The following is a contribution to the JREF's ongoing blog series on skepticism and education. If you are an educator and would like to contribute to this series, please contact Bob Blaskiewicz .

In a recent article for *Skeptical Inquirer*, I wrote about the ways some Young Earth Creationists distort, misinterpret and mistranslate *Beowulf* and use it to support their discredited worldview. Briefly, the argument is as follows: *Beowulf* is a true story; all the monsters in the poem are really dinosaurs or similar reptiles; since the story is true and features dinosaurs, dinosaurs and men must have co-existed relatively recently; therefore, the theory of evolution is wrong. At the end of the article, I noted that this idiosyncratic interpretation of *Beowulf* has found its way into works intended for homeschooled children. In this post, I want to elaborate on the ways Christian homeschooling families approach *Beowulf* and English literature more generally.

I should begin with a caveat: not all homeschooling families are alike. Many Christian homeschoolers approach *Beowulf* in much the same way high school English literature classes do: by analyzing the plot, characters, themes, language, symbolism, etc., without any particular ideological agenda. For instance, the Conservative Homeschoolers forum provides links to many useful resources and study guides (though many of the links are no longer active). On the other hand, many other homeschooling sites do stress a particular interpretation that supports their religious beliefs.

One Christian homeschooling approach to *Beowulf* is to emphasize Christian elements, as well as moral elements that can be seen to reinforce or reflect Christian ideals. In 2009, Homeschool Connections, a Catholic homeschooling organization, offered an online summer class called "Beowulf the Christ," taught by Henry Russell, headmaster of St. Augustine's Homeschool Enrichment Program. According to the course description,

[*Beowulf*] will be explored as an allegory that teaches the Anglo-Saxon world how to transform pagan heroic ethos into a pattern for Christian heroism and how to re-envision blind Fate as Godly Providence. The suggested text is Charles W. Kennedy's 1940 translation, and

students are warned to avoid “a web version that cuts out the Christian elements.”

Jeff Baldwin of Worldview Academy also interprets the poem in a distinctly Christian light. Worldview Academy strives “to help Christians think and live in accord with a biblical worldview so that they can serve Christ and lead the culture” and provides homeschooling resources. Baldwin argues that Beowulf, unlike Aeneas or Achilles, is a Judeo-Christian hero. Baldwin begins his review by saying,

If you can imagine a Christian writing a poem about Aeneas, you have an idea of the epic *Beowulf*. The plot is based on pre-Christian Scandinavian legends, but the author of the poem . . . has attempted to “Christianize” his tale.

Baldwin disagrees with the assessment of E. Talbot Donaldson, “the translator of our recommended edition” (even though Burton Raffel’s is the one actually on sale), who suggests that Christianity has little to do with the poem’s “emotional power.” Baldwin argues that pagan classical heroes “were superheroes--that is, the gods have granted them so much ability (and so much magic armor) that it is entirely evident they will succeed. The mark of being favored by the gods, in pagan thought, is that you are the strongest and best-equipped.” In the Judeo-Christian world, however, “we must be weak to be strong—because God manifests His strength in our weakness. The concept of the underdog, I would argue, is ‘invented’ with David beating Goliath.” While he admits that Beowulf has unusual strength, he believes that “there still persists an element of humility with him that jars followers of Achilles. Achilles is certain of victory, while Beowulf knows the outcome depends upon God. When he defeats Grendel, it is acknowledged that the battle belongs to the Lord.” He concludes by saying that “*Beowulf* provides an excellent launching point for an extended discussion of brokenness and God’s will.”

While these and similar approaches to *Beowulf* may overemphasize the Christian elements, they do not stray far from some standard interpretations (see Irving for a summary of critical responses to the Christian and pagan elements in the poem). Other interpretations promulgated by homeschool advocates are less supportable. Doug Phillips of Vision Forum Ministries says,

The beauty of *Beowulf* is not only its literary brilliance, but its rich Creationist theme, which dominates the epic from its discussion of Cain and Abel and references to the Nephilim of Genesis 7, to one of the antagonists of the story, the dragon, a clear, historic reference to dinosaurs living contemporaneous with man. For these and other reasons, it has long been my view that *Beowulf* is one of the ten most important works of Christian literature in history. Many readers may have missed the rich Creationist theme, the references to the Nephilim and the “clear” reference to dinosaurs and humans living together. That, of course, is because they do not exist. To be fair, the poet

almost certainly was a creationist, and Hrothgar's scop (oral poet) sings about the creation of the earth by the Almighty (ll. 90-98). The scop also mentions the creation of "each of the kinds" (cynna gehwylcum) that move about alive (l. 98). You might think that creationists would seize on this passage—the reference to "kinds" resembles creationists' own language when they try to explain away the huge number of animals on the ark—but they tend not to. As the Classical Christian Homeschooling website explains:

Beowulf was a real historical person, as ancient records confirm; and the poem is a pre-Christian era epic of the Saxons. The references to Old Testament persons and events are not the work of later Christian revisionists, but handed down generation after generation from the post-flood founders of the Saxon tribes. Both Classical Christian Homeschooling and Vision Forum Ministries have gotten their information from Bill Cooper's book, *After the Flood: The Early Post-Flood History of Europe Traced back to Noah*. Doug Phillips calls Cooper's book "a landmark work of scholarship;" Classical Christian Homeschooling calls it "a thoroughly researched account of the historicity of Beowulf." In fact, it is not scholarly in any meaningful way, and it is full of fallacious reasoning and factual inaccuracies.

However flawed Cooper's book is, it is highly influential and respected by creationist homeschoolers. This view of *Beowulf* is given voice in *Jonathan Park and the Hunt for Beowulf*, one of a series of "audio adventures," available on CD sets or as MP3 downloads. They recount the exploits of an intrepid band of adventurers known as the Creation Response Team. In *The Hunt for Beowulf*, the CRT seeks to recover the stolen Beowulf manuscript because it contains proof that dinosaurs (the dragon and Grendel) were still alive in the early Middle Ages.

The Jonathan Park Adventures are enormously popular with creationist homeschoolers and are sold or endorsed by many homeschooling sites. Sadly, they represent the antithesis of education: they are full of logical fallacies, pseudoscience, pseudo-history and pseudo-just-about-every-other-academic-discipline.

Perhaps the most disheartening view of *Beowulf*can be found on the Trivium Pursuit website, run by homeschoolers Harvey and Laurie Bluedorn. A reader wrote to the authors seeking "Biblical direction" about what works to introduce to his or her homeschooled children. The reader mentions *The Odyssey*, *The Iliad*, Dante, Chaucer and *Beowulf*. In response, the Bluedorns say, "The question I would ask is this — do I want to read Homer, Dante, Chaucer, and Beowulf at all and require my children to read them?" They list three

principles to follow in deciding what children should read. The first principle is to do what is pleasing to God. The second is, “There is only so much time in the day.” The third is, “Just because something is old doesn’t mean it is good.”

What are God’s tastes in literature? Well, He certainly doesn’t like Chaucer:

Canterbury Tales is full of gross, profane babble. I don’t believe it is fit for the eyes of a child, even in its abridged form. I’m sure there probably are sections that would be of some value, but I’ve got better use for my time than pulling on the chore boots and wading through the muck for a few pieces of corn. One of the great works of English literature, full of overtly Christian tales. But, nope. A few of the tales are somewhat…earthy, so it shouldn’t be read. *Beowulf* fares slightly better, I guess:
Many years ago I had the children read *Beowulf*, in its unabridged form, and then had them write a paper on it. Hans’ paper was entitled *Be er-wulf: A Story of How God Used a Monster to Rid the Land of the Beer Halls.* Well, at least they read it. The idea that Grendel is a divinely sent tool of vengeance and purgation is an unusual one, however, and suggests that Hans and his parents may have missed some of the poem’s subtleties.

The Bluedorns are quite clear about the purpose of literature:

There is no neutrality. If a piece of literature cannot be used to build Christian culture in my children, then it will be used to build something culturally anti-Christian in my children. Wasting time is anti-Christian. If *Beowulf* or any other work of literature (or history or science) doesn’t explicitly support a particular interpretation of Christianity, it is not worth reading. This may be homeschooling, but it is not education.

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