Heroic Themes in *Genesis B*

B.A. Essay

Svava Berglind Finsen

May 2014
Heroic Themes in *Genesis B*

B.A. Essay

Svava Berglind Finsen

Kt.: 150491-2669

Supervisor: Magnús Fjalldal

May 2014
Abstract

This essay discusses the various heroic themes in the Old English poem *Genesis B*. The poem covers a small part of the Biblical story of Genesis, the fall of Man and the fall of the angels to Hell and is a translation of an Old Saxon poem. Germanic heroic influence is commonly found in Old English works, but in *Genesis B* the heroic themes seem to be the main focus of the poem. The reason why the poet chooses to rely so heavily on heroic themes is possibly because of his audience. The original poet and the translator use heroic themes to tell this Christian story in such a way that Germanic and Anglo-Saxon people would have appreciated and been able to relate to. There is much more focus on the characters’ emotions than in the Bible, and the poet gives his audience a reason for Satan’s disobedience and subsequent actions.

The essay will examine the most prominent heroic themes of the poem and focus on the main theme of loyalty, and how the poet explores that in great detail through the heroic relationship between a lord and his retainers. All the characters are a part of such a relationship, and both God and Satan are portrayed as the lords of their own band of followers. The poet also faces the challenge of having to portray Satan’s pride as a sin despite pride being a common characteristic of Germanic heroes. Furthermore, the similarities between the characteristics and actions of Satan and the Norse god Loki are observed.
Writers of Old English texts were very interested in the story of creation. According to Malcolm Godden, “[i]n terms of quantity at least, the Old Testament was the major influence on Old English literature: it was the source for about a third of the extant poetry and for a large part of the prose, as well as influencing other writings” (206). The Old English poem *Genesis* is a poem in two parts. The poem most likely has two different sources, as both the language and the treatment of the source material differ between those two parts. Lines 1-234 and 852-2935 are generally referred to as *Genesis A*, and lines 235-851 are known as *Genesis B*. S. A. J. Bradley states that the lines from *Genesis A* are usually dated from around the beginning of the eighth century and *Genesis B* from the mid-ninth century (10-11). The *Genesis B* part is considered by most scholars to be a translation of an Old-Saxon poem, a part of which was found in the Vatican Library. The Old English version of the poem is found in the *Junius* manuscript which contains various other religious texts. Anglo-Saxon texts were generally written down and copied in monasteries, as usually only monks and people working for the Church knew how to read and write. These texts were thus mostly religious. C. L. Wrenn states that the Germanic heroic tradition in Anglo-Saxon England was gradually being replaced “by a more consciously Christian didactic poetry,” (91) replacing the oral tradition. While *Genesis B* is undoubtedly a Christian poem it displays many characteristics which suggest that it is under an unusually heavy influence from various heroic and pagan traditions.

The *Genesis B* part covers the fall of Man and the fall of the angels to Hell. The subject matter of the poem is in some ways unusual as it differs greatly from the Bible in some instances, although the basic story is the same. For example, there are two trees in Paradise in *Genesis B*, a tree of death and a tree of life. Adam and Eve’s behaviour is
also different. For example, they do not hide from God after disobeying him, as they do in the Bible. They are more honest and pious in *Genesis B*, and the poet seems to be sympathetic towards their predicament. He points out that the Devil is simply more intelligent, so it is understandable that they are not able to resist the tempter. Furthermore, Satan himself is not the one to tempt Adam and Eve but a volunteer of his. Adam is also approached first, not Eve. What we can deduce from this is that the poet and the eventual translator were quite liberal, as the poem shows so many unique deviations from the Biblical text.

Another unusual aspect of the poem is that its treatment of the subject material is heavily influenced by various heroic traditions. The Germanic peoples in continental Europe had their own heroic and pagan customs. Eventually some migrated to England and brought their traditions with them. Some of these traditions were absorbed into Anglo-Saxon society, such as the lord-retainer relationship, and, with the arrival of Christianity, these traditions gradually disappeared and were replaced by Christian themes and customs.

Heroic and pagan influence is commonly found in Old English works, but in this particular poem the heroic aspects of it seem to be the main focus in this otherwise Christian poem. In some ways, this poem seems to be even more heroic and less Christian than *Beowulf*, which tries hard to fit elements of Christianity into a heroic environment. It is the other way around in *Genesis B* where the poet tries to fit heroic elements into a Christian story. In a way, the objective of the poem is “retelling the Christian origin myth in a Germanic poetic form” as Pat Belanoff has suggested (828). J. M. Evans likewise agrees that the poet’s “first concern seems to have been to write a poem which would be acceptable to an audience familiar with secular Germanic
literature” (123). Not only is the poem influenced by heroic and continental Germanic traditions, but there is also evidence that suggests that the poem is influenced by some pagan aspects as well.

The main reason for the poet to incorporate so many traditional Germanic heroic features into his narrative was possibly to make it easier for an Anglo-Saxon audience of *Genesis B* to relate to the story of the creation of Man and the Fall. According to Michael D. Cherniss “the ideals and attitudes by which the conduct of the characters is judged and which, therefore, establish the moral climate of the poem are virtually identical with those that govern the conduct of the heroes of Germanic legend” (480). We see this not only in regard to Satan, but also Adam, Eve and God. The Genesis story is put forth to its Anglo-Saxon audience as if it were in fact just another story. Biblical and heroic themes must have overlapped for some time after Christianity arrived in England. The Anglo-Saxons retained many of their heroic traditions when they became Christian, and it would have taken some time for them to let go of them. According to Roberta Frank, Germanic legends were “somehow important to the Anglo-Saxons, who tried harder and harder with each passing century to establish a Germanic identity” (88). We can see evidence of this in various Old English works, such as “Deor” and “Widsith”, with their various allusions to known and unknown Germanic legends. Furthermore, Charles William Kennedy maintains that “[m]emorials of Germanic legend and folklore, and pious versification of Biblical story, were fostered side by side and preserved together” (158). This would have helped the secular public to get used to Christianity and the religious traditions that followed and would gradually take over. By seeing the actions of various characters in *Genesis B* portrayed in this heroic manner the poet was making it easier for his audience to understand and appreciate Christian
doctrine. Additionally, the audience could better relate to the characters’ behaviour and actions.

In fact Satan is often portrayed as a Germanic hero. He stands up to his seemingly unjust lord, God, because he believes he and his followers are being wronged by God. Satan is described by the poet as having been the greatest of all the angels: “[þ]a spræc se ofermoda cyning, þe aer wæs engla scynost, / hwitost on heofne” (ll. 338-39) [1] (Then spoke the presumptuous king who had once been the most radiant of angels, the brightest in heaven, 21) [2]. This is reminiscent of other heroic stories where the hero is described as being the finest of men, such as the description of Sigurd in The Saga of the Volsungs; “none would be his like or equal,” he was “counted the foremost in strength and accomplishments, in zeal and valor” (55).

The poet lets his audience see Satan’s side of the proceedings, and we see the Fall mostly from his perspective, not God’s. Therefore, surprisingly, the audience automatically has much more sympathy with Satan than God at the beginning of the poem, because Satan gives us evidence of God’s unfairness. Satan mentions that “[n]æfð he þeah riht gedon / þæt he us hæfð befælled fyre to botme” (ll. 360-61) (Yet he has not done right in having toppled us into the depth of the fire, 22) and that “ðoliaþ we nu þrea on helle” (l. 389) (we are now in hell suffering oppressions, 23). Satan maintains that God “ne mæg ænige synne gestælan, / þæt we on him on þam lande lað gefremedon” (ll. 391-92) (cannot charge us with any sin, or that we did him any harm in that country, 23). Satan sees it as his right to have his vengeance because God has done wrong by him; “[n]e magon we þæs wrace gefreman, / geleanian him mid laðes

[1] Line numbers are taken from Krapp’s edition of the Junius Manuscript.
[2] All translations are from Bradley’s Anglo Saxon Poetry.
"wihite" (ll. 393-94) (May we not take vengeance for this and pay him back with some harm, 23). The poet is clearly trying to show us Satan as a human character, giving him real motives and feelings. Nevertheless, the poet makes sure to mention from time to time how presumptuous Satan really is.

If we were to read this as purely a heroic story without any Christian elements, modern audiences could undoubtedly see Satan as the protagonist of this heroic narrative and could just as well expect him to prevail in the end. He is seen as a typical exiled hero fighting against the oppression and unfairness of the reigning lord, God. Yet, the poet may have been trying to show his audience how easy it is to be tricked by evil people and their actions, by making them sympathise with Satan at the beginning of the poem. Still, as we read on we see that many aspects of Satan’s character point to his inevitable downfall. He is boastful, arrogant and proud, and by the end of the poem it is clear with whom our loyalties should lie.

Despite Satan’s heroic characteristics, it is evident that the poet does not intend his audience to take Satan as some kind of Germanic hero. He rather makes the audience see how immoral Satan’s betrayal of God was by making it so unmistakably influenced by the heroic tradition. Bradley argues that “as a direct consequence of opting for an epic heroic genre, [the poet risks] counterproductively investing the rebel angel with an admirable dignity and heroic appeal which are inherent in the traditional diction and manner of the genre” (12). This appears not to be the case in Genesis B. It is clear that the poet is emphasising heroic imagery so that the audience can relate to the circumstances of the characters. Although he could be seen as a Germanic hero at the beginning of the poem, Satan is a flawed character and a sinner and worst of all, he betrays his lord and still expects his supporters to follow him. He is ignorant of the fact
that he has done anything wrong and does not understand why God punished him and his retainers and banished them from Heaven. The poem’s audience at the time would understand God’s reasons for the expulsion straight away.

Instead of focusing on the heroic aspects of Satan’s character the audience would more likely focus more on the fact that Satan was breaking the heroic code of conduct, which was extremely important in Germanic societies. Therefore Satan would not be seen as the hero of the poem. Alain Renoir partly agrees and says that “[t]he view expressed by Kennedy that ‘Satan of Genesis B may in a real sense be called the hero of that poem’ is at the same time correct and misleading” (47). He continues by saying that “Satan is, if not the hero in the usual sense of the word, at least the prime mover of the action ... Satan’s motivation may be regarded as the key to the action and to its underlying psychology” (48). Ultimately Satan is not the actual hero of the poem though he may be the prime mover and perhaps the main character. He can, nevertheless, be seen as a sympathetic character, or indeed perhaps a pathetic character, who, blinded by pride, committed a great sin and is now bound in Hell. His story is tragic in a way; he has lost his home and his lord and laments his situation. Depending on how one interprets the character, as a hero or an antagonist, his lamenting speech in Hell could be seen as pathetic, or heroically nostalgic and reminiscent of exiled heroic protagonists, such as the speaker in the Old English poem “The Wanderer”. Godden maintains that “the dramatization of his grief and resentment, together with the frequent echoes of a heroic society, strongly recall the sympathetic protagonists of the Old English elegiac poems, The Wanderer and The Seafarer,” (213) something that audiences would likely have appreciated.
The poet also uses the heroic aspect of the poem to show his audience that Adam and Eve are people to be admired and held in high regard despite having broken the rules of the heroic code. Cherniss states that:

their pure motives make their conduct understandable and acceptable to a secular Germanic audience. It is not moral depravity but their zeal to be loyal to their lord which ultimately causes them to be disloyal. Though they are theologically culpable, they remain, from a heroic point of view, respectable human beings (496).

This is of course hugely important as Adam and Eve need to be shown as sympathetic and likable, being the forefathers of the human race. Right after the tempter reveals himself, Adam and Eve realise their mistake, and the poet takes care to show us that they immediately realised what had happened and that “him higesorga / burnon on breostum” (ll. 776-77) (heartfelt sorrows smouldered in their breasts, 33). They start praying to God, “hine bædon / þæt hie his hearmsceare habban mosten, / georne fulgangan, þa hie godes hæfdon / bodscipe abrocen” (ll. 780-83) (begged him that they might receive and willingly undergo the penalty for it, since they had broken God’s command, 33). The audience sees they are truly sorry, and because of the previous emphasis on the elaborate trick the tempter had played on them, the audience is able to forgive them for breaking the heroic code when disobeying God as they did so because of their loyalty to God.

Furthermore, Rosemary Woolf points out an interesting reason for the poet to have chosen to represent the Genesis story in such a heroic way. She notes the dilemma the poet faces; he has to present Satan’s pride as evil to the Anglo-Saxons. This would have been challenging because pride was a common characteristic of heroic characters.
Heroes and kings were often proud, boastful and arrogant in traditional Germanic heroic stories, as we can for example see in *Beowulf* in the speech Beowulf makes to King Hrothgar when they first meet. There Beowulf for example says he has had “great triumphs” (l. 409) and that everyone knows about his “awesome strength” (l. 418). These heroes have right to be proud and boastful, because they have earned it with their heroic feats. That was furthermore the reason why retainers respected them and followed them, even to death. This must have been difficult for Christians to accept, as pride is one of the seven deadly sins. To show the sin of Satan’s pride the poet uses the lord-retainer relationship, and has Satan violate the social hierarchy because of his pride. This violation would not have been acceptable to the audience that therefore would see that pride, at least Satan’s pride, was evil, as Woolf notes (6-7). Throughout the first part of *Genesis B* the poet helps the Anglo-Saxon audience see pride as sinful and dangerous. The poet even mentions pride, or *ofermetto*, as the main reason for the angels’ fall; “[f]ynd ongeaton / þæt hie hæfdon gewrixled wita unrim / þurh heora micla mod and þurh miht godes / and þurh ofermetto ealra swiðost” (ll. 334-37) (The fiends realized that they had got in exchange an infinitude of punishments through their great boldness and through God’s power and most of all through pride, 21).

While the author is not overwhelmingly emphasising Christian lifestyle, and teaching the doctrine is not the main focus of the poem, it does have certain didactic elements to it. Bradley maintains that “the heroic aspect of Anglo-Saxon poetry … is surely not demeaned by its adaptation to Christian purpose” and that “indeed, the heroic idiom may prove a didactic tool in mediating a whole host of Christian concepts” (xvii). The poet uses the poem to enable his audience to see Satan’s sin more clearly and warns
them what the consequences of going against God’s words would be, for example, when talking about the fallen angels:

Hie hyra gal beswac,
engles oferhygd, noldon alwaldan
word weorþian, hæfdon wite micel,
wæron þa befeallene fyre to botme
on þa hatan hell þurh hygeleaste
and þurh ofermetto (ll. 327-32).

(Their arrogance and the angel’s presumption betrayed them. They had been unwilling to esteem the word of the Ruler of all: they received heavy punishment. They were then prostrated in the depth of the fire in hot hell for their recklessness and for their presumption, 21).

He is taking time off in his narrative to warn his readers of the dangers of disobeying God, though he only does that as an aside. These warnings are not the main focus of the poem but come in from time to time to remind the reader that despite how great Satan’s speeches are and how he thinks God is being unfair, he is not the moral hero of the poem.

One of the reasons why Genesis B focuses much more on the motives of its characters than other Biblical works could be because of the traditional Germanic influence. In the continental Germanic tradition there was a great deal of focus on the emotions of the characters involved in various stories and the reasoning behind their actions and their feelings. Evidence of this can be seen in, for example, The Nibelungenlied which is far richer in emotional language and explaining characters’ feelings than its Old Norse counterparts, such as The Saga of the Volsungs and
numerous poems from *The Poetic Edda*, where readers are expected to be able to deduce various meanings behind the actual text, rather than having them spelled out explicitly. *The Nibelungenlied* is not as mythological as the Old Norse texts and is much more Christian than *The Saga of the Volsungs* where the writer must have tried to leave out any references to Christianity, even though the story would have been written down after its arrival. J. M. Evans points out that the “German epic was distinguished from Classical by its emphasis on situation as opposed to action” (117) and that the Germanic narrative technique is to “illuminate the motives and feelings which are in tension within a clearly defined situation” (118). This was clearly lacking in the Biblical version of the Genesis story where we get no background information on the events or the characters. In the Genesis story of the Old Testament the events of *Genesis B* are covered in just a few lines, Genesis 3.1-3.7. We get no mention there of Satan’s motives, and Adam accepts Eve’s fruit without a word of suspicion or defiance. J. M. Evans argues that “an audience familiar with Germanic epic would expect to be told why the devil tempted Man, why Eve believed him, why she tempted her husband, and why he succumbed, yet these are the points which Genesis has left in obscurity” (119). The author of *Genesis B* does his best to elaborate on these aspects in his poem.

For example, in *Genesis B* there is much more focus on Satan’s actions and why he rebelled than in the Biblical version. We get to see the scenario from his point of view: he is upset, angry, and the poet gives us a clear vision of the events that led to his rebellion:

Þuhte him sylfum
þæt he mægyn and cræft maran hæfde
þonne se halga god habban mihte
To himself it seemed that he had a greater force and strength of fellow-fighters than the holy God could command. Many words of presumption this angel spoke. He contemplated how, through his sole strength, he might create for himself a more powerful throne, 19-20).

In his pride he feels he has a right to be as great, or greater, than God himself. Readers can understand, although perhaps not agree, why he might want to overthrow his lord, seeing that he has many loyal followers. We also get to see that the reason why Satan wants to tempt Man is that God humiliated him. Godden argues that “[w]hat clearly inspired the original poet, and presumably his translator, was the challenge of dramatizing the feelings and thoughts of the world’s first sinner” (212). In a way the poet must have been responding to the wishes of a Germanic people who wanted to know more about the Christian characters. Most scholars agree that the poet gives us an interesting insight into the minds of the various characters and the characters seem much more relatable and real than for example in Beowulf, who himself is more of a traditional hero who does not overly contemplate his feelings.

The fact that the poem is a translation from Old Saxon could also be another reason for the heavy continental Germanic influence. Cherniss argues that “although the date of composition of Genesis B is comparatively late, the persistence and prominence of heroic elements in the poem may be attributed to its being a translation of a poem written in a Germanic country more recently converted to Christianity than England”
The Old Saxon poet would likely have been even more influenced by the traditional pagan and heroic values of his culture than had the poem originally been composed by an English author.

Another traditional Germanic aspect of the language of the poem is the fact that the characters use heroic language to express themselves. For example in Satan’s monologue where he calls for a volunteer from his retainers, as a heroic lord might do and in return promises gifts and a place by his side. Kennedy explains that “like some great Germanic prince in the midst of his comitatus he reminds his shoulder-companions of the rich gifts he has heaped upon them in the past, calling for a volunteer who will requite his favors and undertake the temptation of man” (165-166). Satan says:

Gif ic ænegum þægne þeodenmadmas
geara forgeafe, þenden we on þan godan rice
gesæelige sæton and hæfdon ure setla geweald,
þonne he me na on leofran tid leanum ne meahte
mine gife gyldan …
Se þe þæt gelæsteð, him bið lean gearo
æfter to aldre, þæs we her inne magon
on þissum fyre forð fremena gewinnan.
Sittan læte ic hine wið me sylfne (ll. 409-438).

(If of old I bestowed princely treasures upon any follower while we were happily situated in that pleasant realm and had control of our thrones, then never at a more welcome time could he pay me back with returns for my liberality … For the one who achieves that, will ever afterwards be at the ready of the reward of such profits as we inside
here can in future obtain within this fire. Him I shall allow to sit by my own self, 23-24).

This of course is a hollow promise as there is nothing to give there in Hell, although Satan may perhaps not realise it. Nevertheless, as in the heroic tradition, a volunteer steps forward to do his lord’s bidding. As Cherniss observes, the tempter “is presented as a warrior arming himself for battle” (490) as a traditional Germanic hero might do. Additionally, though *Genesis B* is certainly the more heroically influenced of the two Genesis fragments, *Genesis A* also seems to display some heroic aspects. God’s first speech to Adam and Eve could for example be seen as a Germanic lord promising rewards for loyal service, as Cherniss notes (484).

The heroic lord-retainer relationship in *Genesis B* is one of the most prominent themes of the poem. According to Cherniss “the theme of the poem is loyalty, and recurring motifs that center about the heroic attitude toward loyalty and the related attitudes toward vengeance, treasure and exile serve to link the episodes in the poem securely to one another” (483). The poet focuses on loyalty and disloyalty instead of focusing mostly on pride as a sin, as is done in the Bible. This loyalty theme is closely connected to the lord-retainer theme. The poet explores how the different characters are, or are not, loyal to their lord and to each other. Loyalty was one of the main components of the lord-retainer relationship. A lord’s followers were supposed to be loyal to him in every way, and in return he fed them, provided shelter, protection and gave them gifts. The retainers were expected to follow their lord into death and avenge him, if he was killed in battle. One of the greatest shame retainers could face was to be disloyal and abandon their lords, as is seen in *The Battle of Maldon*, for example. This is a theme that is explored in great detail in various ways in *Genesis B*. 
A respectable lord would be expected to have a large comitatus. A comitatus is defined by Stephen S. Evans as being the “body of armed men which a lord, whether king or chieftain, could muster from his own local resources” (2). According to his definition this included both warriors who sat with the lord in his hall and lesser lords from the surrounding area. Still, he mentions that some scholars only define it as the lord’s personal bodyguards and retainers (2). The comitatus, according to S. Evans, is an “unequivocal hallmark of heroic culture” so it is not surprising to see it featured so heavily in this poem which focuses on the Germanic heroic aspects that could be associated with Christian doctrine, no matter how you define the term. Satan and the rest of the angels in Heaven make up God’s comitatus, and after the Fall, the fallen angels make up Satan’s comitatus.

In the beginning, the poet describes how God had made his angels and establishes that the angels are to be seen as God’s comitatus, “þæm he getruwode wel / þæt hie his giongorscipe fyligan wolden, / wycrean his willan” (ll. 248-250) (He firmly trusted that they would follow in his fealty and work his will, 19). The first lord-retainer relationship the poet examines is the relationship between God, the lord, and Satan, the retainer. We know from the poem that Satan was one of God’s favourites;

æne hæfde he swa swiðne geworhtne,
swa mihtigne on his modgeþohte, he let hine swa micles wealdan,
hehstne to him on heofona rice, hæfde he hine swa hwitne geworhtne,
swa wynlic wæs his wæstm on heofonum …
Deore wæs he drihtne urum (ll. 252-261).
(A certain one he had made so strong and so powerful in his intellect, so much he allowed him to command, the highest after himself in the
realm of the heavens, so dazzling had he made him, so winsome was his
person … He was dear to our Lord, 19).

The poet then describes how Satan starts to become more proud and is planning to make
a throne for himself, and how he starts to question God’s work. The poet also notes that
Satan should have acted like a good Christian retainer, “Lof sceolde he drihtnes
wyrcean” (l. 256). (He ought to have done homage to the Lord, 19). God reacts as a
Germanic lord would when he finds out about Satan’s betrayal; he gets angry and wants
revenge. He responds by sending Satan and his followers to Hell as punishment for their
betrayal while the angels loyal to God get to stay in Heaven. In a way the fall of the
angels to Hell could be seen as their exile, and exile was the worst of all possible fates
for a true Germanic warrior.

Like all lords, God expects his *comitatus* to be loyal to him, and now Satan
expects the same of his followers, the fallen angels, who had been loyal to him since
before the Fall. Cherniss argues that “audiences would have seen the hypocrisy and that
the loyalty of the retainers who had just been disloyal to their first lord should not be
anything to boast of” (485). Nevertheless we see this loyalty when Satan calls for a
volunteer to go and deceive Adam and Eve. Perhaps the poet is also showing his
audience that the relationship God has with his followers is a nobler relationship than
the one Satan has with his retainers, the fallen angels. Cherniss proposes that “no
respectable lord would, like Satan, accept into his service retainers whom he knew to
have been disloyal to their former lord” (485). We have already seen that Satan is a
person not to be trusted, and that he does not pay attention to the heroic code, which
would put audiences off seeing him as the heroic and admirable protagonist, which he
clearly thinks he is.
This portrayal of the relationship between Satan and his fallen angels is markedly different from the Old English poem *Christ and Satan*, also found in the *Junius* manuscript, where the fall of the angels from Heaven is described as well. That poem is influenced by the New Testament and is much more Christian than Germanic. Satan’s antagonist is now Christ, instead of God. In *Christ and Satan* the fallen angels are much more sceptical of their leader than in *Genesis B*. Satan in *Christ and Satan* is also less powerful than the one in *Genesis B*. He is scorned by the fallen angels and laments his sin tremendously. In fact, Woolf maintains that the Devil in *Genesis B* is the only portrayal of the Devil in Old English poetry which is not “always miserable, skulking wretchedly round the outskirts of the world,” because he is still “flushed with the exhilaration of defiance” (8).

The lord-retainer aspect of the *Genesis B* story is closely connected to the theme of revenge. In heroic society, if someone wronged you, it was customary to seek revenge, and as Renoir remarks, “revenge [was] a binding duty even when the injured party had fully deserved the injury” (50). Renoir’s example is taken from the Old Icelandic *Brennu-Njálssaga* (Saga of the Burnt Njal) and is a perfect example of the importance of this part of heroic society. Thus, Satan wanting his revenge despite having wronged God in the first place would have made sense to an Anglo-Saxon audience who was familiar with similar stories, such as perhaps the various legends surrounding the Nibelungs that were known in both Scandinavia and Germany and share some similarities with *Beowulf*, such as a hidden treasure protected by a dragon.

Satan is desperate to seek his revenge even though God’s punishment was entirely justified, as Satan broke the heroic code of conduct. The main reason for Satan wanting his revenge is the fact that God humiliated him, and therefore he must react.
Satan decides to take his revenge on God by going after Adam and Eve. Renoir argues that in a way Satan’s motivation is revenge for the sake of revenge because “no physical betterment” will come to the angels in hell after tricking Adam and Eve (49). Cherniss suggests that by causing Adam to break the heroic code of conduct and disobey his lord, Satan’s revenge is done to dishonour God by “depriving him of his new retainers” (488). Satan wants them to suffer the same fate as he and his fallen companions.

After looking at the relationship between God and Satan and the fallen angels the poet turns his attention to Adam and Eve. In the end both Adam and Eve betray God, as Satan did, by disobeying his direct order not to eat from the tree of death. However, their motive is completely different. Godden points out that:

Eve is moved by her concern for Adam and believes that the tempter is from God … [t]he poet points out that God had given her a weaker mind than Adam, and that she persuaded Adam to eat out of a genuine loyalty to him, believing it was for his own good. Adam too accepts the fruit because he genuinely believes Eve’s promise that it is God’s will (214).

Eve is clearly loyal to Adam, and he in turn is loyal to her when he accepts her offer of the fruit. They are guilty of disobeying God but they are still portrayed as innocent in the poem because of the tempter’s deception. Adam’s loyalty and intelligence are emphasised, and his lines “ic þinra bysna ne mæg, / worda ne wisna wuht oncnawan … he het me his word weorðian and wel healdan, / læstan his lare” (ll. 533-538) (I cannot make any sense of your suggestions, of your words and reasons … he commanded me to honour and keep well his word and carry out his precepts, 27) show that he is truly loyal to God and is not interested in what the tempter promises. The poet is,
furthermore, especially keen on excusing Eve’s actions. She is described as having a weaker or frailer mind, and the poet emphasises the tempter’s cunning and coaxing.

Adam and Eve are not portrayed as proud, as Satan is, and neither are they portrayed as vain. They are simply victims of Satan’s deceptions which is what makes them betray their lord and violate the heroic code. In the Bible, Eve knows she is committing a sin when she eats the fruit; the devil only has to tempt her with the potential of increased knowledge. There is no mention of God wanting them to eat from the tree in the Bible. The tempter in *Genesis B*, however, goes to both Adam and Eve and tells them that God has changed his mind, and that he now wants them to eat the fruit from the tree of death. We do not know why the poet chose to add this fact to his version of the story, but it could be to emphasise the fact that God was Adam and Eve’s lord and, as all respectable retainers, they are expected to do what he said. If so, that would further exonerate Adam and Eve. This is greatly different from the orthodox Christian doctrine where Adam and Eve are clearly being punished for their sins whilst in *Genesis B* they are really being punished for having been tricked by the tempter.

While God and Satan display many Germanic heroic characteristics, mainly as regards the lord-retainer relationship, Adam and Eve are different. Adam is portrayed as very intelligent, as he can see through the tempter’s deception, and he refuses to go against God’s word, at least at first. When the tempter first meets Adam he tries to compliment him and appeal to his vanity and pride. Adam, being the ideal Christian, is not so easily won over. He displays both Christian and heroic characteristics. His words of devotion show that he is very much a follower and a true believer in God and he is also heroic, because he honours the bond between a lord and his subject and refuses to go against something his lord has explicitly told him not to do. Adam is extremely loyal
to God, and it is only because of Eve’s false vision and the tempter’s incessant enticement that he finally gives in after a whole day of convincing.

Eve, on the other hand, shows few signs of being influenced by heroic traditions. She displays Christian characteristics unusual for Old English works, and some have argued that she is very much a Christian character, far removed from other more heroic female characters of the Old English canon. If Tacitus, in his Germania, is to be believed, early Germanic communities trusted the advice of their women. The text in Genesis B goes against that tradition by showing what happens when Eve advises Adam to eat the fruit. The females of Old English literature are often portrayed as intelligent and Belanoff argues that wisdom was a “salient feature of the Old English poetic female” (822). A good example is in Judith where the poet emphasises Judith’s wisdom. Belanoff believes we can see the remnants of the Anglo-Saxon female poetic image in Old Norse texts, which conserve many Germanic legends, and also in Tacitus’s Germania (823).

The phrase wacran hyge, or weaker mind, which is used about Eve in the poem, is something which Belanoff claims is never said about any other woman in Old English poetry (824). The poet reminds his audience of her frailer resolution, or weaker mind, a few times in the poem and tries to convince them that this weaker mind is the main reason Eve accepts the fruit. She finally agrees, but as the poet reminds us, “[h]eo dyde hit þeah þurh holdne hyge” (l. 708) (yet she did it out of loyal intent, 32). Not only was she loyal to Adam, but also to God, whom she did not want to disappoint by not believing the tempter’s message. The emphasis is always on how beautiful and shining she is, not on her wisdom, and the poet comments many times on her beauty and loveliness to make readers sympathise with her.
Although Eve does the traditional peace weaving which was expected of women in Anglo-Saxon England, as for example Wealhtheow does in Beowulf, her advice to Adam has disastrous consequences. Belanoff argues that “the Genesis B poet is simultaneously creating and modifying the traditional image of women in Germanic poetry” (826) and argues that we are seeing the beginnings of the nagging wife image established during the Middle Ages (826). In heroic society there was no need to portray women as being less intelligent than men, because they were naturally inferior when it came to strength. Christianity was not so concerned with physical strength and thus needed a new reason for women being inferior to men (Kliman, quoted in Belanoff 827). The poet may have wanted to show some distinctly Christian aspects of his characters and chose Eve as his main focus.

Nevertheless, Eve is also a strong character. She manages to convince Adam to eat the fruit when the tempter could not and, unlike Adam, she accepts her responsibility after the Fall. He blames her entirely for their fate. She accepts her part in it without being angry and regrets her actions deeply. Additionally, this portrayal of Eve, loyal and not proud or vain, goes against how she is often portrayed in other Christian works, such as Paradise Lost and the Bible and could perhaps be another instance of the poet trying to make his characters more Germanic or heroic with emphasis on her loyalty.

Furthermore, various other Germanic heroic features are mentioned throughout the poem that remind us of the poet’s inspiration. Cherniss, for example, suggests that the trees of life and death offer “all a Germanic warrior would want: healthy joyous life with his lord’s favour in this world as well as the next”, in the case of the tree of life, and in the case of the tree of death, “loss of things Germanic heroes hold dear, deeds of
valor, joys, and lordship” (490). The poet additionally shows Satan’s lack of sense of honour when he chooses to fight an opponent on unequal terms when tricking Eve, something that would not be appreciated in heroic society that valued honour. It is clear that the heroic code of conduct is one of the most prominent themes running through the poem.

Not only did traditional Germanic heroic elements influence the author of *Genesis B*, but some suggest that there is pagan influence present in the poem as well, most importantly in the similarities between Satan and the Norse god Loki. John D. Niles states that paganism in England did not die out easily after the arrival of Christianity and that before the Norman Conquest it was reintroduced by Viking settlers numerous times (127). Niles furthermore believes that “Anglo-Saxon paganism was not only a religion but also a major heritage encompassing values, ethics, hopes, fears and collective memories of a people, it did not die with the Conversion, but rather lived on in the form of both odd pagan survivals and, more importantly, deep-set patterns of belief” (140). People would not forget their old customs in only a few short years so the writers of the time had to adapt certain elements of both customs. Gradually people would get used to the new ways of the Christian religion, and this can be seen throughout the surviving Old English verse.

Paganism was clearly a problem at the time as we can see from the writings of the archbishop, Wulfstan. He was concerned with the repentance of the sinning people of England and drove his points home with powerful sermons. Heathenism must have been widespread or else the archbishop would not have found himself inclined to write *De Falsis Deis*, for example, where he warned against the dangers of false gods. However, not much is known about the heathen practices of the English people before
the arrival of Christianity as the Church did what it could to eradicate heathen practices and certainly did not write down histories of heathens or detailed accounts of their various gods.

Niles insists that “[m]uch as one is tempted to associate with the age of pre-Christian English heathendom the colourful stories that the Vikings told about frost giants, Odin’s eye and the final cataclysm of [Ragnarök], there is no evidence that such tales had currency in England before the Viking Age” (127). The paganism practised in England at the time may not necessarily have been the same as was practised in Scandinavia, and the people of England may have worshipped other Gods. We can see from modern place names, for example, that the pagan gods Woden, Thunor and Tiw were known throughout the country, but we cannot be sure they represented the same values and actions to the English as Óðinn, Þór, and Týr did to Scandinavians. Moreover, evidence that Loki was known in Anglo-Saxon England is scarce and highly debated. Nevertheless, the similarities between Loki and Satan in Genesis B are strong enough to merit a look.

Both Satan and Loki are the ultimate enemies of God, or the gods, and both were once in his, or their, favour. As has been pointed out, Satan was one of God’s favourites, and according to “Lokasenna”, Loki and Óðinn were once blood-brothers so they must have been very close (The Elder Edda 84). After Satan has been cast out of Heaven he is put in chains and fettered in Hell and similarly, the Norse gods capture Loki after he has caused Baldur’s death and tie him down in a cave. Loki is to be fettered there until Ragnarök, the battle at the end of the world, and Satan similarly shows no signs of ever being able to escape from Hell. Woolf argues that Loki is “the ‘foe of the gods’, in other words Satan, Godes andsaca, he who is to lead the forces of
evil at the end of the world” (4). Woolf further comments that Loki “delighted in giving evil advice for evil’s sake” (4). He is the cause of many troubles for the gods. He is the mischief maker who cuts off Sif’s hair for no reason, (Edda 96) randomly kills Ægir’s slave (Edda 95), and then finally causes Baldur’s death. Similarly Satan seeks revenge for revenge’s sake. He vindictively does evil for the sake of doing evil when he wants to make sure that since he cannot stay in Heaven Adam and Eve cannot either.

Loki is also often referred to as the trickster, which is notable because in some ways the temptation of Adam and Eve could be seen as a trick, not a temptation. Eve in Genesis B is not tempted because of vanity or pride and does not accept the fruit because she believes she will become like god; she is rather tricked by the tempter, who is working on behalf of Satan. The tempter tricks her into believing him by counting on her loyalty to Adam; not dissimilar to Loki’s various tricks and deceptions.

The tempter shares another characteristic with Loki as they are both some sort of shape-shifters and use that to deceive and trick people into believing they are someone they are not. The tempter in Genesis B changes his shape from a devil to a serpent and then to some kind of an angel. Whether this change of shape was a mistake by the person who copied or translated the poem or not, we cannot be certain. The tempter is first referred to as a warrior and before taking the fruit to Adam he turns into a snake. Eve, however, sees the tempter differently, or as an envoy of their master. He is clearly not a snake anymore. Loki also uses disguises, for example in “Þrymskviða”, where he dresses up as Þór’s bridesmaid (The Elder Edda 99), and when he disguises himself as an old lady who refuses to cry to bring Baldur back from Hel (Edda 51).

Another similarity is the helmet of invisibility that Satan’s volunteer puts on before going after Adam and Eve. Cherniss points out that “The helmet of invisibility
(“hæleð helm” [444]) … introduces a note of the supernatural which recalls the heroic mythology of the North” (490). This helmet could either be a direct reference to some pagan myths of the helmet of invisibility or could just be a warrior’s helmet that is a part of the tempter’s disguise. There is no actual mention of an invisibility helmet in the extant Norse sources, but Woolf maintains that the helmet must be of a mythological origin (2n1). She adds that the helmet is reminiscent of Pluto’s helmet in classical mythology and the tarnknappe won by Siegfried in The Nibelungenlied (3-4).

More interesting is the feather-cloak. As well as the helmet, the feather-cloak, feðerhama, has no origin in Christian history or legend. As with the helmet, Woolf believes that the feather-cloak must have a mythological origin (2n1). She notes that the feather-cloak has been compared to Weland’s fjadrhamr by Timmer who also ascribes some of the features of the Weland story to Satan’s volunteer (3). The resemblance to Loki is, however, more striking. Not only did Loki have shoes that allowed him to fly, or more accurately, “run across sky and sea” (Edda 94), but Loki also made use of Freyja’s feather-cloak, which he borrows in “Þrymskviða” and uses to fly to the land of the Giants to get back Þór’s hammer (The Elder Edda 97). This feather-cloak appears to be similar to the feather-cloak that the tempter, Satan’s volunteer, uses to fly from Hell when going after Adam and Eve. Yet Woolf says that “too much stress must not be laid on these mythological trimmings,” the feather-cloak is not the main deal, rather the fact that Loki and Satan are fundamentally similar (4).

There are furthermore some parallels in the representation of heaven, hell, and earth between the Christian and pagan worlds, as Cherniss points out (480). Both have a place where the gods live, a place where evil resides and a place for humanity. Furthermore, the use of the meadhall in relation to both Heaven and Hell is worth
noting. Woolf believes the use of the words *wloncra winsele*, which are used about Heaven, seems to suggest a Germanic mead hall, as seen in various stories, or even the pagan Valhöll where the fallen heroes feasted (9).

The many different Germanic heroic traditions that influence *Genesis B* make it an extremely intriguing and complex poem. It is clear that *Genesis B*, despite being a Christian poem, is heavily influenced by various traditional Germanic, heroic and pagan aspects. The main purpose of the poem seems to have been to tell the Genesis story in a way that made sense to a Germanic, and later Anglo-Saxon, audience. It is a welcome expansion of the Biblical narrative, gives its readers an insight into the character of Satan and deepens one’s understanding of Adam and Eve. By adding these heroic elements the characters are much more round and relatable.

Christianity has always been a mixture of cultures and is influenced by the various different nations that have converted to Christianity over the years. Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England seems to have been under heavy influence from Germanic, heroic and pagan traditions that existed in the community already. These traditions eventually found their way into Christian stories. The translator must have felt that the poem was relevant to the Anglo-Saxon audience; otherwise he would not have picked this distinctly heroic poem to translate into Old English. These heroic themes are not only apparent in *Genesis B* but in various other Old English works as well. Christian writers may have noticed that not all the existing stories and traditions were detrimental and unsuitable for Christian tradition, and they seem to have used existing heroic themes to enrich and spread the doctrine, as appears to be the case with *Genesis B*. The heroic lord-retainer relationship appears to be particularly well suited to the Christian tradition and it fits perfectly into the Genesis story, as it can be used both to show Adam
and Eve’s loyalty to God, as well as Satan’s disloyalty to him. The heroic aspects of *Genesis B* are a great addition to the Genesis story of the Bible and the poem shows a successful merger of Christian and heroic themes.


