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# Lamech, Cain and the Death of Baldr

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In the manuscript AM 227 fol., containing a version of the compilation *Stjórn*, there are two rather standard pages (fols 10v and 11r) with an illuminated initial introducing an interesting narrative, the apocryphal story about Lamech killing his relative Cain. This narrative was popular in the Middle Ages throughout Europe, so there is nothing really exciting about finding it in a Norse version based on Petrus Comes-tor's *Historia Scholastica*, with comments on *Liber Genesis* 29. The interesting thing about the narrative are the associations it provokes. If we start by looking at the text about Lamech, *Stjórn* has a short passage rather closely translated from *Historia Scholastica*:

**Scolastica hystoria.** *Persi lamech var hinn mesti bogmaðr. ok sem hann hafði langan alldr lifat varð hann blindr baaðum augum. hafði ser þá einn vngan mann fyrer augna suein sua sem hann for at ueiða hefandi af hans tilvisan huat er hann uilldi æigi saker þers at þa veri enn kiot etíð þuiat æigi uar mikill vaní til þers fyrer noafloð. helldr saker lystugleika ok skemtanar ok at hann hefði skinn af þeim dyrum sem hann skaut. Nu sem kayn leyndíz anqkkurum tíma milli þorna ok klungra. skaut lamech hann til bana af sueínsins a uísan etlandi þo allt at eíns at þar mundi dyr fyrer uerða. (Stjórn, 70)*

**Historia Scholastica.** This Lamech was a great bowman, and when he had lived a long life he became blind on both eyes. He had a young boy as his eyes when he went hunting, catching with his guidance what he wished for, not because meat was eaten in those days, there was no big habit of this before the flood of Noa, but rather for pleasure and fun and for the skins from the animals he shot. As Cain was hiding at one time between thorns and bushes, Lamech shot him dead following the guidance of the boy, thinking that there was an animal in front of him. (My translation)

The narrative of the death of Baldr is found in the *Prose Edda*, where it is related in a longer prose passage (Snorri Sturluson, *Edda, Gylfaginning*, Ch. 49). Here we learn that Baldr, the most venerated of gods, had evil dreams. He told his dreams to the other gods and they were interpreted as predictions of his death. The goddess Frigg took precautions in order to save Baldr by asking all living creatures and dead objects not to harm him. But she did not bother to ask the *mistiltein* ("mistletoe") to swear the oath. All the gods now found pleasure and fun in throwing weapons at Baldr as he was not wounded. When it was known to Loki that the *mistiltein* had not sworn the oath, he fetched it and asked Høðr, the blind brother of Baldr, to







throw it at his brother. He offered to help him in the throw so that he would hit his aim. And as Høðr threw the *mistiltein*, Baldr's life came to an end, causing the brother-killing among the *Æsir*, and subsequently the events that lead to the apocalyptic end of the world.

As the killing of Baldr is presented in the Codex Regius version of *Völuspá* it does in many ways present Baldr as a pre-Christian counter-point to Christ. From the passage of the death of Baldr the poem moves to the war between good and evil forces leading to the end of the old world and subsequently to the rising of a new world which could be seen as a parallel to the Christian myth.

First I would like to take a closer look at the story of Baldr in relation to the slaying of Abel and the apocryphal stories about Cain being subsequently killed by his blind descendant Lamech. This latter, apocryphal narrative has not received the attention it deserves in the studies of the death of Baldr. And it is not hard to see the similarities between the tale of Cain's death and the death of Baldr. But there are also obvious deviations from the Baldr story, for example the blind relative, in this case the grandson, led by, here the young son, to kill Cain. The first question then would be if the motif of a blind man killing a relative led by the hand of another person is enough to establish an intertextual relation between the two narratives. And if we do accept that there is a relation, when would the encounter have taken place and in which medium? There could be reasons to believe that there have been possible encounters in oral tradition over a long period of time during which Christianity encounters non-Christian cultures on the fringes of the European world, perhaps as early as the second or third century CE when the apocryphal text was known in the Christian world. It could also be argued, however, that the encounter was later, when the mission in Scandinavia was active, perhaps from the eighth century, and when the encounter would still have been primarily oral even if the missionaries obviously would have based their oral presentations of Christian myths on written sources. If the encounter should be dated at an even later date, the media could have been both oral and written. It could then be argued that the Norse narrative was written at a time when the one holding the pen also could have known the written narrative about Lamech. It is important, however, to also include the visual encounter, most likely in relation to an oral performance of the narrative, as there are many extant examples of the Lamech narrative being present in visual presentations. The visual would not necessarily have worked as a moving force by itself, as anyone who only knew the myth of Baldr's death would have understood the images as representations of this myth. It could be argued that it would have been necessary for someone to relate the story of Lamech in order for an encounter to take place.

The visual representations of Lamech killing Cain are found primarily in church contexts and in illuminated manuscripts. There are frequent examples in the British Isles where Scandinavians definitely could have encountered them. There are also many examples from the Continent. When someone who is acquainted with the narrative of Baldr sees one of these images unaware of the tale of Lamech, the obvi-

ous understanding is that it represents the killing of Baldr. But if this kind of images had any impact on the narrative of Baldr, this would indicate that some transformation has taken place. And it is not plausible that the reverse has happened, that the Lamech narrative has been influenced by a story of Baldr.

If we finally take a closer look at the two stanzas in *Völuspá* that treat the death of Baldr it is clear that this version of the story is not identical to the one presented by Snorri Sturluson.

<i>Ec sá Baldri,</i>	<i>blóðgom tívor,</i>
<i>Óðins barni,</i>	<i>ørlog fólgin;</i>
<i>stóð um vaxinn,</i>	<i>vøllom hæri,</i>
<i>miór oc mioc fagr,</i>	<i>mistilteinn.</i>
<i>Varð af þeim meiði,</i>	<i>er mæx sýndiz,</i>
<i>harmflaug hættlig,</i>	<i>Hqðr nam scióta;</i>
<i>Baldrs bróðir var</i>	<i>of borinn snemma,</i>
<i>sá nam Óðins sonr</i>	<i>einnættr vega.</i>

*(Edda, Vsp 31-32)*

I saw for Baldr, for the bloody god,  
Odin's child, his fate in store;  
there stood grown – higher than the plain,  
slender and very fair – the mistletoe.

From that stem which seemed so slender  
there came a dangerous grief-dart: Hod started to shoot;  
Baldr's brother was born quickly;  
Odin's son started killing at one night old.  
*(The Poetic Edda, Vsp 32-33)*

Here Baldr is killed by Hqðr, seemingly using the mistiltein as a weapon, but there is no mention of Loki or that Hqðr is blind. These parts of the motif of Baldr's death are found only in the narrative of Snorri. It could be that Snorri is our source to the influence of the apocryphal story of Lamech on the oral tradition of the death of Baldr.

## Conclusion

The relation between indigenous traditions and influences from Christian sources has long been a bone of contention in Old Norse studies. It is sometimes too easy to refer to the oral tradition based on a source that is obviously part of the literate world of the thirteenth or fourteenth century, but it may often also be problematic to just explain similarities as the result of influences. Both the pure oral stage and the clearcut influence would be difficult to address. In this essay I have tried to just point out the similarities between two motifs, of the blind Lamech killing the brother-slayer Cain with the help of a young boy, and the blind Hqðr killing his brother



supported by Loki's steady hand. The similarities between these motifs are so obvious that it is hard not to think of them as the result of influences from one to the other (and then the most likely would be from the Christian text to the indigenous narrative). But there are also clear differences in the two stories. Lamech is not the brother of Cain, but a descendant, and the boy leading his hand is his son. Loki on the other hand is the blood-brother of Óðinn, who is the father of Hqðr and Baldr, and in this narrative the brother-slayer is the blind brother. In order to understand this kind of similarities, I contend, the eternal debate between an oral and a literate school of research needs to be replaced by an approach where we scrutinise closer the interplay between the oral and written traditions of the medieval manuscript culture. This could perhaps explain the differences of the two narratives while accepting the influence from the Christian tradition. When written narratives from the Bible or from apocryphal Christian texts as the Book of Lamech are read to a listening audience the various parts of the narrative, as for example *the brother-slayer* or *the blind bowman* are introduced into the store of motifs that form story-telling and can be reused by a story-teller in new narratives. There may very well have been a story about the killing of a god among the *Æsir* in the oral tradition, but the blind god as bowman could be an innovation. It could obviously also be that the whole story of the death of Baldr is made up as a match to the story of the death of Cain. When the eddic evidence is studied the former could seem to be plausible as there is no mention there of Hqðr being blind or of Loki leading his hand. It could be that we once again have a case of Snorri making a story better, perhaps under the influence of the Lamech story (or off-springs of it).

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