

Leeds Studies in English

Article:

Eric G. Stanley, 'Notes on the Text of Exodus', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 16 (1985), 240-45

Permanent URL:

https://ludos.leeds.ac.uk:443/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=123627&siloleft_library=GEN01



Leeds Studies in English
School of English
University of Leeds
<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/lse>

NOTES ON THE TEXT OF *EXODUS*

By E.G. STANLEY

Professor J.E. Cross's interest in *Exodus*, manifested especially in the work he did with the late Susie I. Tucker in two contributions published in *Neophilologus* 44 (1960) pp.38-9 and 122-7, is different from that which led me to produce the following notes. The quality of *Exodus* as a poem lies in part in the poet's use of language and imagery, at times startlingly different from other Old English poets, more often obscure and calling for elucidation of the text. As J.E. Cross says:

The number of debated words and meanings in the scholarship on this poem may suggest that the copyists found it too individual and obscure, and, apart from a loss of manuscript leaves in the middle of the poem and a possible lack of ending, it is certain that we do not have the poet's poem in places. Obviously it has been a quarry for philologists and antiquarians but yet it has value for readers of poetry. Startling images, unique compounds, stylistic subtleties, bold but relevant scriptural comparison and apt matching of Germanic phrase to scriptural concept invigorate the reader and impress on him the drama of the events and the wonder in God's awful power to destroy and save, but involved syntax in places perplexes and the unusual structural principle (if it is not lack of principle) needs some explanation. It is perhaps better to share the poet's excitement and rare skills, blame some of the difficult syntax on the transmission of the text, and offer some indication of influences on the structural principle.¹

The suggestion I offer below for *sæcir* (291), in a context to which Cross and Tucker have given their wider interpretation, is in tune with the attractive individuality well characterized by Cross in the long quotation. Two editions have appeared recently: P.J. Lucas, *Exodus* (London, 1977); and Joan Turville-Petre's edition of *The Old English Exodus Text, Translation and Commentary by J.R.R. Tolkien* (Oxford, 1981; going back, in fact, to lectures given by Tolkien in the 1930s and 1940s). My notes assume knowledge of these two editions, as well as of the earlier editions listed in Stanley B. Greenfield and Fred C. Robinson, *A Bibliography of Publications on Old English Literature to the end of 1972* (Toronto

and Buffalo, 1980) pp.222-3, and of the studies listed in Greenfield-Robinson, pp.223-5. Line references are those in ASPR I, *The Junius Manuscript*.

37 *mansceaðan*] If a reference to the *angeli mali* of Ps. lxxvii 49 were intended, we should expect *hæfdon mansceaðan* pl.; but whereas *malus* can mean 'harmful, unfavourable', OE *mān-* means 'evil, wicked, sinful, flagitious', and that would not be a suitable first element to describe the angel(s) of the Lord, even when angel(s) of death; translating the compound 'the fell destroyer' is an attempt to search out a less explicitly sinful poeticism. There is no evidence for translating the compound as if the first element were short 'man' (instead of long, cf. Paris Psalter 105.16 *maansceaðan*), i.e. 'destroyer(s) of men'. The subject of the sentence must be God, and unemended *mansceaðan* 'evil ravagers' must refer to the Egyptian firstborn. 39 *abrocene burhweardas* is best taken as a verbless absolute construction, not as object of *gefyllt* parallel with *frumbearna fela* (or by emendation *frumbearna gehwylc*): 'He (i.e. God) had horridly laid low at midnight the sinful ravagers, many (or emended each) of the firstborn: the guardians of the city (were) crushed'. The *burhweardas* are unlikely to be the young firstborn (leaving aside the fact that among them were included the firstborn of cattle (see Exodus xii 29)), and they are unlikely to be the idols referred to in line 47; presumably the adult Egyptians in their lamentation (Exodus xii 30) are referred to.

40 *dryrmyde* (with *-yde* for normal *-(e)de*, cf. A. Campbell, *OE Grammar* (Oxford, 1959; rev. ed. 1983) §753(3)) is perhaps not to be emended to *drysm-* or *ðrysm-*, but defended as ultimately from IE *dhreu-s-* (see J. Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 2 vols. (Berne and Munich, 1959 and 1969) I, pp.274-5): a denominative verb from a noun with *-mi-* suffix (see W. Meid, *Wortbildungslehre, Sammlung Götschen* 1218 (Berlin, 1967) §106), morphologically like *cierman*. Derivatives occur with either *r* or *s* (see S. Feist, *Vergleichendes Wörterbuch der gotischen Sprache* (Leiden, 1939) s.v. *driusan*. Translate either 'The slayer (*bana* 39) strewed the land with corpses of the dead', or perhaps 'The land was strewn with the corpses of the dead'. 41 *dugoð* 'old and tried ones' must refer to the Israelites of Exodus xii 28, not to the young firstborn (let alone the firstborn of the cattle). That *forð gewitan* can mean 'die' is irrelevant; here it means 'departed'.

49-53 Though radical, the easiest solution of the many difficulties might be to read *Israhela* instead of *Egypta* (50) and to assume that *hie* nom. pl. (51) refers to the Egyptians, and *hie* acc. pl. (52) again to the Israelites. We could then translate: 'Thus the people of the Israelites, old and weary, endured that captivity for many a (half-)year, because they (the Egyptians) meant to prevent Moses' kin from the journey long cherished with eagerness, if (only) the Lord had let them go'.

95 *efngedælde* 'equally shared out' looks like glossing language, with *ef(e)n-* for Latin 'con-'; cf. *compartīrī* (and OED s.v. *Compart*, v.): ' . . . two pillars each of which, the one by

day the other by night, comparted (more idiomatically shared out with the other) the journey of the valiant-hearted men in the high service of the Holy Spirit'. Though similar formations are not found in Old English, three Old High German compounds are close: *ebenteil* 'equal share' (corresponding to OFris *evendel*, and cf. OIcel *jafndeildir* pret. part. of an unrecorded **jafndeila*, the closest parallel of *efngedælde* as if from *efn(ge)dælan*), *epangiteilun* masc. acc. sg. 'consort', and *ebenteila* fem. 'one who shares equally with (another)'. For other Latinisms in *Exodus*, note 266 *ne willað eow ondrædan* for Exodus xiv 13 *nolite timere*, and perhaps 206-7 *mid him . . . tosomne* for Exodus xiv 20 *ad se invicem*.

169 *fleah fæge gast*] The Israelites seem to be referred to, yet literally they are neither on the point of death, i.e. *fæge*, nor is their *gast* 'spirit of life' at a point likely to lead the poet to use of it either *fleah* 'fled' from *flēon* 'flee' or *fleah* 'moved rapidly' from *flēogan* 'fly'. Perhaps *flēah* here is an exceptional use of the preterite, as at *Beowulf* 1511 *bræc* 'was in the act of breaking, tried to pierce' (thus Klaeber's note) or at *Beowulf* 2854 *wehte* "with 'imperfective' function, perhaps: 'tried to rouse (him)'" (Klaeber's note); for a Modern English parallel, see *Archiv* 214 (1977) p.136. Though the concept 'imperfective function' cannot be demonstrated generally for Old English, 'was ready to break, was about to break' and 'was ready to awaken' would fit the two *Beowulf* uses well. In the present context it seems that the frightened Israelites were ready to die, and perhaps we might translate: 'The life-spirit of those who thought themselves doomed to death was ready to flee'.

291 *sæcir span*] This is, I suspect, a spinning metaphor. Emendation may be unnecessary, even though we may not be sure what *cir* is. As is usually accepted, *cir* is the noun related to *cirran* 'turn', and could refer to part of the turning mechanism of spinning, the reel or better the whorl. For details of the Old English vocabulary of spinning and related matters, see J. Hoops, *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* IV/2 (1918), s.v. *Spinrocken*, pp.206-7. *sæcir* is some technicality transferred, such as 'whorl of the sea', and the passage through the sea is described as if it were a sandy path spun by that sea-whorl, so that we may perhaps translate, 'The sea-whorl spun out sand'.

399 There is probably no need to emend. 398b-9 may be translated, 'The pyre blazed up, that chief slayer of life - he (Isaac) was none the more destined to die (because of that)'. This follows from Tolkien's analysis of the structure of the sentence, based on his view that "Clearly there is an interjection in the manner of OE verse", without accepting the emendation of *fyrst* to *fus*, first suggested by F. Klaeber, "Zu altenglischen Dichtungen", *Archiv* 113 (1904) p.147.

427 *ne* not preceding a finite verb usually means 'nor' (or used correlatively, *ne . . . ne* 'neither . . . nor'); here the sense is looser, perhaps 'and . . . not': 'How needs the son of man a covenant? - and heaven and earth cannot contain the words of His

glory (or less literally His words of glory), [words] reaching wider and further than the corners of the earth can embrace, the circle of the world and the sky above, the gaping of the ocean and this sad air'. At 433 the scribe wrote *ne* for *he*, presumably because he thought that he was dealing with the correlative construction (427 . . . 433) 'neither . . . nor', but Genesis xxii 16 makes a negative impossible at 433.

442 If, in accordance with Genesis xxii 17, *sund* is emended to *sand* acc. pl. neuter 'sands', *sæbeorga* cannot easily be 'of the sea-cliffs', since there are no sands on the sea-cliffs. If *-beorg* were the word 'hill' at all we should have to translate 'the sands of the sea-dunes'; but most often, when *beorg* is used as the second element of compounds it means 'protection', a different word. Compounds like *sæclif* and *sæweal(1)* might make one incline towards 'sea-dune', especially since the clearest cases of *-beorh* 'protection' are words the first element of which is a part of the body. It is uncertain if *licbeorh* 'sarcophagus' is 'a mound for corpses' or, as seems better, 'a protective structure for a corpse'. At *Ruin 5 scurbeorge* must refer to 'structures giving protection from showers', either roofs or buildings more generally, and that is perhaps the closest parallel to *sæbeorga* interpreted as 'of the protecting enclosure of the sea'. Place-name evidence for compounds with second element *-beorg* 'hill' are well set out by A.H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements I*, English Place-Name Society XXV (Cambridge, 1956) pp.29-30: it does not support the interpretation 'sea-cliff, sea-dune'. In place-names and elsewhere *-beorg* 'hill' is used when the material of which it is composed is named, e.g. *sand-*, *stan-*, or when the vegetation covering it is named, e.g. *sealh-* 'sallows', *fearn-* 'fern'. *Andreas* 305-10 is relevant. There the *sæbeorgas* are reached *ofer cald cleofu*, i.e. the cold cliffs are passed to reach the shore enclosing the sea like a shelter. 449 *beorhliðu* is usually explained as 'mountain slopes' here used with reference to the walls of sea-water on either side of the passage through the sea; in view of what seems to me the better interpretation of *sæbeorga sand* (442) as 'sands of the protecting shores of the sea', it seems better to render *beorhliðu* as 'shore slopes'.

465 *meredeað*] This appears to be a compound of the type *kyningwuldor* 'King of Glory' and *eðelwyn* 'delightful home'; so 'sea of death' or 'deadly sea'.

488 *helpendra pað*] The form *pað* for *pæð* is unlikely, and the sense 'course, action', which has been proposed, has no parallel; *helpendra* 'of the helping ones', i.e. 'of the waves considered as the allies of the Israelites', is also difficult. Emendation of *pað* to *lað* does not cure the trouble completely, for *helpendra lað* would involve an unusual genitival construction with the sense 'inflicted by', 'injury inflicted by the helping waves'. To solve this desperate crux both words will probably have to be emended; perhaps the scribe's exemplar had damage at the end of the first and at the beginning of the second word: *helpendum lað* 'hateful to the reinforcements' (qualifying *mod*) would give a possible reading: 'The

proud people could not hold back the violence of the ocean-current hateful to the reinforcements' or 'hateful to anyone who might think of helping', with punctuation as in ASPR, though, as Lucas says, that would involve breach of Kuhn's Law of Sentence Particles, and the crux is likely to be more deepseated and to involve the preceding line (487).

540 *ærdeað* is generally translated 'early or premature or untimely death'; but since poetic compounds with first element *ær-* (discussed by J. Hoops, *Beowulfstudien*, Anglistische Forschungen 74 (1932) pp.20-4) seem to convey the sense 'famed of old' or 'old and excellent for that reason' and since in this strongly personified context of the two arch-thieves, Old Age and Death, the sense of *ær-* in, for example, *ærfæder* would fit well, we should probably translate 'Death famed of old' or 'Old Death'.

547 Collective nouns like *dugoð* can take plural verbs, like *herigað*; but here the heavenly hosts (pl.) are referred to (cf. *weroda Wuldorcyning* 548), and *dugoð* is best taken as *dugoðe* with -e elided before the following vowel, *dugoð' on dreame* 'the hosts in joy'.

556 *hafað ufon* is usually emended to *us on* with *us on* unusually 'into our hands'. A better emendation is *hafað us ufon*, 'He has from above granted to us the race of the Canaanites'.

NOTE

¹ "The Old English Period", in W.F. Bolton, *The Middle Ages*, Sphere History of Literature in the English Language I (London, 1970) pp.28-9.