

Essays in Medieval Studies 2

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page 27*Daughter of Sion, Daughter of Babylon:*
Images of Woman in the Old English Psalms**Patricia Hollahan**

The Anglo-Saxons knew and valued the psalms in liturgy, in education, and in literature. They memorized the psalms and studied them, as they did other books of the Bible, in the light of the vast commentary tradition that came to them with Christianity. They knew Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos* and Cassiodorus's *Expositio Psalmorum*, as well as the commentaries of Jerome, the *Breviarium in Psalmos* of Pseudo-Jerome, and the compilation (sometimes attributed to Bede) of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Cassiodorus known as *In Psalmorum Librum Exegesis*.¹ In addition to studying the psalms in Latin, the Anglo-Saxons created versions in Old English. Most of those which survive are interlinear glosses, but one the Paris Psalter is a complete translation, which seems to have been done for a wealthy patron rather than a monastic establishment. There is some speculation, notably by Wildhagen and later by Francis Wormaid, that the Paris Psalter was done for a woman, based on the feminine forms appearing in the Latin prayers. George Krapp, in his introduction to the metrical psalms, disagrees, and it is unlikely that we will ever know just for whom the psalter was put together.² In any case, what we have in the Paris Psalter is a translation the first fifty psalms in prose, with explanatory passages included.³ and the remaining one hundred psalms in poetry which is often

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remarked upon for being more workmanlike than inspired.

These translations and the amplifications added for interpretation or for metrics provide another perspective on the view of women which came to England as part of the revealed truth of the Bible, in which women could be viewed as positive or negative symbols, typified by Mary and Eve. On the literal level, women are present in the psalms as widows and damsels, wives, mothers, and daughters; and they make the transition from Latin to Old English in various ways. The language of the glossed psalters is literal; *filia* becomes *dohtor*, be she symbolically the Church or the embodiment of sin. In the Paris Psalter, some women are lost in translation the Latin text of Psalm 9 says that the psalmist will declare God's praises "in the gates of the daughter of Sion." The prose translator, concerned as always for our understanding, has eliminated the metaphor, rendering "daughter of Sion" as "city of Jerusalem." Similarly, the "daughters of Juda" who rejoice in Psalm 47 are generalized in the Old English translation to "the kin or tribe of Juda."

One of the daughters who remains is the daughter of Babylon of Psalm 136, who is cursed by the psalmist for his exile from Jerusalem. The Latin is a resounding curse, which is dramatically changed in the Old English. The metrical psalm reads "Lo, thou art bitterly afflicted by Babylon / sadly and evilly by her miserable daughter," the last a literal translation of "O daughter of Babylon, miserable," though the Old English poet

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concludes by turning the curse around, translating "Blessed be he that shall take and dash thy little ones against a rock" as "Blessed be he who takes and sets / his own son on the noble stone." Commentary tradition helps here, for both Augustine and Jerome note that the rock is Christ, and the poet is clearly distinguishing between his own offspring and those of Babylon or the daughter of Babylon ("evil desires at their birth," says Augustine). It is worth noting that neither the Old English poet nor the tradition he draws upon makes any attempt to expand the "daughter of Babylon" into a symbol of feminine evil, weakness, or innate sinfulness. Augustine's comment on this verse is remarkable for its absence of malice. He says, "The city is called both Babylon and daughter of Babylon: just as they speak of 'Jerusalem' and 'daughter of Jerusalem,' 'Sion' and 'the daughter of Sion,' 'the Church' and 'the daughter of the Church. 'As it succeedeth the other, it is called daughter.'"⁴

The most important women in the psalms, with one of the most interesting of the translations into Old English, are those who appear in Psalm 44. Here we have women as participants, indeed central figures, in the action of the psalm, impressive on the literal level and having much to say about human salvation in their spiritual interpretation. Psalm 44, "a canticle for the Beloved," is described in the "Explanatio" portion of *In Psalmorum Librum Exegesis* as an

epithalamium containing the praises of the bridegroom, that is, the Savior, and the commentator notes that in the second, mystical sense the bride represents the Church.⁵ The first nine

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verses extol the attributes of the spouse, who is clearly identified as a king. In verse nine, the bridegroom is adorned (I am not going to try to translate the spices here) " Myrrh and gutta and cassia drop from your garments, from your ivory house from which (10) the daughters of kings have delighted you in your honor. The queen stood on your right hand, in gilded clothing; surrounded with variety. (11) Hearken, O daughter, and see, and incline your ear: and forget your people and your father's house. (12) For the King shall desire your beauty; for he is the Lord your God, and him they shall adore (13) and the daughters of Tyre with gifts shall entreat your countenance, all the wealthy among the people. (14) All the glory of the daughter of kings is within in golden fringes (15) surrounded with variety. Afterwards virgins shall be brought to the king; her neighbors shall be brought to you (16) in joy and exultation they shall be brought into the temple of the king." The version I have just read could be taken from the glossed psalters, which as usual follow the Latin text word for word (with a few exceptions for example, the Stowe Psalter glosses *tyre* [of Tyrel as *maegoe* [of the tribe]).⁶

The prose version from the *Paris Psalter*, on the other hand, gives a much altered and expanded translation of these verses, beginning with verse 10, "from which the daughters of kings have delighted you in your honor." In the *Paris Psalter* translation this becomes "in which the daughters of kings love you, who dwell there for your love and for your honor." This is not an unusual sort of alteration, substituting *love* for *delight* and

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working "in your honor" into an expanded explanation of the situation, but it is suggestive of a community living together in the love of God. What is striking about the prose version of this verse is what follows, the detailed interpretation which the translator plunges into: "The spices show the various strengths of Christ, and the garment shows Christ's body, and the ivory house shows the hearts of righteous men, the daughters of kings show the souls of righteous men." This sets the tone for the commentary built into the rest of the translation. The queen "with gold adorned and with every fairness adorned" is "the congregation of all Christians." In generalizing from female figures to the Church, the translator is following well-established commentary tradition. The *Breviarium in Psalmos* of Pseudo-Jerome glosses "daughters of kings" as "holy souls" and the queen as the Church.⁷ Augustine in his commentary says that "all the souls that have been born through [the Saints'] preaching and evangelizing are 'daughters of kings': and the Churches, as the daughters of Apostles, are daughters of kings" (p. 152), and that the Prophet, in addressing the queen, is addressing "each one of us, provided ... we endeavor to belong to that body, and do belong to it in faith and hope, being united in the membership of Christ" (p. 153), which also provides some authority for the translator's decision to continue to stress the individual souls even when joined as the Church.

What we have here is a version of the psalm which goes beyond translation to explanation of imagery, so that the reader has spelled out not only the literal words of the

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psalm but its spiritual or mystical sense as well the gold-adorned queen, for example, may be understood to have been a real person in David's life but her spiritual meaning is not bounded by sex or historical period when she symbolizes the universal Church. As Augustine says, speaking of her garment, "it is the mysteries of doctrine in all the various tongues: one African, one Syrian, one Greek, one Hebrew.... But just as all the diverse colours of the vesture blend together in the one vesture, so do all the languages in one and the same faith"(p. 153) the congregation of all Christians in our translator's phrase.

The Old English prose translator continues in this vein, setting out both the words of the psalm and their spiritual meaning as well: "Hear now, my daughter, that is the gathering of Christian folk; see, and incline your ear, and forget and renounce your folk, those are evil-willing men and vices, and the house and the family of your lying father, that is the devil." In this direct address, the literal level of the psalm is clearly subordinated to the spiritual sense, in which the daughter represents both the Church and the individual Christian who is exhorted to renounce sin and the devil. This kind of multiple interpretation is more common in the Old English introductions to the prose fifty, which (as Patrick O'Neill has pointed out) frequently offer mystical and moral as well as historical meanings for the images and events

of the psalms.⁸ These readings too are firmly based in commentary tradition. Cassiodorus, for example, says that the Prophet deservedly calls the Church daughter because Christian people have been born from his holy

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proclamations, and that the daughter's people are pagans, her former home is Babylon, and her father is the devil.⁹

At this point in the translation the focus of the interpretation has shifted back to the moral or individual level. As the daughters of kings in verse 10 were explained as "the souls of righteous men," the daughters of the wealthy city of Tyre become the "souls who are enriched with good merits [or works]." Augustine notes that the gifts of the daughters of Tyre are alms (p. 154). The translator has even introduced the daughters of Tyre with the phrase "and so also do," which he typically uses in the introductions to begin an application of the psalm to the life of Christ or of the individual Christian.

Finally, we see in verses 15 and 16 the procession of the maidens brought before the king, led with joy and rejoicing into his temple and the translator explains that these are the souls of those who have preserved their chastity and those repenting and those who have been punished for their faults, either intentional or unintentional clearly a wide variety of Christian folk. Both the *Breviarium in Psalmos* and Augustine interpret the maidens in this broader sense of Christian souls. Augustine again stresses the universality of the Church and her saving mission: "'The virgins shall be brought unto the King after her.' It has been fulfilled indeed. The Church has believed; the Church has been formed throughout all nations. And to what a degree do virgins now seek to find favour in the eyes of that King! Whence are they moved to do so? Even because the

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Church has preceded them."

Here again we find that the single woman, the queen of verse 10 and the daughter of kings of verse 14, represents the Church and the plural women, the daughters of kings, the daughters of Tyre, and here the virgins brought to the King, represent the individual souls who are saved through the Church. This is at least implied in Augustine and is stated explicitly in the *Breviarium's* gloss on this verse "through the Church ... many are led to Christ" (col. 959). This concept may in turn explain the prose translator's rendition of a difficult part in the Latin text "all the glory of the daughter of kings is within in golden fringes surrounded with variety" which precedes the virgins being brought to the king. In the Old English version, which is considerably expanded and altered, we go from the daughters of Tyre, the souls enriched with merits, to an exhortation: "If you do thus, then will honor you all the wealthiest among every people; and have that for their greatest glory that they might see the daughter of kings within with him, (15) from without clothed and adorned with all various beauties of garments and with golden fringes, those are the diverse merits of perfected men."

The translator does not gloss daughter of kings as the Church, but by this point he may not feel that it is necessary to do so, and it does seem to be implied that the beauty of the daughter, the Church adorned with merits, is what leads both the wealthiest among every people and the virgins of the next verse to their greatest glory.

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For the most part, the explanatory expansions of the translation in the prose version of this psalm make it clear that the translator is stressing its application to individual Christians, who must abandon the lies of their father the devil, take up a life of merit, and achieve salvation either by preserving their chastity or by repentance for sins. But there is another level of interpretation of these verses which the translator hints at only twice, once when he refers to the daughters of kings dwelling in the ivory house "for your love and for your honor," which could be a reference to life in a religious community, and again when he refers to the maidens brought before the king as the souls of those who have preserved their "maegohad" literally maidenhood or chastity when a more generalized term like purity from sin would seem more appropriate. I wonder if the translator did mean maidenhood in this symbolic sense rather than in a sexual sense, but I have found nothing elsewhere to support this reading.

If the translator did mean literal virginity, we are seeing a glimpse of another reading of this psalm one which focuses on the queen/Church figure as the mystical Bride of Christ and associates the daughters of kings with those

who serve Christ through virginity. Thus Cassiodorus notes the distinction between the virgins and the neighbors who are brought to the king and says that it represents the distinction between virgins and those who are widows and the chaste (presumably chaste within marriage), and notes that virgins receive heavenly fruit one hundredfold but those others sixtyfold (p.413).

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This interpretation accords well with the liturgical uses of these verses, which are associated with the liturgy of such virgin saints as Cecelia, Agnes, Lucy, and Agatha, as well as with feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary.¹⁰ In fact, Ælfric's sermon for the feast of St. Agnes includes a clear reference to the richly garbed and adorned queen of the psalm. In the course of rejecting the advances of her pagan suitor, Agnes tells him that she has another lover who has offered her better adornments and specifies (in Skeat's translation) "He hath decked me with a robe woven of gold, and hath adorned me with exceedingly [rich] jewels."¹¹

The association of these verses with virginity and with the religious life continues into the Middle English period; *Hali Meidhad*, the early thirteenth-century exhortation to virginity, opens with a quotation from Psalm 44. "Hear, o daughter, and see, and incline your ear; and forget your people and your father's house," and goes on to relate this to a life of chastity.¹²

But this aspect of the psalm is not what the Old English prose translator chose to emphasize. What we have in his version is not so much the Bride of Christ, either the Church or the individual virgin, but the broader gathering of all Christian folk who make up the Church on earth and who must work out their salvation, through virginity or repentance or accepting punishment for sin. In this light, the women in this psalm represent humanity as individuals ("the souls of righteous men") and joined together as the Church. In this psalm translation, in its clear

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and direct language, we have one expression of a tradition which came to England from across time and distance but which was still an important feature of Anglo-Saxon intellectual and cultural life.

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Notes

1. J.D.A. Ogilvy, *Books known to the English, 597-1066* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967); and Patrick P. O'Neill, "The Old English Introductions to the Prose Psalms of the Paris Psalter: Sources, Structure, and Composition," *Studies in Philology* 78, no. 5 (1981), 20-38.
2. George Krapp, ed., *The Paris Psalter and the Meters of Boethius*, ASPR 5 (New York, 1932); Karl Wildhagen, *Studien zur englischen Philologie* 50 (1913), 417-72; Francis Wormald, "The Litany," in *The Paris Psalter*, ed. Bertram Colgrave, *Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile*, 8 (Copenhagen, 1958).
3. *Liber Psalmorum: The West Saxon Psalms*, ed. James W. Bright and Robert Lee Ramsay (Boston, 1907).
4. Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 8 (Grand Rapids, 1956), 632.
5. *PL* 93:714.
6. *The Stowe Psalter*, ed. Andrew C. Kimmens (Toronto, 1979), p. 86.
7. *PL* 26:958.
8. O'Neill, "Old English Introductions," p. 28.
9. Cassiodorus, *Expositio Psalmorum*, CCSL 97 (Turnhout, 1958), 410-11.
10. *Antiphonale Missarum Sextuplex*, ed. Dom Rene-Jean Hesbert (Brussels, 1935).
11. Æfric, *Lives of Saints*, 3d series (EETS 76, 82, 94, pp. 170-73).
12. *Hali Meidhad*, ed. Bella Millett (EETS 284, p. 1).