

DOOMSDAY IMAGERY IN THE OLD ENGLISH *EXODUS**

The Old English *Exodus* contains in its last few lines (if the persuasive rearrangement of the text presented in E. B. Irving's edition of *Exodus*¹ is adopted) an unremarkable reference to Judgment Day, *Eftwyrð cym(e)ð,|maegenþrymma maest ofer middangeard,|daeg daedum fah. Drihten sylfa|on þam meðelstede manegum demedð|,þonne He soðfaestra sawla laedeð,|eadige gastas, on uprodor* (582–587)². The real Doomsday scene in the poem is, however, incorporated into the events of the narrative. The remarkable description of the drowning of the Egyptian host (447–515)³ is unmistakably presented in specific and extended terms that correspond precisely to the circumstances and details of the destruction of the world and of sinful humanity on Doomsday (helping to explain such things as the unrealistically gory nature of the drowning). Not only is Doomsday brought vividly to mind in this passage, but also the torments of hell, for the ensnaring of Pharaoh's army descriptively prefigures the tortures of the infernal host trapped in eternal death. This section thus augments the theme and the allegory of the poem as a whole – the destruction of the evil ones who do not follow God, and the preservation and glorification of the faithful even through the terrors of Doomsday, as they pass on their successful journey to the promised land, ultimately the home of heaven.

Specific correspondences of the drowning to traditional depictions of Doomsday are as follows. The sea turns to blood⁴, *Waeron beorhhliðu blode bestemed,|holm heolfre spaw* (449–450), *floð blod gewod* (463). The tumult reaches to the heavens, *storm up gewat|heah to heofonum* (460–461), *lyft waes onhrered* (483), *rodor swipode|meredeaða maest* (464–465). Structures (the metaphor of shield-walls or sea-walls) collapse, *Randbyrig waeron rofene* (464), *wicon weallfaesten* (484). Screaming and terror are universal, *herewopa maest* (461), *gyllende gryre* (490), *Folc waes afaered* (447), *egesand stodon* (491), *wolde heorufaedmum hilde gesceadan,|yrre and egesfull* (505–506). The ocean floods the dry land, *lagu land gefeol* (483). Wounds are manifest (implying the metaphorical wounds of soul evident at Judgment), *weollon waelbenna* (492). God's handiwork (here the sea) falls, *Witrod gefeol|heah of heofonum handweorc Godes,|famigbosma* (492–494). Sinful men perish by the sword of God in vast numbers, princes fall in the pride of their pomp, *floðweard (g)esloh|unhleowan waeg alde mece,|þæt ðy deaðdrepe drihte swaefon,|synfullra sweot* (494–497), *þa se Mihtiga sloh|mid halige hand . . .|wance ðeode* (485–487), *Maegen eall gedreas* (500), *forðam þaes heriges ham eft ne com|ealles ungrundes aenig to lafe* (508–509), *modige swulton,|cyningas on cordre* (465–466), *hordwearda hryre* (512), *ac þa maegenþreatas meredeað geswealh,|. . . se ðe sped ahte|ageat gylp wera* (513–515); blood reaches

to the sky, *Waes seo haewene lyft heolfre geblanden* (477); the doomed ones are wan, *flodblac here* (498); God's enemies are overcome, *He onfond hraðe,|siððan (grund) gestah, Godes andsaca,|þaet wæs mihtigra mereflodes Weard* (502–504), *Hie wið God wunnon* (515).

Hell is prefigured by the following details: the surroundings and the torture of the victims partake of darkness, *lyft up geswearc* (462), *brun yppinge* (499); there is no hope of escape or return from this fate, *cyre swiðrode/ (waeges) aet ende* (466–467), *forðganges nep* (470); the multitude is bound and hemmed in (as in the fettering and constriction of hell) by this destruction and by the trappings of their own malice (i.e., by their own evilness), *maegen waes on cwealme|faeste gefeterod . . .|searwum asaeled* (469–471), *Sawlum lunnon|faeste befarene* (497–498); the terror includes infinite cold⁵, *sin calda sae* (473).

In the midst of this greatest of calamities (*bealospella maest*, 511), the chosen ones faithful to God (the Israelites, *saemanna*, 479), though likewise threatened by the terror, are saved through intercession (paralleling the preservation of the righteous through Christ) despite the rigors of Doomsday, *brim berstende blodegsan hweop|saemanna sið, oðþaet soð Metod|purh Moyses hand modge rymde* (478–480). The reward of heaven is the counterpart to the division of spoils after the enemy is destroyed.

This undeniable portrayal of the events and themes of Judgment (i.e., the Last Judgment, fulfilling the anticipatory Judgments of the Old Testament) is anticipated earlier in the poem by other incidents and details, e.g., the preliminary stroke of Doom upon the Egyptians through the plague *aet middere niht* (from Ex. 12.29, but like the Judgment of Christ, cf. Mt. 25.6), *Haefde mansceaða aet middere niht|frecne gefylled frumbearna fela,|abrocene burhweardas* (37–39); through obedience to God the Israelites were spared the destruction. Elsewhere the Egyptians are specifically stated to be trothbreakers (140–147) who will be requited for their evil deeds by God (261–263). The Israelites by contrast will be granted glory for their worthy works (314–318), just as Noah escaped the Flood (362–365) and as Abraham was forever magnified by his willingness to submit to earthly sacrifice in obedience to God (420–425). All these themes are typical of Doomsday literature⁶. The conventional homiletic close to the poem (574–590)⁷ referring to the trials of earth, the state of exile, the punishment of hell for the wicked, the reckoning of Judgment Day, and the joys of heaven thus merely restates in straightforward and relatively anticlimactic fashion the vivid illustrations provided by the poet's imaginative handling of the biblical story and his dramatic exploitation of its allegorical potential⁸.

Notes

* Based on part of a dissertation presented at the University of Illinois in 1971.

1. Edward Burroughs Irving, Jr., *The Old English Exodus* (New Haven, 1953).
2. Text and line numbers are from Irving's edition. Lines 582–587 correspond to lines 540–545 reckoning by the codex, as in George Philip Krapp, ed., *The Junius Manuscript*, the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, vol. I (New York, 1931).
3. Unless otherwise noted, line numbers in Irving and Krapp agree.
4. See note 6 for biblical and patristic correspondences regarding this and subsequent details.
5. Icy coldness in hell, a torture opposite and additional to fire, is familiar to many ancient conceptions of hell and also found in Dante. See Ernest J. Becker, *A Contribution to the Comparative Study of the Medieval Visions of Heaven and Hell* (Baltimore, 1899), pp. 58–60.
6. For further information on the treatment of the Doomsday theme in early literature, the following are convenient references: L. Whitbread, „The Doomsday Theme in Old English Poetry”, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* (Halle), LXXXIX, 452–481; G. Nölle, „Die Legende von den Fünfzehn Zeichen vor dem Jüngsten Gerichte”, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur*, VI, 413–476; Milton M. Gatch, „Eschatology in the Anonymous Old English Homilies”, *Traditio*, XXI, 117–165. For typical patristic materials refer to the index in Migne's *Patrologia Latina*, vol. CCXX, cols. 291–308. The following (chiefly biblical) citations, arranged roughly according to the details discussed regarding *Exodus*, are scattered examples of the widespread tradition relating to Doomsday events: Apoc. 16. 3, Lk. 21. 25, Isa. 25. 12, Mt. 24. 30; Bede, *De quindecim signis* (Nölle, p. 460); Caesarius of Arles, *Sermo LVIII* (quoted by E. B. Irving in *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, LVI, 591); Mt. 24. 39, Apoc. 14. 14–16, Isa. 14. 11, Apoc. 8. 7, Lk. 21. 26, 1 Cor. 15. 25, Jude 13, 1 Thess. 5. 3, Prov. 5. 22, Mt. 22. 13, Apoc. 21. 8.
7. These lines in Irving's text correspond to lines 532–548 from the MS as edited by Krapp.
8. Regarding the symbolic significance of the poem, Irving admits the obvious implications as to life as a journey to the heavenly home; he (too severely) cautions against sacramental applications, „no sane reader would be likely to call *Exodus* a poem about baptism”, (p. 15), but he says almost nothing about the Judgment theme. J. E. Cross and S. I. Tucker in their amplification of the poem's inferences (including that of baptism) likewise do not mention Doomsday („Allegorical Tradition and the Old English *Exodus*”, *Neophilologus*, XLIV, 122–127). Cf. Bernard Huppe, *Doctrine and Poetry, Augustine's Influence on Old English Poetry* (New York, 1959), pp. 217–223.