

**10. Harrowing Hell's Halfacre:**  
Langland's Mediation of the "Descensus" from the *Gospel of Nicodemus*

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Ever since Morton Bloomfield's famous characterization of *Piers Plowman* as "a commentary on an unknown text," [1](#) the phrase has been echoed repeatedly (often facetiously, sometimes not) by scholars attempting to define the relationship between the poem and the textual milieu of which it is a part. On one level, the characterization seems disingenuous. After over a hundred years of serious critical attention being paid to the poem, we can point to many texts upon which the poem can be said to offer exposition and dramatization. For example, the sporadic Latin quotes that dot the landscape of the poem can be said to offer a "commentary" on the Scriptures, the Psalter, and the liturgy, insofar as they quote these sources in order to reinforce the authority of the allegorical action taking place in the narrative proper.

These examples, however, are hardly problematic: they are, for the most part, identifiable scriptural quotes. What may have caused Bloomfield such consternation, on the other hand, is the attempt to locate intermediate literary "sources" for the narrative action of the poem. Intertextual traces are everywhere observable in the poem. But their transfer into the allegorical pageant of *Piers* is never a straight "translation," as simply being "carried over." Most often, a literary topos will be translated into *Piers* as into a foreign tongue, so transforming the matter that we are forced to search for the sources of the poet's approach to a given motif.

This being the case, it is profitable to interrogate the traditional philological project itself, with its emphasis on originary sources, particularly as it applies to *Piers Plowman*. The very metaphor of a "source" for a literary work posits a vertical relationship between texts, in which one text feeds into another with greater or lesser accuracy that depends on the sensibilities of the *auctor*, whose authority resides in his source, and whose art consists of his amplification of it.

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The model is sympathetic to a romantic conception of literature as flowing from the fount of genius indeed, the aquatic implications of the term "source" support just such metaphors as these. But such a model of literary production confines the investigation of the historicity of the text to its transmission along its own particular course. The text and its sources are visualized as a vertical hierarchy of textual points in time, isolated from the systems of inscription and interpretation that have made them possible utterances in the first place.

In "Medieval Textuality and the Archeology of Textual Culture," Martin Irvine attempts to provide an "archeological model of investigation" [2](#) that seeks to locate the literary work within the literary and material conditions that govern its creation and interpretation; that is, to locate the work within a "literary archive":

For Foucault, discourses are systematized through a historical "archive." ... The primary sense [of the term "archive"] is equivalent to the sum total of textualized cultural history (the surviving documents of history), and the secondary sense used by Foucault designates the system of discursive rules and types of statement (*énoncé*) that authorize, in the way that linguistic rules authorize individual statements within a language, the discrete or individual discursive events (literary works, histories, law, and so on) considered as part of a larger system of discourse. [3](#)

The archeological approach, then, sees the literary work as operating as one level of discourse within strata of discursive levels, literary, political, and material, all of which form the literary archive, each participating in a system that provides the work with an array of possible utterances with which to make meaning, as well as an array of interpretive strategies that govern the work's construction and mode of reception.

The archeological model of investigation has much to offer to the study of *Piers Plowman*. The poem cannot be seen merely as a compilation of prior texts. It is rather dialogic in just the manner that Irvine claims for Old English texts: it is "an interpretive dialogue with prior texts."<sup>4</sup> One would add that the dialogue involves extra-textual levels as well. Thus, to subject *Piers* to the archeological method is to investigate the system by which the poet mediates between his many and disparate sources and the modes of interpretation and reception that operate in his own time, often far removed from that of his source material. To show how such an approach might be applied to *Piers*, I wish to consider one particular passage in the B-text that offers the archeologist an especially rich strata of discursive levels, that of the *descensus ad inferos* of Passus XVIII, where the poet provides his own version of a popular trope, the Harrowing of Hell.

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Defining the literary archive for this passage of *Piers*--the textual system that it draws upon and, at the same time, directs itself toward--requires not only that we establish an array of source material for the passage, but that we take into consideration the modes of reception that govern their mediation in the text of the poem. The intertextuality of the passage is unusually rich, even for *Piers*: there are elements drawn from the Breviary, the Psalter, contemporary English and continental drama, Fortunatus, and, in particular, the *Evangelium Nicodemi*, the Latin text of the apocryphal gospel of Nicodemus. I wish to focus on the last of these and expose the ideological concern that governed the poet's mediation of his fourth-century source. The *descensus* of the *Evangelium* is transformed in *Piers* XVIII in order to accord with the demands of a fourteenth-century poetic, with two important results. On the level of stylistics, the narrational mode is shifted from an integrative dependence on textual authority to a dialogic allegory. More importantly, the narrative undergoes an ideological transformation which throws into the background the traditional emphasis on the conquering Christ and his power in order to focus instead on his love for mankind.

First, it is necessary to explore the dominant narrational strategy of the poem, that of allegory. We are used to thinking of *Piers* as an allegorical poem. But that proposition having been granted, we tend to walk away quickly from it in favor of the other issues raised by the poem, since we are generally uneasy about allegory itself and perhaps more so with the familiar kind of four-fold exegesis, which is not the most profitable way to read the poem, as R. W. Frank has pointed out.<sup>5</sup> In any case, we expect no debate on the presence of an allegorical strategy within the poem, but we would do well to consider what an allegorical strategy is, and how it works within a text.

Briefly, in Personification allegory, the interaction and relation between various allegorical figures ordinarily draw the reader to the revelation of religious "truths" by interpreting those relations on a level different from the literal significance of the narrative. Allegory functions, in other words, by issuing the reader new sets of instructions on how to read its own text. It requires the reader to reach beyond the letter toward a deeper cosmological truth, often, though not exclusively, by encouraging the reader to supply the sign with significance in a way that is most available to his or her understanding, only to frustrate that interpretation through some shift in the narrative, and demand a reinterpretation.<sup>6</sup> Examples of this abound in *Piers Plowman*, in the unstable figures of Meed, Hunger, or of Piers himself, whose allegorical significance shifts according to the proximity of other figures.

Allegory thus consists of the images, personifications, and relations operating textually: it becomes the fully constructed sign, with the participation of the reader as the final and necessary component of that configuration. This interpretive action on the part of the reader, which completes the sign by providing the "hidden" meaning, is properly

known as allegoresis. Allegory is the letter; allegoresis, the revelation. Above all, however, the text can only

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function as allegory if it actively demands allegoresis. As a signifier, it must consistently strive to reach beyond itself. (In a post-modern poetic, we know the sign cannot help but do so. My point is that medieval allegorists were aware of this function of the sign, and actively exploited it.)

Despite the mythic value of the descent story of the *Evangelium Nicodemi*, which resulted in so many retellings, the narrative itself does not function as allegory according to this model. Like allegory, it is concerned with typology, specifically with the revelation of the letter of the Old Testament through the person of Christ. But it is, in effect, an allegory that provides its own allegoresis. The work of interpretation, that contribution on the reader's part that allows the text its instructional value, has already been done. It is, as it were, a crossword with the answers already filled in.

The *Evangelium* can be said to constitute a compilation. Its relationship to its sources is integrative: it draws on the various texts available to it and provides a synthesis that leaves the texts essentially unchanged. The author compiles from the Old Testament the passages most readily recognizable as those prefiguring the Descent (Psalm 107:15-16; Isaiah 45:2; Isaiah 9:2) and combines these with the few references within the New Testament which indicate that these prophesies have been fulfilled (1 Peter 3:18-20; Ephesians 4:7-9). The resulting narrative is highly discursive, consisting largely of the exclamations of the prophets in Hell pointing out that they had foretold the action of the narrative, reiterating their prophesies to ensure the reader's understanding, as does Isaiah upon seeing the light before the gates of Hell:

Nonne cum essem in terris vivus praedixi vobis Exsurgent mortui, et resurgent qui in monumentis sunt, et exultabunt qui in terris sunt, quoniam ros qui est a domino sanitas est illis. Et iterum dixi Ubi est, mors, aculeus tuus? Ubi est, inferre, victoria tua? (XXI.2)<sup>7</sup>

(Did not I, when I was alive upon earth, prophesy to you: The dead shall rise up, and those who are in their tombs shall rise again, and those who are upon earth shall exult; because the dew, which is from the Lord, is their health? And again I said, Where, O Death, is thy sting? Where, O Hades, is thy victory?)<sup>8</sup>

So the prophets of the *Evangelium* only tell the reader what the reader already knows: that they are prophets. For his own part, the figure of Christ is given few lines in the *descensus* of the *Evangelium*. Apart from two short addresses to Adam and his descendants, the only utterance made by Christ is the repeated "Tollite Portas" of Psalm 24:7: "Be lifted up, O ancient doors! / that the king of glory may come in." The Christ of this text functions, in fact, only as a marker on which the vestments of Old Testament prophesies are hung. In this way, though the *Evangelium Nicodemi* seeks to treat the mystery of the New Dispensation, it has recourse only to the narrative strategies of the Old.

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Its claim to authority is reflexive: it turns back on itself where allegory would reach beyond itself. Where allegory would seek authority by replicating revelation within the imagination of the reader, the *Evangelium* offers only what is offered by the Old Law: an insistence on its own textual authority. "This is what the prophets said, in black and white. And that is just the way it happened."

This insistence produces a paradigm of authority in which the reader is subject to the agency of the text. The only conceivable reaction apart from passive acceptance would be a challenge to the textual authority of the work. But the *Evangelium* anticipates this contingency: indeed, it takes elaborate steps to pre-empt it. The story of the descent is placed within a narrative envelope as the testimony of the two sons of Simeon, Karinus and Leucius, who are among those released in the Harrowing of Hell, and are returned to the world of the living for the express purpose of testifying to its truth. The envelope pattern here is expressly textual, for the testimonies of the two brothers are written, and conform exactly "nihil maius aut minus littera una"<sup>9</sup>--although written in different rooms, a touch reminiscent of the legend of the Septuagint.<sup>10</sup> This textual envelope is placed within the greater envelope of Nicodemus's own written

account, which, in many of the manuscripts, is in turn framed by the prologue provided by one who calls himself Ananias, who has supposedly translated the gospel into Greek from the original Hebrew.

Thus, the self-consciously textual claim to authority made by the *Evangelium* insists on the fulfillment of the Word, but it is finally the Word as drawn from the text of the Law. We are assured of the fact of the New Dispensation without transcending the authoritative texts of the Old. The mythic action of the release from Hell takes place at several removes from the reader, and its authority rests on its own closure, where the reader is effectively enclosed as well.

In the climactic moment of what Simpson calls the sixth vision of *Piers Plowman*, the "inner dream" of Passus XVIII in which the life of Christ is dramatized, Langland provides his own excursus on the trope of the Harrowing of Hell. That he chooses to include this episode that has no direct authority in Scripture<sup>11</sup> testifies to the overwhelming popularity of the *Evangelium Nicodemi* throughout the Middle Ages, and to the authority it still exercised as a holy text. Indeed, many of the elements of the crucifixion and *descensus* scenes particular to the *Evangelium* (the episode of the blind soldier Longinus, the association of Herod's wife with witchcraft, etc.) became so integrated into the literary archive of the Middle Ages that it could be asked whether Langland was familiar with the *Evangelium* itself, or merely with the literary conventions that it generated. Some distinct traces can be found, however, in the text of the poem that indicate that Langland was indeed conscious of the *Evangelium* as a text, rather than merely as a set of textual conventions.

First is the charge made by the "cacchepol": "'Crucifige' ... I warante hym a wicche!" (XVIII.46).<sup>12</sup> Both Walter Skeat and A.V.C. Schmidt see an echo

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here of the charge of the Jews in chapter I of the *Evangelium* that Christ derives his power from association with infernal powers: "Maleficus est, et in Beelzebub principe daemoniorum eiicit daemonia, et omnia illi subiecta sunt."<sup>13</sup> The charge of sorcery is absent in the New Testament Gospels. In his note to the line, Schmidt points out that "maleficus" is translated as "wicche" in at least one Middle English translation of the *Evangelium*,<sup>14</sup> which opens the possibility that not only was Langland familiar with the *Evangelium* itself, but with a Middle English translation of it.

There is also the testimony of Book (XVIII.228-57). This figure makes an obscure reference to Karinus and Leucius in relation to the events following the crucifixion:

*Lo! helle mi3t nou3te holde but opened tho god tholed,*

*And lete oute Symondes sones to seen hym hange on rode. (247-48)*

The sequence here is not quite in keeping with that of the *Evangelium*: Simeon's sons are released after Christ's descent, not before. They are released from death to testify to the Harrowing, not to the crucifixion. But the reference made to "Symondes sones" is followed immediately by Book offering a brief synopsis of the Harrowing:

*And I, Boke, wil be brent but Iesus rise to lyue,*

*In alle my3tes of man and his moder gladye,*

*And conforte al his kynne and out of care brynge. (252-54)*

The close linkage made between Karinus and Leucius, the crucifixion, and the *descensus* in this passage, which serves as a preface to the Harrowing scene of Passus XVIII, strongly suggests that the poet was conscious of these elements as forming a single episode, whose greatest authority was to be found in the *Evangelium Nicodemi*. Book's claim to bear witness to the nativity of Christ (231), an event not treated in the *Evangelium*, precludes the possibility that Book actually represents the *Evangelium* rather than the Scriptures. But his insistence in the last line of his speech that mankind learn to "bileue on a newe lawe" (257) provides the key to understanding the nature of the transformation of the events of the *Evangelium* in the text of *Piers*, and the ideological sensibilities of the poet and his time that made such a transformation imperative.

For Langland, the narrative strategies employed by the author of the *Evangelium* presented limitations that he would have to seek to augment. As a master of allegory, Langland seems keenly aware of the limits of a discourse that is merely informative. He demands that his narrative be instructive as well. Above all, he seems to have recognized in his source its inability to define the New Dispensation in the narratives of the Old. His innovation is to reinvent

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the trope of the Harrowing of Hell: to retrieve it from the prison house of Old Testament textual authority by making it an allegory of Christian revelation.

We might profitably follow James I. Wimsatt here, who distinguished between "allegories of Reason" and those of "revelation." <sup>15</sup> In the great religious allegories of the Middle Ages, the rational faculty can get one only so far. The prime example is, of course, in Dante, where Virgil, the personification of Reason, cannot lead Dante into heaven. For that advancement, Dante requires the revelation of Divine Love, personified in Beatrice. In the case of *Piers*, we arrive in Passus XVIII at a point that requires transcendence of the power of Will's earlier guides, who are abstract representations of rational powers like Wit, Reason, or Conscience. This passus is unique in that the reference to the Deity is not made indirectly, as with the figure of the Tower of Truth or the figure of Piers "paynted al bloody" (XIX.6.). Here the figure of Christ himself is brought into play to demonstrate the ultimate Christian truth: the defeat of Death at the hand of Love. The poet's task in this case, deprived of his favorite device of personification, is to create an allegorical sign by some other means to lead the reader into an understanding of that truth.

As I have suggested, the poet's preferred strategy for instructing the reader how to read the allegory is, essentially, to shift the ground of meaning. The figure of Will, and the reader along with him, are invited to understand the "sentens" of the allegory in one way; then, having apprehended that meaning, the reader is forced into a radical re-evaluation of that interpretation by a shift in the text's mode of signification. I like to call this strategy the Rolling Stone of allegory, much like the stone on which Fortune stands in the tradition of medieval iconography.

The poet employs precisely this strategy in Passus XVIII. As readers, we are offered a false dilemma: in consideration of man's first disobedience to God's commandment in the garden, uttered under penalty of eternal death, which is the more just fate for man damnation or salvation? As interested parties, we are lured into a position where we side with the voices within the text that insist upon the justice of man's salvation. But this strategy is a rhetorical feint: the ultimate intent of the poet is to show us that we are answering the wrong question by insisting on justice. The entire motive force of the Vita portion of *Piers* is to transcend questions of justice, or reason, even to transcend the emphasis on the *power* of God, in order to shift the focus toward divine love.

Much critical attention has recently been paid to the image of Christ as "jouster" in this portion of the poem, and to the implications such a framing device holds for Langland's views on salvation. The allegory of the joust begins near

the beginning of the "inner dream" of the sixth vision, in the tree of Charity scene of Passus XVI, where the crucifixion is presaged in terms of Christ recovering the patriarchs in limbo "bi Iuggement of armes" (XVI.95), and finds its final expression in the beginning of Passus XIX, where "Iesus the Iuster" is presented in "Pieres armes, / His coloures and his cote-armure" (10-

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13). R. A. Waldron has provided the most comprehensive study of the "Christ-Knight" thread of the narrative, suggesting that the image of Christ as feudal conqueror is employed in the poem to provide authority for the conventions and hierarchies of earthly society by providing a mirror for them in the eternal realm.<sup>16</sup> Malcolm Godden explores the image of the Christ-Knight as courtly lover, sacrificing himself for the object of romantic desire, the "lady" soul.<sup>17</sup>

The image of the Christ-Knight is doubtlessly important to the development of the "sixth vision," especially in the case of the crucifixion, where the martial terms of the tournament find their most prominent expression. But it should be noted that the image of Christ as warrior is unmistakably suspended for the *descensus* portion of the narrative. Between the excoriation of the Jews by Faith, who accuses them of violating the laws of "kni3thod" in their treatment of the crucified Christ, and the Palm Sunday episode featuring Christ the Conqueror at the beginning of Passus XIX, the entire motif of battle is conspicuous by its absence. The sudden elision of this thread of the allegory is the more striking, since it is one actually present in the *Evangelium Nicodemi*. At the appearance of Christ before the gates of hell and the cry of "*tollite portas*," Inferus scornfully demands that Satan do battle with Christ:

...inferus dixit ad Satan principem Recede a me et exi de meis sedibus foras: si potens es praeliator, pugna adversum regem gloriae.<sup>18</sup>

(Hades . . . said to Prince Satan: Retire from me, and go outside of my realms: if thou art a powerful warrior, fight against the King of glory.)<sup>19</sup>

Nothing like this occurs in the *descensus* of Passus XVIII. It is noteworthy that Langland departs not only from his source here, but also from one of the allegorical image of the Christ-Knight that he has carefully constructed up to this point.

The departure is susceptible of an explanation, however. In his mediation between a rather dense stratum of literary conventions available for dealing with the topos of the Descent, Langland finds himself having to walk a very fine line. He rejects, and actively subverts, the convention of the pathetic Christ figure so popular during his own time, choosing rather to portray the approach to the crucifixion in heroic terms. But in the *descensus*, he finds the emphasis on God's power inappropriate to his task, even though the keynote of the *Evangelium* is the "unconquered power" (*invictae virtutis*) of Christ.<sup>20</sup> Langland is troubled by the absence of a particular discourse in the *Evangelium* that he considers an essential component of the literary archive of the *descensus*: he does not consider God's power to be the *telos* of salvation, but God's Love. Hence, the image of Christ the warrior is temporarily dissolved in order to provide a site for an exposition on Christ's mercy.

To this end, Langland creates out of the *descensus* an inner vision within the

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inner vision, as it were. Here, in the most self-consciously literary portion of his poem, the real mystery of salvation is to be disclosed. After the crucifixion scene, which also borrows the tradition of the blind soldier Longinus from the *Evangelium*, the descent portion of the narrative is signalled by a macaronic line: 'I drowe me in that derknesse to

*descendit ad inferas*" (XVIII.111). The verb form here is worthy of note: the poet does not employ the complementary infinitive *descendere*, since the reference is not to his own descent. Rather, he quotes the Apostle's creed, which employs the third person perfect, referring of course to Christ. The line does not carry the sense of "I withdrew . . . to descend to Hell," but "I withdrew to that part of the story where 'He descended to Hell.'" The poet shifts here into a meta-narrative, in which he invokes a thoroughly literary trope. The sense given is not "I will tell you how Christ harrowed Hell," but "here's where we do the Harrowing of Hell."

Immediately following this framing operation, we are introduced to another rhetorical feint centering on the figures of the Four Daughters of God, from Psalms 85:10. These four personified virtues perform a courtroom drama around the action of Christ's descent, debating the justice of the event.<sup>21</sup> The doctrinal implications of the debate, as James Simpson has ably pointed out, are central to the theological vision of the entire poem.<sup>22</sup> The issue revolves on the question of whether the devil holds valid rights to the souls in captivity in accordance with the law God had issued and Man had transgressed at the Creation. I wish to show here how the resolution of the quasi-legal question lies in the mode of allegory that Langland adopts for its interrogation. Central to this mechanism is the figure of Truth, for she will eventually become what I think of as the allegorical Rolling Stone.

The onset of their debate is provoked by the appearance of Christ in front of the gates of Hell, in the likeness of a gleam of light (another predominant image of the *Evangelium*, drawn from Isaiah 9:2). Truth, as a personification of what is known to be true, cannot determine what the light means, because her authority derives from truth as known *before the redemption*. Her sister Mercy glosses the light, noting that it "betokens mirth": Man shall be redeemed from the darkness of damnation by the events of this day (XVIII.133-36).

Rightwiseness, the personification of Justice, questions the legality of Christ's plundering of the damned souls, since they have been damned through due process of Divine Law. And now, in her own turn, Truth demonstrates her own contingent nature by siding with Rightwiseness on the point. It is here that we have to take stock again of the allegorical figures: Truth, obviously, is meant as the embodiment of what is True. But in the debate of the daughters of God, which takes place prior to the appearance of Christ in the nether regions, her "truth" is based on the old model. In keeping with this model, she quotes from the Book of Job to prove the impossibility of the redemption of the lost from the prison of hell: *Quia in inferno nulla est redemptio* (XVIII.147-49a). This is, of course, the "truth" of the Old Testament. Until the

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Redemption, the extent to which Truth and Justice may defer to their sister Mercy is, in essence, to no extent at all. Do Well, and have well, and God shall have thy soul (as in Passus VII.113). But according to the strict justice of Rightwiseness, doing well is not a possibility and it can never can be so long as the original sin of mankind remains unatoned for.

Into the midst of this debate emerges the figure of Christ. Although limited in the *Evangelium* to an almost mute luminous presence, here he is not only endowed with speech, but with character: he seems almost avuncular, rather like an amiable repossession agent, as he informs Satan that he has come to wrest his property from him. But *is fallen man the rightful property of Satan?* The poet frames the question for the reader in this way at first, in accordance with the "devil's right's" doctrine, which was, up to the eleventh century, the dominant theory concerning the atonement.<sup>23</sup> This is the doctrine insisted on by Lucifer (XVIII.274-280) and supported by Rightwiseness: that the devil's imprisonment of the damned is a simple matter of property rights. At the outset, Christ buys into this doctrine, defending his claim to the lost souls on a basis of simple purchase: "lo! here my soule to amendes /For alle synneful soules to saue tho that ben worthy" (XVIII.325-26). After only two lines, however, Christ abandons the monetary imagery of "redemption"; he does not insist upon his own payment as clear title. Instead, he urges upon Satan the ethos

of "no honor between thieves," in a discourse that is common for the trope of the Harrowing in the Middle English tradition,<sup>24</sup> that of the "guiler beguiled." Christ's claim is that, in his masquerade as the seductive serpent in the garden, Satan had accomplished the fall of man unjustly. Christ then declares the lost souls in Hell rightfully his, claiming justice by injustice. The manner of duplicity employed by the enemy of mankind is, if we accept this reasoning, appropriate behavior for the savior of mankind. "Go gyle a3eine gyle!" (355). And we, as readers, and as human beings under the burden of the final judgment, want to support this decision, to cry "turn about is fair play," and, in effect, to endorse the ethos of an eye for an eye.

Perhaps we should recall here that Chaucer's Reeve invokes just this ethos: "A gylour shal hymself bigyled be" (I.4320-21), and V. A. Kolve's observation about this line is very much to the point. "The Old Law stands affirmed," Kolve writes, "with human action locked in an endless cycle of aggression and counter-aggression, from which no progress is possible."<sup>25</sup> Langland clearly recognizes that the underlying ethos informing this "scene" derives from the Old Law precisely the ethos which must be transcended. The Christ of Passus XVIII *does* quote the Old Law to Lucifer: *Dentem pro dente, et oculum pro oculo* (337a) and defends his seizure of the righteous heathen by appealing to justice, reason, and the law in two half-lines (346-47); but he follows this with the reminder, drawn from Matthew 5:17 in the Vulgate, that he has not come to "dissolve" the law (*soluere*), but to "fulfill" it (*adimplere*, also carrying the sense of finishing something off).

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The citation is ironic, for to dissolve the hegemony of the Law is exactly what Christ *has* come for, within the scheme of the poem. Having delivered a thoroughly legalistic defense for his intrusion into Hell, and having constrained us to understand the intrusion in these terms, Christ suddenly and radically subverts the privileged position of the law by introducing a word that we have not yet heard in the entire narrative of Christ's passion and descent: Grace.

Now bygynneth thi gyle ageyne the to tourne,

And my grace to growe ay gretter and wyder.

The bitternesse that thow hast browe brouke it thiseluen,

That art doctour of deth drynke that thow madest! (XVIII.359-62)

In this utterance, the entire discourse of the Law is emptied of authority: law itself has become guile, and the Doctour of the Law the advocate of eternal death. With the advent of Grace, the litigious contest between the heavenly and the diabolical is rendered moot. The concept of Grace appears here for the first time in the framed narrative because it acquires significance only subsequent to the crucifixion: Grace before the Passion was an impossibility. Afterwards, it is the New Law.

The opposition between the Old and New Law is reinforced by the allegory of the drink. The drink concocted by Satan is Death, and Christ bids him play it off. But for Christ, Love is the drink. Legality takes second place to desire, as Christ abandons his legal defense of the plundering of Hell, telling Satan that the real motive for his descent is to slake the unquenchable thirst of his love for mankind. To satisfy this thirst, he says, he was willing to suffer death (XVIII.364). The Biblical metaphor of the drink derives from the wedding in Cana (in John 2:1-11), where Christ turns the water into the good wine kept for last. And if we look ahead within our poem to Passus XIX, we find that the



poet indeed saw in this miracle an allegorical figure for the transformation of the old law into the new from the letter of the law to the law of love:

For wyn is lykned to lawe and lyf of holynesse;

And law lakked tho for men loued nout her enemys. (XIX.107-8)

This new wine, the wine kept for last, the drink of Love, provides the deepest significance for the B-text of *Piers*. It is at the center of the alternative doctrine of the atonement, the "satisfaction" theory promoted by Anselm: that Christ's sacrifice is meant to demonstrate the love of God for mankind. For this revelation, the poet rejects the strategies we expect from allegory: we hear no speeches from any character named "Caritas," and Christ does not perform an exegetical exercise on the cup of wine he drinks. The essence of the drink remains mysterious, in order to place it beyond the comprehension of the rational faculty. It is for this reason that the poet quotes the apostle Paul, "I

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have heard the secret words which it is not granted to man to utter" (XVIII.393a): *not* to claim a transcendental authority for the author's vision,<sup>26</sup> but to acknowledge the inability of the author, or any "maker" whose business is with words, to express the mystery of this love within a system of signification which is inadequate to the task.

At this point, we can return to the frame the poet has placed around the narrative of the descent. The four daughters of God have witnessed the event, and Peace is the first to speak, repeating the doctrine of Love she has insisted on throughout the debate. And Truth cries "Trewes . . . thow tellest vs soth, bi Iesus!" (XVIII.416). The figure of Truth here has undergone a radical transformation since she was last heard from, before the appearance of Christ. By the redemption of mankind that takes place with Christ's passion, insisted upon both rhetorically and allegorically by her sister Mercy, she has been emptied of her original signification, and re-filled with quite another. She signals her own transformation both by the figure she chooses to swear by, and by her self-identification (Truth / soth) with the proposition that Peace has argued. She is still Truth, but with the New Dispensation she has become a *different* Truth.<sup>27</sup> As readers, we have been led down one path of interpretation, and our instruction has been made more efficacious by its reversal. The poet has made us accomplices to the Truth of the Old Law so that the revelation of the New appears the more dramatic, the more memorable. The allegory becomes a set of instructions on how to read the allegory.

With the transferral of authority from Law to Love, from Truth to New Truth, most importantly, from written text to the immanent presence of the divine within the human heart, the narrative itself becomes an allegorical figure for the release of the damned from the prison of Hell. The *Evangelium Nicodemi* as narrative is a closed loop, relying on the texts of the past for its authority. *Piers* claims authority, paradoxically, by freeing the reader from that reliance. Through this rejection of textual authority, the poet leads his readers out of the prison house of the Old Law. As an alternative, *Piers* restores to the narrative of the Descent what is required for the literary archive of the New Dispensation: the doctrine of Love, whose authority transcends textuality. In restoring Divine Love to the narrative, Langland has drawn on a level of the literary archive of which he could not even have been aware, so deeply is it inscribed: the descent of the lover into the nether world to retrieve the dead beloved. Why, after all, does Ishtar descend to the house of Irkalla, but to rescue her lover Tammuz?<sup>28</sup> The love of the Divine for His creation is, for Langland, inscribed so deeply in the human heart that it defies rational analysis.

This is, in fact, the message that the text has been struggling to convey from the start. In Passus I, Will's request for instruction on how to know Truth provokes Holy Church's most impatient reproach for just this reason: that it is a Kynde Knowyng, *which the dreamer already possesses within his heart*, without the necessity of instruction by textual

authority. For her own part, Holy

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Church cites the only authority which finally bears any currency within the poem: "I do it on Deus Caritas" (I.86).

## Notes

1. Morton W. Bloomfield, *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth Century Apocalypse* (New Brunswick, 1962), p. 32.
2. Martin Irvine, "Medieval Textuality and the Archeology of Textual Culture," in *Speaking Two Languages: Traditional Disciplines and Contemporary Theory in Medieval Studies*, ed. Allen J. Frantzen (Albany, 1991), p. 182.
3. Irvine, "Medieval Textuality," p. 182.
4. Irvine, "Medieval Textuality," p. 187.
5. Robert Worth Frank, *Piers Plowman and the Scheme of Salvation* (New Haven, 1957), p. 8.
6. See Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre* (Ithaca, 1979); also Priscilla Martin, *Piers Plowman: The Field and the Tower* (London, 1979).
7. Constantine Tischendorf, *Evangelia Apocrypha* (Leipzig, 1853), p. 377. All citations from the *Evangelium Nicodemi* are taken from the "Latine A" text of this edition. The author of the *Evangelium* here has conflated Isaiah 26:19 and Hosea 13:14.
8. Alexander Walker, *Apocryphal Gospels, Acts, and Revelations*, Ante-Nicene Christian Library 16 (Edinburgh, 1870), p. 203. All translations of the Latin text are taken from this translation of Tischendorf.
9. Tischendorf, *Evangelia*, p. 387.
10. In the Latin B version, the brothers are even forbidden by the Holy Ghost to speak to their interrogators (Tischendorf, p. 421). For the legend of the Septuagint, see Moses Hadas, ed. and trans., *Aristeae to Philocrates* (New York, 1951).
11. It should be noted that the Gospel was still included in Latin Bible codexes as late as the twelfth century.
12. All citations from the text of *Piers* are taken from Walter Skeat, ed., *The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman in Three Parallel Texts*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1886).
13. Tischendorf, *Evangelia*, p. 316. See Skeat, *Vision*, p. 251, and A. V. C. Schmidt, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Complete Edition of the B-Text*, 2nd ed. (London, 1987), p. 350.
14. Schmidt, *Piers*, p. 350. See also Skeat, 2: 251.
15. James I. Wimsatt, *Allegory and Mirror: Tradition and Structure in Middle English Literature* (New York, 1970), p. 117.
16. R. A. Waldron, "Langland's Originality: the Christ-Knight and the Harrowing of Hell," in *Medieval English Religious and Ethical Literature: Essays in Honour of G.H. Russell*, ed. Gregory Kratzman and James

Simpson (Cambridge, 1986), p. 72.

17. Malcolm Godden, *The Making of Piers Plowman* (London, 1990), p. 141. Godden also notes the motif of Christ as courtly lover in Grosseteste's *Chateau d'Amour* and the *Ancrene Riwe*.

18. Tischendorf, *Evangelia*, p. 376.

19. Walker, *Apocryphal Gospels*, p. 202.

20. Tischendorf, *Evangelia*, p. 378.

21. The Descent is an unusual setting for this motif, commonly referred to as "the Parliament in Heaven." For the definitive study of this motif, see Hope Traver, *The Four Daughters of God* (Bryn Mawr, 1907).

22. James Simpson, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction to the B-Text* (London, 1990), p. 213.

23. Simpson, *Introduction*, p. 209.

24. Derek Pearsall, *Piers Plowman by William Langland: An Edition of the C-Text* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1978), p. 325n. The theme is rehearsed in the Hymn "Pangue Lingua Gloriosi."

25. V. A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: the First Five Canterbury Tales* (Stanford, 1984), p. 255.

26. A. V. C. Schmidt, ed., *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, p. 352.

27. The transformational nature of Truth's character in *Piers* sets it apart from other versions of the "Parliament in Heaven" motif. For example, in "The Castle of Perseverance," the figures Justicia and Veritas are merely instructed by Pax to consent to Mankind's redemption, in order to preserve peace in heaven. After being ordered to abandon their insistence on the Old Law by God himself, Veritas finally consents, without comment as to the validity of the claim made by Pax.

28. It is no coincidence that Ishtar's speech before the gates of hell includes phrases cognate to Psalm 24:7 and Psalm 107:10-16. See Robert William Rogers, *Cuneiform Parallels to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1926), p. 122.