

C. S. LEWIS, ST JEROME, AND THE BIBLICAL CREATION STORY

The Background of a Recurring Misattribution

Arend Smilde

ABSTRACT – C. S. Lewis frequently quoted a testimony, supposed to be St Jerome’s, in which it is suggested that the biblical account of Creation was ‘poetic’ or ‘mythical’. However, it seems Lewis had confused his authors and was ascribing to St Jerome a passage actually by the Renaissance humanist John Colet. At the same time, Lewis was certainly aware of St Augustine’s similar – and perhaps more relevant – views on the subject; indeed, along with one of his references to Jerome, Lewis briefly mentioned St Augustine too. It remains to be seen precisely which (if any) early Christian authors might have been cited to back up Lewis’s point.

At the end of chapter 4 of his book *Miracles* (1947), talking about the first two chapters of the Bible, C. S. Lewis briefly refers to what seems to be a dictum of St. Jerome:

... the story in Genesis – as St. Jerome said long ago – is told in the manner ‘of a popular poet,’ or as we should say, in the form of a folk tale.¹

Hieronymus of Stridon (c. 347-420), or St Jerome, was perhaps the greatest scholar among the Latin Church Fathers. Living and working in Bethlehem from 386 until his death, he made the Latin translation of the Bible known as the Vulgate, which was the standard Bible text for Western Christendom for the whole [116] medieval period and in some ways authoritative as late as the 20th century. Surely if this mastermind of ancient Christianity held such a view of the biblical creation story, that is a thing worth recalling whenever it seems to be forgotten in modern discussions of the subject. However, anyone who has ever tried to trace Lewis’s ‘popular poet’ quotation to a passage in Jerome’s works must have concluded that it isn’t there. This is in itself perhaps a small matter. Having checked a great many sources in Lewis’s works over the years, I have found him

1. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1947), p. 42; or p. 37 in the revised edition (London: Collins / Fontana Books, 1960).

not impeccable, but nevertheless fairly reliable as regards both letter and spirit of his countless quotations and allusions. Seeing how much he wrote and how much he quoted, and how uniquely successful he was in introducing modern readers to pre-modern authors, it is reasonable to grant him the right to a handful of blunders. It seems we must count this as one of them.

What makes it hard to leave the matter there, however, is the fact that Lewis, over a period of about fifteen years, repeated more or less the same assertion about Jerome in three more publications as well as in a private letter which was later published. This makes a total of five instances – in three of which he used the phrase ‘popular poet’ with regard to the creation story in Genesis and ascribed that phrase unambiguously to Jerome. I will list the relevant passages in what I suppose to be the order in which Lewis wrote them (although I would certainly not argue about the order of the first two).

1. Lewis’s largest academic work, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, excluding Drama*, is described on the title page as ‘The Completion of The Clark Lectures, Trinity College, Cambridge 1944’. The book did not appear until 1954; but since Lewis began working on it in the mid-1930s it may be assumed that much of the writing was at least in a draft stage and much of the reading for it had been done by the time of the Clark Lectures. In the published work, a reference to Jerome and Genesis appears three pages into Book II, chapter 1, on ‘Religious controversy and [117] translation’, as Lewis is discussing the English humanist scholar John Colet (1467-1519). My quotation must be long because, as will appear, it contains the key to solving our problem:

Colet ... has an important place in the history of Biblical studies ... he is one of those who helped to banish the old allegorical methods of interpretation, at least as regards the New Testament, and made some attempt to see the Pauline epistles in their real historical setting. In the *Epistolae ad Radulphum* he himself allegorizes freely on the opening chapters of *Genesis*, as St. Augustine had done before him, but he is seeking a scientific or philosophical, rather than a moral or spiritual sense. It is one among many attempts made in this [i.e. 16th] century to reconcile the Mosaic account of the creation with the cosmological ideas of the day. In this difference between Colet’s treatment of St. Paul and his treatment of *Genesis* there is inherent the recognition that the Bible contains books very different in kind. It was not exactly new – St. Jerome had allowed what we should now call the ‘mythical’ element in *Genesis* – but it was timely and useful.²

2. Lewis’s essay ‘Dogma and the Universe’ was first published in two parts in March 1943 in *The Guardian*, the Anglican weekly that had serialized *The Screwtape Letters* in 1941. After a 1942 essay called ‘Miracles’, also in *The Guardian*, the ‘Dogma’ piece was one of the earliest of what we may now identify as a series of preparatory moves, or building blocks, for *Miracles*. Jerome and Genesis appear in the ninth paragraph:

2. C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954, reprinted as *Poetry and Prose in the Sixteenth Century* in 1997), pp. 159-160.

The first chapters of Genesis, no doubt, give the story of creation in the form of a folk-tale – a fact recognised as early as the time of St Jerome ...³ |118|

3. Lewis began writing *Miracles* not long after this and he finished writing it in early 1945,⁴ but the book was not published until May 1947. The Jeromean passage, now including the phrase ‘popular poet’, is quoted at the beginning of the present essay.

4. On 5 October 1955, Lewis wrote a letter to a woman named Janet Wise, who had written to tell him she was troubled by other people’s disbelief in the authority of the Bible and asked which books on the subject he recommended. In his reply, Lewis explained his own position in some 600 words, in the course of which he noted that

Calvin left the historicity of Job an open question and, from earlier, St Jerome said that the whole Mosaic account of creation was done ‘after the method of a popular poet’.⁵

Interestingly, the editor of Lewis’s letters, Walter Hooper, while stating the source for the assertion about Calvin, has left the one about Jerome unreferenced.

5. When Lewis presented his *Reflections on the Psalms* in 1958, he pointed out in the introductory chapter that this book was only an amateur’s attempt to ‘compare notes’ with fellow Christians, and not another defence of Christianity. However, in the last three chapters he is back in the role of an apologist, arguing that Christians are really justified in seeing specifically Christian meanings in the ancient Hebrew poetry. Jerome appears in chapter XI, ‘Scripture’, second paragraph, as Lewis is distancing himself from |119|

... a prior belief that every sentence of the Old Testament has historical or scientific truth. ... [T]his I do not hold, any more than St. Jerome did when he said that Moses described Creation ‘after the manner of a popular poet’ (as we should say, mythically) or than Calvin did when he doubted whether the story of Job were history or fiction.⁶

* * *

3. C. S. Lewis, ‘Dogma and the Universe’, in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1970), pp. 38-47, quotation on p. 42. The essay ‘Miracles’ is in the same volume. Both were reprinted in a smaller British collection also titled *God in the Dock* (London: Fount Paperbacks 1979), and in an American collection *The Grand Miracle* (New York: Ballantine, 1982). They were reprinted again in the large *Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces*, ed. Lesley Walmsley (London: HarperCollins, 2000), where the quotation appears on p. 122.

4. C. S. Lewis, *Collected Letters II*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: HarperCollins, 2002), pp. 591 and 640.

5. C. S. Lewis, *Collected Letters III*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: HarperCollins, 2006), pp. 652-653 including note 284.

6. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1958), p. 109.

So much for known expressions of Lewis's belief that St. Jerome is an early Christian authority for the 'poetic' reading of the creation story in Genesis. We may note that this is not simply a case of persistence in an unwarranted attribution. The subject at hand – the nature of the biblical account of creation – is a weighty one, so that it will be worth our while to find out what kind of error is involved here and how serious it is. Lewis may have simply confused Jerome with another Church Father. If so, then even if Jerome was the wrong name to drop, Lewis would still have been correct in a general way in invoking an ancient authority: the mere antiquity of the cited authority was surely half his point or more. It would be worse for Lewis, and perhaps for his view of Genesis, if the remark about the 'manner of a popular poet' could not be traced to any early Christian authority at all.

Now it seems in fact that it cannot, at least as far as Latin sources are concerned. All of Jerome's works are contained both in the Online Library of Latin Texts and the Patrologia Latina Database: and no Latin phrase translatable as 'popular poet' can be found anywhere in either of these.

Precisely such a phrase does appear, however, in the *Epistolae ad Radulphum*, written some 1,100 years after Jerome by John Colet – the book Lewis was dealing with in the course of his scholarly work when (as I think) he first envisaged Jerome as a proponent [120] of the 'poetic' view of Genesis. Colet's Latin treatise is partly lost and, in its incomplete state, was first published in 1876, in *Letters to Radulphus on the Mosaic Account of Creation, together with other treatises*, an English translation followed by the Latin originals. The fourth letter breaks off in mid-sentence, so that, since the letters broadly deal with one Creation Day each, it is quite likely that what has come down to us is only about half of the original work. In the second letter (p. 170) we read:

Firmamentum et celum primum factum fuit in illo die quem [Moyses] vocat unum. Sed particulatim haec spectabilia voluit deinceps attingere Moyses; et hoc, modo poetae alicujus popularis; quo magis consolat spiritui simplicis rusticitatis; fingens successionem rerum, operum, et temporum; cujusmodi apud tantum opificem certe nulla esse potest.

– The firmament and heaven had been made first of all, in the day which he [Moses] calls first. But it was the design of Moses to touch on these more conspicuous objects afterwards in detail. And he does this after the manner of some popular poet, that he may the better study the spirit of simple-minded rustics; imagining a succession of events, and works, and times, such as could by no means find place with so great an Artificer.⁷

Colet does not mention Jerome here. Nor does he do so in connection with two other references to the 'poet-like' ways of Moses (*more poetae*) – one at the end of the third letter, and one in the fourth, just before the end of the treatise as we have it. Nevertheless

7. John Colet, *Letters to Radulphus on the Mosaic Account of Creation, together with other treatises*, ed. J. H. Lupton (London: G. Bell, 1876), pp. 9 (English) and 170 (Latin).

there are good reasons to suppose that it is the above passage from Colet that Lewis mistook for, or misremembered as, a passage in Jerome.

At the beginning of Colet's first letter, Jerome is mentioned in conjunction with an earlier, Greek Church Father, Origen, likewise a great Bible scholar. The two are praised, along with 'all the most careful investigators of Holy Writ', for their knowledge of Hebrew [121] as an essential tool for understanding 'the Mosaic record'. This is the only place in Colet's treatise where Jerome is mentioned. Origen, however, is mentioned in two other places. The second of these comes just before the end (as we have it), where Colet once more propounds the notion of Moses as a 'poet'. And he ascribes it to Origen:

Sed more boni pique poetae, qualem illum [sc. Moysen] in libro quem contra Celsum scripsit, vocat Origenes, effingere aliquid voluit nonnihil indignum Deo, modo idem commodum et utile hominibus esse possit.

– But, like a good and devout poet, as Origen in his treatise against Celsus calls him, Moses would invent something, even in a certain degree unworthy of God, if only it might be of advantage and service to man.⁸

Unfortunately, no reference to Moses as a poet (let alone a popular one) can be found in Origen either – a fact already noted by Colet's 19th-century editor and translator J. H. Lupton.⁹ Lupton obligingly mentions a passage in Origen's *Contra Celsum* (I.19) which Colet may have had in mind; but this does not solve our problem of finding an early Christian source for the epithet 'poet' or 'poetic' actually applied to Moses. And since the occurrence of particular words and phrases can no longer be contentious in the age of electronic databases, we may now restate our problem as *whether something at all like the 'poetic' view of Moses can be attested in any early Christian learned author (preferably Jerome)*.

While a definitive answer to this question is beyond the scope of the present essay, it seems useful to note here that Lupton, when talking about Colet's sources and inspirations, mentions Jerome only in passing.¹⁰ Lupton regards Origen as a much more important source for Colet, even if this is largely a matter of a shared direct dependence on Philo Judaeus, the Jewish-Greek scholar from [122] Alexandria who was a contemporary of Jesus Christ.¹¹ In the end, Lupton argues that no other writer – ancient or modern, Christian or pagan – was a greater influence on Colet than was

... Augustine, both as regards the general spirit of enquiry in which he enters on the subject of these Letters [viz. 'the Mosaic Account of Creation'], and the special line of interpretation which he follows.¹²

8. Colet, *Letters*, pp. 27 (English) and 182 (Latin).

9. *Ibid.*, p. 27, note 2.

10. *Ibid.*, p. xvii, note 3.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. xvi-xvii, cf. p. 9, note 2.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. xvii-xix.

Lupton illustrates his point with several passages from Augustine's *Confessions*, Books XI and XII.

Thus Lewis's allusion to Augustine in the passage quoted from *English Literature* was relevant; but about Jerome he appears to have doubled a mistake that was first made by Colet about Origen.

Going back now to my list of Lewis's five misattributions over a period of some fifteen years, and assuming that my chronology is roughly in order, we may note that the first two statements – those from *English Literature* and 'Dogma and the Universe' – do not include the phrase 'popular poet'. What may have happened next, after Lewis wrote or conceived these passages, is that, in consulting 'Dogma and the Universe' for use in *Miracles*, he recovered among other things his own earlier reference to Jerome; remembered its background in Colet along with the 'popular poet' phrase in the same treatise; then perhaps carelessly and too quickly checked that source, thus coming to attribute the phrase to Jerome; and went on to remember it, along with its mistaken attribution, for the rest of his life.¹³ While this reconstruction is certainly speculative, it would still seem to be the best available explanation for Lewis's mistake about St. Jerome and the biblical creation story.

I am grateful to Professor Neil Adkin (University of North Carolina), one of the world's leading scholars on Jerome, for [123] taking up my suggestion that this matter was worth researching. He confirmed my suspicion – and not only mine, as witness some discussions on the internet – that Colet was the clue; and what is more, this Jerome scholar, in a presentation of his own findings, has provided the following valuable comment:

A Jeromean 'popular poet' immediately strikes a student of Jerome as fishy: the very idea can in fact be shown to be alien to him ... for Jerome it is only with the help of the *grammaticus* that 'poets' can be 'understood': by definition they are not 'popular'.¹⁴

But even barring the 'popular' element, Lewis must have been to some extent aware of the incongruity. In his essay 'Christianity and Culture' (1940) he listed Jerome among a number of Christian authorities on the value of 'culture'. He found Jerome definitely suspicious of 'culture' and actually equating *carmina poetarum*, 'the songs of poets', with *cibus daemonum*, 'the food of demons'.¹⁵ It is hard to see how, holding such a view, Jerome could have been content to describe any major Bible writer as one who wrote in the manner of a 'poet', popular or otherwise.

13. That he consulted the essay for the book is in itself certain. *Miracles* contains several passages that are more or less literally taken from previously written essays, including 'Dogma and the Universe'.

14. Neil Adkin, 'C. S. Lewis and St. Jerome's "Popular Poet"', *Studi e rassegne su antico, tardoantico e medioevo* (= *Orpheus* I), ed. C. Crimi et al. (Rome: Bonanno, 2013), pp. 9-12.

15. C. S. Lewis, 'Christianity and Culture', in *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Geoffrey Bles; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), p. 16 in the Eerdmans edition; p. 31 in the 1981 British reprint as Fount paperback; p. 74 in the *Essay Collection* (2000) mentioned in note 3.

* * *

As we saw, Lewis appears to have begun slipping into the error about Jerome while discussing John Colet, partly led astray perhaps by Colet's own dubious reference to Origen. But we have also seen that Lewis, in the very same passage, briefly alluded to yet another patristic parallel to Colet's understanding of the biblical creation [124] story – Augustine. As a literary historian writing about Colet, Lewis was clearly hitting the mark here. Perhaps he would have done better to develop this hunch about Augustine when he wanted to cite an early Christian authority for the idea of a 'mythical' or folktale element in Genesis, or of poet-like ways in Moses. Certainly he would have done better to check his quotations. Presumably he would have done so had he realized that his own authority and status among Christians was, before long, to eclipse that of many an ancient church father. The importance of accuracy, however, is a lesson to be drawn and remembered by all of us.

Postscript: After this essay was written, one more Lewisian reference to Jerome came to light in a newly published collection of essays and reviews, *Image and Imagination*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 68- 69. In his review of a book by Werner Schwarz, *Principles and Problems of Biblical Translation* (1955), Lewis notes the author's distinction between the 'philological' and the 'inspirational' approaches to Biblical translation and how Jerome is described as representing the former and Augustine the latter. Further on, John Colet is also mentioned. While neither the phrase 'popular poet' nor any references whatever to Moses or the creation story appear in this review, it is nevertheless worth reading for anyone wishing to further explore my theme.

Postscript 2 (November 2017; not in *Journal of Inklings Studies*)

While taking stock of Lewis's published letters and letter fragments not included in the three-volume *Collected Letters* of 2000-2006, I found yet another reference to Jerome and Genesis. In a letter of 28 February 1952 to a 'Mr. Canfield', Lewis wrote,

I'm not a fundamentalist in the direct sense: one who starts out by saying, 'Everything we read is literal fact.' The presence of an allegorical or mystical element in *Genesis* was recognized by St. Jerome. Origen held *Job* to be a moral fable not a history. There is nothing new about such interpretation.¹⁶

¹⁶ Richard Purtill, *C. S. Lewis's Case for the Christian Faith* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 83.

Quite possibly, ‘mystical’ is a misrendering of ‘mythical’. In any case, the passage clearly deserves a place in my survey and goes some way toward filling the gap between 1945 and 1955. So far, it is the only case of Lewis citing Origen as an early Christian authority for his own view of Scripture. However, this reference concerns Job rather than Genesis. In John Colet’s *Letters to Radulphus*, the Book of Job is rarely mentioned and Origen is never cited as commenting on Job. My speculation that Lewis was “partly led astray perhaps by Colet’s own dubious reference to Origen” is thus neither refuted nor confirmed. The remarkable thing is that Lewis in his two subsequent observations, as listed above (1955 and 1958), substituted Calvin’s doubt about the historicity of the Book of Job for Origen’s positive assertion (if and wherever he made it) about that book’s true character.