A RELIGIOUS VIEW OF THE HUSBAND’S MESSAGE
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1. Outline of the main interpretation problems
The Husband’s Message1 (henceforth HM) appears on folio 123r-v of the Exeter Book (MS 3501) and progresses through 54 lines. Unfortunately, some of them are obliterated by burn damage but the overall meaning of the poem has not been altered. This poem has conventionally been referred to as an elegy2 because of the presence of the major themes of the elegies, i.e. separation, exile and journey.

From the outset of the poem, the reader can indeed find keywords evocative of both exile and separation, principally onsundran (1a) ‘apart’ and ellor londes (3b) ‘a land elsewhere’. As the poem develops, the following deictics of space occur: þær (6a) ‘there’, adraf (19b) ‘drove away’, getwæfan (24b) ‘to separate’, and elþeode (37a) ‘foreign nation’. The theme of separation runs through the lines of the

1 The text I refer to hereafter is taken from the edition of Klinck (1992).
2 There is uncertainty about whether the poem is a genuine elegy. For instance, Renoir (1981) refers to the text as ‘the least elegiac of the elegies’ or ‘the most elegiac of the non-elegies’ because he has detected in the poem a future happy reunion. Despite the cheerful mood provoked by this expectation, his article highlights that the external circumstances militate against any fortunate outcome. Anderson (1973) notes that the speaker wishes to persuade the woman that she will enjoy a new happy life in the strange land, where her husband (lord, friend) is now living. References to their past joy and to their oath serve to this purpose. Howlett (1978) argues that the text is to be considered as a poem of consolation, rather than as an elegy. This concept hovers also throughout the article by Swanton (1964). Taking the poem together with The Wife’s Lament, he assumes that the HM is the religious allegory of Christ’s message to His bride, i.e. the Church. So do also Bolton (1969) and Niles (2003).
other elegies in the Exeter Book, mostly in Wulf and Eadwacer and in The Wife’s Lament.

In my opinion, the continuous hints at the journey are remindful of the metaphor for life as a sea-journey. For instance, the lord’s commandment þæt þu lagu drefde (21b) ‘that you stir up the ocean’ and mengan merestreamas (44a) ‘to mingle the ocean streams’, are astounding periphrases for the labour of life. More unswerving references to the journey are lade (25a) ‘path; way; journey’, suð heonan/ ofer merelade (27b-28a) ‘south from here/ over the sea-path’, and forðsiþes georn (43b) ‘eager for a journey away’. The allegory of the journey is also found elsewhere in the Exeter Book, notably in The Seafarer, in The Wanderer, in Resignation, and in The Rimming Poem. The maritime imagery of the sea-journey on a ship is the common patristic allegory of the Church as our ark of salvation, as also observed by Anderson (1973) and Kaske (1967).

Time in this poem does not transmit negative connotations. Although in the present a man and his woman are separated, the author does not overemphasise their loneliness, nor does he express melancholy, which readers would anticipate under such circumstances. Quite the reverse, the overall mood in the poem yields a positive attitude toward the future, in the expectation of a new life. Indeed, life in the future is foretold as attractive, princely and blissful. Given this optimistic

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3 I am therefore contrary to Renoir (1981:72), who in his essay on the HM is sceptical about the fortunate outcome of the situation. He argues that ‘Old-English texts known as elegies share with Boethius’ poem an explicit or implicit distrust of the outcome of worldly undertakings. Although their speaking voices may at times afford us glimpses of a very attractive fu-
tone, I assume that the poem represents the consolatory response to the wife in The Wife’s Lament, thus forming together a diptych of elegy and consolation. Having noticed that the Old English elegies are mostly composed by a lamentatio and a consolatio and having seen that WL is the genuine expression of a lament while the main purpose of HM is to reassure a woman separated from her husband, I suggest that this poem is the consolatio related to WL.

In fact, consolation can be found in the frequent mentions to the past when the two characters vowed fidelity. Although significantly long time has gone by, the man has shown in the message that he has not forgotten that oath, thus reassuring the woman and persuading her to comply with his request. Emphasis is placed on faithfulness and loyalty, as the following terms confirm: wordbeotunga (15b) ‘promise’, gebeot (49a) ‘vow’, aþe (51b) ‘oath’ and winetreowe (52b) ‘pledge of friendship’. Fidelity is then interwoven in the past, present and future, since it is mentioned in the present in order to recall the past. The purpose of recalling the past is to lay the ground for the woman’s faith in the future through the remembrance of her pledge of faith. As I shall set forth below, the mystery of faith is the linchpin of Christianity. In fact, faith is very likely to be the core meaning of the text. Moreover, it is significant that the conveyance of faith should be carried out in

ture in Heaven for those who are willing to reject the world, they suggest nothing of the sort in the world itself either for mankind in general or for individual human beings faced with specific problems”.

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the poem by means of runes, for runes are by their nature conveyors of mystery\(^4\).

The poem recounted by one or two internal narrators could be roughly recapitulated as a message from a man to a woman sent through an envoy. The latter recounts his own story in the first person as far as line 11a, whence he makes clear that the man who \(\text{þísne beam agrof}\) (13b) ‘has carved this piece of wood’, commanded that the recipient of the message think back to a vow of loyalty sworn long ago with him. The speaker explains that the author of the message could not deliver it by himself, because he had been driven away from his land by a feud. This is the reason why he has commanded the envoy to instruct the lady that she set out over the sea and join his lord. Particularly, she should undertake a journey southwards, to a foreign land where the man is awaiting her. That man appears to have overcome his troubles there, as he does not lack treasure or company and is not longing for anything but her lady; it follows the message proper, composed of five runes: \(\r; \mathrm{T} ; \mathrm{R} ; \mathrm{i}\). The recipient seems to be heartened by the closing lines, which convey that the sender is still living and wishes to fulfil that oath of loyalty.

I have approximately outlined the poem, although serious interpretation problems arise from the identification of the speaker and his relationship with the woman, from the relationship between the text and the preceding Riddle 60, from the different emendations of line 50 as

\(^4\) For instance, Page (1973:106-7) explains that the term run “translates mysterium in contexts dealing with spiritual mysteries. […] It carries a sense of secrecy, of isolation, sometimes of esoteric knowledge and even perhaps of secret scripts, symbols or messages”.
well as from the transliteration of the runes in lines 50-51. Furthermore, critics have also supposed that the poem together with the Wife’s Lament form a diptych of elegy and consolation, being the HM the message of consolation sent to the same lady of The Wife’s Lament. My interpretation complies with the allegorical reading of the poem, i.e. that the text is the metaphor for Christ’s message to the Church or to every Christian’s faithful soul.

2. Speaker and characters in the poem
The principal difficulty that critics challenge in the analysis of the HM is concerned with the identification of the narrator. Orton (1981:43) states that “the meaning of the damaged opening of the text has a bearing on the nature of the speaker”, thus going straight to the point. According to what can be gathered from the poem, critics account for one or two speakers. There is disagreement about whether the text is narrated by a human messenger who reads aloud the runic message, or it is the prosopopoeic utterance of a rune-staff. Anderson (1973) has put forward the possibility that the first twelve lines of the poem are narrated by the human envoy and the remainder by the rune-staff. Critics who follow the human-messenger hypothesis agree with Leslie (1968) who severely objects that the rune-staff is the speaker. He has therefore raised four objections, the first of which is grounded on the speaker’s frequent voyages, mentioned in line 6: ful oft ic on bates […] gesohte ‘very often I sought on a boat’. The custom of travelling

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is more appropriated to a human messenger than to a rune-staff. His second objection hinges on the passage se þisne beam agrof (13b) ‘who has carved this piece of wood’. According to Leslie, the implication that the envoy is showing the staff to the lady is enhanced by the demonstrative þisne. Moreover, it must also be explained the speaker’s unlikely employment of the third person to refer to himself. The third objection involves expressions denoting the relationship between the alleged speaker and his sender, e.g. mondryhten min (7) ‘my lord/master’, mines frean (10b) ‘of my lord/master’ and min win[e] (39b) ‘my lord/ friend/ beloved’. Leslie claims that these epithets are not suitable to a piece of wood. The fourth objection is that the verb in the clause þæs þe he me sægde (31b) ‘he said me of that’ is also unfortunate for a non-human narrator. This interpretation, set forth by Leslie (1968), has frequently been quoted by scholars, both to support his theory of a human speaker and to confute it.

As a matter of fact, his objections have been invalidated by those scholars who take an allegorical approach to the text, thus considering the option that the poem is a prosopopoeic speech uttered by the rune-staff itself. Remarkably, Anderson (1973) has overcome the problem of the speaker assigning lines 1-12 to a human messenger and the rest

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6 According to B-T, the semantic scope of wine encompasses love, friendship and deference. In fact, it “is applied to an equal […] is applied to one who can help or protect […] is used for husband’s or lover […] is applied to an inferior or subordinate, one to whom favour or protection may be shown”.

7 There is a long-standing controversy about the speaker in the poem. For an outline of other views, see Elliott (1955), Kaske (1967), Bolton (1969), Orton (1981) and Renoir (1981).
of the poem to a personified rune-staff. However, Anderson’s main concern has been to account for the speaker’s habit of making frequent voyages. The purpose of the foregoing argument is to set forth a religious reading of the text. In the light of this interpretation, I agree that the poem is the prosopopoeic address of the wooden object, which I shall establish to be the cross, following Kaske (1967). Accordingly, I shall also elucidate the speaker’s journeys with the main functions of the cross, i.e. to symbolize Christ and to propagate His message of faith far and wide.

Leslie’s second objection to the rune-staff as speaker is the use of the third person in reference to the ‘wood’. His claim is that se þisne beam agrof (13b) is not to be assigned to the staff itself. However, we find other occurrences of prosopopoeia in OE literature. The most outstanding example among them is The Dream of the Rood (lines 95-97). Here the speaker is a cross, which shifts often from the first to the third person (I have underlined where the shift of person occurs):

Nu ic þe hate,    hæleð min se leofa,
þæt ðu þas gesyhðe    sege mannum,
onwreo wordum    þæt hit is wuldres beam.

Now I give you bidding, o man beloved, reveal this vision to the sons of men, and clearly tell of the Tree of Glory.

The employment of the third person to refer to himself generates the effect of depersonalization, hence disconnection and estrangement
from reality. Consequently, the story narrated sounds like a dream, reports situations from another mysterious world; hence it requires that reader strive to abstract the message. Back to the HM, this process of abstraction encourages the figurative reading, which is also confirmed by the enigmatic message carried by the runes at the end of the poem.

As Leslie (1968) asserts, the terms denoting the relationship between the messenger and his master reveal that the speaker must be at the behest of the sender. The possibility that the rune-staff is speaking in the text is ruled out by its temporary nature, i.e. it cannot account for kinship terms of a lord-retainer relationship. Orton’s (1981:46) replies that “in the Exeter Book Riddles, frea (cf. HM 10) is by far the commonest title given by manufactured objects to their users or owners”. Allegorically, the cross personifies Christ’s message of faith, His passion and His sacrifice. Its words denoting a human relationship with the master are legitimated by the fact that the cross bears human features, owing to its personification. The epithets for Christ found in patristic literature are the same as those in the HM, in particular ‘Lord’ and ‘Master’. Those who accept this religious interpretation will not be astonished in hearing that Christ is our Lord, Master, King etc.

The last objection to the prosopopoeic speech is the incompatibility of the verbum dicendi in þæs þe he me sægde (31b) ‘he said me that’ with a rune-staff. In my opinion it is another logical consequence of the prosopopoeia. In fact, if we assume that the messenger is a personified object, we expect it to be able to speak and to hear thus to
report what ‘he’ has been told. It may be objected that the message had been carved in the wood, rather than having been told to him. In my view, the wooden object is paraphrasing the runic message aloud. The message proper, which is composed of the runes carved in the wood, appears at the end of the poem. For that reason, Anderson (1973:245) suggests that “the poet may be using the rhetorical figure of prosopopoeia for conveying the woman’s thoughts while she contemplates the significance of the stave and the meaning of the runes”, and he further explains that “the paradox of speaking without a mouth (as in Riddle 60) or without a tongue (as in Riddle 48) seems to be a convention associated with written messages in Old English personification and prosopopoeia”. Yet again, I claim that there is nothing weird in talking to a stave, once we have established that it is a personified object. Having agreed upon this nature, we may treat the object as if it were a human being. However, I concede that the phrase þæs þe he me sægde (31b) uttered by the rune-staff is categorically inconceivable for those who read the poem literally.

That the text is narrated in the first person and is meant to be a dialogue face to face is patent from the first line that reads Nu ic onsun-
The pronoun ic indicates the speaker, the verb secgan settles the oral nature of the text, the dative pronoun þe stands for the addressee of the speech and the deictic adverb nu together with the present tense wille enclose both speaker and hearer into the hic et nunc of communication. The author has cunningly anticipated the atmosphere of mystery of the poem through the adverb onsundran. Bosworth-Toller (1973)—hereafter B -T— provide the translations ‘apart; separately; especially’. The mystery is aroused by the conveyance of the message apart, separately from others, which might anticipate that the revelation of a secret is about to take place. The third translation ‘especially’ confirms the hypothesis of a mysterious situation, for the woman might be wondering why the message has been addressed especially to her.

Turning to the speaker, he is grammatically identifiable, but readers fail to recognize him personally. As noticed above, the speaker introduces himself/itself in the first lines of the poem, which correspond to a large burn-hole. In the second line, which runs […] treocyn/ ic tudre aweox literally ‘kind of tree/ I from progeny’ grew up’, the speaker talks about his/its pedigree. The puzzle here is to connect the personal pronoun ic in the second hemistich with treocyn in the first one. Editors, who agree that the speaker is a rune-staff, do not place punctuation after the word treocyn, thus assuming line 2 as a single sentence and taking the noun and the personal pronoun in 2b as co-referents.

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9 The term obfuscates further the speaker’s identity, since ‘progeny’ is indistinctly referred to animals, human beings and plants. The same is true for the verb to ‘grow up’.
Others, notably Leslie (1961), split the line into two sentences\textsuperscript{10} by placing a full stop at the end of line 2a. Consequently, the speaker is deemed a human emissary as the correlation between treocyn and ic has been disallowed both semantically and formally (by punctuation). The reiteration of the deictic adverb nu substantiates the present, the vividness of the whole situation, as well as the significance of the message and the speaker’s commitment to the delivery of truth. I believe that the synergy between the prominence of the present tense, the use of the first-person speaker and the observation that the speaker shares the same space with the interlocutor is a blend of the most convincing rhetoric devices to manipulate others’ behaviour. Greimas & Courtès (1979) name the employment of the first person ‘embrayage’. This is the typical feature of promises, orders, instructions and all texts by which the subject intends to influence interlocutors’ behaviour. The speaker’s introduction in the first lines marks his utmost commitment to the truth, also considered that no one is likely to trust in anonymous speakers. The most significant sentence denoting the strength of the message appears in line 8b: Eom nu her cumen. In this hemistich are bounded together the speaker and the elements that make up the woman’s world: time and space.

\textsuperscript{10} This theory is also bolstered by Orton (1981:44), who recalls Kuhn’s law of particles on the relationship between stress and position of personal pronouns. Given that tudre is the stressed element in 2b, it follows that ic is unstressed. According to the rule, “unstressed ic ought to occur in the first dip of the clause, which would in this case be at the beginning of 2a, and so the available evidence seems to point to 2b ic as introducing a new clause which must, given the context, also be a new sentence, as Leslie’s text indicates”.

Yet, the speaker’s physical traits remain ambiguous for the reader. While I agree upon the prosopopoeia theory, in my opinion the speaker is the cross itself carrying the message of faith that should be half-disclosed to the Church. I assume that the second half of the message carries the sense of life. I shall provide some evidence from the patristic literature, from the ASPR as well as from the Exeter Book itself.

The difficulties pertaining to the speaker’s identity in the HM are somehow related to the text that precedes it in the manuscript arrangement. This text has been labelled Riddle 60\(^{11}\) and is concerned with the prosopopoeic monologue uttered by an object to readers who ought to discover its identity. It consists of 17 lines narrated in first person, with references to the speaker’s original place where, as he says, he had been living solitary until a change affected his body and gave him a new existence. There follows an account of his function in this new life. The passage is marked off from the HM by the Tironian note 7, which indicates the end of the riddle, and by a successive capital letter suggesting the beginning of that poem.

It is undeniable that the solution of the riddle and the meaning expressed in the first part of the HM are fairly similar. In my opinion this is one of the reasons why the scribe placed the texts next to each other. Further reasons for such an arrangement of the folios may lie in

\(^{11}\) Critics have also given the title Ic wæs be sonde, as the incipit of the text runs, e.g. Klinck (1992). For reasons related to my interpretation I shall refer to it as Riddle 60.
the similarity between the two texts. As a matter of fact, the riddle is about a piece of wood, namely a reed transformed into a pen\textsuperscript{12}. The speaker in Riddle 60, after an introduction about himself in a riddle-like style, points to the fact that he had to journey and mentions his task as a messenger. Moreover, he specifies the confidentiality of his message, which must be shared only between him and the speaker (or reader), as stated in line 15, for unc anum [twam]/ærendspære ‘for the two of us only/ the message’. It seems to me that the secrecy evoked in the line above, is echoed in the first line of the HM, particularly in the adverb onsundran, which implies that the message must be disclosed to the woman only. For this reason, the same atmosphere of mystery surrounding Riddle 60 permeates the HM too.

Another similarity that bounds together the speakers in the texts is their role as messengers at the command of a lord. Both have to deliver a message. In Riddle 60 (lines 13-16a) the lord-retainer relationship is even more blatant than in the HM:

\begin{verbatim}
 eorles ingeþong ond ord somod, 
 þingum geþydan þæt ic wiþ þe sceolde 
 for unc anum twam ærendspære 
 abeodon bealdlice...
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{12} This solution has been forcibly claimed by Goldsmith (1975). She asserts that Riddle 60 and the HM are to be joined together, firstly because the riddle opening of the HM seems to be the continuation of a previous tale. Secondly, the story about the speaker in HM is concerned with the new life of the reed, after it was cut off from its place of origin. Finally, the speaker in HM is not a wooden object, but he is talking about a tree.
and a lord's thoughts join together,
unite in purpose, so that I to another,
someone far distant, should carry a message,
proclaim it boldly, so no one else
could know the speech of those separated people…

The words eorles ingeþonc, the verb geþydan and the that-clause with
the modal sculan highlight that the speaker shall announce a message,
as required by the lord’s intention. Emphasis on the command is also
underscored by the words ‘required’ and ‘shall’. The former is a plain
request that also strengthens the likelihood that the verb ‘shall’ bears
deontic rather than epistemic modality\textsuperscript{13}. In the HM, the directive
addressed to the messenger and the request to the lady is not as strong as
the master’s will in Riddle 60. The lady in HM seems encouraged to
obey her lord’s commands, rather than obliged. In contrast, in Riddle
60 the envoy is totally subjugated to the eorles ingeþonc ‘lord’s inten-
tion’.

From both texts is manifest the clash between a friendless life in
the first part against companionship and pleasure of mead hinted at in

\textsuperscript{13} Modality is a category of meaning which covers different areas, e.g.
necessity and possibility (the main areas), wish, attitude to factuality, subjectivity etc. The scope of modality is
clear-cut in Modern English. As for the Old English, the degree of modality expressed by
sculan is ambiguous. Particularly, this verb may convey both a strong necessity and an advice,
whereas in Modern English the distinction between an advice and a command is expressed
respectively by the modals should and must. See Huddleston- Pullum (2005). Turning to the
Old English language, B-T give the following translation for sculan: “denoting obligation or
constraint of various kind, shall, must, ought […] denoting a duty, moral obligation”. There-
fore, the verb can also be rendered with ‘must’.
the second one. The poet of Riddle 60 explains that Fea ænig wæs/ monna cynnes/ þæt minne þær/ on anæde/ eard beheolde (3b-5) ‘There were few of human kind to see my home where I stood solitary’. After few lines, the speaker talks ‘over the joys of the mead’ albeit he is muðleas (9b) ‘without mouth’. In the HM too, is visible the collision between the previous unfriendly environment where the man had lived, and the picturesque place where he is now living.

To recapitulate, the texts have been placed in the same folio of the manuscript because they both feature a messenger who relates the story in first person; a message to be delivered; the secrecy of that message; the high rank of the sender; and the description of an earlier hostile environment against a welcoming atmosphere in the present. But one thing is to observe that the texts are allocated in the same folio, due to the mentioned common features, another is to state that Riddle 60 and the HM are a single text.

Indeed, I maintain that the riddle and the poem are not complementary, most of all because I hold the speaker in the HM to be the personified wooden object, thus approving Leslie’s (1968) claim that the speaker in the riddle cannot be the same as in the poem. Therefore, if we maintain that we are dealing with one text, it is anomalous to repeat the passage about the speaker’s origin also in lines 1-12 of the HM. It might be objected that the incipit of the HM reminds to some-
thing that immediately precedes the text\textsuperscript{14}. If it did, I would be inclined to believe that the anaphoric reference would be concerned with The Wife’s Lament, rather than Riddle 60. Anyway, if such a connection be denied, the evidence that the adverb Nu (1a) is an anaphoric link will not be sufficient to support the hypothesis of one text. In fact, I assume that the adverb in this case fulfils the function of plunging the reader in medias res, so as to emphasise the present, rather than to mark an anaphoric reference. Since I have pointed out that the use of present tense is a brilliant ruse to yield vividness, immediacy and trustworthiness, I do not focus upon the anaphoric function of the adverb, but upon its strength in the delivery of a true message.

The different relationship among the characters is a further reason to keep the texts in question separated. I have understood that the speaker in HM is delivering a special message to a definite internal character, acknowledged by the allocutions scattered throughout the poem: the declensions of þu (þe, þec and þin). This relationship is strengthened by the second person declension of the dual pronoun git. The latter plainly refers to sender and recipient, as it has been uttered by the messenger. In contrast, the addressee of the message described in Riddle 60 is non-definite\textsuperscript{15}. In fact, the message talked about in

\textsuperscript{14} The first line of the poem has been employed as evidence for joining the riddle and our poem together, by virtue of its anaphoric reference. Cf. Blackburn (1901), Elliott (1955) and Goldsmith (1975).

\textsuperscript{15} The relationship among the characters of both HM and Riddle 60 has been analyzed by Leslie (1968), who states as follows: “Lines 14b-17 furnish the strongest objection to taking
Riddle 60 is said to be for unc anum twam (15a). The referents of the plural pronoun unc could be either sender and messenger or recipient and messenger. Therefore, if the speaker is a reed-pen, how can we account for its frequent voyages? The question can be solved if the speaker is held to be the cross, symbol of Christ carried by prophets and missionaries in their travel all over the world.

Given that I take the speaker in the HM to be the cross, (wooden object made out from a tree), I think that it is awkward to link the environment portrayed in Riddle 60 to a tree. Following Leslie (1968) this environment is suitable for a reed. Finally, the christian cross was not shaped with a seaxes ord (12a) ‘point of a knife’.

The conclusion is that if we hold the texts to be parts of the same story, we also approve the non-human speaker theory, were the a personified reed, were he the wooden object. On the other hand, if we estimate that the speaker is a human messenger, we shall keep the texts separated since the description of his place of birth is definitely incompatible with a human being. In any event, my opinion is that the speaker in the HM is a wooden object, thought not the same object of Riddle 60.

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the passage as the opening of the Husband’s Message. The object declares that the knife has so fashioned that ‘I beside (or opposite) you should boldly declare a message before the two of us alone, in such way that no other man might relate the words of us two’. A rune-stave cannot fulfil these conditions, for the other person indicated by the dual uncre (l. 17) would, if this were part of The Husband’s Message, require that this be the woman addressed in that poem. But she is the recipient of a message, not a participant in its transmission; hence uncre wordcwidas ‘the words of us two’, must exclude her”.

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3. The runic passage

Having established that the speaker in the HM is not the same as the one in Riddle 60, and that he is a personified wooden object, it must be accounted for a problematic sentence in line 50. Here, readers encounter a runic passage introduced by the sentence ge[\_]yre ic æt-somne. Editors have hitherto proposed three possible restorations for the damaged word at the beginning: ge[c]yre, ge[h]yre and ge[n]yre. The argument put forward by Goldsmith (1975:251) is noteworthy because she eventually claims that all three readings are equally justified\(^{16}\). B-T translate gecyre into ‘convert’, gehyre into ‘hear’ and genyre as the indicative of genyrwian, into ‘compress, contract or constrain’. The disputed letter seems to me to be an n for the reason that the lump at the upper left corner of the suspected letter crooks toward the left. Furthermore, it might also be taken as the serif of the n.

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\(^{16}\) She prefers gehyre and explains in a footnote that “Kaske’s article ‘The reading genyre in The Husband’s Message’ line 49, MÆ, 33 (1964), 204-06, offers an ultra-violet photograph as positive evidence for genyre”. Greenfield is not entirely convinced by the photograph (Greenfield, p. 173). Kaske rightly observes that “there is now no trace of the upper part of an ‘h’ (contra Leslie), but he erroneously states that there is no roughening of the surface in the blotched area. More importantly, he fails to state that part of the top of the preceding letter ‘e’ has also vanished. I am not able to determine what agent was at work here, but some of the ink has certainly gone. This means that ‘h’ is not positively ruled out. We must also note the fact that the supposed ‘n’ is abnormal in having no ‘wedge’ to start it and in having a thickening where the two strokes join. […] If by some as yet untried process it can be proved that the scribe wrote ‘n’, I should regard it as a mechanical error for ‘h’ (cp. folio 75′, line 8, where such an error has occurred)”.
I have enclosed that lump in a red circle, as the following image\textsuperscript{17} shows:

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image.png}
\end{center}

Indeed, the left vertical segment of the letter in question needs two strokes to be shaped, one downwards and the other upwards, which should curl to the right to form the hunch of the letter. Also the small section, which bends upwards at the right bottom (encircled in blue), looks like the final stroke of the n.

A technical examination was carried out by Kaske (1964), who submitted the parchment to the ultra-violet light thus revealing that our letter is an n. The author asserts that the letter cannot be an h because the ultra-violet light has detected no remnants of the upstroke, and even if we assume the presence of this vertical stroke the result is a higher letter. The implication of the reading genyre is that the verb

\textsuperscript{17} This image is the resolution of a digital picture, which I have cut out and adjusted both luminosity and contrast. I admit that its reliability is weak, being a picture that has been taken from a photocopy of a plate of the manuscript. The thickening where the two strokes join, which Goldsmith (1975) employs as objection to the ‘n’, is probably due to the second upward stroke by which the letter ‘n’ was written.
must be retained as the indicative form of genyrwian ‘to compress, constrain’ with the loss of w after r. Another possibility would be to emend genywrwe by scribal omission of a letter. Aside from the implications arising from different readings and considering what I see at first sight, albeit looking at a picture instead of the original manuscript, I read genyre. On visual grounds both c and h ought to be rejected. The former because it does not display knobs (as the ones encircled in the figure above) and it is accurately round-shaped, the latter by virtue of its clean vertical stroke. It might be objected that the upper part of the h has been blemished. However, since a vertical stroke should not branch off towards left, the reading h does not account for the knob at the upper left corner. I admit that my visual evidence is weak, for it rests on a digital photo, hence I do not rule out the possibility of an h in such a context.

The emendation into gecyre has been adopted by Kock (1902) and Krapp & Dobbie (1931-42). Both Elliott (1955) and Niles (2003) agree on the emendation of this word as the indicative form of gecyr- ran, which means ‘to turn, convert’, in the sense that the runes should be converted into proper words. If we accept that the text is the speaker’s paraphrase, i.e. the conversion of the runes into proper words, we must assume that the speaker is a human messenger who is reading the message aloud and at the same time is showing the rune-staff to the lady. This theory is also backed up by those who emend
gehyre ‘I hear’, and explain the present tense as a perfective use of the present\(^{18}\).

In my opinion the verb genyre fits the context of constraining the message within five runic characters. The problem is to link the verb with the following aþe benemnan (51b) ‘to declare by oath’. Orton (1981:50) observes that “there seem to have been limits on the type of verbs which could introduce such an infinitive construction in OE”. While he refers to the infinitive of purpose construction, I venture to say that this can be the gerundive construction of the verb benemnan. This verb could refer to the moment of swearing, when heaven, earth and man were declaring the oath. The messenger would constrain this moment within the runes, which stand for each partaker to the avowal. That is to say that the messenger is the symbol of the oath. I would translate I constrain together heaven, earth and man declaring by oath that. Again, the sense is that the messenger symbolizes the moment at which the vow was being declared. I wish to propose this speculation as a last resort, and trust in all those who decline the verb gehyre and

\(^{18}\) The most accepted emendation is gehyre. For instance Orton (1981) discards genyre and accepts gehyre on syntactical and semantic grounds. For he observes that the construction gehyre + inf. is common in OE, witnessed by its occurrence in the preceding lines 22-3. On the contrary the form genyre… benemnan is not attested elsewhere. Also Leslie (1961) and Klinck (1992) print gehyre. According to the latter, the basic meaning of “genyrwan is used with a sense of confinement and repression and it does not appear with an infinitive of purpose”. More recently, Muir (2000) agrees upon gehyre too.
support the infinitive of purpose construction, although they remain silent on this crux\textsuperscript{19}.

Finally, I accept the emendation genyre, although I do not rule out the possibility of gehyre, given that the lump at the left corner of the disputed letter might be the outcome of a smudge, so that the upper part of the alleged vertical stroke might have been spoilt by fire.

There remain two more problems concerning the interpretation of the runic passage, namely the question of whether to read the runes in groups by their names or to read the initial of their names so as to spell a single word. Since in the manuscript the runes are set off from one another by punctuation, I would read them by their name, thus following Kaske et alii\textsuperscript{20}. The five runes in line 50-51 read: \(\textit{ᛍ}; \textit{ᚴ}; \textit{ᛏ}; \textit{ᚼ}; \textit{ᛦ}.\) As maintained by Page (1973), their traditional transliteration is S; R; EA; W; M. All the same, he explains that:

\begin{quote}
The phonetic value of the runes may have been common knowledge, but the same is not necessarily true of their names. While the names of most of the older runes that are derived from the old Germanic futhark undergo only minor variation and must have been widely known, the newer runes that were devised for speech-sounds resulting from sound changes specific to Old English did not necessarily have stable names. They might have been named in an ad hoc fashion that varied from user to
\end{quote}


user, or like roman letters, they might have had no names other than their phonetic value. The first problem is to assign the acrophonic value to each symbol, since the first, the third and the last rune are liable to more than one assessment. In point of fact, it has been proposed that the S-rune could stand for both sun and sail. The EA-rune could represent both earth and sea, while the last rune is a hybrid between the M-rune and the D-rune. Additionally, if the last rune were the M-rune, it would denote mankind or the Man, metonymically Christ.

There have been attempts to combine the letters in order to spell a word, but no satisfactory results have been achieved so far. The most recent attempts have been made by Bolton (1969), Anderson (1974) and Fiocco (1999). The first suggests that the runes spell the word smearw, i.e. the English translation from the Latin oleum, the second proposes sweard, which means fleece, while the third author claims that the word in question is sweard/ sweord, which according to her

\[21 \text{ In Niles (2003:207).}\]
\[22 \text{ Nicholson (1982) reviewing the hypothesis put forward by Grein (1858) and Arntz (1944), translates this rune into sail. He quotes the sixteenth stanza of the Rune Poem and argues that this poem is an important source of information about the meaning of the runes. Moreover, he notes that a rune could be liable of more than one meaning, because of confusion during oral transmission and attempts of making sense of unfamiliar words.}\]
\[23 \text{ For instance, Elliott (1955) prefers the meaning sea because of the various references and synonyms of the sea in the poem. Nevertheless, he notes that the rune may also symbolize both earth and grave. See also Niles (2003), Goldsmith (1975), Kaske (1967) and Page (1961).}\]
\[24 \text{ Fiocco (1999) considers this character to be the D-rune.}\]
argument means literally the sword upon which oaths were declared, and figuratively phallus. The most customary interpretations deem that the S-rune stands for sun and the last rune for man, rather than for day. The similarity of the last rune with the rune which appears in the next folio (The Ruin, line 23b) should guide us toward the M-rune. A fairly large number of solutions generate by the transliteration of each rune and by combining their possible meanings, i.e. sun/ sail, road, earth/sea, joy and man/ day. Since I acknowledge that the whole poem is the paraphrase of the runic passage, and also that the poem is a covert request to undertake a journey, I consistently agree upon the solution suggested by Nicholson (1982:318), viz. Take the path across the sea to find the joy of earth with the man you were betrothed. The solutions presented by Elliott (1955:7) are also attractive: Follow the sun’s path across the ocean, and ours will be joy and the happiness and prosperity of the bright day, and Follow the sun’s path across the sea to find joy with the man who is waiting for you. Notice that the former author takes the EA-rune to stand for earth, whereas the latter takes it to mean sea.

However, on the assumption that the poem is about Christ’s message to the Church, I venture into another possible resolution of the runic cypher: Christ is the road on earth/sea, joy for man. This interpretation ensues from the metaphor for Christ as the sun, the light that shows the right way to heaven, also found in The Battle of Brunanburh25 (lines 12-17) where the sun is God’s candle:

25 This fragment is taken from the MS edition of Bately (1986).
feld dænede
secgan hwate, sīðhand sunne up
on morgentid, mære tungol,
glad ofer grundas, Godes condel beorht,
eces Drihtnes, oð sio æþele gesceaf
sah to sette.

The field flowed with blood of warriors, I have heard said, from the sun-rise in morningtime, as mighty star glided up overground, God’s bright candle the eternal lord’s till that noble work sank into its setting26.

Although the syntax has been adjusted, my interpretation of the runic passage seems less speculative than the ones above, because it is faithful to the nominal form of the runes. In fact, such a solution features no verbs, save the copula ‘be’. On the whole, I forcibly argue that the runic passage must not be transliterated otherwise one of the main characteristic of the text, i.e. the atmosphere of mystery conveyed by the runes, would be lost. I have already mentioned that the essence of Christ’s message is based on faith. Thus, I surmise that the runes epitomize the author’s intention to underline that men cannot understand God’s law.

According to the most up-to-date translation theories, the harsh points of the source text should not be smoothed out in translation. I am dealing with a translation from old English into modern English, as all modern scholars do with medieval texts. It is also clear that the runes

26 Translation of John Osborne. See www.kami.demon.co.uk/gesithas/readings/brun_me.html.
in this poem represent a crux, but they might have purposely been conceived of as a crux for the audience of those days. If the author intended to be cryptic for the reason outlined above, the obscurities of the text must be transmitted also in its various editions and translations.

4. The religious nuance in the poem
Swanton (1964) and Bolton (1969) already suggested that the poem could be read as the religious allegory of Christ’s message to His Bride, i.e. the Church. The message is delivered by a peregrinus figure. Although they do not linger over the problem of the speaker’s identity, they deem the HM to be the continuation of the Wife’s Lament. This is another OE elegy that could be seen as a monologue through which a woman expresses her grief over her man’s departure.
I pursue the suggestion that the HM could be the message of consolation sent by the man to his woman. Accordingly, I agree upon the hypothesis that the poems form a diptych of elegy and consolation. In fact, the similarity of the two poems has been noticed and most forcibly contended by Howlett (1978:10), whose evidence is validated by “their identical length, their similar but reversed pattern, their shared technique of internal semantic correspondence, and their common diction. The echoing or answering of passages should confirm that the poems belong together”. Howlett’s analysis illuminates the remarkable similarities of the two poems but it is not concerned with any religious symbolism, such as the one set forth by Kaske (1967). The lat-
ter asserts that the speaker in the poem is the cross itself, which speaks prosopopeically. Then, he reviews the function of the Christian cross of joining earth, heaven and man. It is through the image of the cross that I wish to demonstrate that this poem is Christ’s message to the Church, and by synecdoche to all Christians. I shall look at the poem from the allegorical standpoint, and my interpretation rests merely on the comparison of keywords, which appear both in the poem and in the patristic literature. Cross-references to the ASPR shall help to evaluate the Christian influence.

The cross is composed of two straight pieces of wood joined together, one vertical and the other horizontal. Like a tree, the cross is driven into the ground and it stretches onto the sky, thus symbolically joining heaven and earth, and becoming the symbol of this union. In the biblical tradition, the word ‘cross’ has various shades of meaning, which range from the Trinity to Christ’s love for human, and from Christ’s passion to His message of Faith.

At the opening of the HM, the speaker introduces himself saying that treocyn/iic tudre aweox (2) ‘I have grown up from a kind of tree’. This statement should be taken literally on the assumption that the speaker is the personified cross and seeing that the cross derives from a tree, we should not be bewildered at the unspoken hints to the cross, such as metaphors, synecdoche and metonymies. In fact, there are numerous references to the cross in OE literature, where the cross is referred to as a tree or as a wood. For example, The Dream of the Rood

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27 Krapp & Dobbie (1931-42).
(lines 28-31) features a personified cross that describes himself as a mutilated tree:

“Þæt wæs geara iu,     (ic þæt gyta geman),
þæt ic wæs aheawen     holten on ende,
astyred of stefne minum.     Genaman me þær strange feondas,
geworton him þær to wæfersyne,     heton me heora wergas hebban [...]”

It was long ago,     (yet I remember that)
that I was cut down on the edge of the grove,
severed of my trunk.     I remember that strong foes,
wrought me for show,     a gallows for rogues.

Specifically, reader can recognize the hints at the tree when the cross says that he was aheawen ‘hewed down’ and astyred of stefne minum ‘severed my stem’. In the course of the poem, the cross is referred to with various epithets: sillicre treow (4b) ‘wondrous tree’, beama beorhtost (6a) ‘brightest wood’, sigebeam (13a) ‘wood of victory’, wuldres treow (14b) ‘tree of glory’, wealdendes treow (17b) ‘master’s tree’, hælendes treow (25b) ‘saviour’s tree’, wudu selesta (27b) ‘best of woods’. More evidence is given by Christ in Judgement (Muir 2000), where the cross is described as leohta beam (1089) ‘radiant tree’ that dispels the shadows and halgan beam (1093) ‘holy tree’ where Christ was hung.

Turning to the HM, references on the cross are found in the metonymies treocyn (2a) and beam (13b). Due to the indications about the
speaker’s origin as a tree, I assume that he is the cross that has prosopopeically introduced himself at the outset of the poem. I have already invalidated the objection that the speaker cannot refer to himself in third person, by quoting the passage from The Dream of the Rood. The passages fulfillment gesohte (6) ‘often I sought on [...] of the boat’, Eom nu her cumen on ceolþele\(^{28}\) (8b-9a) ‘I have now come on the deck of a ship’, onsen sænacan (27a) ‘sit in the sea-going ship’ and nacan ut aþrong (41b) ‘in a ship urged out’ might subtly convey that the speaker is far more than an ordinary passenger in the ship: he could be a part of the ship. Although line 6 is damaged, the word bat is inflected in the genitive case, so one would expect that the speaker used to journey on _ _ _ of a ship. One of the most logical interpretations could be that the word missing be related to the ship, since the genitive case indicates a relationship within the noun phrase.

\(^{28}\) More than one translation has been proposed for this word. Interestingly, Niles (2003:201) notes that it is a compound noun, although “unattested elsewhere and so its meaning can only be inferred from the present context, its constituent parts ceol and þel present little semantic difficulty. The ceol is the ship. In Old Icelandic the cognate word kjóll denotes ‘keel’ and, by extension, ‘barge’ or ‘ship’, and a bilingual speaker would have been aware of that fact, but in Old English ceol denotes ‘ship’. [...] þel is often a substantial piece of timber. So, apparently the speaker appears to be of treocyn ‘made of wood’ though we cannot be absolutely sure of that conclusion as yet, has often travelled across the seas at his master’s bidding, lodged in the ship’s hold. There he or it has either been resting on a plank or, perhaps, has been secured to a plank-like timber as a part of the ship’s architecture. The phrase on ceolþele, with the noun in the dative singular case, might support either interpretation, thus leaving open the possibility that the speaker is a human messenger (though why should be he in the hold?), a wooden object of some kind (whether physically secured to the ship or not), or a functional part of the ship itself”. He concludes his argument by the statement that the word denotes the ship-mast.
Moreover, the speaker reiterates his location on board more explicitly by the word ceolþele. This term suggests that the speaker used to stay at the ship’s deck, thus leaving room for the inference that the speaker is actually the ship's mast itself. This assumption receives further corroboration from the allegorical reading of the ship as the Church which protects the Christians and leads them across the sea of life. Given that the ship is a metaphor for the Church, then the ship’s mast is a legitimate metaphor for the cross in this context. Moreover, the cross could also be a synecdoche for the Church. The allegory of the Church as a Ship is stoutly encouraged by the following passage of the Bible:

Circuivit ergo arca Domini civitatem per diem, et reversi in castra pernoctaverunt ibi. Igitur, Iosue de nocte consurgente, tulerunt sacerdotes arcam Domini… (Joshua 6:11-12).

So he had the ark of the LORD circle the city, going once around it, after which they returned to camp for the night. Early the next morning, Joshua had the priests take up the ark of the LORD.

Remarkably, the passage underscores that tulerunt sacerdotes arcam Domini ‘the priests were steering Lord’s ark’. It is significant that the priest, who is the head of the church, is appointed to steer the ark, which in turn can straightforwardly be identified as the Church. Another suggestive metaphor in the Bible explains that Faith is an important principle of Christianity. In fact, being partakers of the Church is
not enough to face the storms of life without fear, but men have also to be faithful to their steersman’s word:


A violent squall came up and waves were breaking over the boat, so that it was already filling up. Jesus was in the stern, asleep on a cushion. They woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up, rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Quiet! Be still!" The wind ceased and there was great calm. Then he asked them, "Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith?"

The steersman is allegorically the priest, who reads aloud and comments the Gospel, i.e. God’s word in order to advise the right way (or route). It is worth quoting another passage where the concepts of ‘wood’ and ‘ship’ co-occur:

Tu autem vis, ut non sint vacua sapientiae tuae opera, propter hoc etiam et exiguo ligno credunt homines animas suas et, transeuntes fluctus per ratem, liberati sunt. Sed et ab initio, cum perirent superbi gigantes, speo orbis terrarum ad ratem confugiens, reliquit saeculo semen nati vitatis, quae manu tua erat gubernata. Benedictum est enim lignum, per quod fit iustitia… (Wisdom 14:5-7).

But you will that the products of your Wisdom be not idle; therefore men trust their lives even to frailest wood, and have been safe crossing the surge on a raft. For of old, when the proud giants were being destroyed, the hope of the universe, who took
refuge on a raft, left to the world a future for his race, under the guidance of your hand. For blest is the wood through which justice comes about…

Although the term ratis translates literally into ‘raft’, on the word of the Latin Dictionary (Castiglioni & Mariotti 1966), the poetic use validates the translation into ‘ship’. In the passage above, one might also note that the phrase exiguo ligno credunt ‘they believe in a small piece of wood’ is a likely hint at the cross. As the text develops, the small piece of wood becomes a ship, so I would tentatively state that we are before an expanded synecdoche. By synecdoche, the Christian cross may indeed stand for the Church. Thus, the ship’s mast depicted in our poem may be the cross.

The Christian image of the ship percolated also through other OE poems, e.g. in Andreas²⁹, where the lines 443b-454a seem to describe the same scene as in Marc (4:37-40):

Hwilm upp astod
of brimes bosme on bates fæðm
egesa ofer ýðlid. Ælmihtig þær,  
meotud mancynnes on mereþyssan
beorht basnode. Beornas wurdon
forhte on mode, friðes wijnedon,
niltsa to mærum. Þa seo menigo ongan
clypian on ceole cying sona aras,
engla eadgifa yðum stilde,
wæteres wælmu. Windas þreade,

²⁹ Krapp & Dobbie (1931-42).
sæ sessade, smylte wurdon
merestreama gemeotu.

Oft the deep cried out, one wave unto another, and whiles there rose a horror from the ocean’s womb unto the vessel’s deck, over our bark. And there the Almighty bode upon our ship, the radiant Lord of men. Then were the men fearful of heart; they yearned for calm and mercy at the hand of the sublime God. And the company began to cry aloud upon the ship; then straight the King arose and stilled the waves, the surging seas, and rebuked the winds. The sea was hushed; calm were the stretches of the ocean-streams.

In fact, this passage portrays the moment at which God and His disciples, who are sailing across the ocean on a ship, encounter a sea-storm. In a while, God stills the waves and rebukes the winds, thus restoring tranquillity and relieving the fearful crew. The maritime imagery occurs in the end of Ascension 30 (lines 850-863) too, which relate first the apprehension about undertaking a sea-journey, then the pleasure of being guided by the Holy Spirit into the ‘Harbour of salvation’:

\[\text{Nu is þon gelicost swa we on laguflode}
\text{ofor cald wæter ceolum liðan}
\text{geond sidne sæ, sundhengestum,}
\text{flodwudu fergen. Is þæt frecne stream}
\text{yða ofermæta þe we her on lacað}
\text{geond þas wacan woruld, windge holmas}
\text{ofor deop gelad. Wæs se drohtað strong}\]

\[30\text{ Muir (2000), translated by Kennedy.}\]
ærþon we to londe     geliden hæfdon
ofer hreone hrycg.     þa us help bicwom,
þæt us to hælo     hyþe gelædde,
godes gæstsunu,     ond us giefe sealed
þæt we oncnawan magun     ofer ceoles bord
hwær we sælan sceolon     sundhengestas,
healed yðmearas,     ancrum fæste.

Now is it most like as if on ocean floods, over the chill waters we sail in ships, in
our ocean steeds over the spacious sea, journeying in our barks. Fearful is that
stream, those surges high whereon we toss throughout this changeful world; windy
the waves over the deep sea-path. Bitter was our way of life until we sailed to land
over the ocean’s ridge. Then help came unto us that the Spirit-Son of God guided us
into the harbour of salvation, and granted us grace; that we may have knowledge
even from he vessel’s side where, fast at anchor, we may moor our stallions of the
sound, our old seasteeds.

I have so far been striving to exhibit that the cross, one of the most
patent symbol of Christianity, was by no means unknown to the An-
glo-Saxons. This statement is supported by the occurrences which I
have hitherto presented, although I have not examined the complete
corpus of OE literature for reasons inherent to the foregoing discus-
sion. Studying the poem from the outlook of a religious allegory could
unearth a further Christian imagery, i.e. the marital relationship be-
tween Christ and the Church.

I have summarized that the poem is about a message sent by a man
from a distant land to her lady by a third party, which I have perceived
to be the cross. I shall set out significant evidence from the Bible in order to show that the relationship between Christ and the Church is identical to the marital one.

In the Song of Songs Christ refers to the Church thus:

Tota pulchra es, amica mea, et macula non est in te… (4:7)

You are all-beautiful, my beloved, and there is no blemish in you…

Veni de Libano, sponsa, veni de Libano… (4:8)

Come from Lebanon, my bride, come from Lebanon, come!

Vulnerasti cor meum, soror mea, sponsa… (4:9)

You have ravished my heart, my sister, my bride…

The Church is called at the same time friend, bride and sister. The relationship between the couple in the HM seems to be very intimate. Indeed, the lady in the HM is always referred to by the personal pronoun þu ‘you’, save in line 48 whereby she is named þeodnes dohtor ‘Prince’s daughter’. However, this way of addressing occurs soon after the mention of the man as an eorl gestreona ‘rich man’, in the context of a virtual situation in which they are sharing magnificence. Moreover, these two specific clues about the identity of the protagonists are found almost at the end of the poem.
What readers are allowed to know about the protagonists can only be inferred by miscellaneous clues on their status. For instance, the man is denoted as monn (25b; 28b; 44b) ‘man’, þeoden (29a) ‘prince’, secgum (34a) ‘lord’, win[e] (39b) ‘friend’, eorl (47b) ‘man of the upper class’. As already observed, the woman is mentioned only once as the Prince’s daughter and is probably the referent of gesiþum (34a) ‘retainer’. The aforesaid appositions show asymmetry in the relationship, because the man seems to have a princely connotation, while the status of the lady is expressed through his father’s one. In fact she is a princess, yet her status is not plainly expressed. Although the woman occupies a high position too, she is a step lower in the social rank than his man. Furthermore, her honorary title appears in combination with the description of the man as an eorl gestreon, as already mentioned. The high social status of the man emerge from the fact that he has sent a messenger, who describes the man as mondryhten (7a) ‘my lord’ and frean (10b) ‘master’. Additionally, the man is in a position that allows him to biddan (13a) ‘bid’ and hatan (het 13a; heht 20b) ‘command’. In case his noble lineage is still obscure, lines 35b-36a unequivocally declare that He genoh hafað/ fædan gol[des]… ‘He has plenty of gold-adorned…’. At this point, it should be cleared that the man’s position is higher than the woman’s. This hierarchy mirrors the conjugal relationship as well as the one between Christ and the Church. The most eloquent simile thereabout is expressed in the following passage:
Mulieres viris suis sicut Domino, quoniam vir caput est mulieris, sicut et Christus caput est ecclesiae, ipse salvator corporis. Sed ut ecclesia subjecta est Christo, ita et mulieres viris in omnibus. Viri, diligite uxores, sicut et Christus dilexit ecclesiam et seipsum tradidit pro ea, ut illam sanctificaret mundans lavacro aquae in verbo, ut exhiberet ipse sibi gloriosam ecclesiam non habentem maculam aut rugam aut aliquid eiusmodi, sed ut sit sancta et immaculata. Ita et viri debent diligere uxores suas ut corpora sua. Qui suam uxores diligit, seipsum diligit; nemo enim unquam carnem suam odio habuit, sed nutrit et fovet eam sicut et Christus ecclesiam, quia membra sumus corporis eius. Propter hoc relinquet homo patrem et matrem et adhaeret uxori suae, et erunt duo in carne una. Mysterium hoc magnum est; ego autem dico de Christo et ecclesia! (Eph. 5:22-32)

Swanton (1964:272) observes that freond in the compound freond-scype (19a) “can also refer to a man whom a woman might anticipate as a desirable bridegroom or husband”. I suggest that the gist of the Fifth Letter to Ephesians is the same as the HM because the matrimo-
nial status represents both a union and a contract between man and woman. In the HM the man urges his woman to undertake a journey to ætsomne/ siþþan motan (33), literally ‘together may afterwards’. From here, it may be inferred that the poem foreshadows a future reunion.

The couple is separated since the man ‘has been driven away by a feud’, Hine fæhþo adraf (19b). In my opinion, the feud mentioned could be the same enmity that caused Christ’s crucifixion and His departure from this world. It would thus be clarified why Christ could not deliver the message Himself and sent a messenger. On the assumption that the man in the HM is Christ, the messenger explains that he is to be found suð heonan/ ofer merelade (27b-28a) ‘south from here, over the ocean’s way’, and the lady’s journey should comply with these coordinates. In fact, the south is generally associated with light and warmth, hence with the sun and metaphorically with God. See Isaiah 60:19-20:

Non erit tibi amplius sol ad lucendum per diem, nec splendor lunae illuminabit te, sed erit tibi Dominus in lucem sempiternam, et Deus tuus in gloriam tuam. Non occidet ultra sol tuus, et luna tua non minuetur, quia erit tibi Dominus in lucem sempiternam, et complebuntur dies luctus tui.

No longer shall the sun be your light by day, Nor the brightness of the moon shine upon you at night; The LORD shall be your light forever, your God shall be your glory. No longer shall your sun go down, or your moon withdraw, For the LORD will be your light forever, and the days of your mourning shall be at an end.
It has already been mentioned that the journey across the sea in the HM could then represent the journey of life. The lady is commanded to set off as she hears galan geomorne/ geac on bearwe ‘the mournful sing of the cuckoo in the grove’. The bird is usually regarded as the herald of spring, and we know that in our culture this season represents a new life. Many things conspire together to yield this impression of life: the trees are in bloom, animals come out of hibernation, and the overall landscape is multicoloured while in the wintertime it is almost grey. I would say that the world rises from the dead of winter. Since new life implies logically death of the old one, the epithet “mournful cuckoo” may be explained away, in my opinion, by the intuition that the woman in the poem is doomed to join his beloved only in the life after death. The only condition for the fulfilment of the union is that she must be faithful. Thus, I offer an answer to Greenfield’s question why the woman needs convincing. The effort of faith necessary to the lady seems to be the core meaning of the poem and its main function. Indeed, faith is underlined by the reiteration of specific terms, for example treowe (12b) ‘loyalty’, wordbeotunga (15b) ‘promise’, gebeot (49a) ‘vow’, aþe (51b) ‘oath’, winetreowe (52b) ‘pledge

31 A first answer has already been attempted by Anderson (1975:293-4) who proposes to overcome Greenfield’s question about the lady by “substituting for ‘persuasion’ the idea of ‘assurance’ or ‘reassurance’ […] perhaps she could gather strength from the memory of promises made in earlier days; but such memories diminish with time. The husband, via messenger, asks his wife to recall the earlier promises, but his argument cannot rest solely on memories: a new oath is required, and with a persuasive rhetoric which permits her to believe that their past joys can indeed be renewed in a strange land”.

of friendship’. I recall that faith is indeed the trademark of Christianity, as also stated by John:

Sic enim dilexit Deus mundum, ut Filium suum unigenitum daret, ut omnis, qui credit in eum, non pereat, sed habeat vitam aeternam. (3:16).

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.

Amen, amen dico vobis: Qui credit, habet vitam aeternam. (6:47)

Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.

The message is addressed to the lady, who allegorically symbolizes both the Church and the soul of the Christian. The former should become aware of this message of faith which is to be interpreted (in fact the lady should unravel its meaning, which has been genyre ‘constrained’ into five runic characters), the latter should believe in the Church. Moreover, the Church can be by metonymy the Christians’ soul where God inhabits.

In HM there is a specific hint that lady and man shall sit together with alwaldend god ‘all-ruling God’ in lines 31b-33:

þæs þe he me sægde,
þonne inc geunne alwaldend god
_ _ _ _ _ aetsonne sippan motan...

he said me that,
than all-ruling God granted that you two
together may sit…

The overt mention to God emphasizes the persuasion of the message, because it provides a possibility that the man might be already next to God in Paradise, otherwise the statement that God granted that they shall sit all together would not be valid.

5. Conclusion

The religious interpretation of the poem is corroborated by the following points:

1) the marital relationship between the characters in the poem corresponds to the relationship between Christ and the Church;
2) the feud that caused the man to depart leaving his wife in this land could refer to the feud that caused the Crucifixion;
3) the symbolism about the Christian cross as a messenger of the divine word;
4) the maritime imagery of life as a sea-journey occurs both in the poem and in the biblical tradition;
5) references to the faith are significantly numerous and expressive. Faith is the most important tenet of Christianity.

The points above have been confirmed by evidence provided both by the text itself and by texts taken from the patristic literature and from OE literature. Accordingly, the HM could be allegorically summarized as the message that Christ sends to the Church, which can in turn
allegorically represent all the Christian souls. Like the man in the poem, Christ insists that Christians should be faithful to a future reunion, which can be accomplished only if they undertake a journey across the sea, figuratively the sea of life, hence implying that the reunion will take place at the end of this life. The message is made up of runic letters thus is very hard to interpret because it should represent the Mystery of faith, the foremost tenet of Christianity. Indeed, the recurrent hints at the faith are the most striking evidence that I have used to bear out this religious view of the poem.

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32 Also Anderson (1974:406) notes that “Gerade hier in diesem Gedicht würde ein Bezug auf den Weg zum Paradies sehr gut zu der Erwähnung von zahlreichen Pferden, Freuden, Reichtürmern, und Kameraden (Z. 34-46) passen”. In his opinion, the runic message was carved in the man’s weapon (probably the shield or the sword) and sent to his wife as a confirm of his death: “Mit der einfachsten Versetzung können diese Runen auch von einem SWEARD berichten, das möglicherweise unter den Waffen zu suchen ist. Dramatisch teilt der Erzähler der Witwe etwas von ihrem toten Mann mit. Nach altergermanischer Sitte soll sie ihm freiwillig und freudig auf der Todesreise folgen, was nach archeologischen und literarischen Unterlagen tatsächlich noch während der skandinavischen Wikingerzeit oft getan wurde”. 
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