts or our Old English texts. In Europe during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, rationalist scholars and philosophers sought to go behind Christ's dogma in order to extract the system of morality he taught and embodied. The Age of Reason, therefore, perceived Christ as the Teacher of Common Sense. Romanticism in the nineteenth century objected to "orthodox rigidity and rationalist banality," and thus the Romantics focused on "the beauty and sublimity" of Christ (Pelikan ix). It is interesting to note that both perceptions come up conspicuously short. In both examples of syncretism, we see different levels of contextualization. In Rationalism and Romanticism, Christ is so accommodated to the times that it becomes difficult to understand why he was crucified. He becomes a pseudo-Jesus, as the majority of Christian (i.e., explicitly religious) ideology is removed.

Another example is Charles Monroe Sheldon's remarkable and disturbing 1896 book *In His Steps*, which connects Christianity and the American Dream. Sheldon offers a romanticized description of the financial and social prosperity possible for an American community that decides to follow Jesus wholeheartedly (Pelikan 206). Cultural metaphors are generally designed to help promote the acceptance and expansion of Christianity, but sometimes the metaphors can be extended too far, becoming the focus and eclipsing the foundational term. Although metaphors can be helpful, even the best representations inevitably fall short. The problem is that representations have a way of usurping the place of the represented, and we mistake the representation for the real thing. Contextualization is intended to illustrate, not replace. Those who contextualize must navigate these tensions with care and responsibility, and the Old English texts discussed here demonstrate, again, how to change the medium of the message without changing its content.

Syncretism is essential, even inevitable, because we cannot, in the end, “just get back to what scripture really says.” Scripture *has* to be interpreted, and context is key. The crucial question is how to interpret without misinterpreting. To a degree, it seems impossible. We cannot completely understand the original, considering how far removed it is from us—it is culturally and temporally different. A significant disconnection exists, and so we translate everything into our idioculture. All we can really say is, “This is how I read it in my culture. This is what I extract from it.”

The different contextualizations of Christian scripture throughout the centuries reveal that syncretism is a very complicated practice that can have significant implications. These Old English texts represent a critical moment in the history of Christian contextualization because of their syncretic breadth and complexity. Texts from the Middle English period demonstrate the persistence and future development of syncretism in English literature. In the *Ancrene Riwe* and the writings of Julian of Norwich, for example, Christ is not contextualized as a warrior-hero as in *The Dream of the Rood* but rather as a knight and lover—the Christ of the chivalric and romance tradition.

The Norman Conquest in 1066 signaled the end of the Anglo-Saxon period and radically changed the culture in England. Christianity had to be contextualized using a new set of cultural elements. The Conquest reorganized society, because the Normans were feudalists. William I seized land and redistributed it to his lords, and military service was the most important aspect of the mutually obligated feudal system (Grebanier 59). Under this new, continental order, military service took on a radically different form from the Anglo-Saxon earl/thane relationship. The knight became a prominent fixture in English society. An important convention of the aristocracy was courtly love, a complex code that involved nobly and chivalrously

expressing romantic love and admiration. Much of Middle English literature centers on stories of courtly love, including Marie de France's twelfth-century courtly romance *Lanval*. As the knight became a prominent fixture in literature, the romance tradition began influencing Christianity, and religious writers began portraying Jesus as a lover-knight according to the courtly love code.

The *Ancrene Riwe*, a thirteenth-century work of devotional prose designed to instruct women in the ascetic life, describes Christ as a knight who jousts for the love and redemption of souls. Christ says in the text: "You are under attack, lady, and your enemies are so strong that without my help there is no way that you can escape... For your love I am willing to take on that fight... But I know for certain that in fighting them I shall receive a mortal wound; and I will accept it gladly in order to win your heart" (158). Christ is indeed pierced, and his sacrificial death as a chivalrous knight in a tournament is an allegory for his sacrificial death at the crucifixion. The image also sublimates the ignominy of the cross. The battle metaphor is perhaps analogous in some way to *Rood*, but the lover-knight portrayal emphasizes the love of Christ in his death rather than the conquest of the devil, which creates a new emphasis on the *personal* and *emotional* relationship that the individual can have with Christ. Woolf argues that Christ contextualized as a lover-knight communicates the message of Christianity with beauty and clarity to an elite medieval audience familiar with the courtly romance tradition ("Doctrinal Influences" 38). The lover-knight allegory occurs in various texts throughout Middle English literature, and further research into the complexities and nuances of this contextualization is warranted.

Christian syncretic practices in Old English texts, Middle English texts, or texts from other cultures reveal a broad spectrum over the course of Christian

history. Arthur O. Lovejoy argues that discontinuities dominate the history of Christianity. He asserts that Christianity is not a single entity but rather “a series of facts which, taken as a whole, have almost nothing in common except the name” (6). I argue, however, that behind the surface-level differences lies a great degree of continuity. Christianity has inevitably been contextualized by each culture that has embraced it. Old English literature, for example, demonstrates that various cultural strains blend and pull on us. In hybridity we find a zone of artistic possibility and creativity, and the syncretism characteristic of Old English literature is a product of this possibility. We can create new and creative representations of ideas and events, but those expressions influence future traditions and have been influenced by past traditions to some extent. In our assessment of syncretism, these Old English texts teach us to bilocate, because in them the Germanic-heroic and Christian traditions do not exist separately, but rather blend. They provide a valuable model for synthesis, demonstrating the possibility of embracing two motifs at the same time.

The global and technological nature of twenty-first-century culture makes it more layered than any previous culture, and our syncretic expressions are becoming increasingly complex and difficult to specify. Considering the pre-Christian facets of Anglo-Saxon society, it is now perhaps more important than ever for those who produce syncretic expressions and those who experience syncretic expressions in an increasingly post-Christian society to examine carefully the syncretism of Old English texts in order to understand more clearly the possible forms a relationship between Christian and non-Christian culture can take.

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