Get Thor

TOM SHIPPEY

G. Ronald Murphy

TREE OF SALVATION
Yggdrasil and the Cross in the North
239pp. Oxford University Press. £22.99 (US $35).
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Joanne M. Harris

THE GOSPEL OF LOKI
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As knowledge of Old Norse myth began slowly to be disseminated in the early modern period, it triggered two reactions. One was to use the myths as a basis for new works of art, beginning perhaps with Ewald's drama *Balders Død* (The Death of Balder, 1778), and continuing through Oehlenschläger and Wagner right up to A. S. Byatt's *Ragnarok* (2012). The other response, coming often from Christian commentators, was to see the myths as harmonious with, complementary to, even a *praeparatio evangelica* for the Christian myth: so, for instance, Peter Erasmus Müller, Bishop of Sjælland, who published his "On the Genuineness of the Asa-teaching", first in German and then in Danish, in 1811–12.

We now have a further example of each tradition in Joanne M. Harris's *The Gospel of Loki*, and G. Ronald Murphy SJ's *Tree of Salvation*. The latter makes one point strongly and personally. The history of the conversion of the North is well recorded, with its dates of royal conversions, mass baptisms and (in Iceland) complex negotiations about the transitional period for change of faith. None of this tells us, however, how the new converts, many of them just obeying orders, "got the message". There must have been for many of them a moment of realization, when the new faith at last meant something, and a major part of missionary activity must have been sparking these moments.

Fr Murphy details several of his own such moments, which he believes echo those of converts a millennium or more before. At the heart of the conversions, he argues, must have been a reconciliation of the Cross with the world-ash tree Yggdrasil, a key element in Norse mythology, of which we hear in both the *Prose Edda* and the *Poetic Edda*. Murphy lays special stress on a stanza from the Eddic poem *Vafþruðnismál*, in which the giant answers Odin's question as to who will survive the Fimbulwinter at the end of the world. It will be a human pair, says the giant, Lif and Leifthrasir, who will be sheltered "in Hoddmimir's wood". Murphy takes this to mean Yggdrasil, and argues that if Yggdrasil was in Old Norse myth the means of salvation and the gateway to a new life, then its function could readily be transferred to the Cross.

He argues further that this identification remains visible in the layout and iconography of Norwegian stave-churches, of the round churches of Bornholm (with their central pillars), and of the Viking crosses at Middleton in Yorkshire. At Uvdal, he reports, he felt a strong conviction that the central pillar of St Olaf's Church "was recognized . . . as the trunk of the cosmic world-tree". He gives a moving account of what it might have felt like, at the burial of a warrior in his tree-trunk coffin in Yorkshire, to walk round the cross there and see its comforting iconography: the serpent Nidhögg bound, protection reaffirmed.

There are two underlying reasons for scepticism (apart from the ongoing difficulty of interpreting old icons), and both are flagged by an error or a confusion. Early on, Murphy states that the great Codex Regius manuscript of Eddic poetry, which is our only source for the Lif/Leifthrasir myth of survival in the Tree, is a copy made "for the king of Norway". The manuscript is now one of the great treasures of Iceland, but it was not made for a king. It was found in an Icelandic farmhouse (we do not even know which one) and donated to the King of Denmark, perhaps as a curiosity. The peripheral nature of its survival means that Murphy is unlikely to be right in viewing it as a kind of pagan Bible, universally known and respected.

Murphy also habitually uses the names Woden and Odin in free variation, as if assuming that the stories of Odin and Fenrir, Nidhögg and Yggdrasil, were known across the whole Northern world. In this he continues again a distinguished line of unifiers, including N. F. S. Grundtvig (*Nordens Mytologi*, 1808), Jacob Grimm (*Deutsche Mythologie*, 1835), and James Steven Stallybrass translating Grimm (*Teutonic Mythology*, 1882–88). But most of what they described could be called, much more narrowly, "Eddic mythology"; while one stanza, in one poem, in one manuscript, is an even narrower basis for a theory.

Detail of the carving on the side of the stave church at Urnes depicting the deer eating Yggdrasil, the world tree

Murphy ends with chapters on *The Dream of the Rood*, the modern iconography of Christmas trees, and on the meaning of the runic alphabet or *fuþarc*. Long ago, Walter Skeat tried to browbeat this into spelling out the Lord's Prayer, and Murphy again follows an old initiative, this time decoding the alphabet to spell out "Father, hallowed be he, long ago gave mankind talking staves as hereditary property". The Father who gave us runes is, of course, Odin, and he and Christ "are one".

Joanne Harris takes what is in effect the opposite line by fixing on Loki as her centre, and having him tell the stories of Old Norse myth from his own point of view, rejecting what he calls "the Authorized Version" of the *Eddas*. Loki is a natural starting point for a new interpretation, as he raises so many questions. He is the origin of evil, sire of monsters like Hel and the wolf Fenrir, responsible for the death of Balder, helmsman-to-be of the fire-giants' ship at Ragnarök. But he also comes across as a teenage prankster, cutting off the hair of Thor's wife, Sif – why? – and making a silly bet with the dwarf Brokk, which should have cost him his head. And he is the gods' go-to person as well. He saves Freyja from being handed over to a giant by decoying away, in mare's shape, the stallion the giant needs to finish his building of Asgard. He saves Freyja again by telling the gods how to rescue Thor's hammer from the giant Thrym. He figures as companion of Thor on the famous trip to his namesake, the giant-king Utgard-Loki. How to resolve such contradictions?

Just like the scriptwriters for Marvel comics, Harris assumes that Loki cannot be one of the Æsir by blood; he is an adopted fire-demon. Her Loki also becomes a very modern figure, the clever outsider, always being bullied (just because he is clever) by the sports-freak gods like Thor, about as intelligent "as the average Labrador", or popular posers like Balder, "more teeth than brainpower". Gods and giants all talk like characters from a modern soap opera. Young gods shrug their shoulders and say sullenly, "whatever". When the giant Thrym is told how worried Freyja is about "fitting into her wedding dress" (it's Thor in drag, actually), he replies, "ah, bless". When Loki changes shape and sex to lure away the lustful stallion, he brags afterwards that he "took one for the team".

Loki's involvement with goddesses and giantesses is likewise explained by deliberately anachronistic cliché. Why did he cut Sif's hair? Well, having cuckolded Thor, he decided to take a "trophy". His affair with the giantess Angrboda, which produced the monsters Fenrir, Hel and the Midgard-Serpent, ends when she tells him she "felt violated and used and finally screamed at me to go back to my wife". And once Fenrir has been bound, at the cost of Tyr's hand, bitten off at the wrist, Angrboda shrieks at him, "I let you have [our son] for the weekend and before I know it he's chained up underground".

Structurally speaking, meanwhile, what Harris has done is to take all the Loki stories from both *Prose* and *Poetic Eddas* – there are a dozen out of more than thirty overall – and organize them into a continuous narrative of steadily deteriorating relationships. Loki starts off prankish but useful. After the rescue of Thor's hammer (done at the very welcome price of making a complete fool of Thor), he rather enjoys being a celebrity. But the trip to Utgard makes more of a fool of him than it does of Thor, and after that his motivation is simple: "Get Thor".

This leads to Loki's failed entrapment of Thor with the giant Geirröd, his attempt to get back into favour with Odin which leads only to the story of the fatal ring of the dwarf Andvari and eventually to the unforgivable death of Balder and the refusal to release him by Loki's daughter Hel. Framing the whole autobiography is another single and obscure allusion like Murphy's "wood of Hoddmimir": the motivator of the whole story is the sorceress Gullveig-Heid, who in two enigmatic stanzas of *Völuspá* is burned by the Æsir at the start of their war against the Vanir, but who in Harris's account has survived and used Loki as her cat's paw to bring down all the gods and re-establish Chaos.

Yet, not quite disagreeing with Murphy, the last words of Loki's Gospel are, "Let there be …". The comedy of Old Norse myth, which so staggered the learned world, and then seized the popular imagination with its sheer un-Olympian irreverence, turns out to translate well into modern terms and even modern language: some of Joanne Harris's characters' sarcasms are not very different at all from those in Snorri Sturluson. What we still have difficulty with, it seems, is its accompanying hard-heartedness. "Weep for Balder the Beautiful"? In the Old Norse world view, someone (even if it was Loki) was bound to say, "Me? Why should I?"