SLAVERY, LEARNING AND THE LAW OF MARRIAGE IN ALFRED’S MOSAIC PROLOGUE

Stefan Jurasinski

The collection of laws promulgated by King Alfred the Great near the close of the ninth century is preceded by one of the great literary curiosities of the early Middle Ages: a Prologue with a partial rendering of Exodus into Old English prose remarkable for its occasional indifference to the sense of the original. For the most part, the attention modern scholars have shown to the Alfredian translations has not extended to this text, and much about its place in the history of Old English prose awaits explanation. Though it is based on Holy Scripture, the Prologue shows no significant debt to any exegetical traditions fostered by the Church. Instead, its divergences from its source seem to have as their motive the replacement of Israelite laws with the secular norms of Alfred’s day.¹ What significance these revisions of Exodus

might have for our understanding of the legal environment of late ninth-century Wessex, however, remains unclear. The Prologue thus poses many of the same problems of classification as the free adaptations of Latin works discussed in Hollis and Wright’s *Old English Prose of Secular Learning*. This appropriation of Scripture, apparently intended to provoke discussion of contemporary Anglo-Saxon secular law, places the Prologue among those texts that are ‘distinct from the homiletic, devotional and hagiographic works which constitute the bulk of surviving Old English prose’. It deserves, and has yet to be granted, a significant place in discussions of how Old English came to be used as a vehicle for learning.

The Prologue offers more to historians of various disciplines than is commonly assumed. For example, many clauses in the Prologue that diverge radically from the biblical source concern the treatment of slaves.\(^3\) Given the scarcity of evidence about contemporary Anglo-Saxon cultural practices, speculation about why Alfred was so interested in matters of servitude will likely be fruitless. That said, it seems reasonable to suggest that widespread Scandinavian raiding and settlement disturbed Anglo-Saxon agricultural practices – practices in which slaves played a fundamental role – as much in the late ninth century as they did during the archiepiscopate of Wulfstan in the early eleventh century.\(^4\) Since legislation of any sort concerning servitude is rare in Anglo-Saxon England, Alfred’s discussion of bound labourers invites examination for the insights that it may afford into the norms that governed interactions between masters and slaves. In fact, one of these prescriptions, i.e., chapter 12 of the Prologue to Alfred’s Laws,\(^5\) may be the only clause surviving from the Anglo-Saxon period to dis-

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\(^2\) Hollis and Wright, *Old English Prose*, 3.

\(^3\) These include chapters 3 (on Sunday labour), 11 (on the six-year period of service for male slaves), 12 (on the acquisition of female slaves as wives), and 17 (on the culpability of a master who unintentionally beats a slave to death); chapter 20, requiring the manumission of a slave partially blinded or subjected to other injuries by their master, has undergone little tampering (*Die Gesetze*, ed. and trans. Liebermann, I, 26–33). The most ample discussion of these clauses is in D. A. E. Pelteret, *Slavery in Early Mediaeval England: from the Reign of Alfred until the Twelfth Century*, Stud. in AS Hist. 7 (Woodbridge, 1995), 81–4.
