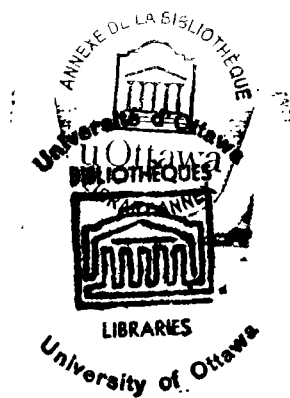


THE NARRATIVE UNITY OF THE  
CURSOR MUNDI

by

Ernest George Mardon

Thesis presented to the Faculty of Arts  
of the University of Ottawa in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy.



*Degree granted  
October 13, 1967  
McAuchamp, Uni. Sec.*

Ottawa, Canada, 1967

UMI Number: DC53341

### INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

**UMI<sup>®</sup>**

---

UMI Microform DC53341  
Copyright 2011 by ProQuest LLC  
All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against  
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

---

ProQuest LLC  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis was prepared under the guidance of Professor A.P. Campbell, Ph.D. of the Department of English of the University of Ottawa.

The writer is indebted to him and to the other members of the English Department for their interest and generous assistance.

CURRICULUM STUDIORUM

Ernest George Mardon

Born: Houston, Texas, U.S.A.  
December 21st, 1928.

Education: Gordonstoun, Moray, Scotland.

Trinity College, Dublin University, Ireland,  
1948-50.

University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada, 1958-  
61.

Mr. Mardon was called up for National Service  
in 1951. After being commissioned in the  
Gordon Highlanders, he saw active service in  
Egypt and the Middle East.

University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada,  
1963-67.

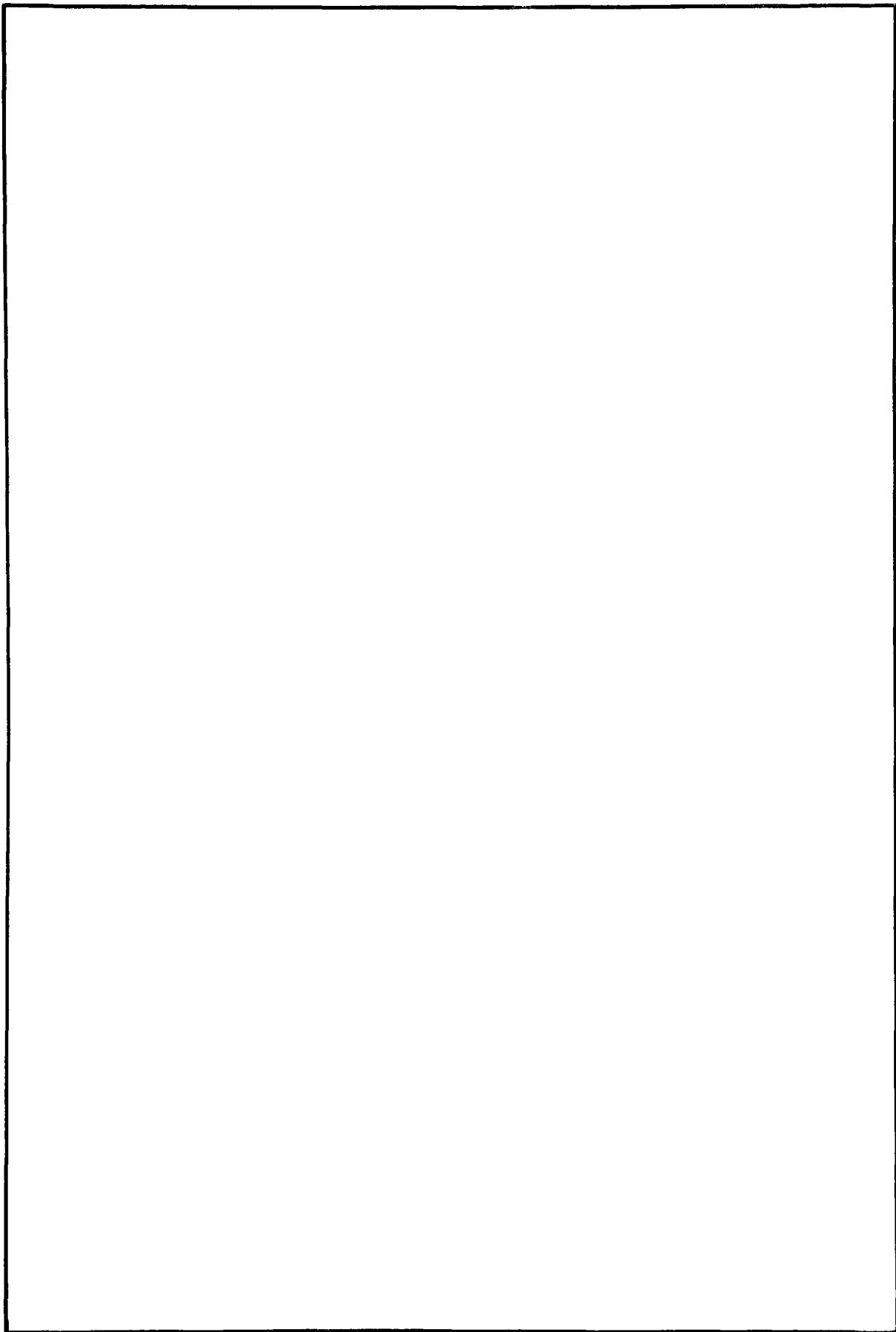
Degrees: Bachelor of Education, University of Alberta,  
1961.

High School Teaching Certificate (Permanent)  
from the Province of Alberta, 1963.

Master of Arts, University of Ottawa, 1966.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
I	INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1
II	CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE <u>CURSOR MUNDI</u> .	13
III	PURPOSE OF THE POEM . . . . .	42
IV	USE OF PROPHECY AS A UNIFYING FORCE . . .	58
V	THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND . . . . .	72
	a) The Quest of Seth for the Oil of Mercy . . . . .	76
	b) The Legend of the Holy Rood . . . .	94
VI	CLIMAX IN THE CRUCIFIXION . . . . .	120
VII	THE HARROWING OF HELL . . . . .	143
VIII	THE FINDING OF THE CROSS . . . . .	172
IX	RECOGNITION OF OUR LADY'S ROLE IN THE HISTORY OF SALVATION . . . . .	190
X	CONCLUSION . . . . .	214
	APPENDIX "A" . . . . .	216
	APPENDIX "B" . . . . .	217
	BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	218



## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

While the exiled Dante was penning the Divine Comedy in Italy, an unknown clerk was writing in the south of Scotland the Cursor Mundi, which is double the length of Paradise Lost, and is one of the most remarkable pieces of literature that survives from the Medieval period. This poem, drawn from Biblical paraphrase, ancient Christian myth, medieval legends, lives of the saints and a mass of miscellaneous information, appears in some ten manuscripts which vary in length from fragments of a few hundred lines to the complete work of some twenty-five thousand lines.

The Northern origin of the Cursor Mundi is indicated by the poet himself in reference to the section on the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, which he recast into the northern dialect of Middle English:

In sutherin engliis was it draun,  
And i have turned it till ur aun  
Langage of þe nothren lede,  
þat can non oþer englis rede.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 20061-64. These lines do not appear in the Midland manuscripts, Trinity and Laud, but do appear in Cotton, Edinburgh, Gottingen and Fairfax. The latter is from Lancashire and is considered 'nothrin' in contrast to the 'sotherin' (Midland) of the Assumption Fragment, ll. 20065-848. In this dissertation we will quote as far as possible from the Gottingen manuscript as it is the oldest, being 14th century. The Cotton manuscript is end of 14th century and beginning of 15th century. See J.E. Wells, A Manual of the Writing in Middle English 1050-1400 (London, 1916), pp. 339-40.

## INTRODUCTION

2

The precise provenance of the Original Cursor Mundi has been the subject of speculation by scholars<sup>1</sup> for the past hundred years. Stated opinions are rather evenly divided between the lowlands of Scotland, and one of the northern counties of England, usually Durham.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>James A.H. Murray, The Dialect of the Southern Counties of Scotland (London, 1873), p. 30 [Durham].

T.L. Kington Oliphant, The Old and Middle English (London, 1878), p. 400. [North Yorkshire].

Max Kaluza, "Zu den Quellen und dem Hss-Verhältnis des Cursor Mundi," Englische Studien, XII (1888), p. 453. [Nordlich vom Tweed].

Heinrich Hupé, Cursor Studies and Criticism on the Dialects of its MSS (1888), p. 186. [Lincolnshire].

Curt Barth, Der Wortschatz des Cursor Mundi, Königsberg Diss., (1903), p. 50. [Durham].

Otto Strandberg, The Rime-Vowels of Cursor Mundi, Uppsala Diss., (1919), p. XV. [Northumberland].

Rolf Kaiser, Zur Geographie des mittelenglischen Wortschatzes. Palaestra 205 (Leipzig, 1937), p. 8. [Scotland].

Bruce Dickens and R.W. Wilson, (eds.) Early Middle English Texts (Cambridge, 1951), p. 114. [Durham].

Jacob J. Lamberts, The Dialect of Cursor Mundi (Cotton MS Vespasian A III), Michigan Diss., (1954), p. 2. [Scotland].

<sup>2</sup>With regard to this city, it is worth mentioning that chronicle writing was particularly associated with the Benedictine Order. The cathedral of St. Cuthbert, Durham, was associated with this religious order. In the 14th century Durham boasted the largest library in the British Isles, and was famous for the copying of manuscripts. (See J. Stranks, Durham Cathedral (London, 1960), p. 23.)

## INTRODUCTION

3

Much of the difficulty arises from a vagueness on the part of the scholars themselves, regarding the particular manuscript referred to. It is essential to maintain a distinction between a lost original manuscript, regarding which only inferences are possible, and certain manuscripts which have been preserved to the present. Apparently those favoring Durham have reference to the Cotton MS. rather than to the lost original. Before a decision on the locality is reached, one has to account for a somewhat ambiguous passage in the "Prologue" of the Cursor Mundi:

Efter hali kirkes state  
 þis ilke boke es translate,  
 unto engliss tung to rede  
 For þe luve of engliss lede,  
 Englis lede of meri ingeland  
 For þe comen to unþerstand.  
 Frenkis rimes here i rede  
 Comunli in ilka stede;  
 þat es most made for frankis men,  
 Quat helpis him þat non can cen.  
 Of ingland þe nacione  
 Er englis men in comune,  
 þe speche þat men may mast wide speae  
 Mast to speke þar-wid war nede;  
 Seldom was for ani chance  
 Englis tong preched in france,  
 Gif we þaim ilkam þair language,  
 And þan do we na utetrage.  
 To levid and englis men i spell,  
 þat understand quat i can tell,<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. 11. 231-250.

## INTRODUCTION

4

Here England is mentioned specifically. For this reason several scholars, in particular Strandberg, reject Scotland:

"I should like to assume, like Kaluza, that the original was written in Scotland, if it were not for a passage that seems to speak against this."<sup>1</sup> As a kind of compromise, he suggests Northumberland. Actually, it is the contrast between Inglis and Frankis that concerns the Cursor poet.

Emerson remarks:

Lowland Scotch, as it is called, is an outgrowth of Northern English, and did not differ from it materially until about 1450. In this early period the language of the Scottish writers and that of Cursor Mundi or other Northern works is almost, if not quite, identical. Moreover, the Scotch themselves called the language English, or Inglis, their form of the word.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Strandberg, op. cit., p. XIV.

<sup>2</sup>O.F. Emerson, The History of the English Language (New York, 1897), p. 100. The same argument is used by Rolf Kaiser, op. cit., p. 8. Also Murray, op. cit., pp. 41-42: "Down to the end of the 15th Century, there was no idea of calling the tongue of the Lowlands Scotch; whenever the 'Scottish language' was spoken of, what was meant was Gaelic or Erse, the tongue of the original Scots, who gave their name to the country. The tongue of the Lowlanders was 'Inglis', not only as having been the tongue of the Angles of Lothian and Tweeddale, and as having been introduced beyond the Forth by Anglo-Saxon settlers, but English as being the spoken tongue of the northern subjects of the King of England, those with whom the subjects of the King of Scotland came most immediately in contact."

## INTRODUCTION

5

Emerson demonstrates that the term 'Scottish' was not commonly used until the end of the fifteenth century, hence 'English' at that time was applied to all localities where non-Gaelic or non-French was spoken, including Southern Scotland. Textual support is found at line 24765 where William the Conqueror is referred to as "William bastard." Other versions of the legend of the establishment of the feast of Our Lady's Conception refer to King William in a more respectful manner.<sup>1</sup>

The time of composition of the Cursor Mundi is also subject to some dispute. The first attempt to assign a date was made by Murray, ". . . written, near Durham, about 1275-1300 (while Alexander III reigned in Scotland), and preserved in an orthography not much later."<sup>2</sup> Murray's dating rests on the Cotton MS Vespasian A III, which in any case is younger than he supposed.<sup>3</sup> His date is probably a

---

<sup>1</sup>For example, in the Legenda aurea's version of this story William is referred to as "the glorious Duc of Normandy." See: William Caxton, The Golden Legend (Kelmscott Press, 1892), pp. 236-37, and also Mirk's Festial, ed. Theodore Erbe, EETS. es 96 (London, 1905), p. 17.

<sup>2</sup>Murray, op cit., p. 30.

<sup>3</sup>Lamberts believes this Manuscript to have been written ca. 1400 in or near Durham, which must be distinguished from the original poem, composed ca. 1300 in Southern Scotland. See his unpublished dissertation for his argument. (Michigan, 1954).

## INTRODUCTION

6

guess. Hupé fixes the time at 1254-90.<sup>1</sup> The earlier date he deduces from a reference in line 9515 to "sent Robert bok," that is, Robert Grossetestés,<sup>2</sup> Chateau d'Amour. The terminal date is assigned on negative evidence: no mention is made of the expulsion from England of the "felun ius" in the year 1290, and no mention is made either of a "groat", a new silver coin minted in 1279. Actually Hupé has settled on his date to agree with his preconceptions regarding the author of the Cursor Mundi. Strandberg says, without elaboration, "it was composed just before 1300."<sup>3</sup> The latest date for the writing of this poem is 1320, and is given by Jakob Schipper.<sup>4</sup> It appears probable, however,

---

<sup>1</sup>Hupé, op cit., pp. 186-89. Hupé settles on Lincolnshire because it enables him to explain the name of John of Lindberg which occurs in the Gottingen MS. line 17100: "John of Lindberghe, i zu sai pat es mi name ful right." He then identifies this name with a Lincolnshire man, having made up his mind regarding the date before he begins examining the evidence.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Grosseteste, bishop of Lincoln, and one of the most learned men of his age, died on 9 Oct. 1253. There were several attempts to procure his canonisation (see the letter of Archbishop Romanus to Pope Honorius IV in 1287, and of Archbishop Greenfield to Pope Clement V in 1307, Raine, Letters from Northern Registers, pp. 87, 182, and that of the dean and chapter of St. Paul's to Pope Clement V in 1307, Wharton, Anglia Sacra, ii, 343.)

<sup>3</sup>Strandberg, op cit., p. XIV.

<sup>4</sup>Altenglische Metrik I. (Bonn, 1881), p. 265.

## INTRODUCTION

7

that the Cursor Mundi original was composed in the southern part of Scotland at about 1300. It is neither possible nor necessary to locate or date it more precisely.

This vast religious epic, which describes the history of salvation, is unquestionably the work of a single resourceful poet who drew liberally from a variety of English, French and Latin sources.<sup>1</sup> He may also have added several thousand lines on the original poem which he outlines in the "Prologue".<sup>2</sup> The poet makes few personal references to himself in his long work. Two of the most significant indicate that he was a priest.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>See: Haenisch, Inquiry into the Sources of the Cursor Mundi, EETS o.s. 99 (London, 1892), pp. 1-56.

L. Borland, "Herman's Bible and the Cursor Mundi," Stud. Phil. XXX (1933), 427.

L. D'Evelyn "Methodius as Source," PMLA XXXIII (1918), 147.

P. Beichner "The Cursor Mundi and Petrus Riga." Speculum, XXIV (1949), 239.

<sup>2</sup>Haenisch does not suggest any source for lines 24970-29555, evidently not considering it proper to the Cursor Mundi. Richard Morris points out (Pref. p. IX) that this material appears only in the northern copies. The poet himself remarks lines 219-220: "þe last resun of alle þis run/ sal be of her concepcion," suggesting that the additions may be merely other poems by the same author or a contribution by a later writer. Strandberg accordingly concludes his investigations at line 24970.

<sup>3</sup>See: Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 23879-84, in which the poet says he is one of the unworthy shepherds whom Christ has set to feed his sheep; and line 23909, "Leudi! loke to þis caitive clerk."

## INTRODUCTION

8

Surviving in one or more editions is the complete Cursor Mundi as projected in the "Prologue" by the author. The poet ordinarily wrote in "short meter," that is, a pair of rimed lines having four alternating accents each. There are also 1,031 lines in "langer bastune," that is, a line of seven accents in rimed groups of four or more lines. These begin at line 14,937. At line 23,944 begin 135 stanzas of "rime couée."

The great popularity of the Cursor Mundi is evidenced by the large number of manuscripts that have survived the destruction of the monasteries and years of wanton neglect. A total of ten complete or fragmentary manuscripts are extant.<sup>1</sup> Richard Morris late in the last

---

<sup>1</sup>The surviving manuscripts are:

Cambridge, University Library, M.S. G8. 4. 27. 2.

Edinburgh, Royal College of Physicians.

London, British Museum, Cotton Ms. Vespasian A. iii.

London, British Museum, MS. Additional 10, 036.

Göttingen, University Library, MS. Theol. 107.

Oxford, Bodleian Library, Fairfax MS. 14.

Cambridge, Trinity College, MS. R. 3. 8.

London, British Museum, Herald's College MS., Arundel Press, 57.

London, British Museum, Bedford MS. 9 (Now MS. Additional 36,983.)

Oxford, Bodleian Library, Laud MS. 416.

## INTRODUCTION

9

century edited four of these manuscripts, in parallel columns, for The Early English Text Society.<sup>1</sup> In this work, we will use the Gottingen MS Theol. 107 as it appears in Morris' edition. This manuscript and the Cotton MS are the most important and most representative of the surviving copies of the Cursor Mundi. It and the Cotton MS sometimes differ in phrasing, but such differences, chiefly lexical, are most pronounced in the first part of Gottingen MS preceeding a transition first noted by Barth.<sup>2</sup> This occurs at approximately line 10962.<sup>3</sup> Beyond this rift the Gottingen MS. and the Cotton MS. are usually almost identical. The Gottingen MS. ends at line 27566, in the sixth of the so-called Additions. The relationship between the several manuscripts is of some interest, chiefly as a guide to comparing various readings. This, however, lies outside of the scope of this thesis.

The Cursor Mundi recounts the history of the world from Creation and the Fall of Adam through the Redemption

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, a Northumberland Poem of the XIVth Cen., 4 versions, ed. Richard Morris, EETS os. 57, 59, 62, 66, 99, 101 (London, 1874-93). [The Manuscripts used by Morris are Cotton MS., Vespasian A III; Fairfax MS 14; Gottingen MS. Theol. 107; and Trinity College MS R. 3. 8.]

<sup>2</sup>Barth, op. cit., pp. 10-13.

<sup>3</sup>Kaiser, op. cit., p. 7, raises a question about this and suggests line 11000 as perhaps more exact.

## INTRODUCTION

10

of mankind by Jesus Christ to the Last Judgment. This work, however, is not a rambling collection of stories, myths, and legends as one might judge from the title Cursor Mundi, (Surveyor of the World), but a highly organized account of man's existence and destiny in this world. The hand of God is seen as an ever present fact in this poem, in the same way as we see it in the illustrations of Medieval Manuscripts.<sup>1</sup> Our purpose is to show the artistic unity of this long poem which deals with human salvation. The poet binds the various elements of his narrative together by his skilful use of prophecy, and the blending in of such legends as the Oil of Mercy, and the history of the Rood-tree. The whole monumental work is framed in the contemporary Medieval devotion to Our Blessed Lady. The unknown author of the Cursor Mundi was writing in a strong tradition; he had before him many examples of works on the history of salvation in both Latin and the vernacular. He had also many paraphrases of the Old and New Testaments, along with collections of myths, legends and the apocryphal Gospels. Nevertheless, his work is unique because it is the most comprehensive poetical treatment of all the

---

<sup>1</sup>See the illustrations in the Badwine Psalter. Also C.R. Dodwell, The Canterbury School of Illuminations 1066-1200 (Cambridge, 1954).

## INTRODUCTION

11

important events in the religious history of the world written in the vernacular during the late Middle Ages. It is also unique in being the first long complete poem on a religious topic written after the Norman Conquest in the English language.<sup>1</sup>

The art of the Cursor poet, we intend to demonstrate in this work, lies in the manner in which he selected from his sources, blended these sources into a smooth poetical narrative in such a way that the reader is carried along by the exciting story of man's fall and redemption. The Cursor Mundi is a tightly constructed work of art, with clarity of purpose, with a clear principle of unity, and progression towards a goal. It is the aim of this thesis to show how the poet creates an organic whole from the combining of the various sources Latin, French and English. It will be shown that this significant Medieval poem is bound together by three unifying strands:

- 1) the work is framed in the devotion to Our Lady;
- 2) the thread of redemption is traced through the

---

<sup>1</sup>This work has a unity which such works as Jacobpo de Voragine's Legenda aurea, the South English Legendary, or the Ormulum lack. In these works, no continuity between the various portions is attempted. See: Ten Brink, History of English Literature, Vol. 1, (New York, 1889), p. 280 ff.

INTRODUCTION

12

history of the wands that became the wood of the cross; and

3) through the myth of the search for the Oil of Mercy.

Before examining what the poet says his aims are in the "Prologue," we shall endeavor to place the Cursor Mundi in its spiritual and intellectual milieu.

## CHAPTER II

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI

As the Cursor Mundi is a long narrative poem, which deals not only with religious matters but in a sense with historical matters, we are to consider first the medieval approach to history, and second the religious and spiritual climate of the century in which the Cursor Mundi was written.

Let us first then have a look at Medieval man's view of history.

## a) Medieval Concept of History

It has often been pointed out that the Christianity of Medieval historians induced them to look at the past in terms of God's purpose for the whole of mankind, and this universalizing tendency led many writers in England as well as elsewhere to start their works with the creation of the world. These works then went on to describe the creation of Adam and his fall, and to outline the manner in which the various nations had arisen in the course of time. The author of the Cursor Mundi wrote in the tradition of Medieval historians and chroniclers. He attempts to

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI 14

satisfy his readers' desire for a better knowledge of sacred history.

Universal history, of which the Cursor Mundi is an outstanding poetical example, arose within the Judaeo-Christian tradition where God was the God of all peoples.<sup>1</sup> Medieval history was universal because it was the record of the acts of God in the human story. The Biblical conception of time is not a cyclical one, based on the periodic renewal of events, as with the Greeks and Romans, but a linear one, made up of a succession of once-and-for-all actions directed towards the final goal of history.<sup>2</sup> The centre of both the revelation and fulfilment of the plan of human salvation is Christ. And Christian history is directed towards its completion which will happen at the end of time with the return of Christ. The general framework of the divine plan was well known to Medieval man. The major stages of history, which commenced with the creation and fall, reach their climax with the redeeming incarnation and end with the second coming of the Lord, were included in most religious histories of salvation during

---

<sup>1</sup>See R.G. Collingwood, The Idea of History (London, 1946), pp. 46-56.

<sup>2</sup>See Jean Danielou, The Lord of History (London, 1958), pp. 1-3.

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI 15

the Middle Ages. The birth of Christ divided the temporal process: before that event there had been a time of darkness and error; afterwards came the period of light and the triumph of faith. To the Christian, the incarnation of the Son of God was an event written into time; it was God's entry into history to give it its deepest reality and meaning. In Jesus Christ history found its true direction and its dynamism; it was He who made it the history of salvation.

Nevertheless, God prepared mankind for the coming of His Son through his revelations to the patriarchs and prophets. This concept of universal history as the unfolding of God's plan for His people is present in Holy Scripture itself, but it was made the subject of explicit analysis little by little in the patristic era. St. Augustine of Hippo was the first to expound the theory that just as the world was created in seven days, so there would be seven ages of the world itself. In the last pages of The City of God, he says:

Then shall we know this thing perfectly, and we shall perfectly rest and shall perfectly see that He is God. If, therefore, that number of ages be accounted as of days according to the distinctions of time, which seem to be expressed in the sacred scriptures, that sabbath day shall appear more evidently, because it is found to be the seventh. The first age, as it were the first day, is from

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI

16

Adam unto the flood, and the second from thence unto Abraham, not by equality of times, but by number of generations. For they are found to have the number ten. From hence now, as Matthew the evangelist doth conclude, three ages do follow even unto the Coming of Christ, every one of which is expressed by fourteen generations. From Abraham unto David is one, from thence even unto the transmigration into Babylon is another, the third from thence unto the incarnate nativity of Christ. So all of them are made fine. Now this age is the sixth, to be measured by no number, because of that which is spoken. . . . After this age God shall rest as on the seventh day. . . . But this shall be our sabbath, whose end shall not be the evening, but the Lord's day, as the eighth eternal day, which is sanctified and made holy by the resurrection of Christ, prefiguring not only the eternal rest of the spirit, but also the body.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, St. Augustine believes that history is made to reflect the same pattern as the six days of creation and the Sabbath rest that followed. Augustine's last age is, in fact, the age of the departed souls. The eighth age, in these terms, inaugurates eternity. These divisions of history are biblical in origin.<sup>2</sup>

The Venerable Bede gave the "seven ages" idea wide currency in his studies of biblical chronology. He first introduced it in his Liber de Temporibus, written in 703, in which he briefly sets out the six ages of the world.

---

<sup>1</sup>St. Augustine, The City of God, XXII, 30 (New York, 1950), p. 241.

<sup>2</sup>See Genesis 5:1, and Matthew 1:1-17.

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI 17

In his full study, De temporum ratione, written in 725, he adds a seventh and eighth age. Most medieval histories include these divisions in world history. As we shall see later in this work, the Cursor mundi arranges its 25,000-odd lines upon this structure, but it divides Christ's life into two ages: the fifth age begins with prophecies and the genealogy of Mary, and proceeds through the Childhood of Jesus; the sixth age begins with the Baptism of Christ by St. John the Baptist in the river Jordan. Jechonias and the Transmigration of the Jews to Babylon, that commenced the fifth age in St. Augustine's schema, are referred to briefly in the closing lines of the fourth age.<sup>1</sup>

In the Middle Ages there also existed a threefold division of human time, that could be superimposed upon the scheme of the seven ages of the world. The Polychronicon defines it as the "distinction of tymes": "Oon to fore lawe i - write, þe seconde undir þe lawe i - write, and þe þridde under grace and mercy".<sup>2</sup> The period of natural law lasted from the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise until the Old Law was given to Moses by God on Mount Sinai.

<sup>1</sup>See Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 9197-9.

<sup>2</sup>Ranulf Higden, Polychronicon, Trans. Trevisa, I. 31.

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI 18

During this time, men were in ignorance and only knew darkly God's intentions and His laws. The period of the written law lasted from the time of Moses to the public preaching of Jesus Christ. Christ introduced the law of Charity, and fulfilled the old law. The poet of the Cursor Mundi, as we today, is living in the time of Grace which will continue until the last trumpet is sounded and doomsday arrives.

This is noted by V. A. Kolve who remarks in The Play Called Corpus Christi:

Causality and chronological sequence supply the secular mind with an objective time-order, but for Medieval Christian thought the dignity of past time consists precisely in those traces of the future written, by God's shaping of events, upon it.<sup>1</sup>

As a result, the progression from episode to episode in religious histories is often without consecutive impulse. It is not built upon a theory of direct causation: Noah's thank-offering does not cause the offering of Isaac by Abraham, nor in any sense lead to it, even though the two actions appear in sequence, with complete disregard of the intervening years. Only the life of Christ has so total a significance that it is dealt with directly in sequential

---

<sup>1</sup>V.A. Kolve, The Play Called Corpus Christi (Stanford, 1966), pp. 118-19.

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI 19

episodes. The rationale behind the time structure of most Medieval religious histories must be described in other terms.

The events chosen for inclusion in sacred histories are those in which God intervenes in human history; significant time, it follows, becomes simply the point of intersection between their actions: the will of God expressed in time from outside time - a causality divine rather than temporal. Erich Auerbach compares the conception of time that is based on a strict sequence of causation,--which he calls horizontal,--to the time implied in a figural relationship between events, which he calls vertical.<sup>1</sup> His distinctions can provide a useful way of thinking about the larger time structure of the history of salvation as well. It is like a series of essays into history from the same center, like the casting of a fisherman standing in mid-stream and making strikes in several degrees of a circle. The sequence of these essays has meaning and moves steadily closer to a goal, but the times between them matter very

---

<sup>1</sup>Erich Auerbach, "Figura", trans. Ralph Manheim, in Scenes from the Drama of European Literature (New York, 1959), p. 72.

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI 20

little. The shape of Medieval religious histories<sup>1</sup> is a linear progression, a sequence of self-contained episodes, but the metaphysic of its structure is centrifugal. The relationship between Noah and Abraham exists in God, not in historical events intervening between them. In the same way, St. Augustine's seven ages of the world are primarily vertical in their connection, initiated by acts of God or by new kinds of covenant with Him; the horizontal connections between them are ignored. No age grows by organic development from another; each is abruptly initiated by God, from outside time. Many authors insert brief statements of non-Jewish historical events to emphasize the fact that Christ came to redeem all men. The only portion of world history that is treated consecutively, as we have noted, deals with the life of Christ which is the pivotal point. At this time, God the Son does not remain outside of time, but becomes Man.

Further, a distinct kind of anachronism is made possible through this concept of time as artifact. This anachronism permits the poet to refer to Christ in Old

---

<sup>1</sup>For a discussion of time with regard to the Mystery Cycles see:  
H. Craig, English Religious Drama, p. 16;  
Kolve, The Play Called Corpus Christie, pp. 101-123.

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI 21

Testament contexts, because Our Lord exists both before His incarnation and after His crucifixion; His relationship to time is not horizontal but vertical, due to His triune nature in eternity. God is outside time, and knowledge of His workings can transcend the limitations of any single historical moment.

Medieval man thought of all history as concentrated in a single conflict concerning the fall of man through original sin, and his redemption by the sacrifice of Christ. He had no need of external unity in order to relate all the events of sacred history. He was sure he was living in the time of Mercy; patiently awaiting the Second Coming. The Medieval 'present time' was a period of amendment which was regarded as a brief space between the apostolic age and judgment day. This passage from a medieval sermon can usefully illustrate this point:

And per-fore arise, for now is tyme for to amend,  
for now is þe day sterre upe. . . . I undirstond  
by þe day sterre noþinge els but þis time, þat is  
now tyme of grace. For had oon man doon all þe  
synnes þat all þe world myght do, and he wolde  
repente him and amend him, he shuld have grace.  
But aftur þis tyme, when þi bodie is ded, had  
a man muche repentance as all þe world myght  
have, but he amend him or þat he die, els he  
shall never have grace withowten ende.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Middle English Sermons, ed. Woodburn O. Ross,  
EETS os. 209 (London, 1940), pp. 112-13.

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI 22

The poet was very conscious of the part providence plays in the affairs of men. As critics have pointed out, in an age of religious faith, it is not surprising that the moments judged to be most important in human history, which centres around Christ's life and death, is never celebrated without reference both ways to the creation and fall, and to Doomsday, to the first coming and the last. God deals with man as Creator the first time, Saviour the second and will come as Judge on Doomsday.<sup>1</sup> A proper understanding of these three Advents are basic and central for a correct comprehension of the structure of the Cursor Mundi, and the underlying purpose of its author. There is a logical progression from the first (the Creation of Man) leading to the second (the Redemption of Man) which in turn leads to a last coming.

Thus human time is the artifact of God; it is shaped by Him and expresses His truth, through a multitude of correspondences, congruences, and paradoxes. Time concerns us because we are alive in it and because God's plan for man's redemption can be worked out only in its

---

<sup>1</sup>See Jacopo de Voragine, Legenda aurea, I, 13.

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI 23

terms. But man's real business is eternity, and medieval religious writers never forget to remind him of that. Their aim was to instruct men in the instruments of man's salvation, his passage through time into eternity.

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI 24

## b) The Didactic Revival of the 13th Century

The thirteenth century didactic movement received its primary stimulus from the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. The century is characterized by a succession of theological, homiletic and liturgical documents designed to educate first the clergy, then the laity in the doctrines of the Church. To provide a clearer view of the Cursor Mundi's position within the didactic revival, the most important products of the period will be considered under two main divisions: earlier works in Latin intended for the clergy, and later works in the vernacular designed for the laity as well as for churchmen.

The ecumenical council which was convened by Pope Innocent III was the most brilliant gathering of church fathers during the Middle Ages. It marks the culminating point of the pontificate which itself represents the zenith attained by the Medieval papacy. Prelates assembled from every country of Christendom, and with them, the deputies of numerous princes. The total included 412 bishops, with 800 priors and abbots, besides the representatives of absent prelates and a number of lesser clerics. Dogma was defined, points of discipline were decided, measures were drawn up against heretics, and finally, the regulations

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI 25

for the next Crusade to free Jerusalem from the infidel were formulated. One of the important resolutions passed was that free schools for clerics be established in connection with every cathedral. Another canon set down by the assembly required preaching to be done in cathedrals and churches as often as possible by capable men ("viros idoneos").

After the Fourth Lateran Council, the movement to promote spiritual education became an official policy of the Church. Universities and other seats of learning were founded across Western Europe. The two great orders of mendicant-friars were established at this time; the Dominican Order was founded in 1216, and the Franciscan officially recognized in 1220. Spiritual education then took on a new aspect because the friars aimed at reaching the laity by means of the art of preaching. This had results in England. In 1240 Walter of Cantelup issued as bishop of Worcester a set of Constitutione in which he proposed that instructional materials such as manuals of confession be made for the facility of parish priests.<sup>1</sup> Archbishop Peckham of Canterbury in 1281 issued a set of Constitutione which is even more famous; in these he

---

<sup>1</sup>See: C.R. Cheney, English Synodalia of the Thirteenth Century, (Oxford, 1941), p. 121.

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI 26

instigated the systematic teaching of religious knowledge to laymen. So that priests might first improve their own knowledge, Becketham, who was primate of all England from 1279 to 1299, included a summary of the fourteen articles of faith: the ten commandments; the two precepts of the Gospels; the seven works of mercy, the seven deadly sins and cardinal virtues, and the seven Sacraments.

The significant works of the didactic revival can be classified under (1) theological manuals (2) homiletic matter, and (3) liturgical matter. Many of them must have been known to the Cursor poet, and several were used by him in the composition of his monumental religious poem. Earlier works in Latin were chiefly intended for the education and instruction of members of the clergy, while later works in the vernacular (French or English) were designed for use by the laity as well as by clerics. Although most of the great theological manuals designed for priests are products of the thirteenth century, they represent earlier traditions important toward the development of such works. The most influential manual of a strictly theological nature before the Great Lateran Council was Honorius of Autum's Elucidarium. He compiled it at Canterbury about

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI 27

1100 and intended it as a reference book for regular and secular clergy.<sup>1</sup>

The Friars with their great interest in the art of preaching were responsible for producing manuals and collections of sermons for use in their work. It must be noted, however, that their homilies were written in Latin, even though they often preached in the vernacular. Collections of the lives of the saints appear to have developed from Calendars of the feast in the liturgical year. In the course of time, the list of names were expanded to include a few details about the saints' themselves. The didactic revival of the thirteenth century produced the great hagiographical collections of the Medieval era. The two most influential collections of the Latin saints' legends are Vincent of Beauvais' Speculum historiale and Jacopo de Voragine's Legenda aurea respectively. The former work contains succinct lives arranged according to historical dates. The Legenda aurea is a true legendary arranged according to the liturgical year from Advent to mid-November. The saints' lives are expanded and contain much apocryphal material. Both compilers were Dominicans. Both these collections of saints' legends were

---

<sup>1</sup> See Laurel Braswell, The South English Legendary Collection, Unpublished Dissertation (Toronto, 1964), p. 20.

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI 28

used as sources for sermons rather than works intended to be used by laymen. They had considerable influence upon later redactions of vernacular legends, and works such as the Cursor Mundi. The Legenda aurea is one of the sources of the South English Legendary,<sup>1</sup> which was written in the midlands a few years prior to the Cursor Mundi.

The clergy encouraged the translation of Latin works into the vernacular so that they would be more readily understood by the laity.<sup>2</sup> The earliest group of vernacular religious works consists of, for the most part, Old French or Anglo-Norman translations of Latin pieces. One that is used later by the Cursor poet, is Robert Grosseteste's Château d'amour (ca. 1225). Grosseteste, a Franciscan and bishop of Lincoln, was probably the greatest scholar of his time and he stressed the importance of lay instruction and especially transmission of such information through preaching.<sup>3</sup> This great man, who was of humble

---

<sup>1</sup>The only manuscript that has been printed in full is Laud 108, dating 1275-90. It is edited by C. Hortsman EETS. 87 (London, 1887). For a discussion of the possible influence of the Legenda aurea on the English collection see Minnie E. Wells, "The South English Legendary in its relation to the Legenda aurea," PMLA, LI (1936), 337-360.

<sup>2</sup>See Braswell, op. cit., pp. 5-8.

<sup>3</sup>See Cambridge Medieval History, vol. VI, 744.

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI 29

origin, said in a Latin preface to Château d'amour that he wrote it in French for those who cannot read or understand Latin.<sup>1</sup> At this same time, Honorius' Elucidarium was adapted and translated into the Anglo-Norman work entitled Manuel des peches.<sup>2</sup> This work in turn was adapted into Middle English by Robert Mannyng of Brunne in 1303 as Handlyng of Synne. Mannyng directs it principally toward the laity, not the clergy. He states at least three times that the work is for the unlearned layman, or "lewde" man because a priest should already know what he has to say.<sup>3</sup> To this end he renders the original into more simple language and the tone of Handlyng Synne is quite colloquial. From the beginning of the fourteenth century there commences a series of theological manuals in English, written largely for the benefit of laymen rather than for church men. The Cursor Mundi is written in this tradition. The poet asks the question:

---

<sup>1</sup>See L. Stevenson, Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln (London, 1899), p. 101.

<sup>2</sup>Just who did the adapting is still in question. M.D. Legge, Anglo-Norman in the Cloisters (Edinburgh, 1950), p. 108, suggests that Robert Grosseteste originated the work.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Mannyng, Handlyng of Synne, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, EETS 172, 123 (London, 1901-3), vv. 37-52, 7, 408-13 and 10,804-7.

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI 30

Frenkis rimes here i rede  
 Communli in ilka stede;  
 Mast es it wrought for frankis man:  
 Quat is for him na frankis can?<sup>1</sup>

"Seldom," he adds, "is the English tongue praised in France; he will give to each nation their own language and there is no outrage in doing so." The increasing use of the vernacular was one of the results, as we have noted, of the Fourth Lateran Council.

Although the immediate impetus for writing works on religious topics was the didactic movement of the thirteenth century, and the emphasis placed upon the art of preaching by the friars, an earlier tradition, especially in England, must not be forgotten. The tradition of homiletic writing in the vernacular was well established in the tenth century. The sermons of Aelfric and Wulfstan that have survived testify to the importance of homilies in English. The tradition of hagiographical cycles of English homilies on the sanctorale and temporale go back to the Blickling Homilies also of the tenth century.<sup>2</sup> An essential difference, however, must be noted between the earlier homilies and those that appear in the thirteenth

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, C. ll. 237-40.

<sup>2</sup>See Early English Homilies, ed. R.D.N. Walker, EETS os. 152 (London, 1917) and The Blickling Homilies, ed. Richard Morris, EETS os. 73 (London, 1880).

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI 31

century. The former belong to a monastic tradition of sermons that are learned and stabilized, while the latter, which are popular, are created under mendicant influence, aiming to entertain as well as inform.

Not all of the English sermons of the Norman period have survived, but we know of them by references in other work which gives continuity to English literature during the so-called fallow centuries.<sup>1</sup> For example, Jocelyn of Brakelond gives a description of a vernacular delivery of a homily in his Chronica (ca. 1202). Abbot Samson, he says, had a pulpit built in the abbey church of Saint Edmund, "ad utilitatem audientium et ad decorem ecclesiae"; from this 'useful' and 'decorative' pulpit the abbot often used to read Scripture and his sermons in English, even though, comments the Chronicler, he was fluent in both French and Latin.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most ambitious collections of sermons in Middle English that was undertaken at this time was by an Augustinian Canon, named Orm, in the Midlands. Orm

---

<sup>1</sup>See R.W. Chambers, "Continuity of English Prose from Alfred to More and his School." Introduction to Nicholas Harpsfield, Life of Sir Thomas More EETS. os 186, (London, 1932).

<sup>2</sup>Jocelyn of Brakelond, Chronica in Memorials of Saint Edmund's Abbey. Rolls Series 16 (London, 1890), pp. 244-5.

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI 32

proposes in his preface to his "little book," Ormulum<sup>1</sup> (ca. 1200) to compose or translate 242 sermons. Although thirty-two are extant, the work comprises almost twenty thousand short lines. The author directs his work chiefly towards his fellow clerics, that they may "spellen to þe folle/Off þe ezzre sawle nede." For the need of souls Orm proposed to render a verse translation of all the Gospels contained in the missal and to include an exegesis on each. It is possible that Orm's spelling was a kind of phonetic index for pulpit reading.<sup>2</sup> In any case his good intentions do not seem to have been utilized much for vernacular presentation: the work exists in only one manuscript, probably the author's own.

Extant in early Middle English are several anonymous and isolated sermons. The alliterative prose Sawles Warde dates from the beginning of the thirteenth century and is contained in the Katherine Group. The greatest number of English sermons, however, occur in collections or groups. A few collections date from the twelfth century and suggest some continuity with monastic

---

<sup>1</sup>Edited by Robert Holt, 2 Vols. (Oxford, 1878).

<sup>2</sup>The Ormulum is the greatest value to the Middle English philologist in indicating for us the quality of the vowels in the many words which it contains.

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI 33

Anglo-Saxon homilies of the tenth century, particularly those by Aelfric and Wulfstan, although more recent Latin and Anglo-Norman influence are evident.

In Old French or Anglo-Norman homiletic material in England strikes a different tone than what remains in English. The fact that Robert of Greatham's Miroir or, as it is often called, Les Evangiles de domées was in Anglo-Norman and composed for the Lady Eleanor (de Montfort?) and her court illustrates an essential difference between French and English devotional literature of this period.<sup>1</sup> French works were usually destined for a sophisticated and educated audience, either lay or clerical; English works usually appealed to a more limited clergy or laity. When the Miroir was later adapted into English as part of the North English Homily Collection, the anonymous translator added a prologue saying that his work was intended for the unlettered who come to the parish church on Sunday to say their prayers and receive instruction.<sup>2</sup>

If the approach differed, however, the authors' purpose and general techniques were similar. Greatham

---

<sup>1</sup>See Marion T.H. Aitken, Etude sur ' le Miroir de Robert Greatham (Paris, 1922).

<sup>2</sup>See Margaret Deansly, The Lollard Bible (Cambridge, 1920), p. 150.

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI 34

translated the Gospels into French because, as he says, it was a sign of "orgoïl" in a priest and a "mult grant folie" to speak Latin to laymen who could not profit from it. As Eleanor's chaplain he hoped to lure her away from the chansons de geste and chronicles he laments she is so fond of hearing. To attract interest to something more edifying he resorts to jingling rhythm and remarkable feats of rhyme. The same complaints against the popular vogue for romances are found in the "Prologue" of the Cursor Mundi, which will be examined in the next chapter. The Cursor poet, who addresses his audience as "lewd", like Greatham, attempts to draw his listeners away from the world of men with a sweep of biblical matter in the most popular of homiletic styles.

A trend towards the increasing use of the vernacular is clearly seen throughout the thirteenth century in both theological and homiletic material. This trend is even more pronounced in that area of liturgical writing dealing with hagiography.<sup>1</sup> The number of vernacular saints' legends, isolated or in collections, in verse or prose, reaches its greatest height in the thirteenth and

---

<sup>1</sup>The lives of saints are liturgical because they developed from notes in church calendars that were used for homilies as part of the religious services.

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI 35

fourteenth centuries. The trend within this genre is not surprising. Saints' legends had always exhibited a tendency toward popularization. The church authorities, at times, had attempted to curb the spreading of certain legends. In the twelfth century, John Beleth, the author of the often-printed Rationale divinatorum officiorum, had tried to ban the legends of the Saints Gregory, Quiriacus, and Julita from inclusion in passionaries and legendaries.<sup>1</sup> Yet, these apocryphal legends continued to circulate, first in Latin and then in the vernacular; Quiriacus' legend is referred to in the Cursor Mundi.<sup>2</sup> The danger involved in vernacular translation even of the more orthodox legends had very early been recognized. When Aelfric of Winchester translated his collection of Passiones martyrum into Old English prose in 995, he gave as his reason a desire to stimulate a failing faith by means of the martyrs' example. It would only be possible, he believed, in a language the faithful could understand.<sup>3</sup>

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries vernacular saints' legends began to replace homilies in Latin read on the appropriate feast days. Extant in

---

<sup>1</sup>See Braswell, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 21830.

<sup>3</sup>See Braswell, p. 22.

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI 36

collections or singly these hagiographical legends represent an impressive body of medieval vernacular literature. A large number of single, isolated legends in verse represent a high degree of craftsmanship and suggest composition for special occasions and sophisticated audiences. An anonymous Anglo-Norman verse life of Edward the Confessor, for example, describes to the listening "seignurs" such an event within the poem itself. On a certain day, says the author, high Mass was sung in honor of Edward before the noblemen who had come from the city to pay homage to the saint on his feast day. The author describes how, after the Gospel was read, a sermon was given on the subject of the saintly king and his great worthiness. Although the device is a narrative commonplace (cf. the recitation of lays in Beowulf, for example), this particular description is suggestive of how and when legends were read, a question of some importance in understanding the Cursor Mundi.

By way of summary, then, a tradition of lay instruction had been established in England by the middle of the thirteenth century. Not all of it was the product of the didactic movement after 1215, since a few religious works in Latin and the vernacular had been in circulation

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI 37

sometime before then. By the mid-thirteenth century lay education existed on two levels. The largest number of works sought to educate priests directly by means of theological manuals, liturgical collections, or sermons-- usually in Latin. A smaller number sought to educate the layman himself in his own vernacular. The friars played an important role on both levels, but they were by no means responsible for all the didactic works of the period, nor were they the authors of the most popular, secularized examples.

The Cursor Mundi, therefore, has a wealthy tradition of religious literature behind it. The tradition is rich in both language (Latin and two vernaculars) and form (sermons and legends). Of all representatives of this large body of religious writing, this poem is one of the most ambitious in scope and successful in execution. The Cursor Mundi, as we shall see, has a unity that the South English Legendary<sup>1</sup> (ca. 1275) and the

---

<sup>1</sup>The South English Legendary is extant in 51 manuscripts. Parts of it have been edited in The Early South English Legendary, ed. Carl Hortsman. EETS os 87 (London, 1887); The Southern Passion, ed. Beatrice Brown. EETS os 169 (London, 1927); and The South English Legendary, ed. Charlotte d'Evelyn and Anna Jean Mill. EETS os 236 (London, 1956 for 1951-2).

[This is a combination of Latin, Old English, and Anglo-Norman saints' legends, arranged chronologically according to the liturgical year. It is the first cycle of saints' lives to appear in Middle English.]

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI 38

Northern Homily cycle<sup>1</sup> (ca. 1300) lack.

By placing this religious poem in its historical context, we can see more plainly that it is the culmination of a long tradition of didactic works for the instruction of the faithful. Other writers before the Cursor poet had determined a hierarchy of significant events in Scripture, and their choice decisively influenced all art forms during the fourteenth century. A number of known and anonymous writers were engaged in translating and making clearer for the "lewde" people a story whose shape and meaning had already been definitely formulated by the Doctors of the Church.<sup>2</sup> The basic source for the Cursor Mundi was, of course, the Bible, but patristic commentary determined the form the matter would take. By judicious use of popular religious commentary and by occasional direct reference to the Fathers, the poet had access to a body of critical thought that was instrumental in the making of the poem. The selection of the most fruitful matter from the Scriptures had been made long before the Cursor Mundi had been written. As the nature of his undertaking required,

---

<sup>1</sup>The North English Homily Collection has been only edited in fragment. See J.E. Wells, Manual, pp. 287-92.

<sup>2</sup>See Kolve, pp. 57-100. His remarks concerning the Mystery Cycles are also applicable to the Cursor Mundi.

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI 39

the poet derived material from various sources. Besides the Vulgate, he used Peter Comestor's Latin Historicia Scholastica,<sup>1</sup> Herman of Valenciennes' Bible,<sup>2</sup> Wace's L'Etablissement de la Fête de la Conception Notre Dame,<sup>3</sup> Robert Grosseteste's Château d'amour,<sup>4</sup> the Pseudo-Matthaei Evangelicum,<sup>5</sup> the Evangelium Nicodemi,<sup>6</sup> the Southern Assumption,<sup>7</sup> Isodore's De Vita et Morte Sanctorum,<sup>8</sup> the Legenda aurea<sup>9</sup> and other works. The poet simply took over certain significant patterns that had previously been

<sup>1</sup>Ed. J.-P. Migne, Patrologia Latina, Vol. CXCVIII.

<sup>2</sup>Parts II-V, edited, respectively, by Otto Moldenhauer, Hans Burkowitz, Eugen Kremers, and Ernst Martin, Series of University of Greifswald dissertations, appeared in 1914. Other titles for this twelfth century poem in the dialect of Picardy, are: Li Livres de la Bible, Bible de sapience, Historie de la Bible, and Roman de sapience.

<sup>3</sup>Ed. par Mancel et Trebutien (Caen. 1842).

<sup>4</sup>The French original was printed and published by the Caxton Society, ed. by M. Cooke (London, 1852). [It is some 1750 lines in length.]

<sup>5</sup>The Apocryphal New Testament, Trans. by M.R. James, (Oxford, 1924), pp. 70-79.

<sup>6</sup>The Apocryphal New Testament, Trans. by M.R. James, (Oxford, 1924), pp. 94-146.

<sup>7</sup>Altenglische Legenden, neue Folge, ed. Hortsman (Heilbronn, 1881), p. 112.

<sup>8</sup>Ed. E.-P. Migne, Patrologia Latina, Vol. LXXXIII, col. 149.

<sup>9</sup>Ed. Grasse (Leipzig, 1846).

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI 40

observed and studied in the Bible narrative, and by simplifying, abridging, or neglecting entirely the mass of incident and detail that surround them, produced a unified sequence charged with meaning which was strong, simple and yet formally coherent.<sup>1</sup>

Within this background, the Cursor Mundi is enclosed in the Medieval acceptance of Our Lady as the Mediatrix of the graces of the Redemption, for this poem, the poet has told us, is written in her honor. Christ is looked upon as a stern judge; Mary is regarded as the smiling mother who pleads for us. This is noted by Graef:

Mary was now becoming more "human", so to speak, she was seen as a woman sharing all the joys and the sufferings of women. If God, even the incarnate God, her Son, was still felt to be in some way remote from men, because He was a divine Person, Mary was wholly human, wholly a mother, smiling at her child, weeping over Him when he had died. True, she was now enthroned in heaven: but she was in heaven also primarily as a mother, placed there to help her children struggling on earth.<sup>2</sup>

The Cursor poet confidently declares his faith in the Virgin Mary:

---

<sup>1</sup>It is important to realize that the inclusion of such stories as dealing with the childhood of Christ, the childhood of Our Lady and the 'pound of flesh' incident in the story of the finding of the cross are embellishments to the Cursor Mundi as a whole. They add to the pleasure without detracting from the unity of the poem.

<sup>2</sup>Hilda Graef, Devotion to the Blessed Virgin (London, 1963), p. 40.

THE CONTEMPORARY MILIEU OF THE CURSOR MUNDI

41

Scho prais ai for sinful menn;  
 Qua menskes hir, þai may be bald  
 Scho sal þam yeld a hundredh fald.<sup>1</sup>

As we shall see, he rounds out his long poem returning to  
 Our Lady after his description of the Last Judgment:

Syden of þe dome yow sal I say,  
 þan of oure leuedi murnand mode.  
 For hir sune scho sagh on rode;  
 þe last resun of alle þis<sub>2</sub>ron  
 Sal be of hir concepcion.<sup>2</sup>

He ends his work with a charming legend about Our Lady.  
 The poet always gives honor to the Virgin Mary. He  
 presents her in a manner that would appeal to his audience  
 and his readers. The Middle Ages loved Our Lady next only  
 to Christ. And in narrating His life, Medieval man  
 allowed her story its proper dignity within it.

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, C. ll. 108-110.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, C. ll. 216-220.

## CHAPTER III

## PURPOSE OF THE POEM

The Cursor Mundi is, literally, the 'courser' of the world from its creation to the Last Judgment. In the two hundred and seventy line Prologue, the anonymous poet clearly states his aims in writing this monumental work. Unlike the author of the Ormulum or the creator of The Canterbury Tales, the Cursor poet, even though his project was vast, embracing all the most significant events of Christian history, completed his plan. He realized it not unworthily. He was familiar with most of the secular poetry popular across Western Europe at the close of the thirteenth century. He had read the French romances, their English imitations, and the often frivolous songs of clerics writing in Latin, but he could develop no enduring taste for this literature. He opens his poem with a rousing description of the romances that the medieval inhabitants of Britain enjoyed reading or listening to:

[Me]n yernis iestis for to here,  
 And romance rede on maner ser,  
 Of alexander þe conquerour,  
 Of Iuli cesar þe emperour  
 [Of grece and Tr]oye þe strong striif,  
 [þere many thosand lesis] hir liif,  
 O brut þat berne bolde of hand  
 First conquerour of meri ingland;

## PURPOSE OF THE POEM

43

Of King arthour, þat was so riche,  
 Was non in his time funden suiche;  
 Of ferliis þat his Knightes fell,  
 Of auntris did i here of tell,  
 Of wawain, Kay, and other stabil,  
 For to were þe runde tabil.  
 Hou King charlis and rouland foght--  
 Wid sarazins ne walð þai never be saght;--  
 Of tristrem, and hiss lief ysote,  
 Hou he for here be-come a sote;  
 Of King ionet and ysumbras,  
 Of ydoyne, and of amadas;  
 Stories of ðivers things  
 Of princes, prelates, and of kinges,  
 Sangys sere of ðivers rime,  
 Engliss, franss, and latine,  
 To rede and here, ilkon is prest,  
 Of thinges þat þaim liked best.  
 þe wisman wil of wisdam here,  
 þe fole him ðravis to foli nere,  
 þe wrong to here right es loth,  
 And pride wid buxummes es wroght;  
 Of chartite has lecchour lite;  
 Charite again wreth wil smite;  
 Bot bi þe fruyt may ilk man se  
 Of quat vertu es ilk a tre.  
 . . . . .  
 þis fruit bitakins all oure dedis  
 Bath gode and ill qua right redis;  
 Ur dedes fra ur hert tas rote  
 Queþer þai turne to bale or bote.<sup>1</sup>

In this stirring opening passage of the Cursor Mundi, we have a listing of the various types of romances that men yearned to hear in the Middle Ages. These romances which were at the height of their vogue at this

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G.11. 2 ff.

time, come from the three Matters.<sup>1</sup> There were cycles of stories about Alexander the Great, the Siege of Troy, King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table, and Charlemagne and his paladins, which are mentioned by the Cursor poet. He also refers to such well-known single romances as Tristram and Iseult,<sup>2</sup> Sir Isumbras, and Amadas and Idoine.<sup>3</sup> The poet notes that each man likes to read of the things nearest his heart,<sup>4</sup> be they of princes, prelates or of kings, written in varying rimes in Latin or the vernacular tongues of French or English.

The Cursor poet goes on to observe that the wise man delights to hear of wisdom, while the fool lends his

---

<sup>1</sup>Jean Bodel, a French poet who flourished about 1200, was the first to divide the romances into three basic groups: the Matter of France, the Matter of Britain and the Matter of Rome the Great. In his Chanson des Saxons, occur the often quoted lines: "ne sont que iii matieres a nul homme attendant, / De France et Bretagne et de Rome la grant." See The Oxford Companion to French Literature, edd. Paul Harvey and J.E. Heseltine (Oxford, 1959), p. 75.

<sup>2</sup>In its earlier form, it was not connected with the Arthurian cycle.

<sup>3</sup>This is a popular roman d'aventure of the first half of the 13th century. It is the story of the trials and success of a squire of low degree.

<sup>4</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 25-26.

## PURPOSE OF THE POEM

45

ear to folly. He questions the value of reading or hearing tales of strange and wonderful happenings. The condemning of popular romances by churchmen was not uncommon during the Middle Ages. Robert of Greatham, who was quoted in the last chapter, is a good example.

At this point, the poet gives a small sermon on the evils of the present age which only esteem those who have paramours, saying men are known for good or ill by what they are attracted to:

For be þat things men draus till  
 Men may þain knave for gode and ill,  
 A sample herebi til þaim i say  
 þat ragis in to þair riott alway,  
 In riott and in rekelage  
 of all þair liif spend þai per stage;  
 For nu es holdyn non in cours  
 Bot he þat can love paramours;--  
 þat foli luve þat vanyte  
 Him likes nou non oper gle.  
 It es bot fanton for to say  
 To day it es, to morn away,  
 Wid chance of ded or change of hert  
 þat soft bigan endis ful smert.  
 For quen þu wenis traistiest to be,  
 þu sal fra hir or scho fra þe,  
 He þat wenis stiffest to stand,  
 War him hiis fal is neist at hand.<sup>1</sup>

He notes that earthly things as earthly love is here today, gone tomorrow. He dwells on the transitory nature of earthly things and that man appears strongest when his fall is close at hand. The poet, after reminding us that

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 45-62.

## PURPOSE OF THE POEM

46

all is unsure in this world, tells us to have devotion to the Virgin Mary who is man's best friend and always remains true. This is how he describes Our Lady:

Forþi i blise þat paramoure  
 þat in mi nede me dos socure,  
 þat savis me in erde fra sinne,  
 And heven bliss me helpis to winne.  
 For þou i sumtime be untrewe  
 Hir luve es evere like neue;  
 Hir luve scho holdes treu and lele,  
 Ful suete it es to manes hele,  
 Suilk in erd es funder non  
 For scho es moþer and maiden alon,  
 Moþer and Maiden never þe less,  
 For þi of hir toke iesu his fless.<sup>1</sup>

He goes on to say that men who can compose poems or write stories should do so in honor and praise of Our Lady and her Son:

Wat bot es to set travail  
 On thing þat noght may avail,  
 þat es bot fantom of þis world  
 As ye have sene i-now and herd.<sup>2</sup>

He points out that we know enough of her fairness and her love to make many poems about Our Lady:

Qua will of hir fayrness spell  
 Find he may inogh to tell;  
 Of hir godnes of hir trouth-hedd,  
 Men may find ever mar to rede  
 Of reuth of luve and of charite;  
 Was never hir make ne never sal be.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 69-80.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 89-92.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 95-100.

## PURPOSE OF THE POEM

47

The Cursor poet then announces that he will undertake such a lasting work in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which will be founded on the wonderfully steadfast ground that is the Holy Trinity, because:

Scho prais ay for sinful men.  
 Qua pat worschipis hir he mai be bald,  
 Scho wil him yeilde a hundreth fald,  
 In hir worschip wald i biginne  
 A lastand werk apon to minne.  
 For to do men knave hir kin  
 pat us suilk worschip gan to win,  
 Sumkin ieste nu forto knau  
 pat don was in þe alde lau;  
 Bituix þe ald lau and þe new  
 Hu cristes bote bigan to brew,  
 I sal you scheu wid min entent,  
 Sothli of hir testament.  
 All þis werld, ar þis boke bline,  
 Wid cristes help i sal our-rinne,  
 And telle sum ieste principale.  
 For all may no man have in tale,  
 Bot forþer may na werk stand  
 Widuten grund-wal to be lastand,  
 þarfor þis werke i wil found  
 On a selcuth stedfast grund,  
 pat es þe hali trinite,  
 pat all has made wid his bounte.<sup>1</sup>

Thus against the vanity and folly of the world, the poet has put the seriousness of the Christian way of life; against sensual love, the adoration of God and the worship of the Virgin Mary. He states that in honor of the Mother of God, he will write a poem which should teach of the decree of God, as embodied in her, its causes as

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 108-130.

## PURPOSE OF THE POEM

48

well as its results, and will show from the beginning of history of the race from which Mary sprang. Furthermore he will write in English so that his work will have as wide a reading public as possible.

The Cursor poet then proceeds to give a brief summary of the topics that he proposes to deal with in his work. The Cursor Mundi, in fact, contains most of the significant passages of sacred history besides a great deal of legendary material. Beginning with the Trinity, on which the work is to rest as on a firm foundation, the poet sets himself to describe the creation of the world, the fall of the angels, the fall of Adam and the fortunes of his immediate posterity;

First at himself i sett mi marke,  
 And siben to tell of his handwarke,--  
 Of þe angelis first þat fell,  
 And after i wil of adam tell,  
 Of his hospring.<sup>1</sup>

Next he proceeds to indicate what events in the Old Testament he plans to include in his long poem:

And of Woe,  
 And sumquat of his sunes thre.  
 Of abraham and of ysaac,

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 131-135.

[It is significant that in this outline of the work, the Cursor poet does not mention that he will deal with the Oil of Mercy or the history of the Rood-tree. As a result, some critics say that all the section on the wandes which became the Cross are interpolated. A study of the text does not support this position.]

## PURPOSE OF THE POEM

49

þat hali men war widuten lac;  
 Sïpen sal i tell to you  
 Of iacob and of ysau,  
 Here neist sal be sïpen teld  
 Hu Ioseph was bath boght and seld,  
 Of þe iuus and of moyses  
 þat goddes folk to lede him ches;  
 Hou godd bigan þe lau him give,  
 þe quilk þe iuus suld in live.  
 Of saul þe King and of davi  
 How þat he faught against goli,  
 And syde of salamon þe wise<sup>1</sup>  
 Hou craftili he did instifie.<sup>1</sup>

The poet then says that he will narrate how Christ came as the fulfilment of the prophecies, after which he intends to deal with the story of Joachim and Saint Anne and the birth of Mary and how she gave birth to Christ, when and where, and of the events of His childhood:

Hou crist cam thoru prophesi  
 His aune folk forto bi;  
 Sïpen it sal be rede on þane  
 Of ioachim and of sainte ane,  
 Of mari als hir douhter milde  
 Hou schoe was born and bar hir child;  
 Hu he was born, quen and quare,  
 How shco him to þe temple bare;  
 Of þe Kinges þat him soght  
 þat thre presantes til him broght;  
 Hou þat herodes King wid wogh  
 For cristes sake he childer slogh;  
 Hou þat iesu til egipt fledd  
 And hu þat he was þennis ledd.  
 And þer suld ze here mani a ded  
 þat iesu did in his barnhede.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 135-150.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 151-166.

## PURPOSE OF THE POEM

50

Next the poet says he will tell of Christ's baptism, of the beheading of John the Baptist and some of the most important incidents in Our Lord's public life:

Sipen of baptist saint iohn,  
 pat iesu baptist in pe flom iordan.  
 Hou iesu wan he longe nade fast  
 Was temped wid pe wicked gast;  
 Sipen of ionis baptising  
 And hou him hefded heroud King.  
 Hu pai iesu crist him selven  
 Ches to him apostilis twelve,  
 And opinli bigain to preche,  
 And all pat seke war to leche,  
 And did miraclis sua rif,  
 Quarfor pe iuus him held in striif,  
 Sipen hu godd all-mightin  
 Turnd water into win;  
 Of fiif thousand men pat he  
 Fedd wid fiif lovis and fisses thre;  
 Of a man sal ze sipen find  
 pat godd gaf sight pat born was blind,  
 And of pe spouse breche, pat womman  
 pat pe iuus demed to stan;  
 How he heled a man unfere  
 pat seke was eght and twenti zere;  
 Hou mari magdalain wid grete  
 Com to wasse ur lauerdes fete,  
 Of hir and martha pat wild nocht blin  
 Aboute pe nedis of hir inne;  
 Of lazar pat ded lay understan,  
 Hou iesu him raysed in fless and ban;<sup>1</sup>

Then the Cursor poet informs us that he will describe Christ's passion, death, descent into hell, and resurrection:

Hou pai sched his blissed blode,  
 And pined him apon pe rode.  
 Wid cristes will pan sal i tell

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 167-192.

## PURPOSE OF THE POEM

51

Hou he sipen harud hell,  
 Hu iuus wid þair grete unskill  
 wend his uprising to dill,<sup>1</sup>

This section, which includes the Crucifixion and the Harrowing of Hell, is the climax of the Cursor Mundi.

After dealing with the descent of the Holy Ghost, the poet tells us that he intends to treat with Our Lady's end,<sup>AND</sup> the finding of the holy cross before proceeding to narrate the events at the end of the world:

Of ante crist come þat sal be Kene,  
 And of þe dreri dais fiiftene  
 þat sal cum bifor domes day;<sup>2</sup>

But before he lays aside his pen, confirming the purpose of this poem, the author declares that he will return to Mary by describing her agony at the foot of the cross before ending the work with a contemporary miracle of Our Lady. This final incident tells how an eleventh century abbot of Ramsey was saved from shipwreck by promising to establish a feast in honor of Mary's miraculous conception:

þe last resune of al þis roune  
 Sal be of hir concepcion.<sup>3</sup>

This return to Our Lady at the close of this very long poem tends to give a balance to the poem. The Cursor poet

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 197-202.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 213-215.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 219-220.

## PURPOSE OF THE POEM

52

truly frames his monumental religious saga in the contemporary devotion to the Mother of Our Saviour.

The Cursor poet is convinced that many incidents in the religious history of the world are as exciting and marvellous as any to be found in the popular contemporary romances. In writing this work, he is motivated by a desire to give praise to Our Lady, to popularize some of the most important events in sacred history, and to produce a poem that could readily be understood by his English-speaking countrymen. He declares;

Nedeful me think it were to man  
To know him self, hou he bigan,  
Hou he bigan in werld to brede,  
Hou his ospring bigan to sprede,  
Bath of þe first and of þe last,  
In quatkin cors þis werld in past.<sup>1</sup>

The poet finishes his "Prologue" with his remarks on why he has written it in English, which we have referred to above in Chapter I. His poem is especially written to help those who cannot read or understand French. He notes in conclusion that:

Coursur of þe werld men au it call,  
For all mast it over-rines all.  
Take we ur biginyng þan  
Of him þat all þis werld bigan.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 225-230.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 267-270.

## PURPOSE OF THE POEM

53

Although not unique in plan in European letters, it was so in English:

There is no lack of compositions in the Middle Ages following a plan similar to that of the Cursor Mundi. Nothing of the kind existed in the English language, however. The most attractive legends and traditions that occupied the age were now first blended for the English people, with the most momentous passages of Bible history. It formed a great fabric in which earlier and later things were interwoven, as promise and fulfilment, picture and reality. The plan of the whole is similar to that of the Collective Mysteries, that now began to take form, not uninfluenced by the Cursor Mundi.<sup>1</sup>

The merit of the poet is so much greater as he was not in a position to base his poem on any single text, as did the authors of the Genesis and Exodus, nor did he desire to do so. He collected his material from several writings, though perhaps not from so many as we might assume in our inadequate knowledge of the sources accessible to him. Aside from Holy Writ, the material was taken, as we shall see in the following chapters, from biblical exegists and homilists; further, many apocryphal books were used, some of them, perhaps, at second-hand. The Cursor poet's remarkable skill is to be found in the way he blended the numerous sources into a unified account of Man's fall and redemption.

---

<sup>1</sup>Bernard Ten Brink, History of English Literature, Vol. 1, (New York, 1889), p. 288.

## PURPOSE OF THE POEM

54

The poet's purpose in writing the Cursor Mundi is not unlike Robert Grosseteste's stated aims when he wrote Château d'amour early in the thirteenth century. In fact, the Cursor poet includes a free translation of Grosseteste's French work, which is a kind of religious romance, dealing with the fundamental articles of Christian belief under the guise of a romaunt of chivalry, a pious Roman de la Rose. The famous bishop of Lincoln, who was the first chancellor of the University of Oxford, offers his 'religious' romance dealing with the four daughters of God and the Castle of Love, which is Our Lady, without an apology. Unlike the Cursor poet, there is no comparison with worldly romances. Grosseteste's prologue opens merely with expressions of piety:

Ki bien pense bien poet dire;  
 Sanz penser ne poez suffire  
 De nul bien fet comencer;  
 Deus nos doint de li penser,  
 De Ki, par Ki, en Ki sunt  
 Tuz les biens Ki sunt el mund.<sup>1</sup>

He wrote this work for the laity, and expounded a difficult subject in terms familiar to his audience, to be used for the benefit of the non-clergy. He puts his purpose thus:

---

<sup>1</sup>J. Murray, Le Château d'Amour de R. Grosseteste (Paris, 1918), vv. 1-7.

[Who thinks well can say well; you cannot adequately begin any good undertaking without thought; may God grant us to think of Him, of whom, by whom, in whom are to be found all the good things that are in the world.]

## PURPOSE OF THE POEM

55

Tuz avum mestier de aire,  
 Mes tresturz ne poun mie  
 Saver le langage en fin  
 D'ebreu, de grin ne de latin,  
 Pur loer sun creatur.  
 Ke la bunche de chanteur  
 Ne sun saint nun nuncier  
 E Ke chescun en sun langage  
 En li conuisse sanz folage,  
 Son Deu e sa redempcion,  
 En romanz comenz ma reson  
 Pur cens Ki ne sevent mie.  
 Ne lettreure ne clergie.<sup>1</sup>

The Cursor poet, like Grosseteste, kept his audience in mind while writing his long poem. His audience would include ordinary people, more familiar with the ways of rural life than with civil or commercial affairs. The poet has the greatest respect for authority, explaining several times the importance of tithes. He does not include such descriptions of courtly splendour as we find in the first part of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,<sup>2</sup> What he does know of courtly life appears to have come from books. Of course, he may have taken into account the limited background and restricted interests of his audience and

---

<sup>1</sup>J. Murray, 11-15 ss.

[We all have need of aid, but assuredly we cannot all know the languages of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, to praise one's creator. So that the mouth of the singer may be unstopped to praise God and proclaim His holy name, and so that each one may know in his own tongue within himself without folly his God and his redemption, I begin my argument in French, for those who have neither letters or learning.]

<sup>2</sup>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. Israel Gollanz, EETS OS 210 (London, 1940 for 1937), pp. 1-18.

readers. He does enjoy including information on practical matters such as the four humours, the effects of old age, the movement of the sun and moon, and the importance of different kinds of fruit trees. He also likes an exciting story, the marvelous and strange, and appears to enjoy describing the final illness of King Herod in all its horror.<sup>1</sup> He makes things concrete and easily understood by over-simplification. In short, the Cursor Mundi represents a microcosm of its audience's range of interest and experience.

As a didactic work, the first object of the poem would be to present the teaching of the church. Yet, its treatment of theological questions represents a very different approach to presentation than do the manuals of instruction. We find no complex theological discussions which are found in some Medieval works such as certain of the plays in the Hegge cycle.<sup>2</sup> The theology in the Cursor Mundi is simple, orthodox and applied.

The poet shows great skill in concealing the didactic purpose of his work. He is both dulce and utile.

---

<sup>1</sup>See Cursor Mundi, G. 1. 11797 ff.

<sup>2</sup>See the debate of Christ with the Doctors in the Temple in Ludus Coventriae.

## PURPOSE OF THE POEM

57

The entertaining narrative and lively style masks the more serious aim, that of teaching the Faith. The nature of God, and His created Universe, the revolt of Lucifer, the Fall of Man and God's plan of redemption all occur within the cyclical framework of the Cursor Mundi. Nothing heretical or theologically unsound creeps into the work.<sup>1</sup> The poet intended his readers and hearers to respond to the Cursor Mundi with heart and devotion.

With particular skill the poet does achieve his purpose: the long narrative is rendered tight and continuous by inter-weaving it, as we shall see, with a tight warp of prophecy, myth and legend.

---

<sup>1</sup>The wonders of Christ's childhood for example had been an accepted part of the oral tradition of the church for centuries as can be seen in stained glass windows and wall paintings in Medieval churches.

## CHAPTER IV

## USE OF PROPHECY AS A UNIFYING FORCE

When the Cursor poet deals with prefiguring and prophecy, he follows the well established formula laid down by the early Fathers of the Church. He was not an innovator in this regard. He used prophecy, as he used myth and legend, to strengthen the narrative unity of his long poem.

The poet skilfully connects the various sections of his narrative and he gives explanations of difficult scriptural passages. For example, the poet interprets what God meant when before the flood he said, "I rue that I made man":

"Me rewis þat ever I made man."  
 Bot ilk a man þat þis word heris,  
 Wat nocht all quat it to peris,  
 þis word was a prophesseye,  
 þat for said was bi his merci,  
 Of þe reuthe him sipen kidd,  
 Quen he to pine him selven didd  
 For his schoylinges apon rode tre,<sup>1</sup>  
 Quat was his reuthe nu all mai se.

He uses many of the well-known prophecies within his work in an appropriate way. He announces that he will come, through the prophecies, to Christ:

Bot lauerdinges, for-þi þat i  
 Thoru wittnessing of prophesi,

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 1602-10.

And thoru prof of þe selven dede,  
To birth i wild ur lauerd lede,<sup>1</sup>

Prophecy is found, of course, throughout the Old Testament. Christ quoted many of the prophecies Himself.<sup>2</sup> The earliest Christians expounded these prophecies. The early Fathers of the Church saw in the patriarchs, such as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, various prefigurings of Christ.<sup>3</sup> Even the Psalms are carefully explained as prophecies of Christ's birth, life, passion, death, burial, and resurrection. Medieval man was very conscious of the reality of prophecy, and for him the past the present and the future were very closely knit together; everything that surrounded him was in some manner an index pointing towards God, towards salvation, or towards damnation. Prophecy is constantly used in the Cursor Mundi, and in the sources it draws upon, not merely because it proves Christ to be the promised and long awaited Messiah, but because it foretells the whole course of human history in order that we may understand that nothing of crucial importance happens by

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 6863-66.

<sup>2</sup>Old Testament prophecies quoted by Christ are too numerous to quote.

<sup>3</sup>See Appendix "A" where some of the figures and fulfilments are indicated by square brackets. For example: The sacrifice of Isaac is a foreshadowing of the Crucifixion. See p. 216.

caprice or accident. In the medieval cycles, some of the most powerful pageants are those dealing with prophecies.<sup>1</sup>

In the Cursor Mundi, the sense of prophecy has been even more skilfully refined. The poet persistently calls to our attention the significance of an action in somewhat the same manner as the Expositor of the Chester Cycle.

The Cursor poet quotes some of the famous prophecies of Isaiah as an introduction to the Fifth Age of the world, which deal with the genealogy of Mary, her birth and childhood, before proceeding to the birth and childhood of Jesus.

He says:

Crist was forsaid wid prophecy,  
 þat mast of spac saint ysay,  
 And to þe ihus so mistrouand,  
 He bad þaim here and understand.<sup>2</sup>

The poet even explains in English the meaning of one prophecy:

"Gode men," he said, "Can ye noght se?  
 For of a man þat hiht lesse  
 A mayden sal brede, of his hup-spring,  
 And scho sal have a sone to king,  
 I wil noght hele for drede of blame,  
 Emanuel sal be his name."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>See "The Prophet's Play" in The Chester Plays, ed. H. Deimling. EETS. es. 62, Part I (London, 1892), pp. 84-104.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. vv. 9265-68.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. vv. 9281-86.

The poet adds "þat es to say, in englis þus, / ur lauerd him-selven alle wid us."<sup>1</sup> The Cursor poet includes such well-known prophecies of Isaiah about the root of Jesse:

"Iesse," he said, "of his rotyng  
 Certaynly a wand suld spring,  
 ute of þat a flour suld brest,  
 þe hali gast þar-on suld rest  
 þe gast þat gives giftes sere."<sup>2</sup>

He then quotes Isaiah again concerning the promised Messiah:

"A mayden sal us bere a childe,  
 Querof i told you here biforn,  
 Tille ure bi-houe sal he be born.  
 þis child sal us be gyven tille,  
 And sal reyne at his wille;  
 Men sal him call wid names sere,  
 'Ferlyful' and 'cunsaylere'.  
 Godd of strenth and fader es he,  
 Cald of þat world es forto be,  
 And 'prins of pais', men sal him call,  
 And never more sal his reyne fall."<sup>3</sup>

The poet also includes Jeremiah's foretelling of the coming of the Saviour, and that when Christ comes the Jews will no longer have an anointed King. This is how he handles this prophecy:

"Quen he þat haliest es comen,  
 Your noynting sal fra you be nomen.  
 Bot yit i hope ye be sua blind,  
 þat ye can nocht mi resun find,

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 9287-88.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 9269 ff.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 9308-19.

## USE OF PROPHECY AS A UNIFYING FORCE

62

King wer ye wont to noint ay-quare,  
 Bot sua sul ye nou have na mare,  
 Fra he be noynted, pat i say,  
 Kingles sul ye be fra pat day."<sup>1</sup>

The prophets Joel and Elias are cited in support of Jeremiah's prophecy. But the Jews took no heed and were faithless:

Bot for na talking paim was tald,  
 It tok never in their hertis hal'd,  
 Bot ay mistrouting and mistrows."<sup>2</sup>

Many of the prophecies that are selected for inclusion in this poem deal with the Virgin Mary. This is in keeping with the framework which centres on the contemporary devotion to Our Lady. The poet declares that God said the following of Mary:

He said, "my lemman es sua gent,  
 Scho smellis suetter pan piment,  
 And wele softer hir vestiment.  
 pan any reclis pat er brent.  
 Fayr es be muth of pat leudy,  
 And ilk toth es as yvory  
 As douues eye hir loke es suete,  
 As rose on thoru er to unmete;  
 And tuene paim fayre acord es nane,<sup>3</sup>  
 Sua es tuix hir kin and my lenman."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 9337-44.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 9349-51.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 9355-64.

There is a long section on the events leading up to the birth of the Virgin Mary in the Cursor Mundi.<sup>1</sup> The thanksgiving offerings of Joachim when he is told by an angel that his wife Anna will have a child is given prophetic significance by the poet. The joyful father-to-be offered ten white lambs, twelve bulls, and one hundred sheep: the lambs to God, the bulls to the poor, and the sheep to the town. This is the significance that the Cursor poet gives to Joachim's offerings:

þe lambis ten all als an  
 Bitakins iesu crist was tan,  
 And don on rode for ur wite,  
 And for us suffrid gret despite.  
 þe bolys twelve he offríd sua,  
 understand tuelve apostlis þa,  
 þat tholid for crist soru and care,  
 And martird for his love þai ware.  
 þis hundrið þat war boune,  
 were all delt to þe comune,  
 Bitakins felauschip, i-wiss,  
 Of saintes hye in heven bliss  
 þe taking of an hundrið tale,  
 All fullines it takens hale.<sup>2</sup>

The last straight prophecy that we will cite from this poem is that of Simeon who cried out with joy when he beheld the infant Jesus. The aged Simeon, whose sons take a prominent part in the Harrowing of Hell as we shall see

---

<sup>1</sup>See Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 10123-10572.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 10391-04.

in chapter VII, foretells that Christ will be the downfall of the wicked and the salvation of the good:

"bis child," he said bi-for pain alle,  
 "Sal be to fele men in dune falle,  
 And to fele in uprising,  
 In takning alsua of gainsaying;  
 bis dunefal sal we understand  
 Suld be all þe mistrouand,  
 bis uprising of operfele  
 þat in trouth war treu and lele."  
 Til mari he said, "þin auen hert  
 A sorful word sal stic over-thuert"  
 þe sword of soru thoru hir hert stod,  
 Quan scho hir sune sau hang on rod.<sup>1</sup>

Now, let us turn to another type of prophecy, in which events in the Old Testament are made to pre-figure events of Christ's life. Selection of episodes from the Scriptures for use in the Cursor Mundi is often based upon their significance as pre-figuring episodes connected with the second Advent - the redemption of ~~man~~ by Jesus Christ. These episodes stand for events greater than themselves. This view of the Old Testament is made clear by the fifteenth century bishop of St. Asaph and Chichester, Reginald Pecock, who in his Reule of Chrysten Religioun<sup>2</sup> explains that God revealed His coming in the flesh in

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 11361-72. '

<sup>2</sup>Ed. William C. Greet. EETS os 171 (London, 1927), 71. [The object of this work (ca. 1456) is 'to win the lay children of the Church into obedience' by rational arguments.]

three ways: by direct announcement to the Fathers, as when he told Abraham that the Messiah would be born by his seed, by announcements through the prophets to the chosen people at large; and by

Figuris and tokens afore rennying, boop afore þe lawe youun to Moyses and in the lawe youun to Moyses, and þat by alle þe sacrificis and opere observanncis y ouun in þe lawe of Jewis.<sup>1</sup>

It is frequently this third form of announcement that is selected by the Cursor poet from the Old Testament material, to assist in binding and unifying the whole poem. Erich Auerbach gives a good description of figura:

It is something real and historical which announces something else that is also real and historical. The relation between the two events is revealed by an accord or similarity.<sup>2</sup>

With this statement to guide us, we may also explore the richer formulation made by St. Basil in the fourth century:

The type is a manifestation of things to come through an imitation allowing us to see in advance the things of the future in such a wise that they can be understood.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>2</sup>For a full explanation of Auerbach's arguments, see Scenes from the Drama of European Literature, (New York, 1959), p. 291 ff.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in Danielou, From Shadow to Reality, p. 188.

Originally, this interest in the concordance of events arose from the need to prove the unity of the Old and the New Testaments. This technique was used in the defeat of the Gnostic heresy, which held that Christ superseded the demiurge of the Jewish Old Testament, as it had been used against the Jews to prove that Christ was indeed their long-promised Messiah. It offered simultaneously an explanation of the Bible as a dual revelation, and a demonstration of the Bible's truth.<sup>1</sup> Figuration produced works during the Middle Ages which tell the story of Christ's birth but pauses at each major incident in the story to explain the relevant Old Testament's episodes that pre-figure it. Christ Himself used this technique in His teaching. The Church Fathers searched for correspondences between events of the Old and New Testament to show that Christ was the fulfilment of the prophecies. But first we must understand God's plan.

An essential part of the first Advent is, of course, the Fall of Man. The important thing here is that Adam disobeyed the command of God almost immediately; by eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge he changed his own nature. The Fall became a kind of datum, a given fact,

---

<sup>1</sup>Louis Rean, Iconographie de l'Art Chretien, (Paris, 1955-9), I. 192.

from which everything else follows; it made necessary the Incarnation, and this created a direct relationship between Adam and Christ which in turn shaped the understanding of the redemption and the manner of its working out. St. Paul speaks of Christ as the Second Adam.<sup>1</sup> The Church Fathers also wrote on the significance of this relationship. The fruit eaten by Adam brought death; to eat of Christ's body brings everlasting life. The necessity of the second Advent of God is the result of man's sin at the beginning of the world.<sup>2</sup> The disobedience of our first parents influences everything that has come after. The Cursor poet has God promise Adam a redeemer even as He expels him from Paradise:

"Ful dere adam it sal be boght  
 Till it be bett þat þu has wroght.  
 Ta þi wiif nu in þi hand,  
 For ye sal leve þis lufsum land,  
 In till þe wreched world to gang;  
 þar þu sal thinck þi liif ful lang,  
 Lang pining þare to drei,  
 And sipen dobil ded to dei.  
 Ye sal be flemed fra mi face,  
 Bituix anð i you send mi grace,  
 þe oile of merci bos zou abide,  
 I hete to send it you sum tide."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See Romans, 5:15.

<sup>2</sup>See Kolve, pp. 57-100.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 945-56.

This is the beginning of all prophecies. Here is the first and basic principle of unity in the Cursor Mundi.

Let us take one Old Testament personage and see how he is used to pre-figure Christ. Noah is rich in figural possibilities. Christ Himself refers to him in his teaching about the end of the world:

Heaven and earth shall pass, but my words shall not pass. . . . And as in the days of Noah, so shall also the Coming of the Son of man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, even till that day in which Noah entered the ark; And they knew not till the flood came, and took them all away; so also shall the coming of the son of man be.<sup>1</sup>

St. Augustine generalized the correspondence into a formula for "Noah signifies Christ, and the ark signifies the Church."<sup>2</sup> Noah gathered his family into the ark and together they survived the first "ending" of the world, so in the final destruction, only the family of Christ will safely journey into eternal blessedness. The description of the coming of the Flood is given balance by the inclusion of the signs of Doom near the close of the vast work, thus giving the poem a balanced structure. The first ending of the world is described graphically--the sun and the moon hid their light, the earth quaked, the seas ran over the

---

<sup>1</sup>Matt. 24: 35-39.

<sup>2</sup>City of God, XV, 26.

plains, beasts and men fled to the high ground until all the land was covered when the wolf and man, the lion and the deer, and the lady and her page swam side by side. The Cursor poet describes it thus:

Stormes ras on ever-ilk a side,  
 Sun and mone leme gan hide,  
 It mirked over all þis world wide,  
 þe rain it fell sua fell and fast,  
 Welles wer, þe bankes brast;  
 þe see to rise, þe erd to cleve  
 þe springes gan over al ute dreve;  
 Levening fell wid thoner and rain  
 þe erd quok and dinned again  
 . . . . .  
 þe water wex ute over þe plaines,  
 þe bestis ran þen to montaynes,  
 Men and wimmen ran þaim wid,  
 ðele þai wend þar haf sun grid,  
 All for noght þan suank a fote  
 Quen þai Cam þar was þar na bote  
 . . . . .  
 Thinc on man ferli þat þar suam  
 Side bi side, both wolf and man,  
 þe leon suam beside the hart,  
 Did na best til oper unquert,  
 þe sperhawk bi þe starling,  
 þai tent till oper non kines thing.<sup>1</sup>

The Flood is followed by the story of Abraham and Isaac in the Cursor Mundi, which is one of the most significant tales in the whole of the Old Testament. The Sacrifice of Isaac is a prefiguring of the crucifixion: it is a figure of a father sacrificing a son innocent of any crime. The figure is significantly different from its

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 1761 ff.

fulfillment, for the tragedy of the former is averted--God provides another offering in the place of Isaac--but the Son must die when His time comes. This last minute reprieve from death into life was likewise related by Medieval man to the Resurrection as a figure of Christ's triumph over death.

Even where the relationship or prefiguring is not stated directly, as in this incident in the Cursor Mundi, knowledge of its existence could be assumed in a large portion of its audience. John Mirk, in a popular collection of sermons entitled Festial, comments on the Sacrifice of Isaac in this manner:

Then by Abraham ye schull  
 Understonde þe Fadyr of Heven,  
 And by Isaac his sonne Ihesu  
 Crist, þe whech he spayrd not  
 for no love þat he had to him;  
 but suffered þe Gewes to lay þe  
 wode apon hym, þat was þe  
 Crosse apon hys schuldres, and  
 ladden hym to þe mount of  
 Calvary, and per dydyn hym  
 On þe autre of wode, þat was  
 þe Crosse. . . . þen as þus  
 was fygur of Crystys  
 Passion longe or he wer borne,  
 ryght so Crist hymselfe þis day  
 yn þe gospelle tolde to his  
 dyscypuls how he schuld be  
 scorned, and betgn wyth  
 scorgys, and don to deth on

þe crosse, and ryse þe  
 Þryð day ageyne to byve.<sup>1</sup>

The poet does not oversimplify his work by making the figural connections explicit. They were such a common and accepted part of Medieval religious thought that his readers, who would have listened to many sermons on 'figurative' exegesis year after year, would immediately comprehend the relationship between episodes in the Old Testament with incidents in the life of Christ. Medieval man looked upon past history as being close to his own time. Though the figures of the Old Testament recede as we progress through the Cursor Mundi, they are never completely lost from sight. Every moment is charged with memories of the past and expectations of the future; thereby we discover order and unity in the poem that tells several stories, each separate and apparently discontinuous, which span all human time. Like recurring chords in music, the figures and their fulfillment discover singleness in diversity. Form and meaning become one.

---

<sup>1</sup>Mirk's Festial, pp. 77-78. (Sermon for Quinquagesima Sunday)

## CHAPTER V

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

Besides prophecy and fulfilment, which we briefly examined in the last chapter, the Cursor Mundi is knit together by the skilful use of myth and legend. This poem on the history of salvation has two binding strands of myth--the quest of Seth for the Oil of Mercy, and the story of the wands that in the course of time became the wood of Christ's cross.

With regard to its definition, let us quote Tillyard:

. . . I refer to the universal instinct of any human group, large or small, to invest, almost always unconsciously, certain stories or events or places or persons, real or fictional, with an uncommon significance; to turn them into instinctive centres of reference; to make among stories A, B, C, D, all roughly having the same theme or moral, one, and one only, the type. Made thus typical, the story becomes a communal possession, the agreed and classic embodiment of some way of thinking or feeling.<sup>1</sup>

In this sense the myth-making instinct is widespread. One can cite as an example the historical event of the Spartans resisting the Persians at Thermopylae as the myth common to the western world of heroic courage against desperate

---

<sup>1</sup>E.M.W. Tillyard, Some Mythical Elements in English Literature, (London, 1961), p. 10.

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

73

odds, or the story of Romeo and Juliet as that of young love ending in tragedy.

The two myths that we will examine in this chapter were among the most prominent in Christendom during the Middle Ages. Medieval man saw a deeper significance in all acts of history: seemingly unconnected events were bound together in a common aim and direction. Events took on new meaning as they illuminated each other. The idea of knitting together the myth of Seth's quest, and the story of the Holy Rood with the account of Christ's Harrowing of Hell came from a sublime imaginative effort to realize dramatically the scriptural account of the central episode of the Christian creed.

It is a fact that the Bible is silent, or offers only a small amount of information concerning the details of Our Lord's early life, or what happened in the three days he was in the tomb before He rose from the dead on the first Easter morn. No wonder that pious imaginations were moved to supply the missing details and to link them with the prophets and legends such as the quest of Seth and the story of the Holy Rood. For the purpose of edification the legend-making processes were given full and free scope. On the other hand, early Christian heretics, particularly

the gnostics,<sup>1</sup> felt the need of Gospel narratives to support their doctrines.

Thus there grew up around the canonical Scriptures the collection of legends which comprise the so-called Apocryphal New Testament. The non-canonical Gospels appeared as counterparts to the canonical Gospels of the four evangelists. Originally the word apocryphal did not mean that which is spurious or untrue, at least not in the minds of those who first employed it. According to the testimony of St. Augustine, some of the apocryphal writings were regarded as canonical.<sup>2</sup>

Even the most superficial reading of these Christian apocryphal writings, however, must disclose their inferiority to the Bible proper. They abound in accounts of alleged miracles which at times descend to absurdity. Nevertheless, the Apocrypha are of the utmost importance for the Church historian since they supply valuable information about tendencies and customs which characterize the early church.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>The Gnostics endeavored to create a Christianity which, fitting into the culture of the time would absorb the religious myths of the Orient and give the dominant role to the religious philosophy of the Greeks. They tended to leave but a small place for revelation as the foundation of all theological knowledge, for faith, and for the Gospel of Christ. See Johannes Quasten, Patrology, Vol. 1, (Utrecht, 1966), pp. 154-78.

<sup>2</sup>See City of God, p. 204.

<sup>3</sup>See Quasten, op. cit., p. 106.

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

75

Accordingly, we possess in the apocryphal writings a picturesque and first hand source of Christian thought through the Middle Ages. Moreover, they represent the beginnings of Christian legend; they are intimately connected with Christian literature and art. The stained-glass windows of the Middle Ages would be indecipherable without reference to these.

James has given us an excellent appreciation of the place of apocrypha in the history of Christian literature:

People may still be heard to say, 'After all, these Apocryphal Gospels and Acts, as you call them, are just as interesting as the old ones. It was only by accident or caprice that they were not put into the New Testament.' The best answer to such loose talk has always been, and is now, to produce the writings, and let them tell their own story. It will very quickly be seen that there is no question of anyone's having excluded them from the New Testament: they have done that for themselves.

'But, it may be said, if these writings are good neither as books of history, nor of religion, nor even as literature, why spend time and labour on giving them a vogue which on your own showing they do not deserve?' Partly of course, in order to enable others to form a judgment on them; but that is not the whole case. The truth is that they must not be regarded only from the point of view which they claim for themselves. In almost every other aspect they have a great and enduring interest . . .

If they are not good sources of history in one sense, they are in another. They record the imagination, hopes and fears of the men who wrote them; they show what was acceptable to the unlearned Christians of the first ages, what

interested them, what they admired, what ideals of conduct they cherished for this life, what they thought they would find in the next. As folklore and romance, again, they are precious, and to the lover and student of medieval literature and art they reveal the source of no inconsiderable part of his material and the solution of many a puzzle. They have, indeed, exercised an influence (wholly disproportionate to their intrinsic merits) so great and so widespread, that no one who cares about the history of Christian thought and Christian art can possibly afford to neglect them.<sup>1</sup>

Material from the Apocryphal Gospels were combined with the Christian myths and legends to enrich and unify the history of salvation. The Cursor poet is the first writer in English to attempt to bring together most of the important items from these various sources. We shall now see how he uses the quest of Seth story to tighten his narrative of the Fall.

a) The Quest of Seth for the Oil of Mercy

The myth of the quest of Seth for the Oil of Mercy and the story of the Holy Rood as it appears in the Cursor Mundi has been formed of elements from many sources. Certain episodes are derived from the Bible; others, from apocrypha and folklore. But despite the many episodes and diverse sources from which these episodes stem, the

---

<sup>1</sup>The Apocryphal New Testament, ed. M.R. James, (Oxford, 1924), pp. xi-xiii.

myth-legend has a kind of unity. It is here primarily a theological rather than an artistic or dramatic unity: it is a unity based on the concept that as man's fall was occasioned by a tree, so man's redemption was achieved through a tree. So effective is the unifying power of this concept that it conceals the fact that the myth has two entirely different origins. The first one from the so-called Apocalypse of Moses<sup>1</sup> deals with the Journey of Seth to Paradise to plead for the promised Oil of Mercy; the second deals with the history of the wood which later became the Cross. This second legend is carried on into Christian times with the well known continuation dealing with the discovery of the true Cross by Saint Helen in the Fourth century.

Although the legends of the Oil of Mercy and the Holy Rood are not well known today, this was not the case during the Medieval period;

Despite the present unfamiliarity with the legend of Seth and the Holy Cross, it was enormously

---

<sup>1</sup>The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament, ed. Charles, II, 123-54. The Apocalypse of Moses, written by an Alexandrian Jew in the first century A.D., belongs to a body of extra-canonical literature which developed about Old Testament figures in the centuries before and after the Coming of Christ. See Robert Pfeiffer, History of New Testament Times (New York, 1949), p. 72.

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

78

popular and widely dispersed in the Middle Ages, especially from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries, appearing in dozens of versions not only in England, France and Germany, but in Italy, Holland, Russia, Bulgaria, Iceland, and elsewhere, and, as late as the seventeenth century, making its appearance in Calderon's "Auto el Arbol del Mejor Frute" and "La Sibila del Oriente y Grain Reina de Saba."<sup>1</sup>

In England these legends were related in somewhat different versions in the following well known works of the late Middle Ages: the Travels of Sir John Mandeville,<sup>2</sup> William Caxton's translation of the Legenda aurea,<sup>3</sup> and Sir Thomas Malory's Morte D'Arthur.<sup>4</sup> There are allusions to them in a number of English mystery plays; they appear in the dramatic literature of France and Germany,<sup>5</sup> and a complete version is dramatized in the Cornish Origo Mundi.<sup>6</sup> In each of these works these two myths, as in the Cursor Mundi, form part of a larger pattern. There are, however,

<sup>1</sup>Esther Casier Quinn, The Quest of Seth, (Chicago, Ill., 1962), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup>Mandeville, Travels, I, 6-7.

<sup>3</sup>Caxton, The Golden Legend, I, 180; III, 169.

<sup>4</sup>Malory, Works, II, 990-94.

<sup>5</sup>Gayley, Plays of Our Forefathers, pp. 246-71; Meyer, "Die Geschichte", pp. 155, 160.

<sup>6</sup>Ancient Cornish Drama, ed. and trans. Norris, I, 52-67, 131-43, 147-217, and cf. 425-27; see also The Legend of the Rood, trans. Halliday.

a number of English texts devoted entirely to the narration of a fully developed Holy Cross legend: The Holy Rode, the Story of the Holy Rood, the "Canticum de Creatione," and The Holy Cross.<sup>1</sup>

As we have said, this legend was represented not only in literature but also in art. It appeared at Troyes, in the windows of the church of Saint Martin es-Nignes, of Saint Pantaleon, of Saint Madeleine, and of Saint Nizier.<sup>2</sup> It was frescoed on the walls of the Choir of Santa Croce in Florence by Agnolo Gaddi.<sup>3</sup> Pietro della Francesca celebrated it in a series of frescoes in the Chapel of the Bocci in the Church of San Francesco at Arezzo.<sup>4</sup> It was painted on the walls of the Chapel of the Guild of the

<sup>1</sup>Legends of the Holy Cross, ed. Morris, pp. 18-46, 19-47, 62-96.

"Canticum de Creatione", in The South English Legendary, edd. D'Evelyn and Mill, EETS os 235 (London, 1956), 167-74.

See also the version in The Northern Passion, ed. Foster, EETS 145 (London, 1913-16), 134-67.

The Northern Passion (Supplement), edd. Henser and Foster, EETS 183 (London, 1930), 31-34, 95-116.

<sup>2</sup>William Wood Seymour, The Cross in Tradition History and Art (New York, 1898), p. 96.

<sup>3</sup>Raimond Van Marle, The Development of the Italian Schools of Painting (The Hague, 1924) iii, 539 ff.

<sup>4</sup>Roberto Longhi, Piero della Francesca (Milan, 1942), Plates XLIII-LXXX.

Holy Cross in the Church of the Trinity at Stratford-upon-Avon.<sup>1</sup> One of the most complete pictorial representations of the legend of Seth and the Holy Cross appears in the Dutch work, Boec van den houte (1483). There is a series of sixty-four wood cuts depicting the legend from Adam giving instruction to Seth to Saint Helen's finding the Cross.<sup>2</sup>

William Meyer, the nineteenth century German scholar, lists a total of fifty works which use the Seth - Holy Cross story during the late Medieval period.<sup>3</sup>

Investigation into the origins of the Seth legend reveals that the quest of Adam's son for the Oil of Mercy was not originally connected with the legend of the Cross but considerably antedated Christianity. In the form in which it appears in the Cursor Mundi, some elements are missing and others have been added, but the core is unmistakably an ancient Jewish apocryphal tale. Although of Jewish origin, the earliest extant version of the Seth

---

<sup>1</sup>Seymour, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup>John Ashton, The Legendary History of the Cross, (New York, 1887), pp. ci-CLXXXVI.

<sup>3</sup>See Wilhelm Meyer, "Vitae adae et Evae".

legend is in Greek.<sup>1</sup> The part of this apocryphal story which concerns us here, the journey of Seth to Paradise, may be briefly summarized as follows:

At the age of 930 Adam falls ill and bids all his sons come to him. Seth offers to get the fruit of Paradise, but Adam refuses. Instead he bids Eve and Seth go to Paradise and pray God to give them "of the tree out of which the oil floweth." They are to put earth on their heads, as a sign of penitence. On the way they encounter a wild beast, whose ferocity is dispelled by "the image of God" in Seth. When they arrive, God sends the archangel Michael to refuse Seth "the Oil of Mercy", but promises him that it shall be given to the holy people at the end of time.<sup>2</sup>

The form in which the Seth legend passed into Western European literature is the Latin version of the Apocalypse of Moses, known as the Vitae Adae et Evae.<sup>3</sup> Of particular interest at this early stage in the legend's development is the object of Seth's quest, "the oil of mercy". The form that it will take is not made clear in the old Jewish original tale.

---

<sup>1</sup>This text seems to have been derived from a Greek translation of a lost Aramaic original.

<sup>2</sup>Our summary is based on the translation of a text derived from MSS. "C" and "D" in Charles (ed.), The Apocrypha and Pseudopigrapha of the Old Testament, ll. 123-54.

<sup>3</sup>William Meyer, Die Geschichte, p. 207.

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

82

The first known instance of a Christian adoption of the Seth legend is in the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus.<sup>1</sup> Originally composed in Greek in about the fourth century, it was early translated into Latin and then the vernacular. There is a thirteenth century Middle English version of the Gospel of Nicodemus.<sup>2</sup> The central idea of the work is the delivery of the righteous Old Testament patriarchs and prophets from hell. It describes how Seth, at the time of the Harrowing of Hell, told the patriarchs of his journey to Paradise; he then announced that Christ would bring the promised oil of Mercy. This Christianization of the Seth legend was later inserted into the Vitae Adae et Evae. As yet Seth was unconnected with the legend of the wood of the cross, but an important link had been established: Seth and his quest had been absorbed into Christian legend. This borrowing from The Gospel of Nicodemus of the specific prophecy of Christ's coming was henceforth to be a constant element in the Seth story.

The merging of the Seth and the rood-tree legends seems to have occurred first with an interpolation into the

---

<sup>1</sup>The Apocryphal New Testament, ed. M.R. James, pp. 94-128.

<sup>2</sup>Ed. Hulme, EETS 100 (London, 1907).

Vitae Adae et Evae of a Holy Cross legend.<sup>1</sup> The earliest extant version which relates the combined Seth and Holy Cross legends is Johannes Beleth's Rationale divinatorum officiorum, written in Medieval Latin in about 1170. In Beleth's account, Adam sends Seth and Eve to Paradise and Seth returns with a branch from the tree of knowledge, which he plants. Another early version is that as Adam and Eve were leaving Paradise, he broke from a tree a branch that he used as a staff.

One of the most widely known Medieval versions of the Seth story occurs in Peter Comestor's Historia Scholastica. This version, which may have been known to the Cursor poet, contains several details omitted from some later retellings of the legend. For example, Seth and Eve go to Paradise for the Oil of Mercy, but they receive instead of the oil, a branch which has three leaves on it. In this version, Adam was buried at Calvary. Another new element is the detail that the blood of Christ fell from the cross upon the skull of Adam.<sup>2</sup>

In these early combined versions the rood-tree legends were of the twig type; at the next stage, the seed

---

<sup>1</sup>See William Meyer, op. cit., p. 108.

<sup>2</sup>Meyer, op. cit., p. 131.

type was to prevail. The most highly developed and most widely influential form of this later seed type of legend is a Latin text of the thirteenth century, to which Meyer gives the name Legende.<sup>1</sup> Its widespread popularity is attested to by its considerable number of manuscripts in Latin and its translations and adaptations into most European languages.<sup>2</sup> This Legende is a bold and elaborate tale, a fitting climax to the development of the legends of Seth and the Holy Cross. Here several innovations appear which were to become incorporated in almost every subsequent version, including the Cursor Mundi. There are the withered grass trail which Adam and Eve made when they left Paradise and which Seth used as a guide on his quest for the Oil of Mercy; there are the three visions which Seth saw through the gates of Paradise; and finally there are the three apple seeds which he is given instead of the Oil of Mercy. The Cursor poet may have used the Legende as a direct source, or merely depended on one of the retellings of the legend as found in works such as the French poet, Herman of Valenciennes' poem bearing in the different MSS

---

<sup>1</sup>See J.E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, (London, 1962), p. 70.

<sup>2</sup>See Quinn, op. cit., pp. 11-12.

the varying titles: Li Livres de la Bible, Historie de la Bible, Bible de Sapience, Roman de sapience.<sup>1</sup>

No matter how interesting a tracing of the sources of Seth legend may be, our primary concern is to see how the Cursor poet handles his material in order to achieve a tight unified narrative of salvation.

Let us now turn to the Cursor Mundi and examine the way in which the poet weaves the quest for the Oil of Mercy into the early sections of his poem. Within the larger drama of the Cursor Mundi, which tells the story of man from creation of the world to the Judgement Day, this myth forms a kind of subplot: its episodes are not related as a unit but are interwoven throughout the work. The relevant parts of the quest of Seth may be summarized as follows: When Adam is about to die, he bids his son Seth go to Paradise for the Oil of Mercy. The path will be apparent since, as Adam and Eve left Paradise, their feet destroyed the grass, and no vegetation has ever grown there. Seth is refused the Oil of Mercy, but is granted three glimpses of Paradise. In the first he beholds a dry tree; in the second, an adder twined about the trunk; in the third,

---

<sup>1</sup>Edited at University of Greifswald, 1914, as a series of dissertations.

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

86

a newborn baby in the top of the tree. He is told that the dry tree and the serpent represent the sin of man and that the baby is Christ, who will be the Oil of Mercy. Seth receives three kernels of the tree of life and plants them in the mouth of his dead father. From the kernels three trees grow--a cedar, a cypress, and a pine--and remain growing in the Vale of Hebron until the time of Moses.

The first mention of the 'Oil of Mercy' in the Cursor Mundi is when God passes judgment on Adam and Eve because of their transgression. He says that they will be exiled from His face till he sends the Oil of Mercy at some future date:

Ful dere adam it sal be boght  
 Till it be bett þat þu has wroght.  
 Ta þi wiif nu in þi hand,  
 For ye sal leve þis lufsum land,  
 In till þe wreched world to gang;  
 þar þu sal thinck þi liif ful lang,  
 Lang pining þare to drei,  
 And siben dobil dede to dei.  
 Ye sal be flemed fra mi face,  
 Bituix and I you send mi grace,  
 þe oile of merci bos you abide,<sup>1</sup>  
 I hete to send it you sum tide.<sup>1</sup>

Adam then asks how he can get reconciliation: God does not explain what he means by the Oil of Mercy.

After the Cursor poet has dealt with the story of Cain and Abel, he returns to the oil of mercy motif. Adam,

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 945-956.

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

87

who is now more than nine hundred years old,<sup>1</sup> has grown weary of life because of his endless years of toil. He tells his son Seth he must go to the angel guarding the gates of Paradise and bid for the Oil of Mercy. He gives direction to Seth on how to find the way there:

"yeis," he said, "i sal be tell and say,  
 Hugat þu sal ta þi right way,  
 Tilward þe est end of þe dalle,  
 A grene gate find þu sale,  
 In þat way sal yu find forsoth  
 þi moþer and min oþer broþer sloth.  
 Foluand throu þat griss greene,  
 þat ever has ben syden sene,  
 þar we cam wendand as unwise,  
 Quen we war put fro paradise  
 Unto this worldes wreched slade,  
 þar i mi-self first was made."<sup>2</sup>

Seth must go to Paradise, along a grass-green path, towards the east of the dale, following the track left by Adam and Eve. His father wants to know of the angel at the gate, when he may leave this world, and whether he shall have the promised Oil of Mercy:

"þu sal him say i am unfere,  
 For i have lived so mani a year,  
 Ay in strije and soru stadd,

---

<sup>1</sup>See St. Augustine, City of God, XV, pp. 77, which deals with the meaning of the word 'year' in the Book of Genesis and the possibility that it might be equivalent to the modern month because no early Old Testament figure has a child before he is 180 years of age.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 1249-60.

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

88

þat wið mi liif i wax all mað,  
 þu prai him þat word me send,  
 Quen i sal fro þis world wend.  
 Anoper erand sal þar be,  
 þat he wið send me word by þe,  
 For i sal have it ute in hey,  
 þat me was hight þe oile of merci,  
 þat time þat i left paradiis,  
 And left it thoru mi folis."<sup>1</sup>

The search for the Oil of Mercy, introduced in this important passage helps to maintain the tight thread of narrative unity to almost the end of the poem. This is also a clear statement by Adam that he hoped to be given forgiveness and to receive the Oil of Mercy, which in another version of the legend is referred to as "the oil of life--that medicine is to man and wife."<sup>2</sup> Adam admits his great sin of disobedience but prays that he has now earned some pity. Seth sets out on his quest without delay and finds no difficulty in following his father's instructions. He arrives at the gates of Paradise the same day, and tells the angel stationed there the object of his quest, and asks when Adam can expect the long awaited Oil of Mercy:

Seth went forth wiðuten nay,  
 To paradis þat ilke day,  
 þe sloth he fand þat gan him wise,  
 Till þat he cam at paradise.

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 1267-88.

<sup>2</sup>Legend of the Holy Rood, ed. Richard Morris,  
p. 65.

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

89

Quen he þarof had a sight,  
 He was al dredand of þat light;  
 Suilk a light as he sau þare,  
 A brinand fir he wend it ware,  
 He blissed him as his fader bodd,  
 And went forth and was nocht radd.  
 þis angel at þe yate he fand,  
 And asked him of his erand.  
 Seth þan sett him spell onende,  
 And told him quarfor þat he was send,  
 Teld him of hiis faderis care,  
 Als he him taght, and ye herd are,  
 To send him word quen he sal dei,  
 Langer to live may he nocht drei;  
 And quen þat godd him had tight,  
 þe oyle of merci þat he him hight.<sup>1</sup>

The angel does not give an immediate answer to Seth, but commands him to put his head within the gate of Eden, and to note whatever he sees therein. Seth did as he was bidden, and saw more marvels than tongue could tell. The meads were decked with gay herbs and trees, diffusing all around most delightful perfumes. In the middle of the land was a bright, shining well, out of which flowed four streams as Tyson, Fison, Tigri and Euftrate. Above the well there stood a large tree with many branches, but without bark or leaves, like an aged dead tree. Seth supposed that the tree stood thus bare, like the grass on the way to Eden, on account of his parent's sin. He turns to the angel and describes what he has seen.

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. 11. 1283-1302.

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

90

When he looks through the gates a second time, he observes that a serpent, all naked, without skin, was embracing the ancient bare tree. On looking a third time, Seth sees, to his amazement, that the tree has changed. It now reaches to the sky, while a new-born child, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lies crying at the top. The root of the tree went down into the uttermost ends of hell, and there he saw the soul of his brother Abel.

He loked in eft and stod þar ute,  
 And sau thinges þat gert him dute,  
 þis tre þat i of bifore said,  
 Anedder it had al umbilaid,  
 Cherubin, þat angel bliht,  
 Bad him ga loke þe thrid siht;  
 Him thout þan at þe thrid sith,  
 þis tre was of a mekil hiht,  
 Unto þe sky it raght þe topp,  
 A new-born child lay in þe cropp,  
 Bunden wid a suadiling band;  
 þar him thout it lay squelaud.  
 He was all rad quen he þat sey,  
 And to þe rote he kast his ey,  
 Him thout it raught fra erd to hell,  
 þar un þer he sau his broþer abel,  
 In his saule he sau him þare,  
 þat caim sloght, þat ful of care.<sup>1</sup>

The angel then explains the meaning of the three visions. The crying baby at the top of the tree was God's Son, who in the fulness of time should bring mankind the Oil of Mercy;

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 1333-50.

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

91

"pat child," he said, "pat þu has sene,  
 Es goddes sun widuten wene,  
 þi fader sinne nou wepis he,  
 þat he sal clens sum time sal be,  
 Quen þe plente sal cum of time.  
 þis es þe oyle þat was hight hime,  
 Til him and til his progeni,  
 Wid pite sal scheu his merci."<sup>1</sup>

Thus, close to the beginning of the work, the author explains what is meant by the promised Oil of Mercy. The cryptic promise of God, that is mentioned in the Apocalypse of Moses, is thus put into a firm Christian text by the Cursor poet, that leaves no doubt as to the outcome, but increases the readers' interest in the narrative which has its climax in Christ's Harrowing of Hell, when Adam finally receives the Oil of Mercy, promised eons before by God the Father.

Even though the angel does not give Seth what he seeks, he does not send him away empty handed. He gives him three pippins or kernels of the apple, which Adam had eaten. Seth was bidden to put these pippins under Adam's tongue as soon as he was dead. Out of these three kernels three trees--cedar, cypress and pine--would grow as if they were one. This passage, which is quoted below, is the first reference to the legend of the Holy Rood in the

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 1355-62.

Cursor Mundi. As the history of Salvation unfolds, the poet returns time and again to these three apple seeds to bind yet closer the various threads of his narrative. This is how he introduces this most important legend:

His leve wild take of cherubyn,  
 Pepins þan he gaf him thrin,  
 þe quilk of þe appil tre he nam,  
 þat his fader ete of, Adam.  
 "þi fador," he said, "þan sal þu say,  
 þat he sal die þe thrid day,  
 Efter þat þu be comen him unto,  
 Loke nou þat þu say him so.  
 Bot þu sal take peins thre  
 þat I take of þat appil tre,  
 And do þaim under his tonge rote,  
 To mani man þai sal be bote;  
 þai sal be cedir, cipris and pine,"<sup>1</sup>

The angel then goes on to explain that the "wands" that will grow from the three pippins betoken the Trinity: the cedar, a "tree of height", denotes the Father; the cypress, a tree of sweet savour, represents the Son; and the pine, a fruit-bearing tree, denotes the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity and his gifts:

"þai sal be cedir, cipris and pine,  
 Till mani a man be medicine.  
 þe fadir in cedir sal þu take,  
 A tre of hit, widuten make;  
 Of cipris be þat suete savur,  
 Bitakins of ur suete saviur.  
 þe mekil suetteness þat es þe son;  
 þe pine to a fruit es won,

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 1365-77.

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

93

Mani kirnels of a tre most  
Gain giftes of þe hali gost."<sup>1</sup>

Thus his errand completed, Seth returns home, and informs Adam that the Oil of Mercy will come through the birth of a Holy Child, at some future date. He also predicts Adam's death that will take place within three days. Adam was so very happy at these tidings that he laughed and then played. He died on the third day, and was buried in the vale of Hebron. The poet goes on to prepare us for the later episodes in which the wands appear:

þe pepins war don under his tonge  
þar ros of þaim þre wandis yong,  
And sone an elne hight þai were,  
þai stod þan still and wex no mare.  
Mani a yere elike al grene,  
Halines on þaim was sene,  
Still þai stod ay, þa wandes thre,  
Fra adam time unto noee;  
Fra noee quen þe flode ras,  
Till abraham þat hali was,  
Fra abraham time still stod þai  
Till moyses þat gave þe lay;  
Ever stod þai still in ane  
Widuten waxing or wane.<sup>2</sup>

The pippins which had been placed under the root of Adam's tongue after a time began to grow, and three small wands grew up, and stood 'without waxing or waning' from Adam's death until the time of Moses. Each grew separately by

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 1377-86.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 1417-29.

itself out of the same root, and was of an ell in height and no more. The poet shows his art as a story teller by selecting those details from this myth that will appeal to his readers. His account of Seth's quest is some two hundred lines in length. It is not so long as to unbalance his narrative. The transition from the legendary material dealing with the origins of the Holy Cross to the description of Adam's offspring is smooth; the poet declares that he will give no more of the story at this point:

No more of þa wandis nou  
But a stori sal i rede you.<sup>1</sup>

We have now to consider the second leading myth, that of the Holy Rood.

#### b) The Legend of the Holy Rood

To the Medieval Christian, the cross on which the Saviour died for the redemption of Man was made of no ordinary wood. Following Saint Helen's discovery of the true cross, fragments had been dispersed throughout Christendom and had become objects of veneration and speculation. From those two impulses of the medieval imagination, curiosity and credulity, a body of legend developed about the wood of the cross. Miracles were

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 1431-32.

attributed to the relics whose wonder-working power was linked with the cross.

The legend of the wands that in time grew into the wood from which Christ's cross was made starts in most of its versions in the days of Moses. The Cursor poet was one of the first writers in English to combine the myths of the Oil of Mercy and of the Holy Cross into one organic whole. His skilful handling of the various threads of these legends strengthens the narrative unity of his whole poem.

The earliest extant Middle English version of the Cross-legend is The Holy Rood-Tree, which dates from the twelfth century.<sup>1</sup> This version commences thus:

Here begins to be told concerning the tree of which the rood was wrought on which our lord suffered for the salvation of all mankind, how it first began to grow. We heard it told by a certain wise man that Moses, when he went from Egypt over the Red Sea with the Israelitish people, when he delivered them from the captivity under Pharoh, came to the place which is named Quinquaginta Fineas, and there rested two nights. During the first night he rested there, on the selfsame spot on which he lay, there grew three rods, the one was at his head, a second at his right side, and a third at his left.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>History of the Holy Rood-Tree, ed. A.S. Napier, EETS 103 (London, 1894), pp. 2-35 MS Bodley 343 (formerly NE. F. 4.12).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

Napier considers this to be the oldest surviving form of the rood-tree legend in Europe.<sup>1</sup>

Most of the elements of the story of the wands that are consistent with the Cursor poet's purpose of linking the Fall of Man to the Redemption of Man by Christ on the Cross are included in his version of the legend. The relevant sections that appear in the Cursor Mundi may be summarized as follows:

The trees that have grown from the seed planted in Adam's mouth are uprooted by Moses and become the wands with which he sweetens the waters of Marah and brings forth water from a rock.

David recovers the wands from the desert, which are now united to form a single staff. With it he changes the color and shape of some Ethiopians. The miraculous staff is replanted and grows into a tree.

Later Solomon attempts to use it in building his temple, but in whatever way the tree is cut, it is always too long or too short. Perceiving

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. XII. Napier makes a thorough study of the various versions of this legend, which include The Cambridge and Harleian Latin prose versions; The Andrius Fragments; Dboecvan den houte and Low German translations; and The Old French Poem. See "Introduction", History of the Holy Rood-Tree, pp. IX-LIX.

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

97

it's miraculous power, Solomon has the tree placed in the temple.

One day a lady named Maximilia accidentally sits on the tree, and, when it bursts into flame, she is inspired to prophecy. The Jews, hearing that Christ will die upon this wood, put Maximilia to death and hurl the tree into a pit.

Miracles are performed until the tree is removed by the Jews and placed over a stream to serve as a bridge. The holy nature of the wood is announced by the Sibyl, who refuses to walk on it and instead wades through the brook barefoot.

At the time of the Crucifixion, a cross is made of the tree. The cross, however, cannot be lifted by any except Christ, since it was destined for Him. By his dying on it he becomes the redeemer, or the Oil of Mercy, for mankind.

These episodes appear at the appropriate place in the Cursor Mundi, tightening the structure of the poem.

The Moses episode of the Rood-tree legend in the Cursor Mundi begins with a dream of Moses, for after the Israelites had escaped from Egypt by crossing the Red Sea, they came into the vale of Hebron where Adam had been

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

98

buried. As they were suffering greatly from thirst, the Jewish leader, harassed by the problem of finding water for the large host, retires for the night and in his sleep sees a wonderful vision of the wands:

Moyses þat niht in sleping lay,  
 þat niht he yede and tok his rest,  
 In sleping he lay in þat forest,  
 Quen he on morn him lokid bi  
 He sau þat him thocht ferli,  
 At his heved sam he stand  
 Waxin of cypris, a wand;  
 Apon his left hand loked he,  
 Anoper he sau of cyder tre;  
 And quan he lokid on his riht hand,  
 Of Pine tre þe thrid he fand;<sup>1</sup>

Moses has the same vision of the wands on the two succeeding nights, and realizes that they must be a sign of some wonder.

At this point the poet ties the wands in with the Holy Trinity, on which the whole work is based--

þarfor þis werke i wil found  
 On a selcuth stedfast grund,  
 þat es þe hali trinite.<sup>2</sup>

This reference to the Trinity also links up with the opening of the Cursor Mundi proper, which describes the characteristics of the Trinity. Here the poet suggests

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 6316-26.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 127-29.

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

99

that the sun, at once round, hot and light, is an emblem of God in the Blessed Trinity. He goes on to explain that the body of the sun is similar to the Father, the light to the Son, and its heat to the Holy Ghost which proceeds from both the Father and the Son:

þe sunes bodi þat I never  
 Bi-takins þe fader self in heven,  
 And bi þe light pater lastand  
 It es þe sone þu understand,  
 And bi þe hete þu understand  
 þe hali gast comes of þaim to.<sup>1</sup>

Moses, in keeping with the Medieval habit of making all history, in a sense, contemporary, knows all about the Trinity:

"Selcuth thing," he said, "Wid-in  
 Es closid in þa wandis thrin."  
 þa wandis takin parsonis thre,  
 And a-fold godd in unite.  
 þan he dron þaim up at þe first,  
 Widuten ani skade or brist,  
 And quiles þai in þat wildernes ware,  
 þa wandis ay wid him he bare.<sup>2</sup>

Realizing that the wands betokened the Trinity, Moses took them up without breaking them, and carried them wherever he went in the wilderness. The Israelites found water in the desert, but it was bitter as brine, quite undrinkable.

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 303-308.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 6339-46.

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

100

The wands, however, when placed in this water made it fit to drink:

Sipen pai fand pat frith widine,  
 water bitter as ani brin,  
 As it war brine sua was it bitter,  
 To drinc it ne was paim never be better.  
 Bot quan pa wandis war in don,  
 be water wex suete als sone,  
 be watris pat sua foule stane,  
 Of suetter never nan pai bifor dranc.<sup>1</sup>

By means of these wands, Moses also healed the sick, and performed numerous other miracles. And when he climbed Mount Sinai where he received the ten commandments from God, he hid the wands in the ground. These miraculous wands remained always in leaf and flower. They also emitted the most pleasant perfume. This is how the Cursor poet put it:

For na drie ne for na wate,  
 Ne changid pai never pair state,  
 Bot ever pai held liif and flour,  
 Savirand wid a suet savur.<sup>2</sup>

The poet later on mentions that Moses used these wands, when on another occasion the Israelites were without water in the desert, to hit the rock. The rock broke and out burst a stream, sufficient for all the needs of the wandering host:

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 6347-54.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 6365-68.

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

101

And ute as a brok it brast þe strand,  
 þar had þai watir in wildernes land,  
 Plente for men, to fhote and hand.<sup>1</sup>

Moses never lets the magic wands out of his possession until he had the ark and tabernacle built. He then places them in this holy place:

þan he tok up þa wandis thrin,  
 And for to kepe did þaim þer-in,  
 For-to bere to ilka stede,  
 Queþer so he þee folk wild lede.<sup>2</sup>

However, just before he dies, he takes the wands from the ark, and plants them in a hidden place, where they remain until the time of King David. This is how the Cursor Mundi concludes the section on Moses:

Bot moyses, right-wis of rede,  
 For-gat he nocht, ar he war dede,  
 To sett his hali wandis thre  
 In a stede he fand þrive,  
 þar þai greu neyder less ne mare,  
 Bot ever bifor as þai ware  
 Right to king david dais,  
 þat ledd his folk in gode lays,  
 þat thoru warning of godes sanþe,  
 Broght þain to his aun lande.<sup>3</sup>

The inclusion of the Moses and the wands episode helps to unify the Redemption story, looking towards the passion of Christ. It permits the Cursor poet to refer back to the

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 6392-94.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 6664-6666.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 6937-46.

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

102

beginning of the poem to the section on the Trinity and as we shall see forward to the crucifixion.

The next time that the wands appear is in the reign of King David. Here the Cursor poet devotes one thousand lines of his religious epic<sup>1</sup> to the history of the tree that was to become Christ's cross. He commences by describing how an angel appeared to David in a dream. The angel said that God wanted King David to cross the Jordan into the country where Moses was buried, and that there he would find the three wands that Moses had carried with him for years:

pu sal find þa wandis þare,  
 þat moyses oft wid him bare,  
 Of cydyr, pyne, and of cypress,<sup>2</sup>  
 þar war þai sett thoru Moyses.

The angel then goes on to explain to the King in his dream that no one can say what great virtue and grace are in these wands whose very shadow has miraculous powers. He says:

"Es na man for-soth can say  
 Of how grett vertu and grace er þai,  
 Nor na manes tung can say ne mele  
 Quat þai sal bere of soulis hele;  
 Of þaim þu sal have a gret vauntage,  
 Bath to þe and þi barnage.

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 7973-8976.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. vv. 8005-8.

Qua may him rest onder þaim umbery,  
 Es þar na thing þat may him cumber.  
 Have god day, for nou wend I."<sup>1</sup>

Here we have a foreshadowing of the wise judgments of Solomon, who was to hold court under the shadow of this wonderful tree. David, according to this version of the legend, without question crosses the river Jordan with his folk and finds the wands. He has no trouble in recognizing them as they are of one height, alike, though different with the three heads growing from one stem. The King knelt to kiss them before drawing them out of the ground without breaking them. David then held them up, and the people saw them shine with light. This shining light is a motif found in many of the Medieval lives of the saints and also appears in the romances of the age. For example of the latter, Havelok the Dane shone while he was asleep thus showing his royal blood. This episode of the Cursor Mundi has several of the characteristics that we associate with saints' lives or even romances. This is how the poet introduces this light:

And quen þe king cam ner þas tres,  
 Honurd and kist þaim on his knes;  
 He drow þaim up, soft i-nogh,  
 Widuten breking of any bow.

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 8011-19.

Quen þe king þaim had ute-tan,  
 His host þaim honurd, everilk-an,  
 þe king þaim held up in þair sight,  
 A lem schan of þa branches bright,  
 þat all his ost miht se þat leven  
 Hou it rahut up into heven.<sup>1</sup>

The Cursor poet selects four miracles of the many that appear in various versions of the legend, for inclusion in his work. All four occur on King David's journey back to Jerusalem. The first deals with a rich man who has been ill for a long time and has lost all hope of recovery. The moment he sees the wands, however, he is made hale and sound. A short time later, the King's procession met four rich "saracens," black and misshapen, their mouth in their breast, brows hanging about their ears and eyes in their forehead. They were four monstrous creatures, that hardly looked like human beings at all. The poet appears to delight in making them as misshapen as possible; his description is vivid:

Foure sarazins wid þe king gan mete,  
 Blac and bla as led þai ware,  
 Mekil riches wid þaim þai bare,  
 þat saw man never bifore þat oure,  
 Sua fraward schapin creatoure,  
 Of þair blac hew it was selcuth,  
 And in þair brestes þai bar þair muth,  
 Hand and side þair broues wern.  
 And recched al a-boute þair ern.  
 þair muthes wid, þair eyen brad,

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 8041-50.

Ful wonderful was pair facis mad!  
 In pair forhefd was pair sight,  
 Loke ne miht pai noght upright;  
 pair armys hari, wid har lid hide,  
 War sett til elboues in pair side,  
 Crumplid knes, and boch on bac;<sup>1</sup>

The description of these four saracens from Ethiopia is similar to some of the wonders that appear in Medieval accounts of foreign countries. The four prophesy that Christ will die on the rood-tree:

Pyne on pat tre suffre he sall,  
 þe King of blis for his folk all.<sup>2</sup>

They request to see the wands, declaring they have the power to heal them. They devoutly kneel and kiss the wands and immediately their skin becomes white and their shape set right. These saracens can foretell the part the wands will play in the redemption of mankind:

Of þaim sal rise ur raunsun,  
 And of all ur sinnes pardun,  
 To þaim þat merci for þair sinne  
 Cries to iesu, of david kinne.<sup>3</sup>

It is thus from the lips of Infidels that Davia is told that his descendant will ransom men and save them from sin.

The third miracle on the return from the wilderness is the curing of a leperous hermit who has had a dream that

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. 11. 8072-87.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. 11. 8099-8100.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. 11. 8111-14.

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

106

the light from the wands will restore him to good health. This proves to be so. The final miracle of the journey is when the waters of the Jordan river divides so that King David, bearing the miraculous wands, walks across dry-shod;

þe king went forth ful sone onan,  
 Til he com a-gayn to flum iordan,  
 He tok þa wandes in his hand,  
 þe strem still bigan to stand,  
 It stod þe folk on ayder side  
 þe kinges passage for to bide.  
 Quen þai war pascid over þe strand,  
 And all comen up-on þe toper land,  
 With ye wele þai war ful glad;<sup>1</sup>

These four wonderful stories would have appealed to the Cursor poet's contemporaries.

On returning to Jerusalem, King David placed the wands in a cistern, with men and lamps to guard them during the night. On the morrow he intended to take them in procession into the city and replant them in his own orchard. Overnight, however, they took root so that no one could pull them out:

þai restid þaim þat niht and bade  
 Of þe wandir gret los þai made;  
 Aboute war þaim þe king ful yerne,  
 He putt þaim in-to a cysterne,  
 And did he siden þaim laumpis liht,  
 And sett men þaim to kepe all niht,  
 þe quiles þe king him went to slepe.  
 Bot god þat al has for to kepe,  
 þat all for-lokis in his sight,

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 8185-93.

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

107

His will widstande has nan na miht,  
 Es na-thing þat may for-barre  
 His wille þat bifore es sua war,  
 He þat sua mihti es and wise  
 He did þa wandis for to rise,  
 In þat cysterne þe rotis fest,  
 Sua depe þa rotis samen kest,  
 þat miht na man þaim þeder winne  
 Widuten breche, for any gynne.<sup>1</sup>

David took this as a sign that they should be left alone and ordered that a Wall and garden were to be made around the growing rood-tree. Every year for thirty years David put a silver hoop around the tree;

Quen it was closid aboute, þat tre,  
 A silver cerkil sone naylede he,  
 þat was stavin for to strenthe,  
 And know þe wax of gret and lenthe.  
 Suilkin serkis sett he sere,  
 Thritti winter, ilka yere.  
 And did an to, I you say,  
 Ever quen he tok anoþer away.<sup>2</sup>

When King David's son, Solomon, comes to cut down the tree to use as the main spar for the great temple, the thirty silver circles are made into coins which are placed into the temple treasury. They remain there until they are used to pay Judas. This is how the poet puts it:

At þe temple for þis reson,  
 þai er wid tresur in comun,  
 Ne war þai never þan spend,  
 Til þat þai war judas bikend,

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 8203-20.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 8241-48.

To him þan was þai tight and tald,  
 Quen he for þaim hs lauerd sald.<sup>1</sup>

Undoubtably the Cursor poet knew of other stories about the thirty pieces of silver that commence with Abraham, and appear and re-appear according to legend throughout salvation history. Nevertheless, he must have decided that the Seth-Holy Rood sequence would better fit his purpose by giving dramatic unity to his work.

It was while King David was sitting under the tree of life that he has the inspiration to build a magnificent temple to God in which to keep the sacred ark, the tables of law, Aaron's rod, manna and the golden oil of the propitiatory sacrifice;

Quen he had made his orisoun,  
 Under þat tre he sett him doun,  
 He thoght þan apon mani a thing,  
 As he þat was suilk a lording,  
 A temple thoght he make on hight,  
 In þe worschip of godd all-miht;  
 Fer and depe he him bi-thoght,  
 Hou þat þis temple sald be wroght,  
 For to kepe in þair ser relike,  
 þat he miht save in his king rike;  
 þat was, þat hali arke þai bare  
 Aboute, wid all þair sayntuare,  
 þat es to say, þe tablis tuin,  
 þat þe ten comandements war in  
 þat god wrat wid his aun hand;  
 I, and par-in war aaron-es wand,  
 þar þar þe fruit pou it war drie,

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. II. 8837-42.

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

109

And of manna als a partye;  
 þe gilden oyle of þe propiciatory,  
 To cherubynes, als sag þe story.<sup>1</sup>

While the King was thus thinking, an angel from God came and sat on a bough of the tree of life and told him that God knows of his desire to build the temple in His honor, and that it should be finished during the reign of his son, Solomon. Thus David was denied the joy of completing the temple, for, as the angel reminded him, he was a man of blood. The Cursor poet does not mention that King David composed his penitential psalms under this tree, only that he prophesied the coming of Christ and that he made the Psalter;

þis ilk it was, king davy,  
 þat mekil spac of prophesy,  
 Of cristes birth ful lang biforn,  
 þat of a mayden suld be born.  
 þat mayden of his aune sede  
 was getyn, in bokis as we rede,  
 And ur lauerd bi-for him hight,  
 Of him suld spring þat all suld right.  
 þis ilke david þe sauter made,  
 Is redd over-all þis world brade.<sup>2</sup>

But the poet does treat in some detail the wonderful childhood of David's son, Solomon. He commences by saying that no child ever loved 'clergy' more than Solomon

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 8263-82.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 8521-31.

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

110

and that he soon mastered the Seven Liberal Arts, which was the basic curriculum of the Medieval university;

þis child was sone sett to bok,  
 And clergy wele he under-tok,  
 For all his herte he gaf to lare,  
 Might never child lore clergi mare.  
 Thoru þe grace of godd in heven,  
 Sone he coude þe artis seven.<sup>1</sup>

The young Solomon loved the holy tree, and often sat under it, learning many wise things under its shadows. The poet says that Solomon put the learning which he got under the tree into three books of Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, and Canticles:

For under þe umber of þat tre,  
 þe king of things lered he,  
 Bath and of tres, grisses fele,  
 Quilk war þair vertus lele,  
 For quat kin evil ilkan miht gayn,  
 Quer-so þai grew in wode or playn;  
 And queþer þe medicin of bote,  
 Funden be in cropp or rote  
 Of lare he lerid under þat tre,  
 þan made he gode bokis thre,  
 And dohutyli he þaim undid,  
 Wid saumplis of tres and griss imid.  
 þe first bok, widuten les,  
 Men it callis ecclesiastises,  
 þat spekir mast, widuten wand,  
 Hou fals þis world es forto fand.  
 Of proverbis es þe toþer bok,  
 þat lerir manhim umbiloke  
 Agayner þir world wrecched-nede,  
 Hou þat he au him for to lede.  
 þe thrid bok, efter þa tua,  
 þe quilk me clepiþ cantica,

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 8435-40.

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

111

A notful bock in hali writt,  
 pe bok of love men clepis itt,  
 For of pat love it spekis māst  
 Bituix manes saule and pe hali gast.<sup>1</sup>

At this point in the narrative, the Cursor poet gives a brief summary of the poem so far:

Bituix and he quam bar marie,  
 Henge per-on his folk to bie,  
 Be bartem of alde adam,  
 pat thoru a bitt broght all in blam,  
 An applis bitt, bath man and wiif,  
 pat tre war dede, pis sal be liif.  
 And writen es in parchemin,  
 pat wrecched adam fel fra  
 And broght him selven in mekil wa:  
 For sua bigan pe crois, i wis,<sup>2</sup>  
 Of iesu crist ur king of blis.<sup>2</sup>

Thus the poet enhances the artistic unity of his long religious poem by showing clearly its continuity. The occasion of this recapitulation is the quoting of the gold inscription on the marble stone at the foot of the aging tree of life. This is what the inscription says:

"Sum-time pat men suld se  
 God him-selven reyne in pat contre,  
 pat plantid was betuix pa floures,  
 par pe stremis held pair cours,  
 Wele i wate never es it wan,  
 Of flour ne fruit pat is has tan,  
 And in this time suilk fruit suld geve,  
 pat all his freindes par-of suld leve;  
 Ne of pat fruit suld na man bite  
 pat he ne suld love it als tite"<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 8451-8476.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 8495-8508.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 8485-8494.

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

112

The poem then returns to his account of the life of King Solomon. Once, while sitting under the miraculous tree, Solomon in a vision was offered by an angel the choice between three gifts--strength, riches, or wisdom. He chose the last. He gave judgment between the two women who claimed the same baby while he sat under the sacred tree.

At the time when the temple was being built, the tree began to wither, and people said it was dying of old age:

Nou bigan it to wax ald;  
 Ilk a man said, þat it sie,  
 þat it for elde bigan to drey,  
 And semed wele it wild na mare,  
 þat men suld it hald in are.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile the workmen, who were building the temple, had been seeking far and wide for a suitable "mayster sperr" for the edifice. They asked leave of Solomon to cut down the aging sacred tree in the royal orchard. The King seeing no other course open to him, gave his consent. But when hewn and lifted into its place, it would not fit because it was too short, and after the workmen had tried in vain for three days, the beam from the sacred tree was laid in the temple together with the thirty silver rings, which were afterwards given to Judas. The power of the

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 8766-8770.

wood to change its length is a motif that occurs in other Medieval legends. St. Erkenwald, first bishop of London (ca. 686), according to the Venerable Bede, on one occasion lengthens a piece of timber with the aid of his sister St. Ethelburga.<sup>1</sup> The same type of incident also appears in the Apocryphal Gospel of Thomas,<sup>2</sup> which is included in the Cursor Mundi.<sup>3</sup> The poet declares that nothing was ever made of the wood from the tree of life except Christ's cross:

pat tre þan ful richely,  
Was in þat temple don to ly,  
Was þar never of made oght,  
Tille þat þe crois þar-of was wroght.<sup>4</sup>

The workmen found a suitable beam as the master span of the temple on the first day of looking which was thought to be miraculous. When the temple was blessed, the wood lay in it in peace.

The next episode that the Cursor poet selects from the mass of legendary material surrounding the Holy Rood deals with the efforts of a priest called Cyril to destroy

---

<sup>1</sup>Ecclesiastical History, IV, 6.

<sup>2</sup>See the Apocryphal New Testament, ed. M.R. James, pp. 49-65.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. l. 12385 ff.

<sup>4</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. vv. 8845-48.

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

114

the sacred tree. After Solomon's time 'Cirillus' came with 500 men and tried to take the holy tree away, but it could not be moved. The episode opens with these lines:

Quen pat þe temple haluid wes,  
 þe tre ever it lay stille in pes,  
 Mani it wald have done a-way,  
 Bot miht þai noght, still it lay.  
 And efter salamon's day  
 þer cam a preist, was of þat lay,  
 þer-to five hundrid men he ledd,  
 Bot þai miht never stir it of stedd;<sup>1</sup>

The priest then attempts to chop it up, but no sooner had he begun when the beam burst into flame;

Wid ax he wald have cutt it þan,  
 All-to sone he it began  
 At of þat tre it brast a blass,  
 þat brint þaim all in þat place,  
 þat quic cam nan of þaim ham:<sup>2</sup>

The blaze burnt the large group so that none of them returned to their homes alive. The Cursor poet, in a few lines, has made a stark, vivid story out of the legend surrounding the priest Cyril. In a dozen lines he has given us the essence of the legend.

In the succeeding section, the author has drawn upon material which tells of Maximilla, "the first Christian Martyr." This episode reads like a selection from one of

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 8867-74.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 8875-79.

the large cycles of legendary lives of the saints. Once a lady called Maximilla came to the temple to worship and pray; she sat down unaware on the sacred beam whereupon her clothes commenced to burn. Then she began to prophecy,

Apon þat tre suld hinge  
 þat lowerd of helle, þat blisful king,  
 Iesu crist of maydin born,  
 To save þe world þat was for-lorn.<sup>1</sup>

She predicted that the Jews would make a cross from the wood. When the Jews heard her call upon Jesus Christ, they were exceedingly angry, because she had slandered their God by the mention of a new one, so they turned against her and beheaded her without any delay. An angel carried Maximilla's soul up to heaven in sight of all the people, saying that she was a Christian which infuriated the Jews. I quote the final lines of the episode:

Sent þan was an angel þare,  
 And up to heven hir saule bare,  
 In hir folk hir oldir siht,  
 And said þat cristian scho hight.  
 þar-for war þe iuus wrath,  
 þat name to here was þaim ful lath,  
 þis womman was first þat men wist,  
 þat martird was fore iesu crist.<sup>2</sup>

The hatred and violence of the Jews to this prophetess is a foreshadowing of their action against the early

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. 11. 8905-08.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. 11. 8917-24.

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

116

Christians, and may have been included by the Cursor poet for this reason. That is to show that sections of the chosen race were set against Christ, even before His birth.

The Jews attempted to get rid of the Holy Rood by throwing it into a fish-pond ("piscyna probatyca").<sup>1</sup> But God sent angels from heaven to stir the water of the pool, and as a result it was endowed with miraculous powers of healing. The poet does not mention the name of the pool. It is similar to the one at Bethzatha that is mentioned in the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> The healing power of certain objects thrown into water is a recurring motif in the legendary lives of the saints.

The following section relates that the Jews, angered again by the miracle which occurred in the probatyce piscyna, dragged the wood from the pond and made a bridge across the brook known as Siloe.<sup>3</sup> Meyer ascribes this episode to Jacobus de Voragine's Legenda aurea, but the account in Johannes Beleth's Rationale divinatorum officiorum (ca. 1170) is essentially the same and

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. 1.8928.

<sup>2</sup>See John, V, 1-16 and also Cursor Mundi, G. 11 13760-71.

<sup>3</sup>A pool called "Siloe" is mentioned in John, 9:7-11.

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

117

considerably earlier.<sup>1</sup> The Jews hoped that sinful men's feet would tread out the virtue of the tree:

"If þat ani vertu be  
Of olines widin þis tre,  
Wid sinful menes fete," said þai,  
"Wid ganging sal be done away."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the tree lay until the Sibyl<sup>3</sup> came from afar to hear Solomon's wisdom.<sup>4</sup> The Sibyl will not cross by the bridge made of the Holy Rood, but after kneeling down in honor to it, she waded through the stream. She also prophesied that the tree was a token of judgment which will come to all men.

This is how the poet treats Sibyl's refusal to walk on the Holy Rood, which contains details from several different sources:

Quen þat scho to þe cite cam;  
Scho cam in at þat ilk zate,  
þat þis tre lay in hir gate,  
Down sho bowid hir to be grund,

---

<sup>1</sup>Meyer, "Die Geschichte," pp. 115-16.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 8939-42.

<sup>3</sup>The Sibyl in several of the Middle English versions is confused with the Queen of Sheba. See Legends of the Holy Rood, p. xviii.

<sup>4</sup>This is one of the few times that the Cursor poet is confused with his Chronology. In line 8871, he says "after Solomon's day;" but in line 8956, he has the Sibyl coming to visit Solomon. The reason for this inconsistency may be due to the poet using several sources at the same time.

## THE USE OF MYTH AND LEGEND

118

þe tre scho honurd þar a stound.  
 Scho left hir syrte widuten schorne,  
 And þar fot wald over þat borne,  
 And to þat tre scho gan hir falde  
 And prophesy þar-of scho told;  
 And namlyest of domes-day,  
 Hou all þis world suld wit of way.<sup>1</sup>

After discussing many things with the Sibyl, Solomon gave her gifts and she returned to her home country. The poet concludes this section of his narrative of the Holy Rood by saying that it lay many a day ready in the temple until the time of Christ's passion;

þer it lay ful mani a day,  
 Bot it was in þe temple boun,  
 At þe time of cristes passion.<sup>1</sup>

In the Cursor Mundi version of the later episodes of the Holy Rood legend, the order of the incidents departs from that of Peter Comestor's Historia Scholastica. Even so, the spirit and the excitement surrounding the wonderful tree is maintained. The unknown poet of this religious poem has made a skilful compilation of episodes drawn from many sources. His treatment of this legendary material is bold, and he develops an elaborate tale that catches the interest of his reader. Though the material is apocryphal, he harmonizes it to be in keeping with his selections from

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 8958-68.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 8974-76.

the Old Testament. The visions and miracles which he connects with the tree of life are similar to those found in the Legenda aurea or the South English Legendary. He makes a strong link between the figures of the Old Testament, such as Moses, David and Solomon, and the central point of Christian history, the redemptive sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. The Jewish elements of the quest of Seth and the Christian elements of the legend of the Holy Rood are fused by the Cursor poet's creative imagination until they become one. His handling of the myth of the Cross adds to the stated purpose of the Cursor Mundi, that is, the education of the faithful Christian in the mysteries of his religion.

Further, the skilful use of these myths serve to heighten the climax of the Cursor Mundi, as we shall examine in the following chapters in Christ's crucifixion and the Harrowing of Hell.

## CHAPTER VI

## CLIMAX IN THE CRUCIFIXION

In the two preceding chapters we have seen that prophecy and the myths of Seth and the Oil of Mercy, and of the Holy Cross have been used by the Cursor poet to bind together his narrative of salvation history. All the events described in the first fifteen thousand lines of this religious epic point forward to the greatest episode in human history--the Passion and death of Jesus Christ. This is the pivotal point of human history. To Medieval Man, whose life was theocentric, this was a simple fact. He thought of himself as living in the age of grace that followed Christ's death, and he expected the Second Coming to be an almost immediate event.

In the twelfth century, the characteristic representation of the Crucifixion showed Christ in majesty, ruling from the cross. The cross, whose antecedant history we have followed through the Old Testament, functioned as a kind of earthly throne, rather than as the instrument of Christ's death. In the thirteenth century, however, this image changed greatly, in response to new meditational modes, new theological ideas, new fashions in sensibility: Christ the Saviour is depicted suffering on the cross, His

## CLIMAX IN THE CRUCIFIXION

121

body broken and bleeding.<sup>1</sup> This transformation of Christianity's central image affected all art forms, including poetry. This can be seen best in the English Mystery cycles; they show Christ "don on þe rood" in greater circumstantial detail, and with greater force and artistic complexity, than any other art form of the Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup>

The treatment of the Crucifixion in the Cursor Mundi is similar to that found in other religious poems of this period, such as the Northern Passion, the South English Legendary, and the Stanzaic Life of Christ. In these works the mood is grave and decorous, quite unlike that of the mature vernacular drama that developed late in the fourteenth century. The above Middle English poems have charm as well as several moving passages. The Northern Passion, for instance, tells us,

Ihesus suffered with gud will  
 All payns þat þai wald putt him tyll,  
 And so þai fore with him þat night,  
 Un-to þat it was day full lyght,  
 And þan þai said he sold be dede.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Walter Dukeshott, The Sequence of English Medieval Art (London, 1950), p. 20; see also Early Medieval Illumination, intro. Hans. Swarczenski (New York, 1951), PL. XV.

<sup>2</sup>See Kolve, op. cit., p. 175.

<sup>3</sup>The Northern Passion (Supplement), p. 77 (1029-32).

## CLIMAX IN THE CRUCIFIXION

122

A couple of times during the crucifixion episode, the Cursor poet includes with personal observations powerful descriptive passages of the indignities and suffering Christ had to undergo. This is how he narrates the crowning with thorns:

A crune apon his heved pai sett  
 of scharp tre was wroght,  
 pat in a hundred stedes, i-wiss,  
 be red blod ute broght.  
 [p]ai cled him in a mantil rede,  
 toke of his aven wede,  
 And siben in his hand pai sett  
 a mekil staf of rede;  
 And wid him plaid sittisott,  
 and bad pat he suld rede  
 Quilk of pain him gave be dint;  
 sare agh pai for him drede.  
 Sare agh pai paim drede,  
 be folk pat war sua felle.<sup>1</sup>

The poet then makes a personal interjection:

be schame pai on ur laverd soght  
 ful store it war to telle!<sup>2</sup>

Later on after Christ has been nailed to the Cross, and the cross raised so all can see Him, the crowd mocks Him:

Mekil heping pai of him made,  
 Bath sarazin und Iu,<sup>3</sup>

The poet declares that he cannot tell the tenth part of the crowd's spite:

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16615-28.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16629-30.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16713-14.

## CLIMAX IN THE CRUCIFIXION

123

Te teind part of pair despiitt,  
i mai nocht tell to yu!<sup>1</sup>

The reason for the Cursor Mundi detailed attention given to both the crucifixion and events immediately leading up to it was a desire to make Christ's last hours on earth as vivid as possible, and prepare us for his glorious conquest of Hell, which will be dealt with in the next chapter. The emphasis is placed on those details, many of them legendary in origin, that would appeal to clerics and laymen alike. The well-known events of Christ's passion are refashioned into an absorbing story, demanding from the hearers or readers the same human reactions as any of the popular contemporary romance: tears at the suffering of Our Lord, anger at the wickedness of the Jews, and later on triumph at Christ's Harrowing of Hell and Resurrection. Legends of unknown origin are grafted on to the account of the crucifixion that we find in four Gospels.

One such legend for which H.C.W. Haenisch could find no source<sup>2</sup> concerns the cock that crew thrice after Peter's third denial of Christ to Judas. The poet inserts it after Peter comes face to face with Our Lord, and turns away weeping:

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, ll. 16715-16.

<sup>2</sup>"Inquiry into the Sources of the Cursor Mundi"  
EETS 99 (London, 1892), p. 38.

## CLIMAX IN THE CRUCIFIXION

124

[I]t es writen of þis iudas  
 quen he had done þat sin,  
 wid his penis þat he tock,  
 went till his moder in.<sup>1</sup>

Judas tells his mother about his betrayal of Christ; she foretells his ruin, Christ's death and resurrection.

"[S]un, has þu þi maistir sald?"  
 "Modir," he said, "za."  
 "þu," scho said, "nu sal be scheint,  
 i wat þai will him sla,  
 To dede þu sal se him be done,  
 bot he sal rise þer fra."<sup>2</sup>

Judas incredulously replies that Christ, once dead, can no more rise than younder boiled cock. In the same moment the cock flies up and crows, and this crowing is the same that Peter heard. This is a dramatic scene between Judas and his mother. This is how the poet describes the miracle:

"Rise up modir eft?" he said,  
 "na sertis! he bes it nocht sua,  
 [N]e sal he never rise eft,  
 treuli non i þe Hight,  
 Are sal þis ilk coke up rise  
 was skaldid zisternight!"  
 unethes had he said þe word,  
 þe coke lep up on flight  
 Feperid fairer þan biforn,  
 crue thorù grace of dright;  
 And þan bigan þe traitur fals  
 to dred him for his pligh [t].  
 [þ]is it was þat ilke coke,  
 þat petir herd him crau,

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 15961-64.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 15977-82.

## CLIMAX IN THE CRUCIFIXION

125

Quen he had nitt his lauerd thriis  
he did him-selven knau.<sup>1</sup>

This brief incident, like many similar ones, helps in tightening the whole frame of the Cursor Mundi by linking various events closer. The prophecy of Judas' mother is just one more of Christ's glorious resurrection. Nevertheless, the Cursor poet uses only a few of the legends that were current during the Medieval period. He ignores the grim story of the three nails used in the crucifixion. The legend of the Forging of the Nails is found in the Northern Passion.<sup>2</sup> It tells of the Jews going to a smith in the town to have the nails made. The smith, who believed that Christ was a prophet, refused, saying that he had burned his hand. The Jews demanded a sight of the hand, which by a miracle looked sore, though it really did not hurt him. The smith's wicked wife offered to make the nails, and with the Jews' help she made three rude nails:

pai war full great and rudely wrought,  
Bot par fore pai for soke pam nocht.<sup>3</sup>

The Cursor poet used good taste in his selection of stories to be included in his work. He does not make

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 15983-98.

<sup>2</sup>The Northern Passion (Supplement), pp. 116-117, (ll. 2547-2604).

<sup>3</sup>The Northern Passion (Supplement), ll. 2603-04.

## CLIMAX IN THE CRUCIFIXION

126

a random choice, but includes legends that assist in giving structural unity to his poem. He used good judgment in omitting the legend of the three nails which is too anti-feminist for inclusion in the Cursor Mundi, which is dedicated to the honor of Our Lady. Though it is an interesting story, it does not have links with other sections of the Passion as the legend of Peter's 'fair feathered' cock.

The Cursor poet has created his own "Harmony of the Gospels,"<sup>1</sup> interweaving a continuous narrative based on the four evangelists' account of Christ's passion. It is enriched by the inclusion of legendary material which adds to the interest of the canonical description of the Christ's death. For instance, the Cursor poet takes the basic facts of Judas' death from Matthew and The Acts of the Apostles,<sup>2</sup> but adds colorful details to the episode. Judas procured a strong rope and hanged himself; his body burst; his soul went out through his belly because it might not come out at the mouth which had kissed Christ;

---

<sup>1</sup>The beginning of the first Harmony of the Gospels goes back to Tatian, who about A.D. 175 combined in his Diatessaron the four Gospels into one continuous narrative, probably first in Greek; see Dictionary of the Bible, ed. James Hastings (New York, 1963), p. 365.

<sup>2</sup>Matt. XXVII: 3-5; Acts of Apostles, I:18.

## CLIMAX IN THE CRUCIFIXION

127

A rape he gat him previli,  
 pat he wist was strang,  
 And fast he fest aboute his hals,  
 him-self par-wid he hang.

[u]te at his wamb þe saule brast,  
 at muth had it na wai,  
 pat he wid kist cristes muth,  
 als ye are herd me say,  
 Quen he come als a traitur fals  
 his auen lauerd to be-trai;<sup>1</sup>

The Medieval audience was interested in why Judas' body burst. The poet gives a satisfactory answer. No source has been found for this explanation of why Judas committed suicide by hanging himself.

As we noted in the last chapter, the legend of the Holy Cross was one of the main threads binding the Old Testament section of the Cursor Mundi to the death of Christ: for on the "tree of life" he was crucified.

After Christ has been condemned, the Jews looked about for wood to make His Cross. They went to the temple and cut the King's tree and found it was still fresh and sound.<sup>2</sup> This they took for the cross:

[I]esus crist, ur savveur,  
 was dampned to do of dau,  
 To be hanged on a tre,  
 als þan was thefis lau.

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16501-04 and 16509-14.

<sup>2</sup>The source for this is "The story of the Holy Rood," in Legends of the Holy Rood, ed. Morris, EETS 94, item no. 3 (London, 1871).

## CLIMAX IN THE CRUCIFIXION

128

Bot swilk a tre pain wantid alle  
 als writen es in sau;  
 pai said pai wold be kinges tre  
 unto pat mister sau,  
 For it was comanded pai it suld  
 ute of be temple drau  
 [p]an went pai to the temple suith,  
 in tua pis tre pai schare,  
 Als mekil als pai sau pat gained,  
 pai tok paim and na mare.  
 pai faud it als nu and fress  
 als it on stovid ware.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the wood from the three pippin seeds given to Seth when he went to the gates of Paradise to ask for the Oil of Mercy for his aged father is used to make Christ's cross. This shows the artistic achievement of unity in the Cursor Mundi. The poet has succeeded in the remarkable feat of weaving the Oil of Mercy of the Holy Rood myths through sixteen thousand lines of verse which tells of the important events of Scriptural history. The importance of relating the fall of Adam to the redemption of mankind by Christ on the cross is one of the prime objectives of this work.

The poet continues his descriptions of the making of the cross by remarking that even though the tree could easily be shaped and cut the men could not stir it a foot. Caiphas sent two hundred men to fetch it, but in vain. Thus the tree continued to show its strange powers. When

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16543-58.

## CLIMAX IN THE CRUCIFIXION

129

it was finished, Christ was brought. He bowed down to the cross and kissed it. It miraculously rose onto His back without help and He carried it forth. There is no known source for this miracle, which is related thus in the

Cursor Mundi:

Quen it was wroght þai all ne moght  
 stir it ute of þe stede,  
 Bituix and þat ur lauerd crist  
 was þedir him-selven ledd.  
 [Q]uen he come to þat suete tre  
 þe felunes to him said,  
 "Take it up," þai said, "þu seis  
 hu it es to þe graid."  
 He lutede dune and kist it sone,  
 and at þe first braid,  
 Widuten ani help of man  
 upon his bac it laid.  
 Into þe tune forth he it bare,  
 bifor þat cursed lede.<sup>1</sup>

It is at this stage in the passion narrative that the whole legend of the cross from the quest of Seth to the martyring of Maximilla is inserted in the Oxford Manuscript of the Northern Passion.<sup>2</sup> The Cursor poet shows greater artistic skill in spacing his account of the legend as we have seen, through the first nine thousand lines of his work.

The measurements of the cross are given as four-and-one-half ells long and half an ell broad,

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16581-93.

<sup>2</sup>"Oxford MS Rawlins on Poetry 175," The Northern Passion (Supplement), pp. 94-116 (ll. 1748-2546).

## CLIMAX OF THE CRUCIFIXION

130

Half feird ellen was þe lenth,  
and oþer half þe brede,<sup>1</sup>

The legend mentioned before has other numbers,

VII cubites þai made it long  
With outen þat in þe erth suld gang,  
And aþer side of cubites thre  
þat aboven þe hevid suld be.<sup>2</sup>

Simon the Cyrenian,<sup>3</sup> who is pressed into carrying Christ's cross to Calvary, is not mentioned by name. He is merely referred to as a "bisen man," which can mean either a busy man or a workman. It was not the Roman custom to make the condemned carry the whole cross to the place of crucifixion. The cross-beam (patibulum) was borne by the criminal to the place of execution, while his titulus or tablet of accusation was hung around his neck, or carried before him by a herald. Christ's 'title' was written by 'Sir Pilate' in Hebrew, Greek and Latin. It was placed over his head on the cross;

[A]boven his heved, als i zu tell,  
a bord was festind plat,  
þar-on it was þe titel writen,  
thoru rede of sir pilat.  
"Iesus nazarene, of ius King,"  
þar apon he wrat,

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16599-16600.

<sup>2</sup>Northern Passion, ll. 790-93.

<sup>3</sup>Mark, XV:21.

## CLIMAX IN THE CRUCIFIXION

131

of ebru, gru, and latine,<sup>1</sup>  
for to schind his state.<sup>1</sup>

It is noteworthy that in a poem as long as the Cursor Mundi, the poet devotes only ten lines to a description of the actual crucifixion and the raising of the cross. This is in contrast to the Northern Passion, which takes fifty-eight lines of verse to describe the putting of Christ on the cross, while in the York play the dialogue accompanying the action of nailing Christ to the cross amount to more than two hundred and fifty lines of text. One can read a convincing description of a crucifixion, as we have in this work, much quicker than it can be acted out on the stage. The Cursor poet does not dwell on his account of the nailing of Christ to the cross. The brevity of his narrative of this incident adds to the horror and wanton cruelty of the action. The Roman soldiers who carried out Pontius Pilate's orders are referred to as "knights" by the Cursor poet.<sup>2</sup> This is in keeping with the work's medieval

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16683-90.

<sup>2</sup>The English have always exhibited great interest in Pilate and his soldiers. A legend is that the Roman legion serving in Palestine at the time of the Crucifixion of Christ had been raised in Northern Gaul and Britain. The Royal Scots (the First of Foot), which is the oldest British regiment of the line, claims to be descended from Pontius Pilate's soldiers. The regiment's nickname is "Pontius Pilate's Bodyguard." Another legend, used by dramatist James Bridie, says that Pilate was born in Scotland. The popular 'Punch and Judy' show is believed to have its origin in an Italian mystery play dealing with the Crucifixion. The various characters represent figures from the Passion.

## CLIMAX IN THE CRUCIFIXION

132

fashion of making narratives contemporary in tone. This is how crucifying of Our Lord is told in this poem:

[p]e knightes pat war wid him sett,  
 pai iesu sone un-clede,  
 And led him to pat rod tre,  
 and par-on pai him sprede,  
 par he gave his suete flesse,  
 for ur ransun in wede.  
 Iesu pu have merci on us,  
 pat sua sare for us blede!  
 [p]ai nailed him opon pat tre,  
 on pe mont calvare,  
 And a thef on eper side  
 pai hinged par him bi,  
 pat pai all suld understand  
 Zode pat wai bi,  
 Of pir tua theves, als qua sai,  
 "pair maistir thef am I." <sup>1</sup>

The insertion of a prayer in the middle of a descriptive passage is quite often found in the Cursor Mundi. Here we have a brief, concise telling of the actual nailing of Christ to the cross. Christ's only reply to the indignities and tortures he has undergone is:

"Fadir," he said, "forgive pu paim  
 pat pai do gaines me,  
 For quat pai do, pai er sua blind  
 pai can nocht selven se." <sup>2</sup>

Thus the poet gives emotional intensity to Christ's:  
 "They know not what they do." <sup>3</sup> The Cursor poet, however,

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16665-80.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16695-98.

<sup>3</sup>Luke, XXIII:34.

## CLIMAX IN THE CRUCIFIXION

133

adds, to St. Luke, "They are so blind, they cannot see themselves." Christ was killed by those He loved and came to save--by those He loved, not by those He hated. This is one of the great paradoxes of the crucifixion. The Stanzaic Life of Christ discussed it in this way:

For las wonder had ben i-wys  
 Yif he of enmys suffrid hade  
 To gych he done hade er amys,  
 sich manas tha e he hade made,  
 Or of alien and stranngers  
 that had not knowen him before,  
 but of his frendes and verray feres,  
 He tholet that grevet mich þe more.<sup>1</sup>

The men who should be His friends, though they scorn Him and kill Him, are not aware of what they really do. This fact, central to the mystery of the Passion, is kept in mind by the Cursor poet in his handling of the crucifixion. He focuses his attention solely on Christ, and the great love He had for all men, even those who were appointed as His executioners. The poet sought to reveal as much as he could of the pathos and dignity of His suffering. Nothing is allowed to take our interest away from Christ during this episode, not like the "japing" and "jesting" of the tortores in the medieval drama that over-shadows Christ and His suffering on the stage.

---

<sup>1</sup>Stanzaic Life of Christ, p. 186 (ll. 5541-48).

## CLIMAX IN THE CRUCIFIXION

134

The Cursor poet continues his narration of the crucifixion with the telling of the story of the penitent thief. The Cursor Mundi calls the two criminals crucified with Christ, Dismas and Gesmas.<sup>1</sup> The poet may have taken them from the Gospel of Nicodemus,<sup>2</sup> which he used for a later section, or he may have learnt them from some other source, considering the general acquaintance with these legends in the Middle Ages. Gesmas joins the passer-bys in upbraiding Christ, while the other, Dismas, says they deserved their doom, but Christ is blameless. He goes on to ask Our Lord for mercy. The details are taken chiefly from Luke, who is the only evangelist to mention the two robbers. The poet expands Dismas' rebuke:

"pu dredes litil godd,  
 pat bis paine es on laid.  
 [L] ittil dredis pu drightin,  
 or his mekil might,  
 þe dome pat es nu given on us  
 we have it all wid right;  
 And þis man, wat we wele pat he  
 es all widuten plight,  
 Have merci lauerd! on me quen þu bes  
 in þi rike sua bright!"<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16738-39.

<sup>2</sup>Ch. X ". . . Dismas on His right hand, and Gesmas on the left," The Apocryphal New Testament, p. 174.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16723-32.

## CLIMAX IN THE CRUCIFIXION

135

Christ replies:

"Forsoth to be i hight,  
pat þu sal be in paradis,  
wid me þis ilke night."<sup>1</sup>

Echoes of the legend of the Good Thief are met with here, that the poet might have expected his audience to know. On the supposition that Our Lord was crucified upon March 25, the Roman Martyrology for this day contains the following entry: "At Jerusalem the commemoration of the holy thief who confessed Christ upon the cross and deserved to hear from Him the words: 'This day shalt thou be with me in paradise'." In the Arabic "Gospel of the Infancy" we are told how, in the course of the flight into Egypt, the Holy Family was waylaid by robbers. Of the two leaders, one was stirred by compassion, besought his companion to let them pass unmolested, and when he refused, bribed him with forty drachmas, so that the Virgin Mary and St. Joseph were left in peace. Thereupon Mary said to her benefactor, "The Lord God shall sustain thee with his right hand and give thee remission of sins." And the Infant Jesus, intervening, spoke, "And after thirty years, mother, the Jews will crucify me in Jerusalem, and these two robbers will be

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16734-36.

## CLIMAX IN THE CRUCIFIXION

136

lifted on the cross with me."<sup>1</sup> This legendary story, with others, subsequently found popular acceptance in western Christendom during the Middle Ages, though the names of the robbers vary, the most commonly given were Dismas and Gestas. We find the two thieves represented in pictures of the crucifixion during the medieval period. Although the poet was acquainted with a version of the Gospels of Christ's Infancy, he most likely did not know the Arabic version in which this story is narrated.

The Cursor poet does not dwell on Christ's last agonies. After mentioning the names of the four who "stode bi þe rode tre" -- His Mother, Mary Magdalene, Mary Cleophas and His favourite disciple, John -- he gives Christ's seven words from the cross:

"Modir, iohn sal be þi sun  
fra nu, instede of me.  
And þi modir, my dere cosin,  
þu loke hir hir," said he,<sup>2</sup>

The poet then describes how the light dimmed about the ninth hour, and other wonderful phenomena. The climax of the poem is soon reached; Christ cries out:

---

<sup>1</sup>"The Arabic Gospels of the Infancy," in The Apocryphal New Testament, ed. M.R. James, p. 81 (Chapter XXIII).

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16757-60.

## CLIMAX IN THE CRUCIFIXION

137

"To þe fadir yeilde i mi gast,  
nu have i done þi will."<sup>1</sup>

And dies.

In normal Roman crucifixion the pains of death were protracted, sometimes for days. Even when the victims were nailed and not merely tied to the cross, it was hunger and exhaustion, not loss of blood, that was the direct cause of death. Sometimes an end was put to their sufferings by the breaking of the crucified victim's legs by hammer strokes. In the case of Christ, however, His suffering on the cross lasted three hours only due in part to the tortures He had previously undergone. Pontius Pilate gave orders that the three crucified men were to be put to death because the following day was not only a Sabbath, but the Sabbath of Passover week. This is how the poet explains it:

[þ]e iuus for þe mekil fest,  
þat on þe moru suld be,  
þai said þat bodi suld þe nane  
left hangand on þe tre.<sup>2</sup>

The soldiers broke the thighs of the two thieves who were found to be still alive;

þe tua þai fand sumdel in lijf,  
Of eþer þai brac þe thie.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16777-78.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16823-24.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16829-30.

## CLIMAX IN THE CRUCIFIXION

138

Turning to Christ, they found that he had already expired:

[B]ot quen pat pai till iesus come,  
 pai fand him dede as stone,  
 For pai wist pai he was dede,  
 of him pai brac no bone.<sup>1</sup>

The Cursor poet then narrates how Longinus, the 'blind knight,' ran his spear into Christ's side. Blood and water gushed out.<sup>2</sup> A drop of the precious blood spurting from the wound falls on the blind soldier's eye and his sight is restored. There is a considerable literature connected with the legend of Longinus and the Holy Lance. The "centurian" of Mark (XV, 29) is often identified with the "soldier" of John, (XIX, 34) who pierced the side of Christ, and both are connected with Longinus who is first named in the "Acts of Pilate" portion of the Gospel of Nicodemus. The Cursor poet would have come across this apocryphal tale either in the Gospel of Nicodemus or the Legenda aurea.<sup>3</sup>

He tells the legend briefly:

Bot longens, þe blind, wid a spere  
 (of knightes was he one)  
 Thoru his side unrekenli

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16831-34.

<sup>2</sup>John, 19:34.

<sup>3</sup>Haenisch ("Inquiry into Sources of the Cursor Mundi," p. 38), believes that the Cursor poet got some of his details from Peter Comestor, Historia Scholastica, p. 1634A.

## CLIMAX IN THE CRUCIFIXION

139

apon his hede it rane;  
 [B]lod and watir ute of his side ran,  
 selcuth mekil wane,  
 And of pat blod ran till hiis ei  
 he gate his sight on-ane.<sup>1</sup>

The poet gives his authority for this miracle as Saint  
 John:

He pat sau it þus he said  
 his wittnes es, saint iahne,  
 For pat man of his freinschip,  
 was sua ner bi him ane.<sup>2</sup>

Another legend, for which no source has been found, has it  
 that the cross blossomed from midday until evening;

þe rode it was wid lieif and brac  
 florist wele selcuthli,  
 Fra middai to þe complene  
 þat mani toght farli;  
 Bot þogh þe iuus pat it sau  
 thocht selcuth ne for-þi,  
 Nouþer þai gave man, ne þai toke  
 ensampel god þar-bi;  
 Bot on þe morn of þat grening,  
 þe tre als ar was dri.<sup>3</sup>

The poet then describes the descent from the cross,  
 remarking with regard to Our Lady:

þe murning þat his moþer made  
 Mai na man rede in rune.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16835 ff.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16845-48.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16859-68. [This passage is  
 found only in the Gottingen and Cotton MSS].

<sup>4</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16879-80.

## CLIMAX IN THE CRUCIFIXION

140

Joseph of Arimathiae, who had begged Christ's body of Pontius Pilate, attempted to get possession of the Holy Rood. The Jews, however, prevented him, and secretly buried it that same night. Again, we have no known source for this episode, which helps connect the crucifixion with the finding of the cross by Saint Helen, which we will examine in chapter VIII. This is how the Cursor poet handles this brief linking section:

Joseph wald have a-wai þe rode,  
 þe ius it him forbedd,  
 þat ilke night þaim-self it did  
 a-way for to be ledd;  
 wid þe theifs croices tuin,  
 quen all war gaue to bedd,  
 And grove þaim thre for cristen men,  
 widin a preve stedd.  
 Forþi þai bar þe maliscon  
 of him þat þar-on bledd.<sup>1</sup>

The portion of the Cursor Mundi on the crucifixion closes with the reflections of the poet. He meditates on the fact that Christ is buried and that now all hopes of holy church hang on Our Blessed Lady. Thus the poet returns to the Virgin Mary, in whose honor he has undertaken the task of writing his poem. The Cursor poet declares:

Nu es þe crois graven under grete,  
 and iesu under stane,

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. 11. 16913-22.

## CLIMAX IN THE CRUCIFIXION

141

And hinges all hope of hali kirc  
 in mari mild allane.  
 Ay till iesu þe thrid dai  
 had fughten again sathane,<sup>1</sup>

The poet then reminds us that mankind was made slaves  
 through a tree, and now was liberated through one;

Thoru a tre, als ye have herd,  
 was all man-kind mad thrall,  
 And thoru his hali rode tre,  
 þan war we frelsted all.  
 Again þat appil adam ete  
 was given iesus þe gall,<sup>2</sup>

It is the history of the pippen seeds that became the Holy  
 Rood that has been the material that has bound tightly the  
 tale of our salvation in the hand of the skilful Cursor  
 poet. He has told its history in a style resembling that  
 of the chivalric romances.

The seventeen hundred odd lines that are devoted to  
 Christ's passion and death are in balance with the rest of  
 the long poem. The Gospel account of these events is  
 supplemented by several legends, some dealing with the  
 cross. The immediate source of a number of these is  
 unknown: they may have been invented by the Cursor poet  
 himself. The sadness of the events described is expressed  
 in moving poetry. We are left with the mourning Virgin Mary,

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16923-28.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16939-44.

## CLIMAX IN THE CRUCIFIXION

142

while Christ descends into Hell. In the next chapter, we deal with the Harrowing of Hell, which for Medieval man was one of the most popular episodes in the whole of religious history. This is the second climax of the Cursor Mundi. It is here that Adam finally received the Oil of Mercy, which is Christ Himself.

## CHAPTER VII

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

Perhaps the Cursor poet's greatest skill as a story-teller is seen in his handling of the popular Medieval episode surrounding Christ's Harrowing of Hell. For in this section of the poem, he makes use of the flash-back technique as well as prophecy. He thus gathers together here all the threads of the past and the future, and shows the triumphant Christ, who was Himself the long awaited Oil<sup>1</sup> of Mercy, promised to Adam when he was expelled from the Garden of Eden.

The ultimate source of this portion of the Cursor Mundi is to be found in the early Christian Apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus,<sup>2</sup> itself an appendix to a book called Acts of Pilate.<sup>3</sup> There are versions of this work in Greek, Coptic, and Latin; and translations of them could have been available to the Cursor poet. The version that M.R. James

---

<sup>1</sup>Oil is the symbol of the Grace of God. It is used in the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, ordination and unction.

<sup>2</sup>The Gospel of Nicodemus in The Apocryphal New Testament, ed. M.R. James, pp. 94-116.

<sup>3</sup>See The Apocryphal New Testament, pp. 94-95.

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

144

calls Latin A is behind the typical English Medieval renderings of the myth.<sup>1</sup>

The story of the Gospel of Nicodemus is that, after Christ had died on the cross and before His Resurrection, Adam and Eve and the other souls who were living in the darkness of Hell suddenly felt the warmth of the sun and saw the shining of a bright light. Whereupon Adam and the other patriarchs and John the Baptist rejoiced and began talking hopefully among themselves. Seth then recalled how, when his father Adam lay sick, he went to the gates of Paradise and begged the archangel Michael for the Oil of Mercy with which to heal his father's body. Michael could not give it to him, but added the Son of God would give it after several thousand years had elapsed. All the patriarchs rejoiced at Seth's words, knowing that the deliverance now was near. There follows an agitated dialogue between Satan and Hell, for they know that some disaster threatens them. They were particularly agitated because it was but recently that they were deprived of Lazarus. As they are talking, there is heard a cry calling for the gates of Hell to open so that the King of Glory may enter. Satan and Hell determine to bar the gates still more strongly.

---

<sup>1</sup>See Tillyard, op. cit., pp. 20-21.

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

145

Whereupon the patriarchs renew the cry to open the gates. The next cry is a climax and decides the issue; and here is how the Apocryphal Gospel continues:

And there came a great voice as of thunder saying: Remove, O prince, your gates, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in. And when Hell saw that they so cried out twice, he said, as if he knew it not: Who is the King of Glory? And David answered Hell and said: The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord Mighty in battle, He is the King of Glory. . . . And now, O thou most foul and stinking Hell, open thy gates that the King of Glory may come in. And as David spake thus unto Hell, the Lord of Majesty appeared in the form of a man and lightened the eternal darkness and brake the bonds that could not be loosed; and the succour of His everlasting might visited us that sat in the deep darkness of our transgressions and in the shadow of death of our sins.<sup>1</sup>

The powers of Hell then expressed their terror and quarreled among themselves, while Christ, taking Adam by the right hand, gathers his saints around Him and makes the Sign of the Cross over them, and, still holding Adam by the hand, "went up out of Hell, and all the saints followed Him." Finally, he delivered them all to the archangel Michael to be housed in Paradise. Enoch, Elias, and the saved thief join them on their way there.

The substance of the Gospel of Nicodemus is as early as the second century, though the developed Gospel

---

<sup>1</sup>The Apocryphal New Testament, pp. 132-34.

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

146

itself may be two centuries later; and by the age of Constantine its central event, the releasing of Adam from Hell by Christ, had become a subject for the artists. After the turn of the millenium it became excessively common, both in the Byzantine and the western artistic traditions. The church ceremony beginning Exultet jam angelica turba caelorum took place on Easter Eve and includes a reference to the descent into Hell. The so-called Exultet Rolls from South Italy, dating from the tenth to the twelfth centuries, gives illustrations of the different parts of the ceremony.<sup>1</sup>

Though there is an Old English version of the Gospel of Nicodemus,<sup>2</sup> the theme of the Harrowing of Hell became more fully developed in thirteenth century Britain. Once this had happened, the literature of the late Middle Ages in England reposed on the authority and security of the great myth and was content to reproduce it unpretentiously and loyally. Only exceptionally did it add to the

---

<sup>1</sup>The Exultet Rolls, ed. Myrtila Avery, (Princeton University Press, 1960).

<sup>2</sup>See The Blickling Homilies, ed. Morris, p. 85 ff; and also The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church, ed. Thorpe, I, 26-28, 94, 108, 216, 218, 228, 248, 460; II, 80, 606-608. The Anglo-Saxon text of the Gospel of Nicodemus has been edited by S.J. Crawford for the Awle Fyale Series (Edinburgh, 1927).

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

147

myth or seek to fashion it anew. On the other hand the literature is less uniform in treatment than is the art. For the artist the dramatic moment was when Christ, having burst the gates of Hell, took Adam by the hand; and he always chose that movement, however much else he succeeded in implying. In the literature the rescue of Adam is nearly always paramount, and the Cursor Mundi is no exception.

The Cursor poet's treatment of the Harrowing of Hell, coming after he had written more than seventeen thousand lines, shows no relaxation of vitality. He versifies the whole of the myth as found in the Gospel of Nicodemus and adds touches of his own. For example, John the Baptist is not just there in Hell along with the rest but appears there after the light has shone in. Seth does not merely tell his story of the oil of Paradise but is asked by Adam to tell it. Further the author seems to have taken the pictures of the myth very much to heart, for he makes Christ take Adam by the hand no less than three times.

The Cursor poet acknowledges his debt to the Gospel of Nicodemus directly:

parfor wroght nicodeme a writt,  
I tell nu wid þi leve of it.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 17287-88.

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

148

The poet appears to have used one of the now missing early Middle English versions of the Harrowing of Hell,<sup>1</sup> which follows closely the Apocryphal work. He begins this section of his poem with a free translation of the twelfth chapter of the Gospel of Nicodemus. The following lines of the Cursor Mundi, which will be followed by the Latin text translated by M.R. James, may suffice to show the poet's method:

Of ioseph, quen þe iuus wist  
 þat he had dolven iesu crist,  
 And all formenged is þair mod.  
 þai sent þair serguntz forto nim  
 Bath sir nicodeme and him;  
 And open twelve þat for him space  
 Quen þat þai soght iesu wid sake,  
 Al þai hidd þaim-self to zeme,  
 Bot forth þan come sir nicodeme.  
 For he was over þe iuus þan,  
 Als þair prins and over-man,  
 He come to þaim in þat siquar,  
 þat in þair sinagog þai war,  
 He said "ye men, murtheres sua curs,  
 Hu dar ye cum in goddes hus!"  
 þais said, "bot quat þar-in dos þu?  
 þat sua spac and held wid iesu.  
 þi part mot ever and wid him be."  
 "Amen, amen, amen," said he.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The original manuscript (which is not in existence at the present day) could hardly have been written later than the middle of the 13th century. See Middle English Harrowing of Hell and Gospel of Nicodemus, ed. Hulme, EETS 100 (London, 1907)

See also Ten Brink, op. cit., II, 241 ff.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. vv. 17289-308.

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

149

Let us compare this passage with the opening of chapter twelve of the Gospel of Nicodemus:

Now when the Jew heard that Joseph had begged the body of Jesus, they sought for him and for the twelve men which said that Jesus was not born of fornication, and for Nicodemus and many others which had come forth before Pilate and declared his good works. But all they hid themselves, and Nicodemus only was seen of them, for he was a ruler of the Jews. And Nicodemus said unto them: How came ye into the synagogue? The Jews say unto him: How didn't thou come into the synagogue? For thou art confederate with him, and his portion shall be with thee in the life to come. Nicodemus saith: Amen. Amen. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

The Cursor Mundi passage is quite a close translation of the Apocryphal Scripture. The next two hundred and seventy lines of the Cursor Mundi<sup>2</sup> is a close paraphrase of chapters twelve to fifteen of the Latin Gospel of Nicodemus.

Earlier, at line 17575, the author makes a digression on the blindness of the Jews of Our Lord's day. This pause in the narrative enables the poet to comment on the action--a technique found throughout the work.<sup>3</sup> The poet declares:

---

<sup>1</sup>The Apocryphal New Testament, p. 105.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 17309-574.

<sup>3</sup>One of the long digressions in the Cursor Mundi is on the evils of old age in the episode dealing with Jacob and Esau. See Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 3559-93.

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

150

Walawai! quat pa men war blind,  
 Quen pai went sua iesus to find.  
 For him to find qua wille him seke,  
 pair mode till him pam most pai meke,  
 To know him drightin all weildand,  
 pan mai pai find him bune at hand,  
 Mightili in all his nede,  
 To suilk he wille his bodi bede.  
 For boght he sitt in hevenes hall,  
 Yeit he is in erd over alle,  
 Mightili bath fer and nere,  
 And nouper mist in heven ne here.  
 pai pat traistli in him trous,  
 His bliscing to pa men buus.<sup>1</sup>

Then the poet returns to the Gospel of Nicodemus to narrate how the Jews seek for the risen Christ in vain, and how Nicodemus finds Joseph of Arimathiae, who had been miraculously delivered from prison. Joseph relates to the Jewish leaders how Christ came to him, blessed him and led him to the tomb, where he showed him the grave-clothes before taking him to his own house in Arimathiae, bidding him to remain there for the next forty days. The Jews are struck with terror and confounded by Joseph's tale.

With the story of the resurrection of Simeon's two sons from Hell the poet commences to deal with the Harrowing of Hell proper at line 17781. The time is some forty days after Christ rose from the tomb. Two young men have also come back to life. They are the sons of Simeon, who took

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 17579-88.

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

151

the infant Jesus in his arms when he was presented in the temple; they have come back to life at the moment when Christ rose from the dead.<sup>1</sup> Joseph of Arimathiae tells Anna and Caiaphas that Simeon's two sons, who were buried in Arimathiae, rose with Christ from the dead, and are now going about the town, kneeling and praying, but speaking with no one. This is how the Cursor poet states it:

Gas, seis nu, forpe hali-dome,  
 And ye sal find pair tumbes tume;  
 In mi cite of arimathi,  
 par er pai walkand witterli.  
 par men seis paim in pat tune,  
 In kneling state and orisune;  
 Ai umquile men heris paim cri,  
 Bot wid nane speke pai of pat bi.<sup>2</sup>

Joseph makes the dramatic suggestion that these two brothers who have come back to live be found and questioned. He cries:

"Ga we pan fulsumli peder,  
 And fand we forto bring paim heder,  
 And sal we paim wid coniuring,  
 Ger tell us of pis up-rising."<sup>3</sup>

The Jewish leaders agree on this course of action. Anna and Caiaphas, accompanied by Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathiae and others seek for Carius and Lenthius. The group also

---

<sup>1</sup>See Matthew, XXVII:52-3.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 17797-804.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 17805-08.

includes Gamalid ("Of him es nocht bot trenth to tell").<sup>1</sup>

The inclusion of Gamaliel, the distinguished Pharisee scholar, is found in chapter seventeen of the Gospel of Nicodemus:

And Annas and Caiaphas, Nicodemus and Joseph and Gamaliel went and found them not in their sepulchre, but they went unto the city of Arimathiae and found them there, kneeling on their knees and giving themselves unto prayer.<sup>2</sup>

All are keen to find out the truth and the two brothers are brought back to Jerusalem, and are conjured to tell honestly how they were raised to life. Both Carius and Lethius trembled and groaned, asked for parchment, and said they would write what they had heard and saw. Even though they sat separately, their accounts of their experiences beyond the grave were identical. This is a skilful way of obtaining an eye-witness account of the "secret works" of Christ during His descent into Hell. This is the great climax of his long religious poem. Here the myth of the Oil of Mercy and the legend of the Cross meet. The artistic unity of the Cursor Mundi is seen in the way he has developed and expanded his legendary material to this point

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. 1. 17813.

<sup>2</sup>The Apocryphal New Testament, p. 121.

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

153

when he pulls the various threads of the narrative together in the Harrowing of Hell as told by Simeon's sons. The poet says:

Quen carius and lenthius,  
 was coniuured of pir iuus pus  
 wid all pair fless pai quoke onane,  
 And wid pair hertis gun pai grame.  
 Till heven pai lifted pair eien brad,  
 And on pair tunges be takni[n]g made  
 wid pair fingres all of be crois,  
 And alsone spac wid manes vois.  
 "Lauerd," pai said, (pat hei drightin  
 pan bad pai give paim parchemine)  
 "we sal yu write and na-thing lij  
 Quat we herd and sau wid ei."<sup>1</sup>

The fact that the account of Christ's descent into Hell is written down by two eye-witnesses, whose accounts are similar, gives it the appearance of truth. The Carius and Lethius description of the Harrowing of Hell is some six hundred and four lines in length and is the pivotal point of the Cursor Mundi. It tells how God gives Adam the long-promised Oil of Mercy. The account of Simeon's sons commences with a prayer:

"Lauerd iesu crist," said pai,  
 "Godd, pat all pir mightes may,  
 pat es upras of ded and liif,  
 And has us kid be right sua riif,  
 pu late us lauerd, wid leve of be,  
 To tell nu of pi aven private.  
 Thoru dede of pi suete croice  
 Coniurd er we to tell wid voice,  
 For pu bad we suld na man tell,

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 17833-44.

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

154

pi dedis dern pu did in hell -  
 be dedis of pi masieste,-  
 Bot thoru pi-self coniurd er we,  
 Siben it es sua nu most we nede  
 be mightes tell of pi godd-hede.<sup>1</sup>

Thus our only knowledge of Christ's "dern deeds" comes from the penned account by these two holy men. Carius and his brother write that while waiting in the mournful place, suddenly a golden light shone upon them.

[A]ls we war stad in mu[rn]ful stall,  
 we self and ur eldris all,  
 Brathli par brast a golden leme,  
 Brighter pan ani sunes beme,  
 Sua right purprin heu es nane,<sup>2</sup>  
 pis ilk light apon us schane.<sup>2</sup>

This light, which is brighter than any rays of sun, rouses the captive souls of Adam and his descendants who are awaiting the Oil of Mercy. Adam "that was man for most," and the patriarchs and prophets begin to rejoice as they sit on their dark seats. Adam fittingly is the first to speak:

'pis ilke light forsoth es he  
 pat maker es of lastand light,<sup>3</sup>  
 Nu has he sent us pat he hight.<sup>3</sup>

All realize that the salvation is at hand. The declaration of Adam that the maker of eternal light has now sent what he

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 17849-62.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 17863-68.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 17874-76.

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

155

had promised is followed by Isaiah. Chapter eighteen of the Gospel of Nicodemus runs thus:

And Isaiah cried out and said:  
This is the light of the Father, even the Son  
of God, according as I prophesied when I lived  
upon the earth: The land of Zabulon and the  
land of Nephthalem beyond the Jordan, of  
Galilee of the Gentiles, the people that walked  
in darkness have seen a great light, and they  
that dwell in the land of the shadow of death,  
upon them did the light shine. And now hath it  
come and shone upon us that sit in death.<sup>1</sup>

In the corresponding passage of the Cursor Mundi, the Holy prophet cries out:

'pis light is es of goddes sun  
pat i in erd tell of was won.  
þe folk in dedeli mirknes stadd  
Sau grete light þat made þaim glad,  
pat light es nu apon us schede  
þar we sitte in þe schadu of dede.'<sup>2</sup>

There is little doubt that the Cursor poet used either the Gospel of Nicodemus or a paraphrase of it for this section of his monumental work.

Next to speak in this drama is none other than the father of Carius and Lethius, Simeon. This righteous and devout man had taken the infant Jesus in his arms when He was presented in the temple.<sup>3</sup> Simeon said:

<sup>1</sup>The Apocryphal New Testament, p. 124.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 17879-84.

<sup>3</sup>See Luke, II:25.

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

156

'Ye thank drifhtin, nu cums i yu ro,  
 ur lauerd iesu crist þe blisse,  
 All-mighti godd es fader hiss.  
 In temple was he me bitaght,  
 And yung in armis i him laght;  
 þe hali gast þus did me mele,  
 Mine eien lauerd has sene bi hele,  
 þe quilk þu has þi folk fordight  
 Of israel, wid blisful light.'<sup>1</sup>

On hearing this, all the saints in hell rejoice the more.

The excitement mounts as a man who seems to have been a hermit approaches Adam and his companions. On being challenged, he replies that he is John the Baptist:

'i hate iohn,  
 Iohn es mi nam, voice and prophete,  
 Biddand forto graith þe strete,  
 To graith þe wai for cristes face,  
 þat till his folk sal grant us grace.'<sup>2</sup>

John goes on to narrate how he baptized Christ in the river Jordan and heard a voice from heaven, saying "this is my son, my dear." He also warns the saints that Christ will soon visit them:

'Comen es i nu forwid þat King,  
 Bodword of his cum to bring,  
 Goddes sun sal yu sone visite,  
 He cums at hand to slak yur site.  
 He þat es bred sua hei of strand,  
 In comes to se þis laithli land.'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 17888-96.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 17902-06.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 17919-24.

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

157

When Old Adam heard that Christ, who had been baptised in the Jordan, was on his way to this loathsome country, he called Seth, as we have mentioned above, to tell about the Oil of Mercy. He charged his son thus:

'sun tell til us all  
 þe sothfastnes, and na thing hele,  
 All þat þu herd of saint Michael  
 Archangele, quen i þe gan wis  
 To þe yatis of paradys,  
 To prai ur lauerd drightin dere,  
 To send me wid his messagere  
 þe oyle of his merciful tre,  
 þat i, seke, moght smerled be.'<sup>1</sup>

Seth tells how he had gone to the gates of Paradise on the request of the aged Adam and had a conversation with Saint Michael. The archangel told him that it was no use toiling after the oil, for Adam must wait five thousand, one hundred years. Saint Michael also told him:

'Hus aven sun sal he send dune  
 In erde þat mani sal mistron,  
 þi fadir cors up sal he rais,  
 And als of oper in þakin dais.  
 þou halier þan he be nane  
 Hoven sal he be in flom iordane.  
 Quen he sal stei up of þat strand,  
 þat oyle he sal bring in his hand,  
 Of his merci to smerli all wid  
 þat sekis treuth wid his grace or right,  
 And till all þaa þat bers baptist  
 To lastand liif in name of crist.  
 þat goddes sun sua, mekil of might,  
 þat mang mankin als man sal light,

---

Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 17928-36.

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

158

Sal bring þi fadir adam and þis  
Of hell to paradís of blis.<sup>1</sup>

Thus Christ Himself will bring the Oil of Mercy to anoint all the patriarchs and prophets who kept God's covenant. When those in hell heard Seth, they were filled with elation. They were no longer mournful, but crying for sheer joy.

The Cursor poet with the aid of Apocryphal Gospels and other legendary material, has made a strong connection between the Fall of Adam, the Quest of Seth and the Harrowing of Hell. In the early centuries of the Christian era, Christ was customarily shown as victorious on the cross. The crucifixion was understood as the great moment in salvation history. But by the time the Cursor Mundi was written in the beginning of the fourteenth century, the dying and the victory of Christ were conceived separately: victory was postponed until Our Lord had harrowed hell. The traditional statement of His triumph there was thought of as a struggle or knightly combat in which He jousts with Satan for the souls of the Just who died prior to this. A fourteenth century sermon extant in three English manuscripts describes

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 17957-71.

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

159

the armor worn by Christ in his encounter with Satan in the underworld and includes this detail:

"Pro equo habuit crucem super quam pependit;  
pro sento apposuit latus suum, et processit sic  
contra inimicum cum lancea, non in mana sed  
stykand in his side."<sup>1</sup>

As a prologue to the struggle between Christ and Satan for man's soul, the Cursor poet gives a discussion between Satan, the duke of death, with Hell. Both became agitated at the joyful cries of the saints when Seth finished his story. There follows a strange dialogue between Satan and Hell. The former tells the latter to make ready to receive Christ, who while on earth claimed to be God's son. He complains:

'pat i made wode, halt, blind, and mesel,  
wid word allane he gave þaim hele,  
I taght þe ded men als þin auen,  
Bot quilk he has þaim fra þe draven.'<sup>2</sup>

Hell is perturbed and wonders who Christ really is, fearing the deliverance of his prisoners from death. He asks Satan:

'Quat es he?  
· · · · ·  
Quatkin a man es þat iesu?

<sup>1</sup>First printed by Rosemary Woolf, "The Theme of Christ the Lover-Knight in Medieval English Literature," RES XIII (1962), 12. She thinks the vernacular phrases in the sermon suggest an English version known to the author. [For a horse he had the cross upon which he hung; for a shield he offered his side, and he advanced against the enemy so, with a spear not in his hand but sticking in his side.]

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. 11. 17989-92.

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

160

þat werrais on þe ever-ai quare,  
 And sipen es dred and dede sare.  
 Sipen his manhed es suilk of might,  
 Qua mai þan gain his goddehed fight?  
 I sai, sipen he es all weilldand,  
 Es na thing mai his will widstand.  
 Qui dredes he ded? þu wate noght, na,  
 Noght bot forto suike þe sua  
 He will þe take and waif in wa  
 To lend þar-in ever and a.<sup>1</sup>

Satan is scornful of Hell's prophecy, saying that he made the Jewish elders rise against Christ, and that death will now bring him here. Hell is not convinced. He reminds Satan that Christ was the same person who drew the dead away from him. Others by prayer have stolen the dead, but Christ does it by His word. He concludes by warning:

'Mai fall þis es þat ilk iesus,  
 þat stinkand lazarun fra us  
 Of his erding þe thridd dai  
 He losed him, and ledd away,  
 þe quilk al dede him quick he yald,  
 His word widstand had i no wald.<sup>2</sup>

Satan admits that Christ has vexed them in many ways. Then Hell forbids Satan to bring Christ there because he realizes that He is God. Thus even the powers of darkness finally are forced to acknowledge who Christ really is-

'wele wat i nu, and wenis noght,  
 þat he þat suilkin mightes moght

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. 1. 17994 and 11. 18001-10.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. 11. 18039-44.

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

161

Es godd stalworth weildand in will  
 And manhed mighti forto fulfill,  
 And es savveor of manes lede.  
 And if þu hedir him lede,  
 All þat her here spread wid me,  
 In presun of mi creuelte,  
 Dune in dome of ded sua dim,  
 To liif he sai þaim lede wid him.'<sup>1</sup>

The mystery cycles which are of a later date than the Cursor Mundi<sup>2</sup> also have a dialogue in hell between Satan and his devils. But here Satan is not all powerful. Hell appears to be his equal. He has cast doubts on his own and Satan's powers to hold Jesus Christ.

It is at this dramatic point in Simeon's sons' narration of the Harrowing of Hell that a loud clear ghostly voice cries:

'Ye princes of helle, undos yur yate!  
 þe king of blis will have in-late.'<sup>3</sup>

This command of Christ electrifies Hell who turns on Satan. He casts him out of the underworld, crying:

'þu do þe heper fra me, sathan!  
 A faint fighter me thinc ert þu,  
 Hu sal þu fight again iesu?'<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 18063-72.

<sup>2</sup>The Mystery Cycle developed following the establishment of the Feast of Corpus Christi early in the 14th century.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 18077-78.

<sup>4</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 18080-82.

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

162

Then he shuts his brazen gates with bars of steel, hoping  
to keep Christ outside.

'Bot opin up pin gates wide,  
Lat in þe King, widuten bide!  
In sal he c[u]me, þe King of blis.'<sup>1</sup>

Both King David and Isaiah proclaim to the waiting throng of  
saints that this is indeed the long-awaited Messiah. While  
they speak, the gates of hell are forced open--

þan brast þe brasen gate sua strang,  
And stelin lock þat þar-on hang.<sup>2</sup>

Christ again in a voice that sounds like thunder from  
heaven, commands that the gates be opened wide for the King  
of bliss. Hell asks as if he had not heard the commotion  
outside the gate which is the King of bliss. David replies  
that he knows well that voice,

For i wid propheci had hight  
Thoru þe haligastes might,  
And þat i tald of forwid þan  
I sai yu nu, wele i it can.  
þe lauerd þat es sua mekil of might,  
þat es sua strang and stif in fight,  
þe blisful king þis es þat ilke,  
For þar mai be nanoper suilk  
He þat biheld fra heven doune  
To here þe plant of his presune,  
Of his sinful sighand sua sare,  
To lese þaim ute of band of care.  
And þu hell, sua fule stinkand sting,  
undo, late in þe blisful King.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. 11. 18095-97.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. 11. 18103-04.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. 11. 18135-48.

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

163

No sooner had David finished his speech than Christ enters hell. The light that radiated from Him broke all the fetters and bands of sorrow of the throng and dispersed the shadows. At this point, the Cursor poet lets Carius and Lethius describe the results of Our Lord's entrance into hell,

pa waful wras sua dedeli dim,  
 All lighted þe leme þat come wid him,  
 Brast all þe bandes of ur site,  
 And visited us wid grete delite  
 In þat mirknes þar we lay,<sup>1</sup>  
 Ever in night widuten day.<sup>1</sup>

They say that "the bands of their sorrow" were burst by the rays of shining light coming from Christ. This is not found in the Gospel of Nicodemus. The English poet adds a freshness and wonder that is not found in the apocryphal scripture. He uses what he finds but is not afraid to change or add to the legendary material that are his sources.

When Hell and Death saw Christ advancing into their realm, they cried out,

Who art thou that hast taken us by thy power?  
 Who art thou, so great, so small, King and  
 slave, dead and yet living? Who art thou that  
 loosest the first sinner, and makes him first  
 free; that lightest up Adam's children with thy  
 light?<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. 11. 18155-60.

<sup>2</sup>See Cursor Mundi, G. 11. 18169-96.

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

164

Christ does not answer, but all the legions of devils,  
cringing like cowards as they are violently cast down,  
wail:

Quepen es pu sua selcuth a man,  
Sua mekil man, mighti and schene,  
And siben of all costes clene,  
For erdes werld pat has bene ay  
ur underlute all to pis day,  
pat agh us rent of yong anō ald,  
Bot never suilk a rent pai us yald.  
A dede man suilk als pis es ane  
Til us yeit sent pai never nane  
Quat es pu pan pat es sua bald  
Comen pis wise intil ur hald?

. . . . .  
Quatkin maistri mas pu on us?  
Mai fall pu art pat ilk ihesus  
pat sathan ur prince us of tald,  
And of pi dede on rode sua bald,  
pat thoru pi dede apon pat tre,  
All pis werld suld bou to pe. <sup>1</sup>

The struggle between Christ and Satan is short.

The Gospel of Nicodemus sums it up this way:

Then did The King of Glory in his Majesty trample  
upon death, and laid hold on Satan the prince  
and delivered him into the power of Hell, and drew  
Adam to him unto his own brightness.<sup>2</sup>

The Cursor poet renders this passage thus:

Wid pis gan Iesus him to wreth  
Als pou he brath had bene in breth.  
Sathan, pat pinful prince, he laght  
And under might of hell bitaght,  
And adam tillward he drogh.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 18202-212 and ll. 18215-220.

<sup>2</sup>The Apocryphal New Testament, p. 136.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 18221-26.

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

165

The poet does not develop this combat between Christ and Satan as several writers do in the late Middle Ages. The conception of the Harrowing of Hell as a tournament in which Our Lord is man's "Champion" was particularly vital in England in the late fourteenth century, and it lies at the center of some of the finest Medieval poems about Redemption.<sup>1</sup> The Cursor poet's treatment of this episode is not so sophisticated as is Langland's.<sup>2</sup>

The Cursor poet continues his narration with Hell mocking Satan for being conquered by Christ. All the riches that Satan had won through Adam and his loss of Paradise, he has now lost through the Rood tree:

All þat þu wan and mad þe rike  
 Thoru adam and þe tre wid suilke,  
 And thoru tining fo paradise,  
 Nu had þu tint on open-wise,  
 þu has tint thoru his rode tre,  
 And gladschip all es gane fra þe.<sup>3</sup>

Hell adds that Satan will feel many lasting pains while in his keeping.

---

<sup>1</sup>See Woolf, "The Theme of Christ the Lover-Knight," pp. 1-3.

<sup>2</sup>The author of Piers Plowman's daring innovation was to combine the theme of the Four Daughters of God, treated separately in the Cursor Mundi (ll. 9517-9812), with the Harrowing of Hell.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 18259-64.

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

166

Meanwhile, according to Carius and Lethius, eye-witness account of the events in the underworld when Christ descended into hell, Jesus informs Hell that Satan, instead of Adam and his brood, shall be under his power. He then turns to call on all the saints, damned through the devil and a tree, to see a tree condemn the devil. These are Christ's words:

'Cum to mi santes nu,  
 All pat mi liknes has on yu,  
 Cumes nu heder all to me,  
 pat thoru be warlou and a tre  
 All dampned war, nu sal ye se  
 A tre did him to dampned be,  
 To dede yu deme he did sua dim  
 Nu sal pat dede be dampned on him.'<sup>1</sup>

When all the saints were under the Lord's wing, Christ said to Adam, who was at his right hand:

'adam i give be pes  
 To be and all childer pine,  
 And till all oper rightwis mine.'<sup>2</sup>

On hearing the joyful tidings, Adam and all the saints fall on their knees before Christ and sing songs of praise to Him. They refer to Our Lord as their "ransomer" who has set the mark of the cross on earth;

[N]u comen art pu lauerd, ur dright,  
 ur ransuner als pu has hight,

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. 11. 18293-300.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. 11. 18304-306.

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

167

þat þu thoru prophete tald a[n]d tight  
 Nu es fulfild bifor ur sight,  
 Thoru þi croice þu has us bought  
 And for us has þu hedir soght  
 Fra dede of hell to lousen us,  
 All has þi dede us savved þus.  
 Lauerd, þai said, all wid a steven,  
 Als þu has sett þi Marke in heven  
 Of þi blis lauerd godd, sun gode,  
 And has þe taken of þi rode  
 Raised in erd of ur ransun;  
 þu sett it lauerd in hell þar dune,  
 To knau þi croice victori,  
 þat dede have here na mare maistri.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the author clearly states that it was through Christ's victory on the Cross that death no longer had mastery over the souls of the just in hell.

Then Christ made the sign of the cross on Adam, blessed all of his saints, and taking Adam by the hand led him towards paradise. On the way, the blessed souls met with two old men who had never been in hell. They identify themselves as Enoch and Elijah, who never were dead, but are awaiting for the coming of Antichrist, who is destined to slay them. Next, the joyful band of saints meet a miserable man carrying a cross. This is Dismas, the penitent thief. Christ grants him permission to go into paradise.

Carius and Lethius finish their strange and wonderful account of the Harrowing of Hell, saying that the

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 18321-36.

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

168

archangel Michael commanded them to return to earth, where they were to be dumb. They end their narrative with a prayer.

"An dos yur penans quilis ye may:  
His pes be wid yu: a[n]d haves gode day."<sup>1</sup>

This vision of the Kingdom of shadows is perfectly orthodox, despite its imaginary character. It is a popular presentation of the Christian faith in Christ's descent into hell. This faith is based on the fact that Christ died to redeem all men from their sin; owing to the fall of the first man their solidarity in his sin had included all succeeding generations. If Christ came forth from the tomb victorious and overcame sin by his innocent death and freed mankind from the power of evil, then it was fitting that the first to benefit should be the souls of those just ones who had lived in hope of redemption. The liberation of the saints of the Old Testament is, then, only a natural consequence of the paschal mystery, of which St. Paul speaks, when in writing to the Ephesians, he tells them that Jesus, before ascending to heaven, "had gone down, first, to the lower regions of the earth."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. 11. 18489-90.

<sup>2</sup>Ephesians, IV:9.

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

169

And what was the reason for Christ's visit to the underworld? "So that everything in heaven and on earth and under the earth must bend the knee before the name of Jesus, and every tongue must confess Jesus Christ as the Lord, dwelling in the glory of God the Father."<sup>1</sup> When He proclaimed the Good News of Salvation to the Kingdom of the dead, Christ delivered the souls which until then had been under the power of the Devil and of death. He subjected all creation to His dominion. St. Paul alludes to Christ's descent into Hell in Romans 14.9: "That was why Christ died and lived again; he would be Lord both of the dead and of the living."

The Cursor Mundi contains a vivid, dramatic description of Christ's Harrowing of Hell, of his binding of Satan, and of his deliverance of the Just from their long imprisonment there. The story of Christ's underworld mission is related by two men who are portrayed as having risen from the dead and who were in the realm of hell when Our Lord came. This results in a highly dramatic presentation which the poet skilfully links with early portions of his poem such as Seth's quest for the Oil of Mercy, and the history of the wood from which the true cross was made.

---

<sup>1</sup>Phil., II:10.

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

170

William Henry Hulme is correct when he says:

The literary account of Christ's descent into Hades was developed from a belief which doubtless prevailed in apostolical times that he descended into the underworld to preach, or to bring salvation, to the dead, just as he had brought salvation to the living by his mission on earth.<sup>1</sup>

The poet rounds out this episode with some details about Christ not found in his known sources. He informs us that Christ was 32 years, six months and two weeks old when He was put to death: that He lay two nights and one day in the grave. While Christ's body was in the tomb, His soul went to hell. His soul returned to His body after midnight on Easter morn. It is with these and similar details that the poet adds to the credibility of his account of the history of salvation.

Before he gives an account of Our Lord's life after He has risen, which is based mainly on the Gospel of John and The Acts of the Apostles, the Cursor poet gives a twenty-two line comparison of Christ to a lion. This is based on an early Middle English Bestiary. It forms a fitting close for this section of the Cursor Mundi. In it, Christ is likened to a lion, who, when it is born lies dead three days, till his father roars at him and gives him life,

---

<sup>1</sup>"Introduction," The Middle English Harrowing of Hell and Gospel of Nicodemus, p. LXII.

## THE HARROWING OF HELL

171

so Jesus rose at his father's bidding. This is how the quaint conceit is developed:

And alsua þar es oper resun  
 Qui he es takened to a leon,  
 Leon quelp quen it es born  
 liges ded to þe threid morn,  
 widuten liif of ain lim,  
 His fadir comis þan to him;  
 And wid his cri þat es sua greis,  
 He gives his quelp liif forto riis.  
 Sua did iesu, ur champioun  
 þou he lai dede for ur ransoun,  
 Quen þat his fader wald, he bad,  
 þe sun upras us alled to glad.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. vv. 18643-54.

## CHAPTER VIII

## THE FINDING OF THE CROSS

The last section of the Cursor Mundi that centers around the Holy Rood legend deals with the finding of the True Cross by Saint Helen in the fourth century of the Christian era. The Cursor poet further binds his long narrative by the inclusion of legendary material on the "Invention", or discovery of the cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified. The story as it has reached us has been admitted since the beginning of the fifth century by religious authors, with however, many more or less important variations. The tradition of the finding of the cross through the work of St. Helen, mother of Emperor Constantine, in the vicinity of Calvary was accepted as true by Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem in 350, who was on the spot a very few years after the event took place. St. Ambrose bears witness to the fact of the finding.

Writers in the British Isles from the earliest times appear to have had a great interest in this legend. For example, Cynewulf, an eighth century poet, wrote 'Elene'--the story of the discovery of the true cross by

---

<sup>1</sup>See The Catholic Encyclopedia, ed. Charles Herbermann, vol. 4 (New York, 1908), p. 523 ff.

## THE FINDING OF THE CROSS

173

the Empress Helena in old English.<sup>1</sup> It was an accepted Medieval tradition that Saint Helen was the daughter of Coel of Caercolvin (Colchester). This would give an added interest in Britain to her life, the conversion of her son, and the finding of the cross. Alban Butler, (1711-73) the great hagiographer and the author of The Lives of the Saints, states: "We are assured by the unanimous tradition of our English historians that this holy empress was a native of our island."<sup>2</sup> With regard to this legendary material, Haenich and other scholars have not succeeded in finding the sources that the Cursor poet might have used. The poet, as we have seen, prepares us for this episode in his narration of the events after Christ's death. After the crucifixion, Joseph of Arimathiae attempted to gain possession of the cross on which Christ died. But the Jews refused to let him have it, and themselves secretly buried it together with the crosses of the two robbers. This is how the author describes the hiding of the crosses:

Ioseph wald have a-wai þe rode,  
 þe iuus it him forbedd,  
 but ilke night þaim-self it did  
 a-way for to be ledd;

---

<sup>1</sup>See "Inquiry into the Sources of the Cursor Mundi," p. 56.

<sup>2</sup>See Butler's Lives of the Saints, ed. H. Thurston, S.J., Vol. III (New York, 1962), p. 346.

## THE FINDING OF THE CROSS

174

wid þe theifs croices tuin,  
 quen all war gave to bedd,  
 And grove þaim thre for cristen men,  
 widin a preve stedd.  
 Forþi þai bar þe maliscon,  
 of him þat þar-on bledd.<sup>1</sup>

He concluded this passage with the significant remark, to which we will return in the next chapter, that when the cross was under earth and Christ was under stone, all hope of the holy church hinged on the Blessed Virgin Mary;

Nu es þe crois graven under grete,  
 and iesus under stane,  
 And hinges all hope of halikirc  
 in mari mild allane.<sup>2</sup>

Some three thousand four hundred lines further on in the Cursor Mundi, after the poet has described the important events of the apostolic times, he returns to the later history of the true cross;

Of þe rode nu for to rede  
 Crist him-self us do to spede!<sup>3</sup>

Here he tells us that when Christ was taken off the cross the Jews hid it deep under the earth with those of the two robbers, so that if found by chance men might not know which one of the three was the one on which Our Saviour was

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16913-22.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16923-26.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 21347-48.

## THE FINDING OF THE CROSS

175

crucified. The poet makes a point of the fact that the cross was found by means of a woman;

A doghti wiif pat hight eline  
was moder of king constantine.<sup>1</sup>

He also emphasizes the fact that he is basing his account of the discovery on a well established source:

Herkin, and i sal tell pan you,  
[A]ls i in a stori it fand.<sup>2</sup>

This legend is similar in genre to many of the Medieval lives of the saints which contain many of the elements of the chivalric romance.<sup>3</sup> It balances the early history of the holy Rood in the Old Testament times of King David and Solomon.

Here the Cursor poet fulfills the promise he made in his preface to deal with the finding of the cross:

Of þe hali crois hou it was kidd  
Lang after pat it was hidd.<sup>4</sup>

First we see the Roman emperor Constantine alone in his tent on the eve of a great battle. In a vision, the

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 21375-76.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 21378-79.

<sup>3</sup>This part of the Cursor Mundi (ll. 21347-846) was published separately, from the Fairfax MS by Richard Morris in his Legends of the Holy Rood, pp. 108-121.

<sup>4</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 211-12.

## THE FINDING OF THE CROSS

176

worried Constantine sees a marvellously fair man, who commands him to look towards heaven and be comforted. The emperor does and sees:

Sau he cristes crois ful bright;  
A titel sau he per-on ley,  
'Herin,' it said, 'sal pu have victori.'<sup>1</sup>

He caused a similar cross to be made and borne before him in the battle, and thus gained the day. Then he despatched two messengers, Benciras and Ansiers,<sup>2</sup> to Jerusalem to his mother Helen with instructions to try and find Christ's cross. She had, at that time, a Christian goldsmith with her who owed money to a Jew. According to the terms of the agreement, the goldsmith was either to repay the money or forfeit its weight of his own flesh. As he could not do the former, the Jew demanded the latter, and Constantine's messengers, who had now arrived in Jerusalem, were called upon to give judgment. Their decision was that the Jew might take the money's weight of flesh, but must beware of spilling a single drop of blood.

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 21394-96.

<sup>2</sup>The forms of this name in the Cursor Mundi are interesting as they preserve the Old French difference between the cases, which the English author must have taken over unaltered from his last original. They are: 21413 Ansiers, nom L: messagers, plur.; 21443 Ansiers, nom (fers); 21475 Ansire, acc. (ire).

## THE FINDING OF THE CROSS

177

The Jew who has previously described to the court what parts of the goldsmith's body he would take -

"His eien firist putt ute i sall,  
And his hend þat he wirkes wid-all,  
Tung and nese, and siben þe laue,  
Till þat i mi covenand have."<sup>1</sup>

- with fiendish delight, is enraged at the adverse judgment and curses the emperor's messengers. This is a punishable offense. The Jew then offered to show Helen where Christ's cross was, if she would remit the penalty imposed on him. She granted his request.

This is a highly dramatic court room scene. By its inclusion, the poet has placed his narrative into the Medieval world. The question of usury and the Jew's position in society was a topical question at the time the Cursor Mundi was written. The Jewish community in York was massacred in 1290 and all Jews were expelled from England by the end of the century. The Medieval audience who were familiar with tales of ritualistic murders of young Christians by Jews, would accept this Jew's inhuman cruelty in demanding his pound of flesh. In his handling of this section of the poem, the poet emphasizes the fact that he is not dealing with an event of ancient history. To Medieval man, the finding of the Cross was an event of

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 21451-54.

## THE FINDING OF THE CROSS

178

recent history. It was commonly believed that Longius' spear that had lanced the side of Our Lord, had been discovered at Antioch by the revelation of St. Andrew, in 1098, during the First Crusade.<sup>1</sup> The poet uses this episode to show the importance of miracles in the post-apostolic age. It is also significant that this anti-Jewish Medieval legend is combined with the legendary material dealing with the holy Rood, which plays such an important part in strengthening the whole structure and framework of the Cursor Mundi.

The poet now narrates the actual finding of the cross. Saint Helen, who is usually referred to as the Queen, accompanies the Jew to the mount of Calvary on a certain day. The search is enlivened by a series of miraculous occurrences. First when they had said their prayers, the earth quaked;

þan said þe iuus, and all it herd,<sup>2</sup>  
"Crist þu es savveur of þis erd!"<sup>2</sup>

Then the Jew, taking off all his clothes but his "sarke", took up a spade and began to dig. After going down more than twenty feet, he found three crosses. But they had no

<sup>1</sup>See The Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. 8, 773.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 21525-26.

## THE FINDING OF THE CROSS

179

way of telling which of the three crosses was the one on which Christ died:

Bot þai wist nocht quilk was quilke,  
þe quilk might be þe lauerd tre,  
And quilk it might be thefs be.<sup>1</sup>

The next miraculous event is when Helen orders that a dead man be brought and laid on each of the crosses. On touching the third cross, the corpse came to life and worshipped the cross thus:

'Godd þe lock, crois, precius thing!  
In þe hang alþer heiest king.  
Menskid wid his fless was þu,  
Of alle tres most of vertu,  
He has þe halud þat all can cene,  
And menskid wid all cristen men;  
Thoru þe has godd sent nu me liif,  
And thoru þe worship of þis wiif.<sup>2</sup>

The author remarks that many Jews witnessed this miracle, and as a result were baptised. The true Cross was then taken to the temple, where the remainder of the beam from which it had been made was discovered. A sweet odour from it filled the temple and a learned Jew informed the queen what the history of the royal tree had been. Helen then prayed to God to reveal to her what she should do with the cross, and an angel appeared and told her to cut it into

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 21534-36.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 21553-60.

## THE FINDING OF THE CROSS

180

four parts, of which one was to remain in the temple, the second to be brought to Rome, the third to be sent to Alexandria and the fourth to be taken to Constantinople. The queen did as she was directed and placed the fourth part personally in the Church of St. Sophia.

The miracles described in this episode balance the ones that appear in the early history of the wands, and emphasizes the fact that we are still living in an age in which God shows his supernatural powers to men. The Cursor poet summarizes the whole collection of myths and legends dealing with all aspects of the cross by a brief discussion of the mysteries which it represents. First the poet states that God gave us an example by the cross:

[b]e grace of godd es grete and gode,  
pat gave us sampli bi þe rode.<sup>1</sup>

And then goes on to explain that many men will not believe the truth without signs:

Bot mani of trouth es sua unslie,  
þei trou noght bot þat þai se wid eie;  
And þat unethes wil þai trou,  
wid uten signe of gret vertu;<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, he maintains that the power and the influence of the cross has been apparent since the beginning of the

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 21627-28.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 21631-34.

## THE FINDING OF THE CROSS

181

world, and that if man were not blind he would see it in the old law as well as the new. He mentions Adam first:

Had adam funden it at hand  
 þat wild þe might had liif lastand;  
 þat planted es in paradis,  
 And dos þe dede up forto rise;  
 And adam wrought, quen he had wogh,  
 under þis tre he him wid-drogh,  
 þar did drightin for to reson <sup>1</sup>  
 And did him in hope of perdun.

Then Abel whose cry was in the cross:

[þ]e blod of abel it crid als  
 Quen him had slan his broþer a fals.  
 wid þat tre gret thing was hid,  
 þat in þis ilk croice es hid,  
 And dede forsoth had bene noie  
 If him ne savved had þe tre.<sup>2</sup>

While Noah was saved by the cross and the ark had tokens of it:

Of four querner es þe arche was made,  
 Als has þe crois on lang and brad,  
 þe dur of þat arche apon þe syide,  
 And þar was iesus wonde wide.  
 Qua wil umthinc him in his mode,  
 Mai find fele takeins of þe rode.<sup>3</sup>

The significance of this symbol in the lives of Moses and David is explained. The rods of the twelve tribes were emblems of the cross.

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 21649-56.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 21657-62.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 21663-68.

## THE FINDING OF THE CROSS

182

Turning to the Christian era, the poet remarks that the cross is the banner of Holy church:

[C]roice es, qua-sum will or nai,  
 Baner of hali kirc to-day;  
 Men has nocht herd pat folk be lorn  
 pat hali croices has wid them born,  
 Bot has bitid of mani quare,  
 be less folk over-come be mare.  
 par croice was stad at ani fight,<sup>1</sup>  
 If pat be dede be done wid right.

It is also our medicine, sources of holy writ, foundation of the clergy and the command of the holy road:

be croice of medicine beris bote,  
 Bath in frut and als in rote,  
 In croice it was for us be flour,  
 pat we have thoru sua grett honor.  
 A riche licknes at beres itt,  
 It es be heved of hali writ,  
 Fundement of ur clergie,  
 Reule es it als of hali vie.<sup>2</sup>

Thus the Cursor poet outlines the vital importance of the symbol of the cross in the history and redemption of man. The cross, according to the Catholic archaeologist P. Didron, is more than a figure of Christ; it is in iconography Christ Himself or His symbol. Didron states:

Thus a legend has been created around it as if it were a living being; thus it has been made the hero of an epopee germinating in the Apocrypha; growing in the Golden Legend; unfolding and completing

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 21719-26.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 21733-40.

## THE FINDING OF THE CROSS

183

itself in the works of sculpture and painting from the 14th to the 16th centuries.<sup>1</sup>

In support of Didron's position, we have the Old English Dream of the Rood,<sup>2</sup> which contains an address of the true cross to the poet, telling of the crucifixion and resurrection, and its reflection thereon. The poet may have worked from several sources simultaneously while writing this last section of the cross myth, which has almost become a protagonist during the long sections of the Cursor Mundi. He invites anyone to improve on his narrative if they can. This is how he ends this important thread, which has run through close to twenty-two thousand lines of his monumental religious poem:

Of þe croice es broght till ende,  
 þe vertu of þe croice us defend!  
 Que þe tale can better attend  
 For cristes luve he it amend.  
 þis, queþer it be ill or gode,  
 I foud it writer of þe rode,  
 Mani tellis diversli,  
 For þai mai find divers stori.<sup>3</sup>

We must emphasize the fact that the Cursor poet did not merely graft the legendary material of the cross onto

<sup>1</sup>P. Didron, Histoire de Dieu, (Paris, 1843), p. 351.

<sup>2</sup>A modern English translation of this work is in R.K. Gordon's Anglo Saxon Poetry (London, 1916), pp. 235-39. It is found in the Vercelli MS and part of it is inscribed in runes on the Ruthwell Cross in Annandale, Scotland.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 21801-08.

## THE FINDING OF THE CROSS

184

the history of salvation. In his hands, the story is amplified and all the details are given a wonderful minuteness. It is in his handling of this material we see his great skill as a story-teller. Also we must not lose sight of the fact that the chief object of the author of the Cursor Mundi as of many other medieval hagiologists was not to compose reliable histories or to write scientific treatises for the learned but to write works of devotion that were adapted to the simple manners of ordinary people. The work, we are certain, must have produced a deep impression on the Medieval audience for which it was intended. This can be seen in part as we have mentioned previously, by the unusually large number of manuscripts that have survived.

About the tenth century, the Fish disappeared as an important emblem used by Christians, and the Cross, an important symbol of our redemption from apostolic times, became the sole and universal sign of the Christian faith. St. Paul in his epistles makes frequent allusions to the humiliation which Christ endured when he suffered death upon the cross. To the ancient Roman world it was a symbol of shame. Cicero says the very name of the Cross should be removed afar:

## THE FINDING OF THE CROSS

185

not only from the body, but from the thoughts, the eyes, the ears, of Roman citizens, for of all these things, not only the actual occurrence and endurance, but the very contingency and expectation, nay, the mention itself,<sup>1</sup> are unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free man.

It was precisely this idea which made the early Christians seize upon the cross as the emblem of their faith. That which had been the symbol of shame now became their glory. The instrument of Christ's passion, by His death upon it, became hallowed for all time. The Medieval Christians, desiring to see the cross identified still more closely with the fall of Adam and Eve inserted the legendary material concerning the Holy Rood to supplement the Old Testament.

The story, as the Cursor poet remarks, has a large number of varying versions. All of the essential facts are included in this English version from the journey of Seth to the discovery of the true Cross by Saint Helen. Anna Jameson remarks:

None of the old legends have been more universally diffused than the 'history of the True Cross': and I believe, that, till a darkness came over the minds of the people, it was, formerly as well understood in the allegorical sense as the 'Pilgrim's Progress' is today.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See The Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. IV, 517-28.

<sup>2</sup>Anna [Brownell (Murphy)] Jameson, Legends of the Monastic Orders (Boston, 1901), p. 70. [The remark on Pilgrim's Progress is not so true in the mid-20th century as when Mrs. Jameson wrote it in 1848.]

## THE FINDING OF THE CROSS

186

The most satisfactory and complete handling of the Holy Cross story in Middle English is found in the Cursor Mundi. No essential part of the legend is omitted. Here the numerous threads of the various legends are knitted into a unified and pleasing whole.

The section on the Finding of the true Cross which we are examining in this chapter is often left out or treated separately. The Cursor poet's inclusion of it is a touch of genius. It helps to bring his account of divine history into the contemporary Medieval world. It also would please an English audience. For in a cycle of our early English saints whenever they are to be found pictorially, either in old illuminated manuscripts or in the decorations of old churches, Saint Helen, the mother of Constantine, with Saint Albin, our first martyr, take precedence over the rest.<sup>1</sup> A festival celebrated on May 3rd,<sup>2</sup> because on or about that day in 326 A.D. Helen is reputed to have discovered the true cross, was an important holy day in Medieval England. Pilgrims returning from Constantinople and Rome where there were important churches especially built to receive so precious a relic as part of

---

<sup>1</sup>See for additional information Anna Jameson, p. 71.

<sup>2</sup>Pope John XXIII dropped this feast from the Roman Calendar in July, 1966.

## THE FINDING OF THE CROSS

187

Christ's cross, brought fragments of the sacred wood to England. It had been discovered that the wood exercised a power of miraculous self-multiplication, "ut detrimenta non sentiret, et quasi intacta permaneret" (Paulinus, Ep. X I ad Lev.) St Cyril of Jerusalem, twenty-five years after the discovery, affirmed that pieces of the cross were spreading all over the earth, and compares this marvel to the miraculous feeding of five thousand men, as recorded in the Gospel.

Possibly the strangest innovation that the Cursor poet makes in his treatment of this material is his connection of the pound of flesh story, that anticipates the Merchant of Venice with his narrative of the finding of the Cross. He, however, integrates it well into his narrative. The Cursor poet does not express many anti-semitic<sup>1</sup> views in this work. He includes the legend that the Jew who helped Helen find the Cross was converted to

---

<sup>1</sup>The popular animosity against the Jews on the charge of usury and the use of Christian blood at their passover was general across western Europe at the time of the writing of the Cursor Mundi. This was in spite of the papal bull, issued by Gregory X in 1273, ordaining that no injury be inflicted upon any Jew or his property. Church authorities often were unable to restrain the people from massacring the Jews.

## THE FINDING OF THE CROSS

188

Christianity, and made bishop of Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> The version of the Quiriacus legend that the Cursor poet uses says that the devil threatened him with vengeance, but that the saint cried:

'Crist, bat es lauerd mine,  
He deme be in to hell depe,  
Ever in welland wa to wepe.'<sup>2</sup>

Another possible reason for the Cursor poet's extensive treatment of this portion of the Cross legend may be due to Saint Helen's particular connection with the Benedictine Order, that had several important foundations in the South of Scotland in the thirteenth century. In the Middle Ages, it was believed that Saint Helen's remains had been carried off from Rome about the year 863, and were deposited in the Benedictine abbey of Hautvilliers in Champagne, France. Her beautiful but empty sepulchre can still be seen in Rome.

This episode of the Finding of the Cross fits in well into the general plan of the Cursor Mundi. If we view this religious poem as an artistically composed work of devotion, we must admit that it is a complete success. It is admirably adapted to enhance our love and respect

---

<sup>1</sup>Butler's Lives of the Saints, p. 229.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 21834-36.

## THE FINDING OF THE CROSS

189

towards God, to foster our devotion towards His blessed Mother, and, in the case of the episode examined in this chapter, to animate us with holy zeal to follow the example of the pious English St. Helen and have a firm faith in the power of the Holy Cross. The Medieval audience would echo this prayer of the Cursor poet:

þat hali croice i have of redd,  
 Quar-apon iesu for us was spredd,  
 Be ur scheld and also ur spere  
 Bituix us and all helles here!  
 Steadfastli in hert to bere,  
 For ilk day we wend in were,  
 Ilk day in were we weind,  
 Bot þe, iesu! have we na freind.  
 Thoru þe croice made us þi freind,<sup>1</sup>  
 To be ur succur at ur end. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 21837-46.

CHAPTER IX

RECOGNITION OF OUR LADY'S ROLE  
IN THE HISTORY OF SALVATION

In the preceding chapters of this work, we have examined the Cursor poet's careful use of legendary material dealing with the Oil of Mercy and the Holy Rood. In this chapter, we will briefly see the way in which he frames his poem in the Medieval devotion to Our Lady.

It is an accepted fact that Medieval poetry of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries was in a great measure orientated towards religion; it was the achievement of anonymous poets like the author of the Cursor Mundi.

As indicated in Chapter III, the Cursor Mundi is framed in the devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mediatrix of Christ's redemption. The conclusion of the poem is merely a placing of the fruits and the reality of man's redemption within the contemporary Christian Church under the protection of Our Lady. This is dramatically indicated through the presentation of the wonderful and miraculous events surrounding the establishment of

## OUR LADY'S ROLE

191

the feast of the conception of the Virgin Mary.<sup>1</sup> In the "Prologue," the poet announced that the last subject he intended to cover would be the conception of Our Lady:

be last resune of all þis roune  
Sal be of hir concepcion.<sup>2</sup>

The author, at the commencement of this monumental poem, also stated that he was writing it in honour of Mary:

In hir worchip wald i biginne  
A lastand werk apon to minne.  
For to do men knaue hir kin  
þat us suilk worschip gan to win,  
Sumkin ieste nu forto knau  
þat don was in þe alde lau;  
Bituix þe ald lau and þe new  
Hu cristes bote bigan to brew,  
I sal you scheu wid min extent  
Sothli of hir testament.<sup>3</sup>

Though he indicated that before his work is finished, he will have dealt with some of the principal stories of salvation history--

---

<sup>1</sup>See Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 24764-24968, which ends the poem proper. The Cotton, Fairfax and Gottingen MSS contains additional poems including an exposition of the Apostle's Creed, and explanation of the Lord's Prayer, a prayer to the Trinity and a Book on Penance. These poems may quite possibly have been written by the Cursor poet, but are outside the scope of this thesis.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 219-220.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 111-120.

## OUR LADY'S ROLE

192

All þis werld, ar þis boke bline,  
 Wid cristes help i sal our-rine,<sup>1</sup>  
 And telle sun ieste principale.

- it is quite incorrect to consider this work as rambling. The Cursor Mundi is a highly structured work. The poet has been most discriminating in his selections of legends and stories to be included. From a careful reading of the text, one finds no evidence of random selection of items to be included. The author appears to have always had aims which he clearly outlined in the prologue.

First, let us examine the position held by Christ's Mother during the late Middle Ages. The devotion to the Virgin Mary dates from the immediate post-apostolic times. It developed more rapidly in East than in West. Nevertheless, western Mariology during the early Medieval period rested largely on the achievements of the great Fathers, especially St. Ambrose and St. Augustine. The Greek influence becomes apparent in the works of Ambrose Antpert (died 784), a Benedictine abbot of a monastery near Benevento in Southern Italy, who strikes an entirely new note in Latin preaching on the Virgin Mary. He praises her because the world has been redeemed through her, the ladder by which God descended to earth; she is the door of heaven,

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 121-23.

## OUR LADY'S ROLE

193

the exaltation of apostles, the praise of martyrs, the jubilation of confessors. Antpert asks Our Lady to

admit our prayers into the sanctuary of your hearing and bring us back the grace of reconciliation. Accept what we offer, obtain what we ask, protect us from what we fear: because we find no one more powerful in merit to placate the wrath of the Judge than you, who have merited to be the mother of the Redeemer and Judge.<sup>1</sup>

The idea that the Virgin Mary appeases the wrath of God, the Judge, was to become one of the most important and popular themes of devotion to her during the Middle Ages. For as time passed, Christ was presented increasingly as the implacable Judge, and His mother became the mediating power to whom Christians turned trustingly to save them from damnation, as she had been able to do in many medieval legends even in the case of those who had formally given their souls to the devil.

This emphasis on Our Lady's motherly mediation produced a change in her image in literature as well as in art. The Byzantine image of Mary was as the great Theotokos, the Majestic, often even severe-looking Virgin who had given birth to God Himself.

---

<sup>1</sup>See Hilda Graef, Devotion to the Blessed Virgin (London, 1963), pp. 38-63.

## OUR LADY'S ROLE

194

In the West, the Virgin Mary was thought of as more "human". She was seen as above all a woman sharing the joys and the sufferings of women. If God, even the incarnate God, her Son, was still felt to be in some way remote from men, because He was a divine Person, Our Lady was wholly human, wholly a mother, smiling at her Child, weeping over Him when He had died. True, she was now enthroned in heaven; but she was in heaven also primarily as a mother, placed there to help her children struggling on earth. This is the image we get from reading the Cursor Mundi. Here she is the gentle Mediatrix of all graces.

A proper understanding of Our Lady's position is vital for a deep comprehension of the Medieval milieu. The Cursor poet shows us the central position she held in the history of human salvation. The great men of the Renaissance of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries held the Mother of God in the highest esteem.

Henry Adams in his Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres, brilliantly summarizes the result of the cultus of Mary:

In the Western Church the Virgin had always been highly honoured. Her miracles became more frequent and her shrines more frequented, so that Chartres, soon after 1100, was rich enough to build its western portal with Byzantine splendour. A proof of the new outburst can be read in the story of Citeaux. The Cistercian Order, which was founded

## OUR LADY'S ROLE

195

in 1098, from the first put all its churches under the special protection of the Virgin, and Saint Bernard in his time was regarded as the apple of the Virgin's eye. . . . You can still read Bernard's hymns to the Virgin, and even his sermons, if you like. To him she was the great mediator. In the eyes of a culpable humanity, Christ was too sublime, too terrible, too just, but not even the weakest human frailty could fear to approach his Mother. Her attribute was humility; her love and pity were infinite. 'Let him deny your Mercy who can say that he has ever asked in vain.'<sup>1</sup>

The permanence of Medieval man's devotion to Our Lady can be seen today in such works as the Cursor Mundi or the sculpture, mosaic, paintings of great churches of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The importance of the Virgin Mary cannot be emphasized too strongly in the period between the first Crusade (1096) and the Black Death (1349). But we will content ourselves with one more quotation from Henry Adams before investigating how the Cursor poet used Our Lady to frame his religious epic:

According to statistics, in the single century between 1170 and 1270, the French built eighty cathedrals and nearly five hundred churches of the Cathedral class, which would have cost, according to an estimate made in 1840, more than five thousand million to replace. Five thousand million francs is a thousand million dollars, and this covered only the great churches of a single century. . . . The share of this capital which was--if one may use a commercial figure--invested in the Virgin cannot be fixed, any more than the total sum given to religious objects between 1000 and 1300; but in a spiritual and artistic sense, it was almost the whole, and

---

<sup>1</sup>(New York, 1913), p. 98.

expressed an intensity of conviction never again reached by any passion, whether of religion, of loyalty, of patriotism, or of wealth, perhaps never even paralleled by any single economic effort except in war. Nearly every great church of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries belonged to Mary, . . . but, not satisfied with this, she contracted the habit of requiring in all churches a chapel of her own, called in English the 'Lady Chapel', which was apt to be as large as the<sup>1</sup> church but was always meant to be handsomer.

This was the religious climate in which the Cursor poet wrote.

In dealing with the Old Testament, the poet points out that he is showing who the Virgin Mary's forebearers were. In this section of the work he makes a conscious effort to tie happenings in other parts of the world to his narrative. He thus shows the all embracing importance of events of Jewish history in mankind's existence on earth. He tells us Troy was built,<sup>2</sup> and that Helen was alive at this time.<sup>3</sup> He mentions that Troy was destroyed by the Greek after ten years of siege.<sup>4</sup> He remarks that in King David's time, Homer flourished, and Carthage was founded by that strong baronage of Africa that was ever

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 100-101.

<sup>2</sup> See Cursor Mundi, G. 1. 7014.

<sup>3</sup> See Cursor Mundi, G. 1. 7048.

<sup>4</sup> See Cursor Mundi, G. 11. 7056-62.

hostile to Rome.<sup>1</sup> The poet notes other important dates such as these. Some are found in his sources such as Peter Comestor's Historia Scholastica, but often he expounds them to make them more significant.

We are never allowed to forget the total world picture in any portion of the poem. The poet, by these references to events in other parts of the world, gives his work a genuine flavor of a worldly history or chronicle. He joins these events of secular history to his account of the supernatural intervention of the Creator in the lives of men. The Blessed Virgin, who is wholly human, is a strong link between the narrative of human redemption and the facts of secular history. The poet devotes a long section to telling of her parents, conception and childhood. This section of the Cursor Mundi is balanced by the equally long account of the wonderful Childhood of Christ. The first section emphasizes the fact that Our Lady was just an ordinary Jewish maiden whom God had selected to be the vessel to bear His Son. The latter section highlights the divine nature of Christ. The role of the Virgin Mary during the life-time of her Son was that of a gentle, loving mother. The poet in his harmony of the Gospel does

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 7995-8036.

not draw our attention to her. She only takes the centre of the stage, so to speak, at the crucifixion. The dying Christ speaks to Mary:

Iesus þan sau his modir wepe,  
of hir he had gret pete,  
"Modir, iohn sal be þi sun  
fra nu, instede of me.  
And þi modir, mi dere cosin,  
þu loke hir hir," said he  
Fra þan he is levedi laght  
in his ward for to be.<sup>1</sup>

She was among the few who remained steadfast to Christ. The poet says he does not possess the power to describe Mary's sorrow when she received the mangled and bloody corpse from Joseph of Arimathiae and Nicodemus, who took it from the cross:

þe murning þat his moper mode  
mai na man rede in rune.<sup>2</sup>

All during the Middle Ages there was popular veneration of the Virgin Mary on Saturdays. This practice, which was widespread in the west in the ninth century, appears to have grown out of the ancient weekly memorial of Christ's Passion. with regard to this custom, Fr. Francis X. Weiser, S.J., states:

The books of that time motivate it by the thought that while the Lord's body rested in death, Mary

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. 11. 16755-62.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. 11. 16879-80.

## OUR LADY'S ROLE

199

alone did not doubt or despair,<sup>1</sup> but firmly adhered to the faith in her Divine Son.

The Cursor poet makes reference to this medieval belief:

[N]u es þe crois graven under grete,  
and iesus under stane,  
And hinges all hope of hali kirc  
in mari mild allane.<sup>2</sup>

And the poet returns to this belief later on:

In þe þan, levedi, hang all  
ur trouth and fai,  
All men was in dute and were  
bot þu, leve hali mai!  
Til þi suete sun up-ras  
þi trouth was stabil ai,  
Hu men agh ur lauerd leve,  
þu lered us þar þe wai,  
[M]ari meke, þu modes es,  
ful of reuth and pete.  
Mirthful maiden, mild of all!  
fulfild of all bunte.<sup>3</sup>

Our Lady was thus believed to deserve more devotion and honor on Saturdays than on other days of the week. The authorities of the Church not only provided a votive mass, but also a special Office in honor of Mary, to be recited on "free" Saturdays.

At the beginning of his account of the Assumption of Our Lady, the poet indefatigably says that he is "Mary's slave:

<sup>1</sup>Francis X. Weiser, Handbook of Christian Feast and Customs, (New York, 1952), p. 38.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 16923-26.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 17067-78.

## OUR LADY'S ROLE

200

þou nan als i be sua unworþhi man,  
 Hirs i am wid all þat i can,  
 wid fell and fless and saule wid-all,  
 I am and ever sal be hir thrall;  
 For i am never mare sua fre  
 Als till þat leuedi thralled be.<sup>1</sup>

She appears to be the inspiration for the whole of the Cursor Mundi. Here the poet also states that any person who devoutly hears or reads this book will receive Our Lady's blessing and the remission of his sins. He has an abiding faith in Our Lady's power and Mercy:

I witt yu to say widuten were,  
 þat all þat hertli wil it here,  
 Hertli heris it or redis,  
 þai sal have hir blissing to medis,  
 Bath cristes aun benisun  
 And of þair sines remissiun;  
 Womman sal nocht peris of barn  
 Ne nane wid mistime be forfarn  
 Ne fall into na dedeli plight,  
 Quen þai it here, dai or night,  
 And mar þar-of i sal yu yeit,  
 Qua hertli redis or heris it,  
 Of ur leuedi and saint iohn,  
 þair beniscon þaim bes nocht won.<sup>2</sup>

The poet then mentions that Saint Edmund of Pontenay<sup>3</sup> has granted forty day's pardon for reading and hearing the history of salvation. Here again the Cursor poet

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 20015-20.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 20043-56.

<sup>3</sup>Edmund who was Archbishop of Canterbury from 1234 to his death in exile six years later, was one of the most learned men of his age. His pupils included Robert Grosseteste and Roger Bacon.

re-affirmed the remark he made in his "Prologue" that his poem is intended for the ordinary people who understand English.

Concerning the story of Our Lady's death, he says that it was written in southern English, which he has turned into the northern dialect:

In suthrin engliis was it draun,  
And i have turned it till ur aun  
Langage of þe norþren lede, <sup>1</sup>  
þat can nan oper englis rede.

This section is transcribed from the South English Legendary,<sup>2</sup> written by an unknown English poet a few years before the Cursor Mundi. The date of composition for this lengthy collection of lives of saints is usually given as about 1285.

Just as in the account of Our Lady's Childhood, the Cursor poet does not hurry over her last days on earth and burial. He tells again how Christ put the Virgin Mary under the protection of Saint John before he died, and how John faithfully served her. He goes to tell how Our Lady became a nun in the temple, doing such works of charity that all

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 20061-64.

<sup>2</sup>Ed. Lumby, EETS *o.s.* 14 (London, 1866), p. 75. The legend of the Assumption of Our Lady had wide circulation in the Middle Ages. The Cursor poet may have also used Wace's version in his Conception Notre Dame.

## OUR LADY'S ROLE

202

loved her. After she had been there for a long time, her Son sent an angel to her to inform her that she would join Him in heaven in three days. The angel greeted her as "Flour of erd, of heven quene, Blissed mote pou ever bene!"<sup>1</sup> while giving her a palm as a token from Christ. The angel then visits the apostles scattered across the world to inform them of Our Lady's imminent death. The poet adds a homely feminine touch when he has Mary put on new clothes:

And quen þat leuedi sua had done,  
A neu smoke scho did hir on.<sup>2</sup>

Our Lady then prays that Christ will keep her from pain, shame and the devil; and to give men whom He has bought, amendment, so as not to fear the devil. The apostles are miraculously all brought to Jerusalem, and salute Mary as the "Queen of Heaven". Our Lady's last request is that the apostles watch over her body, not letting those who slew her Son get hold of it when her soul has departed for heaven.

The earth quakes as Christ and His singing angels come to Mary's bower. Our Lady knew her Son and blessed Him. Christ replies:

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 20153-54.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 20213-14.

## OUR LADY'S ROLE

203

"Suete moþer, þu cum to me,  
Of all wimmen best ye be,  
þat i am king þu sal be quene  
Ful blith þan mai þi hert ai bene."<sup>1</sup>

The poet continues his narration of Our Lady's passing and the miracles that attended her funeral in a leisurely fashion. This whole section of the work covers a total of eight hundred lines. He concludes by quoting St. Jerome, who questioned the bodily assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. But the poet adds that this is not so important as is the fact that Mary is now queen and empress of heaven and earth, and never stops praying for sinful man:

Bot wele we wate, widuten wene,  
Of heven and erd þat scho es quene,  
Bath emperice of hevene, leuedi,<sup>2</sup>  
Sett in throne hir dere sun bi.

According to the poet's reckoning, Our Lady was sixty-three years of age at the time of her death.

The Cursor poet freely manipulates his sources, now to stir his audience by violence, now to move them to pity, and now to charm them with lyric beauty. The narrative pace of this enormous work with epic proportions rarely flags. The Cursor Mundi is sometimes prolix, but only when

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 20601-04.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 20799-802.

## OUR LADY'S ROLE

204

it suits the poet's purpose to be so. He is seldom long-winded. The very matter that he had chosen to write about--the story of man's redemption--demands a solemn movement from one vital incident to the next. The poet moves majestically down through the ages, using legends such as the Oil of Mercy and the history of the Holy Rood to hold the interest of his audience. There is a steady and relentless unfolding of divine history. The poem is rarely vague, and there are many homely references and little touches of humor. Dramatic dialogue is rarely used; the poet saves it for the climaxes of his work. The short rhyming couplets<sup>1</sup> are well suited to this long religious poem, which in many places is as exciting as any Medieval romance.

The author of the Cursor Mundi makes only one personal reference in the twenty-five thousand lines. After giving a lengthy description of what will happen at the end of the world, "the Day of Doom", the poet returns to the present with a prayer to the Virgin Mary that begins thus:

---

<sup>1</sup>The Cursor poet's preoccupation with careful riming is expressed in the following:

Abiud yeit cam of him,  
 Of Abiud, Elyachim,  
 Of quan asor, sadoch of him  
 pat loth er for to lig in rim.  
 (Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 9237-40.)

## OUR LADY'S ROLE

205

[L] Euedi! loke to þis caitive clerk,  
 For-sake þu noght þis roide werk,  
 For þou it roid and stabil be,<sup>1</sup>  
 It es in worschip wrought of þe.

This would indicate that the poet was some "wretched clerk" in a large monastic institution. The language of his appeal to the "Englis lede of mer'ingeland" and the way in which he presents his matter echo the tone and level of such contemporary works as the South English Legendary. The Cursor poet seems to have been someone regularly employed in the instruction of the faithful. We feel, however, that Laurel Braswell is wrong when she insists that the poet must have been a parish priest.<sup>2</sup>

The above prayer is the opening of the last large division of the Cursor Mundi. The poet, whose interest in his work never appears to have slackened, uses a change in pace as he describes the Sorrows of Mary.<sup>3</sup> Here, for the second time only he changes his verse from rhyming couplets to stanzas of six lines.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 23909-12.

<sup>2</sup>For Braswell's argument see The Southern English Legendary Collection: a study in Middle English Religious Literature of the 13th and 14th centuries. (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Toronto, 1964), p. 415.

<sup>3</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 23945-24658.

<sup>4</sup>The rhyme scheme is AABCCB.

## OUR LADY'S ROLE

206

This section is written in the form of a dialogue between the poet and the Blessed Virgin. This seven hundred line poem restates the suffering and death of Christ as it would have been seen through the eyes of His mother. This is a most moving part of the poem. For example when Our Lady compares Christ of former days with Christ hanging on the Cross:

Fair he wes and fre, mi child,  
Soft in speche, in maner mild,  
Quil he stod in his state,  
His face þat for[r]wit was so schen,  
It es nou grisli on to sen,  
His bodi al blodi wate.<sup>1</sup>

The Cursor poet also has Our Lady say that she was so sick she could not get out of bed to see her Son after He rose from the dead:

"Sua seke i was ail sar for soruu,  
Quen mi sun ras þe thrid moru,  
All til his grave þai thrang,  
Might i noght diderward a fote,  
Ne forto bid me was na bote,  
þat lett thoght me ful lang."<sup>2</sup>

He goes on to say that now Our Lady's sorrow is lightened because she is with Christ in eternal bliss, and asks her to help us.

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 24077-82.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 24635-40.

## OUR LADY'S ROLE

207

After a brief apostrophe to Saint John, the poet commences the final section of the Cursor Mundi, which deals with the establishment of the Festival of Mary's conception. He thus takes a contemporary miracle to end his monumental religious epic to show us that Our Lady still watches over and protects her own. He appears to be conscious that he has talked too much, but defends it by saying that nothing can be too long that honors the Virgin Mary:

[L]Istes gode men, with yur leve  
 Ful lath me war yu forto greve  
 þat yu thoght mi talking togh,  
 For me thinc never mar enogh,  
 þat i mai of hir loving rede,  
 þat bett us all ute for ur nede.<sup>1</sup>

This charming legend with which the Cursor poet ends his poem had wide currency in the Middle Ages. It was one of the few strictly English legends that appeared in the Legenda aurea. The poet's immediate source appears to be Wace's The Establishment of the Feast of the Conception. One unique feature of the Cursor poet's handling of the story is his reference to William the Conqueror as "William Bastard".<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 24734-38.

<sup>2</sup>See Note 1, page 5 for the significance of this disrespectful reference to an English king.

## OUR LADY'S ROLE

208

The legend deals with a vision seen by Helsin, the abbot of the Benedictine abbey at Ramsey in 1070, while he was in a storm at sea. There was a historical person called Helsin, who was one of the councillors to William I, and who was sent by him to the King of Denmark with gifts when that foreign monarch threatened to invade England to revenge the death of his cousin, Harold, at the battle of Hastings.

The Cursor poet takes delight in describing how William conquered the English:

[A] king þat hight william bastard,  
 þat werraïd ingland ful hard,  
 sua stalworth man he was of hand,  
 þat wid his fors he wan þe land.  
 Ful selcuth keneli cuth he fight,  
 He slogh þe king þat harald Hight,  
 þat born was of þe danes blod,  
 For-qui þe land he him wid-stode.  
 þan bar wiliam þe seynuri  
 Of ingland and of normundi.<sup>1</sup>

He dwells longer on the earlier part of the story and his version contains many details not found in other treatment of this legend. For example, he explains the reasons why the Danish King threatened to invade England:

Ye king of danmark on-ane  
 Herd þat king harald was slane  
 Of witt al-mast he weind,  
 For luve of harald his freind.

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 24765-74.

Schippis did he dight him yare  
 In-till ingland þan for to fare,  
 Apon þe normandes forto fight,  
 þat wan þe land widuten right;  
 For he suar bi þe king of heven,<sup>1</sup>  
 þat harald slaughter suld heven.

He also describes William's consternation at hearing this news and the steps he took to combat the threatened invasion of England:

To king william badwood was broght  
 Of þis tipand þat him forthoght,  
 He dred him sare þat were suld rise,  
 And warnist him on mani wise;  
 He gedrid souders here and þare,  
 To strenth his castelis everay quar,  
 Als he þat conquerur was gode,  
 And for to werrai understode.  
 His consail bad him for to fand,  
 þe king of danemark widstand,  
 For to speke of sumkin pais,<sup>2</sup>  
 Bituix him and þaa da na is.

William is guided by the advice of his councillors, and sends the Abbot of Ramsey on a peace mission. Helsin, whose name would indicate that he was of Norse descent, was one of the few Englishmen to hold a high position in the court of the Conqueror. The mitred abbot is described by the Cursor poet as:

A heind man and a wis;  
 A grete resun wele schau he cuth,

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 24774-84.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 24785-96.

## OUR LADY'S ROLE

210

Widuten ani maring in muth.

· · · · ·  
Als man was lerid of mekil lare.<sup>1</sup>

Thus skilfully the poet brings his work into his own day. The character of Helsin, well-known historical figure, is given concreteness. He bears "gold" and "silver" gifts to placate the Danish Monarch, and being a clever politician he does not forget to give presents to important people at the Danish court:

Till erlis and baruns of pat rike,  
pan gave he sere giftes eke;  
paa pat he had na gifts till,  
wid hightes faire he went pair will.  
Sua wele in speche cuth he spell,<sup>2</sup>  
pat all pat ost he did to duell.

The peace mission was a complete success, and after in turn receiving gifts from the Danish King, the Abbot of Ramsey set sail once more for England.<sup>3</sup> But no sooner had the ship put out to sea than a violent storm arose;

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 24800-02 and l. 24806.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 24821-26.

<sup>3</sup>It is worth noting that the Cursor poet takes one hundred lines to describe the background of the Abbot's journey. In most versions, this is done in a few sentences. For example, this is how Mirk introduces the legend:  
But now shall ye here how pys fest war fouden.  
ber was yon England a Kyng, was clept Wylliam  
be Conquerour pat send be abbot of Ramsey to be  
Kyng of Denmarke on message. But when he was in  
be see, ber com a derkenesse to hym. . . .  
[Mirk's Festial, p. 17].

## OUR LADY'S ROLE

211

þe wedir als in somer smeth,  
 Sone bigan it ruth and reth,  
 þat ilk wau til oþer weft,  
 And bremlī to þat barge beft.  
 þe lift it blakind al to night,  
 On ilke side þaim slaked sight,  
 þe see for rethnes wex al rede  
 To dole was turned al þair nede.<sup>1</sup>

There then follows a graphic description of the storm, which is written in the best tradition of Middle English verse:

þe wind ras gain þaim ful unride,  
 þe þaim sailed on ilk side.  
 þaim bleu mani unrekin blast,  
 þair mast raf and cordis brast,  
 Strangli straitte þan war þai stadd,  
 þe marinelis was selcuth radd,  
 Sua rad ne war þai never are,  
 For þar war never in perel mare.<sup>2</sup>

All fear that they will drown. They pray to the Virgin Mary to come to their aid. Our Lady cannot refuse them and sends an angel, who tells Helsin that if he promises to establish a feast in honor of Mary's conception, all will be saved:

Nou sal þu hight and vou me here,  
 þat þu sal do als i þe say  
 Till all þe kirkes þat þu may.  
 Quen þu comes into ingland  
 Forto do þaim at understand,

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 24837-44.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 24845-52.

## OUR LADY'S ROLE

212

Fortu halu þis ilke dai  
 Wid all þe worschip þat þai may;  
 In hali kirke rinand bi yere,  
 Als get in was ur leuedi dere,  
 . . . . .  
 Geten was scho all to be born,  
 Forto sauve all þat war lorn.  
 þis es þe day als scho was geten,  
 Loke it never mar be forgetin;<sup>1</sup>

The abbot is only too pleased to promise. He then asks the angel what service should be used, and is told to use the same one as is used on the eighth of September, the Nativity of Our Lady. The poet here remarks that:

Bot nu it es on oper wise  
 þar es made of proper servise,  
 þat qua sua will nu may say,  
 Proper of þat concepcion day.<sup>2</sup>

As soon as Helsin makes his vow, the angel disappears and the storm abates and the vessel makes a safe passage to England. The abbot keeps his word, and the feast soon became one of the most popular in the calendar. The account of the Abbot of Ramsey's vision found its way into the Roman Breviary by 1473.

The Cursor poet, after finishing this delightful legend, which strengthens his theme concerning Our Lady, ends his poem quickly. He concludes with a prayer:

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 24890-98 and 24901-04.

<sup>2</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 24931-34.

## OUR LADY'S ROLE

213

be stori par-wid forto say,  
 Evern quan we will hald bis day,  
 Mai na man serve hire in lede,  
 pat scho ne yeildes paim par mede.  
 Scho do us here at serve hir sua,  
 pat we be wid hir ever and a. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

This tale telling of the institution of the festival of Mary's conception balances the "Prologue" and tightens the whole of this long religious epic by giving it a narrow border. The poet indicates that we are still living in the age of miracles, in the time of Grace before the Second Coming of Christ. The Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of Our Saviour, in whose honor the poet has written this poem, is the only sure advocate that we poor sinners have.

---

<sup>1</sup>Cursor Mundi, G. ll. 24962-68.

## CHAPTER X

## CONCLUSION

The problem we have set ourselves in this thesis is the examination of the narrative unity of the Cursor Mundi. This twenty-five thousand line poem, written in the northern dialect of Middle English, is thought to have been composed in the Lowlands of Scotland in about the year 1300. This poem has often because of its title been incorrectly regarded by critics as a rambling accumulation of Bible stories and legends. This is not so: a careful examination of the text as found in the fourteenth century Gottingen manuscript clearly revealed that the Cursor poet skilfully selected and combined various elements to fashion a narrative of man's salvation. The Cursor poet skilfully combines straightforward Bible accounts with apocryphal myths and legends - some of which are here for the first time found in English. He also gives unity to his work by framing the Cursor Mundi in tender devotion to Our Lady.

The Cursor Mundi is one of the most ambitious religious poems undertaken in the British Isles in the Middle Ages, and is also one of the most successful in execution. It is one of the many works that resulted from the degrees of the Fourth Lateran Council and the consequent didactic

## CONCLUSION

215

revival. It appears to have been written for both the clergy and laity who were not fluent in French. The Cursor poet clearly states his aims in his short "Prologue": to make the account of man's fall and redemption as interesting and as readable as possible; and to increase devotion to Our Lady in whose honor the work has been written.

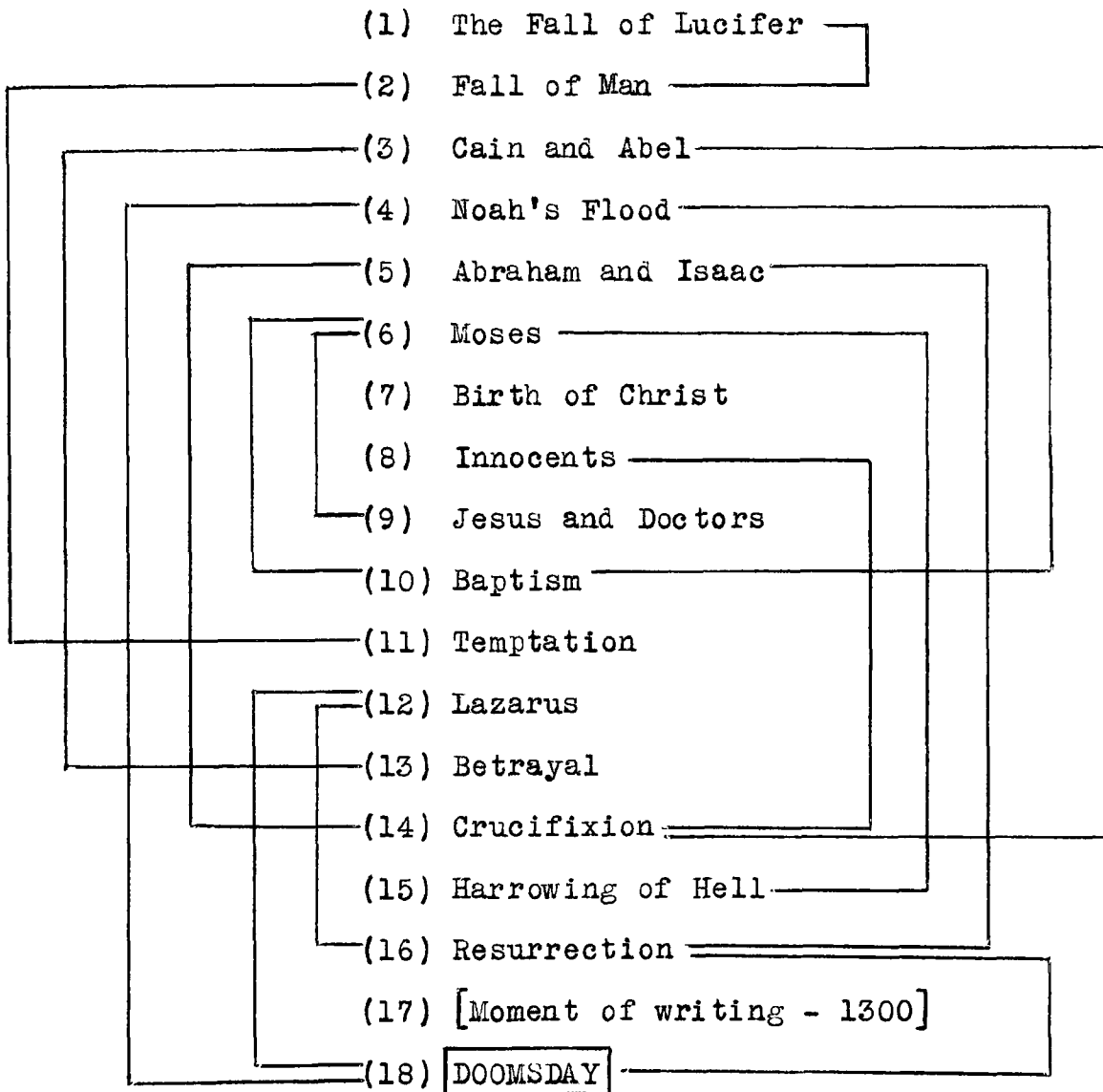
In our examination of the structure of the poem, most attention has been given to the use of the apocryphal stories of the oil of mercy and the myths of the wands that became the tree of the cross.

We have discovered the tight dramatic merging of myth and prophecy in the central great episodes of the salvation epic: the crucifixion and the harrowing of hell.

The poem touches Medieval man closely as it continues into the later history of the cross and ends with a courteous gesture to Our Lady in the account of the establishment of the feast of her conception.

APPENDIX "A"

FIGURE AND FULFILLMENT



APPENDIX "B"

MEDIEVAL CONCEPT OF HISTORY

The Sacred Histories	The Two Times	The Three Laws	The Seven Ages of the World	Cursor Mundi
<p>Old Testament</p>	<p>The Time of Misdoing  (Justice)</p>	<p>Natural Law</p>	<p>First</p>	<p>Creation Adam's Fall Cain &amp; Abel Quest of Seth</p>
			<p>Second</p>	<p>The Flood Noah's Sons</p>
			<p>Third</p>	<p>Abraham Isaac Jacob Joseph</p>
		<p>Written Law</p>	<p>Fourth</p>	<p>Moses Saul David - story of the Wands Solomon - story of the Holy Rood</p>
			<p>Fifth</p>	<p>Prophecies Mary's Childhood Christ's Childhood</p>
<p>New Testament  Apocryphal Gospels</p>	<p>The Time of Grace  (Mercy)</p>	<p>The Law of Charity  (The Law Fulfilled)</p>	<p>Sixth</p>	<p>Baptism of Christ Christ's Temptation Passion Crucifixion Harrowing of Hell Ascension Assumption Apostolic Times</p> <hr/> <p>[Abbot of Ramsey 1070]</p> <hr/> <p>[1300 - Moment of Writing]</p>
			<p>Seventh (Doomsday)</p>	<p>Antichrist Signs of Doom  Judgment Day</p>

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

## PRIMARY SOURCE

Cursor Mundi. Ed. Richard Morris. 6 vols. EETS. os.  
57, 59, 62, 66, 68, 99. London, 1874-92.

## OTHER PRIMARY SOURCES

Aelfric of Winchester. Lives of the Saints. Ed. Walter Skeat. EETS. es. 75, 82. London, 1851-85.

Apocryphal New Testament, The. Ed. Montague Rodes James. London: Oxford University Press, 1953.

Augustine. The City of God. Ed. V.J. Bourke. New York: Doubleday and Co., 1950.

Blickling Homilies of the Tenth Century, The. Ed. Richard Morris. EETS. os. 73. London, 1880.

Caxton, William. The Golden Legend. London: Kelmscott Press, 1892.

Chester Plays, The. Edd. Hermann Deimling and J. Matthews. 2 vols. EETS. es. 62, 115. London, 1892-1916.

Comestor, Peter. Historia scholastica. Ed. Migne, Patrologia Latina, Vol. 198. Paris, 1840-1881.

Early English Homilies. Ed. R.D-N. Warner. EETS. os. 152. London, 1917.

Early Middle English Texts. Edd. B. Dickens and R.M. Wilson. Cambridge: Bowes and Bowes, 1952.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

219

- Early South English Legendary, The. Ed. Carl Hortsmann.  
EETS. os. 87. London, 1887.
- Herman. Li livres de la Bible. Edd. par Mancel et  
Treboutien. Caen, 1842.
- Higden, Ranulf. Polycronicon. Ed. Churchill Babington.  
Rolls Series 41. London, 1865.
- Honorius of Autun. Opera Omnia. Ed. Migne, Patrologia  
Latina, 172. Paris, 1895.
- Jacopo de Voraigine. Legenda aurea. Ed. T. Graesse.  
2nd ed. Leipzig, 1850.
- Jocelyn of Brakelond. Chronica. Ed. Thomas Arnold in  
Memorials of Saint Edmund's Abbey. Rolls Series,  
96. London, 1890.
- Legends of the Holy Rood. Ed. Richard Morris. EETS. os.  
46. London, 1871.
- Ludus Coventriae or the Plaie Called Corpus Christi.  
Ed. K.S. Block. EETS. es. 120. London, 1922.
- Middle English Harrowing of Hell and Gospel of  
Nicodemus, The. Ed. William Henry Hulme. EETS.  
es. 100. London, 1908.
- Mirk's Festial. Ed. Theodore Erbe. EETS. es. 96.  
London, 1905.
- Northern Passion, The. Ed. Frances A. Foster. 2 vols.  
EETS. os. 145, 147. London, 1913-16.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

220

- Northern Passage (Supplement), The. Edd. Wilhelm Heuser and Frances A. Foster. EETS. os. 183. London, 1930.
- Old English Homilies. Ed. Richard Morris. EETS. os. 29. London, 1867.
- Ormulum. Ed. Robert Holt. 2 vols. Oxford, 1878.
- Pecock, Reginald. Reule of Chrysten Religioun. Ed. William C. Greet. EETS. os. 171. London, 1927.
- Robert of Brunne's Handlyng of Synne. Ed. F.J. Furnivall. 2 vols. EETS. os. 119, 123. London, 1901.
- South English Legendary. Edd. Charlotte D'Evelyn and Anna Jean Mill. 2 vols. EETS. os. 235, 236. London, 1956.
- Southern Passion. Ed. Beatrice Daw Brown. EETS. os. 169. London, 1926.
- Speculum Sacerdotale. Ed. Edward H. Weatherly. EETS. os. 200. London, 1936.
- Stanzaic Life of Christ. Ed. Frances A. Foster. EETS. os. 166. London, 1926.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

221

## SECONDARY SOURCES

- Adams, Henry. Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres. New York: Doubleday and Co., 1913.
- Aitken, T.H. Etude sur ' le Miroir de Robert Gretham'. Paris, 1922.
- Ashton, John. The Legendary History of the Cross. New York, 1887.
- Auerbach, Erich. "Figura". (Trans. R. Manheim) in Scenes from the Drama of European Literature. New York: Macmillan and Co., 1959.
- Barth, Curt. Der Wortschatz des Cursor Mundi. Königsberg Dissertation, 1903.
- Beichner, P. "The Cursor Mundi and Petrus Riga", Speculum, XXIV (1949), 239.
- Bennett, J.A.W. (ed.) Early Middle English Verse and Prose. London: Oxford University Press, 1966.
- Birch and Janner. Early Drawings and Illustrations in the British Museum. London: Oxford University Press, 1914.
- Borland, L. "Herman's Bible and the Cursor Mundi", Stud. Phil. XXX (1933), 427-497.
- Braswell, Laurel. The South English Legendary Collection. Unpublished dissertation, University of Toronto, 1964.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

222

- Chambers, R.W. "Continuity of English Prose from Alfred to More and his School" - Introduction to Nicholas Harpsfield's Life of Sir Thomas More. London, 1932.
- Charles, R.D. (ed.). The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament. London: Oxford University Press, 1913.
- Collingwood, R.G. The Idea of History. London: Macmillan and Co., 1946.
- Craig, H. English Religious Drama. London: Oxford University Press, 1955.
- Danielou, Jean. From Shadow to Reality. London: Longmans, 1966.
- \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_. The Lord of History. London, Longmans, 1958.
- Deansly, Margaret. The Lollard Bible. Cambridge: University Press, 1920.
- D'Evelyn, Charlotte. "Methodius as Source", PMLA XXII (1918), 147.
- Gaffney, Wilbur. "The Allegory of the Christ-Knight in Piers Plowman", PMLA XLVI (1931), 158-60.
- Gayley, Charles Mills. Plays of Our Forefathers. New York: Macmillan and Co., 1907.
- Gordon, R.K. (trans.). Anglo Saxon Poetry. London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1916.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

223

- Graef, Hilda. Devotion to the Blessed Virgin. London: Burns and Oates, 1963.
- Harvey, Paul, and Heseltine, J.E. (edd.). The Oxford Companion to French Literature. London: Oxford University Press, 1959.
- Hulme, W.H. "The Old English Gospel of Nicodemus", PMLA XIII (1913), 457 ff.
- Kaiser, Rolf. Zur Geographie des mittelenglischen wortschatzes. Leipzig, 1937.
- Kaluza, Max. "Zu den Quellen und den HSS - Verhältnis des Cursor Mundi," Englische Studien, Vol. XII (1888).
- Kington, Oliphant, T.L. The Old and Middle English. London, 1878.
- Kolve, V.A. The Play Called Corpus Christi. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966.
- Lamberts, Jacob J. The Dialect of Cursor Mundi (Cotton MS Vespasian A III). Unpublished Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1954.
- Legge, M.D. Anglo-Norman in the Cloisters. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1950.
- Meyer, Wilhelm, "Die Geschichte des kreuzholzes vor Christus", Abhandlungen der philosophisch-philologischen Classe der Koniglich Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. (Munich) XVI (1882) 108-160.
- \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_. "Vitae Adae et Evae". Abhandlungen der philosophisch-philologischen Classe der Koniglich Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Munich) XVI (1879), 187-250.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

224

- Murray, James A.H. The Dialect of the Southern Counties of Scotland. London, 1873.
- Quasten, Johannes. Patrology. Utrecht: Spectrum Publishers, 1966.
- Quinn, Esther Casier. The Quest of Seth. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.
- Schipper, Jakob. Altenglische Metrik. Bonn, 1881.
- Strandberg, Otto. The Rime-Vowels of Cursor Mundi. Uppsala Dissertation, 1919.
- Ten Brink, Bernard. The History of English Literature. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1889.
- Tillyard, E.M.W. Some Mythical Elements in English Literature. London: Chatto and Windus, 1961.
- Weiser, Francis X. Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs. New York: Paulist Press, 1952.
- Wells, Minnie E. "The South English Legendary in its Relation to the Legenda aurea", PMLA LI (1936), 337-60.

## ABSTRACT OF

THE NARRATIVE UNITY OF THE CURSOR MUNDI<sup>1</sup>

This thesis is an examination of the Narrative Unity of the Cursor Mundi. This twenty-five thousand line poem, written in the northern dialect of Middle English, is thought to have been composed in the Lowlands of Scotland in about the year 1300. Nothing is known about the author, but internal evidence would indicate that he was a cleric. This poem has often because of its title been incorrectly regarded as a rambling accumulation of Bible stories and legends. This is not so: a careful examination of the text as found in the fourteenth century Gottingen manuscript revealed that the Cursor poet skilfully selected and combined various elements to fashion a narrative of man's salvation. The poet combines straightforward Bible accounts with apocryphal myths and medieval legends. Much of this material is found for the first time in English in the Cursor Mundi. He also gives unity to his work by framing it in the popular contemporary devotion to the Virgin Mary.

---

<sup>1</sup>Ernest George Mardon, Doctor's thesis presented to the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ottawa, Ontario, June, 1967.

## ABSTRACT

The Cursor Mundi is one of the most ambitious religious poems undertaken in English in the Middle Ages, and is also one of the most successful in execution. It is one of the many works that resulted from the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 and the consequent didactic revival. It appears to have been written for both the layman and the clergy who were not fluent in French. The Cursor poet clearly states his purpose in his brief "Prologue": to make the account of man's fall and redemption as interesting as possible; and to increase the devotion to the Virgin Mary, in whose honor the poem has been written.

The results of our investigations show that the stories of the Oil of Mercy and the myths of the wands that became the tree of the Cross helps to give structure to the work. The poet tightens the narrative unity of his poem by the merging of myth and prophecy in the central great episodes of the salvation epic: the Crucifixion and Harrowing of Hell. He rounds out his poem by including the later history of the cross and concludes with a courteous gesture to Our Lady in the account of the establishment of the feast of her conception.