

Aspects of Christianisation and Cultural Adaptation in the Old English Judith

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When a religious writing was translated by an Anglo-Saxon poet two processes often occurred--Christianisation and cultural adaptation. If a writing was not specifically Christian, the poet would reinterpret and adapt it to exemplify the contemporary beliefs of Anglo-Saxon Christianity. Also, the poet would alter certain details to accord with the characteristics and concerns of his society--cultural adaptation. These processes occurred to varying extents. The more literal a translation, the less Christianisation and cultural adaptation can be discerned. Even so, translations such as Genesis A and B, Daniel, and Exodus are greatly influenced by these tendencies.

In many societies, the processes of Christianisation and cultural adaptation were not seen as compromising the character of the original literary composition. In the second century CE, Eusebius recounts that scribes frequently changed details of the Scriptures to accord with current doctrine, as they saw themselves as being just as inspired as the original writers, and as having divine insight into the correct interpretation and exposition of the works. The Anglo-Saxon poets most probably did not see themselves in such an extreme way, but they had no qualms about altering a passage to accord with the 'truth'--the current doctrines of Christianity. When an obviously non-Christian doctrine arose, such as Genesis' polygamy, it was surmounted by appealing to an allegorical meaning. In this way, the underlying themes and doctrines of Old Testament and Apocryphal books were often altered through translation into Old English. In fact, it is somewhat of a misnomer to term the process 'translation' in many cases. There was no real endeavour by the Anglo-Saxon translators to render a Scripture faithfully into their native language; rather, the Old English works are adaptations of the originals.

Perhaps one of the most interesting adaptations is the Old English poem of Judith (OEJ). The original source is Jewish and, as we shall see, several doctrines in the Apocryphal book (Jdt) are quite different from those of Christianity, necessitating a considerable amount of Christianisation. Furthermore, the social attitudes and other such details in Jdt are quite different from those of the Anglo-Saxons, requiring a reasonable amount of cultural adaptation. As such, OEJ is a good work for illuminating Anglo-Saxon poetic practice and motivation in relation to the adaptation of religious works.