

# Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*

## CÆDMON'S HYMN

St Petersburg, Saltykov-Schedrin Public Library, Q. v. I. 18, contains at the bottom of f. 107r arguably the earliest surviving written record of oral Old English poetry: Cædmon's *Hymn*. It is included as an addition to Bede's Latin *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, 'Ecclesiastical History of the English People', which was copied into this manuscript (known as the Leningrad Bede) c.735, at Monkwearmouth-Jarrow where Bede was a monk. Bede completed his *Historia* in 731, and it is, without doubt, one of the most important sources for the history of the period. In relating the life-story of Abbess Hild, Bede recounts an event about a certain Cædmon, a lay worker at the abbey of Whitby during the abbacy of Hild in the late seventh century. He was unable to participate in the traditional entertainment at the feast – reciting poetry to the accompaniment of the harp – because he had never learned the art of composing songs in verse. One night, as the harp player approached him, he left and went to the cattle-shed to look after the animals in his care. He had a vision in which a celestial visitor asked him to sing. He replied that he could not sing. The visitor insisted that Cædmon should sing something about the Creation. Immediately, Cædmon was able to compose a poem praising God, the creator of all things.

At this point in the *Historia*, Bede paraphrases Cædmon's hymn of praise in Latin, and then goes on to narrate that the following day, Cædmon was able to recall and expand on the hymn he had sung. His miraculous powers were made known to the abbess, and from that time on, Cædmon, who became a monk, was able to turn into poetry all the scriptural stories read to him by the brothers at Whitby.

In some of the manuscripts that contain the Latin *Historia*, Cædmon's *Hymn* has been rendered into Old English in the margin or at the bottom of the relevant page. In St Petersburg, Q. v. I. 18, as mentioned above,

it is written in three lines in the lower margin of folio 107 recto. It is composed in the Northumbrian dialect, as are four other versions of the *Hymn*. In other manuscripts dating from the late ninth century onwards, Bede's *Historia* was itself translated into Old English as part of Alfred's educational programme, and thus the *Hymn* appears in Old English within the text.<sup>1</sup> The remaining versions of the poem are written in the more commonly recorded West Saxon dialect, and one of these versions of the story and *Hymn* is edited in the text following this.

The form and interpretation of the *Hymn* have been discussed in many critical commentaries.<sup>2</sup> The *Hymn* is the earliest recorded poem that employs the structure and method of oral poetic composition traditional to the Germanic peoples. The form, the four-stressed alliterative verse-line divided structurally into two halves by the caesura (though this is not visually recorded in manuscript copies of poetic texts), was that used previously solely for composing heroic verse. Here, documented for the first time, is the heroic verse form employed to praise the Christian God. Fred Robinson points out that the opening word of the poem, *Nu*, marks this text as of especial importance.<sup>3</sup> Verse previously used for the praising or eulogizing of heroic deeds, kings, and legendary episodes in history was from this period onwards to be adapted for use in praising the Christian God: a new age for the Anglo-Saxons. Among other things, it is this combination of the Germanic form of poetic composition with the religious content that makes the poem so important in the history of English literature.

Below, the Northumbrian *Hymn* from the eighth-century manuscript, St Petersburg, Saltykov-Schedrin Public Library, Q. v. I. 18, is presented. A second, West Saxon version from the tenth-century manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Tanner 10, follows in the next pair of texts, within its Old English context, for comparison.

1 K. O'Brien O'Keefe discusses the implications of manuscript layout and punctuation in the extant versions of Cædmon's *Hymn* in 'Orality and the Developing Text of Cædmon's *Hymn*', in *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts: Basic Readings*, ed. M. P. Richards (New York, 1994), pp. 221–50, and in her *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 4 (Cambridge, 1990).

2 See for example S. B. Greenfield and D. G. Calder, eds, *A New Critical History of Old English Literature* (London, 1986), pp. 227–31;

F. P. Magoun, 'Bede's Story of Cædmon: The Case-History of an Anglo-Saxon Oral Singer', *Speculum* 30 (1955), 49–63; P. R. Orton, 'Cædmon and Christian Poetry', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 84 (1983), 163–70.

3 F. C. Robinson, 'The Accentuation of *Nu* in Cædmon's *Hymn*', in *Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period: Studies in Honor of Jess B. Bessinger, Jr.*, eds H. Damico and J. Leyerle (Kalamazoo, 1993), pp. 115–20.

## Cædmon's Hymn

Nu scilun herga hefenricæs Uard,  
 Metudæs mehti and his modgithanc,  
 uerc Uuldurfadur, sue he uundra gihuæs,  
 eci Dryctin, or astelidæ.  
 5 He ærist scop aeldu barnum  
 hefen to hrofæ, halig Sceppend;  
 tha middingard moncynnæs Uard,  
 eci Dryctin, æfter tiadæ  
 firum foldu, Frea allmehtig.

## THE SETTLEMENT OF THE ANGLES, SAXONS AND JUTES; THE LIFE OF CÆDMON

During the reign of King Alfred (871–99), Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* was translated into Old English as part of Alfred's programme of educational reform outlined in his own *Preface to Gregory's Pastoral Care*. Scholars agree that Alfred did not translate this version of Bede himself, partly because of the occurrences of Anglian dialectal forms in the text, but it is possible that one of Alfred's circle of advisors and scholars was responsible for it. There are five extant manuscripts of the work in varying states of completeness: Oxford, Bodleian Library, Tanner 10, dated to the first half of the tenth century, and from which the story of Cædmon is edited; Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 41, from the first half of the eleventh century; the burnt manuscript, London, British Library, Cotton Otho B. xi (mid-tenth century); Oxford, Corpus Christi College, 279, part II (beginning of the eleventh century); and Cambridge University Library Kk. 3. 18, from the second half of the eleventh century, and from which 'The Settlement of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes' is edited. The Old English version of the text abbreviates Bede's original to concentrate on matters specifi-

cally relevant to the English, and it tends to focus on the miraculous and religious events of Bede's original. The syntax of the translation is occasionally convoluted, as the first fifteen or so lines of the account of Cædmon below amply show, but it is also often clear and relatively poetic in its diction. The first text edited here is extracted from the *Ecclesiastical History*, book 1, chapter xv, and recounts the arrival of the Anglo-Saxon settlers in the fifth century. Bede's account is one of the most important for this period of history.

The second extract, the story of Cædmon (who died c.670), is told as an important incident in the narration of Abbess Hild's life (book 4, chapter xxiv).<sup>4</sup> Printed as the first text in this volume is the eighth-century Northumbrian version of the poem for comparison. This incident in the narration of Hild's life is usually provided in anthologies because of the information the story provides about the first named Old English poet, and the methods of oral poetic composition that can be inferred from it.

## The Settlement of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes

Ða wæs ymb feower hund wintra and nigon and feowertig fram ures Drihtnes menniscnysse þæt  
 Martianus casere rice onfeng and vii gear hæfde. Se wæs syxta eac feowertigum fram Augusto þam  
 casere. Ða Angelþeod and Seaxna wæs gelaðod fram þam foresprecanan cyninge, and on Breotone  
 com on þrim myclum scypum, and on eastdæle þyses ealondes eardungstowe onfeng þurh ðæs  
 5 ylcan cyninges bebod, þe hi hider gelaðode, þæt hi sceoldan for heora eðle compian and feohtan.  
 And hi sona compedon wið heora gewinnan, þe hi oft ær norðan onhergedon; and Seaxan þa sige  
 geslogan. Ða sendan hi ham ærenddracan and heton secgan þisses landes wæstmbernysse and  
 Brytta yrgþo. And hi þa sona hider sendon maran sciphere strengran wiðgena; and wæs  
 10 unoferswiðendlic weorud, þa hi togædere geþeodde wæron. And him Bryttas sealdan and geafan  
 eardungstowe betwih him, þæt hi for sibbe and for hælo heora eðles campodon and wunnon wið  
 heora feondum, and hi him andlyfne and are forgeafen for heora gewinne.

Comon hi of þrim folcum ðam strangestan Germanie, þæt of Seaxum and of Angle and of

<sup>4</sup> See B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, eds, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 1969), pp. 414–21.

Cædmon's *Hymn*

Now we ought to praise the Guardian of the heavenly kingdom,  
 the might of the Creator and his conception,  
 the work of the glorious Father, as he of each of the wonders,  
 eternal Lord, established the beginning.

5 He first created for the sons of men<sup>5</sup>  
 heaven as a roof, holy Creator;  
 then the middle-earth, the Guardian of mankind,  
 the eternal Lord, afterwards made  
 the earth for men, the Lord almighty.

## The Settlement of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes

It was about four hundred and forty-nine years after our Lord's incarnation that the Emperor Martian acceded to the throne and he held it for seven years. He was also the forty-sixth after the Emperor Augustus. Then the people of the Angles and Saxons were invited by the aforesaid king [Vortigern] and came to Britain in three large ships, and they received a place to live in the east part of the island through the instruction of that same king who invited them here, so that they might battle and fight on behalf of the homeland. And immediately, they fought against their enemies who had often previously attacked them from the north; and the Saxons won the victory. Then they sent a messenger home and instructed him to speak about the fertility of this land and the cowardice of the Britons. And straightaway they sent here more naval forces with stronger warriors; and this was to be an invincible army when they were united together. And the Britons offered and gave them a place to live among themselves, so that for peace and for prosperity they would fight and battle for their homeland against their enemies, and they gave them provisions and property because of their battles.

<sup>5</sup> *ældu barnum*, 'the sons/children of men', becomes *eorðan bearnum*, 'the children of earth', in the West Saxon version.

Geatum. Of Geata fruman syndon Cantware and Wihtsætan; þæt is seo ðeod þe Wiht þæt ealond  
 15 oneardað. Of Seaxum, þæt is, of ðam lande þe mon hateð Ealdseaxan, coman Eastseaxan and  
 Suðseaxan and Westseaxan. And of Engle coman Eastengle and Middelengle and Myrce and eall  
 Norðhembra cynn; is þæt land ðe Angulus is nemned, betwyh Geatum and Seaxum; is sæd of  
 ðære tide þe hi ðanon gewiton oð todæge þæt hit weste wunige. Wæron ða ærest heora latteowas  
 and heretogan twegen gebroðra, Hengest and Horsa. Hi wæron Wihtgylses suna, þæs fæder wæs  
 20 Wihta haten, and þæs Wihta fæder wæs Woden nemned, of ðæs strynde monigra mægða  
 cyningcynn fruman lædde. Ne wæs ða ylding to þon þæt hi hearmælum coman maran weorod of  
 þam þeodum þe wæ ær gemynegodon. And þæt folc ðe hider com ongan weaxan and myclian to  
 þan swiðe þæt hi wæron on myclum ege þam sylfan landbigengan ðe hi ær hider laðedon and  
 cygdon.

Æfter þissum hi ða geweredon to sumre tide wið Pehtum, þa hi ær ðurh gefeoht feor adrifan.  
 25 And þa wæron Seaxan secende intingan and towyrde heora gedales wið Bryttas. Cyðdon him  
 openlice and sædon, nemne hi him maran andlyfne sealdon, þæt hi woldan him sylfe niman and  
 hergian, þær hi hit findan mihton. And sona ða beorunge dædum gefylton; bærndon and hergedon  
 and slogan fram eastsæ oð westsæ, and him nænig wiðstod. Ne wæs ungelic wræcc þam ðe iu  
 30 Chaldeas bærndon Hierusalem weallas and ða cynelican getimbro mid fyre fornaman for ðæs  
 Godes folces synnum. Swa þonne her fram þære arleasan ðeode, hwæðere rihte Godes dome, neh  
 ceastra gehwylce and land wæs forheriende. Hrusan afeollan cynelico getimbro somod and anlipie,  
 and gehwær sacerdas and mæssepreostas betwih wibedum wæron slægene and cwylmde; biscopas  
 mid folcum buton ænigre are sceawunge ætgædere mid iserne and lige fornumene wæron. And  
 ne wæs ænig se ðe bebyrignysse sealde þam ðe swa hreowlice acwealde wæron. And monige ðære  
 35 earman lafe on westenum fangene wæron and hearmælum sticode. Sume for hungre heora feondum  
 on hand eodon and ecne þeowdom geheton wið ðon þe him mon andlyfne forgeafe; sume ofer sæ  
 sorgiende gewiton; sume forhtiende on eðle gebidan, and þearfendum life on wuda westene and  
 on hean clifum sorgiende mode symle wunodon.

### The Life of Cædmon

In ðeosse abbudissan mynstre wæs sum broðor syndriglice mid godcundre gife gemæred ond  
 geweorðad, for þon he gewunade gerisenlice leoð wyrcan, þa ðe to æfæstnisse ond to arfæstnisse  
 belumpen, swa ðætte, swa hwæt swa he of godcundum stafum þurh boceras geleornode, þæt he  
 5 æfter medmiclum fæce in scopgereorde mid þa mæstan swetnisse ond inbryrdnisse geglængde  
 ond in Engliscgereorde wel geworht forþbrohte. Ond for his leoþsongum monigra monna mod  
 oft to worulde forhogdnisse ond to geþeodnisse þæs heofonlican lifes onbærnde wæron. Ond eac  
 swelce monige oðre æfter him in Ongelþeode ongunnon æfæste leoð wyrcan; ac nænig hwæðre  
 him þæt gelice don meahte, for þon he nales from monnum ne þurh mon gelæred wæs, þæt he  
 þone leoðcræft leornade, ac he wæs godcundlice gefultumed ond þurh Godes gife þone songcræft  
 10 onfeng. Ond he for ðon næfre noht leasunge ne idles leoþes wyrcan meahte, ac efne þa an þa ðe to  
 æfæstnisse belumpon, ond his þa æfestan tungan gedafenode singan.

Wæs he se mon in weoruldhade geseted oð þa tide þe he wæs gelyfdre ylde, ond næfre nænig  
 leoð geleornade. Ond he for þon oft in gebeorscipe, þonne þær wæs blisse intinga gedemed, þæt  
 heo ealle sceoldon þurh endebyrdnesse be hearpan singan. Þonne he geseah þa hearpan him nealecan,  
 15 þonne aras he for scome from þæm symble ond ham eode to his huse. Þa he þæt þa sumre tide  
 dyde, þæt he forlet þæt hus þæs gebeorscipes, ond ut wæs gongende to neata scipene, þara heord  
 him wæs þære neahte beboden, þa he ða þær in gelimplice tide his leomu on reste gesette ond  
 onslapte, þa stod him sum mon æt þurh swefn ond hine halette ond grette ond hine be his noman  
 nemnde: 'Cedmon, sing me hwæthwugu.' Þa ondswarede he ond cwæð: 'Ne con Ic noht singan;

They came from among the three most powerful Germanic tribes, those of the Saxons, the Angles and the Jutes. Of Jutish origins are the people in Kent and people of the Isle of Wight: that is the people who inhabit the Isle of Wight. From the Saxons, that is from that land which is called Saxony, come those in Essex, Sussex and Wessex. And from the Angles come the East Anglians and Middle Anglians and Mercians and all the people of Northumbria. That land which is called Angeln<sup>6</sup> is between Jutland and Saxony; it is said that from the time they left there until the present day that it remains deserted. The first of their leaders and commanders were two brothers, Hengest and Horsa. They were the sons of Wihtgyls, whose father was called Wihta, this Wihta's father was named Woden, from whose lineage many tribes of royal races claimed their origin. It was not long before more troops came in crowds from those people that we mentioned before. And the people who came here began to expand and grow to the extent that they were a great terror to those same inhabitants who had previously invited and summoned them here.

After this, they were united by agreement with the Picts,<sup>7</sup> whom they had previously driven far away through battle. And then the Saxons were seeking a cause and opportunity for their separation from the Britons. They informed them openly and said to them that unless they gave them more provisions they would take it and plunder it themselves wherever they might find it. And immediately the threat was carried out; they burned and ravaged and murdered from the east coast to the west, and no one withstood them. This was not unlike the former vengeance of the Chaldeans when they burned the walls of Jerusalem and destroyed the royal buildings with fire because of the sins of the people of God.<sup>8</sup> Thus here because of the graceless people, yet with the righteous judgement of God, nearly every city and land was ravaged. Royal private buildings were razed to the ground, and everywhere priests and mass-priests were murdered and killed among their altars; bishops with the people, without being shown any mercy, were destroyed with sword and fire together. And nor was there any burial given to those who were so cruelly killed. And many of the wretched survivors were captured in the wastelands and stabbed in groups. Because of hunger, some went into the hands of the enemy and promised perpetual slavery with the provision that they be given sustenance; some went sorrowing over the sea; some remained, always fearful, in their native land, and lived in deprivation in the deserted woods or dwelled on high cliffs, always with a mournful mind.

### The Life of Cædmon

In this abbess's monastery was a certain brother made especially famous and honoured with a divine gift, because he was accustomed to producing suitable poetry which pertained to religion and piety, such that, whatever he learned from divine scriptures through scholars, he was able to transpose into poetry after a short period of time adorned with the most sweetness and inspiration, and to produce it well made in the English language. And because of his poetry, the minds of many men were often inspired towards contempt of the world and towards the joining of the heavenly life. And also, similarly, after him, many others among the English began to compose pious poems; but, however, none of them was able to do it like him, because he was not taught the poetic skill that he learned from men or by anyone at all, but he was divinely aided and received his skill at recitation through a gift of God. And because of this, he would never create fables or worthless poetry, but only that which concerned piety, and that was suitable for his pious tongue to sing.

He was established in the secular life until a time when he was advanced in years, and he had never learned any poetry. And he was often in drinking parties, when there was decreed, as a cause for joy, that they should all sing in turns to the accompaniment of the harp. When he saw the harp approach him, he rose up for shame from that feast and went home to his house. On a certain occasion when he did just that, he left the building of the drinking party, and went out to the animal shed, the care of which had been given to him that night. Then, in due time, he got himself settled in rest and slept, and a man stood before him as if in a dream and called him and greeted him and spoke to him by his name: 'Cædmon, sing me something.' Then he answered and said: 'I cannot sing; and therefore I left the party

6 i.e. Slesvig.

7 The Picts were a 'confederation of tribes living north of the Antonine Wall', as Isabel Henderson states s.v. 'Picts', in *The Blackwell*

*Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 365–6.

8 4 Kings 25.8–10.

20 ond Ic for þon of þeossum gebeorscipe ut eode, ond hider gewat, for þon Ic naht singan ne cuðe.  
Eft he cwæð, se ðe wið hine sprecende wæs: 'Hwæðre þu me aht singan.' Ða cwæð he: 'Hwæt sceal  
Ic singan?' Cwæð he: 'Sing me frumsceaft.' Ða he ða þas andsware onfeng, þa ongon he sona singan  
in herenese Godes Scyppendes þa fers ond þa word þe he næfre gehyrde, þære endebyrdnesse þis is:

25 Nu sculon herigean heofonrices Weard,  
Meotodes meahthe ond his modgeþanc,  
weorc Wuldorfæder, swa he wundra gehwæs,  
ece Drihten, or onstealde.  
He ærest sceop eorðan bearnum  
heofon to hrofe, halig Scyppend;  
30 þa middangeard moncynnes Weard,  
ece Drihten, æfter teode  
firum foldan, Frea ælmihtig.

Ða aras he from þæm slæpe, ond eal þa þe he slæpende song fæste in gemynde hæfde, ond þæm  
wordum sona monig word in þæt ilce gemet Gode wyrðes songes to geþeodde. Ða com he on  
35 morgenne to þæm tungerefan, þe his ealdormon wæs; sægde him hwylce gife he onfeng. Ond he  
hine sona to þære abbudissan gelædde ond hire þa cyðde ond sægde. Ða heht heo gesomnian ealle  
þa gelæredestan men ond þa leorneras, ond him ondweardum het secgan þæt swefn ond þæt leoð  
singan, þæt ealra heora dome gecoren wære hwæt oððe hwonon þæt cuman wære. Ða wæs him  
eallum gesegen, swa swa hit wæs, þæt him wære from Drihtne sylfum heofonlic gifu forgifen. Ða  
40 rehton heo him ond sægdon sum halig spell ond godcundre lare word, bebudon him þa, gif he  
meahthe, þæt he in swinsunge leopsonges þæt gehwyrfde. Ða he ða hæfde þa wisan onfongne, þa  
eode he ham to his huse, and cwom eft on morgenne, ond þy betstan leoðe geglenged him asong,  
ond ageaf þæt him beboden wæs.

Ða ongan seo abbudisse clyppan ond lufigean þa Godes gife in þæm men. Ond heo hine þa  
45 monade ond lærde þæt he woruldhade anforlete ond munuchad onfenge; ond he þæt wel þafode.  
Ond heo hine in þæt mynster onfeng mid his godum, ond hine geþeodde to gesomnunge þara  
Godes þeowa, ond heht hine læran þæt getæl þæs halgan stæres ond spellas. Ond he eal þa he in  
gehyrnesse geleornian meahthe mid hine gemyndgade, ond swa swa clæne neten eodorcende, in  
þæt sweteste leoð gehwerfde. Ond his song ond his leoð wæron swa wynsumu to gehyranne þætte  
50 seolfan þa his lareowas æt his muðe wreoton ond leornodon.

Song he ærest be middangeardes gesceape ond bi fruman moncynnes ond eal þæt stær Genesis:  
þæt is seo æreste Moyses booc. Ond eft bi utgonge Israhela folces of Ægypta londe ond bi ingonge  
þæs gehatlandes ond bi oðrum monegum spellum þæs halgan gewrites canones boca. Ond bi  
Cristes menniscnesse ond bi his þrowunge ond bi his upastignesse in heofonas, ond bi þæs Halgan  
55 Gastes cyme ond þara apostola lare; ond eft bi þæm dæge þæs toweardan domes, ond bi fyrhtu  
þæs tintreglican wiites ond bi swetnesse þæs heofonlecan rices he monig leoð geworhte. Ond  
swelce eac oðer monig be þæm godcundan fremsumnessum ond domum he geworhte. In eallum  
þæm he geornlice gemde þæt he men atuge from synna lufan ond mandæda, ond to lufan ond to  
geornfulnessse awehte godra dæda; for þon he wæs se mon swiþe æfæst ond regollecum þeodscipum  
60 eaðmodlice underþeoded. Ond wið þæm þa ðe in oðre wisan don woldon, he wæs mid welme  
micelre ellenwodnisse onbærned. Ond he for ðon fægre ænde his lif betynde ond geendade.

For þon þa ðære tide nealæcte his gewitenesse ond forðfore, þa wæs he feowertynum dagum ær,  
þæt he wæs lichomlicre untrymnesse þrycced ond hefgad, hwæðre to þon gemetlice þæt he ealle  
þa tid meahthe ge sprecaþ ge gongan. Wæs þær in neaweste untrumra monna hus, in þæm heora  
65 þeaw wæs þæt heo þa untrumran ond þa ðe æt forðfore wæron inlædan sceoldon, ond him þær  
ætsomne þegnian. Ða bæd he his þegn on æfenne þære neahthe þe he of worulde gongende wæs  
þæt he in þæm huse him stowe gegearwode, þæt he gerestan meahthe. Ða wundrode se þegn for  
hwon he ðæs bæde, for þon him þuhte þæt his forðfor swa neah nære; dyde hwæðre swa swa he  
cwæð ond bibeað.

70 Ond mid þy he ða þær on reste eode, ond he gefeonde mode sumu þing mid him sprecende

and came here, because I am not able to sing anything.’ Again, the one who was speaking with him said: ‘Nevertheless, you must sing something for me.’ Then Cædmon said: ‘What shall I sing?’ He said: ‘Sing to me about creation.’ When he got this answer, he began to sing straightaway in praise of God the Creator, in verse and words that he had never heard, of which the arrangement is:

Now praise the Guardian of the heavenly kingdom,  
 the might of the Creator and his conception,  
 the work of the glorious Father, as he established the beginning,  
 eternal Lord, of each of the wonders.  
 He first created for the children of earth  
 heaven as a roof, holy Creator;  
 then the middle-earth, the Guardian of mankind,  
 eternal Lord, afterwards adorned  
 the world for people, the Lord almighty.

Then he arose from sleeping, and all that he had sung while sleeping was secure in his memory, and immediately he added many words in the same metre to the words of the worthy poem to God. In the morning, he came to the estate’s reeve who was his superior; he told him about the gift that he had received. And straightaway the reeve led him to the abbess and he informed and told her. Then she instructed that all the most learned men and students should be gathered together, and she asked Cædmon to tell them his dream and sing the poem, so that all of them who were selected might judge what the poem was and where it came from. And they all said, just as it was the case, that it seemed that he had been given a heavenly gift from God himself. When they narrated and told him a holy story and words of divine instruction, they asked him to turn it into harmonious poetry, if he was able. When he had absorbed that information, he went back to his house, and returned again in the morning and sang them the most ornate poem and by that, gave back what had been asked of him.

Then the abbess began to embrace and love God’s gift in that man. And she advised and instructed him to leave the secular order and take up a monastic life; and he consented to do that. And she received him and all his possessions into that monastery, and he was joined with the community of God’s servants, and she instructed him to learn the sequence of holy history and all its stories. And everything that he was able to learn by listening, he ruminated upon, just as a clean beast chewing the cud, and turned into the sweetest poetry. And his songs and poems were so joyful to hear that the self-same men who were his teachers wrote down what came from his mouth and studied it.

First he sang of the creation of this middle-earth and of the beginning of humanity and all that story of Genesis: that is, the first book of Moses. And afterward he sang about the Israelites’ journey out of Egypt and entry into the promised land, and about many other sacred stories written in the canonical book. And he composed about Christ’s incarnation, and about his suffering and his ascension to heaven, and about the advent of the Holy Ghost, and of the Apostles’ teaching; and afterward, he composed many others about the future Day of Judgement, and the horror of tormenting punishment, and the sweetness of the heavenly kingdom. And likewise, he composed many others about divine benefits and judgements. In all his poetry he eagerly took care to draw men away from the love of sin and wickedness, and to arouse them towards love and desire of good deeds; this was because he was a very pious man, humbly devoted to monastic discipline. And to those who wished to act in other ways, he was very fervently inspired in his zealous aim. And therefore, he concluded and finished his life with a good death.

Thus, the time of his death and going forth drew near, when for fourteen days previously, he was physically oppressed and weighed down with infirmity, but in such a way that he could at all times both speak and walk. Nearby, there was a house for sick people, into which it was their custom to bring the infirm and those who were near to death, and to care for them there. Then he asked his servant on the evening of the night when he would be going from this world to get a place ready for him in that house, so that he might stay there. The servant wondered why Cædmon asked this, for it did not seem to him that his death was so near; even so, he did as he had said and asked.

And with that he went there to rest, and, rejoicing in mind, he was talking and laughing about things

ætgædere ond gleowiende wæs, þe þær ær inne wæron. Ða wæs ofer middeneaht þæt he frægn  
 hwæðer heo ænig husl inne hæfdon. Ða ondswarodon heo ond cwædon: 'Hwylc þearf is ðe husles?  
 Ne þinre forþfore swa neah is, nu þu þus rotlice ond þus glædlice to us sprecende eart.' Cwæð he  
 eft: 'Berað me husl to.' Ða he hit þa on honda hæfde, þa frægn he hwæþer heo ealle smolt mod ond  
 75 buton eallum incan bliðe to him hæfdon. Ða ondswardon hy ealle ond cwædon þæt heo nænigne  
 incan to him wiston, ac heo ealle him swiðe bliðemode wæron. Ond heo wrixendlice hine bædon  
 þæt he him eallum bliðe wære. Ða ondswarade he ond cwæð: 'Mine broðor, mine þa leofan, Ic eom  
 swiðe bliðemod to eow ond to eallum Godes monnum.' Ond swa wæs hine getrymmende mid þy  
 heofonlecan wegneste ond him oðres lifes ingong gegearwode. Ða gyt he frægn hu neah þære tide  
 80 wære þætte þa broðor arisan scolden ond Godes lof ræran ond heora uhtsong singan. Ða ondswardon  
 heo: 'Nis hit feor to þon.' Cwæð he: 'Teala, wuton we wel þære tide bidan.' Ond þa him gebæd  
 ond hine gesegnode mid Cristes rodetacne, ond his heafod onhylde to þam bolstre, ond medmicel  
 fæc, onslepte. Ond swa mid stilnesse his lif geendade. Ond swa wæs geworden þætte swa swa he  
 hluttre mode ond bilwitre ond smyltre wilsumnesse Drihtne þeode, þæt he eac swylce swa smylte  
 85 deaðe middangeard wæs forlætende, ond to his gesihðe becwom. Ond seo tunge, þe swa monig  
 halwende word in þæs Scyppendes lof gesette, he ða swelce eac þa ytmæstan word in his herenisse,  
 hine seolfne segniende ond his gast in his honda bebedende, betynde. Eac swelce þæt is gesegen  
 þæt he wære gewis his seolfes forðfore, of þæm we nu secgan hyrdon.



together with those who were already there. Then just after midnight, he asked whether they had any consecrated bread and wine there. They answered him and said: 'Why do you have need of the Eucharist? Your departure cannot be so near, now that you are speaking so cheerfully and happily to us.' So he said once again: 'Bring me the Eucharist.' Then when he had it in his hand, he asked whether they all had a peaceful and friendly mind without any complaint against him. And they all answered and said that they had nothing to complain of about him, but they all felt very peaceably towards him. And they asked him in turn if he felt happy with all of them. Then he answered them saying: 'My brothers, my dearest men, I feel very contented towards you and towards all men of God.' And so he was strengthened with the heavenly viaticum,<sup>9</sup> and prepared himself for entry into another life. And still he asked how soon would it be time for the monks to rise to celebrate God's love and to sing their matins.<sup>10</sup> And they answered: 'It isn't long until then.' He said: 'Oh well, let us bide the time well.' And then he prayed and crossed himself with the sign of Christ's cross, and laid his head on the pillow, and within a short time, he fell asleep. And thus with peace his life ended. And thus it happened that just as he had served God with a pure mind and innocent and serene devotion, so he was likewise released from this earth with a serene death, and came to his sight. And his tongue, that had composed so many salutary words in praise of the Creator, likewise spoke its last words in his praise, as, crossing himself and commending his spirit into his hands, he died. So, similarly, it can be seen from what we have now heard said that he was aware of his own death.

9 The viaticum is the Eucharist given to those who are about to die: effectively, the last rites.

10 Matins is the first service of prayer in the monastic daily office, occurring at 6 a.m. in the winter, and 3.30 or 4 a.m. in summer.