Volume 7: 2014-15 ISSN: 2041-6776

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How sympathetic is the portrayal of Satan in the Old English poem *Genesis B*?

The story of the fall of man from the Garden of Eden is one which has been told throughout history. It is a story which has rationalised, explained and shaped our ideas of perfection and imperfection.[1] Yet there is huge diversity in the accounts of the fall, and the portrayals of the characters involved. The Old English poem known as *Genesis B* describes the fall of Satan and his followers, his plan for revenge upon God, and his sending a messenger to bring about the fall of Adam and Eve.[2] It comprises lines 235 to 851 of the Anglo Saxon *Genesis*, found in the Junius Manuscript, and is agreed by scholars to constitute a different poem.[3] This essay will explore the portrayal of Satan in *Genesis B* to argue that, despite his sins, he is in fact presented as a surprisingly sympathetic and heroic character.

Naturally, some aspects of the poem clearly condemn Satan's disobedience to God. The poem constructs a heroic world in which God is the noble lord and his angels the loyal retainers. God is shown to be a generous, gift giving lord who favours Satan over the other angels. God made him '*swa swiðne geworhtne / swa mihtigne on his modgeþohte*' (so strong and so powerful in his intellect; ll.252-3), '*swa hwitne'* (so dazzling; l.254) and '*swa wynlic*' (so splendid; l.255) that Satan '*gelic wæs he þam leohtum steorrum*' (he was like the bright stars; l.256). The generosity of God is clear. Doane suggests that 'Gifts automatically establish obligations and distinguish levels in a hierarchy', in such a way that those who

1 Paul Morris, 'Images of Eden', in *A Walk in the Garden: Biblical, Iconographical and Literary Images of Eden*, eds Paul Morris and Deborah Sawyer (London: A&C Black, 1992), p.21.

2 ' Genesis B' in *The Saxon Genesis,* ed. A. N. Doane (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991). All quotes in Old English will be taken from this edition and referenced by line numbers within the essay. All translations will be my own.

3 Peter J. Lucas, 'Some Aspects of "Genesis B" as Old English Verse', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature 88C* (1988): 143.

receive greater gifts are tied to greater obligations.[4] Therefore as Satan receives God's highest favour, he should therefore be the most loyal follower. This is established when the poet explains that, '*lof sceolde he drihtnes wyrecean / dyran sceolde he his dreamas on heofonum and sceolde his drihtne þancian*' (he should have given praise to the Lord, he should have held dear his joys in the heavens and he should have thanked his Lord; ll.256-7). The repetition of the phrase '*sceolde he*' reiterates the behaviour that Satan should naturally have exhibited. Yet Satan does not live up to this expectation. His fault is his pride; he wishes to be equal, if not superior, to God. However, his attempts to draw parallels with himself and God serve only to underline that his cause is absolutely flawed. The poet observes that Satan '*þohte þurh his anes cræft / hu he him strenglicran stol geworhte / heahran on heofonum'* (he thought how, through his own ability, he could create for himself a more powerful throne, more exulted in the heavens; ll.272-4) and Satan states, '*ic mæg wesan god swa he*' (I can be a god as well as he; l.283). The poem is filled with Satan's self-referential '*ic*' which highlights his arrogance and his presumption.[5] More significantly, Satan's goal to be equal to God is 'falseness and absurdity'.[6] It is an impossibility that he achieve equal status, so his repeated references to his ambition suggest he is incredibly ignorant of the heavenly hierarchy.

In refusing to play his role within the heroic structure, Satan becomes a threat to society. Neville argues that 'Human status [in a heroic world] is conferred on the basis of conformance to social rules'.[7] Satan breaks social rules by refusing to give the appropriate loyalty and homage to his lord – '*ne wille ic leng his geongra wurþan*' (no longer will I be his subordinate; l.291). Thus, in the eyes of the heroic

4 A. N. Doane, ed. *The Saxon Genesis* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p.118.

5 Brian Murdoch, *The Medieval Popular Bible: Expansions of Genesis in the Middle Ages* (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2003), p.29.

6 R. E. Woolf, 'The Devil in Old English poetry', *The Review of English Studies* 13.iv (January 1953): p.7.

7 Jennifer Neville, 'Monsters and Criminals: Defining Humanity in Old English Poetry' in *Monsters and the Monstrous in Medieval Northwest Europe*, eds. K. E. Olsen and L. A. Houwen (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), p.117.

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culture, he becomes monstrous. We can also see this idea explored in *Beowulf*, when Grendel rejects the society of Hrothgar's hall and chooses instead to attack it; this defiance of the social structure is, the poem suggests, what makes him a monster in the eyes of the Danes.[8] With this in mind, Satan's rebellion is equally as terrifying within the heroic culture and therefore clearly defines Satan as an evil monster. Furthermore, if viewed in this light, Satan's fall is the only way to restore and preserve social order and thus entirely necessary and justified.

The distance between Satan and God after the fall of the angels is highlighted, emphasising Satan's sinfulness. He undergoes a transformational process, moving farther away from God's holiness. For example, it is written that '*heo ealle forsceop / drihten to deofulm*' (the Lord transformed them all into devils; ll.308-9) and '*cwæð se hehsta hatan sceolde / satan siððan*' (the highest one said he should ever after be called Satan; ll.344-5). Although *Genesis B* does not mention Satan's name before his fall, it was generally accepted that 'Lucifer' meaning 'light-bearer' was the name of the angel before he was exiled from heaven.[9] To give him a new name which means 'adversary' highlights the fall from God's grace, as he loses his divine identity. Furthermore, after the fall Satan is referred to as '*cyning*' (king; l.338) instead of '*engla*' (angel; l.338). Doane suggests that this change of language 'relocates him in the fallen world of war and strife' and 'removes him from the language of the Church and freedom to the language of the Synagogue and the law'.[10] Without a doubt, the new vocabulary establishes that Satan has lost the sanctity and favour of heaven. This is reinforced by the fact that before Satan speaks, the poem recounts the events that led him

8 'Beowulf', in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry,* trans. and ed. S. A. J. Bradley (London: Orion Publishing Group, 2000), pp.408-494.
9 Frank S. Kastor, 'The Satanic Pattern' in *Satan,* ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), p.58.
10 Doane, *The Saxon Genesis*, p.130.

into hell: '*þa spræc se ofermoda cyning þe ær wæs engla scynost…*' (then spoke the presumptuous king who had once been the most radiant…; l.338). The effect here is that Satan's loss of heaven is put before his own opinion, and this emphasises his spiritual distance from God.[11]

Satan is indicated to have orchestrated the fall of man, which crucially reveals his true evil nature. He does not feature at all in the biblical account of Genesis, but *Genesis B* portrays him as the sole organiser, holding a council of devils and sending a messenger to do his evil deeds.[12] He asks his followers, '*gif hit eower ænig mæge / gewenden mid wihte þæt hie word godes / lare forlæten sona hie him þe laðran beoð*' (if any one of you can somehow bring it about that they [Adam and Eve] abandon the words and teachings of God they will straightaway become hateful to him; ll.427-9). The very fact that Satan is depicted as the ruler of a diabolical council who asks for a volunteer to destroy mankind reveals the full weight of his evil nature, and suggests that the reader is supposed to despise him.

However, the poem does conjure sympathy for Satan and his plight. Firstly, the descriptions of Satan before his fall are repeated throughout the poem and serve to construct an image of him which is angelic and prelapsarian. His brightness is referenced throughout the poem: '*his lic wære leoht and scene*' (his body was radiant and shining; l.265); '*engla scynost*' (brightest angel; l.338); '*hwit on heofne*' (bright in heaven; l.350). Such repetition of his qualities before the fall mean the reader cannot help but associate these with him even while he is in hell. As Belanoff writes, 'We are reminded so often of a trait he does *not* have that the trait perversely adheres to our image of him'.[13] This means, of course, that it is

11 For a more detailed account of Satan's lack of heaven, see Janet S. Ericksen, 'Lands of Unlikeness in "Genesis B"', *Studies in Philology* 93.i (Winter 1996): 8.

12 *The Bible* NSRV (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), Genesis 3.

13 Pat Belanoff, 'The Fall(?) of the Old English Female Poetic Image', *PMLA* 104.v (October 1989): 825.

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difficult to remember Satan's intrinsic evil when his angelic qualities are so repeated.

The descriptions of hell thus create sympathy for Satan. The language is specific, revealing the cruel torment that Satan and his followers exist in, and it naturally contrasts to the pleasures of heaven. It is written that '*symble fyr oðde gar / sum heard gewrinc habban sceoldon*' (fire or cold, they constantly had to endure some harsh torment; ll.316-7). Additionally, the poem writes, '*licgað me ymbe irenbenda / rideð racentan sal*' (iron bonds lie around me, a halter of chains swings; ll.371-2). These descriptions indicate his harsh penalty, and if the reader views him as angelic rather than demonic, it is easy to feel sympathy for his situation. Satan also compares hell with heaven, saying, '*is þæs ænga styde ungelic swiðe / þam oðrum þe we ær cuðon / hean on heofonrice*' (this confining place is very unlike that other place which we knew before, high in the heavenly kingdom; ll.355-7). The contrast emphasises what Satan has lost, and significantly this section is in his own words which means that his opinion is foregrounded. Ericksen argues, 'Because the narrative suddenly restricts information to no more of heaven than what Satan himself sees, the sense of loss is all the more palpable'.[14] Specifically, because it is Satan's voice which we hear, not God's, it is impossible not to feel pity for his unending torment.

Scholars have seen *Genesis B* as devoutly Christian but following a tradition of Germanic verse.[15] As previously discussed, God is indeed presented as a heroic lord and Satan a rebellious monster. Yet in some respects, Satan himself is also a heroic lord who is generous and rewarding. He asks for a volunteer to leave hell,

14 Ericksen, 'Lands of Unlikeness in "Genesis B"', p.8.

15 Alain Renoir, 'Eve's IQ Rating: Two Sexist Views of Genesis B' in *New Readings on Women in Old English Literature*, eds. Helen Damico and Alexandra Hennessy Olsen (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990), p.268.

saying, '*gif ic ænegum þegne þeodenmadmas / geara forgeafe þenden we on þan godan rice / gesælige sæton and hæfdon ure setla geweald / þonne he me na on leofran tid leanum ne meahte / mine gife gyldan*' (if of old I bestowed princely treasures on any follower while we were happily situated in that pleasant realm and had control of our thrones, then never at a more welcome time might he repay me for my favour; ll.409-13). The use of the past tense '*forgeafe*' here reveals that Satan was a gift-giving lord in heaven; this suggests that he will continue to behave as such in hell. This is proven when he promises, '*se þe þæt gelæsteð him bið lean gearo / æfter to alder þæs we her inne magon / on þyssum fyre forð fremena gewinnan*' (the one who fulfils that will ever be at the complete reward of such advantages as we within this fire are able to achieve; ll.435-437). His generosity adheres to the principles of the heroic structure as found, for example, in *Beowulf*; Hrothgar gives generously to Beowulf in return for Beowulf's slaying of Grendel – 'Then the warlike son of Healfdene gave Beowulf a gilded banner as a reward for victory, an ornate battle-standard, and a helmet and mailcoat'.[16] Clearly, Satan's generosity is no different to that of Hrothgar's, and reflects his status as a noble and gift-giving lord.

Additionally, the loyalty of Satan's men is emphasised; when compared with other heroic literature, this reinforces the idea that Satan is the hero of the poem, not the monster. Satan comments on the loyalty of his followers, saying, '*bigstandað me strange geneatas þa ne willað me æt þam striðe geswican / hæleþas heardmode*' (strong comrades stand by me who will not fail me in the fight, heroes hard in spirit; ll.284-5). The praise of loyal retainers is echoed in poems such as *The Battle of Finnsburh* in which the narrator observes, 'Never have I heard of sixty victory warriors in a battle between men behaving more nobly and more worthily, and never of youths better repaying shining mead than his young

16 'Beowulf' in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry,* ll.1020-2.

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retainers paid Hnæf'.[17] Similarly in the *Battle of Maldon*, Byrthnoth's men are prepared to die to avenge their lord – 'At that point they all desired one of two things – to render up their life or to avenge the man they had loved'.[18] This focus on the loyalty of Satan's retainers suggests that he is a noble and deserving lord, and therefore it seems that the poem is not necessarily as devoutly Christian as it may first appear because it presents Satan as an esteemed and respected ruler.

It is an accomplice, not Satan himself, who tempts Adam and Eve, and this distances Satan from the deed. The biblical version of Genesis does not feature Satan at all, let alone a messenger sent on his behalf.[19] Although Satan's culpability is indicated in *Genesis B*, the poem allows Satan some leeway; he may have sent the messenger, but he did not participate directly in the temptation. The poem describes how '*angan hine þa gyrwan godes andsaca / fus on frætwum, hæfde fæcne hyge*' (then an adversary of God began to get ready, eager in his armour, he had a deceiving ambition; ll.442-3). This implies that the messenger acted under his own free will and was not dictated to by Satan. It has been argued that in the story of the fall, Satan spoke through the serpent, 'using that creature as a kind of ventriloquist's puppet', but this is not what happens in the poem.[20] It is made very clear that Satan did not enter the Garden and therefore had no direct part to play in the way Adam and Eve were brought into sin. In this sense, he is free of blame.

Finally, parallels between Satan and Eve are drawn, which serves to construct Satan in a more forgiving light. As mentioned above, the poem repeats

17 'The Battle of Finnsburh', in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry,* trans. and ed. S. A. J. Bradley (London: Orion Publishing Group, 2000), ll.35-8.

18 'The Battle of Maldon', in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, trans. and ed. S. A. J. Bradley (London: Orion Publishing Group, 2000), ll.207-9.

19 Brian Murdoch, 'The Fall of Man: A Middle High German Analogue of Genesis B', *The Review of English Studies* 19.75 (August 1968): 288.

20 Eric Jager. *The Tempter's Voice: Language and the Fall in Medieval Literature* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1993), p.4.

references to Satan's brightness. Interestingly, Eve is described in similar terms. She is the '*idesa scenost*' (shiniest of ladies; l.626) and '*nu scineð þe leoht fore*' (now light shines out from you; l.614). Belanoff suggests that the most unifying aspect of the Old English poetic image of a female is the 'shining, often golden and metallic, aura of the women' which they share with God and angels.[21] To ascribe this quality to Eve when it has already been linked to Satan has the effect of unifying the two of them, I would argue, in a sympathetic light. The poem makes clear that Eve acted out of misinformation because she was tricked by the messenger and because God assigned her a '*wacran hige*' (weaker mind; l.590). This suggests that she was not absolutely at fault, because she truly believed that eating the fruit would please God, rather than hurt him; she acted in fundamental, but excusable, error. Equally, if Satan genuinely believed that '*ic mæg wesan god swa he*' (l.283) then he also acted in accidental misjudgement. Thus this parallel imagery and structure encourages a reading in which Satan's behaviour stems from ignorance rather than deliberate malice.

Overall, it seems that *Genesis B* offers a challenging interpretation of Satan and his role in the fall of man. On the one hand, a Christian reader knows that Satan is evil; but this poem presents him as a heroic, generous, esteemed lord who leads his men in a flawed rebellion, suffers the cruel punishments, and attempts indirectly to avenge his situation. Taken out of context, his behaviour is no less heroic than that of Beowulf or Byrthnoth, for example. Yet the context is extremely important; this *is* a poem about the temptation of humankind. I would pose the theory that perhaps this poem is working to prove its own point. If we view Satan as sympathetic, then we are being tempted away from God, by eloquent and logical reasoning: we are Eve. And thus the poem is not controversial or heretic; it is a test, to see if we fall.

21 Belanoff, 'The Fall(?) of the Old English Female Poetic Image', p.822.

Volume 7: 2014-15 ISSN: 2041-6776

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Word count: 2657.

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