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THE THEOLOGY OF CAEDMON'S HYMN

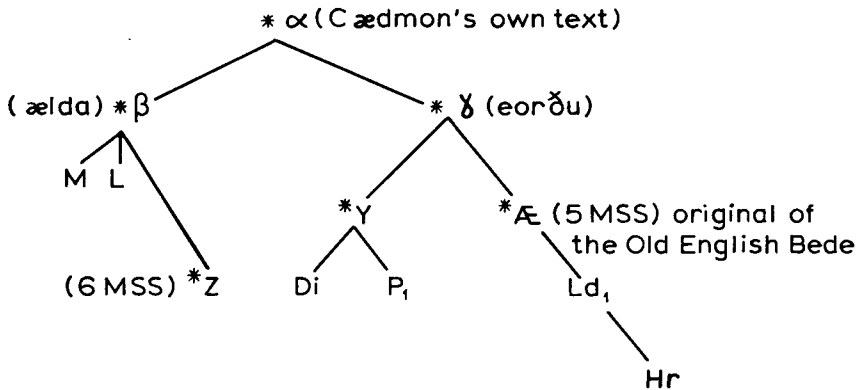
By D. R. HOWLETT

In the thirteen centuries since its composition Cædmon's Hymn has been valued as the oldest monument of English Christian poetry and revered as the issue of a miraculous gift.¹ 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 Cædmon'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 Ld₁, 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 manuscript³ preserves the Latin paraphrase thus:

Nunc laudare debemus auctorem
 regni cælestis. potentiam crea
 toris. et consilium illius. facta
 patris gloriæ' Quomodo ille
 cum sit æternus deus. omnium
 miraculorum auctor extitit'
 Qui primo filiis hominum
 cælum pro culmine tecti'
 dehinc terram custos humani
 generis omnipotens creauit'

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 manuscript⁴ is different, but it implies divisions at the same places:

nunc lauda

re debemus auctorem regni caelestis 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 ricæs uard metudæs mehti and
 his mod githanc uerc uuldur fadur sue he uundra/
 gihuæs eci dryctin or astelidæ he ærist scop aeldu
 barnum hefen to hrofæ halig sceppend/tha middingard
 moncynnæs 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 (128^v), far removed from the Latin paraphrase. The scribe may have tried to arrange the text in distinctiones,⁵ 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 hergē^a hefaenricaes uard metudæs maecti
 end his modgidanc uerc uuldurfadur / sue he uundra
 gihuaes eci dryctin or astelidæ he aerist scop aelda
 barnū heben til hrofe / haleg scepē. tha middungeard
 moncynnæs uard eci dryctin æfter tiadæ firum fold^u
 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. 100^r):

þære ende byrd nesse þis is. (nu sculon herigean heofon
 rices weard meotodes meahte 7 his mod gēpanc weorc
 wuldor fæder swa he wundra gehwæs ece drihten or on
 stealde. he ærest sceop eorðan bearnū heofon to hrofe
 halig scyppend. þa middangeard moncynnnes weard éce
 drihten æfter teode firum foldan frea ælmihtig.

The raised point after fæder 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. 152^v 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
 regni cęlestis. potentiam creatoris. et consilium
 illius facta
 patris glorię: Quomodo ille cum sit eternus deus. omnium
 miraculorum auctor extitit. qui primo filiis hominum
 cęlum
 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. 82^v):

iste est sensus. Nunc laudare debemus
auctorem regni cęlestis. potentiam creato
ris et consilium illius. facta patris glorię.
quomodo ille cum sit ęternus deus. omnium
miraculorum auctor extitit. qui
primo filiis hominum cęlum pro culmi-
ne tecti. dehinc terram custos huma-
ni generis omnipotens creauit.

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

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.
59^v. The English verses, probably incorporated into the text from
the margin of an exemplar, were almost certainly unintelligible
to the scribe.

iste est sensus. † Nu pue sciulun herga hefuⁿricaes
pueard. metudaes mehti. and his modgedeanc
puerc puldur fudur suae hae pundragihuaes
ecidrichtin orastaldehe^auerst scoo peordu
bearnumefento hrofe halig sceppenda. mid-
dumgeard moncinnes peardæci drintinc ef-
ter tiade firum. onfuldurea allmechtig.

† Nunc laudare debemus auctorem regni cęles-
tis. †potentiam creatoris‡ et consilium illius facta
patris glorię. Quomodo
ille cum sit ęternus deus. omnium auctor extitit.
qui primo filiis hominum cęlum pro culmi-

ne lecti. dehinc terram custos humani generis
omnipotens creauit.

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.⁶

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
 metudæs mehti and his modgithanc
 uerc uuldurfadur. Sue he uundra gihuæs
 eci dryctin or astelidæ.
 He ærist scop aeldu barnum
 hefen to hrofæ halig sceppend;
 tha middingard moncynnæs 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.⁷ 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 (metudæs 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):

Ʒys uæs in fruma mið God alle Ʒerh 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

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 ærist scop hefen,
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, moncynnæs 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 scapian,
Non audet quisquam dignos edicere versus,

or the satire of Sidonius ¹¹

Inter crinigeras situm catervas
Et Germanica verba sustinentem,
Laudantem 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 (þonne 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 contemtum saeculi et appetitum sunt vitae caelestis accensi. Cædmon

fashioned, for the first time among Northern peoples, dignos versus.

Cædmon'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 Cædmon'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. Cædmon'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 reccelease weorðan ond sio lar swæ oðfeallan: for ðære wilmunga hie hit forleton.

NOTES

□ enclose letters or words inserted between lines or from margins.

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

- 1 C. L. Wrenn, "The Poetry of Cædmon," Proceedings of the British Academy, XXXII (1946), 285-286.
- 2 E. Van K. Dobbie, The Manuscripts of Cædmon's Hymn and Bede's Death Song (New York, 1937), p. 48.
- 3 Leningrad Public Library MS Q. v. I. 18, fol. 107^r. O. Arngart (ed.), The Leningrad Bede, Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile, Vol. II (Copenhagen, 1952).
- 4 Cambridge University Library MS Kk. v. 16, fol. 91^r. P. H. Blair and R. A. B. Mynors (edd.), The Moore Bede, Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile, Vol. IX (Copenhagen, 1959).
- 5 Mynors (ed.), Cassiodori Senatoris Institutiones (Oxford, 1963), p. 95: positura sive distinctio est moderatae pronuntiationis aperta repausatio.
- 6 Cf. Riddle 26: 13-14 for the same usage: forþon me gliwedon wrætlic weorc smiþa. Cf. the Vespasian Psalter for comparable expressions in Ps. 144: 10 and the Benedicite:

ondettað ðe dryhten all werc ðin
 Confiteantur tibi Domine omnia opera tua;
 bledsiað all werc 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. Huppé, 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, modgithanc, and uerc can be understood as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost only by rendering modgithanc 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 modgithanc as Son would yield an unusual order. To construe mehti and modgithanc 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."
- 9 A. E. Burn, The Council of Nicaea (London, 1925), pp. 108-112; J. N. D. Kelly, Early Christian Creeds, 3rd edn. (London, 1971), pp. 301, 362-365. See also R. G. Heath, "The Western Schism of the Franks and the Filioque," Journal of Ecclesiastical History, XXIII (1972), 102-108. I owe the last reference to Mr. Patrick Wormald.
- 10 Cited in Wrenn, loc. cit.

- 11 C. Luetjohann (ed.), Gai Sollii Apollinaris Sidonii Epistulae et Carmina, Monumenta Germaniae Historica (Berolini, 1887), Carmen XII, pp. 230-231.
- 12 E. Duemmler (ed.), "Alcuini Epistolae," Monumenta Alcuiniana (Berolini, 1873), p. 357.