

CYNEWULF'S *ELENE*—WOMAN SAINT'S LEGEND, JEWS IN THE MIDDLE  
AGES, AND ENGLISH NATIONALISM

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION .....	1
Introduction followed by a Brief Jewish History from Christ to the Penitentials	
Chapter	Page
1. A WOMAN SAINT'S LEGEND: CITING GENDER .....	9
2. JEWISH IDENTITY IN THE MIDDLE AGES AND NOW .....	29
3. ELENE, JUDAS, AND ENGLISH NATIONALISM .....	41
CONCLUSION .....	60
Medieval Perceptions and Jewish History through the Eyes of Cynewulf's <i>Elene</i>	
Works Cited .....	69

## INTRODUCTION

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*Elene* is one of Cynewulf's later poems, written in the early ninth-century. The journey Cynewulf made through the writing of the poem is mirrored in the journey the reader experiences. Cynewulf's mood as he finishes his tale is two-fold. Charles W. Kennedy describes Cynewulf's mood as "that of weariness and age, as of one drawing near the end of his journey" (178). Despite Cynewulf's passionate interpretation of Constantine's dream and the beginning of Elene's journey in the first 275 lines, he at times falters into a forced re-counting of incidents, as in the weeding out of the Jewish sages from 3,000 to 500 and finally to 1, Judas, in lines 276–596. Cynewulf's is also "the mood of the devout Christian who has found in the Cross the central symbol of his longing and all his hope" (Kennedy 178). However we choose to describe Cynewulf's moods, he poignantly depicts Elene, a female saint, and , more poignantly, Judas, a Jew. Cynewulf's story can also be seen in the broader light of how it reflected his society—Anglo-Saxon England.

Old English is, to the modern reader, far removed from Modern English, and must, therefore, be translated into Modern English. Translators work very hard to remain impartial and to best represent what the original writer intended, but despite their efforts, translations can vary substantially. In quoting Old English, I have consistently utilized

The Labyrinth from Georgetown University. For Modern English, though, I have chosen to quote from two works. The reason for this is that Cynewulf wrote poetry. Charles W. Kennedy chose to translate Cynewulf into alliterative verse, which conveys a stronger image through language and patterning, preserving the poetic mode. S. A. J. Bradley's prose translation provides a less ethereal image, a more pointed description of Cynewulf's ideals. Bradley translations are marked with a "B" and Kennedy's with a "K".

When Cynewulf begins *Elene*, he writes from the omniscient point of view. One of the few breaks in that veneer is in the first passionate three hundred lines:

Ne hyrde ic sið ne ær  
 on egstreame      idese lædan,  
 on merestræte,      mægen fægerre. (240b-242)  
 Never learned I      early or late  
 Of lady who led      on the ocean-lanes  
 Fairer band      o'er the paths of the flood. (K 240-2)

The scene Cynewulf creates so entralls him that he breaks his point of view and blatantly narrates his own feelings—an impressive sign of Elene's power. Twentieth and twenty-first century reactions to her typically stem from modern perceptions about women in the Middle Ages. Awareness of women's roles in Anglo-Saxon society and modern gender theory can help readers understand the title character and therefore build a more concrete appreciation for the other characters in the story. A more three-dimensional view of Elene emerges when we relate her to other well-known women of

the period, specifically Judith, a female saint, and Naomi and Ruth, two women from the Bible.

Because Judas, a main character, is a Jew, examining medieval perceptions of Jews alongside Jewish history can give valuable insight into *Elene* and the literature of the Middle Ages. While some historical accounts represent initial instances of patterns of eradication of Jews, other accounts signify specific instances of attacks on Jewish communities. Beyond a surface recounting of Jewish history, it is helpful to know about especially significant moments in Jewish history when analyzing the depiction of Jews in English literature, specifically the attack on the Jews of York in the late twelfth century and Thomas of Monmouth's *The Life and Miracles of Saint William of Norwich* with its ritual murder charge. Another element in the perception of Jews is the distinction between intentionality and ignorance; belief in Jewish intentionality often leads to fervent anti-Semitism.

Although from the later Middle Ages, charges of ritual murder and attacks on Jewish communities shed new light on Cynewulf's possible motives. After examining Judas Cyriacus as a Jew, I will examine his role in the growth of English nationalism. While *Elene* is about two people and an episode in their lives, the binding thread of the story is Christianity. With the thread of Christianity, Cynewulf weaves the concept of an English identity. The moral of the tale points to an ideal Christian self, and, through Cynewulf's poetic eloquence the ideal Christian self becomes an ideal English, Christian self.

Gender, Judaism, Nationalism—Cynewulf's themes run the gamut from individuals to larger collectives. What we, as readers, assume is re-enforced or

challenged by what he writes and what he leaves out. Beyond gender, Judaism, and nationalism are Cynewulf's final words:

þus ic frod ond fus      þurh þæt fæcne hus  
 wordcræftum wæf      ond wundrum læs,  
 þragum þreodude      ond geþanc reodode  
 nihtes nearwe.      Nysse ic gearwe  
 be ðære rode riht      ær me rumran geþeaht  
 þurh ða mæran miht      on modes þeaht  
 wisdom onwreah. (1236-42a)

Thus, old and death-bound    through this doomed flesh,  
 I have wondrously gathered    and woven this lay.  
 At times I have pondered    and patterned my thought  
 In the anxious night watches.    I knew not truth  
 Concerning the Rood    till with radiant power  
 Wisdom made wider    the thoughts of my mind. (K 1236-41)

The story of the finding of the Cross is, to Cynewulf, a joy and a comfort.



## A BRIEF JEWISH HISTORY: FROM CHRIST TO THE PENITENTIALS

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In the years preceding and following Christ's death, Jews were sold into captivity following wars and uprisings. Cecil Roth, a Jewish historian, maintains that the Jew had the reputation of being a bad servant, stemming from his independent temperament and his determination to follow his own religious customs. Because of this perceived autonomous behavior, few owners sought to retain Jewish servants when an opportunity to replace them arose. Another aspect of the freedom Jews retained is what Roth describes as "the intense racial solidarity which the Jews felt more than any other people prompted them to help one another to freedom whenever the opportunity presented itself" (136). While slavery did place Jews in various parts of the world, Jewish traders also moved throughout the world, often settling in large commercial centers. Thus, the Diaspora, or Scattering, of the Jewish people dates back to before the fall of Jerusalem (around 63 BC). According to Roth, there is "positive evidence of the existence of Jews in over forty places in Italy, as well as in Scythia, Dalmatia, France, the Crimea and elsewhere" (137) by the third century.

The Edict of Carcalla, enacted in 212 AD, deemed all free inhabitants in the Roman Empire to become Roman citizens. Jews of the Empire were, for one hundred and seventeen years, citizens in every respect, beyond a few privileges, a condition which

“was not to prevail again in Europe until the nineteenth century” (Roth 139). Christianity became the doctrine of the Emperor Constantine (307-337 AD) and the official faith of the Roman Empire. Yet, according to Roth, “Christianity, though dominant, was not yet sufficiently sure of itself to show real tolerance” (143). Whether this was the only reason or not, the state of the Jews in the Roman Empire was not secure. By 329 AD, Jews were forbidden to have Christian servants, to convert pagans to Judaism, and to intermarry with Christians. Apostasy from Judaism was avidly encouraged. However, Gregory the Great, pope from 590-604 AD, “set an example which was to be followed by later generations, and which was to remain the norm in Christian Europe until the Middle Ages were at an end” (Roth 145). Pope Gregory discouraged forced baptisms and persecution of the Jews. He granted Jews the liberty to worship in their synagogues, although they were not allowed to establish new synagogues or repair the old. Proselytism was to be repressed, as before, and Jews were ordered not to own Christian slaves. Of course, Pope Gregory could order and declare what he would, but the Empire was large and the niceties of his declarations were not always carried out the way he would have desired.

Pope Gregory’s slightly relaxed, “out of sight, out of mind” policy was rejected by Emperor Heraclitus (610-641 AD), who prohibited Judaism. He also sought to have his example of intolerance followed throughout Europe. In 626 AD, Jews were expelled from Gaul by King Dagobert unless they consented to adopt the dominant religion. While many countries were expelling the Jews, countries practicing Islam allowed Jews to exist within their borders, while still implementing restrictions. Most restrictions were not enforced, providing a relatively secure environment in which Jews could live.

Charles the Great, Charlemagne, crowned Emperor at Rome on Christmas day in 800 AD, was not only a “strong ruler, able to override the theological prejudices of the time, but also a far-seeing one, who could realize the important contribution which the Jews could make to the economic life of his Empire” (Roth 165). Charlemagne set about bestowing favors upon Jews and encouraging their migration to and within his domain. With his patronage and influence, Jewish communities flourished and Jewish merchants found themselves farther and farther afield. According to Roth, the last of the European countries to be settled was England. While Roth states that no conclusive evidence exists for the presence of Jews in Roman or Saxon times, it is not out of the question that some isolated merchants may have found their way that far north. There may be no conclusive proof of established Jewish communities in the British Isles before the time of the Norman Conquest, but “there is evidence that there were Jews in England in Anglo-Saxon times” (Ausubel 116). But what is this evidence and is it plausible?

The penitentials of the early Middle Ages were “lists of the punishments to be applied to each type of sin” (32), according to Jacques Le Goff. Penitentials were meant to combat violence and improve behavior. In the penitential of Theodore (668-690, with later elements), Jews are mentioned, although there is no information about possible communities. Two specific penitentials noting Jews are V.3—“If one flouts the Council of Nicaea and keeps Easter with the Jews on the fourteenth of the moon, he shall be driven out of every church unless he does penance before his death” (188)—and XI.3—“If he fasts out of contempt for the day, he shall be abhorred as a Jew by all the Catholic churches” (194). As these penitentials were used in Anglo-Saxon England, it is clear that they construct a picture of the Jews for Anglo-Saxon English people. Therefore,

Cynewulf may have been influenced by the penitentials. According to V.3, some—a highly debatable number considering the range of topics covered by penitentials—Anglo-Saxons were observing religious holidays with the Jews, which implies the existence of a Jewish community. By threatening penance for observing religious holidays with Jews, it is evident that church fathers feared proselytizing by local Jewish communities. On the other hand, XI.3 appears to be more of a warning of how Jews are to be viewed and treated if encountered. It also implies that a negative stereotype of Jews existed. Jewish communities did not need to be present for church fathers to create reactionary rules. This brief overview of Jewish history ending in Anglo-Saxon penitentials illustrates possible historical and recorded influences on Cynewulf. It is important to understand the types of Jewish images to which Cynewulf was exposed, because those images lead to the Jewish image he created in *Elene*.

## CHAPTER 1:

### A WOMAN SAINT'S LEGEND: CITING GENDER

Why did Cynewulf choose to translate *Elene*? According to Christine Fell, “there are two classes of women which attract particular attention from [modern] historians writing about the European Middle Ages, namely queens and saints, not always in Anglo-Saxon society distinguishable” (8-9). Cynewulf’s choice parallels the modern historian and his Anglo-Saxon contemporaries in his interest in impressive historical figures. Elene’s sainthood is compelling, also appealing is her position as Empress, mother of Constantine the Great. Factors to examine in the story include questions about women in the Anglo-Saxon period and establishing appropriate gender behavior.

Why study this work through the lens of women’s roles in society? Obviously male characters play an important role in the story, but how we respond to Elene herself affects our reading of every other character. Examining a popularized Anglo-Saxon version of a female saint’s life demands that the reader have some information about women’s roles in Anglo-Saxon society. As Barbara Kanner notes, “the female population of England constitutes an unique grouping in society because it has always been relegated—by law, custom, and social policy—to the special category of sex, regardless of class or ethnicity” (10). The juxtaposition of a powerful, domineering

Elene with a society that mandates the relegation of the majority of women to private, submissive roles indicates the need to explore gender.

The status of women under Anglo-Saxon rule was not perfect, but neither was it deplorable. Life was a struggle for sustenance in the Middle Ages, but women played an economic role, providing labor and goods. Legally, women were considered viable property owners. Sheila C. Dietrich feels that when historical “sources are examined to discover what they reveal about women in Anglo-Saxon society, the period appears almost enlightened” (32). Christine Fell, in her book, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* (1984), draws on Doris Stenton, whose book, *The English Woman in History* (1956), states:

The evidence which has survived from Anglo-Saxon England indicates that women were then more nearly the equal companions of their husbands and brothers than at any other period before the modern age. In the higher ranges of society this rough and ready partnership was ended by the Norman Conquest, which introduced into England a military society relegating women to a position honourable but essentially unimportant. (13)

An excellent example of the shift in opinions concerning women’s roles is found in an article by B. Bandel who “argues that Æthelflæd’s [an Anglo-Saxon heroine] treatment in twelfth- and thirteenth-century chronicles differs radically from that in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* [c. 890]. Her martial exploits are neglected; her marital exploits or, more accurately, her lack of them, come to the fore” (Dietrich 36).

A change in political leadership can affect how women are viewed, but religious authority can also determine perceptions of women. Opinions vary dramatically on how Christianity affected the rights of women. Christine Fell points out, “there is a major division of views between those works which see Christianity as improving the status of women, and those which see it, as Doris Stenton does, as detrimental” (13). Stenton, Fell points out, argues that Christianity damaged to women’s status, stating that “with all allowance for the efforts of individual churchmen to help individual women, it must be confessed that the teaching of the medieval Church reinforced the subjection which feudal law imposed on all wives” (Fell 13). In deciphering the Bible, the leaders of the Anglo-Saxon church made their own choices as they interpreted and implemented Christianity. As Christine Fell goes on to say, “the situation is not [... simple]. Christianity as interpreted by the fathers of the church developed a full set of theories on the inferiority of women” (13). Yet, at the same time, Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England did allow for some autonomy for women.

Voicing the side of those who feel Christianity improved the lot of medieval women, Christine Fell writes:

On the contrary, in the first enthusiasm for Christianity, we not only see men and women engaging as equals in the challenge of a new religion and way of life, we see also women specifically asked to take a full and controlling part. No women could have been asked to take on so powerful a role as the early abbesses unless they were used to handling

power, but Christianity is certainly not at this stage

cramping their range of activity and responsibility. (13)

It is important to note here that medieval Christianity is in its early stages at this point and women in power were not typical. But, as Fell states, some women did have positions of authority that they utilized impressively, such as Abbess Hilda. Also, the women noted by Fell were probably women who held positions of power before the advent of Christianity, such as Abbess Etheldreda, the virgin wife of King Egfrid who became an abbess in 653 AD. Looking forward to the Norman Conquest, Fell makes the point that “the combination of the new military-based civil law and the increasing effectiveness of anti-female canon law produced a society in which the role of women was very sharply differentiated from that in the pre-1066 era” (14).

Attaining sainthood demands a miraculous and unique contribution to society. If women were relegated to the edges of society, how could they have made that contribution? Christine Fell quotes Lina Eckenstein’s *Woman Under Monasticism*, c. 1896, saying that Eckenstein

summarizes splendidly the early history of women in the religious life: “most of the women who were honoured as saints in England belong to the first hundred years after the acceptance of Christianity in these islands. A few other women have been revered as saints who lived in the 10<sup>th</sup> century and came under the influence of the monastic revival...But no woman living during Anglo-Norman times has been thus honoured for the desire to raise women to



sainthood was essentially Anglo-Saxon and was strongest in the time which immediately followed the acceptance of Christianity. (11)

Because women in the Anglo-Saxon period were on a more equal footing with men than in the post-Conquest period, Cynewulf's Anglo-Saxon society would not be surprised to hear of a woman with power and autonomy who completes the tasks set before her with aplomb.

While queens are typically powerful women, other powerful women in the Middle Ages were in monasteries. Modern readers sometimes see women who choose the monastic life as highly passive. Living within the strict regime of the church was a way to procure the basic necessities of life, but it was also an opportunity for independence.

Alexandra Henessey Olsen states:

Critics have tended to view the female characters in Old English secular literature from the perspective of patriarchal culture, in which relationships to men define reality for both men and women. They describe women in Anglo-Saxon England as passive figures within a world of active, heroic men. This attitude is heightened in respect to women of the religious literature. Modern readers often assume that women who adopted religious life were even more passive than secular women because they voluntarily put themselves under the governance of the male hierarchy of the Catholic church, which many readers believe to have

been more rigidly patriarchal than secular society. Such an attitude ignores the fact that Christianity gave women the chance to operate as full human beings. (222)

Her point concerning women choosing the church is significant. A woman choosing the church gained the opportunity to control her own life in a far greater measure than women who married did. Olsen states that women chose the church, because “they sought to assert their personal autonomy” (227). Of course, not all women in the church chose to enter the monastic life. Many women were placed in convents for political or social reasons. Hilda of Whitby, in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* lived for thirty-three years in the secular world and then dedicated the rest of her life to Christ as a nun. Whether that choice was spiritually or economically driven is unclear, but within two years of taking vows, she was an abbess. While Bede tells her story in its own right, she is also mentioned in the story of King Oswy. Bede describes her in this way:

Christ’s servant Abbess Hilda, whom all her acquaintances called Mother because of her wonderful devotion and grace, was not only an example of holy life to members of her own community; for she also brought about the amendment and salvation of many living at a distance, who heard the inspiring story of her industry and goodness. (245)

When Bede chronologically summarizes his book, he chooses significant moments in the lives of influential people, again noting Hilda: “In the year 680, a synod was held in the

plain at Hatfield under the presidency of Archbishop Theodore to affirm the Catholic Faith: John, an abbot from Rome, attended. Abbess Hilda died at Streanaeshalch” (327). To choose the church does not negate a woman’s autonomy, because one could argue that within the hierarchy of the church, a woman remains more solidly individual and capable of decision-making than if she chose the opposite life—marriage and motherhood.

Although some readers and scholars believe that saints’ legends are all the same and describe them as “quite stilted” (Olsen 223), Cynewulf’s *Elene* is an admirable example of the power and delight that can be found in saint’s legends. To those who lightly pass over saints’ legends, Alexandra Henessey Olsen responds that such an “attitude derives from the fact that critics fail to understand not only the nature of Old English poetry, which represents a literature more personal and more human [...] than Roman literature from which the stories are drawn, but also the nature of female sanctity” (223). Taking the time to delve into *Elene* leads readers into a world of eloquent characterization and potent themes, even in spite of poor translations, which fail to evoke the true beauty of Old English.

Elene’s powerful presence may be a surprise to modern readers, but to the Jews in the text she was frightening. The reasons for this can be found in how Cynewulf characterizes Elene, both in how she is presented and in her speech. His descriptions of Elene are not meek and diluted. In describing her confrontation of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, van der Wurff states that Elene is a woman who is “not only beautiful but also self-confident enough to address these three thousand men without trepidation” (302). Also evident are the descriptors of Elene’s nobility and power. Cynewulf sets the scene, saying:

in cynestole      caseres mæg,  
 geatolic guðcwen      golde gehyrsted. (330-1)  
 The emperor's kinswoman waited in majesty upon a  
 throne, a magnificent warlike queen clad in gold. (B 329-  
 31)

According to van der Wurff, “she would strike the Jews as a figure clothed in royal splendour, invested with power and authority, and not to be intimidated or deflected from her plans” (302). After dismissing the other Jews, Elene addresses Judas, saying:

þe synt tu gearu,  
 swa lif swa deað,      swa þe leofre bið  
 to geceosanne. (605b-7a)  
 Two things are open to you: either life or death, just as it  
 better suits you to choose. (B 605-6)

Cynewulf then states:

Iudas [...] wæs on þære cwene gewealdum (610)  
 Judas [...] was in the queen's power (B 610)

Elene epitomizes the character of a self-assured and powerful person.

Olsen argues that Elene was “considered appropriate for poetic treatment because [she] was active and heroic” (223). But, that same action “has caused many [modern readers] to view her with disfavor, presumably because she is not the passive and inactive female many scholars want women in Old English literature to be” (Olsen 223). Juliana, another of Cynewulf's heroines, is considered to be the reverse of Elene. Juliana is as active as Elene, but Cynewulf has focused more on portraying her verbal activity than on

physical actions, which leads many to ignore her actions and define her as passive. In place of physical acts against the devil, she uses verbal action. Women in Anglo-Saxon texts typically control through verbal action, which is sometimes mistakenly construed as a passive role. “Juliana,” Olsen states, “chooses the chain of circumstances that leads to her martyrdom; martyrdom is not forced upon her, so that it is impossible to treat her as the passive victim of circumstances beyond her control” (223). Much like the Germanic tradition, in which “women normally use speech rather than action to achieve their purposes, but they resort to action when speech fails” (Olsen 225), Juliana and Elene choose their own courses of action. Both use verbal action which culminates in physical action on their part (Elene sends Judas Cyriacus to starve in a pit; Juliana seizes the devil) and then they return to verbal action (Elene eloquently requests that Judas Cyriacus find the nails; Juliana entreats the people to holiness and is martyred). According to Olsen, “the response of literary critics to the problems raised by Elene and Juliana has been to retreat from discussing them as women at all, depicting them instead as allegorical counters in typological narratives” (223).

Although it is possible to examine Cynewulf’s heroines as allegorical, the depth of his genius can only be appreciated by viewing Elene and Juliana as three-dimensional characters who represent women in Anglo-Saxon society. They are not solely passive or solely active; they are people faced with interesting and challenging decisions. As Olsen writes, “Elene may well represent the Church and Juliana events in Christian history, but they are first women whom we must interpret in terms of what we know about women in Old English society” (224). Before we draw conclusions about character, we must first know what sort of society popularized these stories.

Olsen notes the stark contrast between the Latin version (*Sanctae Crvcis Inventio*) of a Helena who asks Judas Cyriacus to find the nails from the cross and the Cynewulfian version portraying an Elene who demands action from Judas Cyriacus. Adding to the Latin source, Cynewulf writes:

Hæfde Ciriacus

eall gefylled,      swa him seo æðele behead,  
wifes willan. (1129b-31a)

Cyriacus had fulfilled the woman's whole desire according  
as the noble lady had bidden him. (B 1128-9)

In this passage, “Cynewulf emphasizes that his Elene is the person who controls the situation” (Olsen 224). But why characterize Elene as assertive and autonomous? Olsen “suggest[s] that Cynewulf heightened the portrait in his Latin source to make Elene the strong, autonomous figure that she is and that we need to understand women of Germanic tradition to interpret her and her role in the poem properly” (224-5). It is a mistake to assume that Anglo-Saxon women were passive. Understanding that Anglo-Saxon women were not necessarily passive creates a plausible explanation for Elene's reaction to Judas Cyriacus' refusal to surrender his knowledge. Elene cajoles, beseeches, and intimidates with speech, and, when this fails, she orders Judas Cyriacus thrown into a pit. Her action is only surprising when viewed through a lens that has been created without complete understanding of Cynewulf's contemporaries. Olsen notes Helen Damico's argument that “Elene's qualities—‘severity of mind, tenacity of purpose, and courage’—link her to those ‘half-mortal, half-supernatural beings called...*ides* in Old English,’” because of this, Olsen makes the argument that

Cynewulf deliberately recast the depiction of Helena to evoke memories of the *ides* and of human women who have similar sagacity of speech [...]. *Elene* develops the dowager empress found in the Latin *Inventio* into an assertive Germanic woman whose speech is action but who acts when she must. (225-30)

The *ides* in heroic poetry were goddesses of fate, which led fallen men to Valhalla. They are a version of the Valkyries.

*Elene*, in which the sex of the main character is an integral element, leads me to consider gender theory. Susan Halloran discusses “the function each character plays in relation to those of differing gender, [...] and the degree to which characters conform to or elude what both medieval and modern audiences might consider ‘typing’” (55).

Halloran presents an idea in the words of Simone de Beauvoir that “[Man] is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other” (55). As the feminist critic, Joyce Tally Lionarons argues, if a “male” action is enacted by a female, then she is “citing” maleness. The same would be true of a man enacting a “female” action. When a woman is passive and honors authority, she is occupying her proper feminine role. When a woman acts with courage and conviction, she is “citing” maleness. Lionarons states that

because Elene’s actions are both part of and constrained by the performance of her normative maternal role, however, her iteration of masculine categories is perhaps better characterized as a ‘citation’ within a larger enactment of

the feminine rather than as a performative in its own right.

(55)

A performative is when a person is acting within a societal role; citing occurs when a person enacts a role that would commonly be performed by the opposite gender. The main issue at stake is the idea that Elene is “citing” maleness and then returning to her feminine role. As Elene completes the sea-voyage, she leaves the ships at anchor to wait

hwonne heo sio guðcwen      gumena þreate

ofer eastwegas      eft gesohte. (254-5)

until the warlike queen with her company of men returned

to them along the roads from the east. (B 253-4)

Elene’s ability to command men is a typical male action. As Elene leaves Jerusalem, she gives Judas Cyriacus “forgeaf / sincweorðunga”(1215b-6a), “costly tokens of esteem” (B 1216). The idea here is that action can be construed as male or female.

Constantine is also involved in this “citing.” He opens the story as a warrior, a king in battle. According to Lionarons, he moves into the next part of the story as a feminized figure because he waits patiently at home while his mother challenges the sea and a strange people. Constantine has appropriated her position as a patient matriarch and forced her to masculinize herself and become a war-queen leading his men. Elene is viewed as succumbing to the idea of “citing” by immediately shifting from her masculine character as warlike queen and shifting to a persona as subject woman submitting to authority by travelling to Jerusalem at the request of her son and requesting aid from Judas Cyriacus in finding the nails in lines 1073-92. Simply put, Lionarons’ view is that



to be seen as passive forces a person into a feminine role and to act in any way is a purely masculine trait.

Elene is seen as “citing” masculinity by completing the task her son gives her, which is proportional to the idea that Constantine is passive by not travelling to Jerusalem. His role must be examined in a broader sense. Constantine is the leader, the Emperor. The opening scene of *Elene* is a battle. Upon winning a battle, it is obvious that the Emperor would have to remain with his people in order to control his newly conquered additions.

As for Elene performing masculine activities, Cynewulf could cite several other cases of women in active roles. In Germanic tradition, there are the *ides*, battle virgins in the manner of the Valkyries. There are also the women of the Bible. Each of these sets of women, while performing feminine tasks (i. e. the *ides* serve ale and fetch Odin’s horn), are also “citing” masculinity by going into battle—Judith enters a military camp and slays Holofernes; the *ides* choose among those slain in war to send to Valhalla. Most Christianized Anglo-Saxons would be in some way familiar with Biblical stories. A case in point, for example, is the story of Judith. Judith is a fair virgin in the city of Bethulia. The Assyrians come to conquer her town and Holofernes, their lord, sets his licentious gaze on her. Rather than submit to his evil desires, she kills him and stirs her people to victory (Judith 13:8-9, 14). Does this make Judith masculine, because she acted when forced? Another example “citing” maleness are the actions of Ruth and Naomi. Naomi moves herself and her daughter-in-law back to her home country, a decisive action. Naomi’s directions to Ruth in relation to Boaz are shrewd but she is still not perceived as masculine. Lionarons concepts of “citing” and performing label action. Action does not

belong to a particular person or gender. People react to situations. For Naomi and Ruth, the men who were to protect and guide them were dead, necessitating that they actively care and provide for themselves. Much like Judith, Naomi, and Ruth, Elene is given a task to perform. Performing a given task does not make a woman masculine, nor does it strip her femininity from her. Elene is a woman in a position of power and authority who handles challenges with fortitude and wisdom. She is unique, but comparable to other strong women, like a Germanic *ides*, a Briton queen, or an Anglo-Saxon Abbess. As Olsen states, “when we read *Elene* and *Juliana* from a feminist point of view, we do not have to reduce the characters to allegorical commonplaces or the narratives to typological paradigms but can admit that Cynewulf depicts his female characters as human beings” (230). By narrowing the roles of women saints to a scale of more feminine or less feminine, we lose their identity as people. They are no longer human beings who faced great odds and triumphed; they are merely oddities.

A typical role for women in Old English society is that of motherhood. While motherhood may be a role that women love, it does not solely define who they are. But, in applying gender theory, it is important to see “typing” applied to Elene. She is a mother, literally to Constantine. Figuratively and spiritually, she is a mother to Judas Cyriacus, because she “gives birth” to him. She also plays the part of a “mother-muse” to Cynewulf, according to Lionarons. Elene meets the criteria of a muse not only as a “metaphor of the (female) muse as a source of inspiration for literary study and creation [...], a commonplace of the classical tradition” (Lionarons 67), but also as an inspiration for finding the cross of Christ. In each of these cases of motherhood, does she fittingly represent the role?

As a mother to Constantine, Elene is supportive and does what he bids her to do. While obeying one's child is not typical of mothering, it is politically valid in light of Constantine's position as Emperor. Despite Elene's familial relationship with Constantine, the Emperor's decisions are law. According to Lionarons, "by her gift of a bridle with its bit made from the nails of the Cross, Elene quite literally hands the reins of masculine martial power back to her son" (59). This action merges with the idea of mothering, as a mother would be delighted to offer her child what she sees as an instrument of great power.

The connection between Elene and Constantine is parallel to that between Judas Cyriacus and his father, Symon. Judas Cyriacus tells the learned men of Jerusalem that his father, on his deathbed, spoke of the holy tree that Elene is searching for :

'Gif þe þæt gelimpe      on lifdagum  
 þæt ðu gehyre      ymb þæt halige treo  
 frode frignan,      ond geflitu ræran  
 be ðam sigebeame      on þam soðcýning  
 ahangen wæs,      heofonrices weard,  
 eallre sybbe bearn,      þonne þu snude gecyð,  
 min swæs sunu,      ær þec swylt nime.  
 Ne mæg æfre ofer þæt      Ebrea þeod  
 rædþeahtende      rice healdan,  
 duguðum wealdan,      ac þara dom leofað  
 ond hira dryhtscipe,  
 in woruld weorulda      willum gefylled,

ðe þone ahangnan cyning heriaþ ond lofiað.' (441-53)

If in your lifetime it should happen to you that you hear  
wise men inquiring about that holy tree and raising a  
controversy about the tree of victory on which the true  
King, heaven's Guardian, was hanged, then, my dear son,  
quickly profess the Child of all concord before death seizes  
you. Never after that shall the Hebrew people be able to  
hold sway determining policies, or to govern the  
multitudes, but in an aeon of aeons filled with joys the  
dominion and the dignity shall live on of those who praise  
and laud that crucified king. (B 441-52)

Judas Cyriacus braves Elene's anger and refuses to talk, believing his father's words—that his people will suffer once the Cross is found. After starving for seven days, Judas Cyriacus, at the point of death, concedes. Because Judas Cyriacus has obeyed his father and only confessed Christ as death approaches him, Lionarons believes that "the text privileges the idea of fatherhood rather than motherhood in Judas's conversion, emphasizing in particular the paternal role of God himself" (65). By denoting his conversion in terms of God and not God's servant, Elene, her typical role as mother is subverted. Lionarons goes on to say that "the exchange not only appropriates Elene's function as spiritual mother, but also erases her as a significant character in the process of Judas's conversion" (65). While Judas Cyriacus heeds his father words and converts, which could be seen as denying Elene's part in his conversion, it is apparent that Elene has been a strong enough catalyst to cause his conversion while he is still relatively

young. Because of Elene's persuasion, Judas Cyriacus lives many years as a bishop in the church, furthering the conversion of others. Elene in this case is the catalyst for Judas Cyriacus' conversion, but his acknowledgment of the overwhelming power of God in no way removes her place in God's plan to bring Judas Cyriacus unto Him. Lionarons implies that Judas Cyriacus' relationship with Eusebius, the bishop who trains him, subverts Elene. But, Cynewulf states that

Elene heht      Eusebium  
 on rædgeþeaht,      Rome bisceop,  
 gefetian on fultum,      forðsnoterne,  
 hæleða gerædum      to þære halgan byrig, (1050-3)  
 Helen commanded Eusebius, bishop in Rome, a very wise  
 man, to be brought to the holy city for advice and help [...].  
 (B 1050-2)

It is Elene who contacts Rome and brings in a bishop to train Judas Cyriacus. Her place in his conversion continues until he is a bishop.

Another role for Elene is that of "mother-muse." Cynewulf is despondent about his sins and in this sad state, his "mother-muse" gives him the inspiration of her story.

Ic wæs weorcum fah,  
 synnum asæled,      sorgum gewæled,  
 bitrum gebunden,      bisgum beþrunen,  
 ær me lare onlag      þurh leohtne had  
 gamelum to geoce,      gife unscynde [...]. (1242b-5)  
 Soiled by past deeds      and shackled with sin

I was vexed with sorrows,    bitterly bound,  
 Burdened with cares,    till the King of might  
 Through His radiant grace    granted me knowledge [...].  
 (K 1242-5)

Cynewulf began *The Fates of the Apostles* in a similar despairing state. In *The Fates of the Apostles*, Cynewulf dwells on death and is then inspired to write about the deaths of the apostles. But, in a gendered reading, the concept of Elene as “mother-muse” takes on a vivid meaning. Lionarons states that, “once his poem has been written, Cynewulf is as much the ‘father’ of *Elene* the poem as her legend is his ‘mother-muse’” (68). In effect, she gives birth to the poet, Cynewulf, and he “gives birth” to her story. The essence of this argument is quite convincing. Her story is inspirational, but inspiration is never that simple. As stated above, Elene crafts a bit and bridle for Constantine from the nails of the Cross. By creating this emblem, she provides him with a means to glorify God—

He ah æt wigge sped,  
 sigor æt sæcce, [...]  
 'Cup þæt gewyrðeð    þæt þæs cyninges sceal  
 mearh under modegum    midlum geweorðod,  
 bridelshringum.    Bið þæt beacen gode  
 halig nemned,    ond se hwæteadig,  
 wigge weorðod,    se þæt wicg byrð.' (1181b-95)  
 He shall have success in war, victory in combat and  
 everywhere immunity and protection in the fighting, who  
 bears this emblem, the bridle, upon a steed, when renowned

warriors, proved men, carry shield and javelin into the  
 storm of spears. This shall be to every man that  
 unvanquished weapon in warfare against oppression  
 concerning which the prophet sang, wise in the complexity  
 of his thought—his understanding, the faculty of his  
 wisdom, penetrating deep and he spoke these words: ‘It  
 will come to be known that the horse of the king shall be  
 distinguished among the brave by its bit and its bridling-  
 chains. That ensign shall be called ‘Holy unto God,’ and  
 the favoured warrior whom that horse bears, he shall be  
 distinguished in war.’ (B 1179b-94)

Cynewulf, in turn, crafts Elene’s story much the way that Elene crafted the bridle and bit. She had taken the nails of the Cross and turned them into an emblem of power for her son. Cynewulf takes Elene’s story and turns it into an emblem of power for Christians in the Middle Ages. By disguising his name in runes at the end of the story, Cynewulf forces the reader to craft the identity of the poet and become a part of the story. Elene crafts the perceptions of those who face Constantine, Cynewulf the perceptions of the reader, and the reader crafts his or her own perceptions of the poet and his meaning, thus influencing those around them.

Themes noted in *Elene* range from spiritual warfare to the meaning of the Cross. John P. Hermann, for example, believes that “the purpose of Cynewulf’s modifications of the traditional narrative can best be understood in terms of the heroic ethos of Anglo-Saxon poetry with the biblical and patristic notion of the spiritual combat” (115). The

image of the Cross becomes a symbol of the transition from physical victory to spiritual victory. Hermann notes Constantine's progression from no spiritual knowledge to a deep knowledge "in a very brief time" (117). Prowess in physical battle is quickly equaled in spiritual prowess, giving the illusion of simplicity in conversion. What you have worked to achieve in the secular realm will immediately be matched upon conversion in the spiritual realm. The allure of many stories and especially this one, is the ease with which new converts grasp Christian principles and become enthusiastic propagators of Christianity. When Judas Cyriacus battles Satan, "Satan does not separate the notions of literal and spiritual battle in his speech, but sees them as part of the same reality, each interpenetrating the other" (Hermann 119). Conversion results not in a continuation of physical, political battles, but becomes a series of polysemous battles with heavy spiritual undertones.

Cynewulf took the basic elements of a story and turned them into a passionate tale abounding with themes. While gender theory impacts modern perceptions of Elene, there is still the concept of conversion embedded in his work. Stepsis and Rand write that Cynewulf "turned [a] bare [Latin] narrative into a theological reflection on the nature of Christianity" (281). But, viewing *Elene* only from the view of gender or Christianity shuts out the effect of a Jewish presence and the larger application of the story to the developing English nation. Cynewulf's story is also the reflection of an eloquent poet. Rather than copy a text or share a tale in the mead-hall, Cynewulf chose to record his own version of an historical event—leaving his mark on Elene's story and all of the story's future readers.



## CHAPTER 2:

# JEWISH IDENTITY IN THE MIDDLE AGES AND NOW

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Judas, a Jew, converts to Christianity in *Elene*. As a Jew, Judas is respected, but once converted, he is known only as “Cyriacus,” a bishop in the Roman Catholic Church. Is it plausible that, through conversion, Judas can morph so completely into a member of the Catholic Church without any ties binding him to his original faith? If it is plausible, as Cynewulf describes, then what does it mean to be a Jew and what did Judas Cyriacus relinquish by converting? The question of who a Jew is has more theories than true answers. Are Jews a race, a religion, a nation, a people, or a language-culture group? Modern thinkers fail to agree on an exact definition. The number of ideas presented below will tell us something obvious—while many people are sure what constitutes being a Jew, there is no definition that is entirely accepted. Nevertheless, a consensus can be formed from the various viewpoints. By examining the ideas of various writers, we can reach a realistic definition of what it means to be Jewish in today’s world, because how we view Jews today defines how we view Jews in Cynewulf’s *Elene*. By understanding who Jews are, we can formulate some opinions on what it meant to be Jewish in the Middle Ages.

In the Middle Ages, attacks on Jews ranged from exclusionary efforts to murder charges and murder itself. But who are the Jews and why would so many people attack them? Questions arise among Jews themselves as to who exactly is a Jew, whether and when a convert becomes a Jew and how to trace lineage. A Gentile discussion that often leads to anti-Semitism is the issue of Jewish willfulness or ignorance in the crucifixion of Christ. A factor in that discussion is whether or not the Jews are still God's Chosen People, as described in Exodus, "And I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God" (Thompson Chain Reference Bible, 6.7)—a question that is neither small nor insignificant.

The *Halakha*, traditional Jewish law, defines a Jew as an "individual who was either born to a Jewish mother, or converted to Judaism" (Patai 15). Yet converts are called proselytes, not Jews or converted Gentiles. In his search for what constitutes being Jewish, Raphael Patai has arrived at a consensus of two beliefs and two duties that Jews share: "They are the belief in the one God; the belief in the special relationship between God and Israel; the duty toward God; and the duty toward one's fellow man" (10). The Jews have not lightly accepted their relationship to God. Being His Chosen People is not, they feel, a choice they made. A Midrash (a term that refers collectively to notes and commentary on the Scriptures) phrases it this way: "When God revealed the Law on Mount Sinai, He lifted up the mountain, held it over the heads of the people, and said to them: 'If you accept the Tora [sic], it is well; if not, here will be your burial'" (Patai 11).

Even if an individual born to Jewish parents formally converts to another religion, he does not automatically cease being Jewish. After baptism, he is not simply a Christian, he becomes a "Jew converted to Christianity." Removing one's Jewishness is

considered impossible. If “a Jew felt that the burden was too heavy and threw it off, this made him a bad Jew, a sinful Jew, but ‘even though he sinned he was a Jew.’ His defection did not eradicate his Jewishness because nothing could” (Patai 20). Another important consideration is whether or not a convert is simply a sinful Jew or actually ceases to be a Jew. And what about those Jews who do not denounce their religion in favor of another but simply stop practicing Judaism?

According to Nathan Ausubel, Jews in Angevin England were property or chattel of the king during the Middle Ages and therefore gained some of his protection. Having the king’s protection, though, requires some form of payment and Jewish coffers were frequently raided to fill royal coffers. The sentiment of one Englishman, John Hare, in a pamphlet written in 1647, was that one of William the Conqueror’s misdeeds was “allowing the Jews to enter England, whereas the Anglo-Saxon monarchs would have been careful to exclude them” (Poliakov 48). The Jewish position, tentative at best, was in a constant state of uncertainty.

On July 18 1290, Edward I issued a decree in England, ordering all Jews to leave the country within three months, although he offered them a modicum of protection as they sought refuge on other shores. England, a safe haven where refugees from the Continent had fled, was no longer a safe place to live, or even a place for Jews to live. The exclusion of the Jews was not absolute, but remaining Jews were forced to keep low profiles to avoid execution. Jewish communities no longer existed in England, but John Toland’s *Reasons for Naturalizing the Jews in Great Britain and Ireland* (1714) argued that not all the Jews had left with the expulsion in 1290 but that some, in fact, had remained and melded with the English, while others had fled to Scotland.

As revolution rocked European governments, it also began to change the perceptions harbored about Jews. As individual freedom was achieved, Jews were granted citizenship and integrated into societies. Citizenship for Jews was an ambiguous privilege. After the Jewish Enlightenment and Emancipation in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Jews and Gentiles mingled more freely than ever before. As the lines between the groups faded over the following decades, the question of who was Jewish became more confusing and important, because many countries, including England, decreed that Jewish authorities could tax all Jews in their localities. The “legal assumption [was] that a person born to Jewish parents was a Jew and that his Jewish birth imposed on him certain duties toward the Jewish community. Only by formally seceding from Judaism could he sever his ties with his ancestral faith and, simultaneously, with the Jewish community” (Patai 22).

Now that Jews were a part of society, there was no longer a ghetto in which to thrust them. Jewish and non-Jewish groups did not seamlessly meld. Existing on both sides were people who did not want to merge. For the Jews, it was a question of maintaining their strict faith. When all Jews lived and worked in a sequestered area, there was no question that each individual was part of the greater collective. Becoming an integrated part of society meant that each individual Jew could choose how he or she would act out the Jewish faith. The struggle of merging with non-Jewish societies reached a climax—World War II. The holocaust proved that Jews needed an autonomous Jewish area.

The Israeli nation enacted the Law of Return on July 5, 1950, stating that every Jew had the right to return to Israel. Simple and concise as the law first appears,

citizenship could still be questioned, resulting in the denial of citizenship to a Catholic monk of Jewish parentage in 1963. In today's world, to be Jewish is a state of mind that should be accepted and recognized by others. Even someone born to Jewish parents may be refused his Jewishness by another person's failure to recognize his claim. Patai's final definition is that "a Jew is a person who believes, or feels, that he, together with all other Jews, is a descendant of Abraham—a descendant, that is, symbolically, mystically, and emotionally" (19).

Keeping the Jewish community alive is its ability to assimilate into a surrounding society without losing the concrete core of Judaism. Even when Gentile values succeed in penetrating the barriers of Jewish existence, they "never amount to more than manageable modifications in the traditional Jewish value system, whose basics remained untouched, unaltered, undiluted" (Patai 12). Jews are separate from their environment while not wholly condemning or denying their surroundings. Ausubel argues that regardless of where a Jew lives or what language he speaks, he remains a Jew, while his attachment to the country he lives in does not waver. Jews are individuals who happen to share "a consciousness of *being Jews*" (Ausubel 3), while they maintain lives in the societies and nations where they make their homes. In the words of a modern author, George Robinson, "For four thousand years the Jewish people have persevered despite persecution and hatred. They have never been more than three percent of the world's population at any time in their history, yet their impact on world civilization is incalculable" (5).

Because of the frequent destruction of the temple—especially after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A. D. by the Romans—the Jews began to adapt to an

environment bent on destroying their heritage and knowledge bases. The rabbis turned their attention to the codification of Jewish law, “shifting the focus of Judaism from the Temple to the Torah, to creating a Judaism whose invisible walls could not be breached by any intruder” (Robinson 323). From approximately 200-220 C. E., Judah Ha-Nasi created “the Mishnah (from the Hebrew shanah/to repeat, “teaching by oral transmission)” (Robinson 323). By creating the Mishnah, Judah Ha-Nasi and his fellow rabbis were creating a method of preserving Jewish uniqueness. They were also instilling in the Jewish mind a message of hope and constancy. The importance of the work revolves around the ideal of the passing of time. Despite hardship and persecution, famine and war, Jews will be born and will marry. Feast days will still be celebrated—this is the lesson of the Mishnah.

As the Jews sought to maintain their beliefs and follow the traditions of their forefathers, the Christian church sought to explain their behavior. Accusations of ritual murder and well-poisoning stem from myths created around Jewish separation. Jeremy Cohen brings to light the argument of Jewish willfulness versus Jewish ignorance in the crucifixion of Christ. On the side of willfulness, Cohen states that “only a people deemed willfully evil could have been charged with the unnatural atrocities that medieval Europeans attributed to the Jews: host-desecration, well-poisoning, and ritual murder” (1). Cohen feels that the majority of anti-Jewish sentiment stems from the “new Christian theological stance...first developed by and propagated by Dominican and Franciscan friars of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries” (1). Noting a trend in portraying the blindness of Jews, Cohen asks the question of “When, if at all, did the motif of the Jews’ blindness give way to a notion of their conscious rejection of the

divine messenger?” (2). The importance of such a question is that “the Christian conception of Jewish disbelief not only influenced the theory underlying medieval anti-Jewish polemic but also conditioned the day-to-day realities of Jewish-Christian relations” (Cohen 2). Medieval Jews did not deny responsibility for the crucifixion; some even went to so far as to say that “if one accepted the salvation message of Jesus’ death, then the crucifixion should be viewed as ‘a praiseworthy act’” (Cohen 2).

For medieval Christians the question becomes “did the Jews of the first century—and their medieval descendants, by extension—recognize Jesus as messiah and Son of God, or were they entirely ignorant of the magnitude of their crime?” (Cohen 3). According to Cohen, the early Middle Ages are characterized by a “tradition of Jewish ignorance” (3), but a new tradition emerges in the later Middle Ages of “intentionality” (3). Ignorance implies that the crucifixion of Christ was acted out not simply because of unbelief, but from an inability to recognize Christ as the Messiah. Intentionality is the theory that Jews understood that Christ was the Messiah, but they chose to deny and crucify him despite their knowledge. The bewilderment of the Jews in *Elene* agrees with the theory of ignorance. Writing in the early Middle Ages, Cynewulf would be familiar with the tradition of ignorance, thus aptly describing the Jewish mindset after Elene’s impassioned speech to the five hundred—

beboden hæfde,  
geomormode,      georne smeadon,  
sohton searopancum,      hwæt sio syn wære  
þe hie on þam folce      gefremed hæfdon  
wið þam casere,      þe him sio cwen wite. (412b-6)

They earnestly considered and deviously inquired what that  
 sin might be which they in that nation had committed  
 against the emperor, and of which the queen had accused  
 them. (B 412-15)

Cynewulf's depiction of the bewilderment of the Jews would further the pre-conceived ideals of his contemporaries.

Studying Cynewulf's *Elene* led Stepsis and Rand to focus on the motifs of darkness and light. They extend their study with the terms of concealment and exposure. For Stepsis and Rand, apparent in all of Cynewulf's poems is that they are "'about' the struggle between good and evil, or to be more specific, the struggle between what it means to be a Christian and what it means to be a pagan (here including the Jewish race)" (274). They feel that Cynewulf develops the contrast between what is hidden and concealed in darkness and its being revealed and exposed to light. That revelation is far reaching in terms of the ultimate exposure being the Cross, a symbol of Christ. According to Stepsis and Rand, the purpose of the light/dark theme is apparent in Judas Cyriacus's conversion:

This conversion takes place through the agency of Christ  
 and the cross which, in the duality of their existence, have  
 bridged the two worlds, been hidden in darkness and made  
 manifest in the light and, by their revelation to man, they  
 enable him to transform himself. (282)

Toward the Jews, Cynewulf can be viewed as antagonistic as many Christians have been and still are. According to Stepsis and Rand, "it was an act of darkness to bury the cross



in darkness and it is an act of darkness to conceal the hiding place of the cross. Cynewulf makes explicit this connection between darkness and the combined sin of the Jewish people in killing Christ and in hiding His Cross” (276). An important distinction to draw here is the absence of time. While the Jews Elene approaches are descendants of the Jews involved in the killing of Christ, they are not the same people. Van der Wurff comments on pronoun usage in Elene’s speech, saying that “its dramatic effect is that the three thousand Jews present are implicated in and made responsible for what their ancestors have done. The difference between past and present is obliterated” (305-6). While Cynewulf can be seen as following and perpetuating popular opinions about Jews, does it necessarily follow that he is in complete agreement? Cynewulf’s portrayal of Judas Cyriacus is drawn with sympathy. Cynewulf’s anti-Semitism is apparent, because it is not until Judas Cyriacus has converted that Elene approaches Judas Cyriacus with civility:

þu me, eorla hleo,      [...]
   
eallum eaðmedum,      ar selesta,
   
þine bene onsend      in ða beorhtan gesceaft,
   
on wuldres wyn.      Bide wigena þrym
   
þæt þe gecyðe,      cyning ælmihtig,
   
hord under hrusan      þæt gehyded gen,
   
duguðum dyrne,      deogol bideð. ( 1073-92)

Refuge of the people, [...] most excellent apostle, in all  
 humility send up your prayer into that radiant creation, into  
 the joy of heaven, and beseech the majestic Lord of his

soldiers that he, the King almighty, reveal to you the  
treasure [...]. (B 1073-91)

By negating his Jewishness Judas Cyriacus is the person to whom God reveals the true cross and the nails.

Beyond the question of Jewish intentionality and Jewish ignorance is the question of whether or not the Jews are still God's chosen people. Jeremy Cohen says of the writers of the Gospels that

Their portrayals of the Jewish involvement in the death of  
Jesus had more pressing objectives: while the Jews should  
have accepted Jesus as the redeemer of whom their  
prophets had spoken, their persecution of him demonstrates  
their repudiation of their heritage, their forfeiture of their  
status as God's chosen people. (5)

Cohen discusses several scriptures that were used as evidence of Jewish intentionality and willfulness in the crucifixion. The strongest example is Matthew 21:33-9, which tells the story of tenant farmers who refuse to pay the owner of the vineyard. In fact, the farmers attack and even kill the owner's messengers. Finally, the owner sends his son. After the tenant farmers kill the owner's son, Jesus says "Therefore I say unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof" (Matthew 21.43). From this parable, medieval Christians adduced that Christ took His kingdom from the Jews and chose a new people. Noting a transfer of God's kingdom is Robert H. Gundry, who states that "the destruction of the tenant farmers is accompanied by the transfer of God's kingdom 'to another nation producing its fruits'

(21:43), that is, to the church portrayed as a new chosen nation” (Gundry 194). J. R. Dummelow’s commentary lessens the blow of transferring God’s kingdom to a transfer of “the privileges of the kingdom” (696). Insightful commentary is presented in Leslie F. Church’s edition of a commentary by Matthew Henry, a Biblical scholar. Henry notes two parts in the verse, stating that “Know then, (1) That the Jews shall be unchurched” and “(2) That the Gentiles shall be taken in” (114). Further illuminating the text are his comments concerning what had been given the Jews and how that has changed. Henry writes,

To the Jews had long pertained *the adoption and the glory*  
(Romans 9.4); and the sacred trust of revealed religion, and  
bearing up of God’s name in the world; but now it shall be  
so no longer. They were not only unfruitful in the use of  
their privileges, but opposed the gospel of Christ, and so  
forfeited [their privileges]. (114)

Jewish unbelief in Christ opened Christ’s message to non-Jews. As Church states: “Though his vine may be plucked up in one place, he will find another to plant it in. The fall of Israel was the riches of the Gentiles. They shall bring forth the fruits better than the Jews had done” (114). In the end, ideas emerged from early medieval Christianity which led to the Crusades and a myriad of other painful episodes in which Jews were shunned, expelled and murdered. For all of the negative connotations to Cynewulf’s work, there are also positive ideals. His picture of a strong, capable woman, who battles with her words and actions, is undeniable. And, while his picture of the Jews is anti-Semitic, he also describes Judas Cyriacus, before his conversion with these words:

þa þær for eorlum      an reordode,  
 gidða gearosnotor,      (ðam wæs Iudas nama,  
 wordes cræftig): (417-9)

One spoke up, one very shrewd in his sayings and expert  
 with words, whose name was Judas. (B 415-7)

It was not necessary for Cynewulf to depict Judas Cyriacus in any other language than when he describes Judas Cyriacus with Elene—gloomy, tormented, anguished and completely in her power—but he does. He gives a full picture of Judas Cyriacus' character—strong, resilient, defiant under pressure, but breakable.

## CHAPTER 3:

### ELENE, JUDAS, AND ENGLISH NATIONALISM

Cynewulf effectively appropriates the story of Elene, the mother of Constantine, to further English nationalism. By juxtaposing an “other”—the Jews— with an ideal self—Elene— an English identity is created. Although *Elene* is about a Greek woman, she has embraced the Christian faith and is therefore capable of challenging other nationalities and religions. By identifying her faith outside of her Greek nationality, *Elene* becomes a story not about Greeks, but about the power of Christianity over all other people and beliefs, creating an illusion of the ideal self.

The same treatment is given to Judas. While identified as a Jew, Judas’s voice is effectual, but upon converting to Christianity and becoming the bishop Cyriacus in the Catholic Church, Judas’s voice becomes even more potent and he gains power over his former antagonists. His Jewish identity is lost in his new faith. Invitingly, this would create an ideal in which all Christians, regardless of nationality are equal; but the moral of the story is redirected, resulting in the ideal self being not only Christian, but also crucially English. Anglo-Saxons went a step beyond relishing their Christianity; they chose to see their particular religious “acting out” of Christianity as superior, creating an ideal, English, Christian self. By identifying themselves with Elene and a converted

Judas, Anglo-Saxons effectively kindle their developing English nationality under attack by Viking incursions.

Cynewulf's Judas is a tortured, despised Jew, while Cyriacus is adored.

Problematically, Judas and Cyriacus are the same person. By converting to Christianity and negating his Jewishness, Judas becomes an important member of society, and, by appropriating his and Elene's story, medieval Christians are able to venerate two saints in the making. The character of Judas Cyriacus that Cynewulf creates is, frankly, more charming than the rather domineering Elene. The largest difference between the two saints is that Elene occupies a secure place in history due to her social situation, while much of Judas Cyriacus's notoriety stems solely from a set of events that are more mythical than factual, because the Cross of Christ is not an artifact. Another puzzling element of the story is that through conversion, Jewishness is negated, because of this, Jews are essentially not Jews. Judaism is lost in the shuffle as the both English and Christian churches, to further Anglo-Saxon conversion, appropriate the story. In the end, Cynewulf's re-telling of the story is neither as simple nor as direct as it would first appear. A saint is upstaged by her foil and a Jew displaces his identity.

The story of *Elene* illustrates a common dilemma in Western European thought—something Thomas D. Hill describes as the “problem of how to reconcile Christian faith with an appreciation for the cultural achievements of the past” (201). The budding Christian culture of the Middle Ages, combined with a growth in awareness of cultural identity, places Anglo-Saxons in a difficult position. Hill states that “a reflective Anglo-Saxon must have been aware that the roots of his nation and culture were pagan and Germanic and that Christianity was a relatively recent innovation among a people to

whom antiquity was precious and innovation suspect” (198-9). Richard Waswo brings this problem to the foreground in his discussion of discrepancies in ethnic origin stories from the mid-seventh to early eighth centuries, stating that “differences [in the stories] serve the same ends. And these ends are those of the formation of an embryonic national myth, the assertion of a prestigious lineage and an imperial destiny” (272). Allen J. Frantzen describes “Anglo-Saxon studies not as a continuous unfolding fabric but as a web, with interconnected, interdependent strands and, depending on where one stands, several centers” (106-7). Anglo-Saxons wanted to take the ancestral ideals they toasted in the mead-hall and combine them with the ideals of their newfound Christian faith, all the while struggling to meld tribal settlements into larger, but still cohesive, social communities. Just as Anglo-Saxon scholars face fragments upon which to build modern understanding of an entire culture, so also Anglo-Saxons faced flawed memories of their own progenitors.

During the early Middle Ages, according to Mark Turnham Elvins, the somewhat mobile society in Britain was “divided by the estates of nobility, clergy and peasantry” (285). This societal division was not experienced on the same levels by Celts, who maintained a more uniform view of nationality. Celts, although they maintained tribal alignments, refused the burdens of arbitrary political relationships and class distinctions that drove a burgeoning Britain. Views of nationality began to shift for the Celts in 1136, when “for the first time since the Conquest a new sense of nationalism began to emerge [...]. To some extent nationality was a matter of self-identification” (Elvins 287). The primary structure of small communities, disparate from all other peoples began to fade even in Celtic communities, bringing diverse groups of people to the same set of

decisions on nationality and allegiance. While Celts and Anglo-Saxons discovered a wider scope of community, the Welsh continued to remain solidified and solitary in their views of nationality. The Welsh chose to use language as an identifying mark. An example used by Elvins relates to the invading “Anglo-Norman armies, that called themselves ‘English’, [but who] were referred to as ‘the French’ by the Welsh [...], on the basis of the language they spoke” (287). In a non-global culture, it is not unique to choose obvious descriptors to define an “us” against a “them.” In each group of people, a movement arose toward a tangible, singular nationality. According to Elvins, “being Celtic in the last analysis was not necessarily a matter of race, which can be seen as a ‘set of arbitrary biological/physical attributes’ but [more a matter of individual perception] and self-identification with *mythos*, language and culture. It was therefore possible to learn the language, embrace the culture and become absorbed into the Celtic ethos” (Elvins 288). For Elvins, the same concept applies to Anglo-Saxons. Merging into a new collective from smaller tribes, they solidified as a group through *mythos*, language, and culture. For later generations, as Elvins notes, “the concepts of nationality can be understood on two levels, the political identity of a subject of the English crown and the ethnic identity of language, culture and the legend of a Celtic past (*mythos*)” (288). In the end, nationality revolves around allegiance and self-identification.

All of the cultures crashing against each other in the British Isles had either to displace their individual national identities or maintain those identities while converging into one group—the English. As Elvins says:

To some extent there has always been a myth of national identity and quite early on in England a political veneer



was seen to cover a number of different races all wishing to be known as English. [For] the Anglo-Saxons [...], it was not until King Alfred that there developed a national sense of cohesion. It was in the eighth century and more commonly by the tenth century “that various English kings had arrogated titles—such as ‘ruler of the English and governor of the adjoining nations round about’”[...]. (K 285).

Creating a unified national origin in the Middle Ages meant deriving not paternity from other cultures, but fraternity. In essence, the Britons and the Anglo-Saxons do not see themselves as the offspring of Germanic and Celtic tribes, but as equals, siblings, even the superiors of their ancestors. By making this claim, they align themselves with the beginnings of a culture and discard the idea that their environment has been created by someone outside their present circumstances. The *Historia Brittonum* was written in the early ninth century and attributed to Nennius, and, according to Waswoit “does what myths and legends do, and in the terms peculiar to the local circumstances of developing Christian feudal society” (276). Orally transmitted legends have three functions, according to Waswo, one of which is “the assertion of military glory” (282). Despite its importance as a conversion story, *Elene* fulfills this quality with the supremacy of Greek power over the Jews in their own city of Jerusalem. Greek supremacy was not a threat to Anglo-Saxons, because the chroniclers of Anglo-Saxon lineage labeled the Greeks as a fraternal civilization.

In order to forge a new culture and meld into a cohesive unit of English people, the Britons, Anglo-Saxons and other peoples on the island had to displace much of their own past. In the words of Bryan Ward-Perkins: “Biological ancestry alone is not determinant of ethnicity...the Anglo-Saxons and the English, in constructing a simple narrative of their origins and of their biological and cultural descent, have chosen to forget much more of their past than they have chosen to remember” (533). The English identity being created in the early Middle Ages mandated that the past was of far less importance than what could be achieved on this very day, even in this very hour. This notion was passed on to the nineteenth century thinker Thomas Macaulay, who expressed that “a developed nation was entitled—and indeed, obliged—to replace the language and literature of a primitive society with those of a more advanced society” (quoted by Frantzen 32).

How then could the Church deal with the Anglo-Saxon’s celebrated pagan past? Songs sung in the mead-hall glorify an Anglo-Saxon or Briton past and the key to keeping converts is to impress them with the idea that, by choosing the Christian faith, their past becomes far greater and more powerful. When faced with this challenge, the Church appropriated non-native stories of Christian faith and triumph and morphed them into stories of cohesion and power gained through assimilation with the protagonist’s Christian ideals. Less importance was placed on Elene and Judas Cyriacus’s nationality and more on their authority through faith and conversion. Also, these stories took place centuries before Anglo-Saxon conversion, and by choosing stories from an earlier era, conversion to Christianity could be painted as swift and relatively simple. If conversion is easy, why not do it? In the case of *Elene*, the converted Judas Cyriacus has few

questions when his father tells him about the cross. When Judas Cyriacus finally declares his Christian faith, he is impressive to the other characters in the story. Hill notes that the authors of conversion texts

had an obvious interest in depicting the conversion as a straightforward and relatively quick one in which the missionaries had no occasion to make compromises and in which their new converts understood and accepted their new faith without hesitations or doubt. (206)

A story about a woman and her travels develops into a story about faith triumphant over disbelief. *Elene* also becomes a story about Judas' revealed belief leading to the miraculous conversion of those who previously refuse the Christian faith.

Why did the Church so adamantly attack a pagan past? Hill states that “roughly speaking, we may say that Christian thinkers who felt relatively secure about their own culture and faith have tended to be receptive to the merits of [a] pagan past [...] and those who felt themselves threatened by it have harshly rejected ‘paganism’ and pagan culture” (201). This observation sheds much light on the church's need to appropriate Roman and Jewish stories. At the time of Bede, who died in 735, the chroniclers read the Bible assiduously and gave it the most literal of translations. Léon Poliakov points to an “imprecation which Hosea hurled against the Jews—‘Ye are not my people and I will not be your God’” (39). From this, it was presumably safe to assume that God had denied Israel for all time and had chosen a new people. Who were these new Chosen People? According to Poliakov, “the prophets of the Old Testament mention ‘the isles of the sea’ which wait for the Eternal God” (38). England is an island. Therefore, the Anglo-Saxons

could be the people spoken of in the Old Testament—they are to become the English, God’s Chosen People. Because of the upheaval of their own time and because of the importance of the present in place of the past, the chroniclers, in their literal translations, failed to tie the verse in Hosea with its following verse. Obviously, any meaning may be construed when removing a set of words from their context. Hosea 1:9-10 reads:

Then said God, Call his name Lo-ammi: for ye are not my people, and I will not be your God. Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured nor numbered; and it shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, there it shall be said unto them, Ye are sons of the living God.

In context, God did not deny His Chosen People, the Jews. No one will take their place. Medieval people, through their interpretation of Christianity and the Bible, elected to believe that they were chosen and that their endeavors to create a Christian English society were right.

In discussing the “cultural revival from the late eleventh through the early thirteenth centuries,” Ivan G. Marcus states that one dimension is a “new awareness on the part of Jews and Christians of members of the other culture” (209). Marcus writes about Hebrew and Latin narratives of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, and, while these works are late medieval and Cynewulf’s work is early, it is possible to delineate some central similarities. All of these narratives “permit us to see how representative writers of each community viewed the presence of the other. In addition,

we can sometimes see a cultural mirroring, that is, how members of one culture thought members of the other looked back at them” (Marcus 209). Marcus’s studies concern “a few extended narratives that were produced in Ashkenaz, the short narrative form of the exemplum” (209). Exempla relate Marcus’s study to Cynewulf’s, in that exempla are not merely moralistic tales, like fables and parables, they

also claim to be based on historical events [...]. Precisely because these stories are made up of credible contextual elements and incorporate personalities and themes familiar to the writer’s audience, exempla became significant vehicles for portraying how Jews and Christians imagined encountering the other. (209-10)

Using Marcus’s example of Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn’s narrative, *Sefer zekhirah* (Book of Remembrance) written between 1175-1200 in Germany, we can see a Hebrew parallel to Cynewulf’s appropriation of *Elene*.

Rabbi Ephraim’s work, according to Marcus, “illustrates how a Jewish writer used Christian symbols and images [...] to construct a positive Jewish self-image” (210). The Rabbi’s work can be viewed as a carefully contrived literary text that articulates “an unexpectedly high degree of Jewish inward acculturation, that is, an appropriation of Christian motifs that the Jewish writer used to craft an anti-Christian cultural polemic” (Marcus 210). On both sides, those of Christians and Jews, there was a pervasive curiosity about the opposing religion. Marcus quotes Rabbi Ephraim and writes, “Christians thought even Jewish leaders were ambivalent about their Judaism and were

vulnerable to being persuaded to become Christians” (211). Rabbi Ephraim appropriated Christian symbols as weapons in the defense of the Jewish faith.

Telling a story about Rabbi Jacob ben Meir (known as Rabbi Tam) that happened when Rabbi Ephraim was thirteen years old, he describes an attack by Christians. Each detail is distinctly and typically symbolic. French crusaders are introduced in the beginning of the story and are recorded as coming “to the house of our Master Rabbi Jacob, may he live, and [taking] all that was in his house” (Marcus 212). The Christians then tear up the Torah in front of Rabbi Tam and commence to argue with him about Judaism. Seeing that he will not convert, “they inflict five wounds on his head, saying: ‘You are the leader of Jews. So we shall take vengeance upon you for the crucified one and wound you the way you inflicted the five wounds on our god’” (Marcus 212). In this case as in many others, one Jew is representative of the whole community. The typical symbols are 1), the ripping up of a Torah; 2), an attack on a representative Jew; and 3), asserting revenge for the crucifixion of Christ. Regarding the first, Marcus points out that the act of tearing the Torah is “at least as old as 1 Maccabees (1:56-57), where it is mentioned in the account of the despoiling of Jerusalem” (212). The Torah is a specific Jewish ritual object to attack. When represented pictorially, Jews are typically depicted holding the Torah. During the second point, the ritual attack on one Jew, Christians argue with the Jew about his religion, but the story quickly moves away from discourse and into a physical attack, which leads to the third point—revenge for the crucifixion. While the Christians say they are taking revenge for the stigmata of Christ, Rabbi Ephraim “considers the Christian perpetrators, ironically, to be guilty of attacking an

innocent ‘head of the Jews,’ even as they had accused the Jews of killing the innocent Jesus” (Marcus 214). How do these typical symbols relate to *Elene*?

In Cynewulf’s *Elene*, Greeks enter the city of Jerusalem and take command.

When a crowd of Jews gathers before Elene, she says,

Ge nu hraðe gangað,  
sundor asecap      þa ðe snyttro mid eow,  
mægn ond modcræft,      mæste hæbben,  
þæt me þinga gehwylc      þriste gecyðan,  
untraglice,      þe ic him to sece. (406b-10)

Go quickly now, seek out individually those among you  
who possess greatest wisdom, strength and skill of mind, so  
that they may explain to me each one of the issues on  
which I shall consult them. (B 406-10)

What Elene seeks is one Jew to represent the whole of Judaica. After being chosen by his own people, Judas Cyriacus is thrust before her. Elene and Judas Cyriacus debate; she tries to garner information, he tries to disguise his knowledge. As the impassioned debate ends, Elene swears

þæt ðu hungre scealt  
for cneomagum      cwylmed weorðan,  
butan þu forlæte      þa leasunga  
ond me sweetollice      soð gecyðe. (687b- 90)

that before this people  
You shall perish of hunger      except you purpose

To leave these falsehoods, and tell me truth. (K 686b-88)

Cynewulf does not end his story in the same manner as Rabbi Ephraim. Although Rabbi Tam was attacked, he still refused to recant his Jewish faith. Instead, Judas Cyriacus espouses the popular Christian ideal that, when forced, a Jew will accept Christianity. Starved and tied in chains for seven days, Judas Cyriacus cries out for mercy and acquiesces to Elene's demands. By the end of Cynewulf's story, Judas Cyriacus is bishop in the Catholic Church. Through the interaction of a Christian and a Jewish character the story illustrates how Jews were imagined from the specific Christian perspective of a Catholic monk. The story fits into a genre that Marcus describes as "reflect[ing] Christian understandings not only of what could take place in real life but also the cultural meanings of those [historically] imagined events for their author and potential listeners and readers" (218). The historical setting merely "sets limits to the cultural imagination that invented or reshaped and adapted them" (Marcus 218).

Was it important to medieval Christians to convert Jews? After facing the cold fact that a converted Jew must give his property and belongings to the crown, it is difficult to believe that anything but the opposite of conversion would be desired by the Jews. Conversion would be welcome by the crown, but for purely mercenary reasons. Yet, the crown did attempt to provide for Jewish converts. Converts were given a small annuity and housing was provided in centrally located areas. The business of conversion, though, was still not generally in the best interest of a Jewish convert, because the crown was not regularly forthcoming with promised annuities or provisions of food and heat for daily existence.



Which of the Jews converted? The records Robert C. Stacey discusses from the eleventh century describe provision for widowed Jewish women, orphaned children and single mothers. This scenario begs the question of why not families, single men, and older people. Stacey believes the answer can be found in the growing financial crisis of English Jews. In the eleventh century, as the crown exacted higher and higher taxes on the Jewish community, fewer Jews were able to maintain the support of their families. As a result, orphans and widows found themselves to be unbearable burdens on the already stretched coffers of their extended families. As Stacey comments, “conversion could literally be in such cases, the only solution” (271). If conversion is made because there is no other way to keep food in your mouth, how sincere and uncoerced is that conversion? Stacey cites several cases where conversion in peculiar and possibly criminal situations is questioned by Christian society, but overall, suspicion is reluctantly suppressed and converted Jews are minimally accepted by Christians. Because of the difficulty surrounding conversion, Jews, according to Stacey, did not “entirely [cease] to be Jews in the eyes of their brothers and sisters in Christ” (278), which raises some interesting questions about Judas, in *Elene*. If Judas is able to negate his Jewishness with baptism, was the story being used as an example for medieval Jews and pagans to follow?

Although written about a Greek woman, Elene, the mother of Constantine, Cynewulf’s story is largely concerned with the conversion of a Jew named Judas. Once Judas converts to Christianity, he quickly becomes a Catholic bishop. So much for a man who is not simply Hebrew, but a practicing Jew. As a Jew, he is treated condescendingly and with disgust by Elene, an emissary of the Church. All of this changes as he morphs into a priest, as seen in these lines:

þa se halga ongan      hyge staðolian,  
 breostum onbryrðed,      bisceop þæs folces.  
 Glædmod eode      gumena þreate  
 god hergendra,      ond þa geornlice  
 Cyriacus      on Caluariæ  
 hleor onhylde,      hygerune ne mað,  
 gastes mihtum      to gode cleopode  
 eallum eaðmedum,      bæd him engla weard [...]. (1093-9)

Then the holy Bishop    with heart inspired,  
 Made strong in spirit,    went forth with joy  
 Joined with much people    praising God.  
 On Cavalry's hill    he bowed his head,  
 Spoke his heart's musings    by the Spirit's might,  
 And in great humility    called upon God [...]. (K 1092-7)

William Chester Jordan asserts that Jews could accept baptism in the Middle Ages. But did this negate their Jewishness? Did they remain Jewish after baptism? According to the beliefs of the day, Jordan asserts that baptism “fully obliterated Jewishness as a religious marker of the convert *and* largely negated [Jewishness] in terms of social relations. Converts did not remain *essentially* Jews, a fact that differentiates medieval anti-Judaism or anti-Semitism from its modern variety” (166). This phenomenon is clearly illustrated by Judas’ story. Upon conversion, no mention is made of who he once

was; his past is forgotten. He is now Cyriacus, bishop, man of God, while before he was one of those who, as Cynewulf phrases it:

wergðu forðan

sceðþeð scyldfullum. (309b-10a)

lived in error    unto this day. (K 310)

Judas' conversion is quick and to the point. He does not spend time glorying in his newfound faith or wondering how to best share that faith with others. The narrator describes Judas' move from convert to bishop with the words,

þa wæs gefulwad        se ðe ær feala tida

leoht gearu

inbryrðed breostsefa        on þæt betere lif,

gewended to wuldre. (1040-6a)

So he who many times before had assiduously ignored the

light, underwent the cleansing of baptism; his heart was

inspired with the better life and directed towards heaven. (B

1044-6)

An inspiring story for Anglo-Saxons who had not yet converted, their converted counterparts, and missionaries!

Inspiring as the story is, with whom does the reader identify? Is it Elene, with her fierce, passionate faith, or Judas with his jarring loss of Jewishness and strong Christian faith? The Jews in the story epitomize an "other" to prevail against. But, coming out of the story with more characterization and personality than Elene is the leader of the Jews, Judas Cyriacus. Are we supposed to identify with the Jews or despise them for not being

Christian? Are we supposed to see them as a counterpart to Anglo-Saxon pagans who had not yet embraced Christianity? *Elene* is a glorious beginning for those who have recently come to Christianity and a passionate encouragement to missionaries. Upon acknowledging Christ, a person becomes a part of “us” and forsakes everything they might once have been. Whether it is truly possible to do so or not, the point is that once a person acknowledges Christ, anything is possible. Anything is possible especially once one is baptized. However, the issue of living daily life remains. *Elene* is a story about a series of incidents, but it, like many saints’ legends, fails to follow a character through the struggle of everyday existence.

How did baptism affect Jews? Time and again it is recorded by Christian sources that Jewish communities chose martyrdom over baptism. The choice was not merely a refusal to accept Christianity. It was also a decision to uphold the community. Karl W. Deutsch explains the decision not to accept baptism:

The impulse which drove them to do so was religious; but that religious faith was strengthened and confirmed by their own and their ancestors’ long-run practical experience. To accept baptism in times of persecution might have meant a short-run social gain for many individuals. But for the mass of the Jewish people and for their descendants it would have meant the loss of the very real mutual aid and protection of the Jewish community. (246)

Rather than face life as a sole convert among a new group of people, Jews chose to remain with a group that would protect their best interest, even if that choice meant death.

Karl Deutsch says “what happened was the clash between two civilizations, neither of which was adapted to full “tolerance” in the sense of free competition. Law and custom, both in the Jewish and in the Christian case, were designed to protect and exalt the members of the group” (Deutsch 248). In the blending of diverse cultures, native ties will hold. Struggling to survive and faced with the choice of supporting a friend and neighbor or giving business to, essentially, an “outsider,” the cord of friendship will rarely break. As Deutsch writes, “throughout the period, in spite of the moral leadership of a few individuals, general poverty continued to nourish the barbarism of intolerance. In the long run one could not be overcome without overcoming the other” (249).

In discussing the sixteenth century, Jody Enders makes well-established points with regard to anti-Semitism. Animal trials are, to Enders, a model by which communities and individuals transfer their own failings to “animal people” through the practices of torture and execution. In Europe, animals were tried for the human crime of cold-blooded murder. Her argument is that by endowing animals with human characteristics, civilization has only a short step to take before endowing humans with animalistic qualities. She states that “having acquired the ammunition they needed to rationalize the commission of ‘good violence’ against their beastly co-citizens, they discovered a strategy for turning that violence against certain *human* animals, [who had] allegedly violent [natures]” (204). Once a set of humanity is stigmatized with a leaning toward violent natures, it is simple to proceed with persecution, torture, and even execution. By attributing human behavior and thought processes to animals, the next step in reasoning becomes attributing less-than-human thought to a sector of humans, reducing them to the status of animals. Enders goes on to say that “by this pseudo-logic,

[early Europeans] turned with a horrifying fervor against the same human animals whom they accused of thirsting animalistically after the blood of Christian children and whom they explicitly equated with pigs: Jews” (204).

An example of this logic is found in Robert Stein’s discussion of the Eucharist as the literal body of Christ; he quotes Gregory of Tours, *Liber miraculorum*, in which a Jewish boy tells his parents about the body of a child being eaten in a church, after which he is “placed in a furnace, where the fire was burning and the door closed: whence, after many hours, he was snatched by the Christians” (130). Not only are Jews equated with murdering their own children, but Christians are touted as delivering Jewish children from the evil hands of their own families. It does not take long for this “pseudo-logic” to turn into a Salem witch-hunt, the goal of which is hatred and killing of Jews—anti-Semitism. As Enders so strongly states, these stories and trials are “also about the delicate combination of sophistry, analogy, inversion, and anger by which the pigs who kill babies become Jews who kill babies” (204-5).

Obviously, not all people of the Middle Ages hated Jews; animal trials are simply a good place from which to point out the ease with which people allow themselves to be deluded. But the discussion does not end with anti-Semitism, which is only one of many outlets for creating an “us” against an “other.” As William Chester Jordan points out, as regards Islam, we must attempt to see “the wider dimensions of hatred: medieval Catholics of medieval Muslims *and* medieval Muslims of medieval Catholics; Catholics of their internal Others, Muslims of theirs” (171). Hatred is only one weed in a garden, but it has a mass of roots that stretches out farther than we want to believe. By endowing animals with human traits, it is a small step to then endow humans with animal traits,

thereby marginalizing a group of human individuals and creating an “other” against which to juxtapose a version of ourselves.

By creating a people to distrust and despise, Anglo-Saxons were able to cement the idea that they were “good” and that there existed a “bad” outside of “us.” As Enders so nicely quotes from *Isocrates*, “In truth, I cannot make up my mind which should astonish us more: the gentleness that is implanted in the fiercest of wild beasts or the brutishness that resides in the souls of men” (201). Converting Jews was not a necessary occupation for Anglo-Saxons. If a Jew could convert and by that conversion displace their heritage and previous religion, it meant that Anglo-Saxons would also have to marginalize their own past and accept the fact that they were no longer an “us” against all “others,” but simply one of many peoples who could accept Christianity. By following Christ and becoming identified with Him, Anglo-Saxons would lose their growing social and cultural identity. Therefore, Anglo-Saxons sought to re-shape the literature that surrounded them to echo their new concept of self.

Léon Poliakov ends a chapter by stating that “England still feels itself an island” (53). Despite the various nationalities in *Elene*, the main point for the expanding medieval English society was that it viewed itself as unique and separate. While Anglo-Saxons learned from stories brought in by the church, the point remained that they were an island—a special group of people who need brook no opposition to their ideals and beliefs. A multi-racial conglomeration of people began, in the early Middle Ages, to grow and, in recognizing the surrounding world, they declared their independence and marginalized the environment that had shaped them. Anglo-Saxons embraced Christianity, but created their own version of it.

## CONCLUSION:

### MEDIEVAL PERCEPTIONS AND JEWISH HISTORY THROUGH THE EYES OF CYNEWULF'S *ELENE*

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The Norman Conquest in 1066 opened the door for a more widespread immigration into England. Jews in Europe began to settle in England heavily enough to be recorded in the chronicles and, more importantly, became prominent enough to be perceived as a threat. From the initial Diaspora to settlement in England, one finds attacks on Jewish communities and individual Jews.

Slightly before the time of the First Crusade (1096-9), the People's Crusade set out. Eager, unorganized, and uncontrolled, they massacred many Jews on the way to the Holy Land. To them, the Jews were much the same as the Saracens—"active enemies whose actions did not bespeak Christian truth" (Stow 82). As the People's Crusade wound its way through Europe, it began to disperse "bit by bit and [to perish] under the blows of famine, epidemics, and the Turks" (LeGoff 69), never reaching the Holy Land. Some kings and church leaders sought to protect the Jews from these random massacres, but as the eleventh century wore on, especially after the First Crusade began, anti-Semitism grew stronger. Reported in the *Annales Saxonici*, concerning Worms and



Mainz: “They thought it right to avenge Christ on the pagans and the Jews. That was why they killed 900 Jews in the town of Mainz, without sparing women and children” (LeGoff 318).

Ritual murder charges began to be insinuated against the Jews around the time of the Second Crusade in 1146. And, as LeGoff writes, “thenceforth there was to be no lack of false accusations to give the Christians scapegoats in times of discontent or calamity” (318). Charges were also leveled against Jews for well poisoning. Thomas of Monmouth, in *The Life and Miracles of Saint William of Norwich*, described the Jews as “Christian-slaying Jews” (Rokéah 104). As fate would have it, most of the miracles attributed to Saint William happened six years after his death, when, conveniently, Thomas of Monmouth was in the area, available to act as witness.

The simplest way to read Thomas of Monmouth’s *The Life and Miracles of Saint William of Norwich* is as a detective story or a mirror for popular opinion of the time. Most scholars, according to Gavin I. Langmuir, approaching the seven books of Thomas’s *Life* are predominately concerned with *who* killed young William. The validity of Thomas’s claim and the repercussions of the charge on Jews are not even considered. Langmuir points out that “few copies of Thomas’s *Life* seem to have been made” (821), which means the story spread primarily by word of mouth—a highly unpredictable method of transmission. At the root of Thomas’ story is the question of where he got his ideas. Why did he so firmly believe the Jews were culpable in this case? Charges of ritual murder in William’s case were not believed at the time of his death. Only after Thomas’s version of William’s life was recorded and transmitted was there a shift in public opinion and an outbreak of similar accusations.

Langmuir believes that Thomas's *Life* is "our most direct evidence for the first medieval accusation that Jews were guilty of ritual murder, a myth which spread, caused the death of many Jews in different localities, and influenced Luther and Hitler among others" (821). The historian Posidonius proffered the first known accusation of ritual murder against Jews in the second century. Josephus records the story, but his reaction leads one to believe that he considered the story more a fable than anything else.

Langmuir believes that "it was apparently unknown outside of Alexandria, for no Roman writer...repeats it" (823). Despite the acknowledgement paid the story by Josephus, the portion of his work relating the tale was not transmitted to Greek or Latin and therefore it is highly improbable that the story was available to Thomas of Monmouth.

The other charge of Jewish ritual murder preceeding Thomas' was made in 415 A. D. in Inmestar (Syria) and recorded by a Christian historian, Socrates. Langmuir believes that "given the bitterness of relations then, the incident might have happened, but it could equally have been imagined by Socrates or others" (826). Regardless of its validity, it was not commented on by the chroniclers of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, namely, "Marianus Scotus, Hermann Contractus, Sigebert of Gembloux, and Otto of Freising" (Langmuir 826). Therefore it is improbable that Thomas of Monmouth was familiar with any other previous charges of ritual murder.

Charges against the Jews in William's case magnified with the arrival of a converted Jew, the monk, Theobald. He told Thomas of Monmouth that "the Jews had a written tradition that, in order to regain their freedom and their fatherland, they must sacrifice a Christian every year" (Rokéah 105). Zefira Rokéah states that she agrees with another scholar, M .R. James,

That the presence of the convert Theobald was the prime factor [in several accusations]. We know that the rash of accusations of a similar nature that followed occurred in places (such as Gloucester and Bury St Edmunds) that had a clear connection with Norwich, to which Theobald had moved. (106)

The charges were proved false, but truth is not often able to quell the rising tides of public sentiment. As LeGoff writes, “with the Jews, Christians maintained a dialogue throughout the Middle Ages, which they interrupted with persecution and massacres. The Jewish usurer, or rather irreplaceable moneylender, was hateful, but necessary and useful” (317).

Thomas, according to Langmuir, was the creator of the “crucifixion accusation” (846). His reasons for creating such a myth seem to stem not from personal feelings of animosity, but from a desire to “achieve his own objective: to ensure himself of a local supernatural protector and to gain prestige on earth by his successful labors to ensure recognition of William’s sanctity” (Langmuir 845). Langmuir believes that Thomas simply used the tools given to him by the animosity of William’s family and the convert, Theobald, toward Jews. While I do think there is evidence to support Langmuir’s conclusion, it is important to consider other possible influences on Thomas of Monmouth.

John McCulloh describes the arguments of Israel J. Yuval in 1993, by saying that the Jews themselves fostered imaginings of ritual murder by martyring themselves when threatened. Roth tells the story of the Jews of York:

After a preliminary attack, the Jews sought refuge in the Castle and held out for some time against a regular siege. In the end, seeing that there was no possibility of deliverance, they resolved to deprive their enemies at least of the delights of massacre. Led by their Rabbi, all the heads of families killed their wives and children, and then fell on one another. When, on the next morning, the gates of the Castle were opened, barely a soul was found alive to tell the tale of that awful night. (183)

Rather than face slaughter by Christians, the Jews of York decided to deny their attackers the minor satisfaction of killing their hated enemies. Doomed to die, the Jews of York ended their own lives. Situations like this—most on a smaller scale—highlighted the fact that Jews, as a minority group, served as a “convenient outlet for the release of the majority people’s tensions and anxieties” (Ettinger 6).

According to R. B. Dobson, “the general interest of the history of the York Jewish community resides in the extreme forms with which it reveals the dominant economic and political pressures affecting every English Jewry of the age” (34). He believes that this tragedy could have occurred at York because the Jews there were “such comparative newcomers to the city that neither local opinion nor the security precautions of the Angevin Government had yet come to adequate terms with the novel problems they presented” (Dobson 35). Surprising as it may seem, Jewish financiers could be found in York within a few years of the massacre—“the Exchequer Pipe Rolls reveal renewed Jewish financial activity there within five years of the massacre” (Dobson 35). They

were, of course, under the vigilant eye of the English Government who sought to ensure that such a disaster did not recur.

Yuval believed that “Thomas employed a conception of ritual murder imported from continental Europe” (McCulloh 700). Thomas was not living in Norwich in 1144 when William was murdered, but he did arrive at the priory before 1150. Thomas’s seven-part book was written mainly between the years of 1154-5, but he concluded his book in 1174. McCulloh states that

One copy of [Thomas’s] text was certainly available in the fourteenth century to John of Tynemouth, who included a much-abbreviated version of Thomas’s life in his own *Sanctilogium Angliae*, but John traveled widely to assemble the materials for his ambitious historical and hagiographical collections. (710)

John of Tynemouth’s use of the manuscript does not imply that the manuscript was any distance from Norwich. If Thomas is to be seen as the originator of the ritual murder charge in the Middle Ages, it would be necessary for his manuscript to be well-traveled and, if not that, then it would be necessary for Thomas himself to be widely traveled. William is mentioned in passing in the Petersborough version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a late 13<sup>th</sup> century chronicle by John of Oxnead, and in several other collections. But,

Despite the number of such references, their brevity and verbal similarity suggest that concrete, historical information about William’s death spread slowly and

primarily as a result of chroniclers' copying from their predecessors, and not through independent use of Thomas of Monmouth's *vita*. (McCulloh 714)

When William's death was mentioned by the Ourscamp chronicler, specific words relate to Thomas's *Life*—"heavenly light" (McCulloh), which implies a belief in William's sainthood. Following that close parallel, which would relate a continental description to Thomas's *Life* are the words "*ut ferunt* (as they say), which [phrase] implies the possibility of an oral source rather than a written one" (McCulloh 718). Although Thomas of Monmouth wrote an extravagant record of Saint William of Norwich, it was not through Thomas that William became known. The murder of a child created its own following. The story found in translations is brief and leads more to a conclusion of the tale's oral telling than the dissemination of a manuscript. Yuval's belief that Christians were more affected by Jewish martyrdom than by the stories of chroniclers like Thomas is more than plausible. When Crusaders offered Jewish victims' conversion or death "the trapped Jews chose an alternative their persecutors had not foreseen. [...] mothers slaughtered their children, husbands killed their wives, [...]. That such scenes would not have influenced Christian perception of Jews and Judaism seems inconceivable" (McCulloh 738). Thomas is more a reflector of popular opinion of distrust and fear concerning Jews than he is a catalyst for that attitude.

While Thomas did not have access to previous charges of ritual murder, he did have access to the biased views of other medieval writers. Thomas's active imagination, like that of Cynewulf, needed few urgings to acclimate itself to the originating of crucifixion myths. When Cynewulf speaks of the Jews in *Elene* two particular instances

provide insightful commentary. In one, as he dies, Judas's father describes the Jews as *unrihtes* "injust," *disige* "stupid," and *wonsælige* "unblessed" (B 472-7). Although a Jew, his belief in Christ leads to his derision of his fellow Jews. The other instance is Judas's brother, Stephen. As he is stoned, he prays for his killers, describes them as "evil," and says,

þæt hie for æfstum        unscyldigne,  
synna leasne [...]. (496-7a)

Out of malice they deprived of life an innocent sinless man.

(B 496-7a)

By describing Stephen as sinless, his death is now similar to Christ's sinless death.

Cynewulf consistently describes Jews with negative language. Although his accusations concern the past, his dislike of Jews is evident. His words are anti-Semitic. By entering the church and studying to be a monk, Thomas of Monmouth was exposed to literature that openly criticized Jews, like Cynewulf's *Elene*, and this—paired with the Jew hating family of William and Theobald, the convert—could have lead his overactive imagination to create myths about Jews that resulted in more deaths than Thomas could have ever envisioned.

We now have three questions: did authors like Cynewulf, who could easily be perceived as anti-Semitic, foster the claim of ritual murder? or was it authors like Thomas of Monmouth who described a supposed ritual murder? or did the Jews themselves foster such imaginings through their reactions when threatened? All of these, when combined, result in a time of uncertainty and danger for medieval Jews. The direct effects of writers are difficult to trace. When traced, it is difficult to delineate exactly how much influence

they have. Regardless of the unquantifiability of a writer's influence on an audience, it exists. Both Cynewulf and Thomas reflect their culture and its conceptions, and Thomas could have been affected by writings such as those by Cynewulf.

Throughout the interpretations of both characters and themes, the reader is called upon to create his or her own version of what Cynewulf is espousing. What do we take from his descriptions of women, of Jews, of the English? Do we choose to agree or to disagree? Despite the interpretation created by the writer, the reader, in the end, defines the ideal self—not for the world at large, but for his or her own individual self.



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