BIBLICAL REALIGNMENT OF A MAXIM IN THE OLD ENGLISH PHOENIX, LINES 355b–60

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It is relatively difficult to find clear biblical sources for Old English maxims. Of the highly theological Wa / Wel / Dol / Eadig group of maxims that occurs in Beowulf, The Seafarer and others, about forty examples in all, only one outside the Metrical Psalms has any direct scriptural parallel. This difficulty is also to be found in relation to the interesting group of God ana wat maxims in the Maxims poems, in The Battle of Maldon and elsewhere. In this paper, I want to look briefly at four aspects of the poet's use of the maxim form in lines 335b–60 of The Phoenix.

First, I suggest that the poet knew he was using a traditional form of expression. I list below the group of maxims which use the formula x ana wat; there are other passages which use the formula, but which are not maxims: 'Ic ana wat ea rinnende (I alone know the flowing river)' from Metrical Charm 2, line 59, and 'Du þæt ana wast (You alone know)' from Psalm 50, line 61b. While the latter addresses God, 'mihtig dryhten' (1.62a) and obviously draws on the traditional form, it does not fall into the group of maxims which is in part defined by the use of what Anita Riedinger calls the formula 'set'.

There are six maxims, a. to f., one of which uses the 'set' formula twice (ff.), and another which paraphrases the 'set' formula (bb.).

a. God ana wat
   hu he þæt scyldige werud forscrifen hefde!
   (Christ, ll.32b–33)

1 All quotations from G.P. Krapp and E.V.K. Dobbie, The Anglo-Saxon poetic records, 6 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931–42). Titles are those of the ASPR editions. All translations are my own, except where noted.

2 Anita Riedinger, 'The Old English formula in context', Speculum, 60 (1985), 294–317. While Riedinger's definitions are complex, her work brings a degree of clarity and rigour to Old English formulaic analysis, and adds a subtle appreciation of the thematic role of formulas in the verse. Her definition of a 'set' is: 'a group of verses usually sharing the same function and system in which one word, usually stressed, is constant, and at least one stressed word may be varied, usually synonymously, to suit the alliterative and/or narrative context' (306). Here the system is x ana x with the constant ana; the formula is x ana (witan); the synonymous terms, God / Meotud / Drihten; and the function is to signify 'knowledge limited only to one person'; and the theme of the 'set' is God's exclusive knowledge of why and when death will come, and what will happen afterwards.
God alone knows how he condemned that guilty band.

b. God ana wat
cyning ælmihtig, hu his gecynde bid,
bb. wiþhades þe weres; þæt ne wat ænig
monna cynnes, butan meotod ana,
uhu þa wisan sind wundorlice,
fæger fyngesceap, ymb þæs fugles gebyrd.

(Phoenix, ll.355b–60)

God, the almighty King, alone knows its gender, whether it be male or female. No-one of all humankind knows, but only the Creator, what the miraculous circumstances, the wonderful dispensation of old, may be concerning the birth of the bird.

c. God ana wat
hwæt him weaxendum winter bringað!

(Fortunes of Men, ll.8b–9)

God alone knows what the years will bring to the growing child.

d. Meotud ana wat
hwær se cwealm cymeþ, þe heonan of cyþþe gewiteþ

(Maxims 1, ll.29b–30)

The Creator alone knows where the plague goes when it leaves our land.

e. god ana wat
hwæþ he þære wælstowe wealdan mote.

(Maldon, ll.94b–95)

God alone knows who will control the battlefield.

f. Meotud ana wat
hwýder seo sawul sceal syðdan hweorfan,
and ealle þa gastas þe for gode hweorfan
aþfer deaðdæge, domes bidað
on fæder fæðme. Is seo forðgesceaf

(Maxims 2, ll.57b–63a)

The Creator alone knows where the soul will go afterwards, and all the spirits who go before God after the day of death to await judgement in the bosom of the Father. The future is hidden and secret; the Lord alone knows these things, the saving Father.

Comparing the Phoenix passage with the other God (meotod, drihten) ana wat maxims in Old English poetry, it is clear that the determinative formula regularly occurs in the second half-line of verse. But the maxims have more in common than a formulaic style, distinctive though that is. Four of the maxims consist of a line-and-a-half; the other two, longer, examples remind the audience of the maxim form. In the Maxims this is done by reiterating the formula
with a variant for God; in the Phoenix example the form is foregrounded by paraphrase (‘hæt ne wat ænig / monna cynnes’) and reiteration of the keyword *ana*. This shows a strong sense of the maxim as a traditional expression with a discernible shape and relatively fixed components.

Secondly, the poet uses this maxim to generate a sense of wonder at the nature of the bird. In doing so, he diverts from the main source, Lactantius, which, in discussing the origin of the bird and its gender, denigrates sexual relations:

> O fortunatae sortis felixque volucrum,
> Cui de se nasci praestitit ipse deus.
> Femina seu sexu seu masculus est seu neutrum:
> Felix que Veneris foedera nulla colit.
> Mors ille Venus est, sola est in morte voluptas:
> Vt possit nasci, appetit ante mori.

(II.161–6)

To this most happy and fortunate of birds, God has granted the power of being self-born. Whether female, male or neuter sexually, she is happy because she has nothing to do with Venus and her unions; her Venus is death; her only pleasure is in death. So that she can be born, she desires first to die.4

The poet may have been a monastic for whom virginity and chastity were the highest grade of spiritual perfection, as Bugge suggests.5 But he failed to make capital of the opportunity given in his main source to emphasize it at this point. Rather, the poet concentrates on the mystery of the bird, which in a rather interesting fashion raises the ‘chicken and egg’ question. This leads him to worship the Creator, who alone knows the answers to the conundra of birth, life and death. Here, though, the overt emphasis is on birth rather than procreation: ‘ymb þæs fugles gebyrd’.

Thirdly, although the overt emphasis of the passage is on the origin of the phoenix, the poet does not leave out of consideration the fact that it is through death that the phoenix is reborn. In all its Old English occurrences, the *God ana wat* maxim has reference to death, judgement, and the unknown eschatological future, and this sense is paralleled in the early Middle English *Proverbs of Alfred*:

> Not no mon þene tyme.  
> hwanne he schal. heonne turne.  
> Ne nomon þene ende.  
> hwenne he schal heonne wende.

Dryhten hit one wat.
dowepes louerd.
hwanne vre lif
leten schule. 6

No-one knows the time when he shall turn hence, and no-one the end, when he shall go hence. The Lord alone knows it, the Lord of might, when our life shall leave.

Referring to the six maxims listed earlier, the only one that does not have clear and immediate reference to death or doom is the one from *The Fortunes of Men*. A glance at the next few lines following the maxim in that poem will show that death is at the forefront of the poet's mind: a whole range of violent and tragic deaths are listed by the poet in the next twenty lines or so.

The primary contextual function of the maxim is to reserve knowledge of death and associated problems to God. But three of the maxims occur in contexts which also refer to mysteries of birth. The examples from *The Fortunes of Men* and *Maxims I* have closely parallel passages (compare *Fortunes.*, I.1-3a and *Maxims I* I.23b-25a) and a similar interest in the cycle of birth, life and death. These associations of the maxim in general make the particular use of the form in *The Phoenix* uniquely appropriate: all the mysteries and questions which surround human procreation, birth, life and death are compounded in the case of the phoenix. All such mysteries and questions can only be attributed to the foreknowledge and dispensation of God, the creator of the bird.

Finally, this passage builds an association between the bird and Christ and the Christian. These associations carry the main allegorical lessons of the poem. There is a submerged reference to Matthew 24:36, where Christ is talking about the Day of Judgement and his own Second Coming: ‘De die autem illa et hora nemo scit, *pet ne wat ænig*, neque angeli caelorum, nisi solus Pater *butan meotod ana*’. The Latin homiletic source conjectured by Förster and Blake” to have been used by the poet and the writers of the prose versions almost certainly used the Matthean pericope at this point: Luke does not have an exact parallel, and Mark has ‘De die autem illo vel hora nemo scit, neque angeli in caelo, neque Filius, nisi Pater’ (Mark 13:32). The addition of *neque Filius* and the absence of *solus* here locate the reference in *The Phoenix* clearly in Matthew. One of the Old English prose versions, the Vespasian, has

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6 *An Old English miscellany*, ed. R. Morris (EETS. OS, 49, London, 1872), 102-38, II.172-9. This passage is evidently based on the same biblical pericope as the *Phoenix* maxim: see below, where the treatment of the biblical source is discussed.

Max Förster, ‘Der Inhalt der altenglischen Handschrift Vespasianus D xiv’, *Englische Studien*, 54 (1920), 64-5; Blake, 101. At this point it is interesting to note Blake's conclusion that the Old English and Old Norse prose versions are independent.
'nan man ne wat . . . bute God ane' at this point, the other is much more diffuse; like the Vespasian version and the poem, the Old Norse has 'engi maðr veit . . . nema Guð einn'. None of the versions accurately render the *Pater* of the Bible, but the poem's *meotod* reflects the biblical context of judgement more closely than the colourless *God* of the prose versions.9

The association of the bird and Christ and the Christian is confirmed in the following lines, where the poet speaks of the millennium that the bird enjoys until the fire engulfs it:

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\begin{align*}
&\texttt{þær se eadga mot eardes neotan,} \\
&\texttt{wyllestrema wuduholtum in,} \\
&\texttt{wunian in wonge, oþþæt wintra bið} \\
&\texttt{þusend urnen. Donne him wearþed} \\
&\texttt{ende lifes; hine ad þeccð} \\
&\texttt{þurh æledfyr.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(ll. 361-6a)

There the blessed bird can enjoy its home, the welling streams in the woods; it can live on the plain until a thousand years shall have passed. Then comes the end of its life: the fire engulfs it in flames.

This is an alteration of the sources (Cyril of Jerusalem's *Catechesis*, Ambrose's *Hexameron* and the Latin *Physiologus*),10 which all have the bird's lifespan as five hundred years; the idea derives from Lactantius (where the only reference to the thousand years is in line 50, compare lines 151-2 of the Old English poem), and presumably the immediate Latin homiletic source, as all the prose versions have the thousand-year lifespan. However, there was also a direct identification of the bird with Christ in that source as all the prose versions refer to the phoenix rising from death 'on þone þriddan dæge' (on the third day), and this the poet omits altogether. The thousand-year lifespan is, like the maxim, a submerged reference to biblical eschatology, this time Revelation 20, where the millennial reign of Christ and the saints precedes the judgement of the dead.

Without elaboration, presumably because the poet was not writing a theological treatise which would need to clarify the precise

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8 F. Kluge edited both the Vespasian and the possibly earlier (see Blake, *Phoenix*, 98) Corpus Christi College, Cambridge MS 198: 'Zu altenglischen Dichtungen. 3. Zum Phönix', *Englische Studien*, 8 (1885), 474-9. The Corpus MS has at this point 'and nafæh he nenne gemacan ne nan man newat hweþer hit is þe carlfugol þe cwefufol buton Crist sylf (it has no mate, and no-one knows whether it is a male or female bird except Christ himself)'. This entirely obscures the gospel allusion.


10 The relevant passage from Ambrose is given in Blake, *Phoenix*, 96-7, and both Ambrose and *Physiologus* are translated in *Sources and analogues*, eds Calder and Allen, 118-20.
meaning of his references and symbols, the maxim and its context draws on well-known eschatological texts to alert the audience to the significance of the bird. Thus, rather than moralising, the poet allows the image to speak for itself. He develops the representation of the bird as Christ, while simultaneously preparing the audience for the later lesson that the bird also represents the Christian here. D.G. Calder writes, 'As a symbol, the phoenix contains in its own enigma the whole paradox of the incarnation: the phoenix is man and Christ just as Christ himself was both man and God.' This maxim and its context balances the Christological aspects of the symbol with the human by reference to the Bible passages.

In conclusion then, this is a maxim remarkably well adapted to the poet's purpose. It brings together scripture and tradition, giving full weight to both. It balances the demands of its sources with the poet's understanding and insight into the lessons his audience could learn from the allegory. It brings the maxim's traditional associations of birth and death into play, and through allusion to eschatological texts it anticipates the extended allegorical exposition of the second part of the poem. Thus the maxim enhances the spiritual message and effectiveness of the poem.