

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Caedmon's Hymn 658-680

Caedmon

What we know of Caedmon comes to us from the Venerable Bede. (d. 731), who tells us—in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*-- that Caedmon was an illiterate and unmusical cowherd, who was miraculously given the power to create (sing) the brief hymn in question, the only work attributed to him. Whatever the case, it seems plausible that the present hymn is the earliest preserved poem in Old English. It is widely thought to represent a continuation of Germanic praise poetry. This old English poem is attested in the second largest number of manuscripts of old English's poetry—all of them manuscripts of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English people*. The poem is a treasured and unique piece of English literature.

A translation

*Guardian of heaven. whom we come to praise
Who mapped Creation. In his thought's sinews
Glory-father. who worked out each wonder
Began with broad earth. A gift for his children
First roofed it with heaven. The holy Shaper
Established it forever as in the beginning
Called it middle kingdom. Fenced it with angels
Created a habitation. For man to praise his splendor*

Translation by Harvey Shapiro

The creator is an intellectual, who mapped his creation. (More frequently described as a moulder, artificer, this creator works from a model in his mind. He protects his creation with his mind, fencing it in, making it a habitation for praise of his splendor.). He is also a father, concerned for his children, and a worker-through, who creates with the sinews of his mind.

What kind of cultural transformation is at work here?

We have looked at Beowulf, and at *The Dream of the Rood*. We opened with a look at the Christian Ostrogoths, Cassiodorus and Boethius. Are we finding, in these writers, testimony to a previously unfamiliar view of the world and its maker? Would we find a parallel to this 'early Christian thinking' in, say, Ancient Greek or Roman literature? Or the literature of the Ancient Near East? In, say, the Egyptian Hymn to Akhnaton or even in the Vedas? These are broad and even vague questions. Yet they may provoke us to see what 'feels new' about early Christian culture in Western Europe.

Already in the fourth century, Saint Augustine has boldly introduced the Christian perspective into pagan culture. That is, two centuries before Constantine, and the transfer of the Roman Empire to the East, Christianity had begun to develop a marked public voice. It had suffered martyrdom, had assumed various religious colorings—in Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople—and had outlived the sporadic recurrences of paganism in the Roman Empire—notably the reign of Julian the Apostate (355-360). The declaration of monotheistic belief, in Caedmon's hymn, falls into place as an already formulated and culturally intelligible text. By the time of this hymn, we have to assume, the Christian world-formulation of the Carolingian World will have to have acquired the familiarity status of a widespread belief.

Masterpaper

Caedmon's Hymn, despite its attribution to an unlettered shepherd, emerges as a confident and quite clearly formulated credo. We take the beliefs of the hymn to be drawn from the society—we are in any case far from the Council of Nicaea, at which the early Church had laid down its basic beliefs. Romanesque church building, in its earliest phase, dotted the landscape, young men found their ways into the clergy, the fields were given holy blessing at harvest time. We are well into the formation of a new culture, by the time a work like Caedmon's Hymn can be formulated. Is there a specific time measurement, for a new culture to ripen into a mature and multi-sided statement? Do you feel that you are in a culture that has begun fully to express itself? Or that is still reaching for the means to give full and mature expression to itself? If this question seems vague, could you pin it down by asking yourself when and where your culture began, and in fact what the name of your culture should properly be?