

Twelfth Stanza



Ġér byþ gumena hiht, • ðon god l eteþ,
Halig heofones cyning, • hr usan syllan
beorhte bl eda • beornum and ðearfum

Translations

(A) Transliteration

{Year; New Year's Day; growing season; the cycle of seasons} is
{men's, lords', heroes'} {trust; hope, desire, expectation; joy,
exultation}

{then, now, thence; inasmuch as; when, while} {God, god, image of a
god, godlike person} {allows; causes to do; allows to escape, lets
out, sets free}

{holy, sacred; venerated} {sky's, heaven's} {king, ruler}

{earth, soil, ground — could be singular or plural} {give, furnish,
supply; surrender, give up}

{bright, shining; excellent, remarkable, magnificent, noble, glorious;
beautiful} {new plant growth, growing parts of plants, shoots,
especially edible new growth; fruits, things to harvest; blossoms,
flowers}

(to) {nobles; chiefs, princes; warriors; rich men; heroes} and {poor
men, paupers, beggars, needy persons}

(B)

Year-new brings humans hope • that Yahweh suffers
— Sacred sky-above's sov'reign — • soil to give up
choicest crops for • chieftains and poor folks.

(H9-1-25)

The frostless season is to humans hope • that God will let
-- holy heaven's king -- • dirt yield
brightly-colored edible vegetation • (for) warrior chiefs and (for) beggars

(ST7)

New Years' Day sees mankind's hope that Yahweh – Holy Heaven's King – will suffer dirt to yield up bright fruits for noble and needy.

(ST8)

The advent of the frostless time of year brings hope to mankind that Yahweh - the king of sacred heaven - will let soil yield bright fruits for noble and needy alike.

Issues in Edition and Translation

Three words have issues in translation: ĝér, gumena, and láteþ. The definitions of ĝér and gumena are important if we are to be comfortable with this stanza at its lowest level of meaning, but they are not critical to understanding the poem at the higher levels of abstraction. On the other hand, our understanding of láteþ in the context of this stanza is of fundamental importance. This is because láteþ helps define the meaning of “god”, which in turn is the topic of this stanza at its higher levels.

The Title Word

In this context, the title word clearly refers to the turning of the year. There has been controversy over the title word, because it has multiple meanings and is the ancestor of the modern “year”, which is ambiguous in current times. The ancient Anglo-Saxons used ĝér just as we use “year”, with three exceptions: they used it to denote a new year; they used it to denote the lunar cycle; and they used it to denote the frostless time of year. In translation B, the rendering was affected by prosodic considerations, as I used poetic license to make a word.

Other students of the OERP disagree among themselves as to how we should precisely translate ĝér. Some students of this poem would have us translate ĝér as “harvest” (Grienberger, 1921; Halsall, 1981; Thorsson, 1993; Pollington, 1996). Some feel that it denotes summertime or the growing season (Dickins, 1915; Osborn and Longland, 1982). Kemble (1840) simply rendered the word as “year”. Paul (1996) interprets the word as “new year”. However, the dictionaries are closer to the position taken by the present author. Hall (1960) only defines ĝér as “year”. Bosworth and Toller (1898) defined the word as “year, annus”, and the Latin *annus* can denote a year's crops or a calendar year (Traupman, 1995). But in 1921, Toller redefined ĝér with several definitions and sub-definitions, including “spring season” and “a revolution (sic) of the moon” – but not including “harvest”. In the additions and corrections

added by Alistair Campbell to Bosworth-Toller, we find “thirteen lunar months” (Campbell, 1972).

We can easily reject “harvest” or “annus” based on context. In this stanza, “harvest” or “annus” would be synonymous with *beorhta bleða*. We can also reject a single cycle of lunar phases because the series is too short, at fewer than thirty days.

Ġér could be the main growing season or non-winter. Checking the examples of *ġér* cited by dictionaries, I found no incidence of *ġér* as “growing season” outside the *OERP*. But Dickens cited a persuasive-looking use in the Finnsburg fragment of *Beowulf*. The fragment is in lines 1133-1136a, which says that Hengest had to remain with Finn because sea ice prevented passage home “until another (season) came to the land, just as nowadays does the gloriously bright weather, which is regulated continuously by the seasons”. (“...oþðæt óper cóm / ġear in ġeardas, • swá nú ġýt déð, / þá ðe syngáles • séle bewitiað, / wuldor-torhtan weder”). (See Alexander, 1995; Dickens, 1915).

On the other hand, “turning of the year” is found in other OE contexts. A homily revealed that “the Hebrew people held their earliest year’s day (forman *ġeares dæg*) on the spring equinox”. Another homily remarked that “People call this day New Year’s Day (*ġeares dæg*) as if it were the first day in the year’s circuit”. A chronicle mentioned “*tó ġeares dæg*” – on New Year’s Day (Bosworth and Toller, 1898; 1921).

Thus, “*ġér*” can refer to a cycle of seasons starting at the end of the last hard frost, not merely to a calendar year. This is analogous to our use of “year” to denote to any period of about 360-365 days. Sometimes we use “year” in a very similar sense, as when an athlete in a seasonal sport is said to have a good “year”. This is an apparent reference to activity only during the sport’s season. However, these “years” are vague enough to indicate a 12-month cycle beginning during rest or training prior to the playing season and ending with the conclusion of the playing season.

But in perspective, this is not a critical issue. The stanza is about how we conceive divine beings; it is not about *ġér*. At the philosophically more interesting levels, the circumstance under which people are hopeful for attractive harvests is less important than is the role of a deity in our mental attitudes. The choice of term used in Translation B was guided more by prosodic than by literal-definition considerations.

Gumena

The original stanza is not politically correct in current contexts. Nonetheless, in a compromise between the original meaning and meter, I translated *gumena* as “human’s”. We get sonic alliteration if he pronounce “human’s” with the initial “h” silent, as some do.

The most important dictionaries seem ambivalent. The original is the plural possessive of *sé guma*, which Hall (1960) says denotes “man” rather than “human”. Bosworth and Toller (1898) define *guma* as “man”, but they also say that *guma* glosses the Latin word for “human”, and their all their examples all show the word denoting “human” in Old English usage. Toller’s 1921 examples show the word can denote male persons only.

Even if we were to translate *guma* as “man”, it would be foolish to infer that the stanza does not apply to women’s notions of divinity.

Læteþ

Just as in Modern English “to let” can imply a passive or an active role, in Old English *lætan* could indicate either lack of interference or active causation. The difference between the two has an implication for our view of the stanza’s attitude toward the main topic word, “god/God”. If the focal deity’s role is to cause or help cause fertility, then that deity is seen as helpful to mankind. On the other hand, if the deity’s role is to not get in the way of the natural tendency of soil to be fertile, then the attitude toward the deity is more anxious.

Critique of Translation B

There are several compromises in Translation B. The net effect is a more pronounced rhythm, slightly better alliteration, and a slightly different pattern of ambiguities.

Line 1 presented the most difficulties. In that line, I had to violate a rule of alliteration and change the rhythm to get the best approximation to the original.

In Translation B, the alliteration in line 1 is of a different nature than is the corresponding alliteration in the original. For the alliteration in line 1 of the translation to match the original, “human’s” has to be pronounced with a silent “h”, so that the word sounds like an alliteration with “Yahweh” and “year”. However, the original has a (nonphonetic) spelling alliteration in the first line, for not all three yoghs (the *g*’s) have

the same sound. (Old English alliteration is based on spelling, not sounds. See Diamond, 1970: 46-48).

The original author(s) intended tense of “lǣteþ” is future. This shows in Translation H9-1-25, which is a horrible approximation of the original poetry but is close to a literal translation of the words. Speakers of Old English typically used the present tense for the future tense verb forms that their language lacked. In Modern English, commonly use a modal auxiliary to indicate future tense. But Translation B cannot have a modal auxiliary verb and approximate the rhythm of the original. Therefore, I used the present tense, just as in the original. (See Mitchell and Robinson, 1994:108, 115.)

Even so, the rhythm of line 1 is not identical to the original. I could not find a way to say “New Year’s Day”, “growing season”, or “frostless time of the year” that would fit into the original’s rhythm or alliteration. Therefore, I attempted to achieve a different rhythm that would have a similar emotional effect as the original.

In line 2, the rhythm perfectly matches the original, but the alliteration is improved. To use “monarch” instead of “sov’reign” would have perfectly matched the alliteration of the original, but the translation has the standard two alliterating syllables in verse 2a.

On the other hand, using “sky-above” instead of “heaven” reduces a significant ambiguity. In the Anglo-Saxon as in Modern English, “heaven” refers both to the sky above us and to the mythical realm where Yahweh, angels, and Jesus reside. The ambiguity is reduced because in Translation B you have to stop and think that the sky is also the mythical Heaven.

Line 3a has the preposition “for” separated from the nouns to which it refers. In Teutonic poetry, the caesura creates a tension as the listener has to wait for the “b” verse. With the preposition before the pause in line 3, tension is slightly greater than would be the case in the original. This is a minor departure from the nonverbal messages of original.

Discussion

The stanza is a discussion of our attitude toward “deity”; it is not about New Year’s Day. “Ĝer” reminds us of ambiguities in our conception of the divine. The overall mood is of joyous anticipation with an undercurrent of anxiety. We are hopeful but worried about divine intervention. ”Ĝer” expresses reverence mixed with anxiety, admiration

mixed with an implicit acknowledgement that Yahweh (or some other god) might act arbitrarily against us.

Many students of *The Old English Rune Poem* think that it shows elements of Christianization, especially in verses like this, where the ancient word “god” appears. (For examples, see Halsall, 1981; Osborn and Longland, 1987: 70-71; Paul, 1996: 50; Shippey, 1976; S. Wódening, 1995a). Yes, this poem shows mixed religion. However, a simply Christianized poem would mention God in praise, supplication, or at least wonder. No deity is dealt with in that way in the *OERP*. What the nobles, beggars and those in between are hoping for is that their beneficent deity will stay out of the way. Of course, this stanza is ambiguous about the identity of the deity in question and about the pantheon in which that deity is classified. Therefore, this is a liberal criticism that can be applied to any religion. “Ĝér” is not saying we are wrong to regard a deity with anxiety; it just holds a mirror up to our minds.

The principle contrasts are between sky and ground, glory and dirt, heaven and earth, hope and anxiety. The divine being mentioned here is not contrasted to mankind so much as shown apart from mankind.

It is possible to make a case that “Ĝér” shows a descent of the visible mixed (or Teutonic Pagan) religion from an earlier sky-god/earth-mother religion. However, that argument is for another publication.

Anticipation of Good Harvest

There is a time, at the start of the frostless seasons, when the people are implicitly hopeful of sensual pleasure and material abundance. At this time, before difficulties and complications have a chance to arise “hope springs eternal in the human breast”. The people tend to be confident they will do their part to turn natural abundance into prosperity. They cannot help but hope that no “act of God” will prevent the feral and agricultural resources from doing what they do naturally. This implicit stanza is plain enough in Translation B.

If Yahweh Does Not Get in the Way

The Creator set up this system to produce material and sensual abundance, and He can choke off the supply at His will. Therefore, people are dependent on Him.

The emphasis here is on alienation and separation between mankind and the divine. This attitude reflects an anxiety- or fear-emphasis concept of deity, for in this implicit stanza the Almighty is a possible saboteur only. What the nobles, beggars and those in between are hoping for is that their Almighty will stay out of the way and let nature run its course. This is clearest in Translation ST8, but it is also an aspect of “People Depend on Yahweh”.

This view can be seen in traditional lore of Abrahamic religion. In the Old Testament, Yahweh causes war, famine and pestilence, impoverishing his own chosen people or crushing whole nations arbitrarily. The traditional lore has affected legal terminology. In American jurisprudence, an “act of God” is a sudden, irreversible natural catastrophe that cannot be foreseen nor avoided.

Note, however, that neglect by Yahweh is not an issue in *The Bible*. Despite the common English phrase “God-forsaken”, no one is ever forsaken by Yahweh. Even Cain, driven into exile, is protected by a magical mark. The neglect of non-Jewish peoples implicit in *Genesis* may be more a matter of bad writing and witless ethnicism than of authors’ intentions. (We know that Adam and Eve were not the first *people* because the sons of Adam and Eve found plenty of other people not descended from Adam and Eve.) The outright hostility against Canaanites found in various passages is not the same as neglect.

People Depend on Yahweh for Physical Abundance and Beauty

It is particularly easy to see the Abrahamic God in this stanza because we all know Him as a resident of Heaven. And with the adjective “sacred” attached to “heaven”, we see that the divine region is meant. This implicit stanza requires that we interpret “l’êtan”/“suffer” as indicating active causation instead of mere toleration.

For an adherent of Abrahamic religion, this aspect of “Gér” would say that it is natural that humans should look to Yahweh for good harvests and therefore they ought to give thanks to Him when abundance and pleasure come to celebrate the relationship between mankind and God. And not only give thanks when harvest is in, but also for the hope deriving from their faith that He will provide.

People Depend on Deities for Physical Abundance and Beauty

This implicit stanza has us see the pantheon or ultimate godhead in a polytheist system as the “god” whose mercy or forbearance is useful for

nature to support mankind. This is similar to the Abrahamic implicit stanza, “People Depend on Yahweh”.

But this stanza is unlike “People Depend on Yahweh” in one important inference. In the Teutonic Pagan system, it is not the case that humans owe thanks to deities for creating rich ecosystems, nor for constantly making the systems work. In Teutonic Polytheism, various deities are to be appealed to for agricultural or natural productivity, but they do not have to intervene for abundance to occur. Therefore, their neglect is not as great a cause of concern. In the Teutonic polytheist system, routine events of nature and weird disasters are “personified” or caused by giants — or simply lack anthropomorphic representation. (See Appendix E of this book; also Faulkes, 1987; Hreinsson et al, 1997e; Larrington, 1996; Stanfield, 2003).

Therefore, the dependence indicated is much weaker than is the dependence implied in Abrahamic-religion views of the stanza. This implicit stanza is easier to see in Translation H9-1-25 than in the others.

If a Pagan Deity Does Not Obstruct

One could say that “(a) god” can have a Pagan referent if we examine at the second (metaphorical) level of meaning. Mention of a deity who is ruler of heaven does give a vague clue. For pagans, any of their weather deities, such as Wódan, Þunor, Tír, or Frea-Ing could be nominated. Since this ruler of heaven is a cyning rather than a cwen, we could rule out the possibility of a female deity if not an ungendered deity. Once we allow “god” to stand for the general idea of “deity”, then allowing “heaven” to stand for a lofty emotional experience of the divine brings in the possibility of Os as a referent.

This would be the fear-emphasis aspect of deity from the Pagan side of “Gér”.

The problem with this interpretation is that there is no surviving Pagan story of a Teutonic deity punishing His or Her own people with natural disasters. The Eddas and the legend of the Brisngamen Necklace tell us that Oðin, Tír, and Freya cause war, but natural disasters seem to be the business of other wights. Moreover, the deities are not responsible for setting up nor for operating nature, and the cast of characters is more complicated than is the case with Abrahamic religions. Therefore, the Teutonic Pagan deities’ anger is out of the question, just as their neglect is no so important. (See Appendix E of this book; also Faulkes, 1987; Larrington, 1996; Hreinsson et al, 1997e).

But if the Pagan deities have the power to bless, surely they have the power to deny. And cataclysmic troubles like wars can involve destruction of seed grains and breeding stock as well as burning of cultivated fields.

Glory and Dirt Combine

This implicit stanza is as easy to see in Translation B as in any other, for it is made clearer by chief-stave analysis. The chief staves are: God, soil (hrusan) and nobles (beornum). The chief staves are in the words God, hrusan and beornum: (a) God/god, soil, and nobles. This implies that “Ĝér” is mainly concerned with the relation among these three.

This implicit stanza is a metaphorical version of “People Depend on Yahweh”. This view of “Ĝér” uses the King of Heaven as a metaphor for weather. By calling heaven “sacred” but not the earth, the stanza sets up a double contrast: the high and (usually) shining versus the low and (mostly) dark. The bright fruits are a metaphor for pleasure and sustenance.

Therefore, power from the glorious sky allows lowly dirt to yield wonders needed to keep us all alive and happy. And unless unusually bad weather prevails, natural beauty and material abundance will be ours on a routine basis. Of course, we know that the metaphor is imperfect, because the dichotomy is too simple. Earth-born events (volcanic eruptions, CO₂ emissions, etc.) cause weather phenomena. But the point is well taken, nonetheless.

Life Is Not a Sure Thing

People must by their nature hope for pleasure, comfort, and the necessities of life. Otherwise, we would go mad. But one can never be completely sure that our most routinely-satisfied and important hopes will be realized. This implicit stanza is based on all the stanzas at the metaphorical level of meaning.

Gird Against Grievous Outcome

What if our hopes are dashed? Hope alone is not good enough; we must have a little anxiety. Although Earth, with its beauty and abundance, is the pleasure planet of the Universe — the wise lay up stores to protect against disaster. This implicit stanza is based on “Life Is Not a Sure Thing”.

The Glorious and Mundane Exist for All

This is the metaphorical version of Glory and Dirt Combine. The King of Heaven and His sacred realm represent the concept of deity and of a the mythical realm, while the beautiful fruits represent the joyful and psychologically strengthening aspects of religion. The nobles are the enlightened seekers and the needy are the rest.

The glorious and powerful above combines with the dirt below us to produce the more and the less noble among mankind. We are all supported — psychologically and physically — by this combination. Both the enlightened and those in need of enlightenment are between the two extremes, and even the enlightened have to live as down-to-earth people, to be aware of where we really are. The noble seekers and the religiously poor are not different orders of beings. We are together in the realm; we make different uses of what it offers.

Moreover, we all experience a certain hope on a cyclical basis. This is a hope that the joyful and psychologically strengthening benefits will be available to all. And we have this hope even if our consciousness of religion has not developed fully enough that we know what those fruits are.

“Deity” Is a Rounded Concept

This implicit stanza is based on the all those below it that refer directly to a deity. On the one hand, we have the concept of a ruler of the glorious sky above and of the divine abode called Heaven. On the other hand, we are looking at the possibility of a disaster caused by that being. This is a criticism of an oversimplified view of the nature of divinity. It is a criticism of our concept of how we really view “deity”.

Therefore, this stanza says that every deity — or at least every pantheon — has an unpleasant as well as a “simply divine” aspect; every deity has a dark side. The fear-emphasis concept of deity emphasizes that we must propitiate to avoid His/Her wrath, neglect, or fun-loving destructiveness. However, it does not take much research to discover Teutonic deities having dark aspects. Examples have already been cited in this chapter. Wódan and Freya cause war without apparent reason. Yahweh has whole cities of people exterminated. Greek deities cause people various sufferings. The Fates cause disasters. Taiowa (the Hopi Creator) and Sotuknang (Taiowa’s principle assistant) decide to repeatedly destroy most of Earth and send what few people are pure on lengthy wanderings. Yes, in the surviving evidence we do not see a dark side of Easter, and

Frey is practically blameless. There may be other individual deities in complex pantheons who never show an unpleasant face. But on the whole, each of the pantheons known to this author has unpleasant aspects. (For examples, see Elton, 1905; Faulkes, 1987; Graves, 1960: 48-49; Hultkrantz, 1987; Larrington, 1996; Waters, 1963).

Following Plato, the rounded concept of deity has fallen out of sight for many religious people. Plato's profound and extensive influence on religious philosophy includes the notion that God is Love, and that considerations of beauty lead to religious fulfillment. Plato has "no definite answer" as to how evil came to be, since God is simply good (Burkert, 1985: 321-325).

But "Gér" reminds us that our own concepts of "deity" are not that simple. This is based on "If Yahweh Does Not Get in the Way", "If a Pagan Deity Does Not Obstruct", "Glory and Dirt Combine"

The Sacred Can Harm the Mundane

"Gér" is one of the stanzas that warns us against over-valuing the glorious, the high and mighty, the sacred. This implicit stanza is based on all the implicit stanzas below it at all three levels.

We must not let religion make a storm that cruelly affects mundane life nor let it make us arrogant about how holy we are. Both the non-sacred and sacred are necessary for a rounded life. The sacred has no meaning except in contrast to the profane. The profane is more fun and fulfilling and tolerable for us if taken with a dose of religion. Religion is more meaningful if taken with a dose of practicality and humaneness. We need to be in touch with the supersoul, but that means being practical in mundane life as well as setting aside times, places, and objects for worshipful activities.

A Less Naïve View of Religion

Based on all the other stanzas in the poem, we find an implicit stanza directing our attention to the range of complexities and subtleties that people can easily miss. Some of the Buddhists, remind us that life, including religion, is both yin and yang inseparable and that the seeker is different but not completely separate. This implicit stanza differs from some other religious philosophies in showing trichotomies instead of dichotomies: sacred heaven, lowly earth, bright fruits; or noble seekers, enlightenment-impooverished persons, and the attractive facets of progressive mysticism. The importance of this message is underscored by

“The Sacred Can Harm the Mundane”, and the hopefulness of it is underscored by “The Glorious and Mundane Exist for All”.

This implicit stanza is like the insight one can get from the meditation of broader awareness, in that it is difficult to put in words. It is a not-completely-verbal undercurrent in “Gér” that only becomes apparent in contemplation near the end of the chains of implicit stanzas.

Themes

Simple Themes

- Deity
- Sacred
- Awareness of what we believe
- Hope
- Universal availability

Contrasts

- Sky versus earth
- Sacred versus mundane
- God versus mankind
- Noble seekers versus enlightenment-impooverished
- Certainty versus uncertainty
- Naivety versus self-consciousness

Advice for Living

The concept of deity does not allow for succinct description. It is more complex than can be expressed in the most motivating and beautiful art. It is more complex than can be expressed in single book. It is something that you can know and yet only distort by verbal description. When a person says that a mono-deity or pantheon or whole religion lacks a dark side, this is not to be taken literally as an expression of more than one facet.

Religion is not for small children. It requires strength of will, good judgment, and ability to perceive complexity. Otherwise, it can lead you astray.

It is up to you to have the strength to balance your religion. Fanaticism is a bad idea. Accept contradictions and contrasts. Do not try to hard to be pure, for life is not a pure thing and we cannot be sure of fine outcomes no matter what we do. Although it is better to be an enlightened seeker

than not, the difference is merely that the nobler make different use of resources than do the others. We naturally hope that the bright fruits of enlightened awareness will be available to all, but we are not to cram enlightenment down others' throats.