Solving the Old English Exodus
An Active Problem-Solving Approach to the Poem
Abstract

This project is an attempt to grapple with one of the most perplexing of Old English heroic poems, known today simply as *Exodus*. This 590 line work is an adaptation of the Biblical account of the Israelite escape from captivity in Egypt and their subsequent flight through the wilderness, climaxing with that most iconic of Old Testament images, the parting of the Red Sea. My reading differs from conventional scholarly attempts at interpreting the work not in the details, but on a more fundamental level. There is little doubt among scholars today that the poem’s perplexing and riddlesome passages are typological allusions, but there has been little attempt to unify all of these poetic nuances into a coherent narrative. My approach aims to unify all of the riddlesome aspects of the work by reading the poem as a riddle itself. This riddle exists as a vehicle to challenge readers in their thinking, their knowledge of theology, and how they will respond to such knowledge in their own personal behavior.
Solving the Old English *Exodus*: An Active Problem Solving Approach to the Poem

By Stephen Hopkins

Accepted By:

___________________
Director, University Honors Program
Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the constant support of some very key people. Special thanks go out to Dr. Patrick Murphy. He has been more than generous with his time and knowledge, teaching me Old English, helping me read and translate the work, and positively challenging my thinking whenever needed. He has truly been an exemplary teacher, embodying what every professor should aspire to be. My readers, Dr. Vincent Palozzi and Dr. Valerie Wilhite, have been very helpful as well, providing great insight and productive feedback on drafts of the work. I would also like to thank the Honors and Scholars Program at Miami University for providing the outlet and funding necessary to conduct this research. Finally, I would like to thank Kristin Bryant, my fiancée, for her unlimited patience and sympathy for me during this whole process. She supported me through many very late nights and long weekends of research and reading. These people all helped shape my thinking about the poem, and their contributions to my writing have certainly only improved it. Any shortcomings to be found in this study are my own, not theirs. I could not have done this without all of these wonderful people. Thank you.
# Table of Contents

Enter the *Exodus* ........................................................................................................... 8  
Traditional Tensions ........................................................................................................ 17  
Riddles Out of the Dark .................................................................................................. 23  
A Riddlesome Reading ................................................................................................... 30  
Works Cited.................................................................................................................... 65.0
Enter the *Exodus*

The *Old English Exodus* is a poetic adaptation in the Anglo-Saxon heroic style of the Exodus narrative found in the Biblical book of the same name. Specifically, the work follows the Israelites as Moses leads them out of captivity in Egypt. Shortly after leaving, they are pursued by Pharaoh and his armies, who wish to reclaim the slaves that they had just released. After a series of miracles involving pillars of fire and cloud, and the well-known parting of the Red Sea and resultant drowning of the Egyptians, the Israelites arrive on the other shore in the relative safety of the wilderness. This story is central to both Jewish and Christian traditions in part because it recounts one of many instances where God has intervened in human history to save His chosen people. The narrative establishes the basis for the Jewish Passover and was often used in medieval Christianity as a typological prefiguring of how salvation and baptism work. This Christian mode of interpretation is a topic that will be explored in great detail throughout this study. However, it is not the material that the poem presents that is remarkable in and of itself; rather, it is its presentation that is noteworthy here.

Before going into the poem in depth, it is first useful to discuss the manuscript itself, as well as my method of reading it. The Old English *Exodus* is one of four biblical poems found in MS. Junius 11, currently housed in Oxford University’s Bodleian Library. It was donated to the library in 1677 by Francis Junius¹, a Dutch scholar and printer. Peter Lucas claims that while the antiquarian M.R. James speculated that the codex was made in Canterbury, there is a great deal of evidence that suggests that it was made and stored at the monastery at Malmesbury, where it remained until the Protestant dissolution of Roman Catholic monasteries in 1539. Eventually, the codex came into the possession of Archbishop James Ussher, who later gave it to his good friend Junius. In 1655 Junius printed his own edited version of the manuscript and gave it the succinct title: *Caedmonis monachi paraphrasis poetica Genesios ac praecipuarum sacrae paginae historiarum abhinc annos M.LXX. Anglo-Saxonice conscripta, et nunc*.

---

¹ Lucas, Peter. *Exodus*. P. 5
It appears that Junius assumed the poems to belong to the legendary vernacular poet, Caedmon, an unlettered swineherd whom Bede describes as miraculously translating scripture into Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse. Following Junius’ lead, the volume was often referred to as “The Caedmon Manuscript” because the works in the book are as follows: Genesis A and Genesis B, Exodus, Daniel, and Christ and Satan. This strongly resembles Bede’s account of the story of Caedmon:

“Canebat autem de creatione mundi et origine humili generis et tota Genesis historia de egressu Israel ex Aegypto et ingressu in terram repomissionis, de aliis plurimis sacrae Scripturae historiis, de incarnatione dominica, passione, resurrectione et ascensione in caelum, de Spiritus Sancti adventu et apostolorum doctrina. Item de terrore futuri iudicii et horrore poenae gehennalis ac dulcedine regni caelestis multa carmina faciebat; sed et alia perplura de beneficiis et iudiciis divinis, in quibus cunctis homines ab amore scelerum abstrahere, ad dilationem vero et sollertiam bonae actionis excitare curabat.

‘And he sang about the creation of the world and the origin of the human race. He sang the entire Genesis story, about the Israeli exodus from Egypt and their entering into the Promised Land, as well as many other of the sacred stories from Scripture. He sang about the incarnation of the Lord, His passion, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, about the coming of the Holy Spirit and the teaching of the apostles. He also composed songs about the terror of the coming judgment and the horror of the punishment of Gahenna. He made many songs about the sweet Kingdom of Heaven, but also many others about divine blessings and judgments, in which all men by love are wrested from sins. He desired to excite delight and skill of good actions in the hearts of men.”

Despite their strong thematic resemblance to the works attributed to Caedmon by Bede, the varying styles of the poems, as well as the incompleteness of the last two, suggest that they were written by different

\(^2\) “A poetic paraphrase of Genesis and of the particulars of the sacred pages of history by the monk Caedmon, written 1,070 years ago in Anglo-Saxon, and now for the first time edited.” Translation of the title is my own. Curiously, Junius’ title suggests that Caedmon would have written these works in the year 585AD, a comically early date, given that Roman Catholic Christianity did not reach the Island until 589AD.

\(^3\) F.W. Garforth. Bede’s Historia Ecclesiastica: a selection. Bell: London, 1967. Translation is my own. Throughout this work all translations, unless otherwise noted, are those of the author.
poets, probably at different times. Nevertheless, it is not outside the realm of possibility that their authors were inspired and influenced by Cædmon’s own popular works.

The manuscript itself has come to us in remarkably good shape. There are only a few leaves missing from the entire book (two from Exodus) and the overall workmanship of the text is quite well done. Line spacing is even and clean throughout, the handwriting is quite legible, the decorative capital letters are ornate, and it would appear that most of the document was penned by one hand, with later corrections and additions made by another. The poems are penned in an early tenth century insular script and it appears that the volume was intended to be illustrated throughout, as more than the first half of Genesis is illustrated. In keeping with this, there are many blank spaces throughout every work in the manuscript that appear to be for further illustration. Why the work was never completed is unclear. What is clear is that this piece was meant to be something quite different from other Anglo-Saxon treatments of scripture. Although often compared to the Old English Hexateuch for both content and illustrations, it is significantly different in theme. The Old English Hexateuch is more or less a direct translation of the Torah, while the works in MS. Junius 11 are highly poetic and their content spans the entire Christian Bible, from Genesis in the poem Genesis to a brief treatment of Revelation in Christ and Satan.

Much of the scholarship on the Old English Exodus is an attempt to establish basic meaning. Whether scholars are debating the meaning of the poem’s narrative arc or the meaning of its more than 166 unattested Old English words, there is no question as to the work’s difficulty. It is characterized by dense, tightly packed, highly idiosyncratic, and enigmatic grammar as well as a confusing web of allegories that could be interpreted to mean any number of things. While it is clear that the work treats themes of salvation, redemption, judgment, and Biblical narrative, this is about all that is clear. As numerous scholars have attempted to nail down a specific allegorical reading, they have often discovered the work’s exceptional resistance to such an approach. There are so many ambiguities and shades of

---

4 Only one work that we presently possess can be positively attributed to Cædmon. The song known as “Cædmon’s Hymn” comes down to us in its original Old English by Bede himself.
5 Blackwell Encyclopedia of Anglo-Saxon England, p.264-266
6 For facsimiles of these images, see MS. Junius 11: Bodleian Library Digital Texts edited by Bernard Muir, 2005.
meaning that there are inherently a great number of possible readings of the work. Is it possible, though, that this was the author’s precise intention? As John Niles in his study of enigmatic poetry from The Exeter Book puts it, “Old English Poetry is a good deal more playful than is often acknowledged, so that the art of interpreting it can require a kind of ‘game strategy’ whereby riddling authors match their wits against adventurous readers who are always hoped to be up to the task.”

Given the Anglo-Saxon propensity for riddling, it does not seem at all unlikely that this poem could be deliberately riddle-some. In fact, there is strong evidence that suggests that the poem is indeed intentionally enigmatic. The first seven lines are of central importance, because they not only begin the work, but pose a challenge: “gehyre se de wille! ‘listen/obey he who will!” Such a challenge confronts the reader in two ways: on a semantic level, one is charged with unraveling the meaning of the work, while on an ethical level, one is burdened with responding to the theological and moral teachings implicit within the work. Because of the work’s firm grounding in Christian theology, it is thus ultimately implied that listening to and obeying the poem will lead to spiritual salvation just as these behaviors brought the reward of physical salvation to the Israelites with Moses in the narrative. The poem tasks its readers with this work, but it also grants to them clues that, if properly understood, equip them to respond appropriately. It is our task then, as readers, to identify and unravel the sites of multiple meaning within the work in order to “solve” the poem.

The Poem as a Challenge

As already stated, this poem is very difficult to read. Nina Boyd writes that the poem is filled with “many obscurities”8, while Stanley Hauer states that, “the poem is laden with difficulties, syntactic, lexical, and interpretive.”9 As an example it will be helpful to look at the opening seven lines because they both demonstrate how convoluted the syntax can be and because they establish the nature of the poem. They show that the work is both riddlesome and challenging. The work begins:

---

7 Niles, John D. Old English Enigmatic Poems and the Play of the Texts. (p. 4)
“Hwæt, we feor ond neah gefrigen habbað ofer middangeard Moyses domas, wraeclico wordriht, wera cneorissum—in uprodor eadigra gehwam efter bealusðe bote lifes, lifigendra gehwam langsumne ræd—hæleðum secgan. Gehyre se ðe wille!”

‘Lo! We, far and near over middle-earth have heard tell about the judgments of Moses, about the wonderful (exile, outlandish) law, for the generations of men— (we have heard) declared to men each of the blessings in the sky, life’s reward after the baleful journey, long-lasting wisdom for each one of the living. Let him hear who will!’

These first seven lines set the tone for the rest of the poem as a sort of challenge to the reader/listener. It is a challenge on the grammatical level because, as can be seen from the verbal phrase “we...gefrigen habbað... secgan, ‘we have heard tell’”, the reader is kept in suspense, unable to fully comprehend the sentence until the very end.

The grammatical delay seen in these lines forces one to listen/read very carefully, depending on grammar (case-endings) and word-choice to convey meaning rather than conventional word order, a deliberate move from the language’s tendency to favor certain analytic sentence structures. It should be noted that while such an arrangement does not violate Old English syntax strictly, it certainly stretches the preferred word orders suggested by other contemporaneous prose and poetic works. The poet seems to be exploiting Old English’s potential for synthetic grammatical constructions in order to play a sort of riddling game in which the reader is at the narrator’s mercy. The narrator establishes a convention in which he sets up a sentence in such a way as to give the reader a certain impression, but then leads them elsewhere unexpectedly. This garden-path structure is hinted at here in the beginning by the delayed verbal structure and seemingly wild scattering of subjects, objects, and descriptors. Such tendencies

---

10 Of course, while I am in no position to say whether or not these lines would have been difficult to understand for a native speaker of Old English, it seems likely that their extremely unique word order would conflate the contemporary audience’s expectations to some degree.
become much more obvious in later passages. In order to see just how *Exodus* compares to other Old English poems, it is worth comparing its first seven lines to the opening 11 lines of *Beowulf*:

"Hwæt! We Gardena in geardagum, ðeodcyninga þrym gefrunon, hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon! Oft Scyld Scefing sceafena þreatum, monegum mægþum meodosetla ofteah, egðode eorlas, syðdan ærest weard feascæft funden; he þæs frofre gebad, weox under wolcnum weordmyndum þah, oððæt him æghwylc þara ymbsittendra ofer hronrade hyran scolde, gomban gyldan; þæt wæs god cyning!

‘Lo! We have heard of the glory of the Spear-Danes, of the people-kings, in days gone by, how the princes performed courageous deeds! Often Scyld Scefing seized mead-benches from enemy hosts, from many clans, he terrified earls, after previously being found destitute; from then he experienced that comfort, he grew under the heavens and throve in honors, until each of the neighboring peoples over the whale-road had to hear him, to pay him tribute; that was a good king!’

A literal, word-for-word translation of each would run as follows:

*Exodus* 1-7:

Lo! We far and near heard have/ over middle-earth Moses’ dooms,/ the wonderful word-right, for men’s generations,/ in heaven blessings each/ after the baleful journey the reward of life,/ for the living each long lasting wisdom/ to warriors to say. Hear he who wills!

*Beowulf* 1-11:

Lo! We the Spear-Danes in days of yore the people-kings the glory have heard, how the princes fame won! Often Scyld Sceafing seized from enemies from many clans, mead-benches he seized, terrified earls, though before he was destitute found; he that comfort experienced, grew under sky in honors throve, until him each of the neighboring ones over whale-road to hear had to, to pay tribute: that was a good king!

Notice that both have a similar pattern of word order. The tendency to place the subject pronoun (we) in front of the objects of the phrase and then close the sentence with the verb is part of normal Old English syntax. This pattern is called a SOV structure, short for Subject-Object-Verb. Despite their grammatical similarity, it is salient that in *Exodus*’s seven lines there is just one long sentence and a challenge, while in
Beowulf’s 11 there are three distinct sentences. Also, the verbal phrases in Beowulf are seldom interrupted by objects as they are in Exodus.

In this excerpt from Beowulf, the word order is not particularly tricky. One does not have to search around in order to find the subject of a verb or an object. In fact, such grammatically associated words are almost always in the same line, with appositive modifiers adjacent to each other. As already mentioned, the introduction of Exodus is quite unlike this. Appositive phrases such as feor ond neah...ofe middangeard ‘far and near over middle-earth’ are split up and mixed across two lines with the verbal clause gefrigen habbað...Moyses domas, ‘Have heard about Moses’ judgments’. It is necessary to cast about and reassemble the words in Exodus in order to piece together the sentences. Beowulf’s syntax is much more representative of Old English poetry as a whole than that of Exodus.

As has been demonstrated, Exodus’ introduction is much more challenging grammatically than other analogous Old English works. But as alluded to earlier, the poem is also established as a spiritual and intellectual challenge with the last sentence “gehyre se ðe wille! ‘listen/obey he who will!’” This phrase, whose verb is a jussive subjunctive, can be interpreted to mean “let him hear who wishes to”. The implication is that the listening will not be easy, but, if achieved correctly, will result in “bote lifes, ‘life’s reward’, just like the hearing of Moses’ law. Interestingly, the verb gehyre, from gehyran, means both “to hear” and “to obey”. There is precedent for the word’s use to convey obedience in Beowulf. Note that in lines 8b-11a the poet writes:

“...he ðæs frofre gebad/
weox under wolcnum, weord-myndum ðah/
oddæt him æghwylc ðara ymb-sittendra/
ofer hron-rade hyran scolde./

While neither poem has punctuation in the Manuscript, it is still possible to speak of “sentences” in the sense of a syntactically and semantically complete unit of thought.

Compare Exodus’s “we...gefrigen habbað...secgan, ‘we... have heard... to say’ to Beowulf’s “hyran scolde, had to obey.” The former is spread out over seven lines, while all of the auxiliary verbs in this excerpt from Beowulf are adjacent.
The verb *gehyre* here is not simply asking readers/listeners to pay attention. Rather, like the legendary king Scyld Scefing, it is commanding the audience to heed the poem. The *Exodus* author, just as Moses and Christ did (Ex. 15:26, John 14:15, Mark 4:9, Mark 8:34), is challenging listeners to not only hear and understand the story, but to apply it to their own lives and obey its message.

This challenge to hear and understand a story on multiple registers at once (literal, typological, and allegorical) is introduced by “*hwæt*, ‘lo/what’, an interjection that also opens the poems Beowulf, Andreas, and Juliana, framing Exodus within the discourse of heroic poetry, and giving the work yet another layer of meaning. The phrase establishes within the minds of listeners a set of expectations associated with heroic poetry: armies, war, battle, and heroes; yet it is up to the reader to untangle the grammar and figure out which characters fulfill which roles. The poem is also set up as an allegory for salvation, for “*bote lifes*, ‘life’s reward’, a process that will be explained if one listens carefully and understands well.

Of specific interest in the first passage is the word *wræclico*. Both the manuscript and Lucas have the word spelled that way, however, Lucas glosses it as “wonderful”. This is probably because it is nearly identical to the word *wrætlico*, which is a very common way to express “wonderful” in OE poetry. Yet if one looks up the first component *wræc*, it is glossed as “having to do with exile”. It seems that the phrase “*wræclico wordriht*” is a pun referring to the law given to Moses during the exile. Compare *wræclico* to other compounds such as *wræcsip* ‘travel in a foreign land’, *wraecmann* ‘a fugitive’, or *wraeclast* ‘path of exile’¹⁴. Each of these convey a sense of exile, and Moses was given the “*wordriht*, ‘law’” while on top of Mt. Sinai (Ex. 20:2-17), in a state that could certainly be described as “*wraeclico*, ‘exile-like’”. The point

¹³ *Friedrich Klaeber*. *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. P.1
here, perhaps, is that by choosing the variant *wreclic* (rather than the more common *wretlic* ‘amazing, ornate’), the poem embeds another small detail for the challenged reader to explicate: the idea that the laws of Moses are “outlandish” or in some sense “foreign” or “strange”. This detail foregrounds the notion of being in this world but not of it, and of God’s wisdom being man’s folly. It should also be noted that lines 2-3 establish a rhetorical pattern that becomes central to the poem’s overall structure: that of long lists of appositive modifiers. For example, “*Moyses domas, wreclico wordriht*, ‘the judgements of Moses, the exile-like/wonderful law’” is a densely packed phrase that conveys to whom, how, and under what conditions the law was revealed to mankind (*haleðum*).

By challenging the reader with the phrase *gehyre se de wille*, the poem becomes more than a neutral narrative. It is transformed into an enigmatic enterprise that forces its audience to stretch their thinking in order to unlock its secrets. They are changed from mere readers into riddlers, whose job it is to wrestle with a highly riddlesome work. They must not approach the poem with a passive mindset, but must be prepared to actively solve the riddlesome episodes in the poem. Figuring out just what the author means is the challenge and the reward. After drawing readers/listeners in and inviting them into the exercise, the poem employs a system of thematically associated riddlesome passages that, by merit of their successive order, have a cumulative effect on the reader’s/listener’s mind. That is, the poem leads its audience to a certain lesson or solution by posing a series of peculiarities that build upon each other when read correctly. Throughout the rest of this work, these places where a system of thematic association exists will be examined. How such a system works to build meaning, and where it comes from within the context of medieval literature will also be discussed. As the analysis of this short introductory passage demonstrates, *Exodus* is an impressively complex work that combines a literal narrative with multiple shades of allegory and typology, framed within the heroic poetic tradition to be a work at once intensely narrative, theological, and instructional. In the end, the poem represents not only a certain genre of writing, but a way of thinking, communicating, and educating that is part and parcel of the medieval mindset.
Traditional Tensions

As previously mentioned, *Exodus* is a difficult poem. On nearly every level it poses a challenge to its readers, be it grammatical, syntactic, morphological, or simply interpretive. Early on, much of the scholarly literature struggled to construe even the basic meaning of the work and its connection to the author’s intent. Some scholars considered it confusing, while some felt that it was just plain bad poetry. Unable to make sense of the so-called “Patriarchal digression” (lines 362-446), Hugo Balg called it a “störende Interpolation, ‘a disturbing interpolation’”15. W.P. Ker said that the lines are “intolerable”. He went on to say that “no reader will hesitate to cut this out as an interpolated passage.”16 These complaints are only about one section of the poem; there are many more about the rest of it. Despite the work’s difficulty, two major interpretative trends gradually appeared within the scholarly corpus: reading the poem as a literal retelling of the Exodus as narrated in scripture, or seeing it as a clever typological reframing of that story. The former trend was favored early on after the poem’s “rediscovery” in the late 19th century, while the latter gradually emerged throughout the 20th century. Typological interpretation became the focus of scholarly attention in the 1970’s and 1980’s.

Some proponents of a literal reading of *Exodus* include Balg, Ker, and Craigie17. These and other early scholars tend to read the work as a poetic paraphrase of the Biblical narrative as recorded in Exodus 13-14. This reading is likely inspired by the manuscript environment surrounding the work. The other three poems in MS Junius 11 are very much grounded within their scriptural narrative sources, with the obvious exceptions of *Genesis B* and the non-canonical portions of *Christ and Satan*18. None of these other poems seem to be quite as typologically complex as *Exodus*, instead favoring a more concrete route.

17 I take these scholars from Hauer’s “The Patriarchal Digression in the Old English *Exodus*, Lines 362-446”.
18 *Genesis B*, is not properly its own poem, but it has been identified as a very long interpolation (817 lines) inserted into *Genesis*. The section treats the non-canonical rebellion and subsequent casting down of Satan from heaven. The striking similarity between this account and Milton’s *Paradise Lost* has been the subject of much scholarly speculation. It is thought by some that Milton, a friend of Junius, may have read the interpolation and drawn inspiration for his own work. *Christ and Satan* details, among Christ’s other accomplishments, the Harrowing of Hell, which is not stated in scripture either, although a staple in church tradition.
for delivering their poetic and theological messages. Among them, *Exodus* stands out with its multiple sites of multiple meaning, highly idiosyncratic vocabulary and diction, and its constantly shifting allegorical devices. Yet it is the second long poem in a series of four, making it susceptible to a more cursory reading than *Genesis*, especially given that the latter is longer than the other three combined. It seems likely, and forgivably so, that early scholars would have assumed a greater thematic and poetic unity among the works in the manuscript, especially because it was originally thought to have been composed by one poet, Cædmon.

As a poetic adaption of a prose historical narrative, this poem seems to have proven quite frustrating when read literally. After all, it frenetically shifts its focus between characters, scenery, and even the ways that it describes certain individuals. For example, in lines 71b-74 the poet says:

```
þær halig God
wið færbryne folc gescylde
bælce oferbrædde byrnendne heofon,
halgan nette, hatwendne lyft.
```

‘There Holy God shielded the people from the terrible heat, [He] covered over the burning heaven, the torrid sky, with the roof-beam [implied tabernacle], the holy net.’

One moment, the poet is talking about the pillar of cloud as a shield from the heat of the sun, and within a line, he/she calls it a net, which would make a poor umbrella indeed. At another point, the narrator is telling about the order in which the tribes are crossing the newly-parted Red Sea, only to launch into an extensive retelling of large parts of *Genesis*. Worse yet, the anticipated battle between the Israelites and the Egyptians never actually occurs, despite the appearance of the traditional beasts of battle. Even more disappointing, the parting of the Red Sea, an event captured in all its visual splendor by Hollywood time and again, is initially conveyed not through the narrator, but as a reported event that has already been performed by Moses while he is giving a speech to his people. A strictly literal reading of the work is an

---

19 *Genesis* ends at 2,936 lines. Compare to *Exodus, Daniel*, and *Christ and Satan*, none of which is more than 800 lines.
20 The so-called “Beasts of Battle” is a motif that often signals impending battle. For more on the subject, see Adrien Bonjour’s “*Beowulf* and the Beasts of Battle.”
excruciating exercise in the suspension of disbelief. This may be why *Exodus* was given relatively little space in academic publications for so long.

After a period of relative obscurity, the poem seems to have received a great deal of scholarly study once modern English translations became available at the turn of the twentieth century. Starting after successive adaptations first by William Johnson, then Francis Blackburn, and finally Charles Kennedy, additional academic attention yields much more published scholarship. No doubt a result of this increased interest, the poem began to be treated with greater critical care and saw increasingly complex readings of it appearing in the literature. In this environment, individuals began to notice the typologically loaded symbols central to the work’s interpretation. Authors such as Bright (1912), George Krapp (1931), Peter Lucas (1970’s), J.R. Hall (1970’s), Maxwell Luria (1980’s) and Thomas N. Hall (1990’s) have teased out many of the work’s tangled typological traits. Some of these saliently tower above the others, like the pillars of flame and cloud, while others suggest a double meaning more covertly, such as the fleeting Israelite moniker *sæman*, ‘sailor’. Still others require a good deal of thought, such as the word *bælce* in line 73. It seems that today allegorical and typological readings of the poem abound, and it is certainly worth pointing out that they have borne much fruit. My reading of the poem is in line with this body of scholarship, though it approaches *Exodus* from a different angle.

As an example of the explanatory power granted to scholars by typology, let us reconsider the word *bælce* by revisiting lines 71b-74.

```plaintext
…Pær halig God
wid færbryne folc gescylde
*bælce* oferbrædde byrnendne heofon
halgan nette, hatwendne lyft.
```

---

21 My survey of the literature is informed by Charles Kennedy’s bibliography, circa 1916.
22 “There Holy God shielded the people from the terrible heat, He covered over the burning heaven, the torrid sky, with the roof-beam, the holy net.”
On a literal level, it would seem strange to call the pillar of cloud a “covering”, especially because this word typically refers to the beams covering a house. In his commentary, Lucas says the poet uses the word to draw a comparison between the pillar of cloud and the tabernacle²³. Assuming that one accepts the *dægscyld*, ‘day-shield’ pillar as a type of tabernacle, one can infer that the heat from which it shields the people is not only literal heat, but the heat of God’s just wrath against a wicked, rebellious, and sinful world, a theme that is central to every work in the manuscript. It should be noted that the tabernacle was the only place, before Solomon built the temple, in which refuge from sin was possible and where one could be reconciled to God. The tabernacle and its office of high priest was itself a precursor for Christ, as Hebrews 5:1-10 suggests, “… [Christ] was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.”

However, while typological and allegorical interpretations have gone a long way towards making the poem coherent, they can seem disjointed. It is apparent that the poem is rife with typological allusions, but why? In this case, it is clear that *Exodus*’ level of literal meaning is probably just as salient as its allegorical and typological registers of meaning. If both levels of meaning are intended to be not only understood, but actually focused on, then how is a reader to reconcile these two competing interpretations when they overlap, as often they do?

As an example, let us examine lines 103b-107a:

“Forð gesawon
lifes latpeow lifweg metan;
segl siðe weold, sæmen æfter
foron flodwege. Folc wæs on salum,
hlud herges cyrm.”

“They saw life’s guide in front marking out the way of life; the sail controlled the journey, [and] the seamen proceeded after [it] on the flood-way. The folk were joyful, the army’s clamor loud.”

²³ Lucas, p. 88, note to line 73: “*bælce* refers to the central beam in the roof of the Tabernacle (Ex. 36:33), or, by extension, the ceiling of the Tabernacle…”
Notice how the poem seems to quickly and economically shift registers. At first it is literally describing the Israelite journey, but then, with the use the single word *segel*, ‘sail’ it enters the realm of typology. One moment the Israelites are following the *latpeow*, ‘lit.-leading-servant’ along the *lifweg*, ‘life-way [i.e. the road that will lead them to safety]’, and the next they are being drawn forth by a sail. The nautical vocabulary used here helps establish a metaphor that is carried out throughout the rest of the work, which will be explored in a subsequent chapter. For now, what is relevant is the pattern (or seeming lack thereof) of alternating between levels of meaning. One moment the Israelites are in the desert, and then they are sailors on a ship, and just as quickly they are once again an army of exiles standing firmly in the scorching wasteland. That is, certain lines suggest either a literal or allegorical reading, but the poem’s focus itself shifts between these registers constantly. Much of the scholarship on the poem has focused on small but interesting moments of typology or on reasons why the literal narrative is important, but I disagree with the scholar who extrapolates the reading of one section to the entirety of the whole poem. The short quote above demonstrates that *Exodus* is both typological and riddlesome at once. Approaching the poem as an interactive riddle is an explanatory vehicle that accounts for the poem’s chimeric quality.

Clearly in a passage like this, and there are many others like it, one cannot pick and choose a certain level of meaning to highlight because the text itself does not allow such a reading to be coherent. Rather, one must accept the work’s challenge to “hear it if you can” and take the time to figure out how these words and their implications can all be true at once. *Exodus* is not the typical typologically-engaged work. It is different from *Genesis* because it does not merely contain typological figures. Instead, it actively uses typology in a playful way to create both difficulty in comprehension but clarity in message. Such a reading is possible, and there are analogues to this type of literature in the Old English corpus; yet they are not to be found within the genres of epic or heroic poetry, nor even in narratives in general. Rather, what *Exodus* appears to be doing most closely resembles the artful ambiguity so prevalent in *The Exeter Book*, Aldhelm’s *Enigmata*, and Alcuin’s *Disputatio regalis et nobilissimi iuvenis Pippini cum*
Albino scholastico. In the following section, we will see how these poetic works, abundant in the vernacular languages and in Latin, were part of a very large and popular didactic tradition that sought to combine learning and entertainment through riddling. Perhaps by applying these interpretative principles to Exodus, we will see that the poem has a textual unity and function that has been previously little noticed and even less understood by scholars.

---

24 “The Discussion of the Royal and Most Noble Young Man Pippin with the Scholar Albinus.” Martha Bayless discusses this work and its significance to Carolingian humor in great detail. See: Halsall’s Humor, History and Politics in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, pp. 157-178.
Riddles Out of the Dark

Neither a largely literal reading nor a tightly typological one will adequately account for all of *Exodus*’ abundant idiosyncrasies. While there has been a great deal of excellent scholarship revolving around certain details and episodes within the poem, there has been little talk of the work’s overall textual unity, probably because such a discussion is difficult to frame within conventional interpretations of the work. However, if one takes a step back and considers *Exodus* not simply as a heroic poem, but as that and more, one can begin to notice the work’s narrative landscape. Prompted by the opening challenge, the reader can see the work as an interactive word-puzzle. Readers/listeners can engage with the text in a much more fruitful way if they try to gehyre it in both comprehension and action. Essentially, it is necessary to engage the text not from our own modern notions of what is and is not “good poetry”, but to try to approach the text with an open problem-solving mindset, inquiring, “how might 10th and 11th century Anglo-Saxon readers have approached this text?” Taking this more culturally relative position, one is free to play with this riddlesome text, to map out its nuances, and to try to connect them in a coherent way, yielding a reading that accounts for all of the work’s details, rather than chucking out the inconvenient or difficult parts as irrelevant interpolations.

At this point it becomes necessary to ask what type of work *Exodus* could be. On the surface, it appears to be a heroic poem. It starts with that famous interjection hwæt!, a marker that begins so many other Anglo-Saxon epic poems. Yet it quickly becomes clear that there is more going on here than the relatively straightforward story-telling one finds in heroic tales. The work is set apart by its tendency to use esoteric phrases in reference to arcane allusions within the biblical narrative, seeming more like a

---

25 If an explanation for a difficult passage can be found that is simpler than pointing to interpolations and unnecessary digressions, one must pursue it. C.S. Lewis discusses this principle, generally known by the name “Occam’s razor”, in *The Discarded Image*, p. 15. Despite this, scholars in the past have tended to favor discarding difficulties in the work through emendations and the ever-dismissive label of “interpolation.”

26 Such as *Beowulf*, *Andreas*, and *Juliana*. The word is highly iconic of Anglo-Saxon poetry not only as a way to grab an audience’s attention, but because it emphasizes the oral and performative aspect of these poems. Today these works are often thought of as “texts” because they come to us in printed form, but their origin in oral tradition, as performances should not be forgotten. For more discussion on the word hwæt’s wide array of meanings and uses in poetry, consult its entry in Bosworth & Toller’s *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*. For more on the distinctions and implications behind orality and textuality of medieval texts, see *From Memory to Written Record* by M. T. Clanchy.
riddle than a narrative. The author of *Exodus* sought to combine these two styles, yielding a poem that is both story and lesson, at once entertaining and exacting. The real question is, did literature like this exist at the time, and what was its purpose?

The medieval genre of the riddle is well attested. For examples related to England, one need only look at *The Exeter Book*, Aldhelm’s *Enigmata*, the anonymous *Dialogue of Solomon and Saturn*, and Alcuin’s *Disputatio*. *The Exeter Book* and the *Enigmata* both contain nearly a hundred riddles in a literary form imitative of oral riddles. Of course, they go further than simply asking “what am I?”, but instead form intricate networks of interrelated riddles, puns, and solutions relating to and creating relations among all aspects of medieval life. As John Niles puts it, “‘Enigmatic poetry’ and ‘wisdom literature’ have a natural affinity for one another, for it often happens that the pleasure of reading poetry of this kind derives from the shock of recognizing the knowledge that one has always had”\(^{28}\). There is a great deal of complexity and depth to these enigmatic poems because they simultaneously act as educator, jester, theologian and playmate.

However, the other two works expand the concept of riddling by changing its form. Rather than posing a question after a series of poetic paradoxes, they embed riddles within the body of another kind of work. *Solomon and Saturn* is framed as a typical dialogue in the spirit of wisdom literature. That is, it is a conversation written like a script between two individuals considered to have been wise. Remarkably, these wise interlocutors are posited as sharing wisdom through riddling. Saturn says that he has searched all the books of men all over the world for one thing, knowledge of the *Pater Noster*. Solomon explains how the prayer works by means of a riddle. Likewise, Alcuin’s *Disputatio* is written as a didactic conversation between Alcuin and his pupil, Pippin. What is important to note here is that these pieces seem to draw a link between learning and riddling, with Alcuin’s account emphasizing the fun of learning in this way. Riddles begin to emerge from all of these sources as a primary means of inquiry and an

\(^{27}\) The *Enigmata* contain precisely 100 while *The Exeter Book* contains somewhere around 92. Lapidge argues on these grounds that *The Exeter Book* was made as a vernacular imitation in the vein of Aldhelm’s work. See: “Introduction to the *Enigmata*”pg. 67.

\(^{28}\) Niles, p. 310.
activity that has great instructional power. This power comes from comparing unlike things and realizing that there are moral and theological lessons to be seen everywhere in life. Part of what makes a riddle so rich and memorable is the multiplicity of meanings that exist at once. Even if the “answer” to a riddle filled with double-entendre is pure and innocent, the other sexually-charged response is still valid and is part of the fun of the process. Niles argues that, “polysemy is not a feature unique to those riddles with a sexual double entendre; it is a *sine qua non* of riddling in general, and it is something that turns real-life oral riddling sessions into far more lively events than they might otherwise be.” Riddling, especially in the semi-oral culture of early Medieval England, was an enjoyable group experience and a communal way of sharing a text to discuss it.

One quick example of how riddles can create associative meaning can be seen in Mercedes Salvador’s interpretation of a series of riddles from *The Exeter Book*. In her chapter entitled “The Key to the Body: Unlocking Riddles 42-46”²⁹, Salvador discusses Exeter riddles 42-46 and their thematic connection. These four are associated because they are considered “dirty riddles”. That is, their language hints at an answer that could be sexually related. For example, riddle 44 goes like this:

```
Wrætlic hongað bi weres þeo,
frean under sceate. Foran is þyrel.
Bið stiþ ond heard, stede haþað godne;
蓬ne se esne his agen hrægl
ofer cneo hefeð, wile þæt cuþe hol
mid his hangellan heafde gretan
þæt he efenlang ær oft gefylde.³⁰
```

“A strange thing hangs by a man’s thigh under its master’s clothes. It is pierced in front, is stiff and hard, has a good fixed place. When the man lifts his own garment up above the knee, he wishes to visit with the head of this hanging instrument the familiar hole which it, when of equal length, has often filled it before.”

---

²⁹ Salvador, Mercedes. Ch. 2 from *Naked Before God: Uncovering the Body in Anglo-Saxon England*.
³⁰ Translation by Mercedes Salvador.
The solution typically offered for this is “key”, but the implications for “penis” are quite obvious. Yet Salvador argues that they are not simply brash double-entendres, but rather that these “dirty riddles” are thematically related. Each of them is wound round with multiple, seemingly conflicting meanings like this one and yet they all have a non-dirty answer. In order they are: cock and hen (42), soul and body (43), key (44), dough (45), and Lot and his daughters (46). They all (with the exception of 43) imply or explicitly mention sex, probably for amusement. However, each also shows the relationship (by allegory, typology, and patristic influence) between the soul and body, and implicitly warns against the body and its desires ruling over the soul. This reading is only apparent if one is a bocer, ‘scholar’ and reads them within the context of each other. That is, there is a progressive association of meaning that can take place when these poems are read in succession. Each poem does have its particular spiritual significance, but when read together, they become didactic by building off of each other. This is a great example of the use of riddles for entertainment, challenge, and teaching all at once and provides an analogue to my claim that *Exodus* is a riddlesome poem.

Riddles then, were in large part popular because of their perceived didactic value and amusing nature. However, the reason for the abundance of Biblical riddling may not be immediately obvious to modern readers. Thus, it is necessary to consider the medieval worldview at large. Unlike in today’s literature, where there is a sharp dichotomy separating religious from secular literature, the medieval reader saw no real distinction between the two. According to Niles “All extant Old English poetry is… religious poetry, at least in the sense that it was composed and copied out by persons who had integrated the basic concepts of Christianity into their mode of thought and perception.” So the vast majority of learned people, the likely audience for *Exodus*, were actively engaged in religious studies of some sort because those were, by and large, the only books that were available at the time in England. Yet most Anglo-Saxon readers were not Jewish, but Christian, and so the Bible becomes a confusing object of study, since less than half of its content would seem to apply to a medieval, non-Hebrew society. As a

---

31 Niles, John. *Old English Enigmatic Poems and Play of the Texts*. P. 3
result, much effort went into understanding scripture and trying to assimilate and reconcile the Old and New Testaments. The result of this endeavor can be summed up in a single word: *figura*. Put simply, a *figura* is a concrete historical event that has prophetic qualities; it parallels future events. It is conceptually related to allegory, though not quite the same, because a *figura* is an actual historical event foreshadowing another real event, and not simply an event that can stand for some other story (or vice versa).

An excellent example of how *figura* works can be seen in medieval interpretations of the significance of the Exodus narrative. For medieval intellectuals who subscribed to this notion of prefiguration, God really did deliver the Israelites from Pharaonic oppression, but this event had more than one purpose; it was not an end in itself. It, like all of the Old Testament accounts, pointed forward in time to Jesus’ coming and delivering mankind from sin. This notion is spelled out explicitly by the apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 10:6: “*haec autem in figura facta sunt nostri ut non simus concupiscentes malorum sicut et illi concupierunt…* ‘But these things were done in a figure for us so that we might not be covetous of evil things as they also were.’” To medieval thinkers, *figura* was also implied by Luke 24, in which Jesus appears after having been resurrected and instructs the men on the road to Emmaus and (later) those who watch Him ascend into heaven. In this chapter, Jesus takes the time to explain every detail in the Old Testament as precursors, or figures, of His own life, giving birth to Christian theology in its earliest form.

Yet there is more to *figura* than simple typology. Picture a figural historical event to be like a pole: there are two ends connected by a shaft. One end represents the event in its historical context, that is, the event as it is perceived by those directly involved. The other end is the salvationary model that it foreshadows, that is, the event in Christ’s life that is paralleled by the former occurrence. Such an understanding of history implies that everything happens for a reason that we, with the aid of hindsight and revelation from God, can look back and understand these *figura* for what they are. History can be

---

33 1 Corinthians 10:1-12 draws several parallels between the Exodus narrative and Christians in general.
34 The Israelites and Egyptians in our case.
read as a narrative about past events but also as allegory for today and eventually for the consummation of all history: man’s reunion with his maker for all eternity in heaven. Hence line 531 in Exodus: “He us ma onlyhð/ nu us boceras beteran secgad/ lengran lyftwynna. ‘He grants us more, as scholars now tell us about better, longer joys in heaven.’” Moreover, our earthly salvation itself is only a shadow of our eternal salvation to come, that time when we “made perfect in love.”

So both events that happen to men in different times point to a reality outside of time that, as C. S. Lewis (explaining Boethius) suggests, has been present to God always because He is eternal, not simply perpetual. Thus Exodus as a poem is a perfect example of this figura thinking in that it takes a historical event and narrates it from beginning to end. The story, read on a literal level, makes sense as a history, albeit an eccentric one obsessed with ironic foreshadowing of drowning. But it also looks forward to the time that the author lives in, a time when Christ has already lived out His mission and has already brought salvation from the sin-cold sea. It culminates in the arrival of the sailors to the heavenly harbor, which itself points to the end of time, to which the author and his audience doubtless looked forward with great anticipation. In the end, the Christian sailors are all rewarded through the strange closing scene of becoming like beasts of battle. The Egyptians “Hie wið God wunnon, ‘fought with God’ (515) and lost. The readers, as God’s faithful sheep, are fed, somewhat ironically, by the spoils of war, thus making them very much like the ravens and wolves that feast after battle; but I will discuss this confusing conclusion in greater detail later. Suffice to say that the figural model of thinking and interpreting history is fully attested to in Exodus. It also lends itself quite naturally to a riddlesome game. The Exodus poet appears to

35 1 John 4:13-21
36 Summing up Boethius’ views on divine determinism (whether God’s foreknowing necessitates an act), he writes: “Eternity is quite distinct from perpetuity, from mere endless continuance in time. Perpetuity is only the attainment of an endless series of moments, each lost as soon as it is attained. Eternity is the actual and timeless fruition of illimitable life. Time, even endless time, is only an image, almost a parody, of that plentitude; a hopeless attempt to compensate for the transitoriness of its ‘presents’ by infinitely multiplying them…And God is eternal, not perpetual. Strictly speaking, He never foresees; He simply sees. Your ‘future’ is only an area, and only for us a special area of His infinite Now. He sees (not remembers) your yesterday’s acts because yesterday is still ‘there’ for Him; He sees (not foresees) your tomorrow’s acts because He is already in tomorrow. As a human spectator, by watching my present act, does not at all infringe its freedom, so I am none the less free to act as I choose in the future because God, in that future (His present) watches me acting.” From The Discarded Image, pg. 89.
be taking the notion of figural interpretation from Paul and is running with it, playfully weaving a narrative that works on multiple interlacing levels of meaning at once.

Scholars of medieval literature are no doubt aware that riddles were, as they still are, a popular pastime for people of all social classes alike. Today, a good deal of scholarship focuses on understanding the riddles of *The Exeter Book*, on Aldhelm’s *Enigmata*, and other riddling writings. Given the popularity of the riddling tradition within Anglo-Saxon England at this time, it would be prudent to read *Exodus* with this in mind, especially because of the challenge that launches the work. And so I propose a particular reading strategy for the poem: one in which readers approach the work with an active, problem-solving mentality. When one encounters a strange word or passage, it should be seen as deliberately difficult. In order to get at the message of the work, one must be willing to hear the poem, by listening carefully, and to *hyre*, ‘obey’ it by playing its game and attempting to unriddle it. Being rife with riddles, *Exodus* has left its modern readers in the dark since its literary reintroduction. In the next section, I will apply this strategy to many of the poem’s more confusing passages in order to see what treasures might be locked within this tightly-sealed *wordhord*, ‘word-hoard’.
A Riddlesome Reading

The enigma of Exodus begins with a seven line introduction to the poem. As previously discussed, this section initiates readers into the challenge of hearing the poem (grasping what it is saying) and heeding the poem (learning its lessons and applying them to one’s life) with the phrase *gehyre se de wille*, ‘let him hear who will.’ Thus the poem transforms the reader into a riddler, whose job it is to play the poet’s game: a constant grappling with strange syntax, difficult diction, and shifting registers of typology, allegory, and the literal narrative. However, as the poem progresses, it recreates the reader again and again, drawing them into the narrative so that, ultimately, they come to be identified with the Israelites as fellow sailors on board the ship of the Church. This chapter will explore how the poem achieves this transformation, unpacking many of the more riddlesome instances along the way.

The literal narrative in Exodus follows the Biblical narrative in Exodus 12-15:21 quite closely. The narrative present tells about the Israelites escaping Egypt, guided by Moses. There is a brief recounting of the events leading up to the Israelites’ actual flight, including a passing mention of Moses’ encounter with God through the burning bush and an allusion to the ten plagues. These mentions are important to a figural reading of the poem because they situate the work in history, one of the necessary characteristics of a *figura*. One example of this recounting can be seen in lines 12-18:

“He was leof Gode, leoda aldor/ horsc ond hreðgerleaw, herges wisal, freom folctoga.
Faraones cyn./ godes andsacan, gyrdwite band/ þær him gesealde sigora Waldendl modgum magoræswum his maga feorh/ onwist edës Abrahames sunum.

‘He was dear to God, the commander of the people, alert and prudent, the leader of the army, the valiant commander. He (God) bound Pharaoh’s kin, God’s adversary with rod-punishment.

[Alternative line 14] Pharaoh’s kin (Moses) bound God’s adversary by rod-punishment. There the
Controller of Victories gave to him, the brave leader, his kinsmen’s life and inhabitation of the homeland to Abraham’s sons.”

Already the observant reader will see that there is ambiguity in line 14 with the identification of the case of “cyn, ‘kin’. If it is accusative, as Lucas glosses it, then the line should be taken as part of the description of “Godes andsaca, ‘God’s adversary’, yielding the appositive phrase “[he] bound pharaoh’s kin, God’s adversary.” But we may also read “faraones cyn, Pharaoh’s kin” as the last in the long list of nominative appositives applied to “leoda aldor, ‘the leader of the people’ from line 12. In this case, the line could be rendered “Pharaoh’s kin bound God’s adversary”, drawing attention to the fact that Moses was adopted by Pharaoh’s daughter in Exodus 2:10. This reading lends another shade of riddling to the work by causing readers to figure out who “faraones cyn, Pharaoh’s kin” really is. It also makes more sense to read it in this way because there is no change of subject after the long description of Moses before we are told that someone bound the Lord’s adversary. It is only logical that Moses would still be the subject, rather than the work suddenly jumping to the Lord as subject of the verb “band, ‘bound’.

Early on in the poem, the author brings uses artful ambiguity to encourage his audience to ask questions about identity. This thinking about who is whom in the poem will lend itself well to the poem’s eventual mixing of identities later- that is, transforming readers into riddlers and then into participants in the action themselves. Thus, in these few lines readers are given all the necessary Biblical background knowledge to follow the narrative, as well as challenges along the way that prepare them for the riddlesome work to come.

It is also worth mentioning a detail that Lucas brings up in his commentary regarding the phrase Godes andsacan, ‘God’s adversary’37. He points out that this phrase refers to Satan in both Genesis B (line 442) and in Christ and Satan (line 190). It seems that the poet is pointing out that within the context of the story, Pharaoh is literally God’s adversary because he is actively opposing God’s plan for the exodus of the Israelites. Simultaneously, the poet gives Pharaoh a name that links him with Satan,

37 Lucas, p. 76 note to line 15.
establishing an allegorical reading of the work in which Pharaoh and his armies represent Satan and his
demons trying to thwart Moses and the Israelites, who will be read as Christ and the Church later on.
Interestingly, this epithet is exceedingly appropriate for Pharaoh in the medieval imagination, thanks to
Isidore of Seville’s entry about him. He writes:

“Pharaoh nomen est non hominis, sed honoris, sicut et apud nos Augusti appellantur reges, cum
propriis nominibus censeantur. Exprimitur autem in latino Pharao denegans eum, utique Deum,
sive dissipator eius. Populi enim Dei fuit afflictor.

‘Pharaoh is not the name of a man, but of a public office, just as among us kings are called
‘Augustus’, since they decree by their own names. But Pharaoh is expressed in Latin as ‘denying
him’, certainly this ‘him’ refers to God, or ‘his destroyer’. For he was the adversary of God’s
people.’

This is the first strong indication that typology will play a central role in the poem’s interpretation. The
section’s diction suggests a riddling scheme that plays off of traditional figural re
readings of Exodus, but
this device lies dormant for several stanzas before it comes to its full strength.

The narrative continues on, with Pharaoh giving Moses and the Israelites leave after God works
the tenth plague: “…frecne gefylled/ frumbearna fela… ‘[He] fiercely felled many of the first-born” (line
38). So the Israelites leave Egypt, led at first only by Moses. The poem describes the forward journey
through the wilderness with Moses as an expert guide. According to the poet, he takes them through the
wilderness by “uncuð gelad, ‘unknown paths’” (line 58). This phrase is striking because it is exactly the
same as the one used in Beowulf, line 1410. Within that work, Beowulf and his companions are
traversing uncuð gelad on their way to Grendel’s mere, in a suspenseful scene that is reminiscent of a
ghost story. Such a route is portrayed as frightening, full of monsters, niceras, ‘sea-monsters’, and flying
reptiles. It is at the end of such a path that the party stumbles upon the severed head of Hrothgar’s thane

---

38 Isidore, Etymolgie book VII, section vi, entry 43. The role of Isidore and his etymologies in shaping medieval
scholastic thought cannot be underappreciated. His encyclopedic work was a standard textbook for all who were
engaged in formal schooling throughout the early middle ages.
Aeschere. Within the context of *Exodus*, Lucas suggests the phrase may be a literal translation of Wisdom 18:3’s “ignotae viae, unknown paths”. As demonstrated later in the poem, the Israelites, being God’s elect, will be delivered from almost certain death in the Red Sea, and the Anglo-Saxon imagination is meant to be sparked with a sense of fear and foreboding at the mention of such a road. Allegorically, the Israelites come to salvation via this *ignota via*, which brings to mind Matthew 7:14, “But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” Readers who make this association in their minds are thus reminded that following God is risky and will be difficult.

As the people continue on, they are forced onto northern paths because of difficulties. At this point, the Vulgate says:

> “igitur cum emisisset Pharao populum non eos duxit Dominus per viam terrae Philisthim quae vicina est reputans ne forte paeniteret eum si vidisset adversum se bella consurgere et reverteretur in Aegyptum. Sed circumduxit per viam derserti quae est iuxta mare Rubrum et armati ascenderunt filii Israhel de terra Aegypti,

> ‘Therefore, when Pharaoh had sent the people away, the Lord did not lead them by the road through the land of the Philistines, which was near, thinking “lest perchance the people turn back if they see difficulty and rising up to war and are turned back to Egypt.” But He led them around by the desert road which is near the Red Sea and, being armed, the Children of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt.’

The poem follows the Israelites on this journey, saying “nearwe genyddon on norðwegas;/ wiston him be suðan Sigelwara land,/ forbærnred burhheleðu, brune leode,/ hatum heofoncolum. ‘Difficultties forced them onto northern paths; for they knew the Ethiopians’ land to their south, knew the scorched hillsides, the brown people, the hot heaven-coal (or scorching sun)” (lines 68-71). Lucas claims that these lines refer to a long-standing Anglo-Saxon cultural tradition of associating Ethiopia with extreme heat, to the point of scorching the earth barren and the people brown, as alluded to in “The Wonders of the

---

39 Exodus 13:17-18
East”\textsuperscript{40}. It is odd that the author diverges from the Biblical narrative, listing Ethiopia as the place that the people wished to avoid, and not the land of the Philistines. Given the perceived discrepancy between the narratives, it is likely that the “dangers” that drive the Israelites north refer, in fact, to the land of the Philistines as in Exodus 13:17, not Ethiopia. The author is using this discrepancy to cause readers to stop and ask “why would God’s people want to avoid Ethiopia?” Ethiopia is used as a geographic place marker because of its cultural connotations. Lucas says that it is employed for its exotic flare\textsuperscript{41}. Yet it is likely that using Ethiopia here is more than a mere exploitation of an exotic locale. Rather, it seems to play off of Ethiopia’s reputation for deadly heat in the Anglo-Saxon popular imagination and symbolically represents the heat of Hell. For the reader/listener, the inclusion of this detail provides encouragement because God will not lead His people into temptation, but will deliver them from evil.

Shortly afterwards, the Israelites come to Etham, where they make their third camp. It is significant that the next two sections of the poem establish the two main allegorical paradigms within the work. Just as God first revealed himself to the Israelites in physical form at Etham, the poet reveals his primary allegory to readers there:

\begin{quote}
"Pær halig God/ wið færbryne  folc gescylde,/ bælce aferbriðde  byrnendne heofon,/ halgan
nette,  hatwendum lyeft./ Hæfde wederwolcen  widum fæðum/ eordan ond uprodor  efne
gedeled./ lædde leodwerod,  ligfyre adranc/ hate heofontorht.  Hæleð wafedon./ Drihta
gedrymost.

There Holy God shielded the people from the terrible heat, [He] covered over the burning heaven, the torrid sky, with the roof-beam, the holy net. The cloud had evenly divided earth and sky in its wide embrace, [it] led the people, [it] quenched the flaming fire bright in heaven with heat. The warriors, most joyful of hosts, looked on with amazement."
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{40} Lucas, note to lines 70b-71a, p. 87
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
Here the poet increases the difficulty of the riddle by drawing a comparison between the pillar of cloud mentioned in scripture and the tabernacle, both of which involve a beam and a covering. Lucas discusses this at great length in his commentary, linking the word “bælce, ‘beam’ with the central beam of the roof of the tabernacle. The pillar of cloud then, becomes like the tabernacle. Of course the heat from which this tabernacle is shielding the people is not only literal heat, but the heat of God’s just wrath against a wicked, rebellious, and sinful world. Thus, in the poem the cloud represents a precursor to the tabernacle. The tabernacle was the only place, before Solomon built the temple, in which refuge from sin was possible and where one could be reconciled to God. The tabernacle itself was a precursor for Jesus, as Hebrews 5:1-10 states. Thus it is possible that the poem is linking Christ to the cloud as the only means of salvation. It should also be noted that right as the trope of heat as God’s wrath is introduced, His mercy, in the form of the heat-shielding cloud is also. The heat of the Middle East in the Anglo-Saxon imagination is used as a vehicle for this metaphor of salvation and grace. And so Christ and His grace are introduced as central allegorical and typological figures within the work.

The poet gives us the second allegorical paradigm in the very next section:

“Dægsceldes hleo/wand ofer wolcnum; hæfde witig God/sunnan sīðfet segle ofertolden,/swa pa mæstrapas men ne cuðon./ne ða seglrode geseon meahton/eorðbuende ealle cræfte./hu afæstnod was feldhusa maest/siððan He mid wuldre geweorðode/poedeholde. ða was þridda wic/folce to frofre./

‘The Day-shield’s protection moved forth over the sky; wise God had covered the course of the sun with a sail, such that men did not know the halyards, and the earth-bound could not see the sail-yard by any skill, how the greatest was fastened for the field-houses (tents), when He honored the faithful with glory. That was the third camp for the people for comfort.”

Notice how the poet describes the cloud now as a sail that also shields the Israelites from the sun. This mention of the sail initiates an extended allegory that persists throughout the rest of the poem. The work

42 See Lucas, notes to lines 73, 74, and 76, p. 88.
suggests that the Israelites are onboard a ship guided by Moses by claiming that the pillar is like a sail (and therefore a mast by extension). This becomes apparent later when the Israelites are repeatedly referred to as “sæmen, ‘sailors’. The poet here is deliberately calling to mind the words of St. Ambrose of Milan, who famously constructed his own metaphor for the Church as a ship. In an advisory letter to bishops, dated from the fourth century, Ambrose writes “Sitting at the helm of the Church, you pilot the ship against the waves. Take firm hold of the rudder of faith so that the severe storms of this world cannot disturb you. The sea is mighty and vast, but do not be afraid, for as Scripture says: he has founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the waters.” By conflating these ideas, the poet establishes the Israelites not only as the protagonists within the poem, but as symbolizing the Church itself. The rest of the work will duly document the journey of the Israelites and their deliverance to safety from the Red Sea, as well as the allegorical journey of the sailors and their deliverance from the land-men to the safety of the heavenly harbor. Thus, the poem becomes an epic narrative about salvation: how it works and God’s role in it. By equating the Israelites with the Church, the reader, who was presumably part of the Church, is suddenly given a new vested interest in reading closely to see how the Church fares. They are also allowed to identify with the Israelites, with the goal in mind that they should emulate their faithful obedience if they wish to be saved.

Another interesting characteristic of this passage is the use of the word Peodenholde, ‘steadfast people’ in line 87 that is used to describe the Israelites. It is a striking choice because it literally translates to “people who hold fast” and usually refers to being faithful to one’s lord or king. It seems that the poet is drawing a comparison between the Israelites’ relationship to God and the relationship of a good people with their king. In each case, fealty is rewarded by giving gifts. The poet is reframing the story in a way that evokes the medieval cultural expectation that one is faithful to one’s lord in all circumstances. The way the poem speaks, readers are encouraged to remain faithful in the face of adversity, just like the Israelites do here. This reframing challenges the audience in the spirit of gehyre se ðe wille! by implying

---

43 Ambrose. *Letters: Translated by Sister Mary Beyenka.* (Epist. 2, 1-2. 4-5.7)
that God, like all good rulers, rewards his faithful subjects. This is a good incentive for the reader to imitate the people who hold fast. This promise is realized at the end of the poem, when the work closes with Moses’ wife handing out treasure to the Israelites on the far shore of the Red Sea.

The compounding effect of the riddlesome references has thus steadily built up throughout the work. Taken individually, these suggestions of sailors and day-shields would be interesting on their own, but when combined with the imagery of the two pillars, they create an explicit allegory wherein the Israelites come to stand for the church at large on its journey through the sea of life for the heavenly harbor. Note the words used for the pillars in line 94: “beamas twegen, ‘two beams.” It is strange that both pillars would be described as being seen at once, yet this scene has caused some scholars to propose that in the poem, both the cloud and fire are simultaneously present. Such a reading violates the Biblical narrative, in which each beam appeared in turn, night and day. So why would the poet include this phrase? Lucas points out that the word beamas is used in Exeter Riddle 30, in the Dream of the Rood, and in Elene as a reference to the cross. 

Mentioning both pillars at once makes it quite clear that these allegorical Israelites see the two beams as the means of their salvation, and points out the figura of the pillars as the two beams of the cross.

After this, the poem follows the Israelites as they approach the Red Sea. During this section, there are many sudden switches from allegory to narrative and back that are signaled by a single word. One such example can be seen in line 118. At this point, the poem has foregrounded the literal narrative, and is explaining why the pillar of fire stays by Israel to protect the people at night. The author describes their potential fears as “the terror of the wastes, gray heath-terror, [that] sea storm.” The pillar stays with them to prevent “a sudden fear-clutch put[ting] an end to life…” Interestingly, the first of the two fears are both legitimate ones for people traveling through the wilderness on foot, namely wolves and other such wilderness hardships. However, by naming the third fear, a sea-storm, the author instantly shifts focus to the allegory of the ship of the Church, giving dual meaning to the ensuing phrase. The pillar, or God in

---

44 Lucas, note to line 94, pg. 91.
this part of the allegory, stays with Israel to prevent them from being harmed in their journey and He stays with His Church to prevent their faith dying from the fears and doubts that are everyday experiences for a Christian. God is portrayed as the protector and sustainer of His chosen people. It is both impressive and confounding when the author switches registers of meaning in the poem so quickly, and it is part of what makes the work so riddle-like.

At this point in the narrative, the Israelites have approached the Red Sea. Naturally, they make camp on the shore as they await further direction from Moses and God. After resting and eating, “Fyrdwic aras, wyrpton hie werige, ‘The army-camp arose, the weary having recovered.’” Notice that the unity of the people is emphasized by describing their action with a singular verb, aras. The poet is exploiting the fact that fyrdwic, ‘army-camp’ is a collective noun, and so takes a singular verb. He/she does so to form a link between the singular unit of Israel and the singular unit of the Church as a body, borrowing Paul’s metaphor from 1 Corinthians 12:27. The body of believers is in the middle of enjoying their respite when they suddenly receive the “férspell, ‘fear-news’” that the Egyptians are pursuing them once again. What is most salient about this part of the text is that, upon hearing the dreadful news, the poet describes the fear of the Israelites with the phrase “egsan stodan, ‘fears stood up.’” The description of fear as a rising thing is strongly reminiscent of the way hair stands up when one gets goose bumps. It is an especially poignant and tangible way of describing just how frightened the Israelites were at the thought of pursuit and it should cause readers to think about what shakes their faith and how they handle such a spiritual crisis.

After a lacuna in the manuscript, the poem discusses Pharaoh and his motives for pursuing the people again. According to the author, Pharaoh has become greedy and has forgotten how “se yldracyning, ‘the elder king’ saved his people from certain death. This refers to Jacob’s saving of all Egypt from famine in Genesis 47, although the lacuna prevents this from being explicitly certain. Like Pharaoh then, Satan can also be thought of as a treaty-breaker, since, according to the Old English poem Genesis, he tried to overthrow God in heaven. Both characters are ungrateful and overly prideful, depending on their own strength and pursuing their own agenda rather than God’s. They parallel each other closely, and
in the end, they both share the same fate, as will be discussed later. The author uses the figural character of Pharaoh/Satan as a warning to readers, demonstrating what the consequences will be for hearing the poem but not obeying.

At this point, the Israelites have little choice but to wait by the Red Sea as their hostile pursuers draw ever closer with massacre in mind: the ship of the Church is stuck and in trouble if left on her own. After describing the agony of watching the Egyptians approach, the poet does something very unusual. In lines 161 through 189 the author draws upon several Anglo-Saxon poetic conventions that are normally employed to signal an impending battle:

“Onhwæl þa on heofonum hyrnednebbæ/ (hreopon hererefugolæ hilde grædige/ deawigfeðere)
ofer drihtneum/ wonn welceasegæ.    Wulfas sungon/ atol æfenleod ætes on wenan/ carleasan
deor, cwyldrof beodan/ on laðra last leodmægnes fyl./ hreopon mearcweardas middum nihtum/
 fleah fege gast, folc was genæged/ Hwilum of þam werode  wランス þegnas/ maðon milpaðas
meara bogum./ Him þær segncyning wið þone segn foran/ manna þengel,  mearcþreat rad; /
guðweard gumena grimhelm gespeon./ cyning cinberge (cumbol lixton)/ wiges on wenum,
westhlanca sceoc./ het his hereciste healdan georne/ fæst fyrdgetrum. Freond onsegon laðum
eagan landmanna cyme./ Ymb hine wægon wigend unforhtæ, hare heorawulfas, hilde gretton/
Þurstige þræwiges, þeodenholde./ Hefde him alesæn leoda dugeðe/ tireadigra twa þusendo/
(þæt waron cyningas ond sceowmagas)/ on þet ealde riht, æðelum deore:/ forðon anra gehwilc
ut alædde watnedcynnes wigan æghwilcnæ/ þara þe he on þæm fyrste findan mihte.

‘Then in heaven the horned-beaked ones cried out, the battle-birds, dewey-feathered and eager for the fight, cried out over the prospect of dead troops. Dark choosers of the slain (ie- ravens) and wolves sang out a terrible evening song in expectation of food. The careless beasts, brave in scavenging, waited behind for the fall of the hateful peoples’ army. The mark-wards cried out in the middle of the night, the doomed spirits fled, the people were approached (and thus trapped). From time to time thanes from the audacious army traversed the tracks on horseback. There the banner-king with the banner proceeded at them, ruler of men, with grimhelm fastened. The king
shook his chin-guard and coat of mail. The standard beamed in anticipation of battle. He commanded his troops to diligently hold fast the troop of warriors. The friends saw the approach of the land men with hate in their eye. The dauntless warriors moved around him, the experienced battle-wolves sought after/greeted battle, thirsty for combat, loyal to their lord. He had selected them, noble by lineage, for the troop of the people, a glorious two thousand, that were [themselves] kings and kinsmen, on that old/venerated custom. And then each of them led out every warrior that he could find who was of the weaponed-kin at that time.”

This passage employs the “beasts of battle” convention that is a staple in Anglo-Saxon heroic poetry. Adrien Bonjour discusses the convention at length and how it was employed to foreshadow a battle. In discussing the theme, Bonjour argues that “the theme is ornamental rather than essential or, in other words, that it is used ‘for purposes of embellishment’ only and not because it is important for the narration.” This may be the case for many uses of the motif in Old English Poetry. However, it is well known that there will not be a battle between the Israelites and Egyptians, as this is not how the Biblical story unfolds. For this reason alone, the poet’s choice to include the convention is worth further consideration.

Why would the poet employ the motif so vividly (over 28 lines) if he/she has no intention of actually describing a battle? Is the poet bowing to hackneyed convention, summoning the beasts because that is what must be done when two large groups of enemies approach one another? Perhaps, but more likely, and in keeping with the riddlesome attitude behind the poem, the author is deliberately playing with the expectations of the audience. The reader is led to believe that the Israelites are going to have to fight their way out or drown in the sea, which is exactly what they themselves thought (see Ex. 14:10-12). The desperation of their situation is brought to readers in a way that they themselves can almost feel. Also, by making the readers sympathize with the fearful Israelites, the author challenges them even more directly by asking “will you be faithful or fearful like the Israelites? Do you trust God even when it looks like you are doomed?”

45 Bonjour, p. 565
Lucas points out that the poet employs another important convention: the showing off of warriors on horses before battle was certainly a dominant Germanic convention\textsuperscript{46}. However, the horses are also mentioned in Ex. 14:9 (\textit{omnis equitatus et currus Pharaonis}, all of the horses and chariots of Pharaoh), implying that the author was not merely bringing in a convention out of the blue, but expertly using it to describe the events in Scripture. Note the contrast between the Egyptians and the Israelites. The former are arrogantly awaiting battle, just like the wolves and ravens from the previous section, and are described as “\textit{hare heorawulfas}, ‘hoary sword-wolves’”. This convention of transformation is used in \textit{The Battle of Maldon} to describe the incoming Vikings. Line 96 reads “\textit{Wōdon þā wælwulfas…}, ‘then the slaughter-wolves waded.’”\textsuperscript{47} Again, the author uses a standard convention to bring about yet another spiritual allegory. The poet makes the Egyptians into hateful animals and then calls them “land-men”, implying that they will have no part in salvation whatsoever because they are firmly fixed in this world, as opposed to the sailors who are onboard the ship of the Church. The epithet also immediately foreshadows that they will not survive their attempted crossing of the Red Sea because they are not sailors. By contrast, the Israelites, though intimidated, fix their gaze at the Egyptians “with a hateful eye”. They are the “seamen” who will successfully cross the Red Sea, and who will make the journey to heaven. There is irony in God’s coming salvation, because the land-men will die by walking on dry ground (and then drowning in the sea) while the seamen will sail across the sea to safety by walking on dry land.

This section features some very striking imagery of the Egyptian army. They are described as a pack of swirling, frenzied wolves, thirsty for blood, and expecting to make a meal of the Israelites. It seems possible that they are called gray (and therefore old) because their first-born had all been killed by the Lord’s angel earlier in the story, leaving only the veterans to fight. The poem does say that the troop, who are mostly gray, are already kings and kin of kings, so they are likely the present rulers of Egypt, and many are probably aged. Also, there is ambiguity about the word “\textit{ealde}, ‘old, ancient’” in line 186. In the manuscript, the word is clearly “\textit{eade}”, which would gloss as a dative noun meaning “to, for, or by

\textsuperscript{46} Lucas, see his note to lines 170-171 on pg. 103.
\textsuperscript{47} \textit{The Battle of Maldon}, edited by Bill Griffiths, line 96, p. 34.
wealth”. Thus the line could be read “He had selected them… on that custom by wealth.” Either way, Pharaoh’s army is not just a rag-tag group of farmers; they are the elite, experienced, and wealthiest of his subjects. Such emphasis makes their threat to the Israelites all the more dramatic. Also, allegorically, there could be some tenuous connection between riches and evil: i.e., the ship of the Church is tempted with money just as the Israelites are about to be attacked by wealthy Egyptians. Readers are once again challenged to think about the Egyptians and how they have been affected by all of this wealth. Combined with the previous mention of Pharaoh’s greed in breaking the treaty from Joseph’s era, this is a reminder for readers that “love for money is the root of all evil”\textsuperscript{48}, and a hindrance to heeding the poem’s challenge.

One other important detail here is the way in which the author ties song to battle. Both in line 165 and in 201 the battle-wolves/eager Egyptians sing an “\textit{atol} æfenleoð, ‘terrible evening-song’” in their lust for attacking the Israelites. The connection between Pharaoh and his armies and Satan and his minions is subtly cemented with this phrase because “\textit{atol}, ‘terrible’” also means “having to do with battle.” From this association with pain and suffering it is also metaphorically extended, becoming a euphemism for Hell. According to the Dictionary of Old English, it is used “\textit{in periphrases for hell: paet atole hus / scæf, se atola ham} ‘the horrible house cavern / abode, the horrible home.’”\textsuperscript{49} And so the Egyptians are semantically linked to Hell, their allegorical homeland as “land-men.” Later on, at the conclusion of the work, the Israelites celebrate their victorious crossing and the destruction of their enemies with songs, but their music is not described as \textit{atol} because they are natives of Heaven, not Hell. This connotation between \textit{atol} and Hell is implied by the repeated use of the epithet “\textit{landmann}, ‘land-man’” to refer to the Egyptians throughout the poem. They are natives of the land, meaning that they are perfectly at home in the world, whereas the Israelites are exiles in this world, as Paul suggests that they should be in Romans 12:2. The connection between the land-bound Egyptians and Hell is reinforced even further in line 207 when the author says that their “\textit{sið wæs gedæled}, ‘journey was split up/divided.’” The verb \textit{gedælan}, “to

\textsuperscript{48} 1 Tim. 6:10.  
\textsuperscript{49} DOE A-G: “\textit{atol}.”
split up/divide” sounds strikingly similar to the noun *dæl*, meaning ‘valley, [metaphorically] Hell.’ Thus the author playfully suggests that they are from Hell and will stay there: it is their journey’s endpoint.

After warning readers about the fate of the land-men, the poem refocuses on the Israelites, who are bracing themselves for battle with the Egyptians and are unsure whether they can survive the ordeal. In the midst of their fear and doubt Moses calls them to stand and fight for God in one of his prominent speeches. Although this large portion of the poem could be considered a typological dry-spell, because it has few figural references, the author reminds readers that this story is meant to be instructional to them by including a single word here and there that subtly reminds the audience of the allegorical implications. For example, in line 244, after a great deal of literal description of Israel’s army, the exiles are called the *leodscipe*, ‘people/nation.’ While this word literally only means a group of people (much like *gens*, ‘race, clan, people’ in Latin), the author chose it because of the element –*scip*, which sounds exactly like the word *scip*, ‘ship’, and thus subtly reminds the reader that, although the poem has been about the Israelites preparing for battle for quite some time now, it is also still about the Church resisting evil.

With all of these literal and allegorical levels of meaning established, let us move on to unriddle a particularly interesting section of the poem. Now we come to the climax of the work: the parting of the Red Sea. Strangely, this is how the poem initially presents such a spectacular event in lines 276-283a:

> “Hof ða for hergum  hlude stefne/ lifigendra þeoden,  þa he to leodum spræc:/ “Hwæt ge nu eagum to  on lociæ/ folca leofost,  fierwandra sum/ nu ic sylfa sloh  ond þeos swidre hand /
> grene tacne  garsecges deop./ Yð up færeð,  ofstum wyrceð/ wæter on wealfesten.

Then the leader of the living ones heaved up/lifted up a loud voice for the army. Then he spoke to the people: “Listen up! Now you see in that [direction], dearest people, a certain awe-inspiring wonder before your eyes. Now I myself and that stronger hand have struck the deep of the sea with a green token/rod/cross. The waves went up, quickly made water into a rampart.”

---

50 Ibid: “*dæl*.”
Moses has risen before the assembly to give a motivational speech to his people in order to prepare them for the coming trial. He declares, or rather seems to narrate what he has apparently just done: i.e. parting the Red Sea. It is very strange that such a significant and potentially visual event is simply talked about, rather than creating a large and dramatic description of it, as the author did with the pillars. Perhaps the poet is saving the visual for later, which is in fact what is done. Nevertheless, by introducing such a spectacular and central plot point through speech rather than sight, the poet emphasizes the oral nature of the work itself. That is, he/she is playfully alluding to the fact that this work is most likely being read aloud to a group of listeners who are in the same position as the Israelites in the poem: they are both learning about the parting of the Red Sea by word of mouth. Taken yet another step further, this could also be alluding to the way in which the gospel is to be transmitted—orally. Since the Israelites are the ship of the Church and they are saved by crossing the Red Sea, this process alludes to salvation as available to all, audience included, who wish to join the pilgrims en route to the heavenly harbor.

The passage also subtly alludes to how salvation is achieved and to whom it is available. Moses’ speech is used to reference far more than the mere parting of a lake. Rather, Moses claims that he and God, “that mightier hand”, have struck the “garsecg deop… grene tacne, ‘ocean’s deep with a green token/rod’.

\[\text{Garsecg, according to Bosworth and Toller}^51 \text{ and the Dictionary of Old English, is the geographical term used primarily for the great sea, that is, the sea that encircles the entire earth. It is often glossed with the Latin term “oceanus”, which again usually refers to a very large portion of the ocean. Both dictionaries list several uses of the word that follow suit, the most striking of which is found in Orosius:} \]

\[\text{“Úre yldran ealne dysne ymbhwyrft dysesmiddangeardes, cwæp Orosius, swá swá Oceanus ymbli gep útan, ðone man gársecg hâtep, on þreó todældon”, “our forefathers, said Orosius, divided into three parts, all the globe of this mid-earth, which the ocean that we call gársecg, surrounds.”}^52\]

---

^51 DOE A-G: “gársecg”.

^52 Orosius. The Old English Orosius. Translated by King Alfred.
The usage of such a term here to describe what is essentially a very large inlet seems odd, causing readers to ask “Why is there such a discrepancy in size reference here?”

The answer to this is locked within the allegory and the key is found in the phrase “grene tacne, ‘green token/rod’. Clearly, the event being described here is Moses’ striking of the ground in front of the sea with his staff, as per Exodus 14:19-22. So it is logical for the grene tacne to refer to his staff as a figure of speech. Thomas Hall discusses why the tacne is green. His answer is that the poet is drawing on a conventional medieval portrayal of the cross as green, and he proceeds to establish that tacne can refer not only to a token but to the cross itself. Remarking on this same scene in the poem, he writes “…within a typological framework, however, the greenness of Moses’ rod can easily be explained as a transference of the symbolism of the green Cross, which itself depends upon a typological association with the lignum vitae.” Thus, Moses and God’s striking of the “depths of the sea that surrounds the earth with the green symbol/cross” can be construed as a reference to Christ’s dying on the cross for the sins of the entire world. The global nature of salvation is emphasized by the fact that the garsecg is the ocean typically thought to surround the continents, and therefore all of the people on earth. What is even more interesting is that in this metaphor, the striking creates a path, as did Jesus’ death and resurrection. So it is as though the author is saying, “yes, God made a path for the Israelites through Moses’ staff, but this was a precursor to the greater work: that he made a path for the whole world through Jesus and the Cross.”

The use of the word “sloh, ‘struck”, with its violent connotation, could also be a reference to the Harrowing of Hell as well, as the bellicose language of “striking the deep” seems to imply. It should also be noted that this parting of the sea results in a transformation of the water- it is called wealfaesten, ‘rampart.’ So God has made the formerly deadly waters into a structure that defends the Israelites from Egypt, and then saves them from sin.

---

53 Hall, Thomas. “The Cross as Green Tree in the Vindicta Salvatoris and the green rod of Moses in Exodus”
54 Ibid. p.307.
In this section, Moses gives two speeches, one right after the other. In the first he commands: “ne willað eow andrædan deade feðan,/ fæge ferhðlocan, fyrst is æt ende/ lænes lifes, ‘Nor will you fear the dead tribe, that body doomed to death: for the time of their fleeting lives is at an end.’ Moses here draws a sharp contrast between the Egyptians and his own people by calling the former dead men walking. This is more than just a statement of overconfidence. Rather, it is a commentary upon the spiritual state of those who persecute God’s people. It also draws a parallel between Moses and Jesus because Moses, being formerly an Egyptian prince, is now in charge of God’s people. He has crossed over from death to life, paralleling Christ’s resurrection from the dead. For Moses, though, there is only one major difference between those who are spiritually alive and those who are not: grace. The only reason that the Israelites can cross through the Red Sea unharmed is because God has chosen them and they have chosen him. The Egyptians cannot complete this journey because they are completely opposed to obeying God. Moses touches on this idea when he chastises Israel’s fearfulness by saying, “eow is lar Godes/ abroden of breostum. Ic on beteran ræd,/ þæt ge gewurðien wuldres Aldor, ‘God’s teaching is removed from your breasts! I gave you better counsel before: that you honor the King of Glory…” Once again, the theme of obeying God, hyran, ‘to hear’ him, is being referenced as necessary for salvation.

That salvation is the goal of the Israelites’/the Church’s journey is made clear in Moses’ concluding statement in lines 293b-298: “ofest is selost/ þæt ge of feonda fæðme weorðen/ nu se Agend up aræde/ reade streamas in randgebeorh/ Syndon pa foreweallæs fægre gestepte,/ wrættlicu wegfuru, od wolcna hrof, ‘Haste is best, now that you are out of the enemies’ grasp. Now the Ruler has raised up red streams into a rampart. The bulwarks, a splendid wave-passage, are built up beautifully, up to the roof of the sky.” J.R. Hall55 claims that Moses’ remarks here achieve the following: First, that the actual water is described as red not only because it is the Red Sea, but because it is being likened to Christ's blood, a symbol of salvation. Thus it makes sense that the Egyptians are destroyed by it because Christ's blood destroys sin and evil. Secondly, he claims that there is a motif reminiscent of the liturgical color scheme

going on in the poem- the sea path and Moses’ rod are green for their association with new life, the red sea is red for its association with Christ’s blood, and the Israelites’ shields are golden, reflecting the light from his fiery pillar. Finally, he points out that the bulwarks being raised to heavens' roof suggests that they lead to salvation, as a sort of stairway going up to heaven. This image supports the notion that the Israelites’/Church’s journey ends at the heavenly harbor, and not simply the other side of the Red Sea.

After Moses concludes his speeches, the people begin their crossing while the pillars of cloud and fire restrain the Egyptians, preventing them from following the Israelites into the Red Sea. The poem pays particular attention to the order in which the tribes cross, following the Biblical order of Judah, then Ruben, followed by Simeon and then the rest. It should be noticed that, according to the poet, Judah is allowed to cross first because of their obedience to God, for their dægweorc, ‘days-work.’ This phrase has drawn a great deal of scholarly attention over the years because it occurs at least four times in the work, describing the actions of God, Pharaoh, and the Israelites. It seems that each time it is mentioned, it is invoked in the concept of God’s justice. That is, God is always paying someone their due, rewarding righteousness and punishing wickedness. This message ties into the work’s emphasis on obedience as a necessary component of salvation.

In lines 319-322, the poet writes:

“Hæfde him to segne, þa hie on sund stigon,/ ofer bordhreoðan  beacen aræred/ in þam garheape  gyldenne leon,/ drihtfolca mæst,  deora cenost.

‘They had [him] as a sign/battle standard to them. Then they moved through the sea. Over the shields the beacon, a golden Lion, was raised up in the spear-heap of armed men, the greatest of the nation, boldest of beasts.’

56 See Lucas p. 94, line 113.
57 For more information on dægweorc, start with D.R. Letson’s “On the dægweorc of the Old English Exodus”, English Language Notes.
Here the imagery of the cross is once again invoked, and the author employs the symbolism of Judah very cleverly. After having talked about Judah in the last section of the poem, he calls the pillar “a golden lion”, “boldest of beasts”. This is a strong reference to Jesus, the Lion of Judah and serves to further reinforce the metaphorical and allegorical reading of the work. What is so clever about this mentioning of the golden lion is that it is not at all out of place to imagine the Israelites having battle standards emblazoned with their tribes’ symbols, so the reference is subtle. In the second half of this section, the poet describes the crossing and movement of the people in terms of what their arms and armor are doing. The resultant effect makes it seem like the Israelites are engaged in an intense battle complete with “death-blows of weapons… bloody sword-swathes… and clash of helmets”. Perhaps he is emphasizing the difficulty of following Christ and the devotion necessary to do it well. Or, if Judah is here standing in for Christ, it could be alluding to the Harrowing of Hell, especially given that they are physically in the deep, ‘deep’ at this point. Regardless of the metaphorical reading, the reader/listener must pay a great deal of attention in order to simply continue following the narrative.

One final curiosity in the crossing scene is line 333, which calls the crossing Rubenites “sæwicingas, ‘sea-Vikings.'” It may seem strange that the poet would use the word Viking for the protagonist, especially given the constant Norse raids and invasions of the 9th century. If the poem were composed before this date, the concept of a Viking may have had a slightly less negative connotations. According to Bosworth and Toller, the word can simply mean “sea-robbers”, “Viking” originally being a generic term for a kind of raiding pirate. But why compare the Israelites to pirates? The author is pointing out that by following God, they (and readers by extension) are robbing Satan of his treasure: human souls,

58 See: Revelation 5:5
59 Historically of course, the fleeing refugees would probably not have the symbols or banners, especially since there was little to no tribal tradition established just yet. But Medieval conceptions of history were usually clothed in their current cultural trappings. For an example of this, Karkov discusses the Genesis illustrations in the Junius Manuscript at length in her book Text and Picture in Anglo-Saxon England.
60 Dorothy Whitelock has written at length about the potential for hostility that existed between the Anglo-Saxons and the Viking invaders/settlers of the 9th century. However, this issue is highly debatable, especially given the linguistic evidence that suggests a vast amount of linguistic interaction between the Anglo-Saxons and those who lived in the Danelaw. In fact, it has been argued that Old English lost its case system from this exact interaction, the result of a pidgin trade language between Old Norse and Old English.
while simultaneously robbing Pharaoh of his treasure: human slaves. That this “theft” occurs as they are stealing away across a body of water is an implicit pun. The author wishes readers to realize that following God angers Satan and incites his wrath, because he is being “robbed” by a merciful God. The poem, in leading readers to identify with the Israelites, recreates them simultaneously as the robbers and as the ransomed.

Returning to the poem, the Israelites are in the midst of their crossing when the work takes a curious turn. The next section is the first of two digressions in the work, and both have been criticized in the past for seeming to break up the narrative unity of the poem. This so-called “patriarchal digression” is introduced in a clever manner. Lines 347-355 state:


‘Then the people’s army marched there after the others, with the mail-clad army… on the forward paths, the people after the cloud, kin after kin. Each knew the right of the tribes, as Moses announced the station of inheritance of earls to them. For them was one father [Abraham]. The beloved founder of the people, experienced in mind and beloved of the noble kinsmen, received the land-right [in Canaan].’

While many scholars have protested the presence of this passage and the following hundred lines, they fit quite nicely with the poem’s allegorical theme, as well as in the literal theme. Stanley Hauer points out that for much of the work’s scholarly life, this entire part of the poem was viewed as a likely interpolation, or else a massive scribal error (he presents some of the more comically inventive proposals in his article). Most of these objections stem from readers who expect the work to be a serious, straightforward epic rendition of the Biblical story and thus their frustration comes from an inability to

---

account for any unexpected shifts inherent in a riddle or literary game. However, Hauer is out to defend
the digression, arguing that it fits on an artistic and stylistic level. He says that “the digression is related to
the main text in the following four ways: (1) through a common interest in genealogy, (2) by certain
major thematic parallels, (3) with several consistent strains of imagery, and (4) by means of a similar
focus on Christological typology”\textsuperscript{62}. On a literal level, this first digression ties the identity of the Israelites
as a newly established people into their history. Digressions in Anglo-Saxon poetry are a staple, and they
often relate to lineage, as in \textit{Beowulf}. The Israelites are shown to come from one father, and are the
embodiment of God’s faithfulness in fulfilling his promise to Abraham that his descendants would
outnumber the stars in the sky and the sand on the shore. The digression also mentions Noah and
Solomon, before again focusing on Abraham. The presence of each of these figures is used to highlight
certain features of the work’s theme on a larger theological scale.

After discussing the common lineage of the Israelites as God’s chosen, the work’s focus moves
backward in time to Noah. There is good reason to link Noah’s story with Moses’, not only on typological
grounds\textsuperscript{63}, but for etymological ones as well. Isidore has this to say about Moses:

\begin{quote}
“\textit{Denique Moyses interpretatur sumptus ex aqua. Invenit eum ad ripam fluminis expositum filia}
Pharaonis, quem colligens adoptavit sibi; vocavitque nomen eius Moysen, eo quod de aqua
sumpsisset eum.”
\end{quote}

‘Then Moses is construed thus, because he was taken from the water. Pharaoh’s daughter found
him exposed on the bank of the river, and picking him up, she adopted him for herself; and his
name is called Moses because she rescued him from the water.’\textsuperscript{64}

Based on this passage, we can assume that Moses was associated with “rescue from water” in the minds
of educated medieval readers. So it is no large conceptual leap from him to Noah, another Christ figure

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid. p. 80
\textsuperscript{63} The theme of rescue from water-related death is obvious. Also, both men were typologically considered
precursors to Christ because they were instrumental in saving mankind from God’s just wrath.
\textsuperscript{64} Isidore, \textit{Etymologiae} book VII, chapter vi, entry 46.
linked to water and salvation. And while this move may seem counter-intuitive to the actual narrative, it achieves something very central to the poem’s challenge: it cements the reader’s personal identification with the Israelites as members of the ship of the Church.

The passage about Noah links him with the Israelites and then in turn recreates readers as sailors on Noah’s own ark, thereby merging all three ships into one. Pay close attention to this excerpt from lines 362-376:

“Noe oferlað, Prymfaest þeodon, mid his þrim sunum, Bone deopestan
Niwe flodas Noe oferlað, Noe oferlað, Noe oferlað,”

Noah, the strength-fast leader, traveled over new floods with his three sons. [It was] the deepest of deluges of those that ever happened in the world’s kingdom. He had for him in his heart the holy covenant. For he led the greatest of treasure hoards over the water-streams, I have heard say. In saving the earth’s life, he had of all of earth-kind forever remnants/survivors, each one the first generation, father and mother of all descendant-producers. The wise sea-man tallied in numbers [of species] more diverse than men know. Moreover the warriors/men ferried/conveyed each of the seeds under heaven in the bosom of the ship that men enjoy.”

The first detail to note is the phrase niwe flodas, ‘new floods’. This use is significant because although the work revolves around the crossing of the Red Sea, it often describes it as a flod, ‘flood’ of some type. Some examples include drenceflod, ‘drench-flood’, mereflod, ‘lake-flood’, flodegsa, ‘flood-terror’, and flodweg, ‘flood-road’. The fact that Noah is linked to the same type of watery peril as the Israelites makes him allegorically connected to them. He is a sort of forerunner to them, as well as ancestor. Notably, the poem points out that he is the forefather not only of the Israelites, but necessarily of everyone living. This
links him with readers/listeners in a very personal way: he becomes part of their genealogy. Taken even a step further, he is not merely the father of all who are now alive, but he is also the spiritual father of all who are spiritually alive. He obeyed God when no one else would and that is why he was spared from the deluge. In the same way, the obedient Israelites are allowed to live through their Red Sea ordeal and Christians are spared from Hell. Finally, note the ending phrase “that men enjoy.” The poet points out that Noah was caretaker of every kind of seed that men enjoy, implying that readers live a life similar to his own and that they are almost like crewmen on his own ship. He is called *snottor sæleoda*, ‘wise sailor’, a compound that implies that he is native to life on the sea. Typologically this makes him a sailor on the allegorical Church of the ship just as much as the Israelites and the assumed Christian audience. So the inclusion of Noah in this work is no rambling digression; in fact it draws readers even further into the work by tying their genealogy and kinship ties into it.

Likewise the inclusion of Abraham in this story is not a formulaic recapping of Genesis. First, it is pointed out that Abraham was a descendant of Noah nine generations later and his kinship with readers is implied. Secondly, the poet tells us that “he on wraece lifde, ‘he lived in exile’, a crucial detail. The Anglo-Saxon imagination was quite taken by the perception of life as transitory and fleeting, as illustrated by Bede’s tale about the missionary Paulinus and Coifi, the pagan advisor of King Edwin in which life on earth is compared to a swallow that flies in one end of a building and out the other.65 Both are extremely fleeting events, and no one can see for themselves what happens after the bird leaves and life ends. A common metaphor for Christian life then was that of exile, that is, Christians were not seen as at home in this life or world. They were separated from their homeland, heaven, but only for a while. Thinking of this as exile was a very popular way of expressing this sentiment, and so by making Abraham an exile, the author makes him “one of us” for the reader on yet another level.

The poem goes on to describe Abraham’s test of faith, the command to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. This episode is a very popular *figura* for God’s sacrificing of his son Jesus later. As in the Biblical

---

text, right as Abraham is about to slay his son, God intervenes. However, in this presentation, God’s intervention is quite lengthy. The speech combines two of God’s speeches found in Genesis 22:11-12, 16-18. God’s declaration to Abraham here is fascinating because of the way it describes His own perfect faithfulness to mankind. God basically says “Well done, Abraham. You passed my test and trusted me in spite of how bad things looked. Don’t kill your son; instead, enjoy my blessings for the rest of your life. You can trust me because my word is always good.” This last point is driven home quite strongly because God’s “treowe, truce/promise” is said to be greater than the entire expanse of the earth and sky. Note that “garsecg, ocean” is used here to refer to the Great Sea, in other words, the sea that surrounds the whole earth. This reading of the word makes most sense here because God is talking about the largest of the large with the phrase “foldan sceatas, expanse of the earth”, which seems to refer to the biggest geographic chunk of “earth” (the whole dry part of the planet) that exists. It makes sense to read garsecg as the whole wet part of the planet then as well, in a parallel construction. Also, line 426 includes a punning use of the word treowe because it can mean treaty, truce, promise, or tree. In this passage, God is literally talking about a truce, however, could He not also be subtly pointing to the cross (so often called Calvary’s tree)? The line could easily be rendered as “How could a son of man need a greater tree?” This double meaning ties in the story of salvation through Abraham with the story of salvation through Christ, both of which come about because of obedience.

Another fascinating thread within this familiar story is the small tangent concerning Solomon. As the author is describing where this sacrifice was to take place (Mt. Zion), he/she mentions that this place would be the exact spot where David’s son Solomon would build the temple to God. The poet describes Solomon with a surprisingly long list of appositive modifiers that elaborately tell about the king’s wisdom and fame. While this may seem strange, it is actually quite indicative of what the author is trying to accomplish with his/her own work here. Clearly the poet wishes to remind readers of Solomon’s

---

Also implied by this juxtaposition is that when God delivers someone, as he did on this spot with Isaac, the appropriate response is praise and thanksgiving, in this case in the form of the temple. At the end of the poem, Israel models this behavior for readers as well. By merging the identities of all of these Biblical figures with the Israelites and with readers/listeners, the poem connects all of their stories, making this passage highly didactic by personal example. Readers are supposed to learn that faith and obedience are rewarded by God. Following the second and final lacuna in the poem, readers are graphically shown the consequences of failing to obey God.

We do not know how the digression ends and how it reconnects to the narrative because of the lacuna. All that we do know is that by the time the poem picks back up, the Israelites have already safely crossed the Red Sea. On the first blank page of the lacuna, a later hand has written in Latin “tribus annis transactis, ‘the tribes having finished the crossing.” Notably, while the parting of the Red Sea was described somewhat passively (in the form of Moses’ reported speech), its closing is described in spectacular first person detail, emphasizing it as a place of judgment more than wonder. The poet writes in lines 447-476:

“Folc wæs afæred; flodegsa becwom/ gastas geomre, geofon deaðe hweop./ Wæron beorhhliðu
blode bestemed, holm heolfre spaw, hream wæs on yðum, wæer waempna ful, wealmist astah.
Wæron Egypte eft oncyrde, flugon forhiægende, fær ongeton, woldon herebleæde hamas
findan—gylp wearð gnornra. / Atol yða gewealc, ne dær ænig becwom, herges to hame, ac
behindan belec wyrd mid wæge. Þær ær wegas lagon mere modgode (mægen was adrenced),
streamas stodon. Storm up gewat heah to heofonum, herewopa mæst; laðe cyrmdon (lyft up
geswearc) lægum staefnum. Flod blod gewod; randbyrig wæren rofene, rodon swipode
meredeða mæst. Modige swulton, cyningas on cordre. Cyrm swiðrode wæges æt ende;
wigbord scinon. Heah ofer healeðum holmweall astah, merestream modig. Mægen was on

Solomon and his wisdom was the subject of a series of Old English wisdom literature tracks called The Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn. In them, Solomon has a series of dialogues about theology, wisdom, philosophy, and liturgical practice. Interestingly, much of the actual verbal exchanges occur in the forms of riddles. There may or may not be some intertextual allusion here. See: The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn. Ed. by Daniel Anlezark.
The folk was terrified; flood-terror came over their sorrowful spirits, the sea threatened with death. The steep slopes were spattered with blood, the sea spewed gore, tumult was on the waves, the water was full of weapons, and the death-mist sprang up. The Egyptians were turned, they fled terrified. They experienced sudden disaster, the cowardly ones wished to find [their] homes, their vow became less optimistic. The terrible rolling waves grew dark against them. Not a single one of that army came home, but fate locked them in from behind with a wave. Where before paths lay, the sea now raged, and the men were drenched. Streams stood up, a storm went up high to heaven, the greatest of army-cries [the storm is made up of their crying]. The hateful ones cried out (the sky grew dark on high) in doomed voices, and blood pervaded the flood. The ramparts were broken, the greatest sea-death lashed the sky. The brave perished, kings in the troop. The noise died down at the end of the waves. The shields shone high over the army, the wall of seawater stood up, brave sea-streams. The men were fastly fettered in death, without the power of advance, bound by [their] armor. The sands awaited the ordained fate, [until the time] when the stream of waves, the sin-cold sea, the surge of the waves, accustomed to deviations of course, the naked messenger of hardship, the hostile warlike spirit, who was dragged down by the fiends, which crushed enemies, came seeking out the eternal foundations with salty waves.”

This segment begins what amounts to a vivid and thorough description of Hell. Perhaps most salient in this selection is the gore: it sounds like the Egyptians have fallen into a divine garbage disposal. The extensive use of bloody carnage seems strange, even gratuitous. One would not expect such grisly violence from a mass drowning, but the author is trying to convey the notion that the Lord Himself is fighting against the Egyptians by means of the water. Also, the water becomes bloody in order to save the Israelites from the land-men, so this feeds into the metaphor of salvation, with Christ’s blood saving the Church from their own sins. Notice how many levels the poet is working on simultaneously: here we see
the poem at one of its most enigmatic and riddlesome points. The important figure that the author draws so much attention to through riddling is the use of Red Sea as a figure for Hell.

The descriptions here portray the Egyptian downfall in great detail: the physical, emotional, and psychological aspects are all explored by the poet in order to make the reader truly understand how terrible it will be against God in the end. He/she writes that the “Folk was terrified, flood-terror came over their sorrowful spirits.” The Egyptians here know that they are about to die, and this fear drowns out their hope before it even touches their bodies. As the narrative progress, the focus shifts from the internal torment of the Egyptians to their physical state of torturous death. Given the order of the events of their deaths, the Egyptians are first torn apart, and then they are bound and fettered at the bottom of the sea by their own armor. This is the armor that they wore into battle with God, trusting that it would withstand his attacks. It represents their pride. Interestingly, pride is also what binds Satan and his demons in Hell in many extra-biblical accounts. Furthermore, the water is called the “sin-cold sea”, that is, it is bitterly cold. Lucas claims “Extreme cold is a familiar hellish torment, usually alternated with extreme heat; cf. Genesis B 316”. Hell is often cold in the medieval imagination, most famously in Dante’s Inferno, where Satan is trapped in the frozen lake of Cocytus. The final detail that confirms the allegory with Hell is that the noise of the Egyptians here is called cyrm, ‘a loud noise’. This description on its own does not indicate much more than the desperation of the condemned. However, according to the Dictionary of Old English, this word is often associated with the trumpets sounded on Judgment Day. In fact, this day is sometimes euphemistically called “cyrmesdæg.” The shouting of the Egyptians announces their judgment and condemnation. In the end, God repays the Egyptians for their deagweorces, ‘day’s-work’ (line 507). This powerful scene ends with a single sober comment: hie wið God wunnon,

---

68 There is an excellent illustration in the Old English Genesis in the same manuscript showing Satan bound at the bottom of Hell. His plight there is strikingly similar to the Egyptians’ here.
69 Lucas, note to 473a, p. 135.
70 Dante. The Divine Comedy, Inferno, Canto XXXI, line 123. Wadsworth’s translation reads “There where the cold doth lock Cocytus up.”
71 DOE A-G. Under the entry “cyrm.”
‘They fought with God’.\(^{72}\) This phrase works on the literal level for the Egyptians and on the allegorical level for Satan and his demons. The poet succinctly recasts all of this suffering and punishment in a single sentence as befitting for those who resist God. This serves as a warning for readers, and a sort of encouragement to continue on in obedience to *hyran*, ‘to hear and obey’ the poem. In the end, the poet actually transforms the Red Sea, first comparing it to the sin that traps the pursued Israelites, then recasting it as Christ’s redeeming red blood while they pass through it, and finally making it Hell, the final resting place for the Egyptians (those who resist God). This process is highly enigmatic and keeps readers constantly asking what is going on from line to line. By being riddlesome, the poem assists readers by forcing them to play close attention to the work and its multiple layers of meaning.

One of the final major riddlesome passages in the text is what has been called the “homiletic digression.” It runs from lines 515-548 and appears to be a speech that Moses makes to the Israelites, although it is not presented as a direct quote. Given the contents of the speech, this artful ambiguity as to whether Moses actually said these things is quite useful. It bridges a gap between the historical Moses, who most certainly could not have said some of these things, and the Moses as a type of Christ, who could know all of these things at any point in time. Dorothy Haines describes the passage thus:

“This homiletic passage from the Old English *Exodus* not only incongruously follows the cataclysmic drowning of the Egyptians, but in the space of a few lines, makes a sudden leap from the decrees of Moses to the poet’s present… because it interrupts the narrative flow of the poem, the passage has attracted some harsh critical treatment, ranging from baffled dismissal to the opinion that it is either out of place or an interpolation which should be removed altogether. When not scorned, these lines are assumed to be transparent and conventional…”\(^{73}\)

\(^{72}\) Lucas points out that this phrase mirrors those used to describe the damned in *Christ III* (line 1526), *Beowulf* (line 113), and *Genesis B* (line 303) in his note to line 515b, p. 141.

\(^{73}\) Haines, Dorothy. “Unlocking *Exodus* ll. 516-532”. Pgs 481-482.
She then makes an effort to legitimize the passage by linking the theme of Moses as lawgiver, referenced in the first seven lines of the poem, to the theme of interpreting the Old Testament properly. Yet this seems to be an example of the kind of frustration that occurs when one tries to read *Exodus* as anything other than a tricky riddle. In attempting to see it as “a story about Moses”, she becomes caught up in the poem’s inherent clash between theme and narrative flow (because of the competing registers of meaning). If one reads *Exodus* as a riddling poem, however, this digression is neither out of place nor is it conventional and vacuous.

The digression in lines 516-548 reads:

> Þanon Israhelum ece rædas/ on merehwearfe Moyses sægde,/ heahþungen wer, halige spræce,/ deop ærende. Dægweorc ne mað,/ swa gyt werðode on gewritum findað/ doma gehwilcne, þara þe him Drihten bebead/ on þam siðfate, swa godælþung geðæ frevern/ on gewritum findað/ doma. Gif onlucan wile lifes wealthstod/ beorht in breostum, banhuses weard,/ Ginfæsten god, Gastes cægon, run bið gereccenod, ræd forð geð;/ hafað wislicu word on fæðme;/ wile meagollice modum tæcan,/ þæt we gesne ne syn/ Godes þeodscipes, metodes miltsa. He us ma onlyð,/ nu us boceras betteran secgað,/ lengran lyftwynna. Þis is læne dream/ wommum awyrged, wreccum alyfed,/ earmra anbid. Eðellecase/ hysne gystsele gihðum healdeð,/ murnað on mode, manhus witon/ faest under foldan, þær bið fyry oswyrn./ open ece scraef yfela gehwylces,/ swa nu regnþeafas rice dælað,/ yldo oððe ærdead. Eftwyrd cymed,/ mægenþrymma mæst, ofer middangeard, dæg daedum fah. Drihten sylfa/ on þam medelstede manegum demeð, þonne He sóðfæstra sawla lædeð, eadige gastas, on uprodor, þær bið leofht ond lif, eac þon lissa bæld. Dugod on dreame Drihten herigað,/ weroda Waldorcyning, to widan feore.

‘After that Moses spoke everlasting wisdom on the seashore to Israel. The noble man, the holy one, spoke a deep message. The day’s-work did not remain concealed so that even still [today] people find in scriptures each one of the ordinances, the which the Lord ordered him with true words on the journey. If the interpreter of life, pure in heart, the guardian of the bone-house, wishes to unlock ample good with the keys of the Spirit, the mystery will be explained, wisdom
will go forth. It has wise words in its embrace, and it wishes earnestly to teach souls, that we are not lacking the people of God, the favor of the Lord. He will grant us more, now that scholars announce better things to us, longer lasting joys in heaven. This is a transitory happiness, choked with sins, granted for exiles, the expectation of the wretched ones. Those lacking a homeland occupied this guest-hall [of the world] with sorrows, worried in their mind, aware of hell, secure under the earth. There be fire and serpents, an eternally open pit with each kind of evil, so now the arch-thieves, age or premature death, share power until the last judgment comes, greatest of powers, over middle-earth, a day hostile for deeds. The Lord Himself will judge many at the meeting place. Then He will lead the souls of the trustworthy, blessed souls, into heaven. There be light and life, and grace in abundance. The troop will praise the Lord in happiness, the wonder-king of hosts, in everlasting life.”

This so-called digression holds the key to succeeding in the challenge from the prologue, gehyran se ðe wille, ‘to hear it if one wills’. The point it makes is that one cannot simply will to comprehend this poem (or scripture) merely through one’s own understanding, but one must be “pure in heart” and must enlist the banhuses weard, ‘the bonehouse’s guardian’ who supplies the keys to unlocking the mysteries of scripture. This work is to be approached in the same way. The rest of Haines’ article is a profitable comparison of the banhuses weard passage in 526 to a collection of homiletic literature. She argues that compounds like that one, as well as beorht in breostum, ‘bright in the chest’, sunu mannes ‘the son of man’, and mana mildost, ‘mildest of men’ all refer to Christ Himself, who in homiletics is portrayed as the “interpreter” or intermediary between God and man, and the Old Testament and New Testament (Heb. 8:6). Her approach is very useful because she solves the mystery of this part of the poem like a riddle, employing the active problem-solving mentality advocated by this paper. So it can be seen that my reading strategy is not unprecedented in the literature, although she does not extend the active riddler mentality to the entire poem.

Mercedes Salvador has more to say about this digression’s enigmatic nature. She compares this part of the poem to Exeter Book riddle 42. This particular riddle is a double-entendre filled description of
a key and lock that subtly alludes to unlocking knowledge through learning. She rightly points out that this same riddle is basically recreated in the *Exodus*, identifying Christ with the one who has the keys to unlocking salvation and wisdom. It should be noted that the poet says “þæt we gesne ne syn  Godes þeodscipes, Metudes miltsa …we, the people of God, are not lacking the Lord’s favor…” Although the audience has been focusing on the homiletic nature of the work for some time at this point, the poet still wishes them to remember the nautical metaphor that is ever-present within the poem. This is done with the use of *þeodscip*, ‘people’, a compound word that is composed of *þeod* + *scip* (people +ship). In this way, the author reminds his readers that this passage is about them as much as it is about all Christendom, the entire ship of the Church. When he/she says “He will grant us more, now as scholars say better things to us”, he/she is claiming that Christians thousands of years later are at a great spiritual advantage because they can see the fullness of time much more clearly and can understand the significance of such *figuras* all the more because of it.

This highly medieval point of view is captured perfectly in this passage. The digression concludes with a summary of what roles the Egyptians and Israelites have been playing in this poem by explaining the fate of those who are destined for Hell and those who are destined for Heaven. And so it can be seen that *Exodus* is riddling from beginning to end; but at what exactly? What does the unity of the body of Christ have to do with the universality of salvation? These are likely questions that are prompted by the work, and they are of great didactic value for anyone interested in the teaching of theology. The poem seems to be suggesting that all *samen*, ‘sailors’ are in the same boat headed to the same harbor (salvation), by the same grace and power (*grene tacne*, Christ’s death and resurrection). Christian readers, then, are *saemen* right along with the Israelites in the poem’s narrative present and its challenge then pertains to readers in a very straightforward way. It goes a step further than simply equating all Christians

---

74 The unity is emphasized in passages like *egsan stodan*, ‘fears stood up’, when fear among the Israelites at Egyptian pursuit crops up universally and simultaneously. They move, perceive, and feel as one.
75 The idea that Christ came and died for all was already pointed out in Moses’ speech when he talks about the *garsecg* and *grene tacne*, ‘the great-sea’ and the ‘green token’.
with the Israeli *saemen*, it explains to them how to follow on the journey in the digression in lines 516-553.

The poem then refocuses on Moses and the narrative present for the rest of its 40 or so lines, ending in a dramatic scene of celebration among the Israelites. They line up on the far shore of the Red Sea, having finally reached dry ground, and they worship and praise God on the spot with dancing and trumpets. Interestingly, the women play a crucial traditional role here. In fact, this is the first time in the entire work that a woman has been mentioned at all\(^7^6\). The poem closes with the image of the Israelites rejoicing on the shore, plundering the Egyptian gold that has surfaced, and worshipping God. There is a peculiar parallel developed here between the Israelites and the beasts of battle from earlier in the poem. The poet describes their song as a *fyrdleod*, ‘army song’, creating a strong resemblance to the wolves’ *atol æfenleod*, ‘terrible evening-song’ in line 162. Yet this comparison does not stop at description.

Notice that the wolves sing in anticipation of their (supposedly) impending meal, their spoils of war. The Israelites here are also singing right before gorging themselves on their own spoils of the war between God and the Egyptians. This raises an important question about the interaction of the levels of meaning: If the Israelites/Church have arrived in paradise at the end, why are they devouring the bodies of the Egyptians?

The answer to this question is twofold. The first reason that the righteous might be depicted as plundering the treasure of the damned could be a social commentary on medieval learning: because the Israelites represent Christianity they are picking through the corpses and leftovers of the slain pagans. They obtain treasure as the reward for being faithful to God. He gives them His slain enemies for their benefit. On one level, this means that Christians can pick through the leftover treasures of the fallen pagans, Classical literature, and, with God’s refining guidance, can sort out the good from the bad and be

---

\(^7^6\) Having the women help in merry-making and treasure-giving is characteristic of Anglo-Saxon culture. There is a great deal of discussion on this topic in the literature, especially in regards to the roles of women as depicted in *Beowulf*. For more information see: Alexandra Hennessey Olsen’s “Gender Roles” from Bjork and Niles’ *Beowulf: A Handbook* as well as Shari Horner’s “Voices from the Margins” from Joy and Ramsey’s *The Postmodern Beowulf: A Critical Casebook*. 

61
benefited from it. So it is a statement about the merit of the transvaluation of pagan literature. In this way, the *Exodus* poet redeploy the old beasts of battle motif skillfully for a new purpose: making a social statement. And yet there is much more to this comparison.

The work reveals the fate of all mankind and the individual, which is contingent upon their relationship with God. It is an exact adaptation of Matthew 25:31-46, in which Jesus declares that at the final judgment, everyone who has ever lived will be separated into two groups: sheep and goats. The sheep are the *saemen*, those who knew God in life, who heard and obeyed, those good trees who bore good fruit as in Matthew 7:17-20. The goats, damned by their own sinful pride and unwillingness to obey, are justly slaughtered for their rebellion, which first made them *godes andsaca*, ‘God’s adversaries’. They are pruned away in order to make room for fruitful branches. Which leads to the strangest part of the poem: the bit about the Israelites becoming beasts of battle themselves and feasting upon the dead Egyptians.

Why do the sheep get to feed on the slaughtered goats? The image is both morbid and quasi-cannibalistic and seems to impugn the purity of God's chosen, or God's own goodness, or both. It is also not what is going on here. What is going on then? The Israelites are participating in the theology of sustenance. They display a model of God's provision in a very strange way (strange when presented literally). Just as a grape must be crushed and "killed" in preparation for digestion and life-giving nourishment, blessings and life are brought to God's people in spite of death. Ironically, the bad branches, which are cast into the fire, still bring about good. The Israelites are blessed with treasure as a result of hearing and obeying. This treasure is literally the wealth of the Egyptian army that has been removed from their dead bodies by the violence of the crashing, saving waves.

In a sense, all Christians become like these *herewolfas*, ‘army-wolves’ with a twist. They all start life estranged from God, in a state of rebellion, and yet He chooses to lead them boldly out of their captivity if they are brave enough to follow. As they are relentlessly pursued by Satan, sin, and death
(who are angered at being robbed of their first-born rebels), they are tempted to go back to Egypt, back to their lives of captivity. Yet they know that life before God was death, and life without Him is death. And so they cling to the hope that they may be liberated, against all odds. Thankfully, liberation has come for all and was accomplished through the work of Jesus Christ upon the **grene tacle**, the green cross. The **garsec**, the great sea that represents the universality of sinfulness, is struck by the **grene tacle**, parallel to death’s defeat when Christ’s dead cross flowers again, burgeoning with green life in victory. Just as He Himself emerged alive, victorious, and glorified from the grave after three days, medieval authors and artists often transposed these wonders to the cross itself. Jesus became man’s mediator with God, their breathing temple and living tabernacle, as hinted at with the mentions of Solomon and Abraham, as well as with the pillar of fire. Through the **twa beamas**, two beams, salvation is made visible and available to all, yet only some accept this. They are the sheep, the **saemen**, the Israelites, those chosen by God who choose Him back. The whole Earth is chosen by God, but only His children know Him and return the love with devotion and obedience.

And so in this strange way, salvation and all of its glorious blessings are only possible because of the dark rebellion and sin of the land men. Salvation is a strange and riddlesome business, and there is indeed a mind boggling **mysterium fidei**. But the poem ends with a poignant picture of the conquering and taunting of Satan and Death when the Israelites become like the beasts of battle. They feast on the remnants of the battle between **godes andsaca**, ‘God’s adversary’, and God Himself. The passage immediately brings to mind 1 Corinthians 15:55 (which in turn is quoting Hosea 13:14) where Paul writes: "‘Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O grave, is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The poem adopts the entirety of Jesus' message in Matthew 7, where Jesus explains how one can be saved. The work is indeed difficult and perplexing. But it is difficult and perplexing precisely because it is modeled after Christianity theology, which itself is difficult and perplexing. The Israelites become wolves, but only in the sense that they benefit from judgment and death, which are the price for salvation.
Just as Christ became bread and wine to be crushed and broken for the benefit of all mankind, so the destruction of evil/Egyptians is a painful, costly process that ultimately yields good fruit (just like cutting limbs off a fruit tree). The riddle is this: How does death lead to life, and how do wolves become sheep? The entire poem employs artful ambiguity and deliberate difficulty to teach its audience about salvation: how it works and how they can access it.

*Exodus* closes with the ironic line “*Werigend lagon/ on deaðstede, drihtfolca maest,* ‘The protectors [of the treasure] lay in their death place, that mightiest of nations.’ This is a final comment on the futility of resisting God that also indicates the temporality of sin and evil, which will come to an end at the end of days. As can be seen, letting the poem make the reader a riddler and engaging the work on its own enigmatic terms allows for the discovery not only of its typological references but also of its thematic unity. Hearing and obeying the poem is a spiritual journey, no less daunting or bewildering than that undertaken by the Israelites themselves, but also just as fruitful. The journey takes our entire life, but it is not what defines us forever. The poet calls the Israelites “*sælafe, sea-remnants*”, implying that in the end, we will not always be sailors, but those rescued from the flood of God’s wrath. By completing this journey, one learns about their place in Church history, how their salvation works, and how great their reward in heaven will be if they continue to hear and heed God. This is the reward for hearing and obeying the Old English *Exodus*: that one can engage in deep theology and Biblical exegesis in a way that is challenging yet engaging. The poem calls readers to pay attention, and then slowly changes their understanding of the Exodus narrative, until in the end, the reader is rendered practically indistinguishable from the Israelites and the Church. Engaging with the poem with an active, problem-solving mentality, as opposed to passively reading it, reaps many rewards: it provides a textual unity and overall coherence that has been sorely lacking in scholarly literature, it unpacks and makes sense of otherwise bewildering lines, and it allows an intimate level of interaction between the audience and author that is educational and engaging. Only the power of the riddle could be used to execute such a difficult process in so few lines.
Works Cited


9) *Bosworth and Toller*. The Germanic Lexicon Project.


