
Read 24th November, 1831.

MY DEAR SIR,

It has not perhaps been hitherto remarked that the well-known history of Cædmon has its exact parallel. We learn from a fragment, entitled "Præfatio in librum antiquum linguâ Saxonîca conscriptum;" published amongst the Epistles of Hincmar Bishop of Rhemes (Bibliotheca Patrum, Paris, 1644, vol. xvi. p. 609), that Ludovicus Pius, being desirous to furnish his subjects with a version of the Holy Scriptures, applied to a Saxon Bard of great talent and fame. The Poet, a peasant or husbandman, when entirely ignorant of his art, had been instructed in a dream to render the precepts of the Divine Law into the verse and measure of his native language. His translation, now unfortunately lost, to which the fragment was prefixed, comprehended the whole of the Bible. The text of the original was interspersed with mystic allusions; and the beauty of the composition was so great, that, in the opinion of the writer of the preface, no reader, perusing the verse, could doubt the source of the poetic inspiration of the Bard.

I have endeavoured to show on another occasion (Hist. of England, vol. i. p. 168), that the marvellous part of Cædmon's history, as told by Bede, may in some degree be explained by natural causes. But it is scarcely possible that the same extraordinary, though not incredible, development of poetical talent should have occurred both in Britain and in Gaul. And the history of the so called Cædmon, will perhaps rather appear as one of those tales
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floating upon the breath of tradition, and localized from time to time in different countries and in different ages.

But, whatever may have been the true history of our Anglo-Saxon paraphrast, there are strong reasons for supposing that his real name has not been preserved. Most, if not all, of the Anglo-Saxon proper names are significant; and whenever we meet with a name which cannot be fairly resolved into Anglo-Saxon roots, bearing a known and intelligible meaning, we have always the strongest presumptive reasons for supposing that it has been borrowed from some other tongue. Now to the name Cædmon, whether considered as a simple or as a compound, no plain and definite meaning can be assigned, if the interpretation be sought in the Anglo-Saxon language: whilst that very same name is the initial word of the Book of Genesis in the Chaldee paraphrase, or Targum of Onkelos: וְכַדּוֹמָן or וְכַדּוֹמָן, (the ו is merely a prefix) being a literal translation of וְרָשְׁכִית, or “In principio,” the initial word of the original Hebrew text. It is hardly necessary to observe that the books of the Bible are denominated by the Jews from their initial words: they quote and call Genesis by the name of וְרָשְׁכִית, the Chaldaic Genesis would be quoted and called by the name of וְכַדּוֹמָן, and this custom adopted by them at least as early as the time of St. Jerome, has continued in use until the present day.

But in addition to the value of the word Cadmon as denoting the Chaldaic Book of Genesis, the name of Adam Cadmon also holds a most important station in Cabalistic theology; the adjective or epithet Cadmon in pure Hebrew signifies Eastern, Oriental, or from the East; and until we can suggest a better explanation of the name given to the Anglo-Saxon poet, it will be difficult to avoid the conclusion, that using the Targum as his text, and being also familiar with the Cabalistic doctrines, he assumed the name of Cadmon either from the Book which he translated, or from the Cabalistic nomenclature: or that, having arrived in Britain from the East, he designated himself as the Eastern visitor or pilgrim.

* In fact, all these words are derived from דרום the East. In their secondary sense the words derived from this root signify beginning or commencement, because it is in the East that we first see the rise or beginning of light and day.
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The numerous episodes, especially those relating to the fallen angels, introduced in the Anglo-Saxon paraphrase of Genesis, possess an oriental character. There was no Latin version of the Bible in which they could be found, and it may be strongly suspected that they are of Rabbinical origin. No small portion of the allegorical literature, as well as of the philosophy, of the middle ages may be distinctly traced to Rabbinical sources; and the supposition that an Anglo-Saxon might be sufficiently acquainted with the Hebrew and Chaldaic languages to enable him to derive this information, is not attended with any improbability.

Duns Scotus was profoundly versed in the Oriental tongues. Venerable Bede himself could read Hebrew; and the fervent zeal with which the study of the Holy Scriptures was pursued during that period of ecclesiastical history included between the age of Saint Jerome and the eleventh century, might easily have induced an Anglo-Saxon monk, or even a layman, during his residence in Palestine, to acquire a knowledge of the language of the Old Testament, and also of that cognate dialect in which its most valuable interpretation is preserved.

The obscurity attending the origin of the Cædmonian poems will perhaps increase the interest excited by them. Whoever may have been their author, their remote antiquity is unquestionable. In poetical imagery and feeling they excel all the other early remains of the North. And I trust I may be allowed to congratulate our Society in having determined to commence their series of Anglo-Saxon publications, by a work which belongs not only to Englishmen, but to every branch of the great Teutonic family.

Yours ever faithfully,

FRANCIS PALGRAVE.