“Caedmon’s Hymn”

All knowledge of the historical Caedmon is derived from Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of English People. There are two surviving copies of “Caedmon’s Hymn”:

“The Moore Bede” (ca. 737) is held by the Cambridge University Library.

“The St. Petersburg or Leningrad Bede,” is in the National Library of Russia.

According to Bede, Caedmon was an old lay herdsman living and working in the religious community of Whitby Abbey in Yorkshire, England (ca. 657 to 680 A.D.). He was accountable to the reeve, or steward, who was in charge of Abbess Hilda’s (who would later become St. Hilda) estates.
It was common practice after the evening meal for the residents of the monastery to take turns singing and playing the harp.

Since Caedmon never learned to sing, he would leave the feast before he could be called on to participate. One night, he returned to the stables and went to sleep.
In a dream, an unknown—perhaps heavenly—person called him by name and asked him to sing. Caedmon explained to the visitor that he didn’t know how. When the visitor insisted, Caedmon gave in, asking what he should sing about.

The visitor told Caedmon, “Canta . . . principium creaturarum,” or “Sing . . . about the beginning of created things.” Caedmon immediately began singing (Niles 144).
When he awoke, Caedmon remembered everything that happened in his dream, including the text of the hymn. He added additional verses and reported his vision and new skills to the steward, who in turn, took him to the abbess. He was given a “test” to prove the veracity of his claim: translate a sacred text into verse overnight. He succeeded, and was immediately accepted into the religious community as a brother.

Bede indicates that Caedmon composed additional poems based on scripture, though “Caedmon’s Hymn” is the only extant example. It is the earliest surviving verse in the English language, earning Caedmon the title of England’s first poet.

Why Should We Care?

- Caedmon’s poem is the oldest surviving verse written in the English language.
- It praises God as the Creator of Heaven and Earth.
- Caedmon’s visitor calls him by name—remind you of any other heavenly visitations?
• Caedmon’s poem is perfectly suited for memorization: “Each Old English line has two balanced phrases with four stressed syllables, three of which are alliterative. Each half-line, if uttered musically, in time to the plucking of a harp, [fits] nicely into our phonological working (short-term) memory, which can accept two seconds of speech only before recycling” (RPO). This made scripture—or at least the stories from scripture—more accessible to the illiterate.

• By including “Caedmon’s Hymn” and history in his book, Bede shows us that “God’s grace reaches even as far as an obscure [cow shed] in Northumbria, and an ignorant cattle-man [can] become a mouthpiece for the divine” (Niles 147).

• Nearly nine hundred years later, another Englishman, William Tyndale, would forfeit his life for the cause of bringing scripture to the masses: “I defy the Pope and all his laws. If God spare my life ere many years, I will cause the boy that drives the plow to know more of the scriptures than you!”

Works Cited
