

When beowulf met the bible

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



Despite origins in a pagan culture, Beowulf features numerous Judeo-Christian images. Beowulf was originally composed by various scop and bards, who shared the stories of the epic hero Beowulf as a didactic tool to spread ideals such as honoring courage and valuing loyalty. Although Beowulf was handed down from bard to bard orally, it was eventually set down by a Christian monk (Leeming 19). The written version featured slight alterations to the epic poem in order to include more allusions to the Old and New Testaments. The changes to Beowulf allowed it to circulate Christian values in addition to traditional Anglo-Saxon values. Anglo-Saxon monks inserted Christian imagery into the epic poem Beowulf to disseminate their religion across England.

The opening lines of Beowulf are constructed to evoke images relating to Genesis. The poem alludes to "the ancient beginnings of us all, recalling/The Almighty making the earth" - in essence the creation of the earth (ll. 6-7). The inclusion of this imagery by the monk is primarily to spread the message of creation - that God created everything, a foundational teaching in Judeo-Christian tradition. Canto 1 also contains numerous references to light and illumination, representative of both the creation of the universe and the dichotomy of heaven and hell. The images commonly associated with divine creation were added by monks to subtly educate the populace on the Christian beliefs.

Grendel is introduced with a direct allusion to the Bible, described as a descendant of Cain. Cain is the original murderer, and his sin is continually carried out by his progeny as well. Grendel not only evokes the imagery of sin, but also of the devil. He is described as making his home on earth a hell,

as well as possessing “ hell-forged hands” - a kenning that exemplifies his sinful power (l. 64). Beowulf’s eventual victory over Grendel can be viewed as a metaphorical victory over sin. Monks included demonic and biblical descriptions of Grendel to highlight the downfall of sin and the importance of its defeat.

Beowulf’s battle with Grendel is not only a religious metaphor but also a direct biblical allusion. Beowulf’s decision to wrestle Grendel barehanded evokes the story of Jacob and the angel. For defeating the angel, Jacob earns a literal name for himself, Israel. For defeating Grendel, Beowulf makes a figurative name for himself as he establishes his reputation as a “ warrior worth[y] to rule over men” and set the path to his ultimate kingship (l. 542). The parallels between the two battles also lies within their timeframe - both happen before the break of day. The monks alluded to Jacob’s struggle with the angel to emphasize the similarities between the older pagan traditions and the newer Christian traditions.

The events leading up to Beowulf’s confrontation with Grendel also have a direct biblical allusion, in this instance the Last Supper. Upon being accepted as the savior of the Danes, Beowulf is invited to “ a banquet in [his] honor” - an event that can be viewed as a communion (l. 223). The meal features a large cup that is passed around the table and drunk by all, similar to the Holy Chalice passed around at Jesus’ last meal. Additionally, Beowulf asks his men to stay awake with him but they all fall asleep after the large banquet, just as the disciples dozed instead of serving as a lookout for Jesus when he was

to be taken. Again, the monks include these direct references to the Bible to relate the Christian culture to the Anglo-Saxons.

Beowulf is one of the many tools utilized by Christian monks to assimilate their religion into Anglo-Saxon culture. As Thomas Foster notes, “ Beowulf is largely about the coming of Christianity into the old paganism of northern Germanic society” - the significance of the poem is not only its literary nature, but the role it had in spreading Christianity throughout the British island (Foster 46). The added Christian images serve largely the same purpose as the original poem, as a tool to educate the people about values and traditions. The biblical allusions only serve to reinforce the didactic nature of the epic. The Christian monks employed the addition of religious images to the pagan epic poem Beowulf in order to spread a religious message.