THE DEATH OF THE MESSENGER: THE 'SPELBODA' IN THE OLD ENGLISH *EXODUS*

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The Old English *Exodus*, one of three poems on Old Testament themes collected in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 11,[1] retells dramatically the events of the biblical book of Exodus, 13–14. Having allowed the Israelites to leave their Egyptian captivity with their leader, Moses, Pharaoh has then changed his mind and sent his army in pursuit. The flight of the Israelites is blocked by the Red Sea and all seems lost, until Moses invokes God's power to make a dry channel through the sea. The Israelites escape and, when the Egyptians try to follow, the divine miracle is reversed, the waters return and the proud Egyptian army is utterly destroyed. In its Old English version, this episode is memorable for its apocalyptic imagery and the almost cinematographic intensity of its presentation, and the closing scene of the poem eventually provides a fitting sequel: the Israelites jubilantly sing of their triumph and greedily strip the drowned Egyptians of their treasures, the spoils of war. An intriguing half-line at the conclusion of the account of the Egyptians' destruction seems to have escaped critical attention, however. Walls of water have come crashing down on Pharoah's army. Men shriek in terror, the sea foams with blood and in the chaos, the poet tells us, 'the whole force perished . . . Pharaoh along with his people': *mægen eall gedreas . . . Faraon mid his folcum* (ll.500b and 502a). This reflects accurately enough the last part of the cursory Vulgate account (Exodus 14:28), although the presence of Pharaoh himself has no biblical authority:[2]

[1] On Junius 11, the so-called 'Cædmon manuscript' (dated to the early eleventh century), see N.R. Ker, *Catalogue of manuscripts containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957; reissued with suppl., 1990), 406–8 (no. 334); H. Gneuss, 'A preliminary list of manuscripts written or owned in England up to 1100', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 9 (1981), 1–60, no. 640. I discuss the contents further, below. All its texts are printed in G.P. Krapp, ed., *The Junius manuscript*, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records [hereafter ASPR], 1 (New York and London: Columbia Press, 1931), with *Exodus* at 91–107. The most recent edition of the latter is P.J. Lucas, *Exodus* (London: Methuen, 1977; revised edition Exeter: University Press, 1994).

[2] It is a detail included by Ælfric, however, in the homily on Judith which I discuss below (see n. 13).

reuersae sunt aquae et operuerunt currus et equites cuncti exercitus Pharaonis qui sequentes ingressi fuerant mare ne unus quidem superfuit ex eis[3]

the waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen of all the army of Pharaoh, who, following them, had entered the sea; neither did so much as one of them remain.[4]

But the Old English poet then takes up the last phrase of the Latin (*ne unus quidem superfuit ex eis*), which he has already anticipated, and not only amplifies it but goes a stage further, elaborating the plain fact of non-survival by drawing attention to something implicit in it:

Egyptum wearð
þæs dægweorces deop lean gesceod,
forðam þæs heriges ham eft ne com
ealles ungrundes ænig to lafe,
þætte sið heora secgan moste,
bodigean æfter burgum bealospella mæst,
hordwearda hryre, hæleða cwenum,
ac þa mægenþreatas meredeað geswealh,
spelbodan eac
(ll.506b–14a)

The Egyptians suffered a profound requital for that day's work, for not anyone of that army, vast as it was, got home again as a survivor, who could describe the expedition, make known throughout the cities, and to the warriors' wives, that most baleful of news, the fall of the guardians of treasure [sc. the warriors]; but sea-death swallowed the great forces – *and the messenger, too.*

I have cited the crucial last half-line – *spelbodan eac* – in the emended form proposed by G.P. Krapp.[5] The manuscript has simply *spelbodan*, which apparently occupies a half-line by itself, and something is obviously missing. However, the earlier lines ('none came back home as a survivor to tell of their fate', ll.508b–10) leave no doubt as to the sense of the corrupt half line. The poet is using the characteristic Old English poetical device of variation to repeat, in different words and with some modification, his statement that the destruction of the Egyptians was so complete that no-one survived. The additional information, given great syntactical emphasis, is that there was not even one person left who could have reached home to tell the sorry story of defeat. Various other emendations of the half-line have been proposed, including Grein's *spilde spelbodan* ('[sea-death] destroyed the messenger(s)'), which

[3] My Vulgate citations are taken from *Biblia Sacra iuxta uulgatam uersionem*, eds R. Weber et al., third edition, 2 vols (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983).
[4] Translations in this paper are my own, unless I state otherwise.
[5] See his note to line 514. *Junius manuscript*, 216

was followed also by Tolkien.[6] As the noun must be in the accusative case (parallel with *mægenþreatas*), and as *spelboda* is a weak noun, there is no way of knowing whether *spelbodan* is singular or plural, and editors and translators have differed in their interpretations, although the plural seems to have enjoyed slightly greater favour.[7] It seems to me that the singular – whether we are to understand it to refer to a specific functionary (perhaps an official *scop*) or to the generic messenger – has a special poignancy in the context and is therefore more appropriate. The evidence of the book of Judith, as we shall see, may support the choice of singular noun.

Although the poet's amplification has no authority in any Latin or Greek text of Exodus 14:28 that I know of, it does nonetheless seem to have been inspired by his familiarity with the Vulgate. He probably recalled a similar passage from Judith, where a synopsis of the Red Sea miracle occurs in an account of the Israelites given by Achior, leader of the Ammonites, who are allies of the Assyrians. He is speaking to Holofernes, Nebuchadnezzar's general and the target of Judith's heroic actions. Achior's description of the Egyptian calamity ends thus (Judith 5:13):

in quo loco dum innumerabilis exercitus Aegyptiorum eos persequeretur
ita aquis coopertus est ut non remaneret uel unus qui factum posteris nuntiaret

when an innumerable army of the Egyptians pursued them in that place, it was so overwhelmed with the waters that there was not even one left, who might tell what had happened to posterity.

Curiously, in this Vulgate version by Jerome the allusion to the destroyed tale-bearer once again does not seem to derive from the likely main source of the translation. Nothing in the known Greek or Old Latin versions of Judith warrants *uel unus qui factum posteris nuntiaret*.[8] Jerome claimed in his preface to this non-canonical book

[6] C.W.M. Grein (ed.), *Bibliothek der angelsächsischen Poesie in kritischen bearbeiteten Texten und mit vollständigem Glossar*, 4 vols in 3 (Göttingen and Cassel: Georg H. Wigland, 1857–64), I, 91; J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Old English 'Exodus': text, translation and commentary*, ed. J. Turville-Petre (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 75, note to line 513. Tolkien suggests *swylce* as an alternative to *spilde*. E.B. Irving (ed.), *The Old English 'Exodus'*, Yale Studies in English, 122 (repr. with supplementary bibliography, Yale: Archon Books, 1970), 95, emended to *swa eac spelbodan* ('and likewise the messenger(s)'); and Lucas, *Exodus*, 141, to *eac þon spelbodan* ('likewise the messenger(s)'), which he makes on the analogy of line 546b, *eac þon lissa blæd*.

[7] It is favoured by C.W. Kennedy, trans., *The Cædmon poems translated into English prose* (London: Routledge, 1916), 115; R.K. Gordon, trans., *Anglo-Saxon poetry* (London: Dent, 1926), 130; Lucas, *Exodus*; and S.A.J. Bradley, trans., *Anglo-Saxon poetry* (London: Dent, 1982), 63. The singular is given by Tolkien, *Old English 'Exodus'*, 31 and Irving, *Old English 'Exodus'*, whose glossary entry, however, suggests the plural as an alternative.

[8] Cf. *Bibliorum sacrorum latinae uersiones antiquae seu uetus Italica*, 3 vols, ed. P. Sabatier (Rheims: Reginaldus Florentain, regis typographus, 1743–49), I, 756 and *Septuaginta. Vetus Testamentum graecum auctoritate Societatis Litterarum Gottingensis editum*, eds A. Rahlfs, J. Ziegler et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1931–), VIII.4, 74.

to have spent little time on it and to have adapted it from a variety of texts, corrected with the help of a 'Chaldee' version.[9] Presumably it was something in one of his sources which prompted the addition, but its identity has not been established. I have traced no patristic commentary on the line in question.[10] Whatever Jerome's haste in preparing Judith, the implication is that he recognized the dramatic value of the extra detail and decided to include it. Jerome used a construction in the singular (*uel unus qui*) and, if Judith was indeed the Old English poet's source for the amplification, this supports the interpretation of his *spelbodan* as singular.

The book of Judith seems to have been well known in Anglo-Saxon England. The eponymous heroine was herself the subject of an Old English poem, copied with *Beowulf* and various prose texts in a codex dating from the turn of the tenth century, although Achior's speech does not form part of the poet's account.[11] There is no certainty about when the Old English *Judith* was composed, but features of the language and style have led critics to suspect a 'late' date – that is, the ninth or possibly the tenth century.[12] Towards the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, at the beginning of the eleventh century, Ælfric wrote a homily based on the book, in which Judith's heroic chastity is the dominant theme.[13] Ælfric saw this as having contemporary relevance in relation to Viking attacks on England, a point made quite explicit in a survey he wrote of the contents of the Old and New Testaments, where he cited the example of Judith's resistance to a threatening enemy.[14] In his paraphrase of Achior's account in the homily, however, Ælfric ignores the words about the death of the messenger and restricts his version to the general statement that no one survived:

[9] '. . . sola ea quae intelligentia integra in uerbis chaldeis inuenire potui, latinis expressi' (*Biblia Sacra*, ed. Weber, I, 691).

[10] The major commentary is that by Rabanus Maurus (*Patrologia Latina*, 109, 539–92). Jerome's translation of Tobit sheds some light on his sources, for he claimed to have consulted a 'Chaldee' text for that also, and this is known to have been an Aramaic version. See *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English*, ed. R.H. Charles, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), I, 244.

[11] The manuscript is London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. xv, fos 94–105; Ker, *Catalogue*, no. 216 (pp. 281–3); Gneuss, 'Manuscripts', no. 399. The text is edited by E.V.K. Dobbie, *Beowulf and Judith*, ASPR, 4 (New York, 1953), 99–109 and by B.J. Timmer, *Judith*, rev. edn (Exeter: University Press, 1978).

[12] Ibid., 6–8 and *Beowulf and Judith*, ed. Dobbie, lxii–xiv.

[13] *Angelsächsische Homilien und Heiligenleben*, ed. B. Assmann, Bibliothek der angelsächsischen Prosa, 3 (Kassel: Georg H. Wigand, 1889; repr. with intro. by P. Clemoes, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1964), no. IX, 102–16. See I. Pringle, '*Judith*: The homily and the poem', *Traditio*, 31 (1975), 83–97.

[14] *Libellus de ueteri testamento et nouo*, printed in *The Old English version of the Heptateuch, Ælfric's treatise on the Old and New Testament and his preface to Genesis*, ed. S.J. Crawford, EETS, OS, 160 (London, 1922; repr. 1969, with the text of two additional manuscripts transcribed by N.R. Ker), 15–75, at 48.

And Pharao se cyning ferde him æt hindan, wolde hi habban eft to his þeowte, ac God hine adrencte on þære deopan sæ þæt of ealre his fyrde an mann ne belæaf[15]

and Pharaoh the king followed them, wanted to have them again in his thraldom, but God drowned him in the deep sea, so that of all his army not one man survived.

Ælfric, a tireless transmitter of sound doctrine, plainly told, apparently had no interest in the theme of posterity's messenger and seems, indeed, to have eschewed it deliberately in favour of the simple account he knew in the Pentateuch version – hence the absence of a *spelboda* from his homily.

It will be seen that the *Exodus* poet has adjusted the idea of telling the news (or not being able to tell it) to posterity, as given in the Judith account, to a more immediate act of reporting (in ll. 511–12, cited above). The disaster, he implies, would have been proclaimed initially in the cities of Egypt, to the populace at large, and announced to the army wives left at home. However, this may be seen as a necessary stage in the process of transmission to 'posterity', that is, to future generations,[16] and I believe that the Vulgate Judith account remains the most likely inspiration for the *Exodus* poet's use of the messenger theme. There is evidence throughout the poem of the poet's deep familiarity with the Bible, and many verbal and narrative details can be traced to specific books, including especially Psalms and also Numbers, Deuteronomy, Revelation and some prophetical and historical books.[17] At the same time, the poet's interest in the theme may reflect a more widely shared concern in Old English poetry, for there is a parallel use of the 'messenger' theme in the translation of yet another Vulgate retelling of the Red Sea episode, this time in Psalms. It occurs in the bilingual 'Paris Psalter', Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, lat. 8824, a book notable for its tall and narrow pages (*c.* 526 × 186 mm), each of which has two columns.[18] The first column contains a Latin text of Psalms in the 'Roman' version, and the second an Old English translation, although this has been made from a different Latin text. The vernacular psalms are from more than one source, too, for the first fifty are in a prose version, which has been attributed to King Alfred and therefore was made towards the end of the ninth

[15] *Homilien*, ed. Assmann, 105. I have ignored Assmann's unhelpful presentation of the homily in 'metrical' lines.

[16] This is the usual sense of *posterus* in the Vulgate. Cf. Genesis 21:23, 26:4, etc.

[17] See *Old English 'Exodus'*, ed. Irving, 14–16. J.B. Trahern, Jr, 'More scriptural echoes in the Old English *Exodus*', in *Anglo-Saxon poetry: essays in appreciation for John C. McGalliard*, eds L.E. Nicholson and D.W. Frese (Notre Dame: University Press, 1975), 291–8; and *Exodus*, ed. Lucas, 54–5.

[18] Ker, *Catalogue*, no. 367 (pp. 440–1); Gneuss, 'Manuscripts', no. 891.

century, and the rest (Psalms 51–150) are in verse.[19] One of the latter, Psalm 105, is a confessional psalm, in which the Israeli nation rehearses its collective past sins, and it includes a resumé of the Red Sea miracle and the drowning of the Egyptians. Echoing the wording of Exodus 14:28, the Vulgate text of Psalm 105:11, as written in the first column of the Paris Psalter, reads:

et operuit aqua tribulantes eos unus ex eis non remansit.

This is the version of both the Roman and the Gallican psalters.[20] However, the parallel Old English version, in the second column, paraphrases both parts of the Latin verse:

and heora feondas flod adrencte, þæt þæra æfre ne com an spelboda[21]

and the flood drowned their enemies, so that from them no messenger survived.

It is notable that the Old English poet has not added words to the second part of the sentence as an amplification of it (as the poet of *Exodus* did), but has substituted the amplification for the simple statement. Thus we are not told that all the Egyptians died, and we could interpret the information to mean that, if any *did* survive, there wasn't a messenger among them. As a consequence, the lack of a *spelboda* here gets a greater emphasis.

Did the two poets, of *Exodus* and of the metrical psalms, use a common source (the Vulgate Judith account), or did one borrow from the other? On the face of it, it is easier to suppose that the psalter poet was familiar with the poem and borrowed the idea of the *spelboda* from it. Nothing in the Latin versions of Psalm 105 could have inspired the alteration unaided, for *unus ex his* clearly refers to the *tribulantes* in general, not to a specific type among them. The psalter poet, therefore, would have needed to be familiar with the Judith version (or a similar source) and to have borrowed from it. On the other hand, the *Exodus* poet's familiarity with both the Old English version of the psalm and the biblical Exodus would have been enough to provide him with the material for his

[19] The prose psalms are J.W. Bright and R.L. Ramsay (eds), *Liber Psalmorum. The West-Saxon psalms* (Boston, Mass. and London: D.C. Heath, 1907); the verse psalms are ed. G.P. Krapp, *The Paris Psalter and the meters of Boethius*, ASPR, 5 (New York and London, 1932).

[20] The third and last (and least popular) of the versions of the Psalms attributed to Jerome, *iuxta hebraeos*, varies in its wording of 105:11, but not in its sense: *et operuit aqua hostes eorum unus de ipsis non superfuit*. For the Gallican and Hebrew texts, see *Biblia Sacra*, ed. Weber et al., I; for the Roman text, *Le Psautier Romain et les autres anciens Psautiers Latins*, ed. R. Weber, Collectanea Biblica Latina, 10 (Rome: Abbaye Saint-Jérôme/Libreria Vaticana, 1953).

[21] *Paris Psalter*, ed. Krapp, 84 (where the lines are given as part of Psalm 105:10).

version.[22] There is, in fact, good evidence that the metrical psalms were widely influential on other vernacular compositions. Lines 60–2 of the verse *Menologium*, a mnemonic calendar of the church year, appear to have been taken, with the most minor modifications, from the metrical version of Psalm 117:22, as it appears in the Paris Psalter.[23] Clearly from the same source are the metrical translations of verses from Psalms which occur intermittently in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 121, fos 42–55, a collection of texts for the Benedictine Office.[24] Most of them occur in the office of prime. Furthermore, the texts of Psalms 90:16–95:2 (except for 92:1–2) have been inserted interlinearly in the Roman Latin text of the Eadwine Psalter, a decorated and illustrated twelfth-century codex from Christ Church, Canterbury.[25] The psalter carries the Gallican and Hebrew texts of the psalms, as well as the Roman. The latter is accompanied by a word for word Old English gloss throughout, except in the section noted, where the metrical version takes over. Its text seems to derive, not directly from the Paris Psalter, but from a common ancestor.[26]

The dating of these various compositions, which in theory would enable us to establish probable interrelationships, is a treacherous area, where supposition rests on supposition and circular arguments are rife. Palaeographical and artistic evidence confirms that the Junius codex, containing *Exodus*, was written in the first half of the eleventh century, possibly at Malmesbury. The poem itself, however, has traditionally been considered an 'early'

[22] Lucas (*Exodus*, 98–9) notes the similarity also between *Exodus* line 144, 'ealles þæs forgeton, siððan grame wurdon . . .', and the Paris Psalter version of Psalm 118:138, 'ealles forgeaton, þa me grame wæron, worda þinra'.

[23] See *The Anglo-Saxon minor poems*, ed. E.V.K. Dobbie, ASPR, 6 (New York, 1942), lxv. For the texts, see ibid., 50 and *Paris Psalter*, ed. Krapp, 102–3.

[24] Ibid., xix–xx; *Minor poems*, ed. Dobbie, lxxiv–viii. On Junius 121, see Ker, *Catalogue*, no. 338, item 11 (pp. 412–18, at 414). The psalm fragments are printed *Minor poems*, ed. Dobbie, 80–6. These fragments preserve our only evidence for the first fifty psalms in the metrical version represented by the Paris Psalter's 51–100. See J.M. Ure, *The Benedictine Office* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1957), 17–19. Ure prints the whole text of the vernacular Benedictine Office. Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 201 contains much of the same text as Junius 121, but does not include the psalms extracts (ibid., 9–12).

[25] Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R. 17. 1; Ker, *Catalogue*, no. 91 (pp. 135–6); *The Eadwine Psalter: text, image, and monastic culture in twelfth-century Canterbury*, eds Margaret T. Gibson, T.A. Heslop, Richard W. Pfaff (London and University Park, PA: The Modern Humanities Research Association, 14 and Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992). The metrical psalms text is printed and discussed by P.S. Baker, 'A little-known variant text of the Old English metrical psalms', *Speculum*, 59 (1984), 263–81.

[26] Ibid., 265–7 and 270–2. At Psalms 148.2, another fragment of the metrical psalms was added as an alternative to the main interlinear gloss, and Patrick P. O'Neill, 'The English version', *The Eadwine Psalter*, eds Gibson, Heslop and Pfaff, 123–38, at 131, sees this 'conscious and selective' use of the metrical version as an indication that its use at Psalms 90:16–95:2, too, was deliberate and not either accidental or consequent on a need to fill a lacuna in the main exemplar (which was Ker's explanation, *Catalogue*, 136).

poem, datable perhaps to as early as the beginning of the eighth century, and at least before the ninth, but the linguistic and other evidence is slender and a later date cannot be ruled out.[27] One of the factors which used to be invoked, rather tenuously, to support an earlier date was the lack of apparent Old Norse influence on the poem, but Roberta Frank has shown that such influence is in fact very likely.[28] Yet, if this helps to make a tenth-century dating for *Exodus* more plausible, it does not exclude the earlier periods, when Norse influence could also have occurred. In short, the poem could have been composed at any time between 700 and 1000. As for the metrical psalms in the Paris Psalter, the linguistic and other evidence is again slim. Krapp tentatively suggested the later ninth or early tenth century, and thought that the composer may have been 'not well acquainted with or not interested in the traditions of Anglo-Saxon poetry'.[29] M.S. Griffiths, noting similarly that the poet seems to have eschewed traditional poetic diction, believes that the psalms mark the end of the period when the 'heroic' style was popular, but he makes no suggestion as to when this might have been.[30] The *Menologium* and the *Benedictine Office* theoretically provide *termini ad quem* for the metrical psalms, from which they both borrow. The former may have been written in the latter half of the tenth century, according to Dobbie.[31] It was inserted into an Abingdon copy of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* towards the middle of the eleventh century, but may have been composed at Canterbury. Junius 121, the manuscript whose text of the Old English *Benedictine Office* includes the metrical psalm extracts, originated for certain at Worcester, in about the middle of the eleventh century.[32] Thus, both these documents were composed fairly late in the Anglo-Saxon period and show only that the metrical psalms must have been composed before the end of the tenth century. The crucial chronological relationship of *Exodus* to the metrical psalms remains unknown.

[27] The dating arguments are surveyed in Lucas, *Exodus*, 69–72. Lucas (ibid., 39 and 72) adduces some slight evidence that the poem might have been composed in a Northumbrian dialect and 'transmitted to Malmesbury via a West-Mercian centre such as Worcester or Lichfield'. The Malmesbury attribution has been challenged, however, by Rodney Thomson, 'Books from the pre-conquest library of Malmesbury Abbey', in *Anglo-Saxon England*, 10 (1982), 1–19 (at 16–18).

[28] R. Frank, 'Did Anglo-Saxon audiences have a skaldic tooth?', *Scandinavian Studies*, 59 (1987), 338–55, and 'What kind of poetry is *Exodus*?', *Germania: comparative studies in the Old Germanic languages and literatures*, eds D.G. Calder and T.C. Christy (Wolfeboro, NH and Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1988), 191–205. I discuss Frank's evidence further, below.

[29] *Paris Psalter*, xvii.

[30] 'Poetic language and the Paris psalter: the decay of the Old English tradition', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 20 (1991), 167–86.

[31] *Minor poems*, lxv–xvi.

[32] *Benedictine Office*, ed. Ure, 5–9.

However, the probability that the poet of the Old English *Exodus* used the book of Judith as his source for the 'messenger' theme, and not the psalm, is strengthened by what may be further evidence of the influence of the book on the poem. The poet's *þæs heriges . . . ealles ungrundes* (lines 509–10) has no direct source in the biblical Exodus account. Although it might be argued that he could have supplied the detail easily enough from his own imagination, it is possible that his knowledge of Judith's *innumerabilis exercitus* provided the idea. Whatever the case, these various witnesses seem to reveal a context in which both the poem and the metrical psalms were popular and influential. Giving this chronological and geographical definition, however, remains for the present an insuperable problem. Many interesting questions are raised, however, not least about the purpose and use of the psalms in Old English. Could they have been used on a regular basis for devotional purposes?

Even if the source of the amplification on the death of the messenger could be known with certainty, the question of why the poet of *Exodus* chose to make it remains. My speculations on a possible answer will centre on the explicit and implicit functions of the 'tale-teller' in Old English poetry, and my emphasis will be on the literal and 'secular' dimensions of the poem.

In the Junius Old Testament poems – *Genesis A* (a 2936-line paraphrase of Genesis 1–22),[33] *Exodus* (590 lines, with two manuscript leaves lost), *Daniel* (764 lines but probably incomplete)[34] – the Anglo-Saxons re-shaped the biblical narratives in their own image. The three poems, along with *Christ and Satan* (729 lines), which can be seen as complementing the Old Testament poems,[35] may have been collected in the Junius codex with the intention of bringing together poems on themes central to the devotional preoccupations of the Lent and Easter periods.[36]

[33] Interpolated in *Genesis A* is the poem known as *Genesis B* (lines 235–851), an Old English translation of an Old Saxon poem on the Fall. Both poems are printed *Junius manuscript*, ed. Krapp, 1–87; the most recent critical edition is A.N. Doane, *Genesis A: a new edition* (Wisconsin: University Press, 1978); *Genesis B*, ed. B.J. Timmer, *The later Genesis*, revised edition (Oxford: Scrivener Press, 1954).

[34] Printed *Junius manuscript*, ed. Krapp, 111–32; the most recent edition is *Daniel and Azarias*, ed. R.T. Farrell (London: Methuen, 1974). Only the first four chapters of the biblical book are used by the poet.

[35] *Junius manuscript*, ed. Krapp, 135–58; *Christ and Satan: a critical edition*, ed. R.E. Finnegan (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1977); C.R. Sleeth, *Studies in 'Christ and Satan'* (Toronto: University Press, 1982).

[36] See G. Shepherd, 'Scriptural poetry', in *Poets and prophets: essays on medieval studies*, eds T.A. Shippey and John Pickles (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990), 11–46, at 34. Liturgical influence on the structure and narrative compass of the Old Testament poems is analysed in detail by P. Remley, *Old English biblical verse: studies in Genesis, Exodus and Daniel*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England (forthcoming).

This tells us nothing, however, about the original composition of the individual poems (each of which had a different author and none of which can be dated with any certainty), or about their original purposes or even original forms. In each case, tales of migration and exile, of oppression and battles for survival, have been thoroughly 'germanicized' – submitted, that is, to vernacular rhetoric and diction. Thus, the obedient angels of *Genesis A* have become 'glorious thanes' (*þegnas þrymfæste*; 15); Moses, in *Exodus*, is (like all the patriarchs) a hero and a 'renowned leader' (*mære magoræswa*; 102); and the Israelites, in *Daniel*, 'share a treasury of gold' (*goldhord dælan*; 2) until, like thanes betraying their lord, they turn from God and precipitate disaster and exile. The narratives of the Old English scriptural poems, with their exemplary tales of loyalty and the consequences of disloyalty, unfold in a recognizable, conventional world.[37]

The Old Testament had a special attraction for the Anglo-Saxons.[38] For one thing, there were compelling analogies to be drawn between the plight of the Israelites and their own situation, harrassed as they were repeatedly from the eighth century onwards by the threat of invasion and subjugation. In the later Anglo-Saxon period, Ælfric, in his homily on the biblical Judith, would draw explicit parallels between Viking attacks on the English and the threat of the Assyrians against the Israelites.[39] Such an idea had been implicit in the concept of providential history which underpinned Bede's influential *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*.[40] At their conversion, the Anglo-Saxons inherited the collective memories of Christian and Jewish history, and so – in accordance with a seamless divine plan – the Israelites of the Old Testament provide the moral certainties and imperatives for action in the present. Implicitly, Bede makes the English in their turn God's chosen people, who may be equally in danger of losing his favour. King Alfred's view was essentially the same as Bede's. It prompted him to preface his law code with an extract from

[37] Irving's account of the 'heroic' aspects of *Exodus* is helpful (*Old English 'Exodus'*, 29–31). See also Barbara Raw's remarks on this and the other Junius poems in *The art and background of Old English poetry* (London: Edward Arnold, 1978), 36–7 and 82–3.

[38] On the Anglo-Saxons and the Old Testament, see M.R. Godden, 'Biblical literature: the Old Testament', in *The Cambridge companion to Old English literature*, eds M.R. Godden and M. Lapidge (Cambridge: University Press, 1991), 206–26. See also T.R. Henn, *The Bible as literature* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1970), 21–5.

[39] See above, 144–5 and n. 13.

[40] See, for instance, I.22: 'Sed non tamen diuina pietas plebem suam, quam praesciuit, deseruit' ('but, in his divine mercy, God did not reject his people [sc. the English], of whom he had foreknowledge'); *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English people* (Oxford: Oxford Medieval Texts, Clarendon Press, 1969), eds B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, 68. On Bede's concept of English history, see esp. G. Tugène, 'L'histoire "ecclésiastique" du peuple anglais: réflexions sur le particularisme et l'universalisme chez Bède', *Recherches Augustiniennes*, 17 (1982), 129–71.

Exodus, in vernacular translation, not only to give biblical authority for his own laws but to make sense of the story of the English nation in terms of a scheme of continuing history.[41] The past, J. H. Plumb has observed, is 'a created ideology with a purpose'.[42]

In my assessment of *Exodus*, I take as my bench-mark Bede's account of the Whitby cowherd, Cædmon, who himself composed scriptural poetry in Old English, and who was granted the 'gift of song' (*canendi donum*), not the gift of exegesis.[43] This is not, however, to deny the allegorical potential of the Junius poems (which is there, of course, in the original biblical narratives) or their possible catechetical function. Joyce Hill, in her review of the huge critical industry associated with the Junius poems, has identified the 'Germania approach' as characteristic of the earlier critics, for whom such strengths as the poems had were entirely pre-Christian and related to the legendary Germanic past.[44] The contrasting 'Latina approach', which enjoyed a subsequent ascendency and was epitomized and underpinned by the work of B.F. Huppé,[45] promotes an all-embracing poetics based on the Augustinian exegetical tradition. At its most extreme, this insists on an entirely typological reading of the poems, according to prescribed Christian practice. In such a reading, the informing theme of *Exodus* is the sacrament of baptism. Highlighting the 'assertive certainties' of both the Germania and the Latina approaches, Hill notes the dangerous tendency of both 'to generate a self-confirming reading' of the poems.[46] Perceptive critics have always been more circumspect,[47] and recent approaches have been particularly unfavourable to the extreme

[41] *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, ed. F. Liebermann, 3 vols (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1903–15), 26–47. See A.J. Frantzen, *King Alfred* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1986), 14–16.

[42] *The death of the past* (London: Macmillan, 1969), 17.

[43] *Ecclesiastical History*, IV.24 (eds Colgrave and Mynors, 414). Cædmon turned scripture into 'delightful and moving poetry in English' (*uerbis poeticis maxima suauitate et conpunctione conpositis in sua, id est Anglorum, lingua proferret*) not intellectual debate (ibid.; the editors' translation).

[44] 'Confronting *Germania Latina*: changing responses to Old English biblical verse', in *Latin culture and medieval Germanic Europe. Proceedings of the first Germania Latina conference held at the University of Groningen, 26 May 1989*, Germania Latina, 1, eds R. North and T. Hofstra (Groningen: E. Forsten, 1992), 71–88.

[45] Above all, his *Doctrine and poetry: Augustine's influence on Old English poetry* (New York State University of New York Press, 1959).

[46] 'Confronting *Germania Latina*', 78.

[47] See esp. S.B. Greenfield, *The interpretation of Old English poems* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972). The accounts of the Junius poems by Greenfield and G.C. Calder, *A new critical history of Old English literature* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1986), 206–26 and T.A. Shippey, *Old English verse* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1972), 135–54, are helpful.

figurative interpretations.[48] In *Exodus*, without a doubt, we must accept what Malcolm Godden has called the 'multi-valency' of the poet's exploration of the exodus story.[49]

The discovery by Roberta Frank of a relationship between the diction of *Exodus* and the mythological poetry of the skalds of pagan ninth- and tenth-century Norway has introduced a new and important area of investigation.[50] Critics always had great difficulties explaining a passage in the poem (ll.71–85) which uses five metaphors for the cloud-pillar that shields the Israelites from the desert sun. No completely satisfactory explanation has been offered, but in fact all five are recognized skaldic synonyms for shield, recommended in skaldic primers for use by aspiring Norse poets. Other puzzling idiosyncracies of *Exodus* may prove to have a similar explanation. Frank also raises the possibility that, in its evocation of ships and sailors, the poem contains political commentary, metaphorically presented, as again in skaldic verse.[51] Such connections do not remove the potential allegorical significance of the poem – they may enhance it – but they demand a careful reappraisal of our perception of the kind of poetry that *Exodus* may be.[52]

Crucial to the Old English poet's amplification in line 514a of *Exodus* is the *spelboda*. This is a frequently used noun, although its occurrence here, in what is (at this point in the narrative) a purely secular context, seems to be unique. A *boda* is one who tells, proclaims, announces (from the verb *bodian*, 'to tell, proclaim', and also 'to preach'). The element *spel* may signify 'tidings', 'a piece of news' or 'a

[48] Some of these are usefully surveyed in J.N. Garde, *Old English poetry in medieval Christian perspective: a doctrinal approach* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991), 25–56 (with *Exodus* at 39–48). Garde herself believes theoretical exegesis to be 'inappropriate' to oral vernacular poetry and sees the poems as narratives of salvation with a didactic purpose. See also W.G. Busse's hostile account of what he calls the 'neo-exegetical' interpetations of the Junius poems in 'Neo-exegetical criticism and Old English poetry: a critique of the typological and allegorical appropriation of medieval literature', *REAL: The Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*, 2 (1984), 1–54. On *Genesis A*, see esp. B.A. Brockman, '"Heroic" and "Christian" in *Genesis A*: the evidence of the Cain and Abel episode', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 35 (1974), 115–28 and N. Boyd, 'Doctrine and criticism: a revaluation of "Genesis A"', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 83 (1982), 230–8.

[49] 'Biblical literature', 217.

[50] 'Anglo-Saxon audiences' and 'What kind of poetry?' (above, n. 28). On other probable Norse influence on Old English poetry, see F.C. Robinson, 'Some aspects of the *Maldon* poet's artistry', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 75 (1976), 25–40 and J.D. Niles, 'Skaldic technique in *Brunanburh*', *Scandinavian Studies*, 59 (1987), 356–66. Niles (ibid. 356) sees *The Battle of Brunanburh* in terms of 'an emerging tenth-century Anglo-Norse poetics' but concedes that this poetics may be little more than 'an inviting road not taken'. On the latter poem, see also below.

[51] 'What kind of poetry?', 200.

[52] It is surprising that a recent study of the figurative meaning of *Exodus* by W. Helder, 'Abraham and the Old English *Exodus*', in *Companion to Old English poetry*, eds H. Aertsen and R.H. Bremmer, Jr (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1994), 189–200, should ignore Frank's work altogether in its analysis of the 'shield' passage (193–4).

message', usually of a portentous or momentous sort, but very often it has the sense of 'narrative', 'tale', 'story' or even 'history'. It is the word used of the 'message' carried by those who bear witness to God's deeds by Nebuchadnezzar in *Daniel* (478; see below), and in the titles of the anonymous homilies in the Vercelli codex it means 'homily'. The compound, *spel(l)boda*, is used in almost all its poetic and prose occurrences, in conjunction with the deity's name, to indicate 'a messenger of God', and often the translation 'evangelist' or 'prophet' is appropriate. In *Genesis A*, the noun describes the angels in disguise, who come to stay with Lot (2496) and, in *Daniel*, it is used both for the eponymous hero and prophet himself (532 and 742) and for the three pious youths thrown into the fiery furnace by Nebuchadnezzar (229 and 464). In *Christ I*, it is used for the annunciatory angel sent to Mary (336); in *Guthlac A*, for the prophets (40); and in *The Phoenix*, for the exemplary Job (571).[53] In an anonymous homily on the birth of John the Baptist, John – sent to bear witness of the coming of Christ – is called *Godes suna spellboda* ('the witness of the son of God') and *weallende spelboda* ('fervent witness').[54] A rather more formal usage is indicated in a Latin-Old English glossary of the late eighth or early ninth century, where *spelbodan* is paired with *oratores* ('orators').[55] In the *Exodus* passage under consideration, *spelbodan* clearly denotes the one who brings, or should bring, the news of the Egyptian defeat, but editors and translators have varied in their choice of a modern English equivalent. Sedgefield, Gordon, Irving and Lucas opt simply for 'messenger(s)', while Tolkien expands the *spelboda* into a 'bearer of tidings'.[56] Kennedy's 'herald' is a somewhat anachronistic term but has the advantage of suggesting what the evidence of the other usages of *spelboda* in the Old English corpus implies – namely, that something more significant than a simple bringer of the news is meant.[57] Bradley's 'tale-teller' conveys this by anticipating a specific further function of the messenger or his successor.[58] In accepting the translator's need for a single equivalent word or phrase for *spelboda*, we must remain alert to the fact that an Anglo-Saxon audience was under

[53] All printed *The Exeter Book*, eds G.P. Krapp and E.V.K. Dobbie, ASPR, 3 (New York and London, 1936), 3–15, 49–72 and 94–113, respectively.

[54] *The Blickling homilies*, ed. R. Morris, EETS, OS, 58, 63, 73 (London, 1874–80), 163 and 165

[55] Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 144 (Ker, *Catalogue*, no. 36, pp. 49–50; Gneuss, 'Manuscripts', no. 45); printed J.H. Hessels, *An eighth-century Latin-Anglo-Saxon glossary preserved in the library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge (MS no. 144)* (Cambridge: University Press, 1890), 86 (O, 240).

[56] W.J. Sedgefield, *An Anglo-Saxon verse-book* (Manchester: University Press, 1922); Gordon, *Anglo-Saxon poetry*, 130; Irving, *Old English 'Exodus'*, glossary s.v.; Lucas, *Exodus*; and Tolkien, *Old English 'Exodus'*, 31. Alone of these editors and translators, Tolkien emends line 514b (unconvincingly and unnecessarily) so that it is united syntactically with line 514a. his version requires *spelboda* to be singular

[57] Kennedy, *Cædmon poems*, 115.

[58] Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon poetry*, 63.

no such restrictive obligation when it heard, and ruminated upon, this word.

Elsewhere in the Old Testament, the narrative power and importance of the messenger as lone survivor of a castastrophe are evident. Examples include a pivotal moment in the long testing period of the patriarch Abraham (or Abram, as he still is at this point in his story), as told in the fourteenth chapter of Genesis. In the conflict of the four kings against five, the latter have been defeated in battle, and one of their party is Lot, Abram's nephew. News of the defeat and the capture of Lot is brought to Abram by 'one who had got away': *et ecce unus qui euaserat nuntiauit Abram Hebraeo* (Genesis 14:13). As a consequence, Abram is able to act. He musters his allies, defeats the four kings, rescues Lot and restores his substance to him, after which he receives a blessing from Melchizedek. From the poet of the Old English version in *Genesis A*, the messenger receives more specific definition, as a 'survivor of the spears':

him þa secg hraðe gewat siðian
an gara laf se ða guðe genæs
Abraham secan
(ll.2018–20a)

then a warrior, a survivor of the spears, who had escaped from the battle, quickly went to find Abram.

A striking fourfold repetition of the theme of the sole survivor occurs in the first chapter of the book of Job. Satan has been permitted by God to test Job with a series of hammer blows to his equanimity, and so four messengers arrive in quick succession to tell how, in four separate calamities, Job's livestock has been taken or destroyed and all his sons and daughters killed. In each case, the messenger announces that only he has escaped to bring the news: *et euasi ego solus ut nuntiarem tibi* (1:15), *et effugi ego solus ut nuntiarem tibi* (1:16), and so on. In his commentary on Job, Gregory the Great explained the escape of 'the one' in terms of the essential survival of the 'prophetic voice'.[59] This episode from Job was put into Old English, too, in a homiletic retelling by Ælfric. He gave the narrative in full, translating the speech of each of the four messengers: *ic ana ætbærst þæt ic ðe þis cydde* ('I alone escaped to tell you this'), *ic ana ætwand . . ., ic ana ætfleah . . ., ic ana ætbærst . .* .[60] As Ælfric then

[59] *Moralia in Iob*, II.xxxiii: 'quia conualuisse se sermo propheticus' (*Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina*, 143, 93).

[60] Homily, xxx ('Dominica .I. in mense septembri. quando legitur Iob'), ed. M.R. Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies Text*, EETS, SS, 5 (London, 1979), 260–7, at 262.

explained it, 'the ancient devil' (*se ealda deofol*) brought about each catastrophe to provoke Job, always deliberately leaving one alive (*ana cucenne*) to tell him of his loss and so turn his heart from God.[61] Thus the role of the messenger is not neutral; in this case it is reinterpreted as temptation.

In Old English poetry, the most celebrated last survivor is the *an æfter eallum* (the 'one, out of all, who is left') of *Beowulf*. He is the unknown man (*gumena nathwylc*) who, long ago, assembled the treasure hoard which will prove to be the death of Beowulf, when he tackles the dragon which has taken over its guardianship. The treasure had belonged to the man's nation. Death had carried off all of its members, except

se an ða gen
leoda duguðe se ðær lengest hwearf
weard winegeomor
(ll.2237b–9a)

the one yet there of the flower of the nation, who survived the longest, a guardian (of the treasure) mourning for his friends.

The survivor himself, having hoarded up the treasure, then awaited death, which would complete the destruction of his race.

All poems of catastrophic defeat presuppose at least one survivor from the losing side to tell the tale to those who wait at home, and to posterity. A well known Insular example is the Welsh *Gododdin*, which tells of the rout of the men of Mynyddog by the Anglo-Saxons at Catraeth. It exists in two incomplete and partly overlapping texts, the one apparently representing an older tradition than the other, and the 'lone survivor' theme is transmitted in two verses of the older and one of the younger:

Out of three hundred wearing gold torques who hastened to Catraeth, alas, none escaped but for one man.[62]

It is not made clear who the British survivor was. One verse of the less archaic tradition repeats the information, but another reports that three out of three hundred survived, in addition to the poet,

[61] Ibid. 263: 'Eal ðis dyde se ealda deofol to gremienne þone godan man. and symle he læfde ænne cucenne him to cyðenne his æhta lyre. þæt his mod wurde fram gode awend.'

[62] *Canu Aneirin gyda Rhagymadrodd a Nodiadau*, ed. I. Williams (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1938), no. lxi B, lines 707–8 (p. 28): 'o drychan eurdorchauc a gryssyws gatraeth / tru namen vn gur nyt anghassant'; trans. K.H. Jackson, *The Gododdin: the oldest Scottish poem* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1969), verse B. 20 (p. 106). See also *Canu Aneirin*, ed. Williams, nos. xc and lx (pp. 45 and 28, respectively) and *The Gododdin*, trans. Jackson, nos. B. 8 and A. 60 (pp. 101 and 140, respectively).

who is usually identified as Aneirin.[63] The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* provides a prominent double use of the lone survivor theme in its entry for the year 755.[64] This is no ordinary entry, but an intense and carefully crafted narrative account of the strife between King Cynewulf and Prince Cyneheard. Both the first phase of the encounter, in which the prince and his men surprise the king while he is visiting a woman, and the second, in which the king's companions in turn attack the prince's party, conclude with but one man surviving: in the first case a sorely wounded Welsh hostage of the king and in the second the godson of one of the king's men, again wounded. We must assume, likewise, that the killing of the English by Vikings at the battle of Maldon in 991, as catastrophic for the English as the encounter at Catraeth had been for the Britons, was not so complete as to prevent at least one man of the Essex party (apart from the cowards, who had fled the battlefield) from getting home with the story of heroic defeat.[65] The Old English poet of the *Battle of Maldon* was subsequently able to put the annihilation of the English to good effect, by turning military defeat into a moral victory for loyalty. Whether we interpret the original aim of the incomplete poem as political, moral or eulogistic – or perhaps a combination of these – its re-creation of an historical event may have played some part in shaping or re-shaping local or national consciousness, thereby becoming itself a part of the historical process. We must acknowledge, however, that the supposed survivor of the battle of Maldon was not the poet himself, for his report is presented as second-hand at one point: *gehyrde ic þæt Eadweard anne sloge/ swiðe mid his swurde* (ll.117–18; 'I heard that Edward struck one violently with his sword').

The poem of the *Battle of Brunanburh*, in the Parker manuscript of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the year 937, undoubtedly also had a role in the establishment or reinforcement of a national identity. In this case, however, the poet could celebrate an unequivocal English victory over a combined force of Strathclyde Britons under Owen, Scots under Constantine II, and Danes under Olaf Guthfrithson.[66] *Brunanburh* is a skilfully made formal panegyric, using conventional heroic diction and drawing

[63] *Canu Aneirin*, ed. Williams, no. xxi (p. 10) and *The Gododdin*, trans. Jackson, no. A. 21 (p. 125). See Jackson's discussion, ibid. 25–7, and, on Aneirin, 22–5. On the place of the *Gododdin* in an early British, Latin-influenced, tradition of panegyric, see P. Sims-Williams, 'Gildas and vernacular poetry', in *Gildas: new approaches*, eds M. Lapidge and D. Dumville (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1984), 169–92.

[64] *Two of the Saxon chronicles parallel*, ed. C. Plummer, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892–99), I, 46–50.

[65] *The Battle of Maldon*, ed. D.G. Scragg (Manchester: University Press, 1981).

[66] *Minor poems*, ed. Dobbie, 16–20; *Saxon chronicles*, ed. Plummer, I, 106–10.

its rhetorical devices perhaps from Latin models but probably also, as John Niles has noted, from the Norse skaldic tradition.[67] There is no clear trace in Old English poems, however, of the formal role of the *scop* as war correspondent, of the sort associated so prominently with the skalds of the Norse saga literature. King Olaf the saint, Harald's son (*c.*1015–30), when he was preparing for the battle of Stiklestad, took the sensible precaution of putting a team of skalds within a shield defence, formed by his best troops, so that they might safely observe the battle and not have to rely on second-hand reports when they came to sing their dispatches.[68]

Yet the conceit of the *Beowulf* poet – who rescued a last survivor (as we have seen) and put into his mouth some of the finest lines of the poem (a lament for the passing of hall-happiness, harp and hawk), before disposing of him – is reminder enough of the power of the poet in the destiny of nations and the moulding of their sense of identity. In heroic literature, the heroes are the individuals in terms of whom that identity is understood, national progress is measured and moral attitude exemplified. The experience of the poem of *Beowulf* is the experience of knowing its hero, and the task of vouching for that experience falls to the poet or storyteller, who provides what Greenfield has termed 'the authenticating voice'.[69] This voice (whose use by the poet of *The Battle of Maldon* I have noted already), no doubt originated in the pre-literate oral tradition of poetry. Its most obvious manifestation is in the use of the *ic gefrægn* or *ic gehyrde* formula ('I ascertained', 'I heard'), which is sometimes varied, especially at the beginning of poems, with the plural, 'we have heard'. This is not only how *Beowulf* starts, but *Exodus*, too: *Hwæt! we feor and neah gefrigen habbað* ('Listen! we have heard, far and near'). It has been suggested that the *ic gefrægn* formula, by virtue of its frequent use, de-personalizes the narrator,[70] but I am not convinced that this would be the case in the oral performance of these poems. The formula usually comes as an

[67] 'Skaldic technique in *Brunanburh*' (see above, n. 50).

[68] Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, ed. B. Aðalbjarnarson, 3 vols, Íslenzk Fornrit, 26–8 (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1941–51), II, 358: 'Svá er sagt, at þá er Óláfr konungr fylkði liði sínu, þá skipaði hann mǫnnum í skjaldborg, er halda skyldi fyrir honum í bardaga, ok valði þar til þá menn, er sterkastir váru ok snarpastir. Þá kallaði hann til sín skáld sín ok bað þá ganga í skjaldborgina. "Skuluð þér," segir hann, "hér vera ok sjá þau tíðendi, er hér gerask. Er yðr þá eigi segjandi saga til, því at þér skuluð frá segja ok yrkja um síðan".' On the political and ideological importance of skaldic report to kingly power, see the example examined by F. Ström, 'Poetry as an instrument of propaganda. Jarl Hákon and his poets', in *Speculum Norroenum: Norse studies in memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, eds U. Dronke, G.P. Helgadóttir, G.W. Weber and H. Bekker-Nielsen (Odense: University Press, 1981), 440–58.

[69] S.B. Greenfield, 'The authenticating voice in *Beowulf*', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 5 (1976), 51–62.

[70] J.D. Niles, *Beowulf: the poem and its tradition* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1983), 199–200 and 203–4.

introduction to a new theme or new episode, and there is great scope for self-dramatization on the part of the teller, by means of a pause or a change in tone and even by gesture, gaze or other non-verbal cues. It is the moment when the narrator (in the person of the performer) interposes himself, calls attention to the fact that the tale is *told*, and thereby affirms the social origin, and social necessity, of the past.

But the poet can, and does, draw attention to himself in other ways. The foregrounding of the very process of the transmission of 'story' is one of the most important characteristics of Old English narrative poems, including those based on the Old Testament: to a significant extent the stories are *about* storytelling. The most useful exemplar is again *Beowulf.* After Beowulf has slain Grendel, when the monster's blood is hardly dry on the ground, the story of events just finished begins to be made (literally) on the hoof. Hrothgar's men gallop excitedly back from Grendel's mere and one of them – he is a *scop*, a man 'laden with exultant words, his mind full of song' (*guma gilphlæden gidda gemyndig*; 868) – immediately recreates Beowulf's exploit. He does it, we are told, with self-conscious, professional skill:

secg eft ongan
sið Beowulfes snyttrum styrian
ond on sped wrecan spel gerade
wordum wrixlan
(ll.871b–74a)

the man began in turn to rehearse with craft Beowulf's exploit, to tell the tale skilfully and directly, conjuring with the words.

We do not hear the details, but the same storyteller then goes on to tell of the exploits of a renowned figure of the past, Sigmund, and this juxtaposition at once establishes Beowulf's place in the same pantheon of heroes. The storyteller alludes also to a hero who went wrong, Heremod, and explicitly draws a contrast with the more successful Beowulf. Later in the poem, during the feasting which follows the slaying of Grendel's mother, storytelling again becomes part of the story. King Hrothgar's *scop* tells at considerable length the lay of Finn and the tragedy of Queen Hildeburh. The term 'digressions', which is usually given to these episodes of storytelling within the main story of *Beowulf*, is misleading. Few critics today would deny their integral part in the narrative structure of the poem and they might be better called 'ingressions', for they lead us, not away from the history of the Danes, but right into the psychological heart of that history. They work on several levels, not simply authenticating the past but establishing the limits of possible action in the present, and serving to define in moral terms the future choices of the protagonists – above all, Beowulf himself.

The storyteller, then, bears the burden of his nation's history.[71] It would not be surprising, in these circumstances, if he were to become a hero in his own right. Illuminating in this respect is the Old English *Widsith*, from the Exeter Book, which has been described aptly as 'a poets' poem'.[72] Widsith introduces himself as a *scop*, who has travelled among almost all the peoples of earth, receiving gifts in exchange for his services, and most of the poem is taken up by an account in his own words of those travels. 'I can sing and tell a tale', he says – *ic mæg singan and secgan spell* (54). He names all the nations and heroes he has served and tells how he has received praise for his singing before 'a victorious lord' (*sigedryhtne* 104). Always, he declares in the poem's conclusion, 'the entertainers of men' (*gleomen gumena*) will meet a lord who is

> gydda gleawne geofum unhneawne
> se þe fore duguþe wile dom aræran
> eorlscipe æfnan
>
> (ll.139–41a)

knowledgeable about songs and liberal in his gifts, one who wants to enhance his fame and sustain his reputation for courage.

Nothing could make clearer, I think, the almost symbiotic relationship between hero and poet in the Germanic tradition of tale-telling in which the Old English poems are rooted. Neither can exist without the other. Søren Kierkegaard, in his celebrated study of the story of Abraham's offering of Isaac for sacrifice, *Fear and trembling*, has written illuminatingly on this relationship.[73] God, Kierkegaard implies, purposely created the hero and the poet (or speech-maker) in tandem: the poet is 'the spirit of remembrance', peddling from door to door his admiration of the hero. There is almost a love affair between the two: 'If he [the storyteller] remains thus true to his love, if he struggles night and day against the wiles of oblivion, which would cheat him of his hero, then he has fulfilled his task . . . .'[74] We remember here the sad story told about himself

[71] There is, I think, no irony in Chaucer's respectful homage, in his *House of Fame*, to one such storyteller, Josephus: 'Alderfirst, loo, ther I sigh/ Upon a piler stonde on high,/ That was of led and yren fyn,/ Hym of secte saturnyn,/ The Ebrayk Josephus the olde,/ That of Jewes gestes tolde;/ And he bar on hys shuldres hye/ The fame up of the Jewerye' (ll. 1429–36); *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. L.D. Benson, third edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 365.

[72] Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon poetry*, 336. The text is printed *Exeter Book*, eds Krapp and Dobbie, 149–53.

[73] See the 'Speech in praise of Abraham', in *Fear and trembling: dialectical lyric by Johannes de silentio*, trans. A. Hannay (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 49–56.

[74] Ibid., 49.

by the poet of the Old English *Deor*.[75] He had good standing with his lord, he explains, until another poet usurped his place:

> oþ þæt Heorrenda nu
> leoðcræftig monn londryht geþah
> þæt me eorla hleo ær gesealde
> (ll.39b–41)

until now Heorrenda, a man skilled in the poetic craft, received the land entitlement which the protector of men had previously granted to me.

The love affair has gone sour; but the discarded poet remains philosophical, for even the sorrows of this world may be only transitory.

The Old Testament poems of the Junius manuscript – *Genesis A*, *Exodus* and *Daniel* – are rooted firmly in this Germanic tradition of storytelling. The Old English poet of *Daniel*, for instance, seems to have been attracted by the clear depiction, in the biblical book, of the rise and fall of nations, of exile and the reasons for exile, of good and bad leadership. The Old English version tells of the rewards of loyalty and the punishments which disloyalty brings, but one of its embedded themes concerns the articulation in words of both personal and national history, and the importance of such articulation for understanding and for salvation. In a practical sense, the hero Daniel is himself a storyteller, even as he is also prophet and judge. He is called, as I noted above, *Godes spelboda* (532 and 742), and his interpretations of dreams are not psychological analyses but annotated statements about 'the destiny of nations' – *wereda gesceafte* (160). What I find interesting in this poem – and what the poet apparently found interesting enough, in the rather muddled biblical account, to want to highlight – is that King Nebuchadnezzar joins the ranks of the storytellers also. After his failure to incinerate three pious youths in a fiery furnace, the king comes to understand that they have divine protection, and it seems good to him to make known this evidence of God's works: *placuit mihi praedicere signa eius*, he says in the Vulgate account (Daniel 3:99). The Old English poet amplifies this:

> Þa ic secan gefrægn soðum wordum
> siððan he wundor onget
> Babilone weard þurh fyres bryne
> hu þa hyssas þry hatan ofnes
> færgryre fyres oferfaren hæfdon
> (ll.458–62)

75 Printed *Exeter Book*, eds Krapp and Dobbie, 178–9; also *Deor*, ed. K. Malone, revised edition (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1977).

I have heard that the ruler of Babylon, when he perceived the miracle in the blazing of the fire, sought with truthful words (to express) how the three young men had survived the heat of the furnace, the great terror of the fire.

Later, following his years of bestial existence in exile (foretold by Daniel) and his eventual return, Nebuchadnezzar recounts to his people the story of that exile, and their own salvation lies in their acceptance of the story's moral truth about God. Again this is implicit in the Old Testament account but is given overt emphasis by the Old English poet.

I return at last to *Exodus*, the most Germanic of the vernacular Old Testament poems in its diction and action. As we have seen, national peril and national salvation are explained in terms of the exploits of the hero Moses and the heroic response he calls forth from his followers, but to a significant degree also the poem exhibits a consciousness of its own importance as story. The closing stages of the poem (574–8) deserve particular attention. Gazing on the sea, which is red with the blood of their enemies, the victorious Israelites break into song. The poet takes his hint from the opening of Exodus 15, the so-called first Song of Moses (which, in the biblical version, immediately follows the destruction of the Egyptians):

Tunc cecinit Moyses et filii Israhel carmen hoc Domino et dixerunt, Cantemus Domino

then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to the Lord: Let us sing to the Lord . . .

In the Old English account, this jubilant outpouring is given the greatest possible emphasis in a process of threefold variation over six lines: 'they exalted with a battle-tale' (*hreðdon hildespelle*; 574a); 'they lifted up a song of glory' (*hofon . . . wuldres sang*; 575a and 577a); and 'they sang with awed voices a battle-song about many marvels' (*fyrdleoð golan aclum stefnum eallwundra fela*; 578b–9). The Israelites are really celebrating themselves, not God. Just as the *scop* in *Beowulf* recreated the hero's exploits in a song, while the body of Grendel was hardly cold, so here our poet has the Israelites at once celebrate the great event in their lives by recreating it and thus beginning the process of its assimilation into the national identity.

The Vulgate Song of Moses (Exodus 15:1–21) circulated independently as one of the liturgical canticles, which were sung in the office and collected with other canticles at the back of the Psalter. Perhaps a knowledge of the canticle inspired the composition of the *Exodus* poem itself. Highlighting as it does, in a few muscular verses, the destruction of the Egyptians, and providing a conspectus of Jewish history, it would have offered a

poet a ready-made theme and a plot for reprocessing in Germanic vein. We may wonder, too, whether the canticle itself circulated, like the Psalms, in a vernacular version. The evidence of the Paris Psalter is negative, for the series of canticles, including the Song of Moses, which follows the bilingually-presented psalms, is in Latin only. However, current work by Paul Remley on the Junius poems indicates that unknown Old English works may have mediated between the Latin Bible texts and the poems themselves.[76] Perhaps there was a far larger pool of vernacular devotional works than the surviving manuscripts allow us to know.

The passage with which I began this exploration of a theme comes at the climax of the main action of *Exodus*, after the Red Sea has overwhelmed Pharaoh and all his forces. None came back home, our poet tells us, 'but sea-death swallowed up those mighty troops, and the messenger likewise' – *spelbodan eac*. Whether he knew it directly, or through some mediating version, the imagination of our poet seems to have been struck by the version in the book of Judith: 'there was not one left, to tell what had happened to posterity'. Its effect was to recreate that far-off moment of biblical history in terms which were particularly relevant to the society in which the poet lived, and whose identity it will have been his task to celebrate and sustain. If all the Egyptian pursuers died, not even their messenger or tale-teller was left to return home with the tidings, to provide material with which a future *scop* might reconstruct and validate the past. It is instructive to note how our poet has presented the Egyptians earlier in the poem. *Exodus* is not like *The Battle of Maldon*, in which, in the interests of emphasizing the heroism of Byrhtnoth and his men, the Viking enemies are depicted as boors with spears, which they insolently, and somehow unfairly, use to pierce the breasts of English stalwarts. The Egyptians in *Exodus* are painted in impressive detail (in lines 170–99). Pharaoh has picked himself a force which is loyal and thirsting for battle, 'two thousand of the most glorious, according to their wealth, kings and kinsfolk, esteemed for their lineage'.[77] The flower of the Egyptian nation faces the Israelites as proud warriors, all of them potential heroes, and no doubt accompanied by their own *scop*, thirsting for some action worth the retelling.

It is in the light of this recognition of a shared warrior ethos, of the heroic opposition of one magnificent power against another – an imaginative contribution by our poet, this, with no Vulgate (or, as far as I am aware, patristic) support – that we must view the Egyptian defeat and the Israelite victory. Only then do we

[76] *Old English biblical verse.*

[77] 'Hæfde him alesen leoda dugeðe tireadigra twa þusendo þæt wæron cyningas and cneowmagas, on þæt eade riht, æðelum deore' (183–6).

understand the full significance of the poet's amplification. Bereft of the *spelboda*, the bereaved Egyptians will have no means to recreate the defeat, no chance to rewrite it and thus to overcome it and re-assert their national identity. Can there in fact be a more abject fate for a proud nation, more thorough annihilation, than the loss of the story of their heroes? The poet of *Exodus* uses Old Testament themes to celebrate Anglo-Saxon values. Conscious of his own role as companion of the hero and authenticating voice of the nation, he invites us to perceive the full measure of the hell to which the drowned Egyptians have been consigned, sinners against God as they were and enemies of the chosen people. It is with this in mind that we view that exhilarating final scene of the poem, in which the triumphant Israelites strip the dead Egyptians of their treasures and jubilantly do what the Egyptians will never now do: sing their own song of national destiny.

Yet the regenerative social power of the *spelboda* is in the end a transitory, earthly phenomenon. However firmly reassured by the certainties of the 'remembered' Old Testament world, the Anglo-Saxon Christian conscience was aware – to judge from the evidence of both poets and homilists – of an approaching final confrontation, which would be experienced individually by all. There would be no living survivor, and none would return to bear witness. There is an anxious reference to this inevitable ignorance in the Old English poem known as *Maxims II*, in which the absence of the comforting anticipation of a *spelboda* is a chilling reminder of the great eschatological unknown. The poem is a catalogue of the divinely ordained laws of the natural world, and of man's place in it, and is collected with the *Menologium* and a version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in London, British Library, Cotton MS Tiberius B. i.[78] The lines in question form a fitting conclusion to it:

Næni eft cymeð
hider under hrofas, þe þæt her for soð
mannum secge hwylc sy meotodes gesceaft,
sigefolca gesetu, þær he sylfa wunað
(ll.63b–66)

None returns here below the heavens who in truth might tell men what God's creation is like, his provision for the people of victory, where he himself dwells.

Perhaps somewhere behind this maxim lies the story of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:20–31), in which the latter, confined to Hell

[78] Ker, *Catalogue*, no. 191 (251–3); Gneuss, 'Manuscripts', no. 370. The text of *Maxims II* is printed *Minor poems*, ed. Dobbie, 55–7; see also T.A. Shippey, *Poems of wisdom and learning in Old English* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1976), 12–20 and 76–9.

after death, pleads in vain for Lazarus to be sent back to the living with a message of warning. But its observation on the limitations of knowledge and the silence between the dead and the living is universal. No Aeneas or St Paul offers help here, and no Dante is on hand.

I end with another version of the theme, which is part of an extended lament about dying and may seem uncannily familiar to readers of Old English poetry:

> What are their places (now)?
> Their walls are broken apart: and their places are not –
> As though they had never been!
> There is none who comes back from (over) there,
> That he may tell their state,
> That he may tell their needs,
> That he may still our hearts,
> Until we (too) may travel to the place where they have gone.

These harrowing lines are not English, or even European, and were in fact composed some two-and-a-half thousand years before the copying of *Maxims II* and *Exodus*. They are Egyptian, translated as 'The Song of the Harper' from an original inscribed on the tomb of Antef, a king of the Eleventh Dynasty (*c.* 2160–1580 B.C.).[79] The composition of the lament may thus not have been far removed from the time when the biblical Exodus of the Israelites is believed to have occurred, the sequel of which was the annihilation of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea and, in the remarkable Old English account of it, the death of the messenger.[80]

[79] Cited by S.G.F. Brandon, *History, time and deity: a historical and comparative study of the conception of time in religious thought and practice* (Manchester: University Press, 1965), 80; see also 79.

[80] At various stages, this paper has benefited from the criticism and generous input of Joy Anderson (who pointed me to Judith), Mary Garrison, Paul Remley and James Simpson.