The document contains a list of notes and references, along with a section titled "Reaping a rich harvest of humanity: Images of Redemption in Irish Bardic Religious Poetry" by Salvador Ryan. The text discusses the use of metaphors and models in the Pauline writings of the New Testament to illustrate the meaning of Christ's death on the cross and its effects on humanity. It mentions the work of various scholars and theologians, including Anselm and Abelard, and discusses the problem of how to speak of what Christ achieved on the cross. The text is rich in historical and theological references, including works by Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, and others. The section concludes with a mention of the manner in which the cross should not be rejected and its historical associations with reproof and violence. The document also notes that it is generally accepted that the art and literature of the later Middle Ages, depictions of the passion and death of Christ became more graphic in their detail, as the earlier image of the victorious Christ.
alive and reigning from the Cross, gave way to the emaciated and tortured dead Christ, an object of pity and scorn. Of course, these apparently neat categorizations risk oversimplifying what was, in fact, a complex range of medieval passion images which continued to draw upon scriptural and patristic models while at the same time incorporating the later soteriologies of Anselm, Abelard and Aquinas. This essay examines one particular genre of late medieval religious literature, Irish bardic religious poetry, in order to demonstrate how a range of models of redemption could continue to co-exist in a complex pattern of passion metaphors. The verse with which we are concerned were composed by a hereditary professional class of native Irish poets from the thirteenth through seventeenth centuries; these poets were, in the main, laymen, although many of their poems may have been composed upon a poet’s retirement to a local monastery where a poet might be given bed and board in return for the production of religious verse. What follows is a cursory examination of the treatment given by a number of native Irish poets to some of the most prominent classical metaphors for redemption.

REDEMPTION AND THE ‘DEVIL’S RIGHTS’

The idea of redemption (buying back) can be understood in both its wider and narrower senses, the former expressing the liberation of humanity which has sold itself into the slavery of the devil. Here the idea draws deeply on its Jewish roots with its allusion to the manumission of slaves, or indeed the release of captives or prisoners of war. However, it can also be understood in the narrower sense of the making of a payment by Christ for humanity (the recipient of the ‘payment’ will be either the devil, who exercises legitimate authority over those who have acquired in his debt or, less frequently in the early period, God the Father whose appeasement is required). In the former case, Christ is forced to acknowledge the ‘devil’s rights’ and thus to pay the ransom for humanity’s release from bondage with his blood. Augustine would regard the death of Christ as a cancellation of debt to the devil in his work De Trinitate. However, the rights of the devil over humanity were to be scuppered when he was tricked into over-extending his authority, and claiming both the human and divine natures of Christ on the cross: thus, in Gregory of Nyssa’s famous image, Christ’s human flesh was the bait and his divinity the fish-hook upon which the greedy devil became impaled.

In a sixteenth-century bardic poem entitled Dhebhriath ma na mairib (A pact made with mankind was broken), an unidentified poet declares, ‘When we fell into the devil’s power, the rule governing us was unrighteous; a woman coveted an apple which destroyed righteousness.’ The poet goes on to speak of ‘the pact made with our foe which binds us.’ In this example, however, credit for the breaking of the pact is also given to the Virgin Mary. If the pact be examined, ‘twill be seen I was tricked in it, Mary was left out in the treaty, let he quash it if that be possible.’ There may be some allusion later in the poem to Christ’s slight of hand on Calvary which caused the devil to over-reach on his claim: ‘... the child’s glory was hidden till he mounted the cross; clear now is the gap he broke.’ For Diarmuid O Coibhthigh, a sixteenth-century bardic poet from Westmeath, Christ’s outwitting of the devil is likened to the achievement of checkmate in a chess-like board game; in the poem Duras na liosa terris riogh (‘Terrible to hear the King’s gift claimed’), he remarks that, To save his folk was a move in the game, a move attended by all blessings; a move that would save us, the Lord perceived, on the chess board, when he had seen his chessmen ruined. ‘Having won his chess pieces (humanity), according to another sixteenth-century poet, Maurchtrach O Coibhthagh, he arranged his folk over the board of his heart; a full board had never yet been won.’ Nevertheless, an earlier bardic poet, the renowned thirteenth-century Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh, remained a little less optimistic about humanity’s prospects, when he observed in the poem Leibheas aibhleach da Ídeas (Adam’s race hath a torch of shame) that ‘for thy race thou didst shed thy heart’s blood and [stretched out] thy hands; yet what avails thy buying of man’s soul since it is sold back [to the devil]?’

VICTORY IN BATTLE AND DELIVERSHIP FROM THE POWERS OF EVIL

The motif of Christ going into battle on the cross against demonic powers and attaining a stunning victory was particularly prominent in the early Middle Ages, and is perhaps best exemplified in the West in Latin hymns such as the Vultus Regis and Paix Lingua, composed by the sixth-century Merovingian court poet, Venantius Fortausinus, and in later compositions such as the eleventh-century sequence Vittimae Paschali Laudis. Bardic treatments of this model of redemption often begin by depicting Christ as a Gaelic chieftain declaring war on alien territory (the world) that was once his own in an effort to reclaim it for himself. This territory had been overtaken by the devil leaving humanity as ‘survivors of a slaughter.’
For the fifteenth-century poet, Tadhg Ó hUiginn, 'we were captives in bonds, fast in Lucifer's chains, when Adam's race was set free.' What Ó hUiginn calls the 'war of the apple-tree' was conducted against the devil's stronghold, but also against mankind's sins: 'against our sins God pressed on the war; he was ready to wage it; 'twas we began it.' Christ pursues the battle against his enemy with particular vigour once he assumes kingship on the cross: in the words of Diarmaid Ó Cobhthaigh, The world's Lord (O God) had his side pierced and thus entered on his power; vast was the harvest of humanity saved when it beheld thine only son's wounded breast. Elsewhere he notes, 'Christ] murmurs not at the wounding of his side and breast; he must save his folk; for our sake he was lifted up on three nails; a king must be over his people!' Upon attaining the kingship over his people, Christ would do what every new Gaelic chieftain was expected to do: conduct a crath or celebratory raid on enemy territory. This crath mirrors the wider tradition of the 'Harrowing of Hell' and hymns such as those of Venantius Fortunatus, which depict Christ ruling from the tree of crucifixion and scooping souls from hell as a triumphant soldier might carry away his trophies.

As early as the eighth century, the Irish poet, Blathmac, conceived of Christ's victory in the following way: 'I was victorious from fighting that, his battle with the Devil. Miserable Devil, his strength was crushed; a great prey was taken from him [...]. Here, then, we find the image of the warrior Christ, the heroic figure who can also be found in compositions such as the Anglo-Saxon Dream of the Rood. Diarmaid Ó Cobhthaigh tells how 'to save his race, the youth advances, braving wounds, and continues in this vein by commenting, 'thou wert furious with thy wounds and didst not hesitate to charge thy foes; no wonder those wounds were inflamed as thou were advancing on thy foe's fort.' In a poem entitled Crata tunnith croch an Chluaindhi (A fruitful tree is the Lord's Cross), an unidentified poet notes that 'God was no sooner on the cross than his foe had lost that contest', going on to portray the raid on hell in dramatic fashion, complete with cross as battering-ram: 'This was the cross with which he broke down the doors on the demons; with this cross he broke down our foe's door and took us from him and marched off with us as his booty on Sunday.' In some bardic poems, Christ is depicted as riding into battle on a horse (the cross), in a manner reminiscent of the Lover-Knight, a popular allegory in Middle English literature. The sixteenth-century poet, Maolmuire, son of Cairbre Ó hUiginn, describes how 'furious at thy wounds, thou dost on the Sunday morning raid drive recklessly thy steed up to Hell's gates and empty its dungeon.' Diarmaid Ó Cobhthaigh continues the narrative in another poem: 'Hell's house lost many men owing to the horse with which thou didst rout thy foes; thou wert wise to bind on thy horse's back thy booty while thou wert yet in thy foe's castle.' Christ's victory was complete: addressing the Virgin Mary, the sixteenth-century poet, Tadhg Óg Ó Dálaigh, relates how 'standing in the danger-gap, thy Son seized possession of land in his ancestors' country', which meant 'peace with us, and then [that we might have] a country of our own.'

Reconciliation of Hostile Parties

While patriarchic writers often pitted Christ against the devil in the conflict which would result in Christ's victory on the cross, his conquest of hell and the liberation of the hosts of human hostages held captive there, nevertheless human beings were also considered to be complicit in their own defection; thus mankind was in a state of conflict with God from the time of the Fall; Christ's war, then, was understood to be directed against humanity and its selfishness. In this particular portrayal, the events on Calvary bring the war to an end and reestablish reconciliation between both parties. Here the passage in Ephesians 2:1-3:18 which speaks of Christ being 'the peace between us', of his 'restoring peace through the cross' and in his own person [killing]: the hostility was surely influential. The sixteenth-century poet Maolchettach Ó Conga recalls how 'a sad affair was the Lord's war; long shall its marks be on the world; it was brought to an end by the Lord's breast, which made a peace that was not easy to bind.' Other contemporary poets use similar language: Fearghal Ó Conga speaks of the breast-wound, concluding 'a peace-bond with sinfull men', while Tadhg Óg Ó Dálaigh remarks that 'many the peacemaker who was wounded when saving another man; thou didst save the world — but at the price which a peacemaker pays.'

Perhaps the most striking expression of the peace wrought on the cross was the Middle English 'Chaster of Christ' allegory which began to appear in Irish bardic poetry from the fifteenth century. Here Christ is depicted as drawing up peace terms on a document: the treaty is written on the parchment of Christ's skin using as pens the nails or the lance which pierced Christ's side; the heart wound provides the inkwell, Christ's blood the ink, his wounds the letters and (once again) the heart wound is
sometimes conceived of as the seal of the document. A poem entitled Bran ar
nabhadh Domhaid (‘God’s anger is the drop before the dark storm’),
which was composed no later than the second half of the fifteenth century, may
allude to the Anselmian satisfaction theory when it states that ‘Though
justice demands that a King be satisfied, we cannot satisfy him; [but] on
his breast as on a document, he has written peace-terms for men with
which they may well be content.’49 Here then, the models of satisfaction
and reconciliation sit side by side. Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh emphasises
the binding nature of the peace wrought on the body of Christ himself
when he comments ‘the steel in the peace made by the priceless nails – none
but a born smith could have stretched it.’50 This last reference alludes to
the description, common in late medieval accounts of the passion, of how
Christ’s body was stretched on the cross with ropes in order that his feet
might reach the locations where the soldiers had decided to place the
nails.51 It also renders the metaphor of Christ’s skin as parchment more
effective, for it was customary to place parchment on a stretching frame as
part of its preparation, and in order for it to be written upon it needed to
be scraped (‘wounded’) and pricked by a sharp instrument; this comparatio
of the written page is mirrored in the wounding of Christ’s own skin in
preparation for the inscription of the letters which will seal the peace.52

Substitution and Satisfaction
The claim in Ephesians 2:16 that ‘in his own person be [Christ] killed the
hostility’, as seen above, was influential in identifying the locus of
reconciliation between God and humanity. But it could also be used to
support theories of substitution and satisfaction: Christ takes humanity’s
place in order to appease God’s wrath and pay back to God the price
which humanity cannot pay. Tadhg Óg Ó Dalaigh remarks that ‘nothing
else but the wounding of God could have made good the heavy losses in
our ranks; our flock could not enter heaven until violence was used.’53 Many
hardi poets were keen to emphasise the fact that Christ willingly placed
himself in the hands of his enemies with the sole purpose of destroying
their kingdom from within. Thus does Christ offer himself as a hostage
in our stead: the fifteenth-century poet Triathal Ó hUiginn stresses that
‘the Lord for his children’s sake freely consented – great favour – to be a
captive.’54 The friar-poet, Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (d. 1497), relates how
‘the battle-hawk of our race was never captive till he came to thee [the
cross] and deigned for my sake to be prisoner.’55 As with much medieval

literature, it is difficult to make a clear distinction between portrayals of
Christ as humanity’s substitute (acting in humanity’s place) and those of
Christ as humanity’s representative (acting on behalf of humanity). These
ideas are not mutually exclusive, nor should they be considered to be, as
argued by N. T. Wright.46 In the poem Rare eadha bhlos ag Dia (‘Rare is the
faithful hair of God’), his body was offered up for us ’47 while Maichtertacl
Ó Cionsa speaks elsewhere of God’s unquenchable vengeance [drawing]
the wine-blood of the Lord’ which comes quite close to the theory of penal
substitution.48 A century earlier, Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn remarked: ‘O
God .. thy wrath was killed on the cross that saved the world’, while
requesting the ‘hundred-streamed cross’ to ‘crucify my sin.’49 The idea
of God’s wrath being broken on Calvary is also vividly expressed by
Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh when he states how ‘... that wave [of blood]
from the shore of Christ’s breast fell on the net of God’s wrath and broke
it.’50 It should be noted that the image of the ‘net’ here might also represent
Christ’s body, the locus for the end of hostilities, as found in Ephesians;
the fourteenth-century English mystic, Richard Rolle, also referred in
one passage to Christ’s body as a net ‘for as a net is full of holes, so is
your body full of wounds. Here, sweet Jesus, I beseech you, catch me up
in this net of your scourging so that all my heart and my love be turned
to you.’51 Christ’s act of substitution was regarded by Ó Cobhthaigh as
a foolishly loving way to remove the wrath against us.52 When the same
poet addresses the question of whether atonement from humanity might
yet be sought by God for the shedding of his Son’s blood, he remarks that
if the Son’s ‘swift-speeding anger’ is let loose (on judgement Day), ‘thou
[Christ] are shooting at thy own generosity.’53

Redemption and the Compulsion of Christ’s Love
One of the most prominent themes in the religious poetry of Diarmuid
Ó Cobhthaigh is that of the powerful love which compelled Christ to
undergo his passion on the cross. Here perhaps we best see exemplified
in an Irish bardic context Peter Abelard’s emphasis on love as the key
to understanding the redemption.48 In the poetry of O Cobhthaigh and
of others, Christ’s love is pitted against his justice (in one poem, O
Cobhthaigh refers to ‘God’s love [which] became a foe to his anger’)49
and appears to trump it each time. Speaking of Christ’s incarnation, O
Cobhthaigh draws attention to the visit made so indulgently to show
us his love [which] checked the rising of the Creator’s great wrath; his
Having Life in His Name

Reading a Rich Harvest of Humanity

Redemption as Recreation: the Sacrament of Christ's Passion

The final image examined here is that of the cross as a fruitful tree, and Christ's passion and death as effecting a new creation or a re-constitution of the created order. The theme of the fecundity of the passion event is multi-layered and complex and deserves fuller treatment than can be afforded here. However, it is a favorite with bardic poets, and especially Diarmaid O Coghaithaigh. The price which Christ pays for humanity's redemption is high: O Coghaithaigh describes how 'clearly did he buy the seed for the field, the field of which we are the corn-grass; broken up was that lea, his sore feet from which came the fruit of love.' Both the cross and the glance of Longinus are likened to ploughs which prepare the ground of Christ's flesh for the seed's sowing. Before this, according to an unidentified author of the poem Olcan carnadh, a dún Adam (Adhainn (O children of Adam, hail hail is God's contract made with us), 'the whole world was a heap of withered wood' and 'when the (sacred) blood sank into it; that sufficed to change us.' The blood of Christ vivifies and fructifies as noted by Maolmhuire, son of Cailbre O hUiginn: 'The dripping of his heart blood - heavy the harvest (coming from it) on Adam's race; corn rises in that rain, torrents of grace pouring down from him.' He describes its fruit harvest in terms of the adherence of humanity to the tree of the cross: 'weighty the fruit of the cross, great the fruit-gathering from the tree of the wound; it gathered Adam's race on itself and caused them to cluster thick on it.'

Diarmaid O Coghaithaigh speaks of how the shedding of Christ's blood dispels the dark clouds of God's anger and, while fertilising the seeds of redeemed humanity, usher in brighter weather. The blood-rain of Thy Son's wounds is the shower that made our seed grow; it was a blessing for the children for whom His side was pierced; the heavier the rain, the brighter the sunshine after it.' The harvest of humanity generated by Christ's blood renders the cross a fruitful wood [bearing] all men as blossoms on its top. The significance of the medieval preoccupation with the living, throbbing, warm blood of the crucified Christ has been comprehensively discussed by Caroline Walker Bynum. Irish bardic poets were equally concerned to emphasise the living nature of Christ's blood on the cross; for O Coghaithaigh, Christ proves his dear love by [pouring] forth torrents of living blood from his breast.' The friar-poet, Páipé Becht O hUiginn explains how the living and warm blood of Christ acted upon divine justice on the cross: 'Justice must be told that she has a right to be upheld; [therefore] the Lord warmed her [with love] for
men, so that she will never be as she was before; Till thou didst change her, God's race could not approach Him confidently. 9 This warm blood of Christ was also expected, however, to inflame the fervour of those for whom it was poured out. An English preaching manual from the thirteenth century put it thus: 'As the spurs of the cross were warmed by the blood of Christ, so ought sinners to be inflamed in charity to the service of Christ by the blood of Christ.' In typical Abelardian fashion, such a gesture of love called for a generous response.

CONCLUSION

The momentous Christian theme of the shattering of humanity's original harmony with God, whether described in terms of demonic plunder or wilful defection, and its subsequent restoration in Christ by means of his passion and death, dominated medieval religious thought just as it had in the period of the early Church Fathers. Late medieval Irish treatments of redemption theory drew on a number of different established traditions, while also reflecting many of the constantly evolving English and continental devotional trends. While some patriarchic models of redemption came to be increasingly questioned during the Middle Ages and alternative theories gained prominence, nevertheless the art and literature of medieval Europe tended not to easily dispense with older metaphors. Rather, a process of accretion ensued; a cursory examination of individual bardic poems, then, can reveal many layers of supposedly competing redemption theories in a relatively peaceful state of co-existence. For medieval Christians, less was rarely more. In the closing decades of the sixteenth century, the Kilkenny poet Turlough O'Carolan, prepared for a visit to St Patrick's Purgatory, Lough Derg, in penitential mood. His own Abelardian response to the work of Christ's redemption, recorded in verse, fittingly recalls many of the themes we have examined above:

Many a writer tells of the testament of love thou didst leave to thy race; that generous testament of thy pierced side and feet is as a parchment dictated by Thee;... the pens that wrote it— sublimes the tale!—were the book-bearing thongs; not long didst thou delay in paying, according to the charter, thy heart's blood, poured forth. 10

Notes


4. For a discussion of some of these issues, see Deborah Williams, Stasis in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995).


7. Ibid., 163.

8. Lambert McKenna (ed.), 'Devil's pact with men is quashed', Irish Miscellany, 58 (1932), 590, stanza 2.

9. Ibid., stanza 13.

10. Ibid., stanza 22.

11. Ibid., stanza 29.


15. Viladesau, The Beauty of the Cross, 177; O'Collins, Jesus our Redeemer, 123.


17. McKenna (ed.), Dúin Dí, poem 15, stanza 17.

18. Ibid., stanza 13.

19. Ibid., stanza 3.


21. Ibid., poem 64, stanza 5.


23. Lawrence, 'The Harrowing of Hell', 119.

24. McKenna (ed.), Aithilghlasb Dáine, poem 64, stanzas 17 and 21.

25. Ibid., poem 88, stanzas 5 and 6.


27. McKenna (ed.), Aithilghlasb Dáine, poem 77, stanza 27.

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19. Ibid., poem 71, stanzas 32 and 33.
30. See Daley, ‘He himself is our peace’.
31. McKenna (ed.), Aithsléibhín Dáithí, poem 60, stanza 1.
32. Ibid., poem 59, stanza 5; poem 71, stanza 30.
33. Ibid., poem 64, stanza 3.
34. Ibid., poem 65, stanza 19.
37. McKenna (ed.), Aithsléibhín Dáithí, poem 71, stanza 17.
38. McKenna (ed.), Óidh Dhá, poem 20, stanza 11.
40. N. T. Wright, Redemption from the New Perspective: Towards a Multi-Layered Pauline Theology of the Cross’, in Davis et al., The Redemption, 93.
41. McKenna (ed.), Aithsléibhín Dáithí, poem 100, stanza 4.
42. Ibid., poem 60, stanza 33.
43. McKenna (ed.), Philip Beirle O'Keeffe, poem 5, stanzas 11 and 50.
44. McKenna (ed.), Aithsléibhín Dáithí, poem 66, stanza 33.
46. McKenna (ed.), Aithsléibhín Dáithí, poem 63, stanza 12.
47. Ibid., poem 67, stanza 27.
48. For a wider discussion of this theme, see O'Collins, Jesus as Redeemer, 181-99.
49. McKenna (ed.), Aithsléibhín Dáithí, poem 64, stanza 10.
50. Ibid., poem 69, stanza 9.
51. Ibid., poem 63, stanza 12.
52. Ibid., poem 64, stanza 7.
53. Ibid., poem 63, stanza 30.
54. Ibid., poem 67, stanza 7.
55. Ibid., poem 63, stanza 11.
57. McKenna (ed.), Aithsléibhín Dáithí, poem 64, stanza 1.
58. Ibid., poem 77, stanza 38.
60. McKenna (ed.), Aithsléibhín Dáithí, poem 63, stanza 37.
61. Ibid., poem 67, stanza 32.
62. Ibid., poem 66, stanza 19.
63. Ibid., poem 63, stanza 2; Ibid., poem 65, stanza 30.
64. Ibid., poem 58, stanza 20.
65. Ibid., poem 77, stanza 4.
66. Ibid., stanza 11.
67. Ibid., poem 63, stanza 26.
68. Ibid., poem 66, stanza 34.

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69. Caroline Walker Bynum, Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), see especially chapter 7, 152-72.
70. McKenna (ed.), Aithsléibhín Dáithí, poem 65, stanza 38.
71. McKenna (ed.), Philip Beirle O'Keeffe, poem 5, stanza 19.