

Cain's monstrous progeny in *Beowulf*: part II, post-diluvian survival

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In part I of this study¹ I concluded that some of the most unusual characteristics of Grendel and his mother (and their ambience) bear a striking likeness to, and may derive from, concepts of a race of cannibalistic giants descended from Cain in an ancient Jewish pseudepigraphical Noah book or (if, as some think, there was no Noah book) pseudepigraphical traditions designated as Noachic. I now take up the second question posed at the beginning of my part I, namely, what knowledge that such a race (or races) survived the Flood is the poet likely to have had?² It is a real question, for, after all, if all mankind and all living creatures – except the prescribed Noah contingent – were destroyed by the Flood (Genesis vi and vii³), without some authority the *Beowulf* poet would not have come to the belief that some of Cain's evil progeny had survived. We should not doubt the reality of that belief. For one thing, we can be confident that he believed in the physical actuality of monsters.⁴ They formed part of the repertoire of medieval belief, especially evident (though not exclusively so) when mystical-popular-folkloristic impulses asserted themselves. In the Middle Ages monsters were not regarded as imagined fictions, nor understood as spiritual-metaphorical symbols. Secondly, to suggest that in deriving his monsters from Cain the *Beowulf* poet was 'merely employing a metaphor for the society of reprobates' and that 'it is unlikely that Grendel was identified with the race of Cain with any save figurative intent'⁵ is surely inadequate. The narrator's two statements about the line of descent from Cain to Grendel and his mother are neither vague nor obliquely hinted; on the contrary, they are markedly definite. The one, after reference to Grendel 'in Caines⁶ cynne' (107a), is as follows:

¹ ASE 8 (1979), 143–62.

² Grateful thanks are due to Stanley Greenfield, Peter Clemoes, George Brown, Peter Brown, John Leyerle, Morton Bloomfield, Fred Robinson and Daniel Melia for their generous help. I, of course, accept full responsibility for all errors of fact, interpretation and judgement.

³ My biblical references are to the Douai translation of the Vulgate, unless otherwise noted.

⁴ See Peter Clemoes, 'Action in *Beowulf* and our Perception of It', *Old English Poetry: Essays on Style*, ed. Daniel G. Calder (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1979), pp. 155–6.

⁵ Marie Padgett Hamilton, 'The Religious Principle in *Beowulf*', *PMLA* 61 (1946), 316 and 320.

⁶ MS *comes* altered to *caines* by erasure; see below, n. 69. My quotations from *Beowulf* are from *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. Fr. Klaeber, 3rd ed. (Boston, Mass., 1950).

Panon [i.e. from Cain] untydras ealle onwocon,
 eotenas ond ylfe ond orcneas,
 swylce gigantas, þa wið Gode wunnon
 lange þrage; he him ðas lean forgeald.⁷ (111-14)

The other reads,

Panon [i.e. from Cain] woc fela
 geoscaeftgasta; wæs þæra Grendel sum.⁸ (1265b-6)

The *swylce* in the first of these statements implies that among the *untydras ealle* who were descended from Cain the poet distinguished those designated by the Latin term *gigantas* from those designated by words of Germanic tradition. Stephen Bandy has pointed out⁹ that the poet seems to have meant by *gigantas* specifically giants destroyed by the Flood, as in 1689b-93:

syðþan flod ofsloh,
 gifen geotende giganta cyn,
 frecne geferdon; þæt wæs fremde þeod
 ecean Dryhtne; him þæs endelea
 purh wæteres wylm Wealdend sealde.¹⁰

Grendel – a *þyrs* (426a) and an *eoten* (761a) – and his mother are never termed *gigantas*. The poet, we can infer, had a clear-cut notion that, whereas some of Cain's monstrous progeny had drowned in the Flood, others had not. I propose, therefore, to survey here the tradition that reports such a survival.

While early Christian writers for the most part argued for the unlimited extent of the Flood, at least one – the pseudo-Justin – stirred up by doubters, attempted a fence-sitting interpretation:

Question 34: If, as some people say, the flood was not in every region of the earth, but in those which men then inhabited, how is it true that the water was carried up above every one of the highest mountains by fifteen cubits?

Answer: It does not seem to be true that the flood did not exist in every place, unless, perhaps, there were places in which the flood existed sloping more than the rest of the regions of the earth.¹¹

⁷ 'From that source evil broods all arose, giants and elves and monsters, likewise giants who fought against God for a long time; he gave them a reward for that.'

⁸ 'From that source arose many fated spirits; Grendel was one of those.'

⁹ Stephen C. Bandy, 'Cain, Grendel, and the Giants of *Beowulf*', *Papers on Lang. and Lit.* 9 (1973), 240. I am indebted to Henry A. Kelly for bringing this article to my attention. See also my part I, *ASE* 8, 149-50, where the giantism of the monster pair is discussed, and R. E. Kaske, 'The *Eotenas* in *Beowulf*', *Old English Poetry*, ed. Robert P. Creed (Providence, R.I., 1967), pp. 285-310.

¹⁰ '... after the Flood, a pouring sea, killed the race of giants, they suffered terribly; that was a people estranged from the eternal Lord; the Ruler gave them a final reward for that through the surging of water.'

¹¹ Pseudo-Justin, *Questiones et Responsiones ad Orthodoxos*, Migne, *Patrologia Graeco-Latina* 6, col. 1282. See Johannes Quasten, *Patrology* (1st ed., 1950; repr., Utrecht and Antwerp, 1966) 1, 206, where it is stated that until now it has been impossible to discover the real author of these writings but that he 'seems to have lived about 400, and to have had relations with Syria'.

Although the Noah story and the extent of the Flood were never for orthodox medieval exegetes the hotly contested issue they became during the Renaissance and the seventeenth century,¹² there is interesting evidence that in less conservative quarters not all were persuaded that the deluge was total. There is testimony, for example, that the Flood was universal *except* for the land of Israel; it occurs as early as the first century AD in the writings of the pseudo-Philo. Speaking about Abraham its author states:

And I will bring him [Abraham] out from their land, and I will lead him into a land which my eye saw from the beginning when all the inhabitants of the earth sinned in my sight and I brought the water of the flood; and I did not exterminate it but preserved it. For the fountains of my wrath did not break forth in it, nor did the water of my destruction come down upon it.¹³

Speculation about the extent of the Flood seems to have developed from a desire to explain how, if the world had been submerged, a dove could have found a living tree with olive leaves. If Israel was spared, that solved the problem. Such reasoning appears in the Midrash Genesis Rabbah (dated to about the fifth century),¹⁴ where the question is raised as to where the dove found the olive leaf, and is answered: 'She brought it from the Mount of Olives, for Eretz Israel was not submerged by the Flood.'¹⁵ The Targum pseudo-Jonathan, containing material of both early and later dates,¹⁶ implies the same view; it adds to the biblical text of Genesis viii.11, where the dove is described bringing back an olive leaf, that she had 'taken it from the mount of olives'.¹⁷ Justification for the opinion that Israel was spared was sought and found in biblical text; commentators looked to Ezekiel xxii.24: 'Son of man, say to her: Thou art a land that is unclean, and not rained upon in the day of wrath.' The 'unclean' land was interpreted as Israel, and so it appeared in the Midrash Rabbah¹⁸ and continued to appear in later writings such as the Pirkê de Rabbi Eliezer, where we read:

The Flood was universal except in the land of Israel, upon which the water of the Flood did not descend from heaven, but the waters were gathered together from

¹² See Don Cameron Allen, *The Legend of Noah* (Urbana, Ill., 1963), pp. 76-9.

¹³ Translation from John Bowker, *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge, England, 1969), app. I ('The Biblical Antiquities of Philo: a Translation of the Passages related to Genesis, vii:4'), p. 309; for Bowker's discussion of pseudo-Philo, see pp. 30-1.

¹⁴ Henceforth referred to as Midrash Rabbah. This early midrash is described by Bowker thus: 'a diverse compilation, but basically it appears to be a Palestinian work of the fifth century (though drawing, of course, on earlier material)' (*The Targums*, p. 79).

¹⁵ *The Midrash Rabbah*, ed. and trans. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, 10 vols. (London, 1939) (Bereshith xxxiii.6) 1, 266.

¹⁶ For a discussion, see Bowker, *The Targums*, pp. 26-8; and see Martin McNamara, *The New Testament and the Palestinian Targum to Pentateuch* (Rome, 1966), pp. 60-3.

¹⁷ Bowker, *The Targums*, p. 167.

¹⁸ *The Midrash Rabbah* (Bereshith xxxiii.6) 1, 266.

all lands, and they entered therein, as it is said, 'Son of man, say unto her, Thou art a land that is not cleansed, nor rained upon, in the day of indignation'.¹⁹

An even more fantastic story limiting the magnitude of the Flood appears in the Midrash Rabbah, where an irrational, though delightfully colourful, account relates how only the high mountains were covered by water – not the low ones. It demonstrates how some writers remained happily unruffled by what seems to us a masterpiece of illogical thinking:

R[abbi] Jonathan was going up to worship in Jerusalem, when he passed the Palatinus [the name given by the Samaritans to Mount Gerizim, which they held sacred] and was seen by a Samaritan, who asked him, 'Whither are you going?' 'To worship in Jerusalem', replied he. 'Would it not be better to pray at this holy mountain than at that dunghill?' he jeered. 'Wherein is it blessed?' inquired he. 'Because it was not submerged by the Flood.' Now R. Jonathan momentarily forgot the teaching [on that subject], but his ass-driver said to him, 'Rabbi, with your permission I will answer him.' 'Do', said he. 'If it is of the high mountains,' he answered, 'then it is written, And all the high mountains were covered. While if it is of the low ones, Scripture ignored it.'²⁰

There was of course no consensus about the sparing of Israel, and controversy can be seen in the Talmud,²¹ expressed in a concern as to how to interpret the reference to 'dry land' in 'whatsoever was in the dry land, died' (Genesis VII.22).²² The dispute is openly stated in the Talmud text: 'One master holds that the Flood descended in Eretz Israel; while the other master holds that it did not descend [there].'²³ The viewpoint that the Flood did not submerge Israel is then expressed: 'On my opinion that the Flood did not descend to Eretz Israel, it is well: for that reason is it called dry land.'²⁴

There is evidence of the belief that fish were not destroyed by the Flood – justified again by the 'dry land' of Genesis VII.22. The Talmud states that according to Rabbi Hisda it (the dry land) is mentioned because the

¹⁹ *Pirkê de Rabbi Eliezer (The Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer the Great)*, introd. and trans. Gerald Friedlander (1st ed., 1916; repr., New York, 1970), p. 168. The final redaction of this text has been dated to the second or third decade of the ninth century (*ibid.* pp. liii–liv); and, for a discussion of this text, see Bowker, *The Targums*, p. 85.

²⁰ *The Midrash Rabbah* (Bereshith xxxii.10) 1, 255. See also Bowker, *The Targums*, p. 170, n. 2, where is reported the repetition of this tall tale as late as the Yalkut of the thirteenth century.

²¹ Talmud throughout this study means the Babylonian Talmud.

²² The phrase 'dry land' does not appear in the Vulgate. This reference is from an English translation of the Hebrew; see *The Holy Scriptures (according to the Masoretic Text), a New Translation* (Philadelphia, 1917). It is interesting to note that, although the phrase 'dry land' was eliminated from the Vulgate (perhaps with conscious effort by Jerome), it appeared in the Septuagint and is reinstated in the King James. I have made no effort to trace its comings and goings, although its disappearance from the Vulgate might in itself be a fascinating problem to resolve.

²³ *The Babylonian Talmud*, ed. and trans. Isidore Epstein and Maurice Simon, 18 vol. ed. (London, 1961), Seder Kodashim 1, 557 (Zabāḥim 113a).

²⁴ *Ibid.* Seder Kodashim 1, 559 (Zebāḥim 113b).

decree of destruction was not against the fish in the sea.²⁵ And the Midrash Rabbah reports: 'WHATSOEVER WAS IN THE DRY LAND, DIED. This excludes fish. But some maintain that they too were included among those who were to be gathered into [the ark], but they fled to the Ocean [the Mediterranean].'²⁶ Both Talmud and Midrash Rabbah also introduce us to the *re'em* – a fabulous animal of enormous size – too large to enter the ark. Nevertheless, it was saved.²⁷ Another survival story was of greater importance and influence, namely the legend that at least one giant escaped the Flood – Og, king of Bashan.²⁸ In the Talmud we are introduced to Og by way of a discussion of the travelling capability of the ark. Some, it states, affirm that because men sinned with hot passion the Flood was a deluge of hot water; if so, how could the ark travel without melting the pitch? And, moreover, 'how did Og king of Bashan stand?' The response: 'a miracle was performed for it [the water], and it was cooled at the side of the Ark'.²⁹

The legend of Og seems to have evolved from interpretations of two biblical passages. Deuteronomy III.11 states, 'For only king of Basan remained of the race of giants. His bed of iron is shewn, which is in Rabbath of the children of Ammon, being nine cubits long, and four broad after the measure of the cubit of a man's hand.' The other reference connected with Og is that to the 'one that had escaped' in Genesis XIV.13: 'And behold one that had escaped told Abram the Hebrew, who dwelt in the vale of Mambre. . . ' The 'one that had escaped' was identified as Og and his escape was interpreted as an escape from the Flood. The legend is amply scattered through the Midrash Rabbah and through the Talmud, and appears in later writings too.³⁰ For example, in a Targum of the pseudo-Jonathan on Genesis XIV.13 we read: 'And there came Og who had been spared from the giants that died in the flood; he had ridden above the ark, with a cover over him, being sustained from the food of Noah.'³¹ Or as in another version, in the *Pirkê de Rabbi Eliezer*:

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *The Midrash Rabbah* (Bereshith xxxii.11) I, 256.

²⁷ *The Babylonian Talmud*, Seder *Kodashim* I, 559–60 (Zebahim 113b). The Talmud commentator suggests that if one believes that Israel was spared this would indeed be a fine explanation for the survival of the *re'em* which could have stayed in the saved land. But, he queries, what about the survival of the *re'em* if one takes the opposite view – that the Flood did descend into Israel? The response provides a superb demonstration of the incredible fables that easily arose among those who yearned for that something extra or hidden: it explains that the sea *re'em* was huge; at one day old it was thought to be as big as Mount Tabor – so gigantic that it cast a ball of excrements that blocked the Jordan. One talmudic opinion suggested that they took only the *re'em*'s head into the ark; another said no, they took only the tip of its nose into the ark; and yet another suggested that they secured it by tying its horns to the ark.

²⁸ Og, as well as his brother, Sihon, are the giants of Deuteronomy II and III, where they are described as members of a race of giants.

²⁹ *The Babylonian Talmud*, Seder *Kodashim* I, 560 (Zebahim 113b).

³⁰ For a summary of legends about Sihon and Og, see *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971), *sub* Og.

³¹ Bowker, *The Targums*, p. 193, and see his comments at 194–5.

And Noah only was left, and they that were with him in the ark, except Og, king of Bashan, who sat down on a piece of wood under the gutter [*first eds. read: on a rung of one of the ladders*] of the ark. He swore to Noah and to his sons that he would be their servant forever. What did Noah do? He bored an aperture in the ark, and he put [through it] his food daily for him, and he also was left, as it is said, 'For only Og, king of Bashan remained of the remnant of the giants.'³²

Og was also identified as Eliezer, the servant of Abraham. We learn that he was spared from the Flood not because of merit but so that the mightiness of the Lord might be demonstrated when, as reported in Numbers *xxi.33-5*, Og is finally demolished by Moses. Therefore, as reported in, for example, the *Pirkê de Rabbi Eliezer*, he is given the earthly reward only: 'When Eliezer had thus dealt kindly with Isaac, he [Abraham] set him [Og] free, and the Holy One, blessed be He, gave him his reward in this world, so that there should not be a reward for the wicked in the world to come; and He raised him to kingship, and he is Og, king of Bashan.'³³ The elements of the Og legend led then to further colourful speculations as to how Moses managed to slay this mighty antediluvian Og.³⁴

The popularity of the Og legend in Christian thought is mostly evidenced by its denial. For example, it has already been pointed out that commentators, such as Nicolas of Lyra of the fourteenth century and Alfonso Tostado of the fifteenth, often mention Hebrew legendary material, including the fabulous story of Og of Bashan.³⁵ Its inclusion, however, was only to exorcize it from Christian minds. Though possibly there is mention of the legend in other Christian sources, it is sufficient for us to be aware of its existence – and even its popularity – among parts of the Christian population whose faulty thinking required the corrections of exegetes such as Lyra and Tostado. The legend of Og, reappearing in Rabelais, is testimony of its stubborn circulation outside Jewish circles;³⁶ for in Rabelais's account of Pantagruel's genealogy

³² *Pirkê de Rabbi Eliezer*, p. 167.

³³ *Ibid.* pp. 111-12.

³⁴ E.g., in the Talmud; see *The Babylonian Talmud*, Seder Zera'im, p. 331 (Berakoth 54b): "'The stone which Og, king of Bashan, wanted to throw at Israel.'" This has been handed down by tradition. He said: How large is the camp of Israel? Three parasangs. I will go and uproot a mountain of the size of three parasangs and cast it upon them and kill them. He went and uprooted a mountain of the size of three parasangs and carried it on his head. But the Holy One, blessed be He, sent ants which bored a hole in it, so that it sank around his neck. He tried to pull it off, but his teeth projected on each side, and he could not pull it off. This is referred to in the text, *Thou hast broken the teeth of the wicked*, as explained by R. Simeon b. Lakish. For R. Simeon b. Lakish said: What is the meaning of the text, *Thou has broken the teeth of the wicked*? Do not read, *shibbarta* [Thou hast broken], but *shirbarta* [Thou hast lengthened]. The height of Moses was ten cubits. He took an axe ten cubits long, leapt ten cubits into the air, and struck him on his ankle and killed him.'

³⁵ Allen, *The Legend of Noah*, pp. 75-6.

³⁶ Some of the legendary Og material appears in Muslim tradition; see *Chronique de Tabari*, trans. M. Hermann Zotenberg (Paris, 1958) I, 388-92; see also D. Sidersky, *Les Origines des légendes musulmanes dans le Coran et dans les vies des prophètes* (Paris, 1933), pp. 100-2.

Og has been transformed into the giant Hurlali, who escaped the Flood, sat astride the ark, was fed through a chimney by the people inside and saved the ark from danger by balancing it with his legs on either side. Rabelais says this is not his invention, but rather, 'I will cite the authority of the Massorettes, good ballocky fellows and fine Hebraic bagpipers.'³⁷ Rabelais's knowledge and use of this ancient Jewish lore (perhaps indebted to his original monastic education) should warn us to remember that, while Jewish interpretations may have been suspect, they were often well known, remembered and repeated by at least some of the Christian populace.

Though the story of Og has no traceable direct connection with Cain, there is some evidence that Og was thought to have descended from one of the fallen angels of the ancient pseudepigraphical story that I discussed in my earlier study.³⁸ The mating of those angels was later most frequently construed (in both Christian and Jewish thought) to have been with the race of Cain, a mating that produced giant progeny. Thus there is the hint that Og (and Sihon) may have been understood by some to have been the progeny of such a mating, for in the Talmud we read: 'Sihon and Og were sons of Ahijah the son of Shamhazai [one of the fallen angels].'³⁹ What is of primary importance about the legend of Og is its demonstration of the resolute conviction – at least in some quarters – that at least one antediluvian giant survived the destructive waters.

Uncanonical beliefs are often most evident in writings of a mystical-popular nature. This is impressively the case in the mystical writings of the thirteenth-century Zohar, where a vast amount of fabulous material parades. The Zohar (containing material that is at least as early as the Talmud and Midrash)⁴⁰ not only expresses the conviction that antediluvian giants survived but also explicitly connects some of them with Cain. We are told that Moses, trying to enrol proselytes before leaving Egypt, was betrayed by them, for they were not sincere, and by reason of their corruption Moses himself was degraded.⁴¹ Moreover these insincere and corrupt ones were the 'mixed multitude', a group composed of 'Nefilim, Gibborim, Anakim, Refaim, and Amalekites',⁴² who were all different species of giants; and we read: 'The Amalekites are those who are left from the time of the Flood.'⁴³

³⁷ *The Histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel* by François Rabelais, trans. J. M. Cohen (Harmondsworth, 1955), pp. 173-4. ³⁸ *ASE* 8, 147-8.

³⁹ *The Babylonian Talmud*, Seder Tohoroth, p. 433 (Niddah 61a); Shamhazai, as pointed out by the editor, in n. 7, was 'one of the fallen angels referred to in Genesis vi, 2, 4, as "sons of God" or "Nephilim"'.
⁴⁰ See the excellent account by Gershom Scholem, *Encyclopedia Judaica, sub Zohar*; see also his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (3rd ed., 1954; repr., New York, 1960), pp. 156-204.

⁴¹ References throughout this study are to the English translation of the Zohar. See *The Zohar*, trans. Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon, 5 vols. (1st ed., 1934; repr. London, Jerusalem and New York, 1973) (Zohar 1.28b) I, 109.

⁴² *Ibid.* (Zohar 1.25a) I, 98-9.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

This 'mixed multitude' are specifically ascribed to Cain in another Zoharic passage: 'The mixed multitude are the impurity which the serpent injected into Eve.⁴⁴ From this impurity came forth Cain, who killed Abel';⁴⁵ and elsewhere: 'The descendants of Cain were "the sons of God". For Cain was born from Samael and his aspect was not like that of other human beings, and all who came from his stock were called "sons of god". R. Judah said that the *Nefilim* [giants] were also called so. The same were the mighty men.'⁴⁶

Furthermore, according to the Zohar, even Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, was described as a literal – not figurative – descendant of Cain. No matter that the author incorrectly interpreted 'Kenite' of the biblical text; as we shall see later, others much closer to our own time do the same. The Zoharic passage reads: 'From Cain was descended Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, as it is written, "And the sons of the Kenite the father-in-law of Moses", and according to tradition he was called Kenite because he originated from Cain.'⁴⁷ Such reasoning, of course, if followed to its logical extreme, would make the descendants of Moses of Cain's seed too, through his Midianite wife Zipporah. But logic has little to do with this kind of thought.

The giants of the 'mixed multitude' and Moses's father-in-law Jethro were not the only ones attributed to Cain by the Zohar. There were others: 'On the side of Cain are all the haunts of the evil species, from which come evil spirits and demons and necromancers.'⁴⁸ A variation is expressed as an interpretation attributed in the Zohar to Rabbi Eleazar: 'And from him [Cain] originate all the evil habitations and demons and goblins and evil spirits in the world.'⁴⁹ And again, in another version, this one assigned to a Rabbi Jose: 'Cain was the nest (*Qina*) of the evil habitations which came into the world from the impure side.'⁵⁰ The sources of the Zohar, itself compiled by a single author in thirteenth-century Spain,⁵¹ have been described by Gershom Scholem as many and of wide-ranging date. Whether Zoharic material quoted here derived from early or late sources is not crucial; in this case what matters is that those ideas demonstrate the folly of assuming that all thinkers and exegetes – or poets – cleaved to what we term logical, rational traditions.

There is more evidence of a struggle to let some of Cain's seed survive. It lies among the confused legends that whirl around Naamah (or Noema), the female biblical descendant of Cain (Genesis iv.22). In many of these legends she is identified as Noah's wife. Her widespread and early acceptance

⁴⁴ In a future study I shall discuss the legends and traditions surrounding beliefs that the devil (serpent) had sexual intercourse with Eve.

⁴⁵ *The Zohar* (Zohar 1.28a) 1, 108.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* (Zohar 1.37a) 1, 138.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* (Zohar 1.28a) 1, 108.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* (Zohar 1.36b) 1, 137.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* (Zohar 1.54a) 1, 172.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ See above, n. 40.

as the wife of Noah is demonstrated by her appearance in the Midrash Rabbah: 'AND THE SISTER OF TUBAL-CAIN WAS NAAMAH. R. Abba b. Kahana said: Naamah was Noah's wife; and why was she called Naamah? Because her deeds were pleasing.'⁵² In the very same passage, however, this identification is contested: 'The Rabbis said: Naamah was a woman of a different stamp, for the name denotes that she sang to the timbrel in honour of idolatry.' Rashi also identified Naamah, the sister of Tubal-Cain, as Noah's wife.⁵³ The old midrash that Naamah was Noah's wife was quoted in later medieval sources too, for example by the Spanish cabbalist Bahya of the mid-thirteenth century.⁵⁴ That the naming of a real kin of Cain for the wife of Noah would excite debate is hardly surprising, for this same Naamah was deemed wicked, and in some circles was also identified as the beautiful woman who seduced the fallen angels and was said to be the wife of Shamdan from whose union sprang Ashmedai and other demons.⁵⁵

The ideal of Noah wed to Naamah the Cainite, thought highly improper by some, led later commentators to improve the situation by inventing a new and more piously appropriate Naamah – a non-biblical Naamah who, they claimed, descended from Seth.⁵⁶ There was, of course, only one Naamah named in the biblical account, and this explains the mistaken interpretation of the Naamah in a nineteenth-century translation of the Book of Yashar. The translator, not realizing that in that work the author was probably using the invented Naamah of Sethite descent, tried to explicate the Naamah he found there as Noah's wife, as the biblical Cainite, and thus he erred. He stated it thus: 'From this it appears that the offspring [Naamah] of the great, pious and illustrious Enoch [immediate son of Cain] was reserved to be the partner of the just and upright Noah [descendant of Seth], thereby connecting the best of the family of Cain and Seth together.'⁵⁷ The confused biblical genealogies of the Cainites and Sethites with descendants of similar names have always contributed much to a generally disordered state of affairs. Family trees have always been a problem.

During the Middle Ages estimates of Noah's wife varied.⁵⁸ Ambivalences

⁵² *The Midrash Rabbah* (Bereshith xxiii.3) 1, 194.

⁵³ See *The Pentateuch and Rashi's Commentary*, trans. Abraham Ben Isaiah and Benjamin Sharfman (Brooklyn, 1949), p. 45; or see *Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth and Rashi's Commentary*, trans. and ed. M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silbermann (New York, 1935) 1, 20.

⁵⁴ See Bernard J. Bamberger, *Fallen Angels* (Philadelphia, 1952), p. 171.

⁵⁵ *The Zohar* (Zohar i.55a) 1, 175; see also the comments by Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (1st ed., 1925; repr., Philadelphia, 1947) v, 147–8, n. 45, and see Bamberger, *Fallen Angels*, p. 171.

⁵⁶ Francis Lee Utley, 'The One Hundred and Three Names of Noah's Wife', *Speculum* 46 (1941), 445.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ For her negative status in Muslim tradition, see Heinrich Speyer, *Die Biblischen Erzählungen im Quran* (Hildesheim, 1961), p. 108, and see *Chronique de Tabari* 1, 106–9; see also Utley's comments, 'Names of Noah's Wife', pp. 449–50. Her ambiguous status and other aspects of her character, as well as her strange names, have been discussed by Israel Gollancz, *The Caedmon Manuscript* (Oxford, 1927),

of various kinds have been noted, for example her rôle in some of the mystery plays.⁵⁹ Names of other wicked women chosen for Noah's wife, such as Eve, Delilah, Wahêla (Lot's wife) and Pandora,⁶⁰ suggest that medieval thought was polarized concerning her status; though saved from the Flood she was not always regarded as a pure and pious type. When the choice of Naamah the Cainite was made as Noah's wife, however, there was, to be sure, no problem about the survival of Cain's seed. Not only was there some belief that Noah married a member of Cain's race, but there is evidence in Muslim tradition that some believed that more of Cain's kin were aboard the ark; the daughters-in-law of Noah were held to be of the race of Cain: 'Sâm's [Shem's] wife, Salib [Sulaib], was descended, like the wives of Nüh's [Noah's] other sons, from Kain b. Adam and bore him four sons, whose names. . .'⁶¹

Other sources indicate a measure of belief that some of Cain's descendants survived the Flood. For example, the favourite choice for the progenitor of the Saracens in the *chansons de geste* was Cain.⁶² These Saracens share many of Grendel's traits: they are giants who are ugly and misshapen, have eyes red as burning coals and are practitioners of magic.⁶³ Is the use of 'Cain's kin' in this context a matter of epithet only, as at least one scholar has argued? Though these descriptions may have contained figurative intent, they do not rule out elements of literal belief; one should not risk the assumption that either the authors or the audience thought of them as mere embroidery. In the ascription to Cain's kin of the terrifyingly ugly, wild-man-karl in the Middle English poem *Ywain and Gawain*⁶⁴ the probability of a literal interpretation is greater: since the identification is not in the Old French original,⁶⁵ its introduction into the English version suggests a long tradition in England of popular belief in real descendants of Cain. This is not an

pp. lxiii-lxvii. I am indebted to Fred Robinson for calling this last reference to my attention. See also Katherine Garvin, 'A Note on Noah's Wife', *Mod. Lang. Notes* 49 (1934), 88-90, and Ann J. Mill, 'Noah's Wife Again', *PMLA* 56 (1941), 613-26.

⁵⁹ See the discussion on Noah's wife as a shrewish, stubborn and disobedient woman by Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1972), pp. 136-44; and see Jeffrey Alan Hirshberg, 'Noah's Wife on the Medieval English Stage: Iconographic and Dramatic Values of her Distaff and Choice of the Raven', *Stud. in Iconography* 2 (1976), 25-40.

⁶⁰ Utey, 'Names of Noah's Wife', p. 450.

⁶¹ *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden, 1934) IV, *sub Sām*. I am indebted to Larry Berman who checked this further and indeed found the genealogy of the daughters-in-law of Noah carefully traced back to Cain in al-Tabari, *Annales*, Prima Series, ed. J. Barth (Leiden, 1964; photographic repr. of orig. ed.) I, 211-13.

⁶² See William Wilson Comfort, 'The Literary Role of the Saracens in the French Epic', *PMLA* 55 (1940), 629 and 652; also C. Meredith Jones, 'The Conventional Saracen of the Songs of Geste', *Speculum* 17 (1942), 204.

⁶³ Comfort, 'Role of the Saracens', p. 651.

⁶⁴ *Ywain and Gawain*, ed. Albert B. Friedman and Norman T. Harrington, EETS o.s. 254 (London, 1964), 16 (line 559).

⁶⁵ *Ywain and Gawain*, pp. 116-17 (n. to line 559).

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instance, I would insist, of either allegory or epithet of the kind typical of the later vitriolic blasts at the English friars.⁶⁶

While uncanonical beliefs were not encouraged, there were many who adhered to literal interpretations of what traditionalists understood as figurative language. The origin of the visual representation of the horns on Moses, about which I have written elsewhere,⁶⁷ is but one of many such examples. It needs to be stressed that often we learn of mistaken interpretations or 'false' beliefs only through their censure: denials confirm the existence of that which they deny. Just such an emphatic denial in the eleventh-century Irish *Sex Aetates Mundi* testifies to a prevalent belief in Ireland that monsters were the descendants of Cain:

And Cham was thus the first person that was cursed after the Deluge, and he was the heir of Cain after the Deluge, and from him sprang the Luchrupans, and Formorians, and Goatheads, and every unshapely form in general that there is on men. And it is therefore that overthrow was brought on the descendants of Cham, and that their land was given to the sons of Israel in token of the same curse. And that is the origin of the Torothors, and they are not of the seed of Cain as the Gaels relate, for there lived not aught of his seed after the Deluge, for it was the purpose of the Deluge to drown the descendants of Cain, and all the descendants of Seth were also drowned along with them, but Noah with his sons and with their four wives, as Moses, son of Amram, tells in Genesis of the Law.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ E.g., in the poem, 'The Orders of Cain', *Historical Poems of the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, ed. Russell Hope Robbins (New York, 1959), pp. 157-62. It was a favourite epithet of Wyclif's which he used to attack and defame the friars, e.g. in 'De Officio Pastoralis', *The English Works of Wyclif*, ed. F. D. Matthews, EETS o.s. 74 (London, 1880), 420, where he refers to their living quarters as 'cayms castel'.

⁶⁷ *The Horned Moses in Medieval Art and Thought* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1970).

⁶⁸ This translation is by Edmund Hogan, *The Irish Nennius from L. na Huidre*, R. Irish Acad. Todd Lecture Ser. 6 (Dublin, 1895), 7-8. Hogan, however, had incorrectly identified this text; it is part of the *Sex Aetates Mundi*. See *Lebor na Huidre*, ed. R. I. Best and Osborn Bergin (Dublin, 1929), p. xxvii, and, for the text itself, p. 5. James Carney's attempt to explain the account of the descent of the monsters in this text as the result of two contradictory accounts of the origin of monsters (*Studies in Irish Literature and History* (Dublin, 1955), pp. 102-14) is not convincing; moreover it suggests a higher degree of logic and rationality than is likely. For additional bibliographical references on the *Sex Aetates Mundi*, see Martin McNamara, *The Apocrypha in the Irish Church* (Dublin, 1975), pp. 30-2.

Charles Donahue has argued that early Irish Christians and many later ones 'viewed with equanimity antediluvians who survived outside the ark' and would not have been troubled by the idea that Cain was the ancestor of monsters; see his 'Grendel and the Clanna Cain', *Jnl of Celtic Stud.* 1 (1950), 172-4.

I am indebted to Daniel Melia for help on this whole problem. Professor Melia passed on to me the following passage of a letter to him from John Kelleher (August 1977), succinctly summing the matter up:

I suspect that Donahue is right when he says (p. 172) that 'Dublittir and his predecessor, the anonymous author of *ST*, seem indeed to have been cranks on the subject of the Flood, members of a minority of historical rigorists, whose theory never wholly imposed itself in Ireland.' I wouldn't say they were cranks. They were just bothered by the illogicality of monsters and oddities descended from Cain surviving the Flood - since it was manifest to everybody who knew *Lebor Gabála* or the story of Fergus mac Leide or indeed any number of other texts that Formoire and

Of course the Irish author of the above passage had not himself understood the biblical text too well. For, after all, it was Ham's (Cham's) son, Cainan, who was the one who was really cursed by Noah; in Genesis ix.25 we read: 'He said: Cursed be Chanaan, a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.'

There was, of course, considerable confusion between Cain and Ham, not only because of the similarity of names (Cain and Cham, or Cainus and Chamus)⁶⁹ but also because Ham, though not of Cain's seed, was traditionally regarded as Cain's successor in the figurative sense. Ham and his son Canaan and all the members of their line were thought to have continued the evil of Cain; thus Cain and Ham represented the same wicked principles. We have just seen how the Irish author attributed monsters to Ham – denouncing the Gaels for incorrectly assigning them to Cain. In the twelfth-century Irish *Lebor Gabála* an author, influenced by the earlier text, also attributes the monsters to Ham, though without repeating the censure on those ascribing them to Cain.⁷⁰ More confusion about these two evil figures, Cain and Ham, is evidenced in the Old English prose *Salomon and Saturn*, where to the question who made the first plough the answer is Cham, son of Noah.⁷¹ More surprising, however, is the mistake or confusion of Alcuin in his *Interrogationes et Responiones in Genesin*, where, in his exposition of the verses in Genesis vi concerning the mating of the sons of God with the daughters of men, Cham is written instead of the traditional Cain.⁷² In my earlier study I pointed out how firmly entrenched was the interpretation of this mating as that of the sons of Seth with the daughters of Cain.⁷³ The substitution of Ham for Cain was no scribal misspelling, for Alcuin meant Ham; he alludes to Noah's curse in the clause, 'illae paterna maledictione impudicae', as Emerson pointed out some time ago.⁷⁴ Alcuin could not have remembered or reread book xv of Augustine's *City of God*⁷⁵ or the traditional exegesis of others, such as Bede;⁷⁶

Lucrúpain and all sorts of *torothor* were around long after the Flood – so they developed (one hesitates to say, invented) the Cham connection and coarbsbhip. In that case I would say that *amal adjfadat na Goedil* is basically an expression of disapproval of the inaccurate popular history circulating in Ireland. It would mean 'the common sort', or 'the plain people of Ireland', or 'the unlearned', or 'those thick harps'.

⁶⁹ Scholars, such as Oliver F. Emerson ('The Legends of Cain, especially in Old and Middle English', *PMLA* 21 (1906), 925), have noted and commented on the fact that Cain's name is spelled *cam(es)* (107a) and *camp* (1261b) in the *Beowulf* manuscript – a possible confusion with Ham. Yet there is no uncertainty as to the identity of the person alluded to, since context certifies that it is Cain.

⁷⁰ *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, ed. and trans. R. A. Stewart Macalister (Dublin, 1938), pt 1, pp. 137 and 245 n. to line 81).

⁷¹ For the mixture and mix-up of the Cain and Ham traditions, see Francis Lee Utley, 'The Prose *Salomon and Saturn* and the Tree called Chy', *MS* 19 (1957), 62.

⁷² Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 100, col. 526.

⁷³ *ASE* 8, 147.

⁷⁴ 'Legends of Cain', p. 925.

⁷⁵ See my discussion, *ASE* 8, 147 and n. 3.

⁷⁶ *Libri Quatuor in Principium Genesis* II, ed. Charles W. Jones, *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* 118A, 100-1.

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moreover, interestingly, his faulty scholarship is repeated *in toto* by his pupil, Hrabanus Maurus.⁷⁷

Traditional thought, as I have said, interpreted Ham as the rebirth of Cain – in the spiritual sense (leaving Alcuin's and Hrabanus's error aside). But that the spiritual rebirth has not been enough to satisfy more prosaic minds is astonishingly demonstrated in our own era – in the Mormon doctrines set down by Joseph Smith in the nineteenth century and stubbornly maintained by some Mormons today.⁷⁸ Joseph Smith constructed a literal descent from Cain to and through Ham by means of Ham's wife. This appears in a tract known as the *Pearl of Great Price*.⁷⁹ First, in some visions of Moses allegedly revealed to him in June 1830, Smith establishes blackness as the mark of Cain; we read in Moses: '...and there was a blackness came upon all the children of Canaan, that they were despised among all people' (VII.8) and 'And Enoch also beheld the residue of the people which were the sons of Adam; and they were a mixture of all the seed of Adam save it was the seed of Cain, for the seed of Cain were black, and had not place among them' (VII.22). Then, in his so-called Book of Abraham which he claimed was a translation of an ancient papyrus found in Egypt and written by Abraham's own hand, Smith explains that Pharaoh and the Egyptians were descended from Cain and therefore could not hold the priesthood (Abraham 1.21–7). The descent is described thus:

From this descent sprang all the Egyptians, and thus the blood of the Canaanites was preserved in the land.

The land of Egypt being first discovered by a woman who was the daughter of Ham, and the daughter of Egyptus, which in the Chaldean signifies Egypt, which signifies that which is forbidden.

When this woman discovered the land it was under water, who afterward settled her sons in it; and thus, from Ham, sprang that race which preserved the curse in the land. (22–4)

In short, Joseph Smith's dogma advanced by the above verses asserts that all the Canaanites were blackened, that they were the seed of Cain and that from them sprang the Egyptians via Egyptus (a black Canaanite married to Ham), thus preserving a black race descended from both Cain and Ham. In equating the Canaanites with the race of Cain, Joseph Smith reminds us of the thirteenth-century author of the Zohar who mistakenly interpreted the Kenites as descendants of Cain. (At least within the biblical text, the

⁷⁷ PL 107, col. 512.

⁷⁸ Only recently has policy begun to change, as, for example, reported on the front page of *The New York Times*, 10 June 1978, by Kenneth A. Briggs: 'The 148-year-old policy of excluding black men from the Mormon priesthood was struck down by the church's leaders yesterday.'

⁷⁹ Publ. by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latterday Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1976 (first issued, as divided into chapters and verses with references by James E. Talmage, 1902).

descendants of Cain are distinct from the Canaanites and the Kenites, and the latter two groups are not the same as one another.) Though Smith's 'revealed' dogma, with its startling interpretation of Canaanites as Cainites and his invented Egyptus as the wife of Ham, strike most of us as incredible; nevertheless some Mormons, such as Bruce R. McConkie,⁸⁰ John Stewart⁸¹ and John Lund,⁸² still maintain Smith's position in their own writings, repeating this doctrine in similar or more drastic ways.

It is difficult to evaluate the norms of certain more popular or off-the-beaten-track doctrines and interpretations. An indirect way of learning about such ideas is far less than satisfactory, for the glimpses are often few and far between. When popular, mystical or heretical ideas are incorporated into traditional canon or are collected and circulated in later periods, as with the Zohar or the modern Mormon tracts, these outside-the-mainstream concepts can be examined at closer hand, but attempts to trace their origins or determine their spread in earlier periods presents an arduous, if not impossible, task. What such documents demonstrate pointedly is that the history of medieval thought (or the thought of any period) must not be construed to be just the history of the more readily accessible traditional, canonical writings. Translations of important works, such as the Babylonian Talmud, the Midrash Rabbah and the Zohar, make available to scholars in fields quite removed from Jewish studies the opportunity of viewing a greater range of ideas that may have influenced or paralleled developments elsewhere in medieval thought.

The source from which the *Beowulf* poet derived his belief that some of Cain's monstrous progeny survived the Flood belongs to that hidden hinterland of ideas out of the range of present historical scholarship. In general we can say that this belief rested on rejecting or misunderstanding or ignoring or forgetting or not knowing traditional exegesis and favouring an interpretation more extravagantly fanciful. The widespread capacity for such a preference has been demonstrated by the belief that the Flood was not universal; by the story of the survival of the giant, Og; by the fabulous survival of Cain's kin described in the Zohar – giants, Jethro, evil spirits, demons, necromancers and goblins; by the view that Naamah the Cainite was Noah's wife; by the Muslim tradition that the daughters-in-law of Noah were all descended from Cain; by the wild karl of Cain's kin in the Middle English

⁸⁰ *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City, Utah, 1966).

⁸¹ *Mormonism and the Negro* (Orem, Utah, 1960).

⁸² *The Church and the Negro* (n.p., 1967). Wayland Hand has called my attention to the fact that there is evidence of this belief among some people in N. Carolina; see *Popular Beliefs and Superstitions from North Carolina*, ed. Wayland D. Hand, *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*, gen. ed. Newman Ivey White (Durham, N.C., 1961) vi, 97 (no. 635): 'Many preachers believe the Negro is the descendant of Cain and a gorilla out of the Land of Nod.'

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Ywain and Gawain; by the confused and murky mix-ups of Ham and Cain; and by the Mormon doctrine that Cain's descendants were literally perpetuated through Ham's wife. But, on present knowledge, we cannot explain the poet's belief in terms of influence from a specific tradition, let alone a specific text. The evidence is insufficient, both in the poem and outside it. Yet probably the *Beowulf* poet mirrors a belief in the real survival of Cain's kin which was more extensive in Anglo-Saxon society than we can realize and, in doing so, provides traces of a remote world of ideas which would otherwise be even more obscured.