

Reading Guide: *Cædmon's Hymn*

This is the origin story of English poetry. The hymn was recorded by the Venerable Bede in 735, but not in Old English, and not verbatim. Instead, Bede paraphrased, or gave the sense of the hymn in Latin prose. Later readers of Bede copied out the Old English in the margins. There are a number of extant versions of the hymn, many in different Old English dialects.

➤ Note the repetition of the name of God. Strictly speaking, though, Cædmon doesn't repeat the name of God, but names God in a variety of ways. What are the characteristics of each name? How is it that a single entity has numerous names? Why? What aspects of the divine is Cædmon trying to represent? What forms of power are being attributed to this God? What does this attribution tell us about the consequent weakness of humans? What other art forms attempt a multiple perspective on a single object like this?

➤ Note also the order of his subjects: for example, he moves from the earthly present (*Nu*) to people (*we*) to heaven (*heofenrices*) to the power above it all (*Weard*). His elevation of the reader's eye is capped by the divine name *Dryhten*. What does this term mean? (Check Bosworth & Toller in the library.) How does it differ from, for example, *weard*?

➤ The Old English term *ece* (eternal, perpetual) is a homonym (same sound) of the Latin word *ecce* (behold). This might be an intentional pun. Are there others?

➤ The Old English term *sculan* (line 1) means *must, have to*. Why is the reader obliged to praise God *nu*, now? What is the urgency? (Compare Psalm 43.) Does the poem itself act as a form of praise? Is the recitation of poetry to be construed as a kind of praise of the divine? In other words, what is Cædmon obliging the reader to do with his or her words?

➤ *Frea* (line 9) is not only a name of God, but a version of the name of an Anglo-Saxon god for whom Friday is named. This is part of the larger social process called the Germanization of early medieval Christianity. This included the development in the fifth and sixth centuries of a cult of saints, of modified tree worship (finding of the true cross), and so forth. How else is Christianity given a native garb in this poem?