CHAPTER THREE

TRADITION AND DESIGN

In the opening lines of the *Paschale carmen*, Sedulius complains that pagan poets have made falsehoods (mendacia) the subject of their ‘overblown’ works and asks rhetorically why he should be silent about the truth, the famous miracles of the saving Christ: *cur . . . clara salutiferi taceam miracula Christi*? If Sedulius had really needed to justify his decision to treat the life of Christ in verse, his strongest appeal might have been to precedence. Christians had been making biblical narratives the subject of their poetry since the first half of the fourth century, and one of their favorite topics was the life of Christ—not a surprising choice in view of this story’s fundamental importance for Christian kerygma and creed. Among the subjects adopted by Christian poets of Late Antiquity only the stories of Genesis could compete with the Gospels in popularity.\(^1\) As we have seen, Juvenecus, the first Latin biblical poet and perhaps the first Christian poet to write in Latin, chose to draw his subject matter from the four Gospels.\(^2\) Juvenecus’ conception of the *vitalia gesta* of Christ as a fit subject for a poem was something of a literary master stroke. The Gospel has an easily identifiable literary structure. It is a powerful narrative with a clear beginning, middle, and end. In the fourth century, in addition, it was rapidly becoming the most important of all stories for a growing number of people. A few decades after Juvenecus wrote his pioneering work, Proba retold the life of Christ in the second half of her Virgilian *Cento*, and around the turn of the fifth century, Prudentius wrote a hymn (*Cathemerinon* 9) in which he also related the life of Christ.\(^3\) Thus, by the second quarter of the fifth century, there were actually a number of possible models before Sedulius as he set out in his ‘little

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\(^1\) The most thorough study of the poetic treatments of Genesis in Late Antiquity still remains S. Gamber’s *Le livre de ‘Genèse’ dans la poésie latine au ⁵ᵉ siècle* (Paris, 1899).

\(^2\) Commodian, a Christian Latin poet whose homeland is assigned variously to Syria, Gaul, and Africa, may have anticipated Juvenecus, but his dates are still debated. For the most recent (1961) edition of Commodian’s poetry, see *Commodiani carmina*, ed. J. Martin, *CC* 128, 1-113. See also the discussion in Roberts, *Biblical Epic*, p. 74, n. 50.

\(^3\) Christian poets also, of course, retold individual episodes from the Gospels. Prudentius, for example, concentrated on the story of Peter walking on the water (Mt. 14. 22-33) in the preface to his *Contra Symmachum* 2. Among Paulinus of Nola’s biblical paraphrases, the longest (330 hexameter lines), *Carmen* 6, deals only with the birth and abbreviated ministry of John the Baptist.
boat’ over what he describes to Macedonius as ‘‘the boundless sea of the Paschal majesty, which terrifies even the most learned of men.’’

The author of the *Paschale carmen* is clearly indebted to Christian poets who preceded him, but it should be recognized that the fifth-century poet also brings something new to his Christian literary tradition. Sedulius adheres to the Juvencan model—he, too, chooses to write an ambitious life of Christ in hexameters—but applies to it his own thematic emphasis. Without disturbing the general biblical chronology and without resorting to purely topical treatment, Sedulius uses *miracula Christi* as a criterion for omission and inclusion of narrative material. The effect of this thematic strategy is to unify the subject and broaden the scope of the poem.

i. *The Narrative Subject of the Paschale carmen*

It is important, at the outset, to be precise in describing the narrative subject of the *Paschale carmen*. Literary historians have often used subject categories very loosely to describe the *Paschale carmen* and other biblical poems of Late Antiquity. Kartschoke, for instance, groups together the poems of Juvencus, Sedulius, and Arator under the category of ‘‘New Testament epic paraphrase.’’ This is somewhat misleading. Christian poets of Late Antiquity did not attempt to paraphrase the entire New Testament. With the exception of Prudentius’ *Dittochaeon*, which retells events from the life of Christ but also devotes four quatrains to stories from Acts and one to Revelation, Christian poets confined their attention to single books or sections of the New Testament. Sedulius himself is also sometimes described as a ‘‘paraphrast of the Gospel,’’ as though the *Paschale carmen* were a paraphrase of a single Gospel. But neither a Gospel nor the Gospels can really be said to constitute the subject of Sedulius’ poem. Nestler’s description of the *Paschale carmen* as a ‘‘Messiad’’ is more accurate. As we have seen, Sedulius eliminates a large number of episodes and details from the Gospel stories (especially those which do not center around Christ) and concentrates on the Savior. The *Paschale carmen* does much more, to be sure, than simply retell the life of Christ. The poet introduces his story with great ceremony and at some length in Book 1. He exegizes freely throughout the poem, drawing explanatory

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4 CSEL 10, 1-2.
5 Kartschoke, *Bibeldichtung*, p. 93.
6 Colombo, *La poesia cristiana antica*, p. 156.
7 See Nestler, *Studien über die Messiade des Juvencus*, p. 43. Neither ‘‘Messiad’’ nor ‘‘Christiad’’ were titles used by the poets of Late Antiquity, but even though somewhat anachronistic, they are the most accurate descriptive titles which can be applied to Sedulius’ poem.