

CAIN'S KIN AND ABEL'S BLOOD: *BEOWULF* 1361-4

By Michael D.J. Bintley

Amongst the various texts which are thought to have influenced the depiction of Grendel's mere in *Beowulf*, the possibility has not yet been considered that the poet also drew upon a tradition associated with Grendel's descent from Cain, also to be found in the composite *Genesis* poem of the Junius manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Junius 11, SC 5123), and Aldhelm's *Carmen de virginitate*. This connection only becomes apparent upon closer examination of the woodland grove overhanging the refuge in Grendel's fens. Of the many trees that appear in Old English literature, few can be as sinister as these. These trees contribute memorably to Hrothgar's description of the mere:

Nis þæt feor heonon
milgearnas þæt se mere standeð;
ofer þæm hongiað hrinde bearwas,
wudu wyrtum fæst wæter oferhelmað.

It is not far hence in a measure of miles that the mere stands; over it hang frosty trees, a wood fast in its roots overshadows the water. (*Beowulf* 1361-4)¹

These trees appear once again in the description of the journey to the mere following the attack by Grendel's mother:

Ofereode þa æþelinga bearn
steap stanhliðo, stige nearwe,
enge anpaðas, uncuð gelad,
neowle næssas, nicorhusa fela;
he feara sum beforan gengde
wisra monna wong sceawian,
oþ þæt he færinga fyrgebeamas
ofer harne stan helonian funde
wynleasne wudu; wæter under stod
dreorig on gedrefed.

Then went those sons of nobles over steep and stony slopes, thin ascending paths, narrow single tracks, unknown ways, precipitous cliffs, many dwellings of water-monsters. He, Beowulf, went on before with a few wise companions to scout out the ground: until that he suddenly found mountain trees hanging over the grey stone - a joyless wood; the water stood beneath, bloody and turbulent. (*Beowulf* 1408-17)

It is well known that Richard Morris was the first to note that the description of the mere is strikingly similar to Saint Paul's vision of Hell in Blickling Homily XVI.² In his consideration of a number of details shared between the two, Wright concludes that both authors were drawing upon a 'common source' that was 'not a Latin but a vernacular version of the *Visio*' (Wright

¹ All references to *Beowulf* from R.D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, eds., *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 4th edn.

² Richard Morris, ed., *The Blickling Homilies of the Tenth Century*, Early English Text Society, o.s., 58, 63, 73 (London: The Early English Text Society, 1874-80), pp. vi-vii.

1993, 133). Orchard and Wright have both acknowledged Fry's suggestion that the description of the mere belongs to a 'vernacular poetic type-scene' which he called the 'Cliff of Death', that is also to be found in *Judith* (111-21) and *Christ and Satan* (24-32, 89-105, 132-360) (Orchard 1985, 41; Wright 1993, 133; Fry 1987, 215). Orchard notes a further parallel in the *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* (also housed within the *Beowulf* manuscript), where at a great river in the wilderness Alexander loses a number of men to some rather hungry hippos, and concludes that Hrothgar's description of the monster-mere 'may represent a significant blend of imported Latin and native Germanic elements, the whole strongly influenced by the Christian homiletic tradition' (Orchard 1985, 45-6).

In the case of *Beowulf*, I would like to suggest that the poet, in his description of the trees overhanging the mere, may also have drawn upon a tradition associated with Grendel's descent from Cain. Grendel inhabits his lair in the fens, *fenbop* ('fen-refuge', 764) and *fenfreodo* ('fen-sanctuary', 851), because of the sins of his forefather, a point made plain early in the poem (102-14). This connection may be of some importance because of a tradition found in *Genesis A*, a work long thought to have been known to the *Beowulf* poet. At the moment of Abel's death, his life-blood is swallowed up by the earth on which it falls:

...of ðam twige siððan
ludon laðwende leng swa swiðor
reðe wæstmē. Ræhton wide
geond werpeoda wrohtes telgan,
grinon hearmtanas hearde and sare
drihta bearnum, - doð gieta swa -
of þam brad blado bealwa gehwilces
sprytan ongunnon.

...from that seed there afterwards grew cruel fruit, and the longer it did the more violently. Those reached out widely amongst the nations of men to entrap them cruelly, those harmful tendrils ensnared the sons of the Lord hard and sorely - as yet they still do - and from them widely fruits of every sort of evil began to sprout. (*Genesis A* 988-93)³

Wright notes a similar tradition in Aldhelm's *Carmen de virginitate*, a work which he suggests may have 'served as a model' for this description in both *Genesis A* and *Maxims I* (Wright 1996, 16). In the composite Junius *Genesis*, however, unlike the *Carmen de virginitate* and *Maxims I*, these branches of sin seem to be offshoots from the evil tree of Eden, which in *Genesis B* is described as *eallenga sweart, dim and þystre; þæt wæs deaðes beam, se bæc bitres fela* ('entirely black, veiled and dark; that was the tree of death, that bore many bitternesses' 477-9). Eve, persuaded to eat from the tree in *Genesis B* by the Tempter, bears one of the fruits of the tree to Adam *on handum* ('in her hands' 636), whilst another *hire at beortan lag [...] deaðbeames ofet* ('lay at her heart [...] the produce of the tree of death' 636-8). Lying dormant in Eve, this seed of evil is passed down to her offspring, awaiting the moment in which he will water it with the blood of his brother Abel. The fruit - endless bloodshed - will then spring forth to ensnare the world of men.

To move further, then, it seems plausible that the *Beowulf* poet, whether or not he knew Aldhelm's *Carmen de virginitate* or the *Genesis A* and *Genesis B* poems, may have been aware of similar traditions surrounding Cain and the blood of Abel. It is fitting that his Mere, home to Cain's offspring and awash with human blood, should be overhung with such a *wynleas* wood as

³ All references to *Genesis* from George Philip Krapp, Ed., *The Junius Manuscript*, The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, 1.

this; a stark reminder, frozen in time, of the mortal sins engendered by Grendel's ancient ancestor, and their continuing grasp upon the world of men.

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Department of English Language & Literature

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