

# What does Herebeald have to do with Christ? The apposition of Christian and pagan myth in *Beowulf*<sup>A</sup>

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The first half of Beowulf's speech before the dragon fight (lines 2425-2471) has often been referred to as the most pagan part of the poem, possibly containing an allusion to the god Odin and his sons Hothr and Baldr. This article, however, proposes a new Christian context for this passage, identifying, in Beowulf's description of a hanged son on the gallows, a hitherto unnoticed allusion to Christ's passion, evinced by a verbal association between the gallows and Christ in Old English poetry, and a broader syncretism between Odin, Baldr, and Christ in Viking-Age Anglo-Scandinavian culture. This allusion is consistent with other Christological references throughout *Beowulf*, subtly preserving the conceit of the characters' pagan world while ironically accenting, in the minds of a Christian audience, the characters' pathetic ignorance of Christ.

**Keywords:** Beowulf, Christ, hanging, gallows, Woden/Odin, Baldr

## 1. Introduction

Before his fatal encounter with the dragon, Beowulf utters a long and peculiar speech to his twelve companions (lines 2425-2471). Whereas the warrior of fifty years ago would have scorned morose oration in favor of immediate action (lines 1384-85), the older Beowulf instead reminisces, on the brink of battle, about an unfortunate accident that took place in his childhood between his foster-uncles, Herebeald and

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Hæthcyn, in which Hæthcyn unintentionally slew his older brother, Herebeald, with a hornbow. Beowulf likens King Hrethel's subsequent grief, and inability to requite the wrongful death of his son, to that of an old man who has lived to see his only child hang on the gallows:

Biowulf mæpelade, bearn Ecgðeowes:  
'Fela ic on giogoðe guðræsa genæs,  
orleghwila; ic þæt eall gemon.  
Ic wæs syfanwintre þa mec sinca baldor,  
freawine folca æt minum fæder genam;  
heold mec ond hæfde Hreðel cyning,  
geaf me sinc ond symbel, sibbe gemunde;  
næs ic him to life laðra owihte,  
beorn in burgum, þonne his bearna hwylc,  
Herebeald ond Hæðcyn oððe Hygelac min.  
Wæs þam yldestan ungedefelice  
mæges dædum morþorbed stred,  
syððan hyne Hæðcyn of hornbogan,  
his freawine flane geswencte,  
miste mercelses ond his mæg ofscet,  
broðor oðerne blodigan gare.  
Þæt wæs feohleas gefeoht, fyrenum gesyngad,  
hreðre hygemeðe; sceold hwæðre swa þeah  
æðeling unwrecen ealdres linnan.  
Swa bið geomorlic gomelum ceorle  
to gebidanne, þæt his byre ride  
giong on galgan. Þonne he gyd wrece,  
sarigne sang, þonne his sunu hangað  
hrefne to hroðre, ond he him helpe ne mæg  
eald ond infrod ænige gefremman

(Fulk & Bjork & Niles 2008: 83-84)

[Beowulf, son of Ecgtheow, made a speech: "Many a battle-rush I survived in youth and many times of strife. I remember all that. I was seven-winters old when the lord of treasure, the friendly ruler of the people, took me from my father. He reared and kept me, King Hrethel, gave me treasure, feasts, was mindful of kinship. Nor was I ever more hateful a whit to him, the

warrior in the fort, than any of his children: Herebeald, Haethcyn, or my Hygelac. For the eldest a murderbed was unfittingly spread by a kinsman's deed, when Haethcyn, with a hornbow, his lord-friend struck with an arrow. He missed his mark, and shot his kinsman, one brother to another, with a bloody spear. That was a fight that could not be atoned for with payment, wickedly sinned, the breast mind-weary; nevertheless, the prince had to lose his life unavenged. It was like the sorrow of an old man who endures that his son should ride young on the gallows. Then he keeps a lament, a sad song, when his son hangs, a joy to the raven, and, although old and wise, he may not perform any help for him.]

Recent scholarship has focused on how this speech seems to undermine the poem's earlier celebration of valour (Georgianna 1987), identifying, in *Beowulf*, at this moment, a complex Hamlet-like psychology (de Looze 1984), while also providing a poignant variation on the melancholy of old age (Porck 2014: 200, 205). The father's lament has drawn linguistic comparison to the prologue of the poem (Leneghan 2020: 90), as well as to depictions of grief in *The Wanderer* and *Égils Saga* (Wehlau 1998), while also prompting debate about the legal aspects of Anglo-Saxon executions and feuds (Whitelock 1939). More relevant to this discussion, however, are the speech's subtle allusions to Norse myth. Joseph Harris (1994) identifies a link between the hypothetical old man—the *gomel ceort*—who grieves for his hanged son, and the god Odin (OE Woden), often referred to in Old Norse as a "gamall karl". The presence of ravens, hanging, and spear-wounds in *Beowulf*'s speech ("hrefne", 2448a; "gealgan", 2446a; "blodigan gare", 2440b) fortifies the association with Odin, who is often depicted in religious iconography alongside ravens, or hanged from a tree and impaled with a spear.<sup>2</sup> These associations can be traced to myths preserved in the Icelandic *Poetic Edda* and *Prose Edda*, both transcribed in thirteenth century manuscripts that postdate the copying of *Beowulf* (c.1000) but whose origins lie in earlier oral

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<sup>2</sup> See Kopár (2013: 64, 72, 98, 112, 120) for discussion of the depiction of Odin on the Gosforth Cross, the Thorwald's cross, the cross fragments of Kirkbymoorside and Billingham, in addition to the Slab of Jurby and Larbro St Hammars I.

composition.<sup>3</sup> In these myths, Odin is often portrayed as a “raven-god”, surveilling the world through vigilant birds (*Gylfaginning* 38 (Faulkes 1987: 33)), and also as a hanging god, who, in a remarkable episode, pierces himself with a spear and hangs himself from the world tree Yggdrasil (*Hávamál* 138 (Orchard 2011: 35)).

The connection between Hrethel, the *gomel ceorl*, and Odin might seem tenuous were it not for the fact that the names of Hrethel’s sons, “Here-beald” and “Hæth-cyn”, are cognates with those of the Old Norse gods “Baldr” and “Hothr”, two sons of Odin involved in a similar fatal accident with a projectile (O’Donoghue 2003: 84). In one version of the myth, Baldr, the best and most beautiful of the gods, is, by Loki’s contrivance, slain with a spear of mistletoe at the hand of his blind brother, Hothr. All beings weep for the universally beloved Baldr, but his death grieves Odin in particular, for he knows it heralds Ragnarok, the doom of the gods:

Höðr tók mistiltein ok skaut at Baldri at tilvísun Loka. Flaug skotit í gognum hann ok fell hann daður til jarðar, ok hefir þat mest óhapp verit unnit með goðum ok mǫnnum. Þá er Baldr var fallinn þá fellusk ǫllum Ásum orðtǫk ok svá hendr at taka til hans, ok sá hverr til annars, ok váru allir með einum hug til þess er unnit hafði verkit. En engi mátti hefna, þar var svá mikill griðastaðr. En þá er Æsirnir freistuðu at mæla þá var hitt þó fyrr at grátrinn kom upp svá at engi mátti ǫðrum segja með orðunum frá sínum harmi. En Óðinn bar þeim mun verst þenna skaða sem hann kunni mesta skyn hversu mikil aftaka ok missa Ásunum var í fráfalli Baldrs. (Faulkes 2005: 46)

[Hod took the mistletoe and shot at Baldr at Loki’s direction. The missile flew through him and he fell dead to the ground, and this was the unluckiest deed ever done among gods and men. When Baldr had fallen, then all the Æsir’s tongues failed them, as did their hands for lifting him up, and they all looked at each other and were of one mind towards the one who had done the deed. But no one could take vengeance, it was a place of such sanctuary. When the Æsir tried to speak then what happened first was that weeping came out, so that none could tell another in words of his

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<sup>3</sup> On date and compilation of the *Beowulf*-manuscript, see most recently Thompson (2018). For a range of arguments on dating of the composition of the poem, from the seventh to eleventh centuries, see Chase (1987). For exponents of an early date, see Fulk (1992) and Neidorf (2014).

grief. But it was Odin who took this injury the hardest in that he had the best idea what great deprivation and loss the death of Baldr would cause the Æsir.] (Faulkes 1987: 48-51)

Despite the obvious differences in the *Beowulf* poet's version of the story, the essential scenario of an accidental, unrequitable fratricide by missile, combined with the similarity of the characters' cognomens, has been used to argue persuasively that the *Beowulf* poet intentionally euhemerized the myth of Baldr and Hothr.<sup>4</sup> The *Beowulf* poet's familiarity with other Odin-adjacent figures from Germanic myth, such as Sigemund (lines 875-79) and Heremod (lines 901, 1709), lends further support to this hypothesis, as well as the fact that Herebeald and Haethcyn—unlike their historically well-attested brother Hygelac—do not appear in any source outside of *Beowulf*: they are quite possibly the poet's confection.<sup>5</sup> A few theories have been put forward to explain the subtle allusion to Odin and Baldr at this particular moment of the poem. Andy Orchard (2003: 119) suggests the poet is "somehow sanctifying his appeal to the figures of pre-Christian myth and legend", while Ursula Dronke (1969) suggests a thematic link between the fall of the Æsir and that of the Geats. I would like to propose, however, a new Christian context for Beowulf's parable of the old man and his hanged son: namely, a typological allusion to Christ's passion.

To my knowledge, only one other scholar has ever proposed a biblical parallel for this particular passage: in 1959, A. C. Bouman compared Hrethel's grief for Herebeald to King David's grief for his son, Absalom. Absalom is, like Herebeald, slain with a dart, but he is also, like the hanged son, snagged in a tree (2 Samuel 1:18). King David further resembles both Hrethel and the anonymous old man, the *gome/ceorl*, since he is unable to avenge his son's death: Absalom, as an

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<sup>4</sup> Ursula Dronke (1969: 323) writes: "The discrepancies are considerable, but if the Christian poet intended to euhemerize the myth of Baldr's death, could he have done it more effectively?" In agreement with Tolkien (1963: 70-74), Dronke cites similarities between Thor and Beowulf, and between the eschatology of Ragnarok and the ending of the poem that further support this euhemerization hypothesis.

<sup>5</sup> Hygelac's invasion of Gaul is reported by Gregory of Tours c. 575. Hygelac is also mentioned in the *Liber monstrorum*, c. 650, as well as in three Scandinavian texts c.1200 (Leneghan 2020: 42-45; North 2006: 199-202).

insurgent, was justifiably executed.<sup>6</sup> Although this link to David and Absalom is evocative, I shall argue that a closer and more meaningful parallel, and indeed possible source, for Beowulf's analogy between a spear-wounded son and a son hanged on the gallows is the passion of the spear-wounded, gallows-hanged Christ. The allusions to Odin and Baldr in the speech actually support my thesis: Odin and Baldr were counterparts of Christ in the Anglo-Scandinavian imagination, across a range of literary and material contexts. The apposition of these equivalent mythological figures, Christian and pagan, in Beowulf's speech is entirely consistent with the "double perspective" maintained throughout the poem (best elucidated by Fred C. Robinson in his 1985 book *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*) in which the reader simultaneously experiences the pagan view of the characters and the larger Christian perspective of the poet: a dual view that endows the pagan characters with vicarious Christian virtue while also underscoring their poignant ignorance of Christianity. Moreover, as we shall see, Christ's crucifixion was typically viewed as a hanging on a gallows in Old English literature. It is therefore not improbable that the audience of *Beowulf* might have thought not only of the myth of Baldr but of the sacrifice of God's only son at this moment in the poem, as the hero approaches his own death.

## 2. Odin, Baldr, and Christ

Odin and Baldr were connected with Christ in the Anglo-Scandinavian imagination, as demonstrated in a range of literary and material contexts. They were both, in fact, counterparts to Christ. The *Elder Eddá's Hávamál* describes Odin in terms plainly evocative of the Christian God:

Veit et, at ek hekk  
vindga meiði á  
nætr allar níu,  
geiri undaðr

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<sup>6</sup> For parallels between King David (who is, himself, a type of Christ) and Beowulf, see Orchard (2003: 142-45).

ok gefinn Óðni,  
sjálfr sjálfum mér,  
á þeim meiði  
er manngi veit  
hvers hann af rótum renn. (Evans 1986: 68)

["I know that I hung on that windy tree  
spear-wounded, nine full nights,  
given to Odin, myself to myself  
on that tree that rose from roots  
that no man ever knows."] (Orchard 2011: 35)

A spear-wounded god sacrificing himself to himself on a tree is certainly highly reminiscent of Christ's death on the cross (North 2006: 199-202). The extraordinary parallels may account for the otherwise inexplicable juxtaposition of Odin and Christ in Old English poems, such as *The Nine Herbs Charm*, which concludes by extolling the healing powers of Christ but begins with a puzzling reference to Woden (ON Odin) that is immediately followed by a description of the lord hanging in heaven:

Wyrm com snican, toslat he man;  
ða genam Woden nigo wuldor tanas  
sloh ða þa næddran, þæt heo on nigon tofleah.  
þær geændade æppel and attor  
þæt heo næfre ne wolde on hus bugan.  
Fille and finule, fela mihtigu twa,  
þa wyrte gesceop witig Drihten  
halig on heofonum þa he hongode. (Bjork 2014: 196)

["A serpent came crawling, it tore apart a person;  
then Woden took nine glory twigs,  
then struck the adder so that it fled away in nine.  
There apple and poison brought it about  
that it never wanted to enter a house.  
Chervil and fennel, two very effective ones,  
the wise Lord, holy in the heavens, made when he hung".] (Bjork 2014: 197)

In the context of a charm concerned with healing, it is unclear whether the wise lord hanging in heaven is Woden or Christ, since both are powerful healers who were hanged. Baldr similarly cuts a Christlike figure as a god who dies but who is then, after Ragnarok, resurrected, as told in *Gylfaginning* 53 (Faulkes 1987: 56). Arthur Mosher (1983: 313) has argued that Snorri Sturluson may have constructed his version of the *Edda* myths precisely in order to depict Baldr as a type of Christ: “a heathen type of the story of the Crucifixion”. Did the *Beowulf* poet have something similar in mind when he euhemerized Baldr as Herebeald and compared him to a son hanged on the gallows? In another version of the Baldr myth, told in the older *Völuspá*, Baldr is *intentionally* sacrificed by his father Odin so that he may later be resurrected—an even more Christian account of the myth (Dronke 1997: 97; O’Donoghue 2003: 88; Hill 2012: 217-218).

Other links between Baldr and Christ abound: the weeping of all beings for Baldr in *Gylfaginning* has an Old English Christian parallel in line 55 of *The Dream of the Rood*—when Christ is on the cross, “weop eal gesceaft” (Swanson 1996: 97) [“All creation wept”] (Dronke 1997). Lilla Kopár (2013: 102-103) identifies an echo of Baldr’s dart-ridden death in line 62 of the Rood’s lament: “eall ic wæs mid strælum forwundod” [“I was all severely wounded with darts”].<sup>7</sup> Heather O’Donoghue identifies a further parallel between Baldr and Christ in Jewish apocrypha: just as all worldly things in *Gylfaginning* promised not to harm Baldr—with the exception of the flimsy, unassuming mistletoe—so all trees refused to participate in Christ’s crucifixion, except a meek stalk of cabbage (O’Donoghue 2003: 84). Another link between Baldr and Christ can be found through Hothr, Baldr’s spear-wielding, blind brother. Just as Hothr is blind, so too is Longinus, the man who, in Christian apocrypha, pierced Jesus’s side with a spear (Dronke 1997: 96-97).<sup>8</sup> This last connection with Longinus is especially suggestive, in terms of *Beowulf*, given the peculiar transmutation of the

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<sup>7</sup> Kopár writes: “The function of possible references to Baldr in a Christian poem might have been to enrich the Christian story by bringing the tragedy of Christ’s death closer to the contemporary audience and to generate empathy.”

<sup>8</sup> Dronke notes that Longinus’ blindness is first mentioned in poems of Blathmac c. 750-70, and is illustrated in an Irish gospel book c. 800. See also O’Donoghue (2003: 98).

arrow that kills Herebeald, the “flane” (2438b), only two lines later, into a bloody spear (“blodigan gare”).

It is not only Old English and Old Norse literature that links Odin and Baldr with Christ: the associations are written in rock. In a recent study of Anglo-Scandinavian Viking-Age monuments, Kopár cites examples from architecture that further exhibit this syncretic mythology, blending aspects of the gods Odin, Baldr, and Thor with Christ, noting: “In the conversion period, Thor became one of the chief pagan counterparts of Christ ... together with Odin and Balder, all of whom shared certain characteristics of the ‘new’ Christian deity” (Kopár, 2013: 61).<sup>9</sup> For instance, Thorwald’s Cross, c. 950 A.D., on the Isle of Man, depicts a triumphant Christ, trampling snakes, opposite Odin, who is ignominiously being wolfed down by Fenrir. The juxtaposition of Christ’s ascendancy with Odin’s death might have been meant to “suggest the superiority of Christianity over the old religion” (Kopár 2013: 72).

The Gosforth Cross of St Mary’s, c. 950 A.D., depicts a crucifixion amidst a variety of scenes from Ragnarok, in which an ambiguous figure on the cross can be interpreted either as Christ or Baldr, and such ambiguity may have been the artist’s intention (Kopár 2013: 98). Scholars have also noted the possible presence of Odin on cross fragments from Billingham and Kirkbymoorside, the latter depicting Odin hanging on Yggdrasil, the world tree of Norse mythology, but with his arms outstretched in a pose suggestive of crucifixion (Kopár 2013: 112, 120). That these pagan and Christian stories exist side-by-side on the same monuments, and are reflected in the same Old English and Old Norse texts, however uneasily, testifies to the affinity these myths would have had in the minds of many Anglo-Saxons, at least in the Viking-age.

Although it is clear a cult of Woden existed in some form in Anglo-Saxon England before the conversion to Christianity, there is little evidence for an Odinic cult comparable to the ones attested by the Old

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<sup>9</sup> For comparisons between Beowulf and Thor, see Dronke (1969: 313-316, 322).

Norse sources until the Viking age.<sup>10,11</sup> Nonetheless, versions of the myths of Odin, Baldr, and Hothr were in circulation well before the Viking Age, and a similar atmosphere of religious syncretism could have lingered for some time after the Anglo-Saxons' conversion (c. 600), during which they, like the Irish before them, undertook the "synchronisation of traditional myths" with biblical ones (Yorke 2015: 167). While the association of Herebeald and the hanged son with Odin, Baldr, and Christ proposed here might therefore lend support to arguments in favour of Viking-age composition, as Dronke notes, such syncretism could have also taken place at a much earlier date in the aftermath of conversion.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For the existence of a cult of Woden in Anglo-Saxon England, see Ryan (1963). Ryan cites Odin's appearance in metalwork, numerous place-names, the day of the week "Wednesday", and OE poetry, including here in *Beowulf's* speech. For a more skeptical view, see Meaney (1966). For more recent discussion, see Kopár (2013: 106-108): "An earlier, originally continental manifestation of the god ...was certainly known in the British Isles under the name *Woden* and venerated among the early Anglo-Saxons ...Woden seems to have enjoyed great popularity among the early Anglo-Saxons."

<sup>11</sup> The apposition of Christ, Odin, and Baldr in *Beowulf* proposed in this article may therefore have implications for the dating of the poem, providing further evidence for the resonance of the poem, or at least this particular passage, in the Anglo-Scandinavian period (Frank 1997). The possibility of Viking-Age composition, however, no longer seems likely on account of linguistic, metrical, and other factors (Fulk 1992; Neidorf & Pascual 2019).

<sup>12</sup> As Ursula Dronke reasons, "If heathen myths survived in Norse poetry at least two centuries after the conversion of Iceland before any of them were recorded in writing, might now some at least of the greater myths have survived also in Anglo-Saxon memory until the end of the eighth century, the latest date commonly considered likely for the composition of *Beowulf*?" (Dronke 1969: 303-304).

### 3. The Hanging of Christ in Old English Poetry

Readers today disassociate the concepts of crucifixion and death by hanging, but to the original audience of *Beowulf*, the two would have been synonymous. To early Anglo-Saxons unacquainted with the Roman method of execution, Christ was hanged on a tree. The word for “gallows” in Old English (*gealga*, *galga*)—used of the hanged son in line 2446a—nearly always occurs in Old English poetry in reference to the crucifixion of Christ, or one of his martyrs, demonstrated in lines 10, 40, and 146 of *The Dream of the Rood* (Swanson 1996: 93, 95, 100), lines 966, 1327, 1409 of *Andreas* (Clayton 2013: 248, 272, 276), lines 179, 480, 719 of *Elene* (Gradon 1996: 34, 44, 53), lines 22 and 40 of *Fates of the Apostles* (Brooks 1961: 56, 57), lines 310 and 482 of *Juliana* (Woolf 1955: 35, 43), line 86 of *Menologium* (Dobbie 1942: 51), line 28 of *Creed* (Dobbie 1942: 79) and lines 509 and 548 of *Christ and Satan* (Clayton 2013: 336, 338). Indeed, Christ’s description of his own crucifixion in *Christ and Satan* combines the gallows with a spear-wound:

Ic eow þingade  
þa me on beame beornas sticedon  
garum on galgum (507b-509a).

["I suffered for you when warriors stabbed me on the cross, with spears on the gallows."]

An even more striking conflation of a gallows-hanging and a crucifixion occurs in *Exeter Riddle 51*. The riddle challenges the reader to discover the identity of an enigmatic *beam*, a word which can mean "tree", "timber", or "beam of light", but whose specific identity, hinted at in the course of the riddle, is ambiguous: the *beam* is either the plain gallows of a criminal or the holy cross of a martyr. *Riddle 51* thereby plays on the close association of these two concepts in Anglo-Saxon thought:

Ic seah on bearwe beam hlifian  
tanum torhtne. Pæt treow wæs on wynne,  
wudu weaxende. Wæter hine ond eorpe  
feddan fægre, oppæt he frod dagum  
on oprum wearð aglac-hade,  
deope gedolgod, dumb in bendum,  
wripen ofer wunda, wonnum hyrstum  
foran gefrætwed.

Nu he fæcnum wæg  
þurh his heafdes mægen hilde-giest  
oprum rymeð; oft hy an yst strudon  
hord ætgædre; hræd wæs ond unlæt  
se æftera, gif se ærra fær  
genamnan in nearowe nepan moste. (Orchard 2021: 370)

["I saw a tree trunk tower in a grove,  
bright with branches. That tree was joyful,  
wood growing. Water and soil  
nourished it beautifully, until, experienced in days,  
it fell into a monstrous state,  
deeply injured, dumb in bonds,  
its wounds wrapped round, adorned in front  
with dark trappings.

Now for another  
 hostile battle-guest, it creates a path  
 through the power of its head; often in the tumult  
 they plundered hoards together; swift and unslack  
 the one who follows, if the one in front  
 was able to brave danger for a comrade in distress.”]  
 (Orchard 2021: 371)

The solution “cross” was first proposed by F. H. Whitman (1977), who noted many similar motifs between the *beam* of *Riddle 51* and Christ's cross as described in other Old English poems like *The Dream of the Rood*: a tree, once joyous in a grove, is tortured, wounded, adorned with ornaments, and then becomes an instrument for clearing a path to salvation—a spiritual battering-ram of sorts that can even harrow hell and raid its hoard for souls. Wilcox (1990), however, later argued that, although *Riddle 51* initially implies “cross” as its solution, the word *fæcnum* in line 8 (“deceit” or “wickedness”) suggests instead the gallows of a wrongdoer. More important to this discussion than determining the riddle's one “true” solution is to note the proximity between the notions of a cross and a gallows in the riddle's associative play. Indeed, in a recent edition of the Exeter riddles, Orchard solves *Riddle 51* as *gealga*: “gallows, cross” (2021: 426), holding both solutions in apposition. The suggestive ambiguity and appositive possibilities of *gealga*, on display in *Riddle 51*, could well have been familiar to the audience of *Beowulf*, especially since, as Fulk (1992: 408) notes, the Exeter riddles “seem close in date to *Beowulf*.”<sup>13</sup> Of the eighteen references to gallows in Old English poetry outside of *Beowulf*, only one allusion in lines 33-36 of the *The Fortunes of Mortals* bears no explicit connection to Christ or his saints:

Sum sceal on geapum galgan ridan  
 seomian æt swylte, oppæt sawl hord,  
 ban-cofa blodig abrocen weorþeð.  
 Þær him hrefn nimeþ heafod-syne (Bjork 2014: 58)

[One must ride the broad gallows, sway in death until the soul-holder, the bloody bone casket, becomes broken. There the raven plucks out the eyes.] (Bjork 2014: 59)

Many, however, have noted the Odinic echoes of the hanging, the raven, the loss of an eye, and, elsewhere in the text, the presence of a wolf and a hawk (Ryan 1963: 471; Swenson 1991: 127; Isaacs 1975: 363). It has been argued that *The Fortunes of Mortals* remains “a didactic Christian poem unified through a complex artistry” in which “the second and third sections, descriptions apparently pagan in nature depicting the whims of Fate, are subordinate to the fourth section’s primary Christian theme” (Dammers 1976). If it could be shown that the Odinic allusion to the gallows is not subordinate to, but rather serves the poem’s ultimate Christian theme by implying Christ’s sacrifice, then every single reference to gallows in Old English poetry, outside of *Beowulf*, would refer to Christ or one of his martyrs.

The association of the gallows with Christ and his saints is also ubiquitous in Old English prose. Of the roughly sixty-six references to gallows in the Old English corpus, at least fifty-three refer directly to Christ’s crucifixion, or that of Christ-like martyrs (Healey & Wilkin & Xiang 2009).<sup>14</sup> Although the word “gallows” is never used in the West Saxon Gospels, Christ’s crucifixion is often referred to as a hanging, using variant forms of the verbs *ahangian*, *hangian*, *ahon*.<sup>15</sup> The frequent use of the verb “hangian”, in particular, to describe Christ’s crucifixion has drawn the attention of lexicographers, who define “hangian” as “specifically of a person: to hang, be suspended on a gallows or cross as a form of execution (esp. of Christ’s crucifixion)”.<sup>16</sup> This Christological connection is salient since “hangian” is the same word used to describe the hanged son—“sunu hangað” (line 2447b)—in *Beowulf*’s speech.

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<sup>13</sup> Fulk (1992: 390) dates *Beowulf* early, no later than c. 725 if Mercian in origin, c. 825 if Northumbrian.

<sup>14</sup> I exclude from my count references to *galgmod*, which does not refer to a substantive gallows, but rather to the psychological state of being “gallows-minded”, i.e., “vengeful”.

<sup>15</sup> For example: Matthew 27:23, 27:22, 27:23, 27:26, 27:31, 27:35, 27:38, 27:44; Mark 15:13, 15:14, 15:20, 15:24, 15:25, 15:27, 15:32; Luke 23:21, 23:23, 23:33; John 19:6, 19:10, 19:15, 19:16, 19:18, 19:20, 19:32, 19:41 (Liuzza 1994).

<sup>16</sup> Cameron, A. & A. C. Amos & A. Healey *et al.* eds. 2018 *Dictionary of Old English: A to I* online. Toronto, Dictionary of Old English Project: s.v. “hangian 1b”.

#### 4. Christological Allusions in *Beowulf*

While this association in Old English prose and verse between the gallows, hanging, and Christ is suggestive, it is insufficient to demonstrate that Beowulf's parable of the hanged son is a Christological allusion. Due to the milieu in which Old English literature was copied, many Old English words only occur in Christian context. Further support for a Christological reading of this passage, however, can be found in the moments surrounding Beowulf's speech. Klaeber (1950: 212) detects in Beowulf's mental state before his remarkable address—"him was geomor sefa,/ wæfre ond wælfus" (lines 2419b-2420a) [he was sad at heart, wavering and slaughter-ready]—an echo of Christ's agony in the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:33).<sup>17</sup>

Many critics have objected, of course, that it is somewhat fanciful to figuratively read the pagan Beowulf as Christ (or as a Christ-like figure).<sup>18</sup> Certainly I do not mean to suggest that Beowulf is a Christ-figure, any more than is the hanged son. I would argue, rather, that the whole point of hinting at Christ's story, however obliquely, by means of the story of the hanged son, and Beowulf's final acts, is to emphasize the *absence* of Christ to the pagans in the poem. *Beowulf* is, after all, a poem populated by pagans who are seemingly unaware of the Christian overtones to their words and actions, overtones that the Christian poet uses to lend dignity, in the ears of his audience, to otherwise damnable pagans, while also underscoring their tragic ignorance.

As Robinson comments, the characters "are circumscribed by the pagan world in which they live and when at times their speeches seem to have a Christian resonance, the audience is supposed to recognize that these are but coincidences of similar elements in two alien cultures,

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<sup>17</sup> The connection seems to be accepted by the editors of *Klaeber's Beowulf*, 4th Edition (2008: 244) as well as by Hoops (1932: 276) and Rauer (2000: 37, 77-78). See also Orchard (2003: 148).

<sup>18</sup> As Klaeber (1950: cxx-cxxi) notes: "Now it would clearly be going too far to say that the author set out with the deliberate purpose of writing an allegorical poem with Christ himself as its true hero. But it is not deemed a reckless supposition that in recounting the life and portraying the character of the exemplary leader, he was almost inevitably reminded of the person of the Savior, the self-sacrificing King, the prototype of supreme perfection."

coincidences which inevitably give dignity to the old heroes as viewed by Christian eyes but which betray no Christian revelation in heathen minds" (Robinson 1985: 32-33). For instance, when King Hrothgar praises Beowulf's mother in terms that recall the praise of the Virgin Mary in Luke 11:27 (lines 942-946), or when he unwittingly echoes scripture in his "sermon" to Beowulf (lines 1700-1784), the Christian audience "would be regretfully aware that he was musing on matters which were ultimately beyond his understanding, since he lacks the theological framework and vocabulary necessary for dealing with them definitively, and, like other pagans, he stands beyond the reach of Christ's redemption" (Robinson 1985: 33).

When Hrothgar beholds the runes on the giants' sword-hilt depicting the flood of Genesis (lines 1687-1690), he has no idea what they mean, but the audience does. He and other characters can only conceptualize the monsters of the poem in terms of pagan demonology; the audience, meanwhile, is aware of Grendel's biblical pedigree, traced back to Cain (line 107). When Beowulf, submerged in Grendel's mere, is presumed dead at the ninth hour before arising again, alive (line 1600), only the audience can be aware of the irony that Christ died at the ninth hour to rise again. Even the dragon fight operates on this double perspective: "It is on one level of perception like the dragon that Sigemund slew; on another it has those connotations of Satanic evil with which Bible and commentary had long invested it" (Robinson 1985: 32). Indeed, Christine Rauer (2000) has shown how the dragon fight in *Beowulf* more closely resembles the dragon fights recounted in Christian hagiography than those in pagan tales. The Christian significance is always there, throughout *Beowulf*: a contrapuntal melody the characters cannot hear, but the reader can. Alternatively, these and other Christian allusions in *Beowulf* may be unconscious reflexes of the poet's background rather than intentional references to biblical tales.

None of this Christian counterpoint, however, amounts to allegory. It is important to the poet's vision that the characters, and their world, are thoroughly pagan. They live, tragically, in a society that has not yet learned of the New Dispensation. In their world, therefore, as Hannah Bailey notes, "types generate types, but they are never resolved by anti-types. History repeats itself but is not redeemed or fulfilled—at least not within the limits of the characters' knowledge, which is bounded by their experience and cultural contexts" (Bailey 2017: 286).<sup>19</sup> Thus, Beowulf's death, however evocative of Christ's, only exposes his kingdom to perdition. In the same way, the *gomel ceorl* cannot make the death of his hanged son a meaningful sacrifice: unlike Christ, there can be no repair, no redemption, no resurrection.

When Wiglaf sprinkles the dying Beowulf with water (lines 2720-2724), a Christian audience might recall the rite of baptism, but, as Daniel Anlezark (2006: 353) suggests, it is ultimately futile: "he does not and cannot baptize him." These are all failures made more pathetic by the characters' ironic ignorance of their similarity to Christian acts. A Christian audience, hearing such a tale about characters who, in their ignorance of God, resemble their own pagan ancestors, might be moved to profound pity (Bailey 2017: 284). Thus, in the image of a hanged son on the gallows, before Beowulf's own death, the poem's audience could hold in apposition the frail succession of earthly kingdoms, in which an heir may futilely perish, with the security of Christ's succession: Christ is the son who can be hanged on the gallows and rise again, stronger than ever.

It may be objected that the hanged son of Beowulf's speech cannot possibly contain such significance because Beowulf does not linger upon the hanged son, but instead elaborates at some length upon the grief of the father, the *gomel ceorl*. First of all, a focus on the father does not mean the son has no significance. Consider the story of Abraham and Isaac as told in Genesis 22: 1-18. The focus of the story is almost entirely on Abraham, on his obedience to God, and his reward for that obedience, yet this does not prevent Christians from creating a typology where Isaac's passive, unsung role suggests a type of Christ.

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<sup>19</sup> This concept of "unfulfilled typology", applied to *Beowulf* in which types that foreshadow the culmination of salvation history are not resolved by anti-types, finds support among a number of scholars (Anlezark 2006: 350; Hodges 2004; Bailey 2017; Leneghan 2020: 30, 36).

Furthermore, even in Beowulf's elaboration of the father's grief, the poet continues to deploy images that are oddly evocative of the myth of the Christ-like Baldr. For example, Richard North has argued that the image of "ridend swefað, hæleð in hoðman" [the riders sleep, the warriors in darkness] in lines 2457-58, used to embellish the emptiness of the hall after the hanged son's death, "not only ... capture[s] the story of Baldr and other dead, closely followed by Hermodhr, riding through *dokkva dala ok djupa* ('dark and deep valleys') towards Hel in *Gylfaginning*" but it also shows the poet leaving "his audience with the thought of the destination of all subterranean horsemen who had lived without Christ" (North 2006: 201-202).

If thoughts of the spear-wounded Baldr can persist this far afield into a section ostensibly devoted only to the grief of the *gomel ceorl*, why may thoughts of Baldr's counterpart, the hanged son, not be far behind? In short, to insist that only one half of Beowulf's analogy matters, and that Beowulf is only speaking about the suffering of three old men (Beowulf/Hrethel/the *gomel ceorl*) neglects the other half of his analogy, in which the hanged son plays a crucial role, apposed with the spear-wounded death of Herebeald and, ultimately, the imminent death of Beowulf himself.

## 5. Conclusion

In a 1984 article, Laurence N. de Looze showed that Beowulf's story of the old man and the hanged son occurs at the center of a chiasmic structure in the poem's second half, and is therefore no mere digression or aside, but rather nested at the core of all other stories—the dragon fight, the Swedish-Geatish wars, and Beowulf's childhood. It is the heart of the poem's latter half. While de Looze provides a compelling psychological explanation for this central structure, this article proposes a concomitant mythological explanation: the story of the hanged son contains a cue of the core Christian story—an intimation of Christ's sacrifice, albeit poignantly unfulfilled. The admittedly submerged—and perhaps even subconscious—gesture toward Christ is a gesture towards irony, rather than allegory, and would occur naturally to a typologically sensitive Christian, to whom all of history, even that of his pagan ancestors, would contain types

imperfectly prefiguring Christ. The echoes of Odin and Baldr detected in the passage, far from precluding this Christian allusion, are actually syncretic with it, as many others have noted literary and material links between Odin, Baldr, and Christ in Anglo-Scandinavian culture. The Old English verbal association between the gallows, hanging, and Christ's passion, and a clear arc of Christological allusions in the surrounding passages, further corroborates the hanged son as a hitherto unnoticed Christological reference. This reference can be cited, as one among many, to counter scholars who continue to doubt the essential Christianity of *Beowulf*.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, I hope the identification of interwound allusions to Christ, Odin, and Baldr in *Beowulf* will further vindicate the readings of scholars like J. R. R. Tolkien and Fred C. Robinson, who have held the poem's Christian and pagan parts in measured apposition, never sacrificing one upon the altar of the other.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Even in 1987, Harold Bloom wrote, "If *Beowulf* is to be considered a Christian poem, we must ask, can there be Christianity without the figure of Jesus Christ, and without the presence of the New Testament?" Bloom went on to cite E. Talbot Donaldson: "There is no reference to the New Testament—to Christ and His Sacrifice which are the real bases of Christianity in any intelligible sense of the term."

<sup>21</sup> Even Robinson, however, says the *Beowulf* poet "never alludes to the Crucifixion" (Robinson 1985: 40).

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