

Treasure and the Life Course in *Genesis A* and *Beowulf**Amy Faulkner*

Verumtamen in imagine pertransit homo
 sed et frustra conturbatur
 thesaurizat et ignorat cui congregabit ea[.]

[Nevertheless man passes as an image; and yet he is confounded in vain: he stores up,
 and does not know for whom he will gather these things.]¹

Psalm 38.7 expresses a very human anxiety about possessions: what will their fate be when we leave this life? The more value a culture places on material wealth, the more pressing this anxiety becomes. In early medieval England, a period in which the worth of the living was measured in monetary terms and the dead were buried with lavish treasures, this natural concern for the afterlife of one's goods receives heightened significance, in literature if not in life, mounting at times nearly to panic.² The poet of *The Seafarer*, for example, imagines the desperation of a man who must bury his brother, and attempts to make good use of the treasure that the dead man stored up during his life:

Ʒeah Ʒe græf wille golde stregan
 broþor his geborenum, byrgan be deadum
 maþmum mislicum Ʒæt hine mid wille,
 ne mæg Ʒære sawle Ʒe biþ synna ful
 gold to geoce for Godes egsan,
 Ʒonne he hit ær hydeð Ʒenden he her leofað.³

¹ Ps. 38.7. All translations are original unless otherwise specified.

² For an explanation of *wergild*, the concept that a person has a “legal value” set on their life, depending upon their class and status, see Carole Hough, “Wergild,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Michael Lapidge et al., 2nd ed. (Chichester, 2014), 489–90.

³ *The Seafarer*, lines 97–102, ed. George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, *The Exeter Book*, ASPR 3 (London, 1936), 146. All subsequent quotations from *The Seafarer* are from this edition, with line numbers following in parentheses. On the translation of this passage, especially lines 98b–99, see John F. Vickrey, “*The Seafarer* 97–102: *Dives* and the Burial of Treasure,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 94 (1995): 19–30, at 25.

[Though a brother might wish to strew the grave of his sibling with gold, to bury with the dead one as various treasures that which he wants to go with him, that which he previously hid when he lived here, gold cannot be a help for the soul that is full of sins, before the terror of God.]

This passage, then, expresses a similar anxiety to Psalm 38.7 about what will happen to the possessions that we have so carefully gathered in this life.

The homiletic tone of *The Seafarer*, though, is not representative of the treatment of treasure throughout the Old English poetic corpus. Elsewhere, especially in heroic poetry, material wealth seems to be a straightforward index of a person's or nation's worth.⁴ While some poets of this genre complicate the relationship between treasure and worth, *Genesis A*, a poetic version of Genesis 1–22, exemplifies the attitude that, in general, the more treasure one has, the better a person one is.⁵ Abraham's great wealth, for example, can be seen as a material manifestation of divine favor:

Him þa Abraham gewat æhte lædan
of Egipta eðelmearce,
gumcystum god, gold and seolfre
swiðfeorm and gesælig⁶

[Abraham then departed, bringing his possessions, gold and silver, near to the border of the Egyptians' homeland, the man good in virtues, very prosperous and blessed]

It would be hard to say whether Abraham was *gesælig* 'blessed' because he possessed a good deal of gold and silver, or whether he possessed the gold and silver because he was *gesælig*: that is to say, blessed by God. Similarly, the poet elsewhere uses the phrase "eadge eorðwelan" [blessed earthly wealth] (*Genesis A*, line 1878) to refer to Abraham's possessions.

⁴ Ernst Leisi, "Gold und Manneswert im *Beowulf*," *Anglia* 71 (1952): 259–73; trans. John D. Niles with the assistance of Shannon A. Dubenion-Smith, in John D. Niles, *Old English Literature: A Guide to Criticism, with Selected Readings* (Chichester, 2016), 173–83, at 175–76. See also Michael D. Cherniss, *Ingeld and Christ: Heroic Concepts and Values in Old English Christian Poetry* (The Hague, 1972), 100–101.

⁵ *Genesis A* is preserved in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius 11. Its title distinguishes it from *Genesis B*, also found in Junius 11, an Old English translation of an Old Saxon poem which renders the apocryphal account of the fall of the rebel angels.

⁶ *Genesis A*, lines 1767–70a, ed. George Philip Krapp, *The Junius Manuscript*, ASPR 1 (New York, 1931), 54. All subsequent quotations from *Genesis A*, *Exodus* and *Daniel* are from this edition, with line numbers following in parentheses. Cf. Gen. 12.5.

The *DOE* specifies that the compound *eorþwela* is “often contrasted with the eternal reward of heaven.”⁷ This is perhaps the sense in which the poet of *The Seafarer* employs this word: “Ic gelyfe no / þæt him eorðwelan ece stondað” [I do not believe that earthly wealth will stand eternally for him] (lines 66b–67). In a poem such as *The Seafarer*, which verges on the homiletic, wealth cannot be both “earthly” and “blessed”: the two contradict one another. For the poet of *Genesis A*, on the other hand, there is no such contradiction. In *Genesis A*, Abraham’s vast wealth serves as another reminder of his excellence. The significant role that treasure plays in *Genesis A*, especially at critical moments in the life course, is a reminder of the importance of wealth in the heroic depiction of a good life – and death.

The *Genesis A* poet’s direct approach to material wealth, which seems to avoid any major allegorical signification, is in line with the poet’s primarily literal interpretation of the biblical source.⁸ This literal emphasis can be contrasted with the possible allegorical function of treasure in the Old English *Exodus*, which shares a manuscript with *Genesis A*. In *Exodus*, the loot that the Israelites take from the Egyptians – “ealde madmas” [ancient treasures] (*Exodus*, line 586b) – could serve a typological function in representing the souls that Christ plunders from the Devil when He harrows Hell and could, moreover, analogically represent the salvation enjoyed by those who undergo baptism; two references to the “hordwearda hryre” [fall of the hoard-guardians] (*Exodus*, lines 35a, 512a) at the beginning and end of the poem create an envelope pattern, perhaps signaling the significance of treasure in the poem.⁹ In comparison, the allusions to treasure in *Genesis A* seem almost ornamental, or even otiose. Henry Mayr-Harting observes: “Many of the old heroic tales were about the winning of a treasure. Treasure fascinated their hearers for its own sake, as sex fascinates the modern reader.”¹⁰ In *Genesis A*, treasure seems to fulfil the purpose outlined by Mayr-Harting: fascinating, for its own sake, rather than a symbol for anything else.

⁷ *DOE*, s.v. *eorþwela*.

⁸ Charles D. Wright, “*Genesis A* ad litteram,” in *Old English Literature and the Old Testament*, ed. Michael Fox and Manish Sharma (Toronto, 2012), 121–71; Nina Boyd, “Doctrine and Criticism: A Reevaluation of ‘Genesis A’,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 83 (1982): 230–38; and Bennett A. Brockman, “‘Heroic’ and ‘Christian’ in *Genesis A*: The Evidence of the Cain and Abel Episode,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 35 (1974): 115–28.

⁹ John F. Vickrey, “*Exodus* and the Treasure of Pharaoh,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 1 (1972): 159–65; Vickrey, “*Exodus* and the Battle in the Sea,” *Traditio* 28 (1972): 122–23; on the wider allegory of baptism and salvation in the poem, see Daniel Anlezark, *Water and Fire: The Myth of the Flood in Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester, 2006), 198; and James W. Earl, “Christian Tradition in the Old English *Exodus*,” in *The Poems of MS Junius 11: Basic Readings*, ed. R. M. Liuzza (New York, 2002), 140–41. Many studies of *Exodus* acknowledge that, while the poet shows awareness of the exegetical tradition, allegory is not as prominent in the poem as it could be; see, for example, Malcolm Godden, “Biblical Literature: The Old Testament,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge, 1986), 225. For a reassessment of the allegorical significance of the treasure in *Exodus*, see Amy Faulkner, “Death and Treasure in *Exodus* and *Beowulf*,” *English Studies* 101 (2020): 785–801.

¹⁰ Henry Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1972), 227.

The genealogical sections of *Genesis A* are no exception. Here the poet embellishes the sparse obits of the biblical source, introducing details about the wealth which the old patriarch bequeaths to his son and how this son, the tribe's new leader, distributes or guards this wealth.¹¹ This catalogue of inheritance and distribution could almost be an exercise in poetic variation, testing the poet's ability to relentlessly vary the same concept: the old man died and gave his wealth to his son.¹² However, a close reading of the genealogical sections of *Genesis A* reveals that these accounts of inheritance are far from ornamental. Rather, the repeated allusions to treasure emphasize the central importance of treasure in the early medieval English life course, at least as it is presented in the heroic poetic tradition. The moment of succession, a critical point in the aristocratic life course, is marked by the inheritance of treasure, while death, the final stage of the life course, is shown to require separation from the treasure that one enjoyed in life. The genealogical sections of *Genesis A*, then, point to the importance of treasure not in the funerary, burial context, but rather to the role that inheritance of treasure plays in aristocratic succession.

Treasure in Heroic Poetry

Blood and gold go hand-in-hand in Old English heroic poetry. Treasure is intimately associated not only with the blood of the battlefield, but also with blood-ties and pseudo-kin bonds.¹³ As Winfried Rudolf argues: "Gold gifts, looted in battle and handed from a lord to a retainer, be he related to him in blood or not, create [...] a 'blood relation' of honour through the very blood which stains these gifts."¹⁴ Rudolf supposes an association in the early medieval mind between inanimate treasures, particularly golden ones, and the vital life-force, epitomized by blood.¹⁵ Etymological and semantic connections between the vocabulary of

¹¹ Daniel Anlezark, ed. and trans., *Old Testament Narratives* (Cambridge, MA, 2011), xi; Thomas D. Hill, "The 'Variegated Obit' as an Historiographic Motif in Old English Poetry and Anglo-Latin Historical Literature," *Traditio* 44 (1988): 101–24; Hill, 102, suggests that it is because of their primarily historical interest in *Genesis* that the *Genesis A* poet chooses to include the genealogical material at all.

¹² Hill, "'Variegated Obit'," 107–8, observes a relative lack of variegation in other Old English texts that catalogue a number of deaths, such as the Old English *Martyrology* and vernacular chronicles; however, he finds a parallel to the variegation in *Genesis A* in the Anglo-Latin *Northumbrian Chronicle*, believed to be the work of Byrhtferth of Ramsey.

¹³ For an anthropological approach to gift exchange in *Beowulf*, see Jos Bazelmans, *By Weapons Made Worthy: Lords, Retainers and their Relationships in Beowulf* (Amsterdam, 1999), especially chapters 5–6 (111–88); on the life cycle, see 168–88.

¹⁴ Winfried Rudolf, "The Gold in *Beowulf* and the Currencies of Fame," in *Gold in der europäischen Heldensage*, ed. Heike Sahm, Wilhelm Heizmann, and Victor Millet (Berlin, 2019), 115–41, at 124.

¹⁵ See Vickrey, "The Seafarer 97–102," for the possibility that *The Seafarer* records, and refutes, the pre-Christian belief that one's possessions are animate. Rudolf, "Gold in *Beowulf*," 122, suggests that certain natural properties of gold may have led to the belief that it manifested a kind of vital energy: for example, it is found in

treasure and reproduction are, likewise, suggestive of a traditional understanding that treasure is related to fertility, as Paul Beekman Taylor notes, for example, in the cases of Old English *frætwe* ‘treasure’, Gothic *fraiw* ‘seed’ and Old Norse *fræva* ‘fertilize’.¹⁶

This association with vitality may contribute to the association between treasure and succession in a number of Old English heroic poems: one such example is *Beowulf*, a poem which, according to Francis Leneghan, takes a “pronounced interest in the matter of royal succession.”¹⁷ For example, Hrothgar gives Beowulf the war-gear which he had previously received from his brother, Heorogar (*Beowulf*, lines 2155–62). Frederick M. Biggs argues that Heorogar’s gift marks out Hrothgar as his successor, rather than Heorogar’s son, Heorowearð.¹⁸ Likewise, Hrothgar’s gift of this treasure to Beowulf could be understood to reflect his desire to name Beowulf as his heir.¹⁹ Jos Bazelmans’ anthropological reading of *Beowulf* supports the close association between treasure and rites of succession: “The coming together of relevant constituents for the person is not an automatic, biological process, but rather requires the activation of numerous relationships within the socio-cosmic universe in a variety of life-cycle related rituals and is realized by the exchange of gifts.”²⁰ The *Beowulf* poet is often thought to be only interested in wealth that takes the form of material treasures, those valuables that can be given as tangible gifts.²¹ However, it should be noted that Hrethel leaves his sons “lond ond leodbyrig” [land and towns] when he departs from this life, while Wealhtheow commands her husband to leave “folc and rice” [people and kingdom] to his kinsmen when he dies.²² These examples show the significance of immaterial as well as material treasures in the context of inheritance and succession.

Nonetheless, it is material wealth, especially richly decorated military equipment, which plays the most prominent role in dynastic succession.²³ At the moment of his death,

the earth; it is often associated with the sun; it is “pure, non-corrosive, malleable, yet durable,” and thus linked to immortality.

¹⁶ Paul Beekman Taylor, “The Traditional Language of Treasure in *Beowulf*,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 85 (1986): 191–205, at 195. See also Rudolf, “Gold in *Beowulf*,” 118–21.

¹⁷ Francis Leneghan, *The Dynastic Drama of Beowulf* (Cambridge, 2020), 18. See also Stephanie Hollis, “*Beowulf* and the Succession,” *Parergon* 1 (1983): 39–54.

¹⁸ Frederick M. Biggs, “The Politics of Succession in *Beowulf* and Anglo-Saxon England,” *Speculum* 80 (2005): 730–31; see also Leneghan, *Dynastic Drama*, 48–49.

¹⁹ Leneghan, *Dynastic Drama*, 18–19.

²⁰ Bazelmans, *By Weapons Made Worthy*, 149.

²¹ Peter S. Baker, *Honour, Exchange and Violence in Beowulf* (Cambridge, 2013), 38.

²² *Beowulf*, lines 2471a and 1179a, ed. R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, *Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 4th ed. (Toronto, 2008), 85 and 41. All subsequent quotations from *Beowulf* are taken from this edition (henceforth referred to as *KIV*), with line numbers following in parentheses. Hill, “‘Variegated Obit’,” 120, reads Hrethel’s obit in the light of the *Genesis A* genealogies, noting that Hrethel enjoys spiritual felicity for leaving “his ancestral property securely in the possession of his heirs.”

²³ On swords and armor as objects of exchange in *Beowulf*, see Bazelmans, *By Weapons Made Worthy*, 150–54.

Weohstan of the Wægmundings bequeaths the war-gear he has won in battle to his son, Wiglaf:

He frætwe geheold fela missera,
bill ond byrnan, oð ðæt his byre mihte
eorlscipe efnan swa his ærfæder;
geaf him ða mid Geatum guðgewæda
æghwæs unrim þa he of ealdre gewat
frod on forðweg.²⁴ (*Beowulf*, lines 2620–25a)

[He held the treasure for many seasons, the sword and the mail-coat, until his son was able to carry out noble deeds like his late father; then among the Geats he gave him countless kinds of war-gear, when he departed from life, wise on the way forth.]

The gift of treasure from father to son results in a commendable departure: Weohstan leaves this life “frod on forðweg” [old/wise on the way forth] (*Beowulf*, line 2625a). The significance of uniting heir with heirloom is marked by *b*-alliteration on “bill ond byrnan” [sword and mail-coat] (*Beowulf*, line 2621a) and “byre” (*Beowulf*, line 2621b), an exclusively poetic word for ‘child’ which, moreover, bears an aural resemblance to the first syllable of “byrnan.”²⁵ In this clearly very public ceremony, Wiglaf’s succession is made manifest in the form of his father’s sword and mail.²⁶ The *byre* ‘child,’ a word etymologically related to the verb *beran* ‘bear, carry,’ thus carries forth the legacy of his father.²⁷ Though Weohstan’s body perishes, his legacy endures through his treasure and his son.

The fate of material goods was also a matter of concern in non-aristocratic contexts. For example, Bede records that, as Cuthbert lay on his deathbed, he insisted that a particular monk, Beda, was close beside him, because Beda “knew all about all the gifts he [Cuthbert]

²⁴ Weohstan had previously plundered this *frætwe* from Eanmund, son of Othhere, and it was granted to him by Onela, Eanmund’s uncle (*Beowulf*, lines 2611–19). R. T. Farrell, *Beowulf, Swedes and Geats* (London, 1972), 11–12, addresses whether “ond his magum ætbær” [and carried it away to his kinsmen] (*Beowulf*, line 2614b) implies that Onela is Weohstan’s kinsman.

²⁵ Hilding Bäck, *The Synonyms for “Child”, “Boy”, “Girl” in Old English: An Etymological-Semasiological Investigation* (Lund, 1934), 65, identifies twelve occurrences in poetry.

²⁶ David C. Van Meter, “The Ritualized Presentation of Weapons and the Ideology of Nobility in *Beowulf*,” *The Journal of English and German Philology* 95 (1996): 177.

²⁷ According to Vladimir E. Orel, *A Handbook of Germanic Etymology* (Leiden, 2003), 41, 64, Old English *byre* and *beran* are both derived from Proto-Germanic **beranan*. Bäck, *Synonyms*, 64, holds that *byre* “is derived from the root of PG **ber*, ‘to bear, give birth to,’” and that “[o]riginally it was probably an abstract word meaning ‘birth’.”

had given and the presents he had received”; Beda would therefore be in a position to remind Cuthbert about any outstanding returns to be made on gifts that he had received.²⁸ Cuthbert’s fear, then, was that his possessions would not be appropriately distributed before he died. Similarly, at the time of Bede’s own death it is recorded that he wished to distribute the “few treasures” which he possessed to the priests of the monastery: “some pepper, some napkins and some incense.”²⁹ However, this anxiety about the fate of one’s earthly goods can be distinguished from the more pressing fear found in the world of heroic poetry, where the dying person’s possessions take on a heightened significance as a symbol of their enduring bloodline.

In this secular, aristocratic setting, then, the concern is that the dying leader’s possessions should be bequeathed not just appropriately, but to somebody of their own blood. Weohstan’s gift of treasure to Wiglaf represents the successful transfer of treasure from the dying patriarch to his younger blood relative; in *Genesis A*, on the other hand, Abraham fears that his possessions will not be inherited by a member of his immediate family:

Hwæt gifest þu me, gasta waldend,
 freomanna to frofre, nu ic þus feasceaft eom?
 Ne þearf ic yrfestol eaforan bytlían
 ænegum minra, ac me æfter sculon
 mine woruldmagas welan bryttian.
 Ne sealdest þu me sunu; forðon mec sorg dreceð
 on sefan swiðe. Ic sylf ne mæg
 ræd ahycgan. Gæð gerefá min
 fægen freobearnum; fæste mynteð
 ingeþancum þæt me æfter sie
 eaforan sine yrfewardas.
 Geseoð þæt me of bryde bearn ne wocon. (*Genesis A*, lines 2175–86)

[What do you give me, ruler of spirits, as comfort for noble people, now that I am so destitute? I have no need to build an ‘inheritance seat’ for any of my children; rather, after me my worldly kinsmen will distribute my wealth. You have not given me a son;

²⁸ Bede, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti* 37, trans. Bertram Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert: A Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede’s Prose Life* (Cambridge, 1940), 276–77.

²⁹ Peter Hunter Blair, *The World of Bede* (Cambridge, 1990), 308.

therefore sorrow afflicts me very much in my mind. I cannot think of any counsel. My steward goes rejoicing in noble children; he intends firmly with inner thoughts that after me his children will be the guardians of the inheritance. They see that no children have woken from my bride for me.]³⁰

In an instance of traditional Old English understatement, Abraham laments that he will have no need to build an “yrfestol” (*Genesis A*, line 2177a), the seat from which inheritance is distributed. This emphasis on inheritance can be seen also towards the end of his speech in the compound “yrfewardas” [guardians of inheritance] (*Genesis A*, line 2185b), which like “yrfestol,” alliterates with “eaforan” [children]. These “yrfewardas,” however, are not Abraham’s own children, but those of his steward, his “woruldmagas” (*Genesis A*, line 2179a). While Bosworth-Toller defines *woruldmæg* as a “kinsman according to the flesh,” A. N. Doane holds that here it indicates “that the inheritors are related merely by circumstance rather than blood.”³¹ In the context of this passage, in which Abraham is concerned that somebody unrelated to him will inherit his wealth, Doane’s reading makes most sense of “woruldmagas.” Abraham’s imagined scenario depicts a breakdown of the ideal model of inheritance found in Weohstan’s gift of war-gear to Wiglaf in *Beowulf*. Moreover, in contrast with Bede’s account of the death of Cuthbert, where Cuthbert’s anxiety is limited to the just distribution of his goods, this example from *Genesis A* illustrates the particular fear, found in both Old English poetry and Old Testament narrative, that one’s wealth will pass to somebody from outside the kin group.³²

There are some possible exceptions to these observations. For example, as suggested above, Hrothgar’s gift of ancestral treasure to Beowulf could reflect the king’s desire to name Beowulf as his heir, despite the fact that he has living sons (*Beowulf*, lines 946b–49a).³³ Wealhtheow’s response to Hrothgar’s gesture reveals that she, at least, cannot condone the king’s intentions:

Me man sægde þæt þu ðe for sunu wolde
hererinc habban. Heorot is gefælsod,
beahsele beorhta; bruc þenden þu mote

³⁰ Cf. Gen. 15.2–3.

³¹ Bosworth-Toller, s.v. *weoroldmæg*; A. N. Doane, ed., *Genesis A: A New Edition, Revised* (Tempe, 2013), 372.

³² See also Ps. 48.11.

³³ Leneghan, *Dynastic Drama*, 63–65, 84–85.

manigra medo, ond þinum magum læf
folc and rice þonne ðu forð scyle,
methodscaft seon. (*Beowulf*, lines 1175–80a)

[People have told me that you would have this warrior as a son for yourself. Heorot is cleansed, the bright ring-hall; enjoy many rewards while you may, and to your kinsmen leave the people and kingdom when you must go forth, to face the decree of fate.]

Her meaning is made explicit when she turns towards her own sons, sitting beside Beowulf in the hall (*Beowulf*, lines 1188–91). The situation outlined by Wealhtheow represents the ideal of succession in the heroic world, at least as it is presented in poetry: the wealth of the old king is passed to his blood relatives, who will take up his position along with their inheritance. Leneghan points out that “the fact that Hrothgar’s plan to adopt Beowulf is never again mentioned suggests that Wealhtheow’s words and deeds had their desired effect.”³⁴ Wealhtheow’s intervention puts a stop to Hrothgar’s adoption of Beowulf. While Hrothgar’s gift of treasure may have represented the king’s desire to “violate the dynastic principle,” as Leneghan puts it, this symbolic gesture never reaches its fulfilment.³⁵

Secondly, the treasure at Scyld Scefing’s funeral is conspicuously heaped around the dead king rather than, as might be expected, under his son Beow’s protection: according to the conventions of the heroic world, the treasure of the dead king should pass directly to his blood heir. However, Scyld, who arrives fatherless from the sea, should perhaps be regarded as something of a special case. The symbolism of his return to the sea, his funeral barge loaded with no less treasure than the boat in which he arrived as a baby (*Beowulf*, lines 43–46), takes precedence over any account of the treasures that he might have bequeathed to Beow.³⁶ Moreover, the treasures that the Scyldings bring to the funeral barge are repeatedly called *madmas* (*Beowulf*, lines 36b and 41a); while this word can mean ‘treasures’ in a general sense, it very often refers specifically to gifts.³⁷ The word *lac* ‘offering, gift’ (*Beowulf*, line 43b) implies, more strongly still, that the funerary treasures have been given to Scyld. As such, it need not be assumed that Beow has been deprived of his inheritance.

³⁴ Leneghan, *Dynastic Drama*, 75.

³⁵ Leneghan, *Dynastic Drama*, 74.

³⁶ On the treasures with which Scyld arrives, see Rudolf, “Gold in *Beowulf*,” 121.

³⁷ *Bosworth-Toller*, s.v. *madm*; Elizabeth M. Tyler, *Old English Poetics: The Aesthetics of the Familiar in Anglo-Saxon England* (York, 2006), 27.

However, the most famous example of a king who dies and does not give his wealth to his son is, of course, Beowulf himself. He wins the dragon's hoard, but has no son who can inherit this vast wealth. Leneghan observes: "Contrary to Beowulf's own wish that the treasures he has gained with his life will benefit his people, the lordless Geats return them to the earth from which they once came."³⁸ As William Cooke shows, it is in the messenger's speech that the first suggestion of not using the treasure is raised (*Beowulf*, lines 2999–3027); the messenger recommends that the whole hoard should be burnt on Beowulf's funeral pyre, firstly because it would be unfitting for the Geats to enjoy the treasure which their king purchased with his life, and secondly because the coming years will be blighted by inevitable wars which will spring up as a result of the Geats' lack of a lord.³⁹ In the end, it seems as though some of the treasure is burnt, and some placed in the tomb with Beowulf.⁴⁰ Another reason for the Geats' disinclination to make use of the treasure, as their king wished, could be the curse that is supposed to have been laid on the hoard (*Beowulf*, lines 3051–57, 3069–73), although these passages are the subject of much debate.⁴¹ At the end of the poem, in any case, the treasure lies wasted and useless in the tomb, alongside the king. An analysis of treasure in the genealogies of *Genesis A*, a heroic poem of roughly the same date of *Beowulf*, will illuminate the role that treasure plays in Beowulf's death and the Old English heroic tradition.⁴²

Treasure in *Genesis A*

³⁸ Leneghan, *Dynastic Drama*, 138.

³⁹ William Cooke, "Who Cursed Whom, and When? The Cursing of the Hoard and Beowulf's Fate," *Medium Ævum* 76 (2007): 207–24, at 208. See also Gale R. Owen-Crocker, *The Four Funerals in Beowulf and the Structure of the Poem* (Manchester, 2000), 87.

⁴⁰ *Beowulf*, lines 3137–42, 3163–68; Cooke, "Who Cursed Whom," 208. Owen-Crocker, *Four Funerals*, 91, however, argues that the war-gear hung on Beowulf's pyre comes from the king's "own resources," noting that the mail-coats are described as *beorht* 'bright' (*Beowulf*, line 3140), while the treasure from the dragon's hoard is known to be rusty (*Beowulf*, lines 2763a, 3049a).

⁴¹ On the curse, see Owen-Crocker, *Four Funerals*, 100–101; and Andy Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (Cambridge, 2003), 153–55. For the argument that the curse is in fact laid on Beowulf's barrow by the Geats, "to protect it and its contents from impious intruders," see Cooke, "Who Cursed Whom," 209–10.

⁴² R. D. Fulk, *A History of Old English Meter* (Philadelphia, 1992), 348–49, dates *Beowulf*, *Genesis A*, *Daniel* and *Exodus* early on metrical grounds, though his dating of *Exodus* is more tentative; he argues that "if it belongs with this group, [it] is the last of the four." He makes similar observations in a more recent work: Fulk, "Beowulf and Language History," in *The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment*, ed. Leonard Neidorf (Cambridge, 2014), 19–36. Here, he finds that on the grounds of both non-parasiting and Kuhn's Law, for example, *Beowulf* is the most conservative of any Old English poem (24–25, 27) and that in terms of non-contraction, *Genesis A* and *Daniel* are the most conservative (25). Leonard Neidorf, "Lexical Evidence for the Relative Chronology of Old English Poetry," *SELIM: Journal of the Spanish Society for Mediaeval English Language and Literature* 20 (2013–14): 36–37, uses lexical evidence to define a group of the earliest Old English poems, including both *Beowulf* and *Genesis A*, which he dates to the period c.675–750.

The poet of *Genesis A*, as Thomas Hill observes, “goes to considerable length to vary and elaborate the simple statement that a given patriarch died.”⁴³ In many cases this variation takes the form of a regular model which draws together a number of central and connected points: the death of the patriarch; their wealth; the succession of their heir; and what the heir does with the wealth. In this model for death and succession, then, wealth plays an integral role, highlighting the powerful connection between treasure and the life course in heroic poetry. As will be seen, this model can also be found in *Daniel*, suggesting that this association was not simply an idiosyncrasy of the *Genesis A* poet.⁴⁴

A clear example of this model for succession can be found in the passages which detail the succession of three descendants of Cain:

Malalehel wæs
æfter Iarede yrfes hyrde
fæder on laste oð þæt he forð gewat.
Siððan Mathusal magum dælde,
bearn æfter bearne broðrum sinum,
æðelinga gestreon, oð þæt aldorgedal
frod fyrndagum fremman sceolde,
lif oflætan. Lameh onfeng
æfter fæder dæge fletgestealdum,
botlgestreonum.⁴⁵ (*Genesis A*, lines 1066b–75a)

[Mehujael was the guardian of inheritance after Irad, in his father’s wake, until he died. Afterwards Methushael distributed the treasure of the nobles to his kinsmen, to his brothers, son after son, until he had to experience a separation from life, wise in ancient days, give up life. Lamech received the household goods after his father’s day, the household treasures.]

⁴³ Hill, “‘Variegated Obit’,” 102.

⁴⁴ Although both poems are considered to be early, according to Anlezark, *Old Testament Narratives*, viii, they “could not have been written by one author.”

⁴⁵ Hill, “‘Variegated Obit’,” 103, notes that the Bible does not mention the age or death of Cain’s descendants, and posits that the poet may have confused Seth’s and Cain’s descendants, Methuselah and Methushael, providing an obit for Methushael in error. The names of Cain’s descendants are very similar to the names of Seth’s line, which would provide ample opportunity for confusion.

In two and a half lines, the *Genesis A* poet depicts Mehujael's rise, his period of rule and his demise. Given the length of the genealogies in the biblical source, brevity is a necessity. Two of the five precious half-lines are used to emphasize the fact that Mehujael succeeded his father: "æfter Iarede" and "fæder on laste." The poet's allusion to Mehujael's period of rule, his time as "yrfes hyrde" [the guardian of inheritance], is an indicator not only of his status as leader, but a reminder of the line of ancestors preceding him, who likewise defended the family treasure. The pattern continues for his descendants, Methushael and Lamech, though the former's rule is represented by his distribution of the wealth, and the latter's simply by the receipt of his inheritance. Throughout the genealogies, the *Genesis A* poet employs the temporal adverbs *æfter* and *siððan* (see above, lines 1067a, 1069a and 1074a), a reminder of the progression of these bloodlines, represented by the continued inheritance, defense and use of the family wealth. In this account of these three successive descendants of Cain, the transmission of wealth features as a corollary of dynastic succession. Given the well-known taint of Cain's descendants, the presence of treasure in the account of these life courses can hardly be put down to the poet's admiration for this family line.⁴⁶ Rather, the passing on of treasure is fundamentally implicated in the cycles of death, reproduction and succession which make up the biblical genealogies.

Further analysis of similar passages in the genealogies will reveal, firstly, the consistency with which the *Genesis A* poet relies on this model and, secondly, the extent to which wealth is implicated in succession in the poem. In the passage concerning Enosh, Seth's heir, the association between inheritance of wealth and perpetuation of the family line is brought to the fore:

Him æfter heold, þa he of worulde gewat,
 Enos yrfe, siððan eorðe swealh
 sædberendes Sethes lice. (*Genesis A*, lines 1143–45)

[After him, when he departed from the world, Enosh held the inheritance, after the earth swallowed the body of seed-bearing Seth.]

Wealth holds a central position in this account of the two, overlapping life courses of Seth and his son Enosh. The b-lines feature three references to Seth's death and departure from this

⁴⁶ For belief in Cain's cursed progeny in Anglo-Saxon England, see *Beowulf*, lines 104b–14 and *Genesis A*, lines 985b–95a.

life: “þa he of worulde gewat” [when he departed from the world]; “eorðe swealh” [the earth swallowed] and “Sethes lice” [Seth’s body]. These apparent expressions of finality are balanced in the a-lines by expressions of continuation and new life.⁴⁷ In line 1143a, the verb *healdan* [hold, defend] affirms that Seth’s position will not lie vacant after his death. In the next a-line, the poet specifies that Enosh will be the one to take on this position. Most strikingly, in line 1145a, in the midst of describing the committal of Seth’s body to the earth, the poet uses the epithet “sædberendes” [seed-bearing], a term probably inspired by the etymological interpretation of Seth’s name, *semen* ‘seed,’ which can only make one think of new life and reproduction: Seth is swallowed by the earth, but is succeeded by Enosh, just as the seed swallowed by the earth produces new growth.⁴⁸ The patterning of these lines is testament to the artistry of the poem, a feature of *Genesis A* that is seldom celebrated. Wealth lies at the center of these lines on life and death, the half-line “Enos yrfe” (*Genesis A*, line 1144a) expressing with simplicity that which remains of Seth once his body has been laid in the ground: his son and the inheritance.⁴⁹

The verb that describes Enosh’s defense of his inheritance is *healdan*: likewise, Seth’s descendant Mahalalel “heold land and yrfe” [defended land and inheritance] (*Genesis A*, line 1167), while Methuselah “heold maga yrfe” [defended the inheritance of kinsmen] (*Genesis A*, line 1218). Defense of the nation’s treasure is seen as a marker of leadership elsewhere in Old English heroic poetry. As Elizabeth Tyler suggests, in *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Brunanburh* “control of the nation’s hoard becomes almost a shorthand for kingship.”⁵⁰ For example, Heremod is expected to “folc gehealdan / hord and hleoburh” [protect the people, the hoard and the stronghold] (*Beowulf*, lines 911b–12a), though he disappoints his subjects in this respect.⁵¹ In Old English heroic poetry, defending the national hoard is a requirement of

⁴⁷ Leneghan, *Dynastic Drama*, 44, identifies a similar effect in the opening lines of *Beowulf*, where “oblique references” to Scyld’s death and old age are “carefully balanced by allusions to his vigour when he was still a youth”: the effect is to sustain “the impression of dynastic progression.”

⁴⁸ For the etymology of Seth’s name, see A. N. Doane, ed., *Genesis A: A New Edition* (Madison, 1978), 253–54, who also notes both the story alluded to by the *Genesis A* poet, in which Seth “plants the seeds of the tree of the Godly city,” and the legend of the Holy Rood, “where Seth bears three seeds from Paradise and plants them in dead Adam’s mouth,” though he suggests that “the onomastic explanation is to be preferred.” See further, Fred C. Robinson, “The Significance of Names in Old English Literature,” *Anglia* 86 (1968): 29–30; and Samuel Moore, “The Old English *Genesis*, ll. 1145 and 1446–8,” *The Modern Language Review* 6 (1911): 200–201. Doane, *Genesis A: A New Edition, Revised*, 319, notes that while the Cainites are “sweordberende” [sword-bearing] (*Genesis A*, line 1060a), Seth is *sædberende*.

⁴⁹ See in this volume Terri Sanderson, “‘Given ham of pine gode’: Charity and Crisis in the *Soul’s Address to the Body*”, for the association between death and the surrender of wealth in the context of almsgiving.

⁵⁰ Tyler, *Old English Poetics*, 22; see *The Battle of Brunanburh*, lines 9b–10a (the verb for ‘defend’ here is *ealgian*, rather than *healdan*).

⁵¹ See also *Beowulf*, lines 1850–53a, 2369b and 3003b–04; and Cynewulf, *Juliana*, line 22a, ed. Rosemary Woolf, rev. ed. (Exeter, 1993), where Eleusius, a man of some authority, defends a hoard: “heold hordgestreon”

leadership. In *Genesis A*, the repeated collocation of *healdan* and *yrfe* reminds us that this defense of wealth is one of the primary duties of the heir who steps into his father's position.

However, the king or leader's wealth, while it marks out his position, is not his own possession but that of his people. Peter S. Baker argues that "there is no distinction to be made between the king's personal wealth and the national treasury."⁵² The king does not possess the hoard, but defends it for the sake of his nation. In light of this, the role that wealth plays in the model of succession found in *Genesis A* becomes clear: it refers not necessarily to the patriarch's personal wealth, but to that of the community, governed and defended by the patriarch. The vocabulary used to describe the inheritance in the genealogies of *Genesis A* supports the association with goods of the community. At times the poet uses, perhaps even coins, terms that imply domestic wealth: for example, *flettgesteald* [household goods] (*Genesis A*, lines 1074b and 1611a) and *botlgestreon* [household treasure] (*Genesis A*, lines 1075a and 1621b), both found only in *Genesis A*.⁵³ Elsewhere, the reader or listener is reminded that this apparently domestic wealth also has the power to confer the status of leader; for example, the wealth that Methushael distributes to his kinsmen is "æðelinga gestreon" [treasure of nobles] (*Genesis A*, line 1071a). The same half-line occurs in *Beowulf* (line 1920a) with reference to the gifts brought back from Heorot, given to Beowulf by King Hrothgar, and then passed on by Beowulf to King Hygelac: this, then, is royal treasure.

Anxiety over the fate of one's wealth is qualified if this wealth is the responsibility of the family, rather than the individual alone. The dying patriarchs in the *Genesis A* genealogies know that their wealth will pass into the protection of their heirs, who will henceforth defend the wealth, and carry out the duties of leader: seen in this light, Abraham's anxiety about the fate of his possessions, discussed above, is a pressing one. In the world of Old English heroic poetry, one of the leader's main duties is the distribution of wealth to their subjects, so much so that the phrase *sinces brytta* 'distributor of treasure' is a well-used epithet for a leader.⁵⁴ Accordingly, in the genealogies of *Genesis A* not only the inheritance but also the distribution of the family wealth is a clear marker of succession. After Noah dies, for example, the poet records how his sons distributed his wealth:

[defended the hoard of treasure]. As Bazelmans, *By Weapons Made Worthy*, 134, observes, the triad of people, treasure and stronghold occurs on a number of occasions in *Beowulf*.

⁵² Baker, *Honour, Exchange and Violence*, 215.

⁵³ *Botlgestreon* also occurs on one occasion outside of the genealogies (*Genesis A*, line 1930).

⁵⁴ See *Genesis A*, lines 1857b and 2728b; and *Beowulf*, lines 607b, 1170a, 1922b and 2071a for examples of *sinces brytta*. This epithet is not confined to heroic poetry; it describes Alfred the Great in the metrical preface to the Old English translation of Gregory the Great's *Dialogi*; Hans Hecht, ed., *Bischofs Wærferth von Worcester Übersetzung der Dialoge Gregors des Grossen über das Leben und die Wunderthaten italienischer Väter und über die Unsterblichkeit der Seelen* (Leipzig, 1900), 2, line 15.

Ða nyttade Noe siððan
 mid sunum sinum sidan rices
 ðreohund wintra þisses lifes,
 freomen æfter flode, and fiftig eac, þa he forð gewat.⁵⁵
 Siððan his eaforan ead bryttedon,
 bearna stryndon; him wæs beorht wela. (*Genesis A*, lines 1598–1603)

[Then Noah enjoyed afterwards the broad kingdom with his sons for three-hundred
 and fifty winters of this life, noblemen after the flood, (up to) when he died.⁵⁶
 Afterwards his heirs distributed wealth, produced children; wealth was bright for
 them.]

While Enosh's succession is complemented by the inheritance of his father's wealth, here a similar transitional moment in which the father dies and the son or sons succeed him seems to be marked by the distribution of wealth: "ead bryttedon" [they distributed wealth] (*Genesis A*, line 1602b).⁵⁷ The sense of 'distribute' here should perhaps be understood in light of Bazelmans' reading of the relationship between king and people in *Beowulf*; Bazelmans outlines a situation whereby "the king is indispensable because he mediates between the ancestral 'worth', accumulated by himself and his predecessors and embodied in the royal treasures," and the retainer.⁵⁸ In *Genesis A*, the heirs who distribute their predecessor's wealth likewise mediate between ancestral worth and their people.

It should be noted that the verb *bryttian* can also mean 'enjoy,' allowing the poet to exploit several layers of meaning.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, "distribute" should probably be taken as the primary meaning here, based on evidence from other accounts of distribution in the poem. Elsewhere, for example, distribution is described with the less ambiguous verb *dælan* 'distribute': "Geomor siððan / fæder flettgesteald freondum dælde" [Gomer afterwards distributed his father's household goods to friends] (*Genesis A*, line 1611). Moreover, the very

⁵⁵ On line 1601, see Doane, *Genesis A: A New Edition, Revised*, 346–47.

⁵⁶ The parenthetical insertion of "up to" in the translation follows Doane, *Genesis A: A New Edition, Revised*, 346.

⁵⁷ Cf. *Genesis A*, line 1181. See also *Genesis A*, line 1891b, which is made up of the phrase "ead bryttedon," and *Daniel*, line 671, which is nearly identical to *Genesis A*, line 1602.

⁵⁸ Bazelmans, *By Weapons Made Worthy*, 168.

⁵⁹ *DOE*, s.v. *bryttian*. A similar semantic overlap can be seen in the Old English verb *brucan*, which means both "use" and "enjoy" (*DOE*, s.v. *brūcan*); see further Robin Norris, "The Augustinian Theory of Use and Enjoyment in *Guthlac A* and *B*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 104 (2003): 166.

common epithet *sinces brytta* ‘distributor of treasure,’ used for leaders, strongly suggests that ‘distribute’ is the primary sense of *bryttian* in the passage that describes the inheritance of Noah’s goods.⁶⁰ Even so, the echoes of ‘enjoy’ add to the sense that, in spite of Noah’s death, the family continues to succeed and prosper: mourning is balanced by celebration, death by life. Fittingly, then, this distribution of material wealth finds a parallel in the increase of the family, as expressed by the following half-line “*bearna stryndon*” [produced children] (*Genesis A*, line 1603a), which echoes “*ead bryttedon*” in form.⁶¹ Treasure and offspring are both epitomized by the “*beorht wela*” [bright wealth, prosperity] (*Genesis A*, line 1603b) that follows.⁶²

While all three of Noah’s sons distribute his *ead* and *wela*, elsewhere in *Genesis A* the succession model takes on a heightened function in marking the seniority of one son over the other:

þa yldestan
 Chus and Chanan hatene wæron,
 ful freolice feorh, frumbearn Chames.
 Chus wæs æðelum heafodwisa,
 wilna brytta and worulddugeða
 broðrum sinum, botlgestreona,
 fæder on laste, siððan forð gewat
 Cham of lice, þa him cwealm gesceod. (*Genesis A*, lines 1616b–23)

[The eldest were called Cush and Canaan, fully noble in life, the firstborn of Ham. Cush was the chief among the princes, distributor of desirable things and worldly benefits to his brothers, household treasures, in the wake of his father, after Ham went forth from his body, when death separated them.]

⁶⁰ In a very similar context elsewhere in the poem, the verb *bryttian* takes “*gumum*” [men] as an indirect object (with “*gold*” as the direct object), suggesting that in the present case *bryttian* likewise primarily means ‘distribute’ rather than ‘enjoy’ (*Genesis A*, line 1181). Anlezark, *Old Testament Narratives*, 115, reads “shared out the wealth” here.

⁶¹ Wordplay on wealth and children can also be found, for example, in *Riddle 20*, line 27a, ed. Krapp and Dobbie, *Exeter Book*, 190, in the compound *bearngestreona* [procreation of children]. See also *Beowulf*, lines 2794–98, discussed below.

⁶² A nearly identical half-line occurs in *Daniel*: “*wæs him beorht wela*” (*Daniel*, line 9b). In both cases the wealth seems to represent the good fortunes, or even blessings, of those who possess it. This connotation is consistent with Tyler’s observation that when *beorht* ‘bright’ collocates with *frætwe* ‘treasure, adornments,’ it introduces the sense of moral or spiritual brightness; Tyler, *Old English Poetics*, 92.

The poet exploits the succession model to indicate that while Cush and Canaan are both “frumbearn Chames” [the firstborn of Ham] (*Genesis A*, line 1618b), it is Cush who will inherit his father’s position. It is Cush, not Canaan, who distributes the family’s wealth, and Cush, therefore who is the “heafodwisa” [chief] (*Genesis A*, line 1619b). This example demonstrates the strength of the association not only between treasure and procreation but, specifically, between treasure and dynastic succession.

The Model of Treasure and Succession in *Beowulf*

In adapting the rather dry genealogies of Genesis, then, the *Genesis A* poet makes use of a model which allows them to draw together several interconnected points: the death of the patriarch in question; the succession of their heir; their wealth; and what the heir does with this wealth. While it may seem as though the *Genesis A* poet could have invented this model of succession as a shortcut for varying and enriching the biblical genealogies, it should be noted that this same template can be found in the Old English *Daniel*, also preserved in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius 11. Nebuchadnezzar’s death is described in familiar terms:

Siððan þær his aferan ead bryttedon,
welan, wunden gold, in þære widan byrig,
ealhstede eorla, unwaclice,
heah hordmægen, þa hyra hlaford læg. (*Daniel*, lines 671–74)

[Afterwards his sons distributed wealth generously there, riches, twisted gold, in the spacious stronghold, the city of warriors, the eminent abundance of riches, when their lord lay (dead).]

The death of the father is reported in the context of his sons’ distribution of wealth. As in many examples from *Genesis A*, the adverb *siððan* ‘afterwards’ signals the arrival of the next stage in this dynasty, the time of the “aferan” [sons] (*Daniel*, line 671a). Line 671 is nearly identical to *Genesis A*, line 1602, which describes how Noah’s children succeed him, and share out his goods. The poet places emphasis on the wealth distributed by Nebuchadnezzar’s heirs, using variation to define this inheritance: while the nouns *wela* and *ead* could imply a

generic “prosperity,” the phrase “wunden gold” indicates treasure.⁶³ Clearly, then, the model of succession outlined above is not confined to *Genesis A*. The predictability of the model in *Genesis A*, and its appearance in *Daniel*, could suggest that it represents a traditional way of thinking about death and succession, one in which the inheritance of treasure represents the continuity and stability of the community, even as the life cycle of an individual reaches its end.

The *Genesis A* poet presents the death of a patriarch as a departure swiftly remedied by the arrival of their heir, the whole process stabilized by the transmission of the community’s wealth. The opening of *Beowulf*, as Leneghan has demonstrated, represents a similarly confident portrait of a successful dynasty: “the provision of worthy and legitimate heirs ensures that the royal house itself and its subjects remain relatively untroubled by the death of an individual monarch,” though as the poem goes on royal succession becomes “increasingly uncertain.”⁶⁴ This uncertainty is reflected in the breakdown of the heroic succession model identified in both *Genesis A* and *Daniel*, leaving some doubt as to the role that treasure will play following the death of King Beowulf.

At the end of *Beowulf*, the hero goes to face the dragon without having produced an heir, meaning that when he dies the Geatish throne is left empty. Without a king to protect them, the Geats are open to attack from all sides.⁶⁵ The hoard that Beowulf has purchased with his life is burnt on the pyre with the dead king, and buried in the ground with him, “gold on greote” [gold in the earth] (*Beowulf*, line 3167a).⁶⁶ The messenger that brings the news of Beowulf’s death to the Geats is emphatic about the need to burn all the treasure: “nalles eorl wegan / maððum to gemyndum” [no man to wear a treasure in remembrance] (*Beowulf*, lines 3015b–16a).⁶⁷ While the messenger’s speech implies that it is the looming threat of violence from the Swedes which prevents the Geats from making use of the treasure, the close association between treasure, succession and reproduction in Old English heroic poetry, together with Beowulf’s explicit lament that he does not have a son to whom he can grant his war-gear, invites a reading of the wasted hoard in relation to Beowulf’s childlessness.⁶⁸

⁶³ The phrase *wunden gold* often refers to gifts, or gold offered as a gift: see *Genesis A*, line 2128b; *Daniel*, line 672a; and *Beowulf*, lines 1193b and 1381a (“wundnan” in line 1381a: MS reads “wun / dini or -dmi” [KIV, 48]).

⁶⁴ Leneghan, *Dynastic Drama*, 82; see also Michael D. C. Drout, “Blood and Deeds: The Inheritance Systems in *Beowulf*,” *Studies in Philology* 104 (2007): 199–200.

⁶⁵ *Beowulf*, lines 3003b–4.

⁶⁶ On the burning and burial of the treasure at the end of *Beowulf*, see Owen-Crocker, *Four Funerals*, 87–91, 97–101.

⁶⁷ See further *Beowulf*, lines 3010b–21a.

⁶⁸ *Beowulf*, lines 2729–32a. On the threat of violence preventing the Geats from using the treasure, see Owen-Crocker, *Four Funerals*, 99–100. For a reading of the wasted hoard in the context of dynastic succession, see Leneghan, *Dynastic Drama*, 138–39.

At the moment of his death, Beowulf is fixated on the gold that he has won from the dragon:

Ic ðara frætwa frean ealles ðanc,
wuldorcyninge wordum secge,
ecum dryhtne, þe ic her on starie,
þæs ðe ic moste minum leodum
ær swyltdæge swylc gestrynan. (*Beowulf*, lines 2794–98)

[For the treasure that I look upon here, I say thanks in words to the Lord of all, the glory-king, the eternal Lord, that I was able to gain such things for my people before my death-day.]

This passage features two of the elements found in the *Genesis A* succession model: wealth and death. However, two elements are missing: succession of the heir, and what that heir does with the inherited treasure. Though Beowulf lies dying, there is, in contrast to the *Genesis A* genealogies, no *yrfeward* ‘heir’ to succeed him, in this passage or elsewhere in the poem. As a result, there is no one to inherit, defend or distribute the treasure. The absence of any child is only made more conspicuous by the verb *gestrynan*, which, though used here in the sense of ‘acquire,’ also means ‘procreate,’ as in *Genesis A*, line 1171a, “bearnastrynan” [beget children].⁶⁹

It is worth noting that immediately before he dies Beowulf removes a neck-ring, decorated helmet and mail-coat to give to the young Wiglaf, the only one of his warriors to come to his aid (*Beowulf*, lines 2809–12). Biggs observes that while this gift could be interpreted as Beowulf’s way of naming Wiglaf as heir, Beowulf tells Wiglaf earlier that if he had a son he would give him his “guðgewædu” [armor] (*Beowulf*, line 2730), and makes no symbolic gift of treasure to the younger man at this critical point; moreover, as Biggs goes on to add, nothing in the messenger’s speech indicates that Wiglaf is the new king of the Geats.⁷⁰ In this final section of the poem, Biggs suggests, “the poet directs us to a surprising

⁶⁹ Beekman Taylor, “Traditional Language of Treasure,” 191, suggests that the “double duty” performed by the verb *gestrynan* should lead the reader to understand that “Beowulf is consoling himself with the notion that a treasure won is a benefit to a people comparable to, if not equal to, a son.”

⁷⁰ *Beowulf*, lines 2729–32a. Frederick M. Biggs, “*Beowulf* and Some Fictions of the Geatish Succession,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 32 (2003): 55–77, at 71–75; Biggs also observes that, in light of possible Swedish aggression towards the Geats, Wiglaf would not be a good candidate for kingship, as his father, Weohstan, had previously killed the Swedish prince Eanmund.

possibility: [...] only a king's son can himself become a king."⁷¹ Leneghan observes that the poet's contrasting of Wiglaf's youth with Beowulf's age could, along with the gift of armor, be seen as a signal that the brave young Wiglaf will be named Beowulf's heir; however, he goes on to conclude that "the possibility that Wiglaf will ever succeed Beowulf as ruler of the Geats is never seriously entertained, presumably on account of his lack of Hrethling blood."⁷² As a result of Beowulf's childlessness, then, the Geats are left without a king.

Beowulf's death scene features death and treasure, but without a son there can be no succession and, following the model found in *Genesis A*, no further use for the treasure. As such, the Geats place the dragon's treasure "on beorg" (*Beowulf*, line 3163a), in Beowulf's barrow. In *Genesis A*, it is Seth's body which is swallowed by the earth, while his treasure is inherited by his son; in *Beowulf*, the remains of the king and the treasure share the same fate.

The necessary relinquishing of control over one's earthly possessions is a disturbing prospect for most of us, reminding us as it does of the endpoint in the individual life course. As has been demonstrated above, in Old English heroic poetry certain critical points in the life course are marked by the exchange or transmission of treasure, the movement of the tangible artefact symbolizing the abstract transition. The poets of *Genesis A* and *Daniel* avail themselves of a poetic model which draws together the central elements of a smooth succession: the death of the leader, their wealth, their heir, and what the heir does with that wealth. In this model, then, son and treasure both represent the dead person's legacy, a cognitive overlap paralleled in the wordplay facilitated, for example, by the semantic range of the noun *gestreon* 'wealth, product' and verb *gestrynan* 'gain, procreate.' The transmission of wealth becomes a corollary of succession, with child and treasure both shoring up the dynasty. The failure of the model at the end of *Beowulf* can be seen to represent the growing uncertainty surrounding the possibility of untroubled dynastic succession in the latter part of the poem.⁷³ The *Genesis A* poet presents their narrative of succession with no such uncertainty. Rather, in the genealogies of *Genesis A* the death of the individual patriarch is balanced by the sure knowledge of the continuation of the community, represented by the young heir and the enduring glimmer of bright gold.

⁷¹ Biggs, "Beowulf and Some Fictions," 74. Cf. *Genesis A*, lines 2175–86, where for Abraham it is imperative that he is succeeded by a son.

⁷² Leneghan, *Dynastic Drama*, 100–101.

⁷³ Leneghan, *Dynastic Drama*, 82.