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THE THEOLOGY OF CAEDMON'S HYMN

By D.R. HOWLETT

In the thirteen centuries since its composition Caedmon's Hymn has been valued as the oldest monument of English Christian poetry and revered as the issue of a miraculous gift. One modern critic has suggested that the miracle which instantly struck the monks and was so piously recorded by Bede was not that a herdsman attached to a monastery recited a poem of his own composition merely: but rather that one obviously quite untrained in the aristocratic heroic tradition of the Anglo-Saxon poetic manner - its highly technical diction, style, and metre - suddenly showed that in a night, as it were, he had acquired the mastery over this long and specialized discipline.

In the absence of comparative material it is idle to speculate whether Caedmon's contemporaries recognized the hymn as part of "the aristocratic heroic tradition" or considered it "a piece of great poetry in itself" or rejoiced that its author had "preserved for Christian art the great verbal inheritance of Germanic culture." One might infer, however, that they were amazed at the theological understanding of an illiterate herdsman. To make poetry of Trinitarian orthodoxy does require special gifts.

A Trinitarian interpretation of the hymn depends upon sentence division implied by the capital letters and punctuation of six manuscripts which come from the eighth to the twelfth century, from English and Continental traditions, from every part of Dobbie's stemma: 2
L and M are the Leningrad and Moore manuscripts of the Historia Ecclesiastica from the mid-eighth century. Tanner MS 10 in the Bodleian Library is the best extant copy of the Old English Bede, a tenth-century manuscript descended from *Æ. Bodleian MS 163, from the first quarter of the twelfth century, is one of Dobbie's Z family. Bodleian MS Laud Misc. 243, perhaps from the first half of the twelfth century, is Dobbie's Ld, and Dijon Bibliothèque municipale MS 547 (334), perhaps from the third quarter of the twelfth century, is Dobbie's Di. The punctuation of these manuscripts is not uniform enough to imply descent from a single archetype. It suggests a sentence division which may have appeared independently to Bede and to many scribes as natural and obvious.

The Leningrad manuscript preserves the Latin paraphrase thus:

Nunc laudare debemus auctorem
regni cælestis. potentiam creat
oris. et consilium illius. facta
patris gloriae. Quomodo ille
cum sit aëternus deus. omnium
miraculorum auctor exitit
Qui primo filiis hominum
cælum pro culmine tecti
dehinc terram custos humani
generis omnipotens creavit
The raised points after gloriae, extitit, tecti, and creauit mark major pauses. The capital letters at Nunc and Qui mark what the scribe regarded as the two principal sentences, each containing two major pauses. But a corrector has added two strokes to make a littera notabilior of the Q in Quomodo, dividing the text into three sentences, beginning at Nunc, Quomodo, and Qui. The punctuation of the Moore manuscript is different, but it implies divisions at the same places:

nunc lauda
re debemus auctorem regni cælestis potentiam
creatoris. et consi
lium illius facta patris gloriae; quomodo ille cum
sit aeternus deus.
omnium miraculorum auctor extitit. qui primo
filiis hominum
caelum pro culmine tecti; dehinc terram custos
humani generis omnipotens cre
auit;

The original scribe used no capital letters and only two raised points, after extitit and creauit, implying that the two principal sentences begin at nunc and qui. But in ink fainter than that of the rest of the text a reviser has added points after creatoris and deus, marks for major pauses after gloriae and tecti, an abbreviation mark after the p of omnipotens, and part of the terminal punctuation after creauit. The reviser's punctuation implies division into two principal sentences, beginning at nunc and qui, each containing one major pause, after gloriae and tecti. The first principal sentence has one medial pause on either side of the major pause (after creatoris and deus). This would appear to justify division into four phrases, beginning at nunc, quomodo, qui, and dehinc, though the third and fourth would share a single verb.

In the Leningrad manuscript the English text appears on the lower margin of the same folio as the Latin paraphrase. It has only one capital letter, at the beginning, and only one punctuation point, at the end. The first and last lines of the English text, beginning with Nu and tha, may correspond to the first and last divisions of the Latin paraphrase at Nunc and dehinc:

Nu scilun herga hefen rices uard metudes mehti and
his mod githanc uerc uuldur fadur sue he uundra/
gihuæ eci dryctin or astelidæ he æríst scop aeldu
barnum hefen to hrofæ halig sceppend/tha middingard
moncynnaes uard eci dryctin æfter tiadæ firum foldu
frea all mehtig.
In the Moore manuscript the English text has been added on a folio near the end (128v), far removed from the Latin paraphrase. The scribe may have tried to arrange the text in distinctiones, according to the sense. He has used only one capital letter, at the beginning, and only one punctuation point, where the arrangement of the lines does not reflect the correct distinctio:

Nu scylun hergen hefanriceas uard metudes maecti
end his modgidanc uerc uuldurfadur / sue he wundra
gihuaes eci dryctin or astelidæ he aerist scop aelda
barnū heben til hrofe / haleg scепen. tha middungeard
moncynnes uard eci dryctin æfter tiadæ firum fold'ū
frea allmectig /

primo cantauit caedmon istud carmen.

The divisions at Nu, sue, and tha may correspond to those implied by the punctuation of the paraphrase, at nunc, quomodo, and dehinc.

Tanner MS 10 preserves only the Old English text (fol. 100v):

bære ende byrd nesse þis is. (nu sculon herigean hefon
rices weard meotodes meahte 7 his mod gebanc weorc
wuldor faeder' swa he wundra gehwæs ece drihten or on
stealde. he ærest sceop eorðan bearnū hefon to hrofe
halig scyppend. þa middangeard moncynnes weard þæce
drihten æfter teode firum foldan frea ælmhigt.

The raised point after faeder implies division into two principal sentences, beginning at nu and swa, with two major pauses, after onstealde and scyppend.

Unfortunately the English verses have been rubbed nearly away from the left margin of fol. 152v of Bodleian MS 163, but the Latin text on the same folio implies divisions at the same places as the Tanner manuscript:

quorum iste est sensus; Nunc laudari [sic] debemus
auctorem
regnī célestis. potentiam creatoris. et consilium
illius facta
patris glorīę: Quomodo ille cum sit eternus deus. omnium
miraculorum auctor exstitit. qui primo filiis hominum
cēlum
pro culmine tecti. dehinc terram custos humani generis
omnipotens
creauit;
Both the capital letters and the punctuation confirm that the principal sentences begin at Nunc and Quomodo.

The Latin text of MS Laud Misc. 243 further confirms this arrangement (fol. 82v):

isto est sensus. Nunc laudare debemus auctorem regni célestis. potentiam creati
tis et consilium illius. facta patris gloríæ. quomodo ille cum sit ëternus deus. omnium
miraculorum auctor exititis qui
primo fillis hominum cèlum pro culmi-
test. dehinc terram custos huma-
ni generis omnipotens creauit.

Nu we sceolan herian herian heo fon rices weard. metudes mihte 7 his modgépanc. weorc wulder fa
der. swa he wundra gehwæs ece
drihten þa he ærest sceop eorðe
bearnū heofon to hrofé. þa mid
dan geard moncynnes weard ece
drihten æfter teode fyrum on
folden frea ælmihtig halig scyp
pends.

The sentences of the Latin paraphrase begin at Nunc, quomodo, and qui, but because of an intrusive þa before he ærest the English sentences begin at Nu, swa, and þa middan geard.

Finally the Dijon manuscript preserves a carefully corrected and punctuated Latin text, which follows the English text on fol. 59v. The English verses, probably incorporated into the text from the margin of an exemplar, were almost certainly unintelligible to the scribe.

isto est sensus. Nu pue sciulan herga hefuðrícæ
pueard. metudaes mechtí. and his modgédeanc
puerc puldur fudur suae hae pundragihuaes
ecidrichtin orastaldehæauerst scoo peordo
bearnumëfento hrofé halig sceppendá. mid-
dumgeard moncinnes peardzeci drinkínc ef-
ter tiade firum. onfulufrea allmechtig.

Nunc laudare debemus auctorem regni céles-
tis. potentiam creatoris et consilium illius facta
patris gloríæ. Quomodo
ille cum sit ëternus deus. omnium auctor exititis qui
primo fillis hominum cèlum pro culmi-
ne ...cti. dehinc terram custos humani generis omnipotens creavit.

The principal sentences begin at Nunc and Quomodo. There is a major pause after extitit.

With characteristic modesty Bede apologized for his paraphrase:

Hic est sensus, non autem ordo ipse uerborum quae dormiens ille canebat; neque enim possunt carmina, quamuis optime composita, ex alia in aliam linguam ad uerbum sine detrimento sui decoris ac dignitatis transferri.

Bede was, however, doctus in nostris carminibus, and his paraphrase renders more of the hymn's decor ac dignitas than many have realized. If arranged as Old English verse, five lines of the paraphrase alliterate. All six manuscripts considered above mark at least a major pause after facta patris gloriae and uerc uuldurfadur. Each of the half lines in Cædmon's first sentence consists of five syllables; Bede's first sentence is nearly as regular. Bede used masculine auctorem to render Cædmon's masculine uard, feminine potentiam for feminine mehti, neuter consilium for the compound whose first element is neuter mod, and neuter facta for neuter uerc. These correspondences may imply that Bede saw some purpose in finding words generically equivalent to Cædmon's. Since neither of the oldest Northumbrian texts nor the best West Saxon text of the hymn has the pronoun we, Bede's rendering of scilun herga as first person plural, laudare debemus, looks odd at first. Omission of a subject pronoun we would make unusual Old English syntax. The Old English Benedictine Office preserves, apparently, the normal usage, we sculon God herian. Since both uerc and facta may be nominative as well as accusative, one can make good sense of Bede's paraphrase by construing uerc uuldurfadur as subject of the first sentence, assuming that we are part of God's handiwork, the creatures who should praise Him.

Three of the manuscripts mark the beginning of the second sentence with a capital Q in Quomodo. The line which begins sue he in Moore, the raised point before swa he in Tanner, and the point before swa he in Laud confirm that the second sentence should begin there. Consequently Bede's Quomodo ille ... extitit should be construed as exclamatory, like Cicero's Quomodo mortem filii tulit! Similarly Cædmon's sue should be translated not "how" or "as," but "thus," as in Swa cwæð eardstapa and Swa cwæð snottor on mode in The Wanderer.
I would arrange the texts thus:

Nunc laudare debemus auctorem regni caelestis.
potentiam creatoris. et consilium illius.
facta patris gloriae' Quomodo ille
cum sit aeternus deus. omnium miraculorum
auctor extitit' Qui primo filiis hominum
caelum pro culmine tecti' dehinc terram
custos humani generis omnipotens creauit'

Nu scilun herga hefenricæs uard
metudaes mehti and his modgithanc
uerc uuldurfadur. Sue he uundra gihuæ
eci dryctin or astelidæ.
He ærist scop aeldu barnum
hefen to hrofæ halig sceppend;
tha middingard moncyynæs uard
eci dryctin æfter tiadæ
firum foldu frea allmehtig.

Now ought we, the creatures of the Father of glory, to praise the Guardian of the Kingdom of Heaven, the Power of the Ruler, and His Counsel. Thus did He, the Eternal Lord, establish the beginning of every wonder: first He, the Holy Creator, fashioned heaven as a roof for the children of men; then afterwards the Protector of mankind, Eternal Lord, Omnipotent God, adorned the earth, a country for men.

The hymn is orthodox and Trinitarian. It is nine lines long, it names God nine times, and it consists of three sentences (if not of an introduction and three sentences). Although Old English poems commonly begin with an expressed subject pronoun, it is appropriate in this hymn for the subject to follow the object since the object is the Trinity: the Father (hefenricæs uard), the Son (metudaes mehti), and the Holy Ghost (his modgithanc). To speak of the Son as the creative Power of God is to follow St. Paul, who described him as Χριστὸν θεοῦ δύναμιν, Christum Dei Virtutem (I Corinthians 1:24), and St. John (1:2-3):

�yς υαες in fruma mi5 God alle ùerh hine
auorden sint
Hoc erat in principio apud Dominum. Omnia per ipsum
facta sunt.

To speak of the Paraclete, the Comforter, se Frefriend, as God's Counsel is to follow St. John again, who described Him as
gāst soð fæstnises mið iuh uunas 7 in iuh bið
Spiritum veritatis . . . [qui] aput vos manebit et in vobis erit (14:17),
ðe iuh gel rað alle
ille vos docebit omnia (14:26).

Praise of God as the Lord, His Power, and His Counsel recurs in Psalm 146:5:

Magnus Dominus noster et magna Virtus eius
et Sapientiae eius non est numerus (iuxta LXX),

Magnus Dominus noster et multus Fortitudine
Prudentiae eius non est numerus (iuxta Hebr.),

micel dryhten ur 7 micel megen his
7 snýtre his nis rim.

To speak of the Son in terms of the Father, "the Power of the Ruler," is what Cædmon would have learned from the Creed, as well as from the psalms. The second article of the Nicene Creed describes the Second Person of the Trinity as "the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds . . . begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made." The sixth article affirms that He "sitteth on the right hand of the Father." To speak of the Holy Ghost as his modgíthanc, that is, dependent upon hefenricæ uard, also implies familiarity with the Creed. The filioque clause, concerning double procession of the Holy Ghost from the Father and the Son, was not inserted into the text of the Nicene Creed at the Council of Toledo in 589, as is often affirmed. Some manuscripts of the acts of Spanish councils omit the word filioque altogether, and others contain it only in the margins or between the lines. The interpolation probably crept into the Creed from an anathema and spread from Spain to Gaul and Italy. A text of the Creed with the filioque clause was added to a copy of the Gregorian Sacramentary which Charlemagne had requested in 785, and the interpolated Creed was promulgated at the Councils of Frankfort (794), Friuli (796), and Aachen (809). But this happened more than a century after Cædmon's death. The implication of the hymn that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone is exactly what one should expect from Cædmon.

Cædmon's names for God follow a rational order. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are praised by the creatures of the Father of glory, who acknowledge that even before he uuendra gihues or astelide God was eternal, eci dryctin. The order of creation in the hymn follows that of Genesis 1:1, Psalm 146:8,
and the Apostles' Creed:

In principio creauit Deus caelum et terram;

Qui operit caelum nubibus et parat terrae pluuiam;

Credo in Deum Patrem Omnipotentem, 
Creatorem caeli et terrae;

He aerist scop hafen, 
tha middingard æfter tiadæ.

Cædmon states that at the first fashioning of things (ærist) God was the halig sceppend, who scop, but that afterwards (æfter) He was the Protector of His later creation, moncynnes uard. The hymn concludes with a reaffirmation of God's eternity (stated once before and once after the account of creation) and with a summary of God's comprehensive power, frea allmehtig.

Recovery of the theological aspect of the hymn allows one better to understand the impact of Cædmon's gift upon his contemporaries, and especially upon Bede. Even if Bede did not know of the anonymous versifier who complained ¹⁰

Inter eils Gothicum matian ia drincan ia scapiän, 
Non audet quisquam dignos edicere versus,

or the satire of Sidonius ¹¹

Inter crinigeras situm catervas 
Et Germanica verba sustinentem, 
Laudanter tetrico subinde vultu 
Quod Burgundio cantat esculentus, 
Infundens acido comam butyro,

he may have shared their view that the pagan Germanic peoples wrought no dignos versus. He may have cared no more for "the aristocratic heroic tradition" than Alcuin cared for the ancient songs of Ingeld, which he condemned as carmina gentilium. ¹²

One learns only from the Old English translation of the Historia Ecclesiastica that Cædmon left the banquet for shame at his inability to sing (bonne aras he for scome from þæm symble). Bede wrote simply that Cædmon surgebat a media caena. To refrain from what he may have regarded as frivola et supervacua poemata at convivia was not shameful. The miracle for Bede was that a man who had not sung before received a gift which he used only to make poems by which multorum saepe animi ad contemptum saeculi et appetitum sunt vitae caelestis accensi. Cædmon
fashioned, for the first time among Northern peoples, *dignos versus*.

Caedmon's hymn appears to owe little to "the great verbal inheritance of Germanic culture." One need look no further for literary sources than the beginning of the book of Genesis, Psalm 146, and the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, which even an illiterate layman could have known orally. As the synod which finally determined the orientation of English Christianity occurred near Caedmon's home during his lifetime, an interest in doctrinal inquiry or ecclesiastical polity is less surprising among laymen at Whitby about 664 than it might be at other times and places. Caedmon's contemporaries must have wondered nonetheless at the sudden composition, the structure, and the doctrine of the hymn. The *Historia Ecclesiastica* records many circumstantial details of composition, but nothing about structure and meaning. Perhaps Bede and those after him who preserved the story and the hymn considered the structure and doctrine too obvious for comment.

Hie ne wendon ðætte æfre menn sceolden swæ recceleæe weordæn ond sio lar swæ ðfeallæn: for ðære wilnunge hie hit forleæon.
NOTES

enclose letters or words inserted between lines or from margins.

Old English Biblical quotations are from the Vespasian Psalter and the Lindisfarne Gospels.


3 Leningrad Public Library MS Q. v. i. 18, fol. 107r. O. Arngart (ed.), The Leningrad Bede, Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile, Vol. II (Copenhagen, 1952).


6 Cf. Riddle 26: 13-14 for the same usage: forpon me gliwedon wætlic weorc smib>a. Cf. the Vespasian Psalter for comparable expressions in Ps. 144:10 and the Benedicite:

ondonennaæ 5e dryhten all wer<e 5in
Confiteantur tibi Domine omnia opera tua;
bledsidæ all wer<e dryhtnes dryhten
Benedicite omnia opera Domini Dominum.

7 Mr. R. Hamilton first suggested the Trinitarian aspect to me, though in a different form. Cf. B. F. Huppe, Doctrine and Poetry (New York, 1959), pp. 99-130, and M. W. Bloomfield, "Patristics and Old English Literature: Notes on Some Poems," Comparative Literature, 14 (1962), 36-43. Metudæs mehti, modgithæc, and uerc can be understood as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost only by rendering modgithæc and consilium very loosely as "wisdom" and by ignoring the passive connotations of uerc and facta, which do not suggest the creative power of the Spirit. To understand uard as Father, mehti as Spirit, and modgithæc as Son would yield an unusual order. To construe mehti and modgithæc as parallel would give two locutions for the Son, but only one each for the Father and the Spirit.

8 Cf. N. F. Blake, "Cædmon's Hymn," Notes and Queries, 207, N. S. 9 (1962), p. 245: "Each aspect of God's greatness which is emphasized in the Hymn finds its counterpart in the psalms."


10 Cited in Wrenn, loc. cit.