
Marsden’s edition is the fourth complete edition of the so-called Old English Heptateuch (OEH) and the first since that published in 1922 by S.J. Crawford (which was reprinted with the text of additional manuscripts transcribed by N.R. Ker in 1997).

The “Heptateuch” is comprised of more-or-less literal Old English translations of the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua, and a homiletic summary of Judges. The origins of these texts can be traced back to the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, to translations of portions of Genesis (chapters 1–24, 26), the second half of Numbers, and Joshua which were accomplished by Ælfric, abbot of Eynsham. Ælfric’s Old English texts, along with other pre-existing translations from an unknown source, were gathered and joined together with further translations (accomplished by at least three anonymous writers in Marsden’s view) “specifically to complete a Hexateuch for the compilation project” (p. lxx). This “original compilation” was then extended in “a second phase of compilation” (p. lxxiv) in which the Old English homily on Judges and the text “On the Old and New Testaments” (both composed much earlier by Ælfric) were added to the Hexateuch. This second compilation is represented by a manuscript now housed in the Bodleian Library, Laud Misc. 509. This manuscript, which is dated paleographically to the second half of the eleventh century, also contains Ælfric’s treatise “On the Old and New Testaments” which Marsden edits here and Ælfric’s letter to the layman Wulfgeat (which is not included in this edition).

Marsden has chosen to base his edition on the text of Laud Misc. 509 (indicated by the sigla “L”), whereas Crawford had based his on the earlier witness, Cotton Claudius B.iv (“B”). As Marsden explains, “the aim of the editing of the Hexateuch has been to establish a sound copy of L, which is chosen because, overall, it appears to transmit more accurately than B the archetypal text brought together at the time of the compilation of the OEH, of which L and B are copies. No attempt is made to reconstruct that archetype. Similarly, in Judges and the Libellus, the aim has been to produce a correct version of L’s text of Ælfric’s two works, not to try to establish a hypothetical ‘autograph’ text” (p. clxxvi).

The resulting edition is a tour de force of precise and exacting scholarship. Marsden’s edition respects the narrative structure of the Old English text,
inserting modern chapter and verse divisions in an unobtrusive superscript and omitting parallel Vulgate text. As he notes “Unless an artificial, hybrid ‘Vulgate’ were to be created for the occasion, tailored, by the selection of variant readings from random sources, to bring it into the closest possible correspondence with the Old English version, it would be necessary to present a critical Latin text with its own extensive apparatus” (p. xxxiii). This is sure to be the standard edition of the text for years to come.

As is to be expected, the newly edited texts are preceded by an up-to-date bibliography and a comprehensive Introduction. Divided into five separate sections, the “Introduction” surveys the editions, facsimiles, and excerpts of the texts published since the appearance of Edward Thwaites 1698 edition of Laud Misc. 509 and establishes the importance of the present edition, which as Marsden states, “is the first to collate all the available manuscript material and to present variations in a single apparatus.” Marsden then describes the ten manuscript witnesses to the OEH/Libellus text (including a bifolium known in the seventeenth century but now lost). He cursorily but effectively summarises recent scholarship regarding the manufacture, appearance, collation, and history of ownership of these witnesses and supplements this discussion with three helpful tables that succinctly compare their contents and structure. Aside from the edition itself, Marsden makes a major contribution to our understanding of the history and transmission of these texts in his lengthy examination of the relationships between these manuscripts. This examination is based on his thorough and unparalleled knowledge of the textual variants. He methodically describes the unique features of each textual witness, compares the same in order to list variant readings, and to assess evidence resulting from errors in transmission. The results are a wealth of particular information about these texts as well as a revised stemma (presented on p. clx). The scheme presented by Marsden agrees substantially with that first published by C.R. Dodwell and P. Clemoes in their introduction to their 1974 facsimile of Claudius B.iv (The Old English Illustrated Hexateuch, EEMR vol. 18). Marsden’s analysis, however, clarifies details of the textual relationships and emphasizes their connection to a common prototype, the compilation labeled “LB.”

My one trifle with this edition is its title, The Old English Heptateuch and Ælfric’s Libellus de Veteri Testamento et Novo. One the surface, it is a welcome abbreviation of that of Crawford’s edition (The Old English Version of the Heptateuch, Ælfric’s Treatise on the Old and New Testament and his Preface to Genesis). In calling his edition “The (…) Heptateuch” Marsden reproduces the scholarly tradition that stretches via Crawford back to Thwaites. However, as Marsden so clearly points out, the common prototype, the compilation LB,