

ANGLO-SAXON CHRISTIAN  
POETRY BY A. J. BARNOUW  
TRANSLATED BY LOUISE DUDLEY

912d

B262

Ed

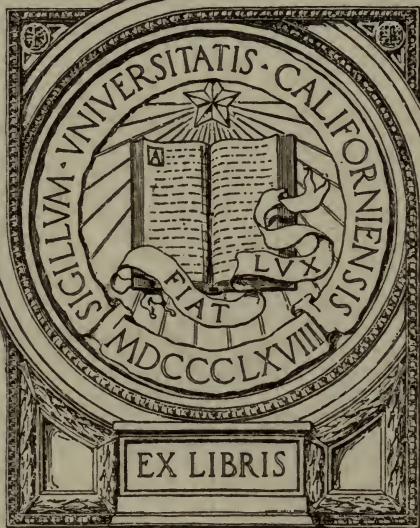
UC-NRLF



φB 298 108

YB 31376

ALUMNVS BOOK FVND



EX LIBRIS

912 d  
B262  
Ed









ANGLO-SAXON CHRISTIAN POETRY



Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2007 with funding from  
Microsoft Corporation



# ANGLO-SAXON CHRISTIAN POETRY

AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED AT THE OPENING OF THE LECTURES ON  
THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE AT LEIDEN  
OCTOBER 12, 1907

BY

A. J. BARNOUW

TRANSLATED BY

LOUISE DUDLEY



THE HAGUE

MARTINUS NIJHOFF

1914

Cong. Adams.

TO THE  
MEMBERS OF THE  
CONGRESS

On reading Dr. A. J. Barnouw's address: *Schriftuurlijke Poëzie der Angelsaksen*, published at the Hague in 1907, it at once occurred to me that such an admirable appreciation of Anglo-Saxon Christian poetry ought to be translated into English and thus made accessible to a wider audience. Accordingly, I wrote to Dr. Barnouw proposing an English edition of his address, and suggesting that the task of translating it be entrusted to Dr. Louise Dudley, formerly a graduate student in Bryn Mawr College. To this proposal Dr. Barnouw courteously assented, and the fruit of these negotiations will be found in the following pages. In adapting to this later purpose a paper which was originally prepared for oral presentation, Dr. Barnouw has taken the opportunity to expand some paragraphs in order to make his discussion more comprehensive; he has also added foot-note references for the convenience of readers who may wish to consult the texts cited.

It is hoped that this essay in its present form may prove of value to many students in the colleges and schools of England and America, affording, as it does, a lucid and vigorous statement, unencumbered by technical detail, of the distinctive and important contribution made to the beginnings of English literature by the Anglo-Saxon Christian poets.

CARLETON BROWN.

Bryn Mawr College, November 1913.





At the beginning of Old English literature we find two types of poet: Widsith, the "far-traveller", the wandering singer of the princes' courts, and Caedmon, the monk versifying in his narrow cell. The first of these is a wholly fictitious personage, while from the second — of whose existence Bede's well-known account gives assurance — there is preserved only a hymn of nine verses. Yet the two figures stand forth as typical representatives of the secular and the religious poetry of the Anglo-Saxons.

Widsith <sup>1)</sup> sketches the life and ideals of himself and his companions in these verses:

---

<sup>1)</sup> Cf. *Widsith, A Study in Old English Heroic Legend*, by R. W. Chambers (Cambr. Univ. Press, 1912).

So destined to rove they wander at random  
 The gleemen of men over many a ground,  
 They say their need, they speak their thanks,  
 And always South or North meet some one  
 Skilled in song, not stingy of gifts,  
 Who would find fame among his friends,  
 And be an excellent earl, till all is gone,  
 Light and life together: he who leaves praise  
 Has under the heavens a high reward. 1)

Such were the *scopas*, the singers of heathen times with their truly Germanic love of gold, and their reverence for the glory of this world, which was everything to them since they did not know of anything better when "all should be gone, light and life together".

The scops were still singing in this way at the courts of the Old English kings when Augustine landed in Southern England in the year 597, bringing Christianity to the heathen. I can not tell here of the rapid progress made by the new faith, nor how it won confession from the best

---

1) Vv. 135—43.

of the folk, and the tolerance, if not the respect, of all the kingdoms of the Heptarchy in the sixty years that followed Augustine's coming <sup>1</sup>). But with the introduction of Christianity the glory of the scop began to fade. "Wherever he found the man of God, the preacher Liudger, he learned psalms from him", is said of the Frisian singer Bernlef in the life of the apostle<sup>2</sup>). So must many an Old English poet have done. And the hymns to God rose above the songs in praise of the folk-king; the heroes of the old epic made place for the heroes of the Old Testament, for martyrs and saints. Widsith gave way to Caedmon.

His manner of life stands out in marked contrast to that of the scop. He did not wander from

---

1) Cf. the articles *Augustin* and *Bekehrungsgeschichte*, in the *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, ed. by J. Hoops.

2) "Ipse vero Bernlef ubicumque virum Dei repperisset didicit ab eo psalmos," *Monumenta Germaniae historica, Scriptores* 2, 412.

place to place, nor did he sing his songs for gold. But in the stillness of the cloister at Streoneshalh he wrote songs to the glory of God until about the year 680, when he quitted an existence of privation and self-denial, assured of an entrance into another life.

In Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, which was written shortly after the poet's death, the story of Caedmon's sudden consecration to poetry reads like a fairy-tale. The popular imagination could not see the father of Old English Christian poetry except in the glamour of a miracle.

"This man had lived a secular life until the time when he had grown old, and he had never learned a song. Therefore at feasts where it was decided, in order to increase the mirth, that each one should sing in turn, when he saw the harp nearing him, he often rose from the table for shame, and went home to his house. On



a certain day when he had done this, and had quitted the house where the feast was, and had gone to the stable — since he had to care for the cattle that night — and had lain down to sleep, there appeared to him a man who greeted him and called him by name. ‘Caedmon’, said he, ‘Sing me something’. Then he answered and said, ‘I can not sing. I left the festival and came hither, because I could not sing.’ But he who was speaking with him said, ‘However you may sing to me’. ‘What’, said Caedmon, ‘shall I sing?’ Said he, ‘Sing me the creation.’ And when he received that answer, he began to sing verses which he had never before heard, in praise of God the Creator. This is the order of them <sup>1)</sup>:

---

1) I translate from the text which is found in the Old English version of Bede.

Now ought we do *homage* to the Guardian of *heaven*  
 For the *might* of the *Maker* and the thought of His *mind*,  
 The *marvellous* Father of *men*. He *made* the beginning  
 Of *every* wonder, the *eternal* Lord.

First he *created* for the *children* of earth  
 The heavens as a *roof*, the holy *Redeemer*.  
 Then the *world* the *Wielder* of men,  
 The *everlasting* Lord afterwards made,  
 The ground for the people, the *almighty* God.

“When he arose from his sleep he remembered all that he had sung in his dream, and soon he added in the same meter more words of the song worthy of God”. This singer consecrated by God entered a monastery, and in the remainder of his life “he turned into song all the story of Genesis, and also he sang of the going out of Israel from the land of Egypt, and of many other stories from the Holy Book, the incarnation of Christ, His passion and His ascension into heaven, the coming of the Holy Ghost, and the teachings of the Apostles. And also of the fear of the future judgment, and of

the terror of punishment in hell, and of the sweetness of the heavenly kingdom made he many songs.”

In this summary Bede has given us a fairly complete catalogue of the extant scriptural poetry. It is not, indeed, a legacy from Caedmon himself, but it is the work of men like him, of monks and scholars. Yet their poetry is not on that account poetry of the cloister, entirely estranged from the life outside the monastery walls. The bishop in armour was not in those days an unfamiliar figure. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle mentions a bishop Ealhstan, who in 823 conquered Kent for King Ecgberht of the West Saxons, and in 845 vanquished the Danes. And in the year 871, Heahmund, who like the former was bishop of Sherborn in Dorsetshire, perished on the battle-field of Meretun. Old German poetry had known man only as a hero, and though for the folk-kings the monk sub-

stituted princes of the church, this change involved no real departure from the ideals of the old national poetry.

Hence the charm which the Christian poets found in the Old Testament with its stories of battle, its lust for vengeance, and its shouts of victory. And even when the Hebrew story was but brief and matter-of-fact, if it were a motive that appealed to the Germanic mind, the Anglo-Saxon imagined a stirring scene which he described with all the perplexing verbosity of his language.

“When Abraham heard”, one reads in *Genesis* XIV, 14—16, “that his brother was taken captive, he armed his trained servants, born in his own house, three hundred and eighteen, and pursued them unto Dan. And he divided himself against them, he and his servants, by night, and smote them, and pursued them unto Hobah, which is on the left hand of Damascus. And he brought

back all the goods, and also brought again his brother Lot, and his goods, and the women also, and the people." The poet of the *Genesis* <sup>1)</sup> makes of this short and unexciting account, a description full of colour and life. Abraham, the faithful hero, shares the fatal intelligence with his friends, and asks them for help. They promise to avenge his hurt or to fall on the field of battle. He collects his faithful followers and marches to the combat. He speaks to his leaders and assures them that God will help them. The heroes wage the battle under the shadow of the night. Shields and shafts shake, combatants fall, arrows clash. The men fall in great heaps where before they had laughingly carried off booty. For Abraham gave them battle and not gold as the ransom for his nephew. The enemy turn to flight followed by Abraham's host as far as Damascus. Abraham goes up on the highway to

---

1) Cf. Grein—Wülker, II, 318 ff.

see the retreat. Lot is saved with his possessions. The women rejoice. They see the birds on the field of battle tear in pieces the corpses of the enemy. Abraham returns home taking with him the wealth and the women of the conquered. Never did any man with a small army achieve a more brilliant military expedition. 1)

Yet this *Genesis A* — as the poem is called in distinction from the later interpolated *Genesis B* (vv. 235—851) — is not the most typical example of the Germanic-epic treatment of Biblical material. This poet who knew so well how to expand the words of the Vulgate is nevertheless distinguished from his Anglo-Saxon colleagues by his unusual fidelity to the original. He tells the episodes in the Old Testament order without attempting to create from them an epic with Abraham as the dominating hero. The deeds of Abraham are told only in a series of

---

1) Vv. 2024—95.



episodes, in some of which he does not even appear.

In the book of *Exodus*, the course of the narrative lends itself more easily to such a concentration on one chief figure; and the Anglo-Saxon poet who handled this material <sup>1)</sup> shows all the marks of an excellent workman. Everything connected with the departure of the Jews from Egypt is the work of Moses. The poem commences with his rising against Pharaoh. Courage and strength are his attributes. Like a German folk-king he marches at the head of his army. And although the exodus of the Jews is described in the Vulgate as a flight, in the Anglo-Saxon poem it is pictured as a mighty action of war. An actual encounter between the Jews and their pursuers does not take place, but when the Egyptians see the waters close between them and the fleeing host, to the vision of the poet the very elements are clothed with human rage and

---

1) Cf. Grein—Wülker, II, 445 ff.

passion for destruction. The battle is between them and Pharaoh's folk :

The folk was afraid : the flood-terror seized  
 Their sad souls, the sea threatened death.  
 The mountainous surges were sprinkled with blood,  
 The sea spit blood, thunder was in the billows,  
 The water was full of weapons, slaughter-mist rose.  
 The Egyptians were again turned back,  
 They fled in fright, they understood fear.  
 The timorous soldiers wanted to return home :  
 Their boasting became more sorrowful. There rose black  
 [against them  
 The awful rolling waves: not one returned  
 Of that host to his home, they were locked behind  
 With the waves, by wyrd. Where ways were formerly,  
 Was the seething sea, sunken was that army.  
 The streams increased, the storm arose  
 High as the heaven. 1)

Whoever after repeated reading of the *Beowulf* takes up poems like the *Genesis* and *Exodus*, will find that the poets though dealing with foreign material have remained purely national. No violence is done to the traditions of

1) Vv. 446—60.



Old English poetry either in form or imagery. It were unjust to say that the customary epic phrases were employed mechanically without a clear notion of their meaning. The figurative language is stereotyped, it must be confessed, but to no greater degree than in the *Beowulf* or in any other Old German poem. For poetry was then just beginning to outgrow the bonds of communalism. It was taking its first unsteady steps without the support of its twin sister Song, which was destined to keep its communal character longer. Not in his creativeness, but in his delivery lay the poet's merit. Widsith, for example, received a reward for his poem, not because he composed it, but because he sang it. For the singing alone was his, and his part in the poem was done when that was finished. Subject-matter, style, and alliteration were not his, they were the possession of everyone. The listener was familiar with the content of Old English poetry before the

poet began, nor was there anything new to him in the poet's wealth of stereotyped phrases. For these were but an expression of the subjectivity of the primitive community, as was the alliterative meter or the gift of improvisation — that common endowment of the men at the ale-drinking from which Caedmon withdrew.

Caedmon is the professional poet, the artist who separates himself from the people. Cynewulf,<sup>1)</sup> who a century later claimed the reward of his Maker by his verses to Him, may have believed himself raised above the people because of his knowledge of the Church Fathers. ✓ Yet both wrote for the people and the speech they use is the popular speech. For what else could the poet of the cloister do when he would

---

1) He safeguarded his conscious authorship by weaving in his name in runes at the end of both his saints' legends, *Juliana* and *E'lene*, and of the more lyric *Ascension of Christ*, and *Fata Apostolorum*.

incorporate his new Biblical material in the epic literature of his country? He could not substitute Hebraisms for the traditional epic phrases, nor could he distort the meanings of these phrases to make them express the foreign conceptions of other people and of other times. They would have lost their vitality and those who heard the song would not have understood it. No, the epic phrases retained their old power, the Biblical ideas had to be changed to suit them. "Every country has its custom", and the foreign material must be interpreted in accordance with those customs. The new teaching could be made comprehensible for its hearers only through the ideas and conceptions that were familiar to them. So we find the Biblical narrative dressed out in the imagery and the phrases of the Old English epic.

As Pharaoh's army, for example, comes marching on, the poet sees the beauty of the glit-

tering host, and the terror of the approaching combat, just as his native poetry had always been accustomed to see them.

Then became the *men's mood* disloyal to *Moses*,  
 Since they saw from the south ways  
 The force of *Pharaoh* going forth,  
 Bearing their spears, the glittering band,  
 Saw the helmets high up, saw the host tread the marches.  
 Their shafts were made strong, strife was aroused.  
 Their shields shone, the trumpet sounded,  
 The birds of battle screamed as they wheeled about,  
 Eager, dewy-feathered, over the bodies of the fallen,  
 Dark death-seekers; while dreaming of prey  
 The wolves sang a menacing even-song. 1)

Moses himself is called *hildecalla*, "battle-summoner", or *guthweard gumena*, "the war-protector of men." The beginning of the *Fata Apostolorum* 2) testifies of the apostles that "they made known the power of the noblemen", and that "their fame sprang wide", words which

---

1) *Exodus*, vv. 155—65.

2) Cf. Grein—Wülker, II, 87 ff.

repeat almost exactly what is said of the Danes in the beginning of the *Beowulf*. In the *Genesis* Abraham and Aaron are called *haeleth higerofe*, "stout-hearted heroes". The patriarchs are as gracious in gifts to their faithful followers as were the Germanic princes whom Widsith praised. And like one of those princes God sits on His "gift-stool" surrounded by His faithful angels. In the use of metaphor<sup>1)</sup>, also, we may see how firmly entrenched was the traditional phraseology, for this characteristic Old English trope did not give way to the simile even after the continued reading of Latin poetry and the imitation and translation of Latin models.

The personal element, repressed as it was by the poet in order that he might give expression to the heart of the folk, is scarcely recogniza-

---

1) Cf. Gummere, *The Beginnings of Poetry*, pp. 447—48.

ble in this poetry. In modern times, however, when the protection of literary property has become a matter of importance, historians have inquired into the paternity of these foundlings of Old English literature in order to restore to them their supposed rights. And since history records the name of only one scriptural poet, all the poems dealing with the events of the Old Testament have been foisted on Caedmon. The first of these offenders was Junius, who in 1655 brought forth an edition of poems entitled *Caedmonis monachi Paraphrasis poetica Genesis ac praecipuarum sacrae paginae historiarum*. Even in the seventeenth century the justness of the ascription of these poems to Caedmon was doubted— and justly so— by Hickes. His reason was that poems like the *Menologium*, a saints' calendar of the tenth century, and the historical songs of the *Battle of Brunanburh* and the *Death of Eadgar* from the



*Chronicle*, which date from the same time, do not differ in style from the *Genesis*. Though the sharper criticism of the nineteenth century has succeeded in discovering a personal element in these poems, scholars still hesitate to rely upon these results alone, without the support of grammatical evidence, in deciding questions of authorship. For example, a comparison of the figure of Moses in the *Exodus* with that of Daniel in the poem of that name <sup>1)</sup> leads to the conclusion that the latter is of more recent date, for it is clearly the work of a man in whom the leaven of Christianity had caused to arise a more pious and gentle spirit. The love of war ascribed to Moses, and described with so much zest by the poet of the *Exodus*, is foreign to *Daniel*. There the hero has had to give way to the pious preacher who teaches by instructive example. The conclusion seems obvious that

---

1) Cf. Grein—Wülker, II, 476 ff.

this peaceful conception of the man of God bears the stamp of an age which had enjoyed the blessings of Christianity for a longer time than that which produced the *Exodus*. Yet the critic would hesitate to accept this difference in conception as proof of difference in origin, if it were not confirmed by grammatical research.

Again, there is in the *Genesis* an interpolation (*Genesis B*) of over 600 verses which describes the fall of the angels and the temptation of Eve. It was recognized at an early date that these lines did not belong to the original poem, because this part of the narrative is paraphrased earlier in the poem, in the place where it chronologically belongs. Yet repetition is so characteristic of Old English poetry that this alone could not determine the presence of extraneous verses. Still the difference in tone between the interpolation and the rest of the poem is unmistakable. It sounds a deeper and warmer note



than the original. The poet of *Genesis* is at his best in descriptions of nature; the writer of the interpolation on the other hand is distinguished by his knowledge of the human heart. But only after Sievers' discovery that the vocabulary of the interpolation betrays Old Saxon origin, whereas the original shows no such influence, could we at once assign to foreign origin what until that time might have passed for a false judgment of our easily deceived subjectivity. For who would have ventured to assert that the poet of the *Genesis* would not be able to rise above the general level of his poetic talent when inspired by an element in the history of Satan to which the German mind was very sympathetic: namely, the breaking of troth to one's lord? There was no more terrible sin, no one which was more damnable. Hear how Wiglaf cursed the men who failed Beowulf in his last fight:

Now without land-right  
 Every man of you empty-handed  
 Must wander about when the athelings  
 From afar hear of your flight,  
 Of your deed so disgraceful. Death is better  
 For every earl than life without honour 1).

That remained the conviction of the Christianized Englishman, and in Lucifer's fall he found a warning example of the perjured man. The Satan of the Saxon poet, on the other hand, is magnificent in his obstinacy. He accepts his expulsion like a hero, without lamenting over his unpardonable sin. For him Wiglaf's words that death is better than life without honour have no meaning. His unbroken pride refuses to recognize any prejudice to his honour; he is stung not by remorse, but by anger. If only he were not chained! If only he had his hands free, and might be outside even for a moment,

---

1) *Beowulf*, vv. 2886—91.

a winter-hour, then with this band he could . . . ! 1)  
 For he was still conscious of himself as a mighty  
 prince, and was certain that his men would not  
 lose faith in him, the faithless one.

If I ever to any man,  
 Gave gifts as a lord while we in that glorious kingdom,  
 Sat blessed, sure of our throne,  
 Then he might at no more acceptable time  
 Acknowledge his debt; if any of my thanes  
 Would still be my supporter,  
 Let him pass up and out from here  
 Through this cloister, if he has cunning enough  
 To fly in feather-garments,  
 To soar through the clouds to where stand created  
 Adam and Eve in the earthly kingdom  
 Encompassed with wealth: and we are cast off here  
 In this deep dale! Very dear are they now  
 To the holy Lord, and they may enjoy the happiness  
 Which we should have in the heavenly kingdom,  
 According to right. Now is it all  
 Promised to man. Therefore is my mind so sad,  
 My heart so sorrowful that they the heavenly kingdom  
 Shall enjoy forever. If any of you  
 May bring it about that they abandon the word of God,

---

1) Vv. 368—70.



marked a contrast. In this case the difference between the two poets is sharpened, perhaps, by difference in nationality. More than two centuries after Augustine began his gradual and peaceful conversion of the English, their relatives on the continent were made Christians by force. The figure of the sentimental Satan which the Anglo-Saxon drew, the Satan who, alas, would wish but once to reach heaven with his hands out-stretched to the bright day, betrays the influence of the gentler spirit of the Gospel, whereas the vigorous nature of the recently converted heathen shines forth in the Saxon whose devil clenches his hands for vengeance, an attitude which is more closely kin to the spirit of the Old Testament.

In an Old English poem of a time which still remembered the first years of Christianity, a Satan who lamented but did nothing would be unimaginable. For although his poetry may be

verbose, and repetition its characteristic feature, the Anglo-Saxon himself was a man of action. How little the weakly complaining guardian of hell realized the ideal of the nobleman— and in Old English poetry Satan always appears as a nobleman— we can learn from the poet of *The Wanderer* :

I know indeed

That in an *earl* 'tis an honorable custom,  
 That he *hold fast* the thoughts of his *heart*,  
 And *possess* his soul in silence, let him *ponder* whatsoever  
[he will.

For he who is sad and *weary* may not *withstand* fate.  
 And the *heart* without *hope* can give no *help*.  
 Therefore the *glory-eager* his gloomy heart  
*Binds fast* within his *breast*. 1)

The *Beowulf* also teaches not contrition but deeds :

For every man it is better

To *avenge* his *friend* than to mourn *very* much. 2)

And English folk-lore still says the same, chang-

---

1) Vv. 11—18.

2) Vv. 1384—85.



ing only the nature of the deed to suit gentler manners, "A little help is worth a great deal of pity." Even when a dead friend's memory does not call for deeds to revenge him, it is not proper that a German lament, he may only remember. Lamentation is unbecoming in all except the women. "Lamenta ac lacrimas cito, dolorem et tristitiam tarde ponunt. Feminis lugere honestum est, viris meminisse", says Tacitus in the *Germania*.<sup>1)</sup>

But the woman in tears is no favorite in Old English poetry. It is significant that the only woman's figure of importance, which Christian epic has preserved for us, is that of Judith, who, being averse to lamentation of which her sex need not feel ashamed, remembered the injury she had suffered and avenged it like a man<sup>2)</sup>. History and saga of the Anglo-Saxons have kindred figures.

---

1) Chapter 27.

2) Cf. Grein—Wülker, II, 294 ff.

I have only to remind you of Thrytho in the *Beowulf*, and of Cynethryth, the wife of King Offa of Mercia, whose character recalled that of Thrytho to her fellow-countrymen so vividly that traits of the historical figure became confused with those of the woman of the saga.

Thus the Anglo-Saxon poets found in Hebrew literature subject-matter and motives akin to those of their own poetry, which could be re-created in the national forms. Their imagination, however, attempted something even bolder when it transformed the characters of the New Testament to suit the figure of the Germanic hero. In the Hebrew Jehovah there is something of the wrathful God of the Old English *Genesis*, who with his own hands seizes and crushes the rebellious Lucifer, even as Beowulf seized Grendel in Heorot. But a Christ as an armed hero of war does not find its prototype in the Bible. Christ against Satan, the good



against the evil principle formed a fruitful motive for the Anglo-Saxon poet, whose poetry gloried in contrast. And against Satan as we found him described in *Genesis B* a Christ with His trusted followers marched to the war. The descent into hell and the terror of the judgment are the scenes which show the warlike Christ as the glorious conqueror of the devil and his hosts. The Judgment Day, "the most terrible of days" <sup>1)</sup> is the subject of the last part of the *Christ* <sup>2)</sup>, which formerly was ascribed to Cynewulf in its entirety. And the Descent into Hell is sung in a poem in the Exeter MS. <sup>3)</sup>, whose style and spirit seem to betray the authorship of Cynewulf, though it must have been written at an earlier date than the *Judgment Day*. In the *Ascension*, a poem which Cynewulf has signed

---

1) *Christ*, v. 1021.

2) Ed. A. S. Cook. Boston, 1900.

3) Cf. Grein—Wülker, III, 175 ff.

in runes (Part II of the *Christ* trilogy), it is said of Christ after His victory over hell and Satan :

The Saviour of souls will seek now  
 The Gift-stool of spirits, God's own child,  
 After the play of battle. Now you may see plainly  
 What kind of Lord it is who leads this host. 1)

Yea, a lord with the courage and the generosity of a Beowulf, the hero who attacked the devilish monster in his hole in the sea and overcame it, then, having become king, ascended the "gift-stool" and gave gold and rings to his faithful ones. 2)

In these instances the figure of Christ was influenced by the conceptions which people had formed of His natural adversary. But even when all thought of conflict was wanting, even when the poet devoted his rhapsody to the Christ on the cross, He remained the hero, for Anglo-Saxon poetry knew man only as a hero. And thus we find Him

---

1) Vv. 571—74.

2) *Beowulf*, v. 2635.

in *The Dream of the Rood*<sup>1)</sup>, a wonderful mystic poem which dates from the beginning of the eighth century, shortly after Pope Sergius X discovered a piece of the true cross and caused it to be worshipped. The adoration of the cross, introduced into England perhaps by Abbot Ceolfrith of Wearmouth, who was in Rome in 701, must have been the occasion for the poem.<sup>2)</sup> But although the poet found his inspiration in the ritual of the church, it is not incense but the fragrance of the forest that blows through his verses. He sees the cross in a dream at midnight :

Lo! I will write of a wonderful vision  
 A dream that I had in the darkness of night,  
 While reasoning men were lying at rest.  
 It seemed I saw a strange tree  
 Uplifted in air, enveloped with light,  
 Brightest of all beams. That beacon was wholly  
 Covered with gold; gems stood

1) Ed. Albert S. Cook, Clarendon Press, 1905.

2) Cf. Alois Brandl, *Sitzungsberichte der kön. preuss. Academie der Wissenschaften*, XXXV, 1905.

Sparkling at the foot, and there were five jewels  
 Up on the cross-piece. Angels of God were watching it  
 Beautiful for all time; it was not a tree of shame,  
 Holy spirits beheld it,  
 And men of earth and all the marvellous creation.  
 Glorious was that victory-tree, and I was guilty of crime,  
 And polluted with sin. I saw the tree of glory  
 Shining in gladness adorned with garments,  
 Decked with gold: gems had  
 Covered it faithfully, that tree of the forest. 1)

Then the cross speaks and tells its adventures, a form which the author borrowed from the riddle poetry of those days. It was felled in the woods long ago, was dragged up the mountain, and raised upright. There it saw the Lord of men hastening to ascend it with great courage:

Then the young hero ungirded himself, that was God al-  
 [mighty,  
 Strong and courageous. He ascended the high cross  
 Where He would redeem mankind, proudly in the sight of  
 [men,  
 I trembled, when the hero embraced me, yet I dared not  
 [bow to the ground,

---

1) Vv. 1—17.

*Fall to the lap of the earth, for I must stand fast. 1)*

Only after the death of Jesus, when the "noblemen" come to take him down does it bend over :

They took then the almighty God,  
 Lifted him down from the living torment; the warriors left  
 [me standing,  
 All wet with blood, and wounded with arrows,  
 They laid Him down then, weary of limb, they left not His  
 side,  
 They regarded the Ruler of heaven, and He rested there a  
 [while,  
 Tired after the mighty strife. They made Him then an earthly  
 [dwelling,  
 His men in His murderers' sight; they carved it from the  
 [bright marble,  
 And they set therein the Saviour! They began to sing a sor-  
 [rowful song,  
 Dreary in the evening dusk, then they would depart  
 Fatigued, from the famous prince. 2)

A bolder adaptation of foreign material to the national setting is not to be found in Anglo-Saxon poetry. Not only is the descent from the Cross by

1) Vv. 39—43.

2) Vv. 60—69.

the *hilderincas*, the "battle-heroes", represented as a strife in which the young hero sinks down, weary to death, but even the cross which is felled on the edge of the forest, dragged to the mountain, pierced with nails and arrows, and buried, has to suffer all these indignities at the hands of *strange feondas*, "strong enemies". The Cross itself is a faithful thane of Christ, the *weruda god*, the "God of troops", whose assailants it would like to crush. And in the evening the men who keep watch by the fallen hero sing the death-song in true Germanic fashion.

Thus attachment to Christ among the Anglo-Saxons took on that form in which alone it was known between men who were not blood-kin, that is, fidelity to the lord. Of course, the poets, versed as they were in patristic literature, frequently translated the Christian epithets literally, for their language lent itself admirably to word-coinage. But when a word had real meaning for them,



it took on national dress. As an example of the mingling of native and foreign phraseology, in Cynewulf's *Ascension of Christ* the birth of Jesus is referred to as the arrival of a nobleman, a hero, within Bethlehem; heralds announce it to the shepherds. 1) "The renowned Prince, the glorious King leads the company of His thanes [to use the untranslatable Old English word], that dear troop, to Bethany. On the feast day they did not slight the word of their Teacher, their Gold-Giver" — which of these two epithets expressed more to the poet? — "Soon were the heroes with their Lord in the holy city where their Glory-Giver revealed to them many signs in parables" 2) "His thanes praised Him, loved Him gratefully, the Lord of life, the Father of created things. He gave them afterwards for this a noble reward, the dear compani-

---

1) Vv. 448—50.

2) Vv. 456—63.



ons" 1). "In the heavenly city joy was renewed over the coming of the hero" 2) 'But the young men, the stouthearted heroes, went to Jerusalem sad at heart after they had seen God, their Joy-Giver, ascend to heaven'. 3)

Their sadness is that of every pious Anglo-Saxon. For his home is on high in the holy city where the Giver of Gifts reigns. He lives far from His favour in this place of exile. In this conception Christian teaching and German sentiment are in harmony. For Christian asceticism which teaches that this earth is a vale of tears, a place of exile, touches a sensitive chord in the heart of the converted Englishman. Even the energy of his poetry melts into pathos when the poet's motive is the pain of exile. The weakness of the keeper of hell in *Christ and Satan* can be explained only by the

---

1) Vv. 470—73.

2) Vv. 529—30.

3) Vv. 533—37.

poet's compassion for the banished prince. The pain of loneliness and the bitterest of all needs, separation from the lord, is the unique motive of the few elegiac poems which are preserved in the Old English language. Thus "The Wanderer" sighs :

For this he learns who long must forego  
 The loved lore of his dear lord,  
 When sorrow and sleep together, not seldom  
 Hold enchained the poor exile,  
 Then he imagines he embraces and kisses  
 His liege lord, and lays on his knee  
 His hands and his head, as when he sometimes  
 In days of old enjoyed his gift-stool.  
 Then awakens again the friendless exile,  
 And sees before him the fallow waves,  
 Sea-birds swimming or spreading their wings,  
 Frost and snow falling fast mingled with hail. } ✓  
 Then the weary one feels heart wounds  
 Sore for his loved one 1)

The German keeps in the word *elend*, a recollection of the meaning of exile to the Anglo-Saxon :

---

1) Vv. 37—50.

*elend* is “other-land-ness”, it is misery. And “elend” was the life on earth, this “prison”, <sup>1)</sup> “this narrow land whither we had to turn in shame banished from the fatherland” <sup>2)</sup>. The sombre winter landscapes in the *Beowulf* which, as it were, symbolized the misery of the vale of tears, found their counterpart in the glowing pictures of the paradise set in radiant light where the door stood open for the holy ones of heaven, as in the *Phoenix* <sup>3)</sup> which abounds in such scenes.

Bede tells that when the Christian preacher Paulinus, in the beginning of the seventh century, had spoken of Christ before King Eadwine of Northumbria and his *witan*, one of the latter rose up and said: “The life of man, O King, is like the flight of a sparrow through the hall as you sit at meat in the winter-time with a warm fire burn-

---

1) *Christ*, v. 25.

2) *Christ*, v. 32.

3) Cf. Grein—Wülker, III, 95 ff.

ing on the hearth, but with the icy rain-storm without. The sparrow flies in through one door, tarries for a moment in the light and the warmth of the fire, and flies out again through the other into the winter-darkness whence it came. If this new teaching tells us something certain of this darkness, let us follow it" <sup>1)</sup>). That was the strength of Christendom. Howsoever rich in gifts, howsoever fortunate in the favour of the earthly master, for every one, even for the lord, the hour of exile must come, and the shadow of its approach cast itself over festival and song of triumph. The Anglo-Saxons did not know the proud certainty of entrance into the paradise of fallen heroes which the Scandinavians called Valhalla. Their life was as that of Scyld, of whom the beginning of the *Beowulf* tells that as a child he came floating in a small boat, who knew from whence?, and that after his glorious reign over the Danes he was

---

1) Bk. II, ch. 13.

placed on a ship laden with treasure, and surrendered to the mercy of the waves. "And no one of the hall-dwellers knew who received that burden" <sup>1</sup>). But Paulinus knew. He taught that the narrow place of exile, the night of terror is not the beyond, but this present world. The dead king on the ship in the sea had been released from the ban, and was upon the way back to the fatherland. Thus the place of exile became the harbour of happiness, of which Cynewulf sang :

*Hard was life*

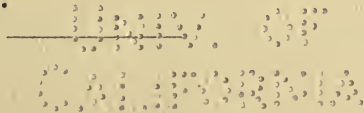
*Ere we at land had anchored  
Over the stormy sea ; then strength came to us  
When to the haven of happiness led us  
The ghost-son of God, and gave us gifts  
That we might know where we might moor  
O'er the side of the vessel our sea-horses  
Our old ocean-steeds fast to the anchor <sup>2</sup>)*

In this way the teaching and the poetry of the church gained power through the support of the

1) Vv. 50—52.

2) *Ascension of Christ* (*Christ II*), vv. 856—63.

national ideas and traditions. The church did not destroy, but reanimate. We have to thank the Church of Rome even for the preservation of the secular poetry. The *Beowulf*, that epic of pre-Christian days, is, in the form in which we know it, the work of a convert, who by inserting a Bible myth here, and an utterance of Christian faith there, reconciled his love for the heathen hero-poetry with his new creed. He wrought quite in the spirit of the preachers of the seventh century, whom Gregory charged to spare the heathen temples, but to destroy the idols therein. They understood that the word they preached, and the poems they composed could have vitality only in those forms which had already been shaped by the heathen genius. The teaching and the poetry of the Church lived only through a reconciliation with heathendom.

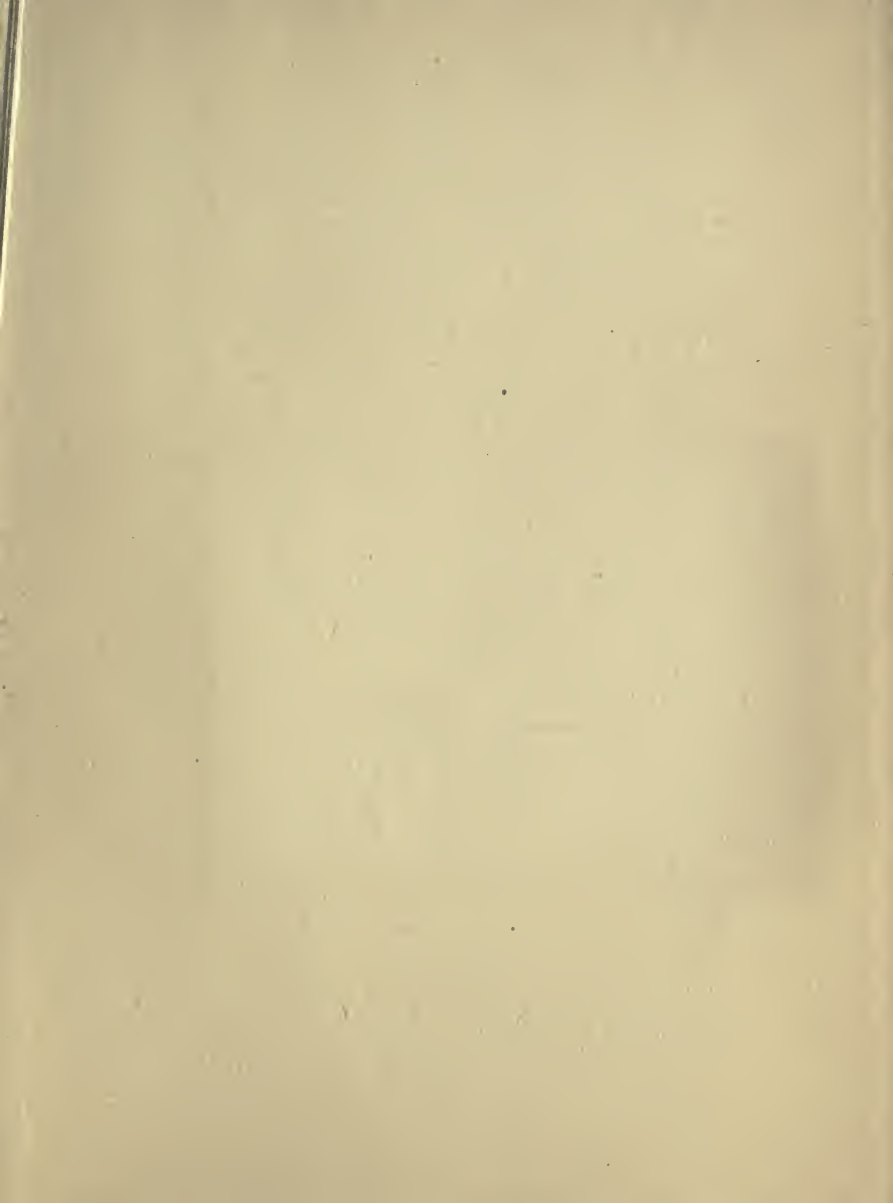












STAMPED BELOW

AN INITIAL FINE OF 25 CENTS  
WILL BE ASSESSED FOR FAILURE TO RETURN  
THIS BOOK ON THE DATE DUE. THE PENALTY  
WILL INCREASE TO 50 CENTS ON THE FOURTH  
DAY AND TO \$1.00 ON THE SEVENTH DAY  
OVERDUE.

FEB 13 1935

IN STACKS

MAR 7 1956

21 MAR 1956

MAY 3 1 1956 LU

17 Apr '61 RR

REC'D LD

APR 19 1961

JUL 3 1976 3 2

IN STACK

JUL 3

FEB 1976

MAR 13 1989  
AUTO. DISC.

DEC 13 1988

CIRCULATION

LD 21 100 3 1984

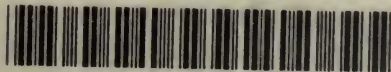
YB 31376

304337

*Barnow*

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARY

**U.C. BERKELEY LIBRARIES**



C006770537

