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# Analysis of the Adaptation of Christian Faith As Depicted In Beowulf

## Converting to Christianity in Beowulf

The old English poem Beowulf was written in the late first millennium. During this time period, the majority of Anglo - Saxons were Christians, but they had not been for very long. Prior to the conversion of Christianity, they had been pagans. Many Anglo - Saxons still held on to their pagan beliefs, and simply tried to reconcile these beliefs with Christianity. This same attitude is apparent in Beowulf. We frequently see themes like fate and fame, and old rituals of worship, which are strong pagan beliefs that were considered essential, yet we also see references to God that try to explain why these concepts are compatible with a Christian life. Beowulf contains several biblical references, from names and events to fundamental Christian beliefs. These allusions, direct mentions, and Christian aspects seen throughout the poem alongside old pagan ideas imply that Beowulf was written as a story to eventually convert pagans to the Christian lifestyle and way of thought.

The creature Grendel, the first of the poem's three antagonists, is the most obvious mention in relation to biblical figures and Christian ideals. In the poem Beowulf, a description of the monster's origins has evident reference to the aforementioned. "Grendel was the name of this grim demon haunting the marches, marauding round the heath and the desolate fens; he had dealt for a time in misery among the banished monsters, Cain's clan, whom the Creator had outlawed and condemned as outcasts." Cain is the son of Adam of Eve, the first people on the earth as told in the Christian creation story. Cain was jealous of his brother Abel, and killed him, making Cain said to be the origin of evil in many versions of the narrative. When God discovered this act, Cain was then cursed. The common belief is that the descendants of Cain are monsters, giants, and the "ill-favored creatures" referred to in many other popular poems among Beowulf. In this quote describing the likeness of Grendel, the "Creator" is capitalized, inferring that this means the monotheistic God.

Another specific example in this early section, regarding Grendel, of the mixing of pagan and Christian beliefs is when Grendel first comes to attack Heorot. The poem tells of how the people became so frightened that they turned to any source of help that they could find, including reverting back to old ways and praying to the idols instead of only serving the "Creator". The end of this section, before "Here Comes the Hero", rebukes this act. "That was their way, their heathenish hope: deep in their hearts they remembered hell. " This passage ends with the importance of worshipping "the Almighty Judge," remembering "the Lord God," and finding "friendship in the Father's embrace." This again points to the thought that Beowulf was laced with strong Christian archetypes to convert Anglo - Saxons away from pagan traditions.

The tale of the great flood is described in many different stories and religions, but in Beowulf, it's telling is preceded and followed by biblical terminology and continued prayer to the single Christian God, again tying that event to Christianity instead of pagan beliefs. This next section puts together the pagan's trust in their traditional king, who uses the story of the flood to further incorporate the Christian stories in the people of his kingdom. Historical context shows, "Christianization involved the conversion of a king rather than the people themselves. It is in

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Beowulf, composed not more than approximately 50 years after the conversion of the Anglo - Saxons, that we are able to find a vivid image of a society still struggling to establish their identity within a new belief structure." (Moloney 2). The king Hrothgar, in the section entitled "Another Celebration at Heorot" comments on the hilt of the sword Beowulf presents to him after his defeat of Grendel's mother. Hrothgar describes the engravings on the hilt of the sword as showing the flood destroying the giants. He continues to describe the "Almighty" making the waters rise, referencing the biblical flood, to punish them in "the deluge for retribution." All of the phrases and worship said by the king, along with the historical understanding of why it was included, is another strong factor in proving that Beowulf intended to help ease pagans into the Christian mindset.

The most influential pagan belief confronted in Beowulf is the notion that immortality is only guaranteed through fate, fame, and legacy. Fate is mentioned before Beowulf goes courageously into battle, such as saying that the outcome will be determined by fate, or just after a battle, that the fates determined for them to win. Fame is mentioned as a reward for the bravery that was shown, or will be shown, in battle. When Beowulf heroically wins a fight, the concepts of fate and the hand of God are balanced by mentioning both as being the reasons for the victory. The idea of fate is converted to Christian inspiration, rather than pagan's thoughts of immortality, by adding that the battle was won through "the power of the Lord", or that "God will reward as He has in times past, and that you must be in agreement with the will of the Lord". In these ways, the pagan people can still hold on to their old beliefs in fate while understanding the Christian concept of "God's hand" in their lives. Additionally, in the article titled Christian Elements in "Further Celebrations at Heorot", the author emphasizes the relationship the king had with Christianity, and retells Hrothgar's warning to his people and Beowulf concerning their concept of immortality. "... Hrothgar tells Beowulf that earthly success, given by God, must be handled with humility and a sense of sharing or the earthly king will bring on his own doom: that man survives only through the protection of God, that all earthly gifts flow from God, and that the proper bearing of man is to be humble and unselfish." The ideals in this section and words from Hrothgar are perhaps the most influential, as it confronts not only the pagan's methods of worship, but their afterlife, traditions, and entire belief system.

Written during a time of religious conversion and discovery, the poem Beowulf confronts a time in history when beliefs were questioned, influenced, and changed to fit the mindset of the new system. Amidst the pagan setting of the story, there are many references to the Bible, such as Cain and the flood, and there are many examples in Beowulf of pagan beliefs, such as fate and fame, that are then explained by trusting in God and His rewards. This story of a traditional pagan hero, reinforced by the Christian figures and ideals, was presented to these people who held on to their old religion and gods as a method of easing the conversion that was forced upon them.