Why can Christ wash his disciples' feet with his palms (*fôti mid is folmun* 4506a), but not with his hands (fôti mid is handun*) in the Old Saxon *Heliand*?**

[and other matters of prosody, syntax, and meter]

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I. Introduction

1. The full passage in which our line is found is the Old Saxon rendering of the famous Gospel scene in which Christ humbly washes the feet of his disciples. I give the extended text in (2), noting the beats (or lifts) of the metrical line with diacritic marks on the vowels of the relevant syllables. Alliterating beats are marked as ő, non-alliterating beats as ó. Non-beats (dips) are unmarked. The | represents the caesura between the *a*-half-line and the *b*-half-line.

2.

| Thô he sélbo gibőd,
then he self commanded

uuáldand mid is uuőrdun, | hêt im uuáter drágan
ruler with his words ordered them water to bring

hlűttar te hándun, | endi rês thô the hélago Críst,
clear to his hands and arose then the holy Christ

the gődo at them gőmun | endi thar is iűngarono thuóg
the good one at the banquets and there of his disciples washed

főti mid is fólmun | endi suarf sie mid is fánon áftar,
feet with his palms and wiped them with his cloth afterwards

drűknide sie diűrlìca. |
dried them dearly

'Then he himself, the ruler, commanded with his words, ordered them to bring clear water to (his) hands; and then the holy Christ, the good one at the feast, rose and there washed the feet of his disciples with his palms, and then wiped them with his cloth, dried them lovingly.' *Hel.* 4502-4507

3. Examining our passage, you will note that the clean water was brought *te handun*, but he did the washing *mid is folmun*. Is there a reason for this? One possibility, of course, in Old Saxon and perhaps in closely related Old English, is that it was idiomatic to refer to activities done with the hands with the noun *folm* rather than the noun *hand*. For example, when Grendel reaches out towards our sleeping hero in Beowulf (747b-748a), the text reads:

4. **| rǣ̆hte ongéan**
reached against

fēond mid főlme;
fiend with palm

'The fiend reached towards (him) with his palm.' *Beo.* 746b-747a

5. However, in addition to the almost immediately preceding *te handun* in our Old Saxon passage, we also find frequent use of the noun *hand* in these kinds of situations. I give you an Old Saxon and an Old English example below.

6. a. **huô imu ên ĕrl bigán | an ĕrðu sā́ian**
how himself one man began in earth to sow

hrĕ̄ncòrni mid is hā́ndun.
pure wheat with his hands

'how one man began to sow in the earth pure wheat with his hands'
Hel. 2389a-2390a //

b. **| Forðon sceall gā̆r wésan**
since shall spear be

mőniġ, mőrgenċeàld, | mū́ndum bewúnden,
many morning-cold by-hands wound

hǽfen on hā́nda,
raised in hand

'Because many a spear, morning-cold, shall be wound by hands and raised in hand,'
Beo. 3021b-3023a

7. Somewhat distressingly, the Old English passage above introduces yet another word for 'hand', *mund*. We see this in other passages with a pretty clear 'hand' meaning:

8. **| Iċ on őfoste gefĕ́ng**
I in haste grabbed

mícle mid mū́ndum | mǽġenbýrðenne
great with hands mighty-burden

'I in haste grasped with my hands a great mighty burden' *Beo.* 3090b-3091b

9. When we line up the verses with prepositional phrases containing the various words for 'hand' in them, this is what we see:

hlűttar [te hā́ndun]$_{PP}$ (2)
fő̆ti [mid is főlmun]$_{PP}$ (2)
fēond [mid főlme]$_{PP}$ (4)
hrĕ̄ncorni [mid is hā́ndun]$_{PP}$ (6a)

hæ̋fen [on hā́nda]$_{PP}$ (6b)

mícle [mid mū́ndum]$_{PP}$ (8)

10. We can add to these the two other a-verses cited above which contain prepositional phrases:[1]

uuā́ldand [mid is uuṓrdun]$_{PP}$ (2)

the gṓdo [at the gṓmun]$_{PP}$ (2)

11. It is hard not to notice that the first nominal element (noun or adjective) in the NP which is the complement of the PP invariably alliterates. In fact, in all of our a-verse cases above we see a phenomenon known as *double alliteration*, with our PP-internal alliterating element providing the second alliteration in each case.

12. If Jesus had been said to have used his hands, we would have gotten **fṓti mid is hándun*, and there would be no double alliteration.

13. Of course, if you haven't forgotten your important lessons about Germanic alliterative verse, then you will recall that the standard teaching is that the *a*-verse shows what is usually called 'optional' alliteration on its second beat. Since **fṓti mid is hándun* is, alliteration aside, prosodically identical to *fṓti mid is fólmun*, why am I marking it as 'ungrammatical'?

14. And besides, a line that doesn't scan isn't *ungrammatical*, right? It's fine, as a sentence, it just doesn't scan!

15. I'd like to argue that this straightforward understanding of the matter is not the optimal way to conceive of what is going on in this instance, though it is of course obvious that one can construct grammatical sentences that do not scan.

II. How West Germanic Alliterative Verse is Said To Work

16. The structure of a 'normal' half-line in West Germanic alliterative verse is well-established.[2] Each 'normal' half-line has two beats (or lifts). The first beats of each half-line must alliterate.

17. Regarding the second beat in each half-line things get more interesting. There are basically two types of 'normal' half-line, both seen in the verse below.

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[1]The b-verses display a systematic pattern as well:

endi suarf sie [mid is fā́non]$_{PP}$ áftar (2)

[an ḗrðu]$_{PP}$ sâian (6a)

iċ [on ṓfoste]$_{PP}$ gefḗnd (8)

The b-verse patterns will be discussed in what follows.

[2]A 'normal' half-line is to be contrasted with a 'light' half-line, a 'heavy' half-line, and a 'hypermetrical' half-line, which will for the most part fall outside of our immediate concerns today. The vast, vast majority of verse lines in *Beowulf*, the *Heliand*, and the Old Saxon *Genesis* are 'normal' half-lines.

18. **ettho lűsta thes lı̋chamon | ettho lı̋f éuuig.**
either lusts of the body or life eternal

‘either lusts of the body or eternal life’ *Hel.* 1661

19. As you can see, in the *a*-verse both beats participate in the alliteration with the first beat of the *b*-verse. This is a case of ‘double alliteration’. **It is only possible in the *a*-verse.** I will call this type of *a*-line **‘type 1’**.The *b*-verse, as in the example above, can *only* alliterate on its first beat.

20. Interestingly, as mentioned above, the *a*-verse is not required to show double alliteration. The general discussion of a-verses holds that alliteration of the second lift is *optional*. Thus, it is possible for the a-verse to show alliteration only on the first of its beats. That is, it *can have* the same alliteration structure as every *b*-line *must have.* I will call this a **‘type 2’** half-line (whether it appears in the *a*-line or the *b*-line). A typical example is given in (21).

21. **that sie se̋lƀon Kríst | gise̋han móstin.**
that they self Christ see might

‘that they might see Christ himself’ *Hel.* 1661

22. As you might guess from the name, ‘normal’ half-lines are, well, the norm. The vast majority of half-lines in Old Saxon (and, e.g., in Beowulf) are one of these two types of ‘normal’ half-line.

III. PPs in Old English and Old Saxon

23. We’ve seen a number of essentially random lines containing prepositional phrases above, linked largely by the fact that they talk about ‘hands’. In this set of examples, we have seen a universal ‘double alliteration’ in the a-verse. A review of the prepositional phrases (for the most frequent prepositions) in the Old English *Beowulf*, the Old Saxon *Heliand* and the Old Saxon *Genesis*, nearly 10,000 metrical lines (each with an a-verse and a b-verse) reveals that this patterning is not accidental. Some initial rough statistics, which we will refine as we go along, are given below (25, 26, 27).

24. In these tables, I will refer to the first lift in the a-line as a1, the second as a2, the first lift of the b-verse as b1 and the second as b2. Recall that the first lift of the a-line must alliterate (so we can designate it as a̋1) as must the first lift of the b-line (so b̋1). The second lift of the b-line **must not** alliterate, so we can designate it b́2. Most importantly, there are two kinds of a2 positions: alliterating (in the case of double alliteration), which we can label a̋2, and non-alliterating, which we can label á2. Finally, x indicates that the relevant element does not bear any ictus (i.e., does not fill a lift).

25. Here is the data for the Old Saxon prepositions *te, under, umbi, af, bi, oƀar,* and *mid*:

	te	*undar*	*umbi*	*af*	*bi*	*oƀar*	*mid*	total
a͛1	152	27	34	2	34	42	80	**371**
a͛2	249	74	25	9	28	20	214	**619**
b͛͛1	186	43	16	3	29	36	106	**419**
allit.	587	144	75	14	91	98	400	**1409**
á2	18	1	1	0	2	5	6	**33**
b́2	85	8	2	1	1	14	34	**145**
x	21	3	1	0	6	0	13	**44**
non-allit.	124	12	4	1	9	19	53	**222**
Total	711	156	79	15	100	117	453	**1631**

26. And here is the data for the *Beowulf* prepositions *æfter, æt, be, for, fram, ġeond, in, mid, of, ofer, þurh, under, wiđ,* and *ymb(e)*:

	æfter	æt	be	for	fram	ġeond	in	mid	of	ofer	þurh	under	wiđ	ymb(e)	to	on	total
a͛1	40	21	8	23	5	5	27	27	13	30	13	18	25	6	45	122	**428**
a͛2	19	18	6	6	3	0	11	16	11	22	2	25	19	3	41	84	**286**
b͛͛1	3	17	9	7	2	2	8	20	9	12	2	15	11	11	49	119	**296**
allit.	62	56	23	36	10	7	46	67	35	70	18	58	58	21	135	325	**1010**
á2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	**4**
b́2	2	2	2	0	3	2	0	3	2	6	0	0	3	1	8	17	**51**
x	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	6	3	**13**
non-allit.	2	3	2	2	3	2	0	4	2	6	1	0	3	1	17	20	**68**
total	64	59	25	38	13	9	46	67	35	70	18	58	58	21	152	345	**1078**

27. The behavior of individual prepositions will not be our concern today, so here's a much easier to read table. We will repeat this table as we walk through reasons to modify it below.

	Old Saxon	*Beowulf*	Total
a͛1	371	428	**799**
a͛2	619	286	**906**
b͛͛1	419	296	**715**
allit.	1409 (86%)	1010 (94%)	**2419** (89%)
á2	33	4	**37**
b́2	145	51	**196**
x	44	13	**57**
non-allit	222 (14%)	68 (6%)	**290** (11%)
Total	**1631**	**1078**	**2709**

28. The statistics seem to indicate that describing the presence of a second alliteration in the a-verse as 'optional' may be missing a significant generalization. Even from these raw numbers, which I hope to provide good reasons to modify below, we find 942 instances of the first stressed element in the complement to the preposition in the second position in the a-line (i.e., a͛2 + á2), 652 in Old Saxon and 290 in *Beowulf*.. Of these, fully 905 (over 96%) participate in alliteration. Why?

29. We can gain some insight, and make our numbers more precise, by the investigation of the 'exceptions' to the alliteration of the first stressed element in the complement of

the preposition which we find in our data. Are they 'random' exceptions (reflecting poetic 'optionality') or is something systematic going on?

30. Let's start with an easy case. The failure of the prepositional complement to occupy a lift at all (since only lifts alliterate, these must be non-alliterating). There are only 57 of these in our corpus, and they show a very distinct pattern: none involve nominals (i.e., nouns or adjectives) being contained within the PP.

31. The most frequent case in the *x* (no lift) rows above concern Old Saxon *te* and its cognate Old English *to*, and they represent precisely the general patterning of the data. The vast majority of cases of non-lift complements of prepositions are relative and interrogative pronouns. Old Saxon has *te huuî* 'for what' (H555, 1547, 1551, 1703, 2026, 2253, 2952, 3816, 3987, 5342, 5636, 5849, 5967, and G579), *te thiu* 'to which' (H248, 2511, 3534, 4818, 5439, 5882), and *te im* 'to him' (with a presumably very weakly stressed object pronoun — such elements do not normally bear ictus) at H692. In Old English we find *to þæs þe* 'to which' (B714, 1585, 1616, 1967, 2410) and *to hwan* 'for what' (B2071). For *all* other prepositions we find only (1) interrogative, (2) relative, or (3) weak pronominal complements. Such elements are never found in the alliteration cases.

32. For the *x*-row of the table above, therefore, I would not consider the failure to find an alliterating lift on the prepositional complements exceptional. This is totally expected behavior.

33. Let's turn next to the á2 cases in the data. Here matters are more interesting, but very largely explicable. Since I said above that I consider these 'single alliteration' a-lines to be identical to b-lines as a 'type 2', we can consider the (more numerous) b́2 data at the same time.

34. We can stick with *te/to* for this discussion as well, since we find a healthy number of á2 and b́2 data points with these elements. The vast majority of cases of non-alliterating (but lift-occupying) complements of prepositions involve pronominals and bare demonstratives. Such elements do not typically appear in lifts in Old Saxon and Old English. However, when they are the sole element serving as the complement of a (normally proclitic) preposition, they appear to get a 'weak beat' — sufficient to allow them to occupy a lift, but insufficiently strong to allow them to bear the alliteration. That is, they carry a weak 'sentential stress' in PPs. For *te* in Old Saxon we find *te mí*[3] 'to me'; *te thí*[4] 'to thee'; *te ús*[5] 'to us'; *te iú*[6] 'to you'; *te ím(u)*[7] 'to him/it'; and with the bare demonstrative *te thiú*[8] 'to that.'

35. For Old English (a significantly smaller corpus) we find numerous cases of this type (the list is representative, rather than exhaustive): *æfter þón* (B724b), *æt þé* (B2149b), *be*

[3]*Hel.* 145, 1102, 1915, 2152, 2955, 3288, 3394, 3885, 3913, 3915, 3920, 4056, 4385, *Gen.* 768, 814.

[4]*Hel.* 2936, 3074, 32303, 3225, 4035, *Gen.* 635.

[5]*Hel.* 5158.

[6]*Hel.* 1737.

[7]*Hel.* 1237, 2317, 3571, 4267, 5963.

[8]*Hel.* 9, 12, 16, 315, 959, 1228, 1239, 1428, 1459, 2016, 2254, 2536, 2781, 3568, 3838, 4087, 4147, 4591, 5423, 5647, 5655, 5769

þón (B1722b), *be þé́* (B1723b), *fram mé́* (B541), *fram þé́* (B581), *mid hím* (B923, B2948a), *on þáḿ* (B137b), *on þé́* (B2248b), *on méċ* (B2650b), *wiþ þé́* (B811b), and *to þé́* (B525b).

36. It is not hard to see why the elements we have excluded from the table above have a prosody which diverges from that of a simple preposition + NP constituent. The preposition in these cases is not followed by a normally tonic element, so we get a different prosody. The correct generalization we should be exploring is this: if the complement of a PP contains an element which normally receives a beat (a noun or an adjective, for example), that element must receive a *strong* beat, and **strong beats must alliterate**. A non-alliterating beat represents a *subordinated* stress — weaker than the beats which alliterate. We can then exclude the bare demonstrative and weak pronoun complement data from our table above (as well as the non-ictified examples discussed earlier), giving us the following revised table:

	Old Saxon	*Beowulf*	Total
á1	371	428	**799**
a̋1	619	286	**906**
b̋1	419	296	**715**
allit.	1409 (95%)	1010 (96%)	**2419** (96%)
á2	16	2	**18**
b́2	53	37	**90**
non-allit	69 (5%)	39 (4%)	**108** (4%)
Total	**1478**	**1049**	**2527**

37. Having excluded data that we should probably have expected to be divergent, the regularity of alliteration in the a2 position is even more compelling: we now have 635 Old Saxon and 288 Old English examples of the first stressed word in the complement of a preposition being in position a2 (for a total of 923 examples). Of these, only 16 Old Saxon and 2 Old English examples fail to alliterate (18 in total).

38. It is important to note, as you probably already know, that what I have said above about the nominal object of a preposition having to alliterate does not entail that *all* nouns and adjectives (including those outside of PPs) must alliterate. Within an NP, for example, it is the leftmost stressable element which bears the primary stress — the stress on postposed genitive (relative to its head noun), or a postposed head noun relative to its (preposed) adjective or genitive is *subordinated* to the (sentential) stress on the element which precedes it within the NP (Rieger 1876, more or less). Some typical examples involving the very frequent Old Saxon noun *barn* 'child' show how this works.

endi that bă̋rn gódes 'and that child of god' (*Hel.* 3262b) [Ń Ǵ]

themu gő̋des bárn 'for the child of god' (*Hel.* 4939b) [Ǵ Ń]

that he is hímilisc bárn 'that he his heavenly child' (*Hel.* 246a) [Á Ń]

39. Unsurprisingly, we get the same prosodic relationships on the NP-internal elements when the NP is a complement to a preposition:

te them gődes bárne 'to the child of god' (*Hel.* 429a) [P D Ő Ń]

umbi that bărn gódes 'about the child of god' (*Hel.* 2539a) [P D Ń Ǵ]

40. We see precisely the same pattern in Beowulf, unsurprisingly. It is always the left-most stressable element within the NP that alliterates: the second stressed word in the NP has the weaker, non-alliterating stress.

ofer ýlda béarn 'over the children of ancestors' (*Beo.* 605a) [P Ő Ń]

þāra þe gűmena béarn 'the children of which men' (*Beo.* 878a) [Rel Ő Ń]

bếarn Healfdenes 'the children of Healfdene' (*Beo.* 469a, 1020b) [Ń Ǵ]

bếarn Écgþeòwes 'the child of Ecgþeo(w)' (*Beo.* 529b, 631b, 957b, 1383b, 1473b, 1651b, 1817b, 1999b, 2177b, 2425b) [Ń Ǵ]

41. There remains a small pool of seeming 'exceptions' to our generalization regarding PPs, but many of these also seem to me to be revealing as to the detailed working of sentential stress patterns in Old English and Old Saxon, building upon our general observation about NPs above. While I will not have time to go through all of these, and I do not have a full analysis of every single one of them, the type of argument that I think will be helpful can be seen from some of the examples below.

42. The first case concerns expressions like 'John as a name' or 'the name "John".' We see this attested about 4 times in Old Saxon, in the form either *te námon* or *bi námon*. Typical examples include:

the scal Hếliand te námon / ếgan mid ếldiun. 'who shall own "Savior" as name among men' (*Hel.* 266b-267a)

hêtun ina Iűdeo liúdi / Őliueti bi námon. 'the Jewish People called him the name 'Oliueti' (*Hel.* 4236b-4237a)

43. While the precise analysis of such structures is not entirely clear to me, that *te/bi namon* does not act prosodically like a 'regular' preposition phrase does not surprise me. Plausibly, the prepositional phrase in these cases is NP-internal, rather than an argument or adjunct in the VP, and is thus subject to the same 'subordination' of its stress as other non-initial, NP-internal stressed elements are.

44. Similar considerations hold of a significant number of additional seeming 'exceptions' to our rule regarding PPs: in these, as perhaps in the naming construction, the PP seems to form a constituent with what precedes, and thus be prosodically subordinated to it, weakening the lexical stress of its most highly stressed element to the point that it carries only weak sentential stress, and thus cannot alliterate. I give you a number of different types of example.

sô lămb under uúlƀos 'like a lamb among wolves' (*Hel.* 1874b)

brṓdes te lébu ‘bread for life (sustenance)’ (*Hel.* 2868a)

kűning obar thit ríki ‘king over the realm’ (*Hel.* 5191b)

nórð te sḗuua ‘north to the sea’ (*Hel.* 759b)

diápo under érðu ‘deep under earth’ (*Hel.* 4112b)

úp te hímile ‘up to heaven’ (*Hel.* 1489b)

IV. Conclusions

45. I hope I have convinced you that there is a reason why Jesus washes his disciples feet with his *folm* rather than with his *hand*. We have a generalization that the first stressed element in the full-NP complement of a P must alliterate. It will trivially do so in the á1 and b́1 positions, where alliteration is in any event mandatory. But why should it invariably alliterate in the ‘optional alliteration’ a2 position?

46. Since, in an NP which contains multiple stressable elements, the left-most gets the stronger stress (and must alliterate) and, as we saw in the examples above, the later elements are prosodically subordinated to that stress and appear in non-alliterating lifts, it is not surprising that it is the first stressed element in the complement of the P that alliterates: the complement of the P is an NP, after all.

47. In my view, the crucial consideration is that, because the P is itself proclitic, there is normally nothing for the NP’s elements to be subordinated to, prosodically. Thus the first stressed element will almost always get a strong stress, and strong stresses must alliterate. This understanding of traditional West Germanic alliterative verse has many implications for our understanding of verses which do not have a PP in them! Some of these appear to work out quite well — the discussion of the role of syntactic constituency in determining the prosody of ‘heavy verses’ (with three apparent lifts) in Suzuki (2004) and related literature accords well with the ideas developed here. Whether the rest of the corpus can be understood in this way remains to be seen.

48. So, why do I say that the a-verse **fôti mid is handon** is ‘ungrammatical’? Alliteration and beats and lifts and dips and the like are *metrical* concepts, not grammatical ones. The way I would like to have us conceive of these matters is as follows.

49. A verse *fôti mid is handon* **must** show the sentential stress pattern **fṓti mid is hándon**, as our study of stresses within PPs has shown. But in such a prosodic rendering, the lexical stress on the word for ‘hands’ has been *subordinated* — it is a ‘weak sentential stress’ (hence its non-alliteration). But there is no **linguistic** mechanism whereby its stress *can be* subordinated: it is not part of a constituent with a stronger sentential stress to which it can be subordinated. So, whereas **fṓti mid is hándon** (note the stress marking) is a perfectly grammatical sentence, because *hándon* has its appropriate level of strong sentential stress, it is *unmetrical* as a verse, because syllables bearing strong sentential stress *must* alliterate. Since *hándon* bears such stress, but does not alliterate, the line is metrically ill-formed.

50. The important lesson, in my view, from these considerations, is that the poet is not free to manipulate the natural prosody of the language at will. The poetic grammar acts not as a generator of otherwise ungrammatical strings (like *főti mid is hándon*), but as a filter on the set of possible grammatical strings. The poets task is to use the *grammar* to generate lines which scan, not to use the poetic system to generate lines which, while they scan, are ungrammatical. The Beowulf-poets drunken warrior audience would have just been confused by a tale told in a long string of ungrammaticals.

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