Beowulf in a Nutshell, Joseph Pearce, Crisis Magazine, June 5, 2021

Beowulf, the Old English epic, probably dates from the early eighth century, a golden age of English Christianity when the land was awash with saints. The *Beowulf* poet, who was almost certainly a monk, was a contemporary of St. Bede the Venerable, a Doctor of the Church, and St. Boniface, the English apostle to the Germans. He was also writing at a time when Anglo-Saxon literature was flourishing. Caedmon, the poet who probably wrote the mystical masterpiece "The Dream of the Rood," had died in 680, a generation or so earlier. It is odd, therefore, that contemporary critics, betraying the arrogance of their ignorance, claim that *Beowulf* is not a Christian poem.

Harold Bloom, exposing his inability to read the allegorical dimension of the poem, claims that "*Beowulf* eschews any mention of Jesus Christ, and all its biblical references are to the Old Testament," adding that the virtues of the poem's eponymous hero "have nothing to do with salvation, and everything to do with warlike courage." He concludes his woefully awry reading of the poem with the preposterous claim that the monk who wrote the poem was a closet pagan: "But does *Beowulf* conclude with the triumph of the Christian vision? God's glory as a creator is extolled in the poem, but nowhere are we told of God's grace. Instead, there are tributes, despairing but firm, to fate, hardly a Christian power."

A reading of the poem from the perspective of the profoundly Catholic culture in which it was written will illustrate, contrary to Professor Bloom's assertions, that there are distinct allegorical references to Christ, especially with respect to His Passion, and that the whole poem has everything to do with salvation in a specifically orthodox theological sense.

Let's begin with the notion that the poet speaks of "fate" in the pagan fatalistic sense. The word that Professor Bloom mistakenly translates as "fate" is the Old English *wyrd*, from which the modern word *weird* is derived. This word, as used in the staunchly Catholic culture of Anglo-Saxon England, meant the mystical presence of divine providence. The idea of the weird-woven web is that all human actions impact others in the communal web in a way that renders the one who acts morally responsible for his actions and answerable to God for them, all of which is subject to, and inseparable from, the "weirdness" of God's providential design. A misunderstanding of the "weirdness" of the poem is, therefore, fatal to any true critical appreciation of it.

Structurally, the poem is divided sequentially by Beowulf's fighting with three monsters: Grendel, Grendel's Mother, and the Dragon. The battle against the first two monsters is a parable of the necessity of God's grace and the consequent rebuttal of the heresy of Pelagianism, which was rife in England at the time, as is evident from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* written at around the same time as *Beowulf*. Like Bede, the *Beowulf* poet is warning against the dangers of this heresy, which taught that men could go to heaven by the power of their own will, by merely doing what the Bible teaches, and that, therefore, they did not need the supernatural assistance which theologians call grace.

Let's investigate this parabolic dimension of the poem.

The poet begins by telling us that Beowulf is the mightiest warrior in the world. He can defeat any foe by the brute power of his own strength. He proves as much by spurning all weapons and defeating Grendel through the strength of his own mighty arm. Beowulf seems to epitomize the Pelagian Man who

can defeat evil through the power of his own will and strength, without the necessity of any outside assistance, natural or supernatural.

He then faces Grendel's Mother, this time carrying the most powerful sword known to man. The sword, as well as Beowulf's own strength, prove to be powerless against the supernatural power of this new monster. He would most certainly have been killed had not a magical sword miraculously appeared within his grasp. It is through this supernatural assistance that Beowulf prevails and without which he would have perished. "If God had not helped me," Beowulf says, "the outcome would have been quick and fatal."

As for the sword, we discover that its hilt is engraved with biblical images of God's defeat of evil in salvation history. The moral and theological message is clear enough. No human person, however strong, can defeat the power of evil without supernatural assistance (grace), nor can the most powerful works of human ingenuity (the sword signifying what we would now call technology) save us from evil. Our triumph over evil is only possible with divine assistance.

This brings us to the final section, in which Beowulf, as an old man, faces the dragon. In this section, numerical allegorical signifiers are employed to connect Beowulf's fight with the dragon with the Passion of Christ. We are told that Beowulf selected twelve "hand-picked" companions, one of whom was the thief who had raised the dragon's wrath through the stealing of the "precious cup" from the dragon's hoard.

On the eve of the battle with the dragon, Beowulf is "sad at heart, unsettled yet ready, sensing his death." At the key moment, when Beowulf goes to face the dragon, eleven of his hand-picked followers "broke ranks and ran for their lives to the safety of the wood." Only one of the twelve had the courage to remain by his Lord's side. After Beowulf is slain in his slaying of the dragon, his hand-picked company come skulking from the woods to join the one who had remained at the Lord's side, but only ten of them; the eleventh, the Judas figure, is not with them.

At the poem's conclusion, the people erect a huge burial mound for Beowulf on a headland, "high and imposing, a marker that sailors could see from far away." Then we are told that *twelve* warriors rode around the tomb, mourning the loss of Beowulf as both a man and a king. The traitor, the Judas-figure amongst the hand-picked troop, has evidently been replaced. The twelve are clearly signifiers of the apostles, which makes Beowulf, in the final part of the poem, in some limited but very real allegorical sense, a Christ figure.

This, in a nutshell, is proof that *Beowulf* is a deeply Christian poem and proof, also, that there are none so blind as critics who will not see the Christian significance of a poem even when it is staring them in the face.

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