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CAEDMON'S HYMN, LINE 1: WHAT IS THE SUBJECT OF SCYLUN OR ITS VARIANTS? ¹

By BRUCE MITCHELL

1. The question posed in my title has the obvious answer we in Cæd(H) 1

\[
\text{Nu we sculan herian heofonrices weard, metudes myhte 7 his modgebanc, wurc wuldorfæder, swa he wundra gehwilc, ece drihten, ord astealde; he ærest gesceop ylda bearnum 5 heofon to hrofe, halig scyppend, middangearde mancynnes weard; ece drihten after tida firum on foldum, frea ælmyhtig,}
\]

an answer which is of course supported by debemus in Bede's Latin paraphrase:

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

The nominative we or something like it appears in a majority of the seventeen versions of the Hymn listed by Dobbie (pp.xciv-x). Two of the four Northumbrian versions (Di and P) have Nu pue. The eight West-Saxon versions in Latin manuscripts of Bede's Ecclesiastical History - H, W, Bd, Ln, Mg, Tr 1, Ld 1, and Hr - all have Nu we. Three of the five versions in manuscripts of the "Alfredian" translation also have Nu we - Ca, O (where we is added above the line) and B. C has Ne, which Smith (p.3) and Dobbie (p.xcix) took as an omission of the pronoun we but which is perhaps better regarded as a scribal conflation of Nu and we.

2. But the same question provokes no obvious answer in the three remaining manuscripts - the two "oldest Northumbrian texts" and "the best West Saxon text" (Howlett, p.6):

\[
\text{Cæd(M) 1 Nu scylun hergan hefaenricaes uard, metudæs naecti end his modgidanc, uerc uuldurfadur, sue he wundra gihuaes, eci dryctin, or astelida.}
\]
The noteworthy absence of *we* from these manuscripts - I deliberately avoid the pre-emptive term "omission" - has in my opinion been too easily brushed aside by scholars who are apparently content to accept the implication of Smith's gloss (p.53): "scylun, lpl. Cl". It is the initial purpose of this paper to enter a syntactical caveat against this attitude, which seems to me a remarkable one in view of the fact that "it is a peculiarity of the Ingvaeonic languages that there is only one form for the three persons of the plural" in verbs (A. Campbell, *Old English Grammar* §729 (Oxford, 1959)).

3. Smith (pp.3-4) offers the following comment:

The other important difference is that D [= ASPR Di] P have *we* (line 1), but ML omit it. The later versions give no indication of the original reading, for two manuscripts of the OEBeDe (which in respect of reading *eorðan* follow DP) omit *we*, whilst the remaining manuscripts, both HE and OEBeDe, insert it. It is probable that *we* was added independently (like *on*) in the prototype of the later HE group (for they also agree in reading *gehwilc* for *gehwæs* and *tida* for *teode*), but otherwise we must suppose that addition or omission of *we* depended largely upon individual scribes. In early Northumbrian such pronouns were sometimes omitted, as in ML, and the fact that DP have *we* but that two of the related OEBeDe versions omit it rather indicates that we was in *Y* but not in *Y*'s prototype from which the OEBeDe versions are ultimately derived.

Smith's footnote reads:

Cf G. Sarrazin, ESt xxxviii. 183ff. The addition of *we* is more likely than its omission in later recensions and there was, as Frampton, *op.cit.* 9, shows, a strong
tendency to begin OE poetry with a pronoun (e.g. Beowulf, Exodus, Daniel, &c.). The 'modernizing'
tendency is noticed also in later versions in the
substitution of ord for the earlier or (MLDP) (cf Frampton 6).

The implications of this and his glossary entry above are that it
was immaterial whether we was there or not; that debemus was an
acceptable translation, whether Bede's version had we or did not
have it; and (one must presume) that any native speaker of Old
English hearing a vernacular version of the Hymn without we would
without blinking take it to mean the equivalent of "we are obliged
to, we must". Somewhat similar attitudes seem to me to be implied
in Dobbie's note (p.198):

Nu] The omission of the pronoun subject we (in M and
L of the Northumbrian version, and T and C of the West
Saxon eordan-group) is not unparalleled in early
Northumbrian (see Genesis 1098, where ic is omitted
in the MS., and also Genesis 828, 885, where ic has
been added above the line) but may well have seemed,
to the later scribes, to require emendation.

But the notion that the 1st pers. nom. pl. pron. we could be
unexpressed at the beginning of a poem in which it does not occur
and in which there was therefore no first person grammatical
referent derives no support from GenA 870, GenA 1098, GenB 828, or
GenB 885 (G. Sarrazin, Estudien 38 (1907), 183, and Dobbie's ASPR
note quoted above), and virtually none from And 1487 (A. Fogatscher,
Anglia 23 (1901), p.285), where there is a clear sequence And 1478
ic . . . 1481 Mycel is to seccanne . . . 1483 Peat scell eglaewr/
mann on moldan bonne ic me talige . . . to justify the non-expression
of we, the subject of sceolon, in And 1487 Hwaedre git sceolon// . . .
reccan. I cannot accept Smith's notion, tentatively endorsed by
Dobbie (pp.xcix and 198), that "the addition of we" can be explained
away as the result of a "modernizing' tendency" when there is no
evidence that scylun alone can mean "we must" in Cad(M) 1; see 6 and
8 below.

4. It is, however, possible to argue that the absence of we in three
manuscripts of such authority as M, L, and T, is proof that the first
sentence of the Hymn gave good sense without we. It could indeed be
claimed that to believe it was unacceptable Old English or that it
made nonsense without we would involve accepting unacceptable coin-
cidences. If so, another subject for scylun must be found. Here I
am grateful to Christopher Ball, of Keble College, Oxford, for
allowing me to make use of an idea which he first propounded in the
late nineteen-sixties: that the original subject of scylun was uerc
wuldurfadur and that we is a later insertion which changed the mean-
ing of the sentence. We need look no further than Beo 395 Nu ge
moton gangan . . . to establish that Cad(H) 1 Nu we sculan herian
. . . is acceptable Old English. Further examples of this pattern
appear in And 595, 811, and 1517, Dream 78, El 511, and GuthB 6.
For variations of it, see *inter alia* GenB 816, ChristC 1327, and Fast 39. Although I have at the moment no exact parallels for the Adverb-Verb-triple Object-Subject pattern involved in Ball's interpretation, I am confident that it is good Old English and that the different intonation patterns which the language then had - capable as they must have been of distinguishing the Object-Verb-Subject/Object-Subject Verb pattern in GenA 2887 Wudu bær sunu, fæder fyr and sword - would have permitted a scop to make such a relationship clear. The closest example I have so far found is

*PPs* 133.1 Efne bletsien nu blice drihten 
ealle his agene onbyhtscealcas.

For variations, see *Beo* 377, Sat 579, and Met 4.47.

5. We have Bede's testimony that Casdmon based his later poems on the scriptures and we find in the Psalms sound scriptural basis for both the interpretations so far proposed. We animate beings are called upon to praise God in *Ps(A)* 94.1 cumad gefen we dryhê 
wunsumie we gode, Latin uenite exultemus dño iubilemus dñ, and to praise His works in *Ps(A)* 20.13 we singað 7 singað megen ðin, Latin cantabimus et psallimus uirtutes tuas. God's inanimate creations are called upon to praise Him in *Ps(A)* 102.21 bledsiað dryhê all werc his, Latin benedicite dñm omnia opera eius, and in *Ps(A)* 144.10 ondettað de dryhê all werc ðin, Latin confiteantur tibi ðne omnia opera tua. But a third possibility - suggested by Howlett (p.6) in 1974 - is that those who heard we construed ucerc uuldurfadur as a nominative appositional variant of it, "assuming that we are part of God's handiwork, the creatures who should praise Him". This interpretation too makes good Old English - such appositional variants play a vital role in the weaving of Old English poetry - and draws scriptural authority from passages in which inanimate creations of God are exhorted in the imperative to praise Him and are thereby personified; these include *Ps(A)* 102.21 and 144.10 (the last two examples quoted), the whole of *Ps(A)* 148, and *PsCa6* 8, the *Hymnm Trivm Pverorvm* or Benedictice, which begins bledsiað all ucerc dryhtnes dryhten . . . , Latin benedicite omnia opera dñi dñm . . . But if it is to be accepted for MSS M, L, and T - those without we - this last interpretation too must clear the hurdle "Can scylun alone mean 'we must'?" So, for what remains of this argument, it can be subsumed under the two main divisions we/no we.

6. We must now ask whether there are any arguments by which it can be proved that, despite the syntactical difficulties raised in 3 above, scylun alone can mean "we must". The absence of we in MSS M, L, and T, can of course be attributed to scribal omission. Such omission is well attested in manuscripts of Old English poetry - but this is merely the dishonoured argument "There are examples of x. Therefore this must be one" - and the addition of we above the line in MS O may be regarded as an actual example - but since it cannot be proved as one because it is "a corrector's addition" (Dobbie, p.xcix) and therefore may be due to the influence of another version with we or of Latin debemus, it may equally well be regarded
as another testimony to the existence of an independent version without we. One can see that, if the Latin version with debemus had come first, scylun alone could be explained as a careless gloss for it; compare Coll 253 wyllap wesan wise, Latin volumus esse sapientes, and see NM 70 (1969) p.376, where I discuss the possibility that there are unthinking cribs in the Old English Bede. But this is out of the question, for there is no doubt that the Old English Hymn came first; see Smith, pp.12-13, and Dobbie, pp.xcix-c. The possibility that scylun without we is due to the influence of debemus seems to me so remote that it too can be dismissed, even (I believe) in MS L, where "the hymn is written in the lower margin of fol. 107a, below the relevant passage in the Latin text, and in the same hand" (Dobbie, p.xcv), for here the readings of MSS M, where "the text of the hymn is added on fol. 128b, the last page of the manuscript" (ibid.), and L support one another. It can scarcely be said to arise in MS T, where the Hymn is an integral part of the Old English text.

7. We are left then with the possibility that Caedmon sang we and that scribal omission accounts for its absence from manuscripts M, L, and T. But there is another possibility: that Caedmon did not sing we and that its appearance in the majority of manuscripts is the result of later insertion in one or more than one prototype. Now the fact that Bede wrote debemus means either that the version he heard or read had we or that it did not and that — since in my opinion scylun cannot mean "we must" — he misunderstood or was misled by his immediate informant(s). Is such a misunderstanding likely? One could suppose that Bede and his fellow monks might have been unfamiliar with Old English poetry and were misled by the difficult element order involved in taking uerc uuldurfadur as subject; see 4 above. Or one could suppose that they were more accustomed to thinking "we must praise God" than "God's inanimate creations must praise Him" and were misled by anticipating the former. But Howlett (p.6) gives good reasons why we should think better of Bede's understanding of Old English poetry and Colgrave and Mynors (p.xix) state that his book "became a pattern and gave a new conception of history to western Europe", which suggests that he was not easily misled. So I am forced to conclude that Bede's source in all probability had we and from now on will assume that it had.

8. If this conclusion and the arguments I have so far advanced be accepted, it follows that we cannot be properly described as a later addition brought about by the "'modernizing' tendency" discussed in 3 above. So we seem bound to conclude either that the absence of we in MSS M, L, and T, is the result of omission after Bede's time or that there were two separate forms of the text — one with we and one without we — before Bede's time. When discussing the possible meanings of Bede's mihi cantare habes, I wrote in NM 66 (1965) p.110 that the existence of "an oral tradition independent of Bede . . . is, of course, certain — unless all the by-standers except Bede or his informant(s) were deaf-mutes, or unless no-one else ever bothered to mention the matter". I now
carry this further by suggesting that the presence or absence of we be traced back to the initial, or to an early, recital of the Hymn. We can postulate either that Cædmon himself delivered two versions or, given the excitement of the occasion described by Bede and the inherent unreliability of human witnesses, that some of those present heard we and some did not, depending on which of the two ideas discussed in 5 above - "We must praise God" or "God's inanimate creations must praise Him" - was uppermost in their minds. While it is impossible to believe that Cædmon sang the Hymn only once to a human audience - both the tungerefa and the Abbess Hild are likely to have had a private performance before what must have been only the first public one - I am inclined to give Cædmon the benefit of the doubt: Bede does say that exsurgens autem a somno, cuncta quae dormiens cantauerat memoriter retenuit and I am reluctant to allow human frailty to obtrude into this sacred moment. But the possibility of error on the part of one or more of the hearers is a very real one. For, while Bede's description of the first public performance neither supports nor rules out the possibility that a written version was made more or less on the spot - on this see 9 below - it does not rule out the possibility of independent oral performances by excited bystanders rushing off to infirmary, cottage, or the study of a dedicated scribe or mystic left unmoved by such worldly excitements. And independent oral performance inevitably carries with it the possibility of textual corruption; witness the well-known story of how the message "We are going to advance. Can you send us reinforcements?" was passed down along a line of advancing troops and reached its ultimate recipient in the form "We are going to a dance. Can you lend us three and fourpence?" and see the work of Alison Jones/Gyger on the Old English Daniel and Azarias (Medium Ärum 35 (1966) pp.95-102) and on the two versions of Soul and Body (Medium Ärum 38 (1969) pp.239-44).

9. This suggestion of misunderstanding at the initial, or at an early, recital of the Hymn is in my view rendered more plausible and more attractive by the consideration that it might also account for other variations, including those typified by the reading Cæd(M) 5 aelda barnum where Cæd(Di) 5 has eordu bearnum, and for the fact that this variation cuts across the we/no we variation in the various manuscripts. If accepted, it also means that arguments about which version came first will have to be rephrased in some such way as this: Did Cædmon sing we or did he not? Did he sing aelda or eordu? Here we can, I think, dismiss some arguments for the idea that he sang we, including the fact that the majority of manuscripts read we and the parallels gathered by F.P. Magoun, Jr (Speculum 30 (1955) p.62), for these are relevant both here and in Magoun's general argument only if we accept the idea that Cædmon was not the first to use Germanic alliterative verse for Christian purposes, an idea which Magoun "proves" by using these same parallels; compare here Smith, pp.14-15. We will perhaps continue to argue about the respective value of Bede's readings - debemus supports we scylun and fillis hominum aelda barnum - and of the lectio difficillior principle - which supports scylun and eordu bearnum, but this can be countered by the argument that the change from aelda to eordu could have been made by a hearer who had in mind
some such phrase as *homo ex humo* (see John Golden, *NM* 70 (1969) pp.627-9) and the non-expression of *we* by a hearer who had in mind some such verse as *Ps(A) 102.21 bledsiað dryhē all werc his*, Latin *benedicite dām omnia opera eius*. However, the idea of initial or early misunderstanding makes it difficult to sustain arguments about the primacy of particular readings. So I will not pursue them here. Nor will I attempt to draw a stemma, although I will voice my surprise that the presence or absence of *we* has not been taken more seriously in the discussion of the relationships between the various manuscripts of the *Hymn*. But I have to agree that there are very real difficulties. I have, I hope, established the possibility that oral versions with and without *we* existed before Bede's time. Both may have been committed to writing, although it is to be noted that the Old English *wreoton* in Bede (T) 346.4

... *seolfan þa his lareowas æt his muðe wreoton 7 leornodon* is not supported by the Latin... *doctores suos uicissim auditores sui faciebat* - a point overlooked (conveniently, it may seem, since it hardly supports his notion of oral tradition) by C.L. Wrenn (*PBA* 32 (1946) pp.277-95); see my comments in Mitchell 1974. On the other hand, it is arguable that only a version with *we* was written down and the absence of *we* in MS T is a genuine instance of scribal omission; see 6 above. Here I must leave the reader, for I find myself in a predicament reminiscent of that which led Dr Johnson to write: "Some words there are which I cannot explain because I do not understand them".
NOTES

I use throughout the short titles of OE texts proposed by Christopher Ball, Angus Cameron, and myself, in Anglo-Saxon England 4 (1975) pp.207-21 and 8 (1979) pp.331-3. Beowulf is cited from Klaeber (3rd edn.), the remaining verse texts from the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, abbreviated to ASPR.


The names of the authors serve as cue-titles for the following works:

Three Northumbrian Poems, ed. A.H. Smith, Methuen's Old English Library (London, 1933);
The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems, ed. E.V.K. Dobbie, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records 6 (New York and London, 1942);