introduction

The Theology of Sacred History:
The Liturgy of the Medieval Church
Sacred History

In order to understand the relationship between the liturgy and the medieval religious lyric, it is necessary to study the liturgy not as a collection of prayers or formulas, but as both a history and a method of formulating history. There is a profound analogy to be developed between the medieval theologian's understanding of the events of creation and the universe as the language of God—its grammar—and the modern linguist's approach to semantics through structure—through phonemic, morphemic and syntactic analysis: for the medieval liturgy might be seen as the meta-language of creation.

History can be explained simply as a chronicle of events, a succession of dates, and time may be given only a descriptive ordering value. Or the principle the historian uses to formulate history may be a logical one, and time may be conceived in terms of cause and effect. The medieval liturgy, however, was formulated as a sacred history: that is, the principle of explanation was God, Who is beyond time, in His relationship to man, who is in time. For the medieval soul God was both the ground of value—i.e., the origin, end, and center of time—and the means of understanding it. (See Figure 1 and descriptive note.) It is necessary to outline the nature of this view of history before the full dimensions of the liturgy itself can be made clear.
The Beginning and End of History

For the medieval theologian the principle of sacred history was living, dynamic, since it was not only the basis of interpreting past events, but it also gave the meaning of the present and the direction of the future. According to sacred history, events literally begin at the beginning with God and end at the end in God. God is their foundation and their purpose. In its sequence, this sacred history begins with the creation of the world for God's glory, the disobedience of man through pride, and man's fall. It tells of God's remedy for this, a second creation, more wonderful than the first: the coming of God Himself into the world through Christ, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, Who redeems man through His incarnation, death, and resurrection. It tells how Christ, after ascending to His Father, sends the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, to establish the Church and to perpetuate it with His gifts of grace and with the sacraments, by which men are taught, sustained, and united to Christ until the consummation of all things at the end of time. The end of time will occur with Christ's second coming in majesty, with the resurrection of the dead, and the final judgment where man is fixed in the pains of hell or the eternal joy of paradise. Sacred history encompasses all time, and each event is given significance by its context in the total plan. Sacred history gives meaning to individual action as well, so that every thing done, every act, offers information and has value by its context in sacred history.

This order, with God as the beginning and end and with history conceived of as stages in the creation of a new reality, is fundamentally Hebraic and is the principle of order of the accounts in Holy Scripture. From the time of the early Church, Holy Scripture was the foundation of commentary and theological refinement, and the order of events in Scripture became the structural basis for some of the later more general theological works. The same principle of order was used in the early technique of catechesis put forward by St. Augustine and implied by St. Gregory of Nyssa. Histories of the world were organized according to the stages of sacred history. This order is at the heart of Augustine's City of God, for example, which is two contrasted stories, the origin and the final end of the City of God and the City of Earth.

Many Middle English works are ordered by sacred history, among them works of instruction such as Cursor Mundi, which divides history into seven
ages from the creation and fall to the end of the world. Sacred history is also the principle by which the three dramatic cycles of Chester, York, and Wakefield are ordered. One purpose of this study will be to show how each of the Middle English lyrics that meditates on an event is conceived in the context of the beginning and the end of sacred history and that the total plan of sacred history is incorporated as a structural principle of the poem.

The Center of History

God is not only the beginning and the end of history; the second dynamic principle of sacred history is that God is the center. God the Father through the Holy Spirit sends His Son into history, and Christ, being both God and man, becomes the means whereby man is united to God and raised up to Him.

The central events of sacred history, to which all events point, in which all events culminate, are the Incarnation, the moment God enters the world by taking on man's human nature through Mary; Christ's passion and death, the moment He atones for man's sin; Christ's resurrection from the dead, showing His godhood and thus giving the guarantee of man's hope for his own future resurrection; and, nine days after Christ's ascension, Pentecost, when through the coming of the Holy Spirit Christ establishes His Church which will be for man the means of union with God through grace and knowledge until the end of time. Thus the Church provides the central focus of present history. It is the present moment's unity with God through Christ, and it is the particular point of view from which the Christian soul interprets all things, from which he relates himself in an historical present to a past, to the present, to the future. It is this central focus of history in the present time, on Christ within the Church, which establishes the basic proportion of value, the divine ratio, among events lived in the context of sacred history.

A perception of this divine ratio or proportion among events informed the method by which the exegete interpreted Holy Scripture, and it is the principle by which the liturgy reformulates sacred history. Based on the precedent of Christ in the Gospel, Who applied the words of the psalms and prophets to His own coming, and on the practice of the authors of the New Testament themselves, especially on St. Paul, the exegete divided Holy Scripture into the Old and the New Testament. The incarnation and death of Christ, Who is Himself the New Testament, was seen to fulfill the events
INTRODUCTION

and prophecies of the Old by which His coming and death were prefigured. Thus at the same time as they were historical realities, the events, historical personages and sayings of the Old Testament were applied to the actions and words of Christ in the New and were seen to have allegorical value relative to the value of Christ.⁶

Although with the Acts of the Apostles, the Epistles and the Apocalypse, Holy Scripture as such is complete, the Old Testament and the New are not as yet completely fulfilled. Scripture is assumed into the living Church which perpetuates in the present all things in Christ until His second coming.⁷ The liturgy is the re-enactment of sacred history in the present. It reformulates Holy Scripture perpetually according to the divine ratio of events.⁸ Through its sacraments it is the present means for the Christian soul of achieving the purpose of his life, the union with God in heaven.⁹

We shall see that this proportioning of events is also the principle of structuring in the religious lyrics, that it defines the role of the poet and his relationship to his audience, as well as defining the character of the audience itself, and that it also determines the power and beauty of the poem. A description of the ways in which the liturgy reformulates sacred history will provide the method and context for studying the poems.
nim supplices rogamus tui
mus un accepta heas tibi

[Latin text continues]