

LECTIO I: SEDULII CARMEN PASCHALE
(fifth century, ca. 425–450)

NB: I have literally excerpted and freely paraphrased the following from Carl Springer, *The Gospel as Epic in Late Antiquity: The Paschale carmen of Sedulius* (Brill, 1988), pp. 1–48, 128–135.

SEDULIVS was one of many Christian poets in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries who recast biblical narratives in extended hexameter poems. The biblical epic was one of the earliest and most popular of the new Christian poetic forms. Among the more successful Latin biblical epics that have survived are Juvenecus' *Evangeliorum libri quattuor* (ca. 329–330), Proba's *Cento* (usually dated to the 360s), Sedulius' *Paschale carmen*, Avitus' *De spiritualis historiae gestis* (written shortly after 500), and Arator's *De actibus apostolorum* (544). While earlier scholarship has often viewed Sedulius' verse as a direct descendant of the schoolboy exercise of *paraphrasis*—a view first popularized by Ernst Curtius in his *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*—there remains much within the poem that cannot be properly described as paraphrastic.

Much remains uncertain about the date and provenance of the *Paschale carmen*. We can establish only that Sedulius' poem was a product of the fifth century (roughly speaking), with a *terminus post quem* of c. 390 and a *terminus ante quem* of c. 495. If the testimony of a subscription first preserved in a ninth century manuscript can be trusted, Sedulius lived in Italy and Greece and wrote his Christian epic sometime during the years 425–450: *Sedulius uersificus primo laicus in Italia philosophiam didicit; postea cum aliis metrorum generibus heroicum metrum Macedonio consulente docuit. In Achaia libros suos scripsit tempore imperatorum Theodosii et Valentiani*. Another common subscription, found in some of the oldest manuscripts, identifies Asterius, consul in 494, as responsible for its publication: *Hoc opus Sedulius inter cartulas dispersum reliquit, quod recollectum, adunatum, atque ad omnem elegantiam diuulgatum est a Tertio Rupho Asterio quinto, uiro clarissimo, exconsule ordinario atque Patricio*.

Despite Curtius' suggestion (*European Literature*, pp. 148 and 460) that the main purpose of Sedulius' *Paschale carmen* was to enable its author to show off his 'magniloquent rhetoric in Christian guise' or to strut about in 'the frippery of the pagan school rhetor,' Sedulius presents himself in the *Paschale carmen* as engaged not only with the rhetoric of a text but with its proper interpretation. The understanding of various biblical passages was critical to the doctrinal positions staked out by fifth-century Christians, and Sedulius' interpretation of scripture often reflects these larger hermeneutical (or heretical) issues. The Arian and Sabellian heresies are directly confronted, and, though it never surfaces outright, the Nestorian controversy may have shaped, directly or indirectly, Sedulius' Christology.

Sedulius and his fellow biblical versifiers remained important rhetorical models for the composition of biblical verse throughout the Middle Ages. Among the Carolingians, Sedulius enjoyed the reputation of a poet to rival Virgil, and his text often directly follows Virgil's in numerous Carolingian manuscripts. In Anglo-Saxon England, too, Sedulius remained required reading and exercised a marked influence on the poetry of Aldhelm, Bede, and Alcuin.