Blend of Oral-Formulaic Verse and Christian Values in “Caedmon’s Hymn”

In large part, Caedmon’s Hymn is an important text for its revelations about the role of oral poetry in the Middle Ages. The poem, the only surviving one from Caedmon’s series of hymns, provides one of the earliest examples of poetry in the German language. Caedmon’s Hymn is also one of the earliest available examples of written Old English. Bede’s story functions as an explanation of how the oral tradition poetry came into existence. As he tells Caedmon’s life story, Bede provides an example of how a poet learned to orally compose his works, a process now titled oral-formulaic composition. The theory of oral-formulaic composition suggests that some poets, Caedmon included, were able to store in their minds a formula that would allow them to rapidly compose verses with conventional metrical conditions. In his story of Caedmon’s “dream song,” Bede provides an example of how this particular poet created poems with the help of his divinely gifted skill.

According to Bede, Caedmon authored a relatively large collection of poems. And while only this small selection from his one hymn exists, it is likely that his entire poetic oeuvre consisted of religious hymns. Unlike many popular Old English poems, Caedmon’s Hymn strays from the theme of epic heroes engaged in war. Caedmon’s use of explicit creation themes is nevertheless not necessarily Christian. Within the context of Bede’s Ecclesiastical History, however, Caedmon’s Hymn takes on a specifically Christian slant. The monotheism in the poem (evident in his mention of a singular, “all powerful” creator) fits nicely into Bede’s story of conversion from paganism. At the very least, the retelling of the poem provides an example of the ways in which later writers were able to appropriate the oral poems of earlier generations for more modern, and in this case Christian, purposes.