The suffering servant and salvation in Piers Plowman: An interpretation of the B-text.

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THE SUFFERING SERVANT AND
SALVATION IN PIERS PLOWMAN:
AN INTERPRETATION OF THE B-TEXT

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ABSTRACT

Some of the most significant *Piers Plowman* scholarship of the last thirty years has argued convincingly that Langland organized his poem along thematic rather than narrative or allegorical lines. Critics have thoroughly examined many of the themes operating in the poem, but one that seems to have escaped notice, even from advocates of the exegetical approach to medieval literature, is the theme of the Suffering Servant. The Suffering Servant theme is closely related to the poem's major themes of the Incarnation and salvation, and serves as a vehicle by which the poet develops those larger themes.

This thesis provides a reading of *Piers Plowman* based upon the theme of the Suffering Servant. Christ, who is traditionally understood to be the fulfillment of the Suffering Servant prophecies of Isaiah, thus becomes for the dreamer both the example and the goal of a Christian life. He is identified in the poem with Truth, Charity, and finally with the suffering and triumphant Servant of God. Piers the Plowman becomes the guide along the road to salvation, and the emblem 1
of perfectible mankind. For Langland, that perfection is reached, as his narratives and images illustrate, through honest labor, physical and spiritual poverty, acceptance of God's will, and patient suffering. It is through such humility and perfect acceptance that Christ, Piers, and the faithful Christian become united in triumph over pride and over death itself.

The thematic reading of *Piers Plowman* provided in this thesis by no means represents the only possible approach to the poem. On the other hand, it lends considerable support to the theory that Langland's poetic method is indeed strongly thematic. In addition, an examination of the Suffering Servant theme in detail reveals that it is pervasive throughout the poem and serves to connect and explain many of Langland's narratives, images, and other themes. Finally, by tracing the development of a single theme, with all its connections, throughout the entire poem, we begin to get a better idea, not only of the workings of Langland's poetry, but of the meaning of his vision.
INTRODUCTION

Despite the wealth of good solid Piers Plowman scholarship during the past thirty or forty years, students of the poem are still tempted to ask after reading it, "What is it really about?" Yet, Langland himself is quite explicit about the meaning of his poem. In Passus I, the dreamer asks Holy Church how he may save his soul. "Whan alle tresors arn tried," replies Holy Church, "treuthe is the beste" (I. 85). During the course of the poem, the way to Truth becomes the way of suffering, the way of charity--in short, an imitation of the life of Christ, with Piers the Plowman as a sometime guide. Yet if this was all very clear to the poem's fourteenth- and fifteenth-century audience--and the large number of manuscripts of and early references to the poem indicate that it may well have been--that clarity had somehow been lost over the course of six centuries, until modern scholarship began to bring the poem back into focus.

Part of what seems to be a problem in understanding the meaning of the poem is really a problem in understanding Langland's method, in coming to grips with
what Elizabeth Salter calls "... the potential yet fluctuating richness of connected meanings."\(^1\) The difficulty exists for at least two reasons. First, Langland's allegorical figures are highly fluid, and operate on a number of levels either interchangeably or simultaneously. His allegory is different in kind from the allegory of the Roman de la Rose. E. Talbot Donaldson, Robert Worth Frank, Jr., Morton Bloomfield, and Elizabeth Salter all provide thorough and satisfying studies of Langland's allegorical method.\(^2\)

The second cause of difficulty in understanding Piers Plowman lies in the fact that because it is long and alliterative, and is peopled with a myriad of characters, the tendency is to read it as a narrative poem. Basically, it is not, despite its many narrative passages. Salter observes:

> ... it soon becomes apparent that the unity and consistency of the poem cannot be most


persuasively argued on narrative grounds . . . It is the development of theme or themes which is of overriding importance, and which is served, not controlled, by means of a narrative.3

If we accept that stance—and the work of Salter and of John Lawlor4 is very convincing in that regard—then we must read Piers Plowman not for its story line, but for its "connected meanings," its themes, which are supported and illustrated by the narratives, just as the themes themselves support and expand upon the core of meaning—what the poem is about.

This paper provides a reading of Piers Plowman based mainly upon one of the poem's many interconnected themes: patient suffering or, more specifically, the Suffering Servant. Except for brief mention and some rather broad interpretive strokes, the Suffering Servant theme has been all but neglected in Piers Plowman scholarship, even by those critics whose approach to the poem has been avowedly and almost exclusively exegetical, for example, Huppe and Robertson, R. E. Kaske, and Ruth M. Ames.5

3 Salter, pp. 46-47.


It will become clear early in the paper that no single critical approach, and attention to no one theme alone can adequately explain such a monumental work as *Piers Plowman*. Yet, by understanding that Langland's method is basically thematic, and by hitching a ride, as it were, on one theme and observing how it is related to the central meaning and to the other themes as it moves through the poem, we can begin to have a much better idea of how the poem, in all its complexity, works. And an understanding of Langland's complex poetry may help us finally understand the beautiful simplicity of his vision.

CHAPTER I

THE VISIO

In Piers Plowman: An Introduction, Elizabeth Salter says of Piers that he "... is firmly set in our respect and affection before he begins his arduous pilgrimage of change. In his long absences and his later altered appearances the plowman is always remembered. Hence the resolve 'to seke Piers the Plowman' in the last lines of the poem is as Langland meant it to be, an urgent move towards a real, living creature, as well as a restatement of an ideal."\(^6\) Robert Worth Frank, Jr., believes that the poem is called the Vision of Piers Plowman "... because it gives us the poet's vision of man's capacity for salvation." Yet, Piers is "... always human, never divine." He represents preternatural man in his innocence, and the "... pure humanity of labor and love [which] in itself possesses the right to eternal life."\(^7\) In fact, one of the main conclusions of Frank's Piers Plowman and the Scheme of Salvation, is that Langland's artistic

\(^6\) Salter, p. 55.

vision "... is moralistic rather than raptly prophetic, realistic rather than mystical." According to Salter, Frank fails to recognize "... that medieval mystical literature has its roots in the firm dogmatic teaching of the Church, that didactic, meditative and mystical content is frequently found in natural sequence within the scope of a single text." 

Frank's apparent failure to recognize what Salter proposes does not vitiate his study, however. In support of her view, Salter quotes the author of The Cloud of Unknowing:

... our soule, bi vertewe of this reformyng grace, is mad sufficient at the fulle to comprehende al him by loue ... the eendless merueilous miracle of loue, the whiche schaal neuer take eende ... 

8 Ibid., p. 118.

9 Salter, p. 83. It seems that the only way we can make sense of Piers Plowman while still including everything is to accept the fact that Langland especially is given to such "natural sequences" not only in terms of his religious context, but of his allegory, imagery, and narrative as well. Both the defenders and the opposers of the exegetical approach agree on this point. Cf., R. E. Kaske, op. cit., and E. Talbot Donaldson, "Patristic Exegesis: The Opposition," in Critical Approaches to Medieval Literature, ed. Dorothy Bethurum, The English Institute (New York: 1960).

Salter is perfectly accurate when she says that the "major activity of the poem" is to "comprehende al him by loue."\textsuperscript{11} However, that theme does not necessarily make the poem mystical. Another passage which she cites from The Cloud of Unknowing seems to support Frank's view as well as hers:

\textit{\ldots bi his mercy withouten thi desert arte (thou) maad a God in grace, onyd with him in spirit withouten departing, bothe here and in blis of heuen withouten any eende. So that, though thou be al one wyth hym in grace, yit thou arte ful fer bineth hym in kynde.\ldots}\textsuperscript{12}

The experience of oneness with God through Sanctifying Grace is promised not only to the mystic, but to all the faithful. Simply, the author of The Cloud here is reminding his audience of the duality of their human nature: we are one with God in spirit, through grace, "\ldots yit \ldots ful far bineth hym in kynde." This clarifies a bit further Frank's definition of Piers. The plowman is not divine, but represents perfected humanity, the complete and full response to God's grace in the human soul, the result of an unequivocal \textit{f\textsuperscript{iat} voluntas tua}.

The dual nature of humanity and the human perfection of Piers suggest, of course, the dual nature of

\textsuperscript{11} Salter, p. 84.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 120.
Jesus Christ as God and man:

For in kynde knowynge in herte ther comseth a myght,
And that falleth to the fader that formed vs alle,
Loked on vs with loue and leet his sone dye
Mekely for gure mysdedes to amenden vs alle.
(I. 165ff)\textsuperscript{13}

Throughout the poem, Christ is held up as the example of the perfect life, the perfect response to God the Father. Thus, we have in the poem mankind, represented by the poet and the folk in the field; we have Christ, who is presented through various narratives and images (e.g., the "plante of pees," I.152ff); and we have Piers, who represents an ideal of humanity and with it, the human nature of Christ (\textit{Petrus, id est, Christus}, XV.212).\textsuperscript{14} This view of the perfectibility of man, and of man's search--pilgrimage--for perfection forms the thematic core of \textit{Piers Plowman}.

The theme of \textit{Piers Plowman} is stated literally and very simply near the beginning of the poem: "Teche me to no tresor," the dreamer says to Lady Holy Church,

\ldots but tel me this like,
How I may saue my soule that Seint art yholden.

\textsuperscript{13} All quotations from \textit{Piers Plowman} are from \textit{Piers Plowman: The B Version}, ed. George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson (London: The Athlone Press, 1975). Spelling of \textit{f} and \textit{3} have been normalized to \textit{th} and \textit{gh}, respectively.

Lady Church not only provides the dreamer with an answer, but with a gloss, as well:

'Whan alle tresors arn tried treuthe is the beste:
I do it on Deus caritas to deme thee sothe.
It is as dereworthe a drury as deere god hymseluen.
For who is trewe of his tonge, telleth noon oother,
Dooth the werkes therwith and wilneth no man ille,
He is a god by the gospel, a grounde and o lofte,
And ek ylik to oure lord by Seint Lukes wordes.
(I.85ff)

Langland may have confused Luke with John, which seems likely in light of the Deus caritas reference:

We are of God. He that knoweth God, heareth us. He that is not of God, heareth us not. By this we know the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error. (I John 4:6)15

The most explicit reference is in I John 4:16:

And we have known, and have believed the charity, which God hath to us. God is charity; and he that abideth in charity, abideth in God, and God in him.

Thus, truth is much more than being "trewe of tonge." He who tells the truth also "Dooth the werkes therwith and wilneth no man ille." In lines 143ff, the dreamer learns that truth

15 All quotations from Scripture are from the Douay-Rheims translation of the Latin Vulgate. Coincidentially or not, the field full of folk is between two worlds, the tower and the pit. The indication in Passus I is that the poem will be a pilgrimage to the Tower of Truth. The two-world motif is continued in the Lady Meed episode, the Seven Sins vs. the Virtues, Christ vs. the powers of hell in Passus XVIII, and finally, in Anti-Christ vs. Christ in Passus XX.
is a kynde knowynge that kenneth in thyn herte
For to louen thi lord leuere than thiselue.
No dedly synne to do, deye theigh thou sholdest . . .

In a word, the person who loves God so perfectly lives in love, that is, in God, and God lives in him. In fact, Holy Church tells the dreamer that such a person is a god on earth and in heaven.

Therefore, from the very beginning of Piers Plowman, Langland sees man as having the capacity not only for salvation, as Frank says, but for being "ylik to oure lord." Yet, this is not high-powered mysticism, either, but basic Christian doctrine: by sharing in our humanity, Christ enables us to share in his divinity. Langland never loses sight of this simple truth, and as the poem progresses, that truth becomes its thematic climax.

Lady Holy Church continues her identification of Truth with Love, and of Love with Christ in Passus I, through images of healing and of the Incarnation. Love is the treacle of heaven, and also the plant of peace, so heavy that heaven could not hold it until it fell to earth and in Jesus Christ took on flesh and blood:

For truthe telleth that loue is triacle of 
heuene:  
May no synne be on hym seene that vseth that 
spice, 
And alle hise werkes he wrought with loue as 
hym liste; 
And lered it Moyses for the leueste thyng and 
moost lik to heuene, 
And ek the plante of pees, mooste precious of 
vertues. 
For heuene myght nat holden it, so heuy it semed, 
Til it hadde of the erthe yeten hitselue. 
And whan it hadde of this fold flessh and 
blood taken 
Was neuere leef upon lynde lighter thereafter, 
And portatif and persaunt as the point of a nedle 
That myght noon Armure it lette no noone heighe 
walles. (I.148ff) 

After the Incarnation, Love is instantly manifested 
again in the poem through the act of Redemption, 
ll. 165-168, above. The roles of the Father and the 
Son in the redemptive act suggest a passage from St. 
Paul: 

And whereas indeed he was the Son of 
God, he learned obedience by the things 

17 For a detailed discussion of the imagery in the 
Review of English Studies, New Series 16 (1965), pp. 349-
63. Among other salient points, Kean presents a caveat 
against the closely circumscribed exegetical and alle-
gorical reading of medieval literature. Kean observes 
that Langland uses imagery "... which has arisen 
through the traditional association of groups of 
biblical texts. These, were, in many cases, brought 
together in early Christian times ... and the process 
results in an established imagery with complex asso-
ciations which is at the disposal of every Christian 
writer in the Middle Ages" (p. 350).
which he suffered: and being consummated, he became, to all that obey him, the cause of eternal salvation. (Heb. 5:8-9)18

Christ's sonship, of course, emphasizes his divinity; and both Langland and St. Paul juxtapose that divinity with Christ's suffering, and present him as an example for the faithful:

And yet wolde he hem no wo that wrought hym that peyn,
But mekely with mouth mercy he bisoughte To haue pite on that peple that peyned hym to dethe.
Here myghtow sen ensamples in hymself oone That he was myghtful and meke and mercy gan graunte
To hem that hengen hym heigh and his herte thirled. (I.169-174)

For let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who being in the form of God thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man. He humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross. For which cause God also hath exalted him, and hath given him a name which is above all names . . . (Phil. 2:5-9)

Christ's obedience in his suffering and death, his "mekeness," as well as his eventual triumph, is still interpreted by the Church as the fulfillment of the Suffering Servant prophecies in Isaiah.19

18 The Nicene Creed, already part of the Mass in the fourteenth century, also emphasizes this belief. It was drafted by the Council of Nicaea, 325, A.D., in response to the Arian heresy which denied the divinity of Christ.

19 For the text of these prophecies, cf., Is. 42, 49, 50, 52-53.
Matthew, who is concerned in his gospel with the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, is quite succinct:

. . . You know that the Princes of the Gentiles lord it over them; and they that are the greater exercise power upon them. It shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be the greater among you, shall be your servant. Even as the Son of man is not come to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a redemption for many. (Mt. 20:25-28)

It seems logical, then, for Holy Church to address her example of Christ's mercy and humility first to the rich and powerful:

Forthi I rede the riche, haueth ruth on the pouere;
Though ye be myghty to mote beeth meke of your werkes,
For the same mesure that ye mete, amys outhre ellis,
Ye shulle ben weyen therwith whan ye wenden hennes:
Eadem mensure qua mensi fueritis remecietur vobis.
For though ye be trewe of your tonge and treweliche wynne,
And as chaste as a child that in chirche wepeth,
But if ye louen leelly and lene the pouere,
Of swich good as god sent goodliche parteth,
Ye ne have na moore merite in masse ne in houres
Than Malkyn of hire maydenhede that no man desireth. (I.175ff)

Thus, through her example of Christ, Church has made Truth-Love more explicit for the Poet-Dreamer: "... louen leelly and lene the pouere." Through charity, the Dreamer may finally triumph over evil and death as did Christ, "a grounde and o lofte":

15
Loue is leche of lif and next oure lord selue,
And also the graith gate that goth into heuene.
Forthi I seye as I seide er by sight of thise textes:
Whan alle tresors ben tried treuthe is the beste. (I.204ff)

Thus, Langland has set the direction for his poem. Even though the actual pilgrimage to Saint Truth does not begin until the appearance of Piers in Passus V, until after the dreamer is able "to knowe the false," Lady Church's extended definition of Truth-Love has given the poem its thematic focus, and thereby a unified plan. Although the central meaning of Piers Plowman remains singular throughout the entire poem—the salvation and perfection of man—Langland uses a thematic approach, as we have already observed, to illustrate and to amplify that meaning. By the end of Passus I, he has introduced all his major themes including Truth; the world, the flesh, and the devil; Charity; honest labor; the Incarnation and Redemption; unity and Holy Church. All these themes have received fairly generous attention in Piers Plowman scholarship, for example, Mary Carruthers' study of Saint Truth, Ben Smith's work on the images of Charity in Piers Plowman, and P. M. Kean's seminal article on the
Incarnation. However, another unifying theme which has grown out of Lady Church's definition of Truth and Love, but to which scholars have given only a passing reference, at best, in the theme of the Suffering Servant. As shown above, the theme is firmly established in Passus I, both through scriptural references, and simply by repetition. Langland then picks it up again almost immediately in Passus II.

At the beginning of the second Passus, the dreamer implies that he cannot recognize Truth unless he knows the false (II.1-4). The Lady Meed episodes (Passus II, III, IV), and the confession of the seven deadly sins (Passus V), seem designed to make clear the lines of demarcation. And here again, on the level of day-to-day morality, the Suffering Servant motif is woven into the overall theme. When Lady Meed is married to Fraud in Passus II, the newlyweds are invested by Flattery (Fauel) with certain assets, among which is the ability or right "To be Princes in pride and pouerte to despise" (80). They may also backbite, boast, bear false witness, scorn, scold, slander, and,

in short, break all the ten commandments. The scene seems to be a preparation for the confession of the seven deadly sins which expands upon the sins introduced here. At any rate, the line again has been drawn between the prideful, sinful rich on the one hand, and the humble poor on the other, and thus brings before us once again the importance of recognizing that Langland's approach is a thematic one, and that one of his controlling themes is patience in suffering and under oppression.

Yet, as Church's definition in Passus I promised, it is this pouerte, lowness, which will be victorious in the end. Conscience's speech to the King in Passus III seems to be part of an apocalyptic vision in which the world is ruled by Reason, and where love, meekness, and honesty replace Meed:

Reason here, of course, is more than simply logic, or good sense, or a way of controlling the emotions. It represents and ensures nothing less than the Divine law and universal order. During the course of Lady Meed's trial, appeals are made that Wrong be released on bail upon a promise of amendment. The King, recognizing that such a precedent, in the absence of true repentance and restitution, would undermine justice and order, sets the condition for Wrong's release:

But Resoun have reuthe on hym he shal rest
in my stokkes,
And that as longe as he lyueth, but lowenesse
hym borwe.

Thus, "loweness," i.e., humility, submission of the will, is necessary for the true repentance which will allow
I, Conscience, knowe this for kynde wit me taughte
That Reson shal regne and Reaumes gouverne,
And right as Agag hadde happe shul somme.
Samuel shal sleen hym and Saul shal be blamed.
And Dauid shal be diadem and daunten hem alle,
And oon cristene kyng kepen vs echone.
Shal na moore Mede be maister on erthe,
Ac loue and lowenesse and leautee togideres;
Thise shul ben Maistres on moolde trewe men to saue. (284ff)

The Scriptural references are to I Samuel 15, which envisions the reign of David after Saul is dethroned. Conscience goes on to prophesy that love and peace shall arise among the people, and that Isaiah's Messianic prophecies will be fulfilled:

Alle that beren baselard, brood swerd or launce,
Ax outher hachet or any wepene ellis,
Shal be demed to the deeth but if he do it smythyte
Into sikel or to sithe, to Shaar or to kultour:
Conflabunt gladios suos in vomeres &c.

The Messiah, of course, is of the line of David—"And there shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse" (Is. 11:1)—whom, as we have just seen has replaced Saul as king. As emphasis or reminder, Langland seems

Wrong to be reconciled with the rule of Reason. Likewise, in the first hundred lines or so of Passus V, it becomes clear that the only appropriate response to Reason's teaching is repentance and submission of the will. Only thus can true order - the Divine Law - be reestablished. For a thorough discussion of the role of Reason in Piers Plowman, cf. John Lawlor, Piers Plowman: An Essay In Criticism (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1962), especially pp. 17-86, passim.

19
to give a verbal echo to the name a few lines later:

Preestes and persons with Placebe to hunte
And dyngen upon Dauid eche day til eue;
(III.311-12)

Furthermore, the Messiah has the spirit of God upon him, "... a spirit of counsel and of fortitude."
Though powerful, he is not vengeful or proud, "... but he shall judge the poor with justice, and shall reprove with equity for the meek of the earth."
(Is. 11:4). And, as Conscience's and Isaiah's prophecies indicate, his reign is a reign of peace:

Conflabunt gladios suos in vomeres . . .

Of course, according to the New Testament interpretations of Old Testament prophecies, the Messiah, Christ, is also the Suffering Servant of God. The two come together rather curiously in Passus IV, in the character of Pees. It seems strange at first that so shortly after the Messianic vision in which Peace overcomes all the forces of evil and violence and reigns over an Eden-like kingdom, that Langland would give the name Pees to a character who has been so thoroughly beaten down by Wrong:

Thanne com pees into the parlement and putte
vp a bille
How wrong ayeins his wille hadde his wif taken,
And how he raussyshed Rose, Reignald's looue,
And Margrete of hir maydenhede maugree hire
chekes.
'Both my gees and my grys hise gadelynges
feccheth.
I dar noght for fere of hym fighte ne chide.
He borwed of me bayard and broughte hym neuere
ayen,
Ne no ferthyng therfore for nought I koude
plede.
He maynteneth hise men to murthere myne hewen,
Forstalleth my feires, fighteth in my Chepyng,
Breketh vp my berne dores, bereth away my whete,
And taketh me but a taille for ten quarters Otes;
And yet he beteth me therto and lyth by my mayde.
I am noght hardy for hym vnethe to loke."
(IV.47ff)

We can accept the apparent weakness of Pees, how-
ever, if we understand his complaint in terms of the
connection between Messiah and Suffering Servant. His
line, "Withouten gilt, god woot, gat I this scathe"
(IV. 79), is a clear echo of Matthew and Paul as we
have seen above. And yet, for all that, he does file
a complaint with the king, and what is even more dis-
concerting, he allows himself to be bought off by Meed
for "... a persent al of pured gold" (IV.95). This
is curious indeed, until we begin to discern a pattern.
As with his introduction of the Suffering Servant motif
in Passus I, Langland here again follows his relatively
elevated definition and discussion with a piece of
closely related but very pragmatic didacticism in
a narrative or dramatic form. Thus, after an explanation
of Christ's meekness and obedience in suffering, Church
immediately applied the example to worldly rulers. After
the definition of Truth, Langland moved to the Lady
Mee episodes and to the seven deadly sins in Passus V.
So too with Pees, he reminds us that we have not yet
reached the "tour on a tofte," but are still in a "feeld ful of folk." Pees is a man who tries to follow Christ's example, but who, in his human weakness, is still at the mercy of "false," and who, as a result, occasionally falls. Even though Pees forgives Wrong "... with a good wille," it is for the wrong reason. He has succumbed to greed, to the lure of the world. Yet Pees is a man of good will, and his failings are those of an honest man. For Langland, he seems to represent, not the lowest classes, whom he occasionally condemns for their restiveness, but the small farmer, the honest worker who is helpless against the depredations of the unscrupulous nobility. The chief example we are to draw from the character of Pees is his lowness, his innocent suffering. It is not he, but Wrong who sins against law and order; and therefore, it is not Pees, in the end, but Wrong and ultimately Lady Meed who are condemned.

However, the exemplum of Wrong and Pees--noble rank and humble station--high and low--is important not only to the Lady Meed episode. By virtue of its position in the poem, it serves through its contrasts to establish the theme for the first Piers episode which begins about three-fourths of the way through Passus V. In the first part of Passus V, Langland shows that not even Repentance, which, as we have
seen, must logically follow Reason in the Divine Order, is sufficient for a person to attain to Truth. Even after the seven deadly sins confess and are pardoned, the people soon lose their way again. Yet, it is not the proud nor the ostensibly holy, in this case pilgrims and palmers, who know the way to Truth:

'Knowestow aught a corsaint,' quod thei, 'that men calle truth? Kanstow wissen vs the wey wher that weye dwelleth?'

'Nay, so god glade me,' seide the gome thanne. 'I ne seigh neuere Palmere with pyk ne with scrippe Asken after hym er now in this place.' (V.532ff)

Piers, at this point in the poem a humble plowman, speaks up and offers to lead the way. In fact, he and truth seem to be on intimate terms:

'Peter!' quod a Plowman, and putte forth his hed: 'I knowe hym as kyndely as clerc doth his bokes. Conscience and kynde wit kenned me to his place And diden me suren hym sithen to seruen hym for euere, Bothe sowe and sette while I swynke myght. I haue ben his folwere al this fourty wynter. . . (V.537ff)

Truth becomes strongly personified in Piers'

22 Cf., R. W. Frank, Jr., op. cit., p. 14: "Because of its idealization in various passages in the Old and New Testaments, particularly Ecclesiasticus VI:18-19, and II Timothy 2:6, and especially in Augustine, the plowman had become a symbol of human labor and primitive, uncorrupted human nature. A strain of mystical thought conceived of human nature as having originally possessed both a human and a divine character."

23
description of him; he is just in his dealings with laborers, "... the presteste paiere that pouere men knoweth," and indeed seems to provide them with a perfect example of meekness: "He is as lowe as a lomb and louelich of speche" (V.551, 553). Obviously, he is also being identified here with Christ, in his attributes of lowness and humble obedience. Then, in an allegorical shift typical of Langland, meekness, in line 561, becomes the way to the mansion of Truth: "Ye moten go thorough mekeness. . ." Piers tells the folk that when they arrive at the mansion, they will find that it is roofed over (hiled), not with lead, ". . . but with loue and loweness. . ." But more than that, Langland here makes another identification and clarifies his implications that somehow Truth, Love, lowness, and Christ are one and the same; for the love and lowness which roof the mansion are ". . . as bretheren of o wombe." 2

A few lines later (606), the people are told that this dwelling place of Truth is

23 Kane and Donaldson note several MS variations for this line. Skeat reads it as follows: B "... with Loue and Lowe - speche - as - bretheren." (600); A "... with Loue - as - Bretheren - of - o - wombe" (81); C "... with Loue and with Leel speche. The barres aren of Buxumnesse as bretheren of on wombe" (238-39). The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman In Three Parallel Texts, ed. Rev. Walter W. Skeat (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1886), II, 186-87.
actually the human heart. Thus, by the end of Passus V, we have a composite picture of Truth-Love-Christ who was introduced in Passus I, and who can be known through conscience and kynde wit. A distinguishing and recurring characteristic of this figure is meekness or patient suffering: obedience to God's will:

And if grace graunte thee to go in this wise
Thow shalt see in thiselue truthe sitte in thyn herte
In a cheyne of charite as thow a child were,
To suffren hym and segge noght ayein thi sires wille. (V.605ff)

Again, as in the Pees episode, Langland follows an instructive passage with a rather simple, dramatized application of the instruction. In Passus VI, it is a knight who, following the example of Christ, humbles himself, submitting to a peasant, Piers, so that he may learn to plow:

'By crist!' quod a knyght thoo, 'thow kennest us the beste,
Ac on the teme trewely taught was I neuer. Ac kenne me,' quod the knyght, 'and I wol konne erie.'

'By Seinte Poule,' quod Perkyn, 'for thow profrest thee so lewe
I shall swynke and swete and sowe for vs bothe . . . (VI.21ff)²⁴

Thus, through this vignette of Piers and the knight, Langland inserts yet another high-low contrast into his poem. But there is an added level of complexity

²⁴ Kane and Donaldson note "faire" for "lowe" (24) in some MSS. Skeat gives "faire" in B, and "lowe" in A.
here; for the contrast is not simply between a humble plowman and a knight, it is also between the knight's high position and the fact that he surrenders his will and submits not only to plowing, but also to being taught by a plowman. So Langland has moved in his narratives--and his theme--from simple good-versus-evil in the Pees-Wrong episode, to conversion and repentance in the seven deadly sins allegory. Now, with the knight, he depicts a man who is already good--much like Chaucer's knight, we may presume--but who in his desire to become better, moves one step closer to the attainment of St. Truth. Obviously, the few lines on Piers and the knight are not sufficient to herald the entire *Vita de Dowel, Dobet and Dobest*. But they do seem emblematic, especially when taken with the Pees and the Seven Sins episodes, of the often complex yet always single-minded movement toward perfections--Truth-Love-Christ--which Langland continues to develop throughout the rest of the poem.

Langland again reenforces his idea of the dignity of labor in Passus VII. All workers who earn an honest living and who live in love and in the law receive the same absolution that is given to Piers by Truth:

Alle libbynge laborers that lyuen by his hondes,
That treweliche taken and treweliche wynnen
And lyuen in loue and in lawe, for hir lowe herte
Hadde the same absolucion that sent was to Piers. (VII.62ff)

Langland never allows his audience to forget that the informing spirit of the virtues of poverty and honest labor is humility, lowliness. It is "for his lowe herte" that the laborers share in the absolution. Likewise, forty lines later it is the halt, the lame, and the helpless who receive the pardon, "For loue of hir lowe herte":

Ac olde men and hore that helplees ben of strength,
And wommen with childe that werche ne mowe,
Blynde and bedreden and broken hire membres
That taken this myschief mekeliche as Mesels and othere,
Han as pleyn pardon as the Plowman hymselfe;
For loue of hir lowe herte oure lord hath hem graunted
Hir penaunce and hir Purgatorie vpon this pure erthe. (VII.100ff)

At the end of Passus VII, the dreamer reasons that salvation is not to be had through indulgences and absolutions, but through Do-Well. In arriving at his Conclusion he once more makes the contrast between the humble and the mighty, between lowly labor and the power of wealth:

Ac to truste on thise triennals, trewely, me thynketh
It is noght so siker for the soule, certes, as is dowel.
Forthi I rede yow renkes that riche ben on erthe
Vpon trust of youre tresor triennals to haue,
Be thow neuer the bolder to breke the x hestes,
And namely ye maistres, Meires and Iugges
That have the welthe of this world and wise men ben holden
To purchace pardon and the popes bulles. (VII.185ff)

He continues to inveigh against the wealthy and the wise that on Doomsday they will be judged, not by their wealth and the pardons and indulgences that it purchased, but

What thow didest day by day the doom wole reherce.

Unless Dowel helps you, he says,

I sette youre patentes and youre pardon at one pies hele. (VII.196ff)

Thus, at the end of the Visio, Dowel has come to represent the honest worker whose life is identified with truth, humility, poverty, and the willing acceptance of that poverty as an acceptance of God's will. In short, to do well is to be lowe in herte, the premier attribute of the Suffering Servant.

The dreamer enters the Vita de Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest, beginning with Passus VIII, with a fairly good notion of who Dowel really is. And, therefore, in his search for him, the dreamer can with some confidence reject the friars who claim that Dowel lives with them. Falling asleep in a wood, he dreams he meets Thought, who tells him that Dowel is the honest, active life, Dobet is the cloistered life, and Dobest the life of...
a Bishop. However, the dreamer is dissatisfied with mere theory and wants to know

How dowel, dobet and dobest doon among the peple. (VIII.114)

So thought refers him to Wit (Intelligence).
Wit discourses to the dreamer throughout Passus IX, giving him another definition of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest. "Dowel . . . is to doon as lawe techeth," Intelligence says; dobet is to love and to give ("to loue and to lene"). And, to gyuen and to yemen bothe yonge and olde, To helen and to helpen, is dobest of alle. (IX.202ff)

So much is our duty toward our neighbor. Intelligence then redefines Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest from the viewpoint of our relationship with God, as far as unaided intelligence can see it. Dowel is "to drede," that is, to fear God; and Dobet is "to suffre." Dobest springs from both of these and controls man's stubborn will which can drive away Dowel and so lead to mortal sin. Typically, Langland's parallels are seldom congruent, owing not to any ineptitude on his part, but rather to his apparent preference for the simplicity of natural, intuitive logic over artificially imposed

25 For line 204, Kane and Donaldson note "Ac . . . lene thi frend and thi foo" in some MSS.
systems. Even so, it is not difficult to see the parallels between Intelligence's two-fold definitions: between obeying the law and fearing the Lord (Dowel), and between healing-helping, and controlling an errant will which can negate such good works. All four, summed up as "love God, love your neighbor," the two greatest commandments, can be related to Intelligence's sermon on marrying at the proper time and for the proper reason, for love.

More significant for our purposes than all that, however, are the definitions of Dobet. For in them, Langland seems to be equating love ("to loue and to lene . . . that is dobet") with suffering in its strictest sense, i.e., allowing ("and dobet to suffre"). Thus, a knowledge of God's law and a surrendering of the will to it, as a response, lead to good works and the avoidance of sin. Love-suffering, then, involves submission of the will to God which is, as we have seen, exactly what Christ did in becoming man and dying on the cross.

26 "Suffer. 5. To submit patiently to. 6. To endure, hold out, wait patiently. To suffer long; to be long suffering. 1362 Langl. P.Pl. A.IV.18 'Sette my Sadel vpon Suffre-til - I - seo - my-tyme.'" Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford, 1933), X.
This equation of Dobet with suffering is picked up again by Learning in Passus X:

So is dobet to suffre for thi soules helthe
Al that the book bit bi holi cherches techyng;
And that is, man, by thy myght, for mercies sake,
Looke thow werche it in werk that thi word sheweth;
Swich as thow semest is sighte be in assay yfounde:
   Appare quod es vel esto quod apparest;
   And lat no body be by thi beryng bigiled
But be swich in thi soule as thow semest withoute. (X257ff)

The sense of Dobet here is the same as in Passus IX: suffer, that is, submit to the teachings of Scripture and Holy Church, and then let your actions reflect this act of your will. Earlier in Passus X, Dame Study identifies all three--Dowel, Dobet, Dobest--with charity or love:

     Loke thow loue lelly if thee liketh dowel,
     For dobet and dobest ben drawen of loues scole. (X.192-93)

This love does not come from nowhere, it comes from Theology, who

     . . . biddeth vs be as bretheren and blissen ourc enemys
     And louen hem that lyen on vs and lene hem at hire nede
     And do good agein yuel . . . (X.202ff)

So again the dreamer is told that love involves suffering and giving. We must not only bless our enemies and
love those that slander us, but also help them in their need.\textsuperscript{27}

In Passus XI, Langland further intensifies his theme. In the central portion of the passus, Good Faith gives the dreamer illustrative examples of love and patient suffering all from the life of Christ. As a transition from his earlier definition of Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest, he uses a sermon on charity, focusing again upon giving, and the love of enemies:

\begin{verbatim}
For Seint Iohan seide it, and sothe arn
his wordes:
Qui non diligit manet in morte.
Whoso loueth nought, leue me, he luyeth
in deeth deyinge.
And that alle manere men, enemyes and
frendes,
Loue hir eyther oother, and lene hem as
hemsellue.
Whoso lenth noght he louth noght, lord
woot the soothe,
And comaundeth ech creature to conformen
hym to louye.
Hir euencristene as hemsell and hir enemyes
after.
For hem that haten vs is our merite to louye,
And souereynly pouere peple; hir preieres
maye vs helpe. (XI.176ff)
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{27} In X.370-376, this idea of "love your enemies" is taken up again, with a reference to Romans 12:19-21: "Revenge not yourselves, my dearly beloved; but give place unto wrath, for it is written: Revenge is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord. But if thy enemy be hungry, give him to eat; if he thirst, give him to drink. For, doing this, thou shalt help coals of fire upon his head. Be not overcome by evil, but overcome evil by good." The emphasis seems to have shifted a bit, from patient suffering and submission of the will, to the note of divine justice and retribution. Nevertheless, the end result seems to reflect Theology's teaching that by such charity we ". . . do good agein yuel."
Images of the poor and lowly are commonplace in *Piers Plowman*, and Langland's theme of patient suffering is extrapolated from those images and references which, in turn, he uses as examples of his theme. In the above passage, the poet adds the poor to those whom Good Faith is bidding the dreamer to love. Thus, we have "euencristene," "enemyes," and "souereynly (especially) pouere peple." The way to the poem's prime example is now clear, for Christ came to earth as a pauper, and also forgave those who crucified him. Once again, Langland seems to use the deductive method, moving from idea and scattered references to a focussed and sustained example. Therefore, it is the image of Christ as poor man that he now begins to develop:

> For oure Ioye and oure Iuel, Iesu crist of heuene,  
> In a pouere mannes apparaille pursueth vs euere,  
> And loketh on vs in hir liknesse and that with louely chere

28 Regarding the poor, particularly, Langland continued to develop as a social critic and advocate, as C illustrates. Note especially X71ff, a famous passage not found in A or B: "The most nedy aren oure neighebores," etc. Langland's compassion and strength of feeling on the subject of the poor seem all the more evident because of his simple, concrete images and the directness of his appeal. Skeat says, "This description of the struggling life of the honest well-conducted poor is in William's best manner, and is of undying interest." *Op. cit.*, Vol. 2, p. 122, n 85.
To known vs by oure kynde herte and castynge of oure eighen,
Wheither we loue the lordes here before the lord of blisse. 29 (XI.185ff)

Good Faith continues to preach to the dreamer regarding Charity, mostly for the sake of the poor, he says, "For in hir likness oure lord lome hath ben yknowe" (XI.233). Again, the teaching is

That we sholde be lowe and loueliche, and lele ech man to other,
And pacient as pilgrymes for pilgrymes are we alle. 30 (XI.241-42)

One of the times Christ appeared in the likeness of a poor man was on the road to Emmaus, where Cleophas knew him, not in his poor apparel, but in the breaking of bread—"bi hise werkes." The example has additional pertinence here because in the gospel account of it, we find this reflection by Luke:

Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and so to enter into his glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded to them in all the scriptures, the things that

29 Skeat says of 1.186 (180 in his edition), "Surely a beautiful line." The reference he gives is to Matthew 25:40: "And the king answering, shall say to them: Amen I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me."

30 The unmistakeable parallel with Chaucer must give rise to all sorts of speculation about who read whom. Or perhaps the meter of the clause was just coincidentally suited to each poet's needs. The idea is certainly not original with either Chaucer or Langland. CF., J. A. W. Bennett, "Chaucer's Contemporary," in Piers Plowman: Critical Approaches, ed. S. S. Hursey (London, 1969), pp. 310-324.
were concerning him.

... 

Then he opened their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures. And he said to them: Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise again from the dead the third day: And that penance and remission of sins should be preached in his name, unto all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. (Lk. 24:26-27, 45-47).

Langland is offering as example not simply the gospels in a general way, but a Christ with very specific attributes which echo again the mystery of the Incarnation which he depicted in Passus I. Christ was not only born poor, but

... in the apparailee of a pouere man and pilgrymes likness
Many tyme god hath ben met among nedy peple,
Ther neuer segge hym seigh in secte of the riche. (XI.243ff)

The unfavorable comparisons of the rich with the poor in this passus and elsewhere also echo the Lady Meed episode in Passus II and III, which immediately follows Langland's introduction of the Incarnation theme. His next step in Passus XI, as in previous ones, is the movement from example to practical application:

Although it be sour to suffre, ther cometh swete after.
As on a walnote withoute is a bitter barke,
And after that bitter barke, be the shelle aweye,
Is a kernel of confort kynde to restore.
So after pouerte or penaunce paciently ytake ... (XI.259ff)
Thus, the poor suffering Christ is our example, our way. But he is also our comfort and our goal:

Maketh a man to haue mynde in god and a gret wille
To wepe and to wel bidde, wherof wexeth mercy
Of which crist is the kernell to conforte the soule. (XI.264ff).

In lines 380ff, Reason clarifies the apparent paradox and sums up the Passus:

Who suffreth moore than god? quod he;
'no gome, as I leue.
He myght amend in a Minute while al that mysstandeth,
Ac he suffreth for som mannes goode, and to is oure bettre.
Holy writ, quod that wye, 'wisseth men to suffre:
Propter deum subiecti estate omni creature.
Frenche men and fre men affaiteth thus hire children:
Bele vertue est suffrancet mal dire est petite vengeance.
Bien dire et bien suffrir fait lui suffrable a bien venir.31 (XI.380ff)

Passus XI as a whole is difficult and occasionally obscure. To begin with, it depicts a dream within a dream, so it is not always easy to determine precisely on which level of dreaming or wakefulness we find the dreamer. Likewise, the speeches and sermons are long and convoluted, so that it is not always clear who is speaking or to whom the dreamer is responding. Finally,

31 Skeat refers us to I Peter. The emphasis is upon the suffering and eventual triumph of Christ, and the necessity for man to surrender his will and follow Christ's example, thereby rejecting sin.
although he has been told on at least two occasions that Dobet is "to suffre," the Dreamer, upon waking from his deeper dream tells a "wight" (Imagination) that Dowel is "To se muche and suffre moore" (XI.412). Despite the apparent confusions, however, the theme of patient suffering as the way to Truth remains clear and constant. The theme is re-echoed briefly in Passus XII and XIII.

In XII.138ff, there is a succinct restatement of Langland's original Incarnation image:

For the heighe holy goost heuene shal tocleue,  
And loue shal lepen out after into this lowe erthe,  
And clennesse shal cacchen it and clerkes shullen it fynde:

XII.262ff contain a mention of the Meed theme, a comparison of rich with poor couched in bird imagery:

Thus the Poete preueth the pecok for his fetheres;  
So is the riche reverenced by reson of hise goodes.  
The larke that is a lasse fowel is moore louelich of ledene,  
And wel awey of wynge swifter than the Pecock,  
And of flessh by fele fold fatter and swetter;  
To lowe libbynge men the larke is resembled.

32 Early in Passus XII, Imagination will tell him that Dowel, Dobet and Dobest are Faith, Hope and Charity, thus making Love, which had been equated with suffering and identified as Dowel, the equivalent of Dobest. Cf., R. W. Frank, Jr., op. cit., and Donaldson, The C-Text and Its Poet.
The allegorical figure of Patience moves throughout almost all of Passus XIII. He first appears "... in pilgrymes clottes," reminiscent of the appearance of Christ in the likeness of a poor man in Passus XI. Patience and the Dreamer, attending a feast with Conscience, Scripture, Learning, and a great "maister," are seated at the lowest place, "... at the side borde," and are fed "a pitaunce." Nonetheless, in ll. 134ff, we are reminded of the theme which Langland has been developing:

Pacience hath be in many place, and paraunter knoweth
That no clerk ne kan as crist bereth witnesse: Pacientes vincunt &.

33 Cf., Stella Maguire, "The Significance of Haukyn, Activa Vita, in Piers Plowman, RES, 25 (1949), pp. 97-109: "The Introduction of Patience in Passus XIII . . . marks the beginning of the change in the Dreamer's approach to his difficulties. Wit, Study, Scripture, Reason, et al have a moral bias, but Patience is himself a virtue. The Change indicates a return from speculative to practical morality" (pp. 99-100). For discussion of Langland as a practical moralist, cf., Elizabeth Salter, op. cit., and R. W. Frank, Jr., op. cit. Many scholars have noted the connection between Piers Plowman and the medieval homiletic tradition.

34 Patience continues, saying that Dowel is to learn, Dobet is to teach, and Dobest is to love your enemies. He makes a direct scriptural echo of X.202-204, and 370-376:

And so thow lere the to louye, for the lordes loue of heuene,
Thyn enemy in alle wise eueneforth with thiselue;
Cast coles on his heed of alle kynde speche;
Bothe with werk and with word fonde his loue to wynne;
About a hundred lines later, Haukyn the Active Man appears and is developed throughout the rest of Passus XIII. It is in Passus XIV, however, during the course of Patience's long sermon to Haukyn about the virtues of poverty, that Langland seems to call together all of the sometimes disparate elements of his theme of patient suffering. Among its many attributes, Poverty is the enemy of pride, a restraint from The Deadly Sins, possession without fraud, an honest worker, and a gift from God. Willingly accepted and properly understood, Poverty is a form of patient suffering. Indeed, as we have seen, Poverty for Langland is one of the chief vehicles through which Christ submitted himself to the task of our salvation, and through which man can most properly imitate Christ. It is in Passus XIV, therefore, that Langland reintroduces the example of Christ himself, in apparent preparation for the reintroduction of Piers in Passus XV, and for the climactic crucifixion and harrowing of hell scenes in Passus XVIII.

And leye on him thus with love til he laughe on the. (XIII.142-46)

The lines are practically lifted from Romans. cf., n. 23 supra.

35 Cf., Stella Maguire, op. cit. After almost thirty-five years, this remains a standard among the interpretations of Activa Vita.
It must be understood, first of all, that poverty for Langland means both physical poverty, as opposed to Meed and riches, and also spiritual poverty, as a counterpoint to pride which both engenders and feeds upon the accumulation of riches:

Ac if the pouke wolde plede herayein, and punysshe vs in conscience, We sholde take the Acquitaunce as quyk and to the qued shewen it:
Pateat &c: Per passionem domini, And putten of so the pouke, and preuen vs under borwe.
Ac the parchemyn of this patente of pouerte be moste, And of pure pacience and parfit bileue, Of pompe and of pride the parchemyn decourreth, And principalliche of alle peple but they be of poore herte. (XIV.189ff)

A few lines later, pride and riches are linked together:

Beati pauperes quoniam ipsorum est regnum celorum. Ac pride in richesse regneth rather than in pouerte; Or in the maister or in the man som mansion he haueth. Ac in pouerte ther pacience is pride hath no myght, Ne none of the seuene synnes sitten ne mowe ther longe, Ne haue power in pouerte, if pacience it folwe. (XIV.216ff)

36 Ll. 190-200 seem to be a quite lucid explanation of Piers' apparently enigmatic tearing of the pardon in Passus VII. That pardon is not from Poverty, but from Rome, and so is unacceptable. Cf., Rosemary Woolf, "The Tearing of the Pardon," in S. S. Hussey, op. cit., for a review of the theories and a very interesting interpretation.
Such physical and spiritual poverty robs the seven deadly sins of their power, and is the best defense against them, as Pacience goes on to explain in 225ff. Viewed in this light, the patient poverty which Pacience dwells upon in his sermon to Haukyn, the "odibile bonum" which is followed by "pees," becomes both a means to and a sign of the surrendering of the will to God.

Pacience is providing Haukyn and the dreamer with guideposts, practical morality, along the road to St. Truth. Again, Christ becomes the chief of these examples or guides; and just as his pardon is written on a parchment of poverty, so again, he appears as a poor man, and more than that, as a servant of the poor:

And though Sleuthe suwe pouerte, and serue noght god to paie,
Meschief is ay a mene and maketh hym to thynke
That god is his grettest help and no gome ellis,
And he his seruaunt, as he seith, and of his sute bothe,
And wheither he be or be noght, he bereth the signe of pouerte
And in that secte oure saueour saued al mankynde. (XIV.254ff)

37 'Paupertas,' quod Pacience, 'est odibile bonum, Remocio curarum, possessio sine calumpnia, donum dei, sanitatis mater, absque sollicitudine semita, sapiencie temperatrix, negocium sine dampno,
Incerta fortuna, absque sollicitudine felicitas.
(XIV.276ff)

So the image of servant is added to Langland's theme of love through patient suffering which has dominated his picture of Christ thus far. For the faithful, the application is clear:

Forthi al poore that pacient is of pure right may cleymen,  
After hire endynge here, heueneriche blisse. (XIV.260-61)

With the same basic motif, couched in the homely but very immediate images of food, drink, and clothing, Patience has opened Passus XIV. Not surprisingly, the piece of the Paternoster which Patience offers as food is the "fiat voluntas tua," the total acceptance of the Father's will:

But I listnede and lokede what liflode it was  
That pacience so preisede, and of his poke hente  
A pece of the Paternoster and profrede vs alle.  
And thanne was it fiat voluntas tua sholde fynde vs alle,  
'Haue, Haukyn,' quod Pacience, 'and et this  
whan the hungreth  
Or whan thow clomest for cold or clyngest  
for drye.  
Shul neuere gyues thee greue ne gret lordes wrathe,  
Prison ne peyne, for pacientes vincunt. (XIV.47ff)  

It is most fitting, then, that Passus XIV, the whole Haukyn episode, and the Visio de Dowel all close with the same images. Haukyn the Active Man weeps over his wretched sinfulness and bewails his possessions and his mastery over others:

'I were noght worthi, woot god,' wuod haukyn,  
'to werien any clothes,  
Ne neither sherte ne shoon, saue for shame one
To couere my careyne,' quod he, and cride mercy faste
And wepte and wailed, and therwith I awakede. (XIV.332ff)

In this marvellously simple, movingly human way, Langland is saying that the recognition of poverty and sinfulness is a recognition of the human condition. Man can overcome sin and, in the long run, the human condition itself, by following the example of Christ who accepted suffering patiently by converting material poverty into poverty of spirit. Thus, the truly poor man can share in the triumph of Christ, who is the servant of the poor. We have the impression at the end of Passus XIV that in some vaguely different form, we have heard all this before. Yet, as before, Langland's repetitions are part of his larger process of accretion, perhaps, even, of amplification. In this passus, the patiently poor, patiently suffering Christ also becomes Christ, servus pauperum, servus servorum. The folk in the field, at least the majority of them, have become Haukyn, who "... does not merely belong to the world of the Visio, rather than to the more abstract world presented in the rest of Dowel," but is "... in his own person, the embodiment of that world... the personification of a whole manner of life."38 Pacience has taught him contrition, confession,

38 Maguire, pp. 99, 104.
satisfaction, and the necessity of suffering God's will "gladly and with trust."39 This is the theme and message of Passus XIV.

But more significantly, that message marks an important milestone along the journey to St. Truth. In Passus I, Holy Church identified Truth with Love, and Love with Christ. The climax of that cumulative identification and of the passus is her description of the Incarnation (I.148ff), and of the Redemption (I.165ff). Christ becomes the first model in the poem of the obedient acceptance of God's will, and of the fusion of the divine with the human. When Piers Plowman appears for the first time in the poem, in Passus V, one of his first references is to the Incarnation, and more specifically, to that aspect of it which involves patient suffering and the acceptance of God's will. This suffering of the divine will is identified with Truth, and they, in turn, are connected to heaven by the "cheyne of charite." Now in Passus XIV, it is that chain which enables Haukyn to link his will with the divine will despite the difficulty of living a life without sin.

Much of Passus XV is an encomium on charity, in much the same way that Passus V extolled Truth. In fact, Passus V on the one hand, and the Haukyn episode plus

Passus XV on the other, are thematically and structurally parallel. In Passus V the speech of Repentance is followed by the appearance of Piers Plowman, the only person who can guide the people to St. Truth. Truth itself in Passus V is just, kind, low as a lamb, and gentle of speech. Thus, the way to Truth is through meekness, and Truth's mansion is leaded over with love and lowness.\textsuperscript{40}

Haukyn's repentance at the end of Passus XIV is followed in XV by Anima's sermon in which he describes Charity as lowly and childlike, ll. 170ff. And just as only Piers knew the way to Truth, so, too, only he can discern true Charity and teach the dreamer its meaning:

\begin{verbatim}
'Withouten help of Piers Plowman,' quod he, 'his persone sestow neuere.'
'Wheither clerkes knownen hym,' quod I, 'that kepeth holi kirke?'
'Clerkes haue no knowyng,' quod he, 'but by werkes and wordes.
Ac Piers the Plowman parcyueth moore depper
What is the wille and wherfore that many wight suffreth:
Et vidit deus cogitaciones eorum.
For ther are pure proud herted men, pacient of tonge
And buxome as of berynge to burgeises and to lorde,
And to poore peple han pepir in the nose,
And as a lyoun he loketh ther men lakken hise werkes.
For ther are beggeris and bidderis, bedemen as it were,
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{40} Cf., n 18 supra.
Loken as lambren and semen lif holy,
Ac it is moore to haue hir mete on swiche
an esy manere
Than for penaunce and parfitnesse, the
pouerte that swiche taketh.
Therfore by colour ne by clergie knowe
shaltow hym neuere,
Neither thorugh wordes ne werkes, but
thorugh wil oone,
And that knoweth no clerk ne creature on
erthe
But Piers the Plowman, Petrus id est cristus.
(XV.195ff)

The passage is very significant to our reading of the
poem, for it synthesizes the sometimes parallel, some-
times intersecting themes which Langland has been
developing since Passus I. First, it reconfirms,
through its parallelism with Passus V, that Truth
and Charity are equivalent.41 Second, it identifies
Charity as an act of the will:

Clerkes haue no knowyng . . . but by werkes
and wordes.
Ac Piers the Plowman parceyueth moore depper
What is the wille and wherfore that many
wight suffreth:
Et vidit deus cogitaciones eorum.

. . .

Therfore by colour ne by clergie knowe shaltow
hym neuere,
Neither thorugh wordes ne werkes, but
thorugh wil oone . . .

By thus linking Charity with the will, Langland makes
it one with his theme of patient suffering--the

41 Cf., P. M. Kean, op. cit., and T. P. Dunning,
"Piers Plowman: An Interpretation of the A-Text,"
in Vasta, op. cit., pp. 87-114.
acceptance, the suffering of God's will. In addition, the emphasis in Passus XV generally is upon the poor, the meek, and the honest worker, as it so often is in the poem, and upon Christ as the prototype of that poverty of spirit and acceptance of the Father's will:

Amonges cristene men this myldnesse sholde laste
In alle manere angres, haue this at herte
That theigh they suffrede al this, god suffrede for vs moore
In ensample we sholde do so, and take no vengeaunce
Of oure foes that dooth vs falsnesse;
that is oure fadres (XV.258ff)

In addition to asserting the oneness of Truth and Charity, and identifying Charity as an act of the will, the passage also plays off Haukyn, the active, repentant man, against Piers, the perfected man. We have seen above that Haukyn is identified with a way of life, the lives of the dreamer and of the folk in the field. In XV.195ff, another composite figure, Piers, is invoked and identified with Christ, Petrus id est Christus. Thus, the circle becomes complete. The example set by Christ which Langland has been showing us throughout the poem is attainable, indeed has been attained by Piers. As Huppe and Robertson suggest, the phrase Petrus id est Christus is probably not meant to express complete identification.42 But neither

42 Donaldson, The C-Text and Its Poet, Chapter VI, pp. 156-198 passim.
is it necessary to limit Piers, as they do, to being the perfect priest, although such a reading is acceptable. But Piers is more universal than that. In light of the theme of patient suffering and of the Haukyn episode, he seems to represent here the full flowering of God's grace in man, the patient man who has indeed triumphed, the suffering servant who is ultimately victorious. He is, as we noted above, perfected humanity.43

Therefore, Langland's synthesizing and clarifying of the themes of Charity and patient suffering in Passus XIV and XV serve as a preparation for the climax of those themes in the poem: Christ's passion, death, and triumphant Harrowing of Hell in Passus XVIII. As a further preparation, Langland seems to make his allegory and his imagery especially explicit in XVI and XVII. In XVI.8, Anima tells the Dreamer that the Tree of Charity is named "Pacience" and "pouere symple of herte" (poor in spirit). In Abraham's explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity, Christ, the Son, is called "Sothfastnesse" (Truth), and is identified as the servant of God:

So thre bilongeth for a lord that lordshipe cleymeth:
Might and a mene his owene myght to knowe,

43 Ibid., pp. 185-196 passim.
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So thre bilongeth for a lord that lordshipe cleymeth:
Might and a mene his owene myght to knowe,

43 Ibid., pp. 185-196 passim.
Of hymself and of his seruaunt, and what
suffreth hem bothe.
So god, that gynnynge hadde neuer but tho
hym good thoughte,
Sente forth his sone as for seruaunt that tyme
To ocupie hym here til issue were spronge,
That is children of charite, and holi
chirche the moder. (XVI.191ff)

The passage is important also because it looks forward
to Passus XIX, the founding of Holy Church. Again,
Truth-Love-Christ are attainable; they are living in
the world, fighting against sin and ultimately the
Anti-Christ in Passus XX, just as Piers goes after
the devil in XVI.85ff,

To go robbe that Rageman and reue the fruyt
fro hym. (89)

The people of Holy Church are the "children of Charite,"
whose life is represented by the repentant Haukyn and
by the perfected Piers. They are the issue of Holy
Church and of the love and redemption of Christ, which
was first made manifest in the Incarnation.

The full impact of the Incarnation-Redemption is
captured simply yet very powerfully and starkly in the
Good Samaritan episode in Passus XVII. The Dreamer
apologizes to the Samaritan that Faith and Hope have
fled at the sight of the wounded man. "Haue hem excused,"
replies the Samaritan,

. . . hir help may litel auallle.
May no medicyne vnder mone the man to
helle brynge,

50
Neither Feith ne fyn hope, so festred be hise woundes, Withouten the blood of a barn born of a mayde. (XVII.93ff)

Again, the fullness of the Incarnation-Redemption is available to all the faithful. But to repentance must now be added baptism and the Eucharist, the sacrifice of the New Law:

And he be bathed in that blood, baptised as it were, And thanne plastred with penance and pas sion of that baby, He sholde stond and steppe; as stalworth the worth he neuere Til he haue eten al the barn and his ydronke. (XVII.97ff)

The Samaritan ends his episode with a prophecy, or promise:

And alle that feble and feynte be, that Feith may noght teche, Hope shal lede hem forth with loue as his lettre telleth, And hostele hem and heele thorugh holy Chirche billeue Til I haue salue for alle sike; and thanne shal I turne And come ayein bi this contree and conforten alle sike That craueth it or coueiteth it and crieth therafter. For the barn was born in Bethleem that with his blood shal saue Alle that lyuen in Feith and folwen his felawes techynge. (XVII.119ff)

In the Dreamer's eyes, at least, the promise is fulfilled as Passus XVIII opens. He has slept all of Lent, and dreams of the first Palm Sunday:

Of gerlis and of Gloria laus grely me dremed, And how Osanna by Organye olde folk songen,
And of cristes passion and penaunce, the peple that ofraughte.
Oon semblable to the Samaritan and somdeel to Piers the Plowman
Barefoot on an Asse bak bootless can prikye
Withouten spores other spere . . . (XVIII.7ff)

Imagistically, at least, there is a fusion here of the Samaritan, Piers, and Christ. Faith tells the Dreamer that it is Jesus, who is going to joust in Jerusalem, "And fecche that fende claymeth, Piers fruyt the Plowman." 

"Is Piers in this place" asks the Dreamer. Faith replies,

'This Iesus of his gentries wol Iuste in Piers armes,
In his helm and in his harbergeon, humana natura;
That crist be noght yknowe here for consummatus deus
In Piers paltok the Plowman this prikiere shall ryde,
For no dynt shal hym dere as in delitate patris. (XVIII.20ff)

Regarding this obviously important and often controversial passage, E. Talbot Donaldson says:

These lines, which stand almost unaltered in the C-Text, clearly identify Piers with Christ—but, we must note, not with the divine nature of Christ but with Christ's human nature, with the Son of Man, not the Son of God. In one sense, since Christ did take

44 The fruit, of course, is the souls which the devil stole in Passus XVI. The motif is an old one. Cf., the OE Exodus, especially 11.580ff, where the Egyptian treasure which washes up on the banks of the Red Sea and which is gathered by the Hebrews may be seen as a type of the souls of the faithful being redeemed from the devil (Pharaoh).
mankind's and Piers' nature, Piers may be said to represent Christ, for Christ was not part God and part man, but wholly God and wholly man. But in another sense, and perhaps the more important one, Piers stands for no more than all mankind in the era between the Creation and the Incarnation, the mankind whose nature Christ took. Thus we must not lose sight—as it is probable the poet never did—of the mystical doctrine which comprehends simultaneously the duality and the unity of Christ's nature, the doctrine that is most effectively presented in the lines quoted above.45

This, of course, is the same Piers whom we encountered in Anima's reference in Passus XV, the man living in God's grace who alone can know and practice true Charity, who possesses that poverty of spirit which enables him to surrender freely his will to God. In Passus XVIII, however, although Christ still wears Piers' human nature, it is not the simple workman whom we see, but a sprightly ('spakliche') knight,46 who is to joust

45 Donaldson, The C-Text and Its Poet, p. 182. I quote Donaldson at length here, because his explanation is representative of the more lucid and sensible readings of the lines in question.

46 "Sprightly, lively," is Skeat's translation of "spakliche." He goes on to say, "The comparison of Christ to a knight is most curious, and is kept up throughout the Passus. The idea is old enough. See The Ancren Riwle, p. 390." Skeat, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 249. We may add that the idea is also new enough. Cf., Hopkins' "The Windhover": "O my Chevalier."
with "the fend and fals doom to deye." He will retrieve the fruit of Piers the Plowman which the devil had stolen, and will conquer death forever:

\[ O \text{ mors ero mors tua.} \]

Then, just as quickly as Langland made Christ a knight, he makes him a prisoner before Pilate, and the butt of the soldiers' ridicule. He is nailed "naked to the roode" (XVIII.51), and dies

\[ \text{Pitousliche and pale, as a prison that deieth,} \]
\[ \text{The lord of lif and of light tho leide hise} \]
\[ \text{eighen togideres. (XVIII.58-59)} \]

The rapid movement and the sparse yet graphic narrative of the Crucifixion scene, together with Langland's juxtaposition of the image of Christ first as a poor man and now as a knight and a dying prisoner brings into sharp focus his suffering servant motif. It is a clear fulfillment of the Incarnation-Redemption theme introduced in Passus I. The final movement of his multifaceted theme of patient suffering is victory and triumph--

\[ \text{pacientes vincunt.} \]

As we have noted above, one of Langland's methods of developing his theme is through a system of promise and fulfillment; for example, Passus XVII, as a promise of help for the poor and of salvation, and Passus XVIII as a fulfillment in the ultimate triumph of Christ. In a broader sense, we see Piers himself as an example of the reality of living in God's grace, and of the possibility of salvation. In Passus I, the climax of the
Incarnation passage bears with it also an apparent contradiction. Love became so heavy that heaven could no longer hold it. Yet, when it took on flesh and blood and had eaten of the earth,

Was neuere leef upon lynde lighter therafter,
And portatif and peraunt as the point of a nedle
That myghte noon Armure it lette ne none heighe walles.47 (I.156ff)

The contradiction, of course, is inherent in the very idea of surrendering the will to God, of patient suffering, and in the entire idea of the Crucifixion, especially as Langland presents it, with his sharply contrasting images of Christ. It also lies at the essence of the theme of pacientes vincunt because, as Langland makes so clear in his vignettes of fourteenth-century society, it is usually the proud rich, not the patient poor who conquer.48 Yet, the promise in Passus I--the prophecy--is clear: When Love (Christ)

47 Cf., Matthew 11:28-30: "Come to me all you that labor and are burdened, and I will refresh you. Take up my yoke upon you, and learn of me, because I am meek, and humble of heart: and you shall find rest to your souls. For my yoke is sweet and my burden light."

48 As we saw in our discussion of Passus I, Langland's lesson from the Incarnation-Redemption passage is that the rich should have pity on the poor, and that the mighty should be meek.
which was so heavy in heaven came to earth, it became lighter than the leaf of the linden tree, and light and piercing as the point of a needle, so that neither armor nor high walls could resist it. This is followed by a very brief account (ten lines) of the Crucifixion. The martial imagery—piercing, armor, high walls—is obvious, though somewhat mixed (love is light as a leaf and also light as a needle).

Now, in Passus XVIII, the promise finally becomes fulfilled within the context of the poem. In the Harrowing of Hell, Love (Christ) pierces hell gate simply by a word, and by the very presence of his Light, the same Light, Satan has noted, which stole Lazarus from Death:

Eft the light bad vn louke and Lucifer answerd Quis es iste?
What lord artow? quod Lucifer; the light soone seide 'Rex gloriae,
The lord of myght and of mayne and alle manere of vertues, Dominus virtutum.
Dukes of this dymme place, anoon vndo thise yates
That crist may come In, the kynges sone of heuen!
And with that breeth helle brak with Belialles barres;
For any wye or warden wide opned the yates. (XVIII.317ff)

49 Skeat says, "There are very frequent allusions to this striking narrative of the Harrowing of Hell in our old authors, which are too numerous to mention here." The influence, he believes, is from the Gospel of Nicodemus. Op. cit., Vol. II, p. 256, n 261.
The faithful are caught up in the Light and borne safely away, while Saten is bound in chains.

Just prior to the Harrowing of Hell, the four Daughters of God—Righteousness, Truth, Mercy, and Peace—debate the meaning of the Light which is approaching hell. Righteousness claims that the suffering of the souls in hell will never cease, but Peace says that she can prove that suffering will turn to happiness:

For hadde thei wist of no wo, wele hadde thei noght knowen;
For no wight woot what wele is that neuere suffrede,
Ne what is hoot hunger that hadde neuere defaute.
If no nyght ne weere, no man as I leewe
Sholde wite witterly what daye is to meene.
Sholde neuere right riche man that lyueth in reste and ese
Wite what wo is, ne were the deeth of kynde.
So god that bigan alle of his goode wille
Bicam man of a mayde mankynde to saue
And suffrede to be sold to se the sorwe of deying,
The which vnknytteth alle care and comsynge is of reste. (XVIII.205ff)

Peace's argument is simply a restatement of one of the central arguments of the poem, revealed here through the example of Christ himself. The Peace who is speaking here is, of course, not the same Pees who sold out to Meed for a pouch of gold in Passus IV. Yet, the name is the same, just as it is inescapable that Love in the Incarnation passage is called also the
"plante of pees." It is largely through the flexibility of his personification allegory, and through the simple echoes of images and names that Langland is able to give his theme--after all, a very common one in Christianity--such immediacy, and then to take the many facets and reflections he thus creates and refocus them into a single person, a single incident, a single message which is accessible to all his readers. In Passus XVIII, the person is Christ, the incident is the Harrowing of Hell, and the message is Love, as an act of the will. As we might expect him to do, he amplifies all three in Peace's song, lines 407ff:

Clarior est solito post maxima nebula phebus;
Post inimicicias clarior est et amor.
'After sharpe shoures,' quod pees, 'moost shene is the sonne;
Is no weder warmer than after watry cloudes;
Ne no loue neuere, ne leuer frendes,
Than after werre and wo whan loue and pees ben maistres.
Was neuere werre in this world ne wikkednesse so kene
That loue, and hym liste, to laughynge ne broughte;
And Pees thorugh pacience alle perils stoppeth.'51


Thus, peace and patience are again linked with Love. Immediately before Peace's song, the song of the angels recalls the Haukyn-Piers-Christ connection which we examined above:

Culpat caro, purgat caro, regnat deus dei caro.

The flesh sins, the flesh atones, the flesh of God reigns as God. Upon this central tenet of Christianity—man's fall, and his redemption by God made man—hangs the entire poem. But, of course, the act of redemption itself, as Langland illustrates as early as Passus I, begins not with the crucifixion, but with the Incarnation through which God humbled himself to take on human nature, human cares and human suffering. The fact that the flesh of God reigns as God underscores and brings to a climax the theme of the poem as we have been reading it: God's Suffering Servant, who himself is God, ultimately transcends his human nature and reigns in triumph. This triumph, furthermore, is the fate of every faithful soul, every repentant Haukyn who follows the example of Christ's patient submission, and whose emblem is Piers himself. As if in corroboration of all that Passus XVIII has summarized, the Dreamer awakens on Easter morning, and with his wife and daughter goes to church to kiss the cross and to reverence "goddes resurexion."

In Passus XIX, we find woven around the main theme, the founding of Holy Church, a sort of reprise of
Passus XVIII, and of the major themes of the poem as we have been examining them. The Dreamer falls asleep during Easter Mass and dreams he sees Piers the Plowman all bloody, and in the likeness of Jesus. He calls upon Conscience for aid in his confusion:

'Is this Iesus the Iustere,' quod I, 'that Iewes dide to dethe?
Or is it Piers the Plowman who peynted hym so rede?'
Quod Conscience and kneled tho, 'thise arn Piers armes,
Hise colours and his cote Armure; ac he that cometh so blody
Is crist with his cros, conqueror of cristene.' (XIX.10ff)

So once more, Langland makes the identification between Christ, the Son of man, and Piers, _humana natura_. In the first part of Passus XIX, Jesus the suffering servant becomes Christ the Knight, the king, and the conqueror. Later, Piers again becomes the leader of the folk, and then St. Peter and a model of the perfect bishop. As the ideal leader of the people, Piers follows the example of God who makes it rain alike upon the just and the unjust:

Right so Piers the Plowman peyneth him to tilye
As wel for a wastour and wenches of the stewes
As for hymself and his seruaunts, saue he is first yserued.
So blessed be Piers the Plowman that peyneth hym to tilye,
And travaailleth and tilieth for a tretour also soore
As for a trewe tidy man alle tymes ylike.
(XIX.434ff)

Langland, therefore, has come full circle with Piers
and with his theme, or, in a truer sense, has amplified but not really changed what he began with. Despite his identification with Christ in the preceding Passus, and his position here as a builder and leader of Unity Holy Church, Piers is still a plowman. What is even more important, he plows for all men, good and bad, in the hope that all men, like Haukyn, come to repentance and salvation:

So blessed be Piers the Plowman that peyneth hym to tilye,

...  

And worshiped be he that wroghte al, bothe good and wikke,
And suffreth that synfulle be til som tyme that thei repente.

Piers Plowman ends on what, for most commentators, is a puzzling, anticlimactic, or even inartistic note. Many, even when discussing the structure of the poem, choose simply to ignore the rather enigmatic conclusion. Professor Bloomfield, arguing that Langland is an apocalyptic writer, seems to suggest that the poem ends in medias res, as it were, reflecting the major problem of the time, the reform of the friars, with apocalyptic urgency."

The frere with his phisyk this folk hath enchaunted,

52 Ibid., pp. 127-54 passim.

61
And doth men drynke dwale; thei drede no synne.'
'By crist!' quod Conscience tho, 'I wold bcome a pilgrym,
And wenden as wide as the world renneth
To seken Piers the Plowman, that pryde myght destruye,
And that freres hadde a fynding that for
nede flateren
And countrepledeth me, Conscience; now kynde me avenge,
And sende me hap and heele til I haue Piers
the Plowman.'
And sitthe he gradde agter Grace til I gan awake. (XX.378ff)

On the other hand, Donaldson feels that since the C-Text ends with the search for Piers Plowman still unsatisfied, the poet's progress toward God which, as he argues earlier in his book, is similar to a theological system of St. Bernard's, "seems to have stopped short of its goal," interrupted, he suggests, by the poet's death.53

Both views of the conclusion are difficult to either prove or disprove, at least from the text itself. There is certainly a note of urgency in Conscience's cry for Grace, and it is true that the search for Piers Plowman begins anew at the end. But much has happened since the Prologue, and the circumstances are changed. Although it is in a somewhat weakened state in Passus XX because of the friars, Unity, that is, Holy Church, has been established among the people. We have been shown

how Christ conquered evil and death, and Piers is no longer unknown as he was before Passus V. On the contrary, he is living proof of the reality of salvation and of the perfectibility of human nature. Unlike the folk in the Visio, Conscience now has a clear goal; he is not searching aimlessly for some vague good, but plans to seek out Piers the Plowman, and for a very definite reason,

... that pryde myghte destruye. (XX.382)

He knows, because of the action and revelations of the Vita, that pride can be destroyed; and he has gained the wisdom to seek God's help—Grace—in his quest for perfect unity.

As Donaldson observes, there is, near the end of the poem, particularly in Passus XIX and XX, "the constant repetition of the word unity."\(^{54}\) For Langland, it is in unity—whether Unity Holy Church or, in the broader sense, the unity of the field full of folk—that the Christian ideals in his poem can be learned and achieved. About midway through Passus XX, the Dreamer, seeing that he is being stalked by Old Age and Death, asks Nature to help him escape and to avenge him. "If you will be avenged," says Nature, "go into unity and stay there until I send for you. And see that you learn some

\(^{54}\) Ibid., p. 187.

63
craft before you leave." Predictably, the Dreamer
is confused by Nature's last injunction:

'Counseille me,' quod I, 'what craft is best
to lerne?'
'Lerne to loue,' quod kynde, 'and leef
alle othere.' (XX.207-208)

It is thus, so very simply, that Langland makes
the last of the great connections or identifications
in his poem. Unity Holy Church is yet another of
Langland's echoes, this time an echo of Lady Holy
Church, the first of the allegorical personifications
that the Dreamer encounters in the poem (Passus I).
And Nature's response to the Dreamer in Passus XX is
a reply not only to his last question of the poem,
"What craft is best to learn," but also to his first,
"How may I save my soul." In Passus I, Lady Holy Church
counselled the Dreamer that of all treasures, Truth is
the best. The way to Truth, he learned, is through
patient suffering and Love—the example of Christ's
Incarnation, Redemption, and generally of the life of
Christ who himself is Truth and Love. The guide is
Piers Plowman who, much like Christ, is the representa-
tive of man in his perfectibility, just as Haukyn repre-
sents him in his fallen and repentant states. At the
end of the poem, Piers Plowman is not Conscience's goal,
nor the Dreamer's, nor the poet's. The notion that he
is may lie at the root of much of the critical confusion
and disappointment regarding the ending of the poem.
But rather, Conscience is seeking Piers out because he is the guide to the goal which by turns has been Truth, Love, Unity, Christ himself—in a word, salvation. "How may I save my soul?" In Passus XIX and XX, Unity has become yet another manifestation, like Truth, Love, and Patient Suffering, of Christ on earth, of the life of Christ reflected in the life of man. When Nature sends the Dreamer into Unity, he is telling him to live in union with Christ and with God's people, the Church. When he calls him thence, it will truly be time for the Dreamer to die. But since Christ has conquered Hell, the Dreamer will have escaped eternal death, provided he has learned to love and, through patient suffering, has attained that poverty of spirit which will enable him to "leef alle othere."
CHAPTER III
CONCLUSION

Therefore, the Poet-Dreamer, and with him the readers of Piers Plowman, have learned the way and the guideposts, as well as the pitfalls, to salvation. The poem does not end with disillusionment, nor with a dark prophecy, nor even with confusion or frustration, but with hope:

The poem closes with both a warning and a note of hope. There is neither universal darkness nor the supernal vision . . . This is neither a tragedy nor a comedy, for the drama of salvation continues as long as mankind exists and as long as there is a Piers Plowman, a goodness and a divinity in man. Conscience's cry for grace . . . is nothing less than a cry for and a faith in the salvation of man. And the salvation of man is the great theme of the whole poem. It is the poem's reason for being.55

Still, it is not quite true that in the conclusion, "nothing is concluded." For after experiencing the poem, the reader knows that God will send his Grace, that Conscience will find Piers Plowman, and that Piers will help the people establish Truth, Love, and Unity under the reign of Christ, the Suffering Servant, Knight, King, and Conqueror.

Yet, of all the attributes which accrue to Piers and to Christ through the course of the poem, of all the themes that combine to give it meaning, the idea of the Suffering Servant seems to have been most pervasive in Langland's mind, and recurs with predictable regularity. There is perhaps no little irony in the fact that the poet-dreamer at the beginning of the Prologue, is dressed as a hermit "vnholy of werkes." Does he see himself as a wastour who very shortly will begin his own pilgrimage through repentance to truth and salvation? Then, in the field full of folk, Langland immediately establishes his principal contrast: low and high, honest labor and meed, humility and pride:

A fair feeld ful of folk fond I ther bitwene
Of alle manere of men, the meene and the riche,
Werchynge and wandrynge as the world asketh.(I.17-19)

The tension of that contrast gives impetus, as we have seen in detail, to much of his poem and indeed is carried through to the very last lines. Pride takes many forms in the poem, but Langland finally has it settle with the friars, as any self-respecting fourteenth-century poet might do. So at the end of Passus XX, Conscience vows to seek Piers the Plowman, "that pryde myght destruye." In our imagination, Piers leaves the poem as he entered it, as the embodiment of that humility, that total acceptance which is the counterpoint and foil to pride, the path to truth and to salvation.
We have also noted in detail how Piers comes to represent mankind perfected. For Langland, that perfection is reached through honest labor, poverty, both physical and spiritual, acceptance of God's will, and patient suffering. It represents the triumph of God's Suffering Servant. Lawlor observes:

Langland's poem thus succeeds in communicating not a cumulative effect of discursive thinking, but the very pressure of experience itself . . . Until the living example is set before us, all our inquiries serve only to mislead. So the Plowman, and after him the Savior Himself, are sent to meet our need. It is thus fitting that the Dreamer goes forth at the end to seek a true exemplar. Langland's last and most individual stroke is in deepest conformity with his whole design. By it he draws that design conclusively away from a formal into a truly imaginative unity.56

The foregoing interpretation of *Piers Plowman* represents one of many possible approaches to the poem. It does not—as no single study of the poem could—consider many elements which, if taken into account, would change the approach and, to some extent, the interpretation. But it does take into account the poet's intense spiritual appetite, his taste for irony and contradiction, his vision, and his gentle love of the poor:57 elements which combine to form his poetic

56 Lawlor, pp. 296-297.

and spiritual imagination, and which help give Piers Plowman its "imaginative unity." Piers Plowman is one of the three or four greatest literary achievements of the Middle Ages, and one of the great poems in our literature. Because of Langland's craftsmanship, faith, and imagination, and thanks to some enlightened scholarship, we have, after six centuries, a poem that is artistically satisfying and still spiritually relevant.
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VITA

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