



Annotated English Translation of the Old Saxon Heliand: A Ninth-Century Biblical Paraphrase in the Germanic Epic Style

Tonya Kim Dewey

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The modern translator of the Heliand in some sense faces a reversal of the problem faced by the original Heliand poet. The poet's purpose in composing the Heliand was to introduce the Gospel story to a population either recently converted to Christianity or in the process of conversion. In this social context, a great deal of pagan vocabulary found its way into the Heliand, at times clashing with aspects of Christianity. Details of the time and place of composition of the Heliand remain uncertain. Scholars agree that it was composed sometime in the mid- to late-ninth century, somewhere in the Old Saxon speech area. However, both the time and place comprise a wide range of possibilities. Various suggestions have been put forth for the place of composition, but none of these are entirely convincing. The text itself comes down to us in two major manuscripts and four fragments. Manuscript M (Monacensis, housed in the Bayrische Staatsbibliothek, Munich) is dated to the late ninth century, and is the oldest of the surviving manuscripts. It lacks some passages contained in the more complete but younger C manuscript (Cottonianus, housed in the British Library, London, dated to the late tenth century). Fragment V (housed in the Vatican Library, Rome) consists of one leaf with lines 1279-1358 of the Heliand and three leaves of the Old Saxon Genesis, and is roughly contemporary with manuscript M. Fragment P (formerly housed in Prague, now in the Museum für deutsche Geschichte, Berlin) is likewise a single leaf, comprising lines 958-1006. The largest fragment, S (Straubing, housed in the Staatliche Bibliothek am Johannes-Turmeier-Gymnasium), comprises four leaves, but has sustained heavy damage. Finally, fragment L was uncovered in Leipzig in 2006. It is a single leaf which had been used as a cover for an early print book. It is possible that this leaf comes from the manuscript mentioned by Martin Luther in his letters. Several modern editions of the Heliand are available (see the Selected References). This translation was prepared using Sievers (1878), which prints the texts of the two primary manuscripts side-by-side.

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