

Essay by: Laurence W. Mazzeno

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Overview

Commonly thought of as an English epic poem, *Beowulf* actually celebrates the deeds of a Norse hero. In fact, all the characters in the poem are from the region of northern Europe from which the Danes, Swedes, and other Norse tribes originated. This should not be surprising, however, because Norse warriors invaded the British Isles in the early sixth century and remained there for nearly three hundred years. That *Beowulf* is written in a language now called Old English may be a testament to the popularity of the story; while it takes place between 600 and 800 c.e., the one surviving version of the poem was transcribed centuries later, probably by a Christian monk. The manuscript was preserved in the collection of an English man until the seventeenth century, when it was donated to the British Museum. Despite its damaged condition, the manuscript has been examined repeatedly by scholars interested in the historical background and literary qualities of this unique poem...

Christian Themes

Since the early nineteenth century, critics have debated the extent to which Christianity plays an integral role in the poem. Some have argued that the original poem simply celebrated the virtues of the society that existed in northern Europe before missionaries brought Christianity to the region. These critics contend that overt references to a Christian God were added by later transcribers, who adapted the original tale by giving it a Christian coloring. Others, among them the distinguished medieval scholar and fantasy novelist J. R. R. Tolkien, have argued that the Christian elements have been woven skillfully into the text; they claim that the poem in its present form celebrates Christian virtues as they were understood by a medieval audience.

The most obvious Christian reference is the designation of the monster Grendel and his mother as descendants of Cain, the son of Adam who kills his brother Abel. Less direct references include frequent acknowledgement by characters in the poem that their lives are in the hands of God, who determines their destiny and who will reward or punish them for their deeds.

Additionally, *Beowulf* celebrates those who exhibit friendship, self-sacrifice, concern for their community, and generosity, virtues shared by Germanic peoples and by the Christians who converted them. The idea of gift giving, a holdover from pre-Christian tradition, figures prominently in the poem, as evidenced by Hrothgar's sharing of valuable treasures with Beowulf to honor his bravery and Beowulf's sharing of the gifts he receives from the Danish king with his own sovereign, Hygelac. The hero of the poem is venerated not simply for his bravery, but also for his concern for those whose welfare has been entrusted to him. In the Danish kingdom, Beowulf puts his own life at risk to relieve Hrothgar's people from the scourge of the monster that has been threatening their safety. Similarly, when he has become king of the Geats, he takes it on himself to lead a band of warriors in combat against the dragon to retrieve the treasure that will benefit his people once it is rescued from the serpent's clutches.

In several ways the poem presents a value system [consistent] with Christian principles that would have resonated with a medieval audience that saw personal bravery and combat in service to kingdom and church as noble. The monsters in the poem are clearly embodiments of evil forces that must be overcome for society to be safe and prosperous; the hero who takes on the quest of freeing the land from such monsters fights as the representative of good. Beowulf does not believe he can conquer these forces on his own; rather, he recognizes that he will succeed only as long as God allows him to do so. He also knows that he will eventually die, and he accepts that knowledge stoically. Throughout the narrative, he measures his success by his ability to make life better for those he serves. The idea of fatalism that permeated northern European religions is transformed into a

version of divine providence that stresses God's control over human events. All people, even heroes, have to face the inevitable fact that death awaits them at the time God has chosen to call them.

While it would be unwise to make specific links between Beowulf and Christ, there is one parallel that can be seen in the poem; both are aware of their mission to take responsibility for and act with love toward their fellow men and women. This is the great lesson of Beowulf's life, and it is brought home to readers by the contrasts the poet sets up between Beowulf's actions and those of many of the other leaders described in the poem. At three points in the narrative, the stories of Norse rulers and fighting men are highlighted: first in the opening prologue; again by the scop, or poet, at the banquet given by Hrothgar to honor Beowulf after he has slain Grendel; and once more in the section that follows Beowulf's return to his homeland. In all three instances, one reads of leaders who take vengeance on their neighbors and even on their own kinsmen, perpetuating blood feuds that lead to social unrest. By contrast, Beowulf is presented always as a peacemaker — albeit of a distinctly medieval character. He fights against the monsters not to gain personal favor but to first to rid Hrothgar's kingdom of the monsters menacing it, and then to save his own people from the threat of the dragon. The audiences that would have listened to the poem in the eleventh century would have accepted the notion that violent behavior was compatible with Christian principles. In fact, most devout Christians believed in the idea that "might makes right" — at least in the sense that a just God would not allow those fighting in his service to fail.

Seen in this light, Beowulf's actions speak of selfless sacrifice; if he is violent, it is because, like people of his age, the times required violent action to secure peace and bring about prosperity. His own words throughout the narrative and the advice he receives from Hrothgar before departing the land of the Danes stress the importance of avoiding the sin of pride and recognizing that victory comes not from personal prowess but from the hand of God. In a sense — though it is important to emphasize that the parallels are not exact — Beowulf is like Christ, working on earth to further the eternal Father's plan for humankind. Like the knights of Arthurian legend, whose stories would replace the Norse tales as favorite readings among English audiences within a century after the surviving version of *Beowulf* was transcribed, Beowulf is the model Christian hero.

Goldgyfan or Goldw lance: A Christian Apology for Beowulf and Treasure

Joseph E. Marshall

While commentators have recognized the important presence of gift-exchange in Beowulf, they invariably disagree about what treasure represents and how it functions within the poem, especially in the final one third of the poem (lines 2200 to 3182) where Beowulf eagerly exchanges his life for the dragon's buried treasure. A host of critics, including Kemp Malone, E. G. Stanley, Margaret Goldsmith, Eugene J. Crook, and Alan Bliss, question Beowulf's motives for seeking the gold and conclude that he is guilty of avarice. Other critics, such as Willem Helder, Patricia Silber, Robert Creed, Henry Woolf, and Wade Tarzia, grapple with the dubious nature of the dragon's hoard and offer a variety of explanations for its curse, plundering, and reburial. This article offers, in **response to critics' accusations of avarice** and their uncertainty about buried treasure, a renewed investigation of the Beowulf-poet's distinction between distributed treasure and unused treasure, for the former seems to be a metonymy for lordship and the Christian ideal, while the latter seems to be a perversion of them both.

Beginning in the early 1960s, commentators began to question Beowulf's motives and behavior in the final section of the poem. One of the earliest critics to raise doubts was Malone, who despite proclaiming Beowulf "an ideal hero," acknowledges that Beowulf seems particularly fond of the dragon's hoard; for Malone, it symbolizes "the vanity of worldly goods."² Two years later Stanley proposed that Beowulf is guilty of "avarice" because he not only takes solace in the fact that he has acquired the hoard but also desires to see the hoard before he dies.³

...[However]As he gazes upon the treasure, Beowulf thanks the Lord for enabling him to acquire the dragon's treasures. Taken out of context, this passage seems to indicate avarice, but it is important to notice that Beowulf is only gratified because he was able to acquire the treasures for his men (*minum leodum*). This selfless motive is further underscored by Beowulf's desire for this treasure to perform the need of his people (*leoda þearfe*) in his stead. Beowulf's use of the word *bebohte* (exchanged) captures this critical point, for he genuinely believes that his act has given his people a chance to rebuild and continue their way of life. By exchanging his old life-span for this treasure, Beowulf gives the Geats a chance to survive. In a poem that continually celebrates gift-exchange, Beowulf's gesture to his people is the epitome of lordship and generosity because he sacrifices himself in order to save the kingdom.