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

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

Nu we sculan herian heofonrices weard,
metudes myhte 7 his modgeþanc,
wurc wuldorfæder, swa he wundra gehwilc,
ece drihten, ord astealde;
he ærest gesceop ylða bearnum 5
heofon to hrofe, halig scyppend,
middangearde mancynnes weard;
ece drihten æfter tida
firum on foldum, frea ælmyhtig,

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

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 þue*. 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):

Cæd(M) 1 Nu scylun hergan hefaenricaes uard,
metudæs maecti end his modgidanc,
uerc uuldurfadur, sue he uundra gihuaes,
eci dryctin, or astelidæ.

He aerist scop aelda barnum 5
 heben til hrofe, haleg scepem;
 tha middungeard moncynnæs uard,
 eci dryctin, æfter tiadæ
 firum foldu, frea allmectig,

Cæd(L) 1 Nu scilun herga . . . , and

Cæd(T) 1 Nu sculon herigean heofonrices weard,
 meotodes meahte and his modgeþanc,
 weorc wuldorfæder, swa he wundra gehwæs,
 ece drihten, or onstealde.
 He ærest sceop eorðan bearnum 5
 heofon to hrofe, halig scyppend;
 þa middangeard moncynnæs weard,
 ece drihten, æfter teode
 firum foldan, frea ælmihtig.

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*, 1pl. 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 Ingvaenic 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 *eorþan* 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,¹ 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 *eorðan*-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. Pogatscher, *Anglia* 23 (1901), p.285), where there is a clear sequence *And* 1478 *ic . . . 1481 Mycel is to secganne . . . 1483 Þæt scell æglawra/ mann on moldan þonne ic me tælige . . .* to justify the non-expression of *we*, the subject of *sceolon*, in *And* 1487 *Hwære 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 *Cæd(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 coincidences. 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 uuldurfadur* and that *we* is a later insertion which changed the meaning of the sentence. We need look no further than *Beo* 395 *Nu ge moton gangan . . .* to establish that *Cæd(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/Subject Verb pattern in GenA 2887 *Wudu bǣr sunu, / fæder fyr and sweord* - 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 bliðe drihten
ealle his agene onbyhtscealcas.

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

5. We have Bede's testimony that Cædmon 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 *cumað gefen we dryh̄t wynsumie we gode*, Latin *uenite exultemus dño iubilemus dō*, 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 dryh̄t all werc his*, Latin *benedicite dñm omnia opera eius*, and in Ps(A) 144.10 *ondettað ðe dryh̄t all werc ðin*, Latin *confiteantur tibi dñe omnia opera tua*. But a third possibility - suggested by Howlett (p.6) in 1974 - is that those who heard *we* construed *werc 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 *Hymnvm Trivm Pverorvm* or *Benedicite*, which begins *bledsiað all werc 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 *wyllaþ wesan wise*, Latin *uolumus 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 Cædmon sang *we* and that scribal omission accounts for its absence from manuscripts *M*, *L*, and *T*. But there is another possibility: that Cædmon 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 *exurgens 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 Ævum* 35 (1966) pp.95-102) and on the two versions of *Soul and Body* (*Medium Ævum* 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 *filiis hominum aelda barnum* - and of the *lectio difficilior* 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 dryht̄ all werc his*, Latin *benedicite dñm 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 Latin of Bede's account of the poet Cædmon is quoted from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 1969), the Old English from the Old English version of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Thomas Miller, EETS OS 95, 96, 110, 111 (Oxford, 1890, 1891, 1898, 1898).

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);

D.R. Howlett, "The Theology of Caedmon's Hymn", *Leeds Studies in English* 7 (1974) pp.1-12;

Bruce Mitchell, "Bede's Account of the Poet Cædmon; Two Notes", *Iceland and the Mediaeval World: Studies in Honour of Ian Maxwell*, ed. Gabriel Turville-Petre and John Stanley Martin (Melbourne, 1974) pp.126-31.