And thus did Hezekiah': Perspectives on Judaism in the Old English Prose Psalms

Emily Butler

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‘AND THUS DID HEZEKIAH’: PERSPECTIVES ON JUDAISM IN THE OLD ENGLISH PROSE PSALMS

BY EMILY BUTLER

The Old English Prose Psalms, contained in the Paris Psalter, have been discussed almost solely with regard to authorship (principally, the question of their attribution to Alfred the Great) or to their use of unusual and distinctive sources that emphasized Davidic and other Old Testament interpretations of the Psalms. In spite of this, recent work on their strategies of translation and interpretation has begun to incorporate the Prose Psalms into broader debates on the literary culture of Anglo-Saxon England. The Prose Psalms and their interpretative apparatus, consisting of Old English introductions and Latin rubrics, can help us better understand how Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards the Old Testament and Judaism informed their conception of national and religious identity. The Paris Psalter shows us a strikingly personal appeal to the Old Testament, especially to the experiences of Hezekiah and other righteous Jewish figures of that period. Rather than highlighting the divide between Christians and Jews, the Prose Psalms are focused on the conflict between the people of God and their enemies, in any era.

Recent debates over the identification of the corpus of works that should be attributed to the circle around King Alfred the Great (r. 871–899) have featured the Old English Prose Psalms fairly prominently, and Patrick O’Neill has done much to bring the Prose Psalms into broader conversations about the literary corpus of Anglo-Saxon England, especially through his recent study of the strategies of translation and interpretation employed in the Prose Psalms. Nevertheless, we have more to learn from this distinctive work, which offers an unusual glimpse of the formation of Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards scriptural history, national identity, and community building. The Old English Prose Psalms display a surprisingly personal appeal to the Israelites of the Old Testament, with King David and, more surprisingly, King Hezekiah held up as figures not simply of veneration, but of empathy and emulation. The Old English introductions to the Prose Psalms not only emphasize specific Old Testament figures as models for contemporary Anglo-Saxon readers to emulate, but also significantly heighten the focus that is placed on the cyclical nature of salvation history, by using language that reinforces the sense of the parallels between the experiences of David, Hezekiah (or other Old Testament figures), Christ, and the Anglo-Saxon reader. Such language encourages the reader to look positively on and empathize with those Israelites who persevered in times of trial and persecution, without taking up the question of Jewish culpability in more recent times. From this personal empathy, the Prose Psalms nurture a shared sense of identity.
and community, as the Anglo-Saxons face their own versions of the trials that afflicted Hezekiah and other Israelites in the Old Testament.

The Prose Psalms, along with their accompanying Old English introductions and Latin rubrics, offer views of an Old Testament past and an Anglo-Saxon future that share many qualities. As Malcolm Godden notes, Anglo-Saxon treatments of Old Testament material often show a sense of continuity, since ‘the Old Testament was a veiled way of talking about their own situation’. More specifically, the Prose Psalms reinforce the political and religious roles of righteous Anglo-Saxon leaders. In addition to that, the Prose Psalms shape an Anglo-Saxon identity that is informed by the cyclical nature of salvation history and by the complex nuances of the populus Israhel tradition and early medieval Christian attitudes towards Jews.

As discussion of Anglo-Saxon perspectives on Judaism has blossomed, this is an opportune moment to consider the evidence contained in the Prose Psalms and their manuscript context. While some have read antisemitism in Old English literature, other scholars have argued for more positive portrayals of Jews or Judaism. What seems beyond dispute is that the Old Testament helped the Anglo-Saxons to think through their sense of religious and ethnic distinctions. Moreover, as Nicholas Howe has demonstrated, their use of Old Testament models also contributed to the sense of a shared Anglo-Saxon identity. This approach envisions a corporate role for the Anglo-Saxons, and that in turn creates a powerful link between individuals, who were figured as part of this larger community of the people of God. This effect is heightened by the use of the Old English vernacular for many of the texts that grappled with Old Testament history, especially texts like the Prose Psalms, which adapted some of the most significant and best-known religious and liturgical texts in the scriptural canon into the language of daily life.


Beyond Anglo-Saxon England, a certain ambivalence towards Judaism is apparent from the earliest days of Christianity, but Augustine’s formulation of the situation became the foundational position for the medieval church. While the Jews, in Augustine’s view, had fallen from their status as God’s chosen people after they killed Christ, their history nevertheless demonstrated the connection between the Old and New Testaments. By contrast with much of what had been dominant in early Christian theology, Augustine embraced the Old Testament as a crucial witness to God’s plan and argued against the killing of the Jews. Augustine argued for a common source for both the Jewish and the Christian faiths, and his so-called witness doctrine asserts that Jewish scriptures should be preserved because ‘they bear witness for us that we have not fabricated the prophecies about Christ’. While this stance does not allow for much dignity from a Jewish perspective, it does shift the Christian perspective to one that views Judaism as a heritage worth tolerating, rather than suppressing. Moreover, paying attention to the Israelites of the Old Testament seems to have helped Anglo-Saxon writers ‘reflect upon their own conceptions of religious and ethnic difference’. In the apparatus of the Prose Psalms, the difference that matters is the difference between the people of God, on the one hand, and their enemies, on the other.

The frequent references to Old Testament figures and events in the Prose Psalms and their apparatus offer us a way to refocus the debate over Anglo-Saxon conceptions of Judaism, and it is in this context that we must consider the Prose Psalms. As in most of medieval Europe, the psalms were a fundamental part of both worship and education in Anglo-Saxon England. The deep integration of Old Testament figures into the apparatus of the Prose Psalms, therefore, suggests a fundamental level of comfort with the emulation of Israelite kings. As a result, the Prose Psalms and their apparatus raise new possibilities in conceptualizing community and identity in Anglo-Saxon England, as realities that could be imagined from purely textual connections. For most Anglo-Saxons, neither contemporary Jews nor the Jews of the Old Testament would have been familiar parts of daily life, but sympathetic textual representations encouraged a sense of kinship with the Israelites of the Old Testament. Moreover, through these distant but communal ties, an Anglo-Saxon sense of personal and national salvation was nurtured. As we shall see, the Prose Psalms give us a glimpse of an Old Testament heritage that was perceived on very personal terms. Unlike Bede’s

more famous but ultimately more abstract alignment of the peoples of Britain with the books of the Pentateuch, the Prose Psalms take individuals from the Old Testament as models for contemporary life in Anglo-Saxon England, encouraging readers to look to righteous Israelites for inspiration in living their own lives.

The Prose Psalms are preserved in a single eleventh-century manuscript, known as the Paris Psalter (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Fonds latin 8824), which contains a complete text of the Latin Romanum Psalter, alongside a translation into Old English. The first fifty psalms are translated into Old English prose, while the last one hundred are translated into verse. With the exception of Psalm 1 and two others for which pages are missing (Psalms 21 and 26), each of the first fifty psalms in the Paris Psalter is headed by an introduction in Old English. The Paris Psalter is the only extant copy of the complete text of this version of the psalter, although the Vitellius Psalter (London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius E. xviii) also preserves fragments of the Old English introductions, alongside a text of the Gallicanum Psalter with an interlinear Old English gloss. There does not appear to have been any direct contact between the two manuscripts, and they may even have come from distinct lines of transmission.

The material for the Old English introductions is generally drawn from the pseudo-Bede Argumenta, a Latin psalter commentary from the seventh or eighth century, but the basic scheme of interpretation is derived from a strain of Irish exegesis that reaches back to the Antiochene school. Additionally, all of the psalms in the Paris Psalter for which pages are not missing are given Latin headings that offer further interpretative possibilities. The translator of the Prose Psalms (hereafter referred to as the paraphrast) was also responsible for the Old English introductions, but a later compiler assembled the Latin text of the Psalms, the Prose Psalms (with their introductions), the Old English metrical psalms that followed, and the Latin rubrics that ran throughout the Psalter text. The Paris Psalter is thus a composite text displaying the work of several different contributors.

As noted, one of the major debates over the Prose Psalms has been their attribution to King Alfred. Alfred, king of Wessex between 871 and 899, is well known for his program of translation, his interest in the education of administrative officials, and his reaction to Viking incursions, but his deeply held piety and concern for reform and personal penance are also important factors to consider with respect to the Prose Psalms. The suggestion of an Alfredian connection for the Prose Psalms came originally from William of Malmesbury, who announced in his Gesta regum Anglorum that Alfred had begun a translation of the Psalms before his

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8 For a full description of the manuscript, see Patrick P. O’Neill, King Alfred’s Old English Prose Translation of the First Fifty Psalms (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 1-22.
9 O’Neill, King Alfred’s, 28-30.
The most likely candidate for this supposed translation is the prose section of the Paris Psalter, and Janet Bately has written persuasively in favour of this attribution, as well as making the case for the psalms as having special significance for Alfred, both for their foundational role as educational texts (in his own learning and in the curriculum of the schools) and for their status in one of the sapiential books of the Bible. The debate has continued since then, but on balance, the evidence in favour of an Alfredian attribution seems more compelling, particularly when we consider the Old Testament emphasis in the Old English introductions to the Prose Psalms.13

David Pratt’s work on Alfred’s political thought and his personal piety also suggests compelling associations between the Prose Psalms and the Alfredian milieu, but in order to examine this, we must first consider the apparatus given to the psalms in the Paris Psalter in more detail. We can illustrate the approach most easily with Psalm 4, the first with the full, four-fold scheme of interpretations, as deployed in the Paris Psalter. (Psalm 1 is missing an Old English introduction, and Psalms 2 and 3 do not include second historical interpretations.) I preserve here the numbering given to the interpretations in O’Neill’s edition, starting with the Davidic, then the second historical interpretation, followed by the Christological and moral interpretations:14

1° ðə feorða sælm ys sceawed ‘Dauides sælm’ and ‘Dauides sang’, for ði ælc þæra sælma ðe swa sceawed byð—þæt he sw ægðer ge ‘Dauides sælma’ ge ‘Dauides sancg’—ælcnæ þæra he sancg be sone mid weorode, ac ða he þysne sælm sancg, þa gealp he and fægnode Godes fultumes wið his feondum; 4° and swa deð ælc welwillende man þe þisne sælm singð; 2° and swa dyde Ezechias þa he was ahred æt his feondum; 3° and swa dyde Crist ða he was ahred æt Iudeum.

1-The fourth psalm is called ‘David’s psalm’ and ‘David’s song’, because each of the psalms which are called this—be it ‘David’s psalm’ or ‘David’s song’—each of those he sang aloud with his troop, but when he sang this psalm, then he boasted and rejoiced in God’s help against his enemies; 4° and thus does each benevolent man who sings this psalm; 2° and


14 O’Neill, King Alfred’s, 102. All translations are my own, unless otherwise attributed.
thus did Hezekiah when he was freed from his enemies; 3 and thus did Christ when he was freed from the Jews.

Collectively, these four senses of scripture allow a reader to hold multiple layers of meaning and significance in the mind at a single time. What is distinctive about the interpretations provided for the Prose Psalms in their respective introductions is their strong emphasis on literal or historical interpretations, a trait that they share with and probably acquired from Irish models of exegesis. While the Irish connections in the Prose Psalms have long been recognized, their window on to Anglo-Saxon ideas about Judaism has received little comment.15 Many of the introductions to the Prose Psalms, like Psalm 4, have a second historical interpretation, specifically citing an Old Testament figure or event other than David. More specifically, twenty-nine out of the forty-two Prose Psalms that have an intact Old English introduction (69% of such psalms) feature a second historical interpretation, in addition to the traditional Davidic interpretation and in place of an allegorical interpretation. Of these psalms that have second historical interpretations, Hezekiah is far the most common topic, appearing in seventeen (59%) of the introductions.

As noted above, this style of exegesis is often associated with Irish scholarship of the early Middle Ages, and the introductions draw very closely on the pseudo-Bede *Argumenta*. Nevertheless, there are distinctive features of the Old English introductions to the Prose Psalms, and we should remember that the paraphrast chose to use these sources and adapt their basic approach to his own purpose. In fact, the paraphrast's handling of source material has no match in surviving commentaries.16 As exemplified in the introduction to Psalm 4, the likenesses drawn in the Old English introductions tend more towards similarities of emotional state or situation, between David, Hezekiah (or another Old Testament figure), Christ, and the person reading the psalm. In the Old English introductions, Hezekiah is the most frequently referenced Old Testament figure, other than David himself.17 A similar pattern holds in the Latin headings to the Prose Psalms, suggesting a strong sense of affinity with Hezekiah's life story.

In the early psalms, the most common formula used to refer to Hezekiah in the second historical interpretations is ‘and swa dyde Ezechias [b]a’ (‘and thus did Hezekiah when’), seen in Psalms 4, 5, 9, and 12. The same formulation is used of the Israelites (‘Israela folc’) in Psalm 14, whereas Psalms 6, 13, and 15 refer to Hezekiah with ‘and eac Ezechias be’ (‘and also Hezekiah concerning’) or ‘and eft Ezechias be’ (‘and again Hezekiah concerning’). In both forms, the introductions emphasize the repetitive or cyclical nature of the alignment of Hezekiah with David and, by extension, with the Anglo-Saxon reader.

15 See Emily Butler, ‘Alfred and the Children of Israel in the Prose Psalms’, *NQ*, 57 (2010), 10-17, for a discussion of the some of the Old Testament resonances in the Prose Psalms.
17 Butler, ‘Alfred and the Children of Israel in the Prose Psalms’, 11, Table 1.
With the exception of Psalm 27, which reverts to ‘and eac Eze[c]hias’, all of the second historical interpretations from Psalm 20 to Psalm 50 are framed as prophecies of David concerning Hezekiah or the other Old Testament events mentioned. This often happens with the phrasing ‘and eac he witgode on þam sealme be’ (‘and he also prophesied in that psalm concerning’). To explicitly portray David as having directly prophesied Hezekiah (or the Maccabees or the Babylonian captivity) suggests that David was already aware of the cyclical and exemplary qualities of the psalms, driving this home for the reader, as well. In some cases (Psalms 28-30, 32-33, 37, 39-42), the paraphrast has gone even further by adding ‘þæt he sceolde þæt ylce don’ (‘that he would do the same’) or ‘þæt hy sceoldon þæt ylce don’ (‘that they would do the same’) to again reinforce the parallels between David, on the one hand, and Hezekiah or other Israelites, on the other hand.

Psalms 30 and 39 are especially striking versions of this, with expansions into more specific actions of the Israelites in captivity that will mirror David. The second historical interpretation assigned to Psalm 30 sees the Israelites imitating David’s prayers and lamentation: ‘and eac he witgode be þære wræce þe æfter him wurðan sceolde þæm folce (þæt wæs, þa hi to Babilonia geleædde wæron), he witgode þæt hi sceoldon gebiddan on þa ylcan wisan þe he dyde, and hyra ungelimp þær seofian swa he dyde’ (‘and he also prophesied concerning the miseries which would come upon the people after him [that was, those who were led to Babylon], he prophesied that they would pray in the same manner which he did, and there lament their misfortunes as he did’). Psalm 39 focuses even more narrowly on the action of singing the same psalm as an enactment of the similitude between David and the later Israelites: ‘and eac he witgode be þam gehæftan folce on Babylonia þæt hy sceoldon þone ylcan sealm singan and þæt ylce seofian, and eft fægnian þonne hy on geneare wæron, and þysne sealm singan swa he dyde’ (‘and he also prophesied concerning the imprisoned people in Babylon that they would sing the same psalm and lament the same way, and again rejoice when they were in refuge, and sing this psalm as he did’). The effect of this is to underscore both the similarity of circumstances and, more importantly, the similarity of emotional and behavioural responses. The Anglo-Saxon reader is thus encouraged to do likewise when troubles come.

An equally intriguing variant appears in the introduction to Psalm 40: ‘and eac he witgode be Ezechie cincge þe æfter him beon sceolde, þæt him sceolde þæt ylce beon’ (‘and he prophesied also concerning King Hezekiah, who would be after him, that he would be the same as him’). Here, David prophesies that Hezekiah will not only act in ways that recall David’s action, but he will ‘be’ just like David. The pattern is clear for the reader looking for guidance in facing trials: look to the Old Testament kings whose reactions to their struggles are preserved in these psalms, and embody their lives anew.

It is vital to recognize at this juncture that although the paraphrast has drawn subject matter for the introductions from the Pseudo-Bede Argumenta, the manner of expression in the Prose Psalms is new. The Argumenta do not include any of
this language of similitude, as we might term phrases like ‘and swa dyde Ezechias’ and ‘Þæt he sceolde þæt ylce don’. The paraphrast of the Prose Psalms has adopted language that makes the Old Testament events less features of a distant past than guides for present experience. Although it provides unusually vivid examples, the Paris Psalter is not the only site of such a move. With a different technique but a similar effect, the rubrics provided for the Old English Prose Genesis ‘underscore the physical presence of the narrative’ and bring an immediacy to the biography of Joseph, as experienced by an Anglo-Saxon reader. So, the paraphrast of the Prose Psalms is not alone in this kind of engagement with the Old Testament, but what is unique about the Prose Psalms is the sustained and personal call to imitate and even identify with individual Old Testament figures as guides for living.

What produces this sustained effect is the thorough way that the paraphrast has used the source material in the Pseudo-Bede Argumenta. Most noticeably, the paraphrast almost never misses a chance to capitalize on a mention of Hezekiah in the Argumenta. Out of all the psalms in which the Argumenta mention Hezekiah and the Paris Psalter has an intact Old English introduction, the only ones to exclude a reference to Hezekiah are Psalms 3 and 7, both of which lack second historical interpretations of any kind. The paraphrast has also taken advantage of every opportunity given in the Pseudo-Bedan text to mention the Babylonian captivity or the Maccabees, with the exception of Psalm 23, where there is no second historical interpretation at all, even though the Argumentum refers to the captivity. The Latin heading does, however, mention captivity, suggesting that the compiler of the manuscript was attentive both to the Prose Psalms and to the Argumenta.

In the case of Psalms 13 and 28, the paraphrast has singled out Hezekiah from a longer list of several Old Testament figures mentioned in the Argumenta, suggesting that the use of Hezekiah as an exemplary figure resonated especially deeply for the paraphrast. More noticeably, in Psalm 32, although the Argumentum does not mention Hezekiah by name, the Old English paraphrast has taken a reference to a victory over the Assyrians (‘Post victoriam de Assyriis carmen triumphale componitur’) and replaced it with a more direct reference to Hezekiah, who was king at the time of the Assyrian attacks. Moreover, the paraphrast has transformed a communal victory with a general lesson (‘docetur irritæ spei esse omnia quibus præter Deum mortales exsultant’, ‘it is taught that all things in which mortals rejoice more than God are of vain hope’) into a moment of personal thanksgiving after the release from sufferings: ‘and he witgode eac be Ezechie þæt he sceolde þæt ylce don þonne he alysed wære of his earfþum’ (‘and he prophesied also concerning Hezekiah, that he would do the same when he was released from his hardships’).

As we can see, the Old Testament history that is referenced in both the Old English introductions and the Latin rubrics is generally limited to occasions or periods when the Jewish people were under threat in some way, occasions when

they were the sympathetic, even victimized, party in the situation. Hezekiah (r. probably 729–687 BCE) was the king of the southern kingdom, Judah, around the time of the prophet Isaiah, and it was during his reign that the Assyrian Sennacherib mounted a siege on Jerusalem, until the Assyrians were forced to withdraw, possibly because of pestilence. The Assyrian and Babylonian captivities saw the tribes of the northern kingdom, Israel, deported eastward into Assyria in the eighth century BCE (hence the Ten Lost Tribes), while much of the population of the southern kingdom, Judah, was deported into Babylonia in the sixth century BCE. Finally, the Maccabees are known for their violent resistance to forced Hellenization (which was to have included a rejection of monotheistic Judaism) under the Seleucids in the second century BCE.

As an addendum to this list and in light of Hezekiah’s role in the kingdom of Judah, it is worth noting the poet of the Old English *Exodus* gives Judah (both the son of Jacob and, later, the southern kingdom) a central role in the *populus Israhel* tradition, as Judah inherits the chosen status when the northern kingdom falls into idolatry and is carried away into captivity. While there is no reason to believe that the paraphrast of the Prose Psalms was specifically relying on the Old English *Exodus*, this suggests yet another reason why Hezekiah might have been regarded sympathetically by an Anglo-Saxon author.

The most common themes that emerge in the interpretations related to Hezekiah are his illness (*metrumnes* or *untrumnes*) and the attacks of the Assyrians under Sennacherib. It is clear in both 4 Kings and Isaiah that Hezekiah was spared because of his prayers and lamentation, which would be mirrored by the singing of the psalms by someone in distress, and it is also made explicit that the one who spared Hezekiah was the ‘God of David your father’ (4 Kings 20:5 and Isaiah 38:5), linking the two exemplar figures most favoured by the paraphrast of the Prose Psalms. In fact, Isaiah 39:6-7 is a prophecy from Isaiah to Hezekiah about the Babylonian captivity, a statement that once again highlights Hezekiah’s place in a nexus of Old Testament figures who can be read as similitudes of each other and of later Christians, like the Anglo-Saxon audience of the Prose Psalms.

That most of the non-Davidic Old Testament references in the Old English introductions and in the Latin rubrics are handled in such a way implies a view of the psalms as fundamentally focused on suffering and empathy. By contrast, when Wulfstan added a passage on the Babylonian captivity to his adaptation of Ælfric’s *De initio creaturae*, which includes an overview of Old Testament history, the important part is that this captivity demonstrated the extent to which the Israelites had estranged themselves from God. The consistently sympathetic treatment of the periods of captivity in the Old English introductions to the

19 Zacher, *Rewriting the Old Testament*, 57-60.
20 Dorothy Bethurum, ed., *The Homilies of Wulfstan* (Oxford, 1957), Homily VI, lines 115-22. For more on Wulfstan’s adaptations to Ælfric’s homily, see also Joyce Tally Lionarons, *The Homiletic Writings of Archbishop Wulfstan* (Woodbridge, 2010), 82-5.
Prose Psalms provides a clear contrast, being focused far more on the sorrows of captivity than on its causes or the degree to which captivity was a deserved consequence of unrighteousness.

It is striking that Hezekiah is so dominant in the non-Davidic Old Testament references in both the Old English introductions and the Latin rubrics, and it is worth a brief recapitulation of some of the Old Testament connections, sympathies, or resonances in Alfred’s reign. Without claiming that Anglo-Saxon England was free from bigotry on the subject, we should not discount the very sincere (if not always purely benign) Anglo-Saxon interest in the history, laws, and even destiny of the Jewish people. Alfred, like the Carolingian kings before him, accepted the role of a novus David, or even a novus Moyses, to be a king who was also priestly, anointed of the Lord, and leading the chosen people of God. One of the most famous Old English translations of Old Testament material, the extended translation from Exodus that opens Alfred’s Domboc, served not so much as a source of legislation, as a frame or context that highlighted the development towards Alfred’s own laws and the value of what Alfred had done. Material from Mosaic laws, as recorded in Exodus chapters 20–23, occupies nearly a fifth of Alfred’s entire Domboc, a much larger proportion than most early medieval legislation gave over to prefatory material. This provided a meaningful framework for Alfred’s own laws and, as Patrick Wormald noted, ‘said something of immense symbolic moment about the law of Wessex’ since it highlighted the ‘essential continuity’ that linked Christ’s coming, the descent of the Spirit upon the Apostles, and the ongoing royal legislation that shared with Holy Writ the same basic objective: the holiness of society.

This appeal to an Old Testament context for contemporary political legitimacy is telling, but the Prose Psalms go beyond this in their valorization of individual Old Testament Jewish figures. In light of this, it is worth emphasizing that not only the paraphrast of the Prose Psalms, but also the compiler of the Paris Psalter chose to embrace and enshrine such a perspective on the Old Testament in the text of the psalter. The Latin rubrics seem to have their origin long after Alfred’s time, but the fact that the compiler of the manuscript evidently noticed and chose to extend the Old Testament slant of the Prose Psalms and their Old English


introductions is significant. Much of Old English literature is difficult to date with any precision, but even this tentative and relative chronology indicates a broad and enduring Anglo-Saxon interest in the exemplary potential of the Children of Israel. The Paris Psalter, then, is witness to a tradition of sympathetic engagement with the Old Testament in a liturgical or devotional context that extends across several centuries.

The Old English Prose Psalms seem to betray a certain anxiety over military and political threats, as much as they speak to more specifically religious concerns, and this suggests another sphere in which Hezekiah would provide a valuable example to Anglo-Saxon readers. It is not surprising that Alfred in particular might become interested in the life of a king like Hezekiah, since both of them were besieged by foreign armies and since both of them took an interest in religious and political reform. Hezekiah is most famous today for the construction of the eponymous tunnel that would guarantee Jerusalem a supply of water during times of siege, but aside from his efforts to survive and repel the Assyrian invasion, Hezekiah is known for suppressing idolatry and reinstituting worship in Solomon’s Temple, much as Alfred saw himself in the role of a specifically Christian, pastoral king who also overhauled military defenses in the face of military attacks.

On a very basic level, David and Hezekiah provide a model of kingship for Alfred and a model of righteous living for all, a connection the Old English introductions to the Prose Psalms emphasize in phrases like ‘swa deð ælc welwil-lende man’ (‘thus does each benevolent man’) and ‘swa dyde Ezechias’ (‘thus did Hezekiah’), both quoted from the introduction to Psalm 4. The change of tense only emphasizes the cyclical nature of history, reminding readers that what they feel or experience, David and Hezekiah have also felt in their time. Nevertheless, there is also something more happening here, when we consider that Alfred used textuality as a prism through which to assess and respond to the political and physical travails of the Anglo-Saxons as they faced the Viking incursions of the later ninth century. Scandinavians continued to exert quite forceful and direct influence on the Anglo-Saxon political scene right through until 1013, when Swein Forkbeard became king of England, but the particular emphasis on textuality during the reign of Alfred exemplifies the mingling of political, religious, and literary thought that characterized his response to the Vikings and, more generally, his approach to the role of king. So, a text that offers not only examples of spiritual and physical fortitude, but also an important reminder of a kind of community of the faithful who have suffered persecution throughout salvation history, fits very neatly with the literate practices of Alfredian Wessex.

Alfred set up a kind of rule during which it was crucial for the king and his administrative officials to engage with texts in some way on a daily basis. According to Asser, Alfred explicitly delineated a procedure by which those who are not able to read for themselves can still benefit from edifying texts.25

In Alfred’s philosophy, this inability to read did not release anyone from the obligation to experience texts. Moreover, even (and perhaps especially) at a time of great political stress from frequently violent external forces, the health of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom itself was linked to a certain standard of learning, the ‘cure’ that moves beyond the mere ‘prevention’ of Alfred’s military efforts against the Vikings.\(^{26}\) Alfred’s concern that ‘we have lost both the wealth and the wisdom because we would not incline our minds to the track’ of our forebears and their knowledge is a particularly clear example of this linkage.\(^{27}\) The compilation of the Paris Psalter suggests that there was a wider, ongoing influence from these practices, still playing out in the eleventh century.

Alfred seems to have spent much of his reign focused on personal penance and cultivating his own fascination with noteworthy texts, both in his programme of translation and in his own libellus, a book that he carried with him and into which he would ask scholars to copy passages he liked. Tellingly for this discussion of the Prose Psalms, Asser specifically mentions Alfred’s wish to include psalms in his libellus.\(^{28}\) David Pratt’s work on Alfred’s political thought has demonstrated fundamental connections between the king’s private devotions and his public governance. In considering the apparatus of the Prose Psalms, we must take into account this strong sense of personal sinfulness and Alfred’s need to visit churches to pray, even during the night.\(^{29}\) This practice may suggest a sense of connection both with the weaknesses of well-known, yet flawed Old Testament leaders like David, and with the societal stress suffered by the kingdoms of Israel in the face of repeated invasions from the empires to the east.

Textual interactions can foster a sense of community between people facing serious physical and political threats, and even between people who are geographically and temporally separated. David Pratt has characterized acts of local reading in late ninth-century England as projecting ‘West Saxon court theatre, conducted at a distance by reading texts alone.’\(^{30}\) More fundamentally, texts provide a vehicle for imagining communal ties, and the Psalms provide an especially potent way of matching words to the experiences of daily life, allowing the reader to find a kind of sympathy or community in the shared textual history and the generations of devotional and liturgical recitation that have given voice to the Psalms.

The textual activities carried out by Alfred and his court fostered community both among the administrative and ecclesiastical officials of the kingdom, and with

28 *Asser’s Life of King Alfred*, ch. 24.
29 For Alfred’s feelings of sinfulness and his devotional practices, see Pratt, *The Political Thought of King Alfred the Great*, 242-63, and Pratt, ‘The Illnesses of King Alfred the Great’, *ASE* 30 (2001), 39-90. For Alfred’s nighttime visits to churches, see *Asser’s Life of King Alfred*, ch. 76.
the historical and literary predecessors Alfred brought into dialogue with them. Beyond this, such activities provided a way of imagining a unified Anglo-Saxon nation. Bede is often credited with helping to establish and shape a perception of the descendants of the various fragments of Germanic tribes who are believed to have settled in post-Roman Britain (Saxons, Angles, and Jutes, in Bede’s list in chapter I.15 of his *Historia ecclesiastica*) as, in fact, a single group that could be lumped together under the simpler label of ‘the English’, but it is not a coincidence that the kings of Wessex from the time of Alfred are the first kings to call themselves kings ‘of the Anglo-Saxons’. Alfred’s status as a leader who repelled some of the worst Viking pressures up to that point and his role as a sponsor of literacy in the kingdom of Wessex undoubtedly strengthened the claim of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ kingship.

No matter how limited his personal literacy may have been, Alfred did sponsor it in others, and even as his own reading was mediated by more educated assistants, Alfred in turn mediated the reading of his subjects. In the Prose Psalms and their Old English introductions, Alfred models Anglo-Saxon textual production on Old Testament patterns of expression, with a strong emphasis on how David, Hezekiah, and other Israelites communed with, pleaded with, and expressed gratitude to God. The Prose Psalms depict the people of God before the advent of Christ and the people of God after Christ’s coming in an organic transformation or evolution from the one to the other, where the latter group has much to learn from and emulate in the lives of the former. In this way, the Prose Psalms provide a glimpse not only of Anglo-Saxon constructions of a distinctive, ‘othered’ group of people, but also, in Samantha Zacher’s words, of the ‘self-understanding of early English nationhood […] and the religious community’. 31

Both the Old English introductions and the Latin rubrics are revealing of Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards Judaism. There may be a greater Christological emphasis in the rubrics, but they contain few overt or specific references to Jews as aggressors or oppressors. Some of the Christological headings implicitly figure Jews as hostile, such as the twelve psalms whose rubrics are variations on ‘Uox cristi ad patrem de iudeis’, although in one case (Psalm 7), this part of the heading is paired with a reference to Hezekiah crying out against his enemies. The headings to Psalms 113 and 125 refer to idolatrous or impious practices among the Jews, but there is no mention of specific acts of antagonism on the part of the Jews. In spite of the Christological bent of many rubrics, the tendency is that, far from being the aggressors or the destroyers of the faith, the Children of Israel are seen as victims of assaults from without the pale of faith in the Judeo-Christian God. So, rather than focusing primarily on the divide between Jews and Christians in the Middle Ages, or even on the distinction between those of the Jewish faith who either did or did not embrace the teachings and legacy of Jesus, the apparatus of the psalms remains primarily focused on the strife between the people of God and their various enemies and persecutors throughout the ages.

In this respect, although they do not focus on such a distinction, the Prose Psalms seem to support the broader medieval ‘attempt at separation between the biblical Hebrew, who could be lauded as belonging to the original *populus dei* (the people to whom were given the very laws, rituals, and theology upon which Christianity was founded), and the (contemporary) Jew, who was often constructed as a sign of willful, even obstinate, otherness’.32

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that for Anglo-Saxons in the ninth and tenth centuries, knowledge of even contemporary Jews was likely to have been solely textual. The paraphrast of the Prose Psalms does not look for opportunities to either valorize or castigate contemporary Jews, but rather to the value for contemporary Christians in looking to the sources and exemplary figures of Judaism, emphasizing its status as a faith worshipping the same God who was worshipped by those very Christians. In fact, it is the cyclical nature of the oppression of God’s own people that makes these Old Testament episodes relevant to the Prose Psalms, just as the more positive elements of salvation history are also cyclical, continually demanding the attention of the faithful to texts like the Psalms.

In the context of the debate over the favourability (or not) of Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards the Jews, this particular example is not unique, but by displaying both Old Testament and New Testament references, as well as both admiring and more critical references to Jews, the Prose Psalms illustrate an important distinction in Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards the Jewish people. Hezekiah and other Old Testament figures remain powerful examples for the Anglo-Saxons, independent of more antagonistic Christian attitudes towards Judaism since the Old Testament era. Through an imaginative alignment of the concerns and reactions of Hezekiah with those of Alfred and the Anglo-Saxons of the late ninth century, the Prose Psalms joined the weekly cycle of the psalms with a larger cycle of human history and demonstrated one way that text and the translation of text could fortify a kingdom.

Intriguingly, the psalm texts of the verse portion of the Paris Psalter show another, but equally distinctive debt to the Old Testament. Whereas the prose section of the psalter asks the reader to focus on an empathetic connection to specific individuals from the Old Testament, the verse section of the psalter picks up on textual or rhetorical cues from the Old Testament. The relatively frequent occurrence of the superlative genitive in the verse portions of the Paris Psalter is a striking adoption of Hebraic syntactical usage. The metrical psalms, for example, use the phrase ‘worulda woruld’, literally meaning ‘world of worlds’, but offered as a translation for the Latin ‘saecula saeculorum’, which is often rendered in English as ‘world without end’. The superlative genitive is rare in both the Christian Latin poetry known to have been read by the Anglo-Saxons and in Anglo-Latin poetry, but it is far more common in the corpus of Old English poetry that is based on

Latin sources and Christian topics. The Old English verse translations of Psalms 51-150 contribute far the greatest number (if not the highest concentration, per line) of superlative genitives in Old English poetry. The metrical psalms of the Paris Psalter have never been connected with Alfred’s reign, and it quite possible that a reader could miss this element of the verse translations, but these facts make the evidence of at least limited knowledge of and engagement with Old Testament patterns of expression all the more important. Once again, the treatment of the Old Testament in the Paris Psalter speaks to a larger trend than what might otherwise appear to be one man’s idiosyncratic fascination with an Israelite king whose story mirrored his own. Instead, in the Paris Psalter, we see multiple stages of adaptation and compilation that deliberately draw on the Old Testament in several different ways.

This places the Paris Psalter, and especially the Prose Psalms, in marked contrast with some Anglo-Saxon texts. Scheil finds a ‘baroque montage of anti-Judaic images’ in the Blickling Homilies, as well as in the homilies and poems of the Vercelli Book, but the Prose Psalms treatment of Jews falls squarely in the more nuanced populus Israhel tradition, also described by Scheil. Although they remind the reader of the sufferings of Christ at the hands of the Jews, the Prose Psalms show less of the ambivalence towards the Jews that is visible in the works of Bede and Ælfric. While it is clear that there was a larger trend of at least partially sympathetic treatments of the Jews, the explicit and repetitive sympathy of the Prose Psalms for specific figures and for the Israelites as an entire people encourages the reader to identify closely with the travails of the Israelites and to use them as models in their own lives.

By contrast with the anti-Judaic writings of Anglo-Saxon England, the Old English introductions to the Prose Psalms, with their admiration for Old Testament leaders, are more closely aligned with the corpus of Old English Old Testament poetry. Samantha Zacher outlines the role of Old Testament figures in the development of an Anglo-Saxon sense of identity, as well as its context in a tradition that spread across a much wider geographical and chronological territory in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Howe, Scheil, and Zacher have highlighted the relatively positive depiction of the Old Testament Israelites in Old English Biblical poetry, and Zacher’s recent work has demonstrated that Old English Old Testament poetry favours ‘a special dynamic that valorized the

34 Scheil, The Footsteps of Israel, 277.
35 Scheil, The Footsteps of Israel, 111-91. See also Howe, Migration and Mythmaking, esp. 76-80; and Hanning, The Vision of History in Early Britain, esp. 20-62.
choseness of the Old Testament Israelites and marked it as a status to be strived for and emulated’.  

Similarly, Damian Fleming takes issue with those who view *Elene* as a fundamentally or straightforwardly anti-Jewish poem, suggesting instead that it be read as granting a distinctive voice to the Jewish, Hebrew-speaking characters it depicts.  

Within the larger Anglo-Saxon corpus, especially the poetic corpus, there is ample evidence of varying attitudes towards Judaism, implying that while the Prose Psalms may show unusual and striking features, they do not represent a break with other examples of Anglo-Saxon thinking on the subject of Judaism.

One contrast that does demand further attention is that between the Prose Psalms and other adaptations of texts used in the liturgy. The translations in the Paris Psalter are certainly not the only translations or paraphrases of liturgical texts into Old English, but they stand out all the more in comparison to the other liturgically-inspired works that survive, notably the Old English Benedictine Office and the *Advent Lyrics*. The so-called Old English Benedictine Office, which includes verse translations of the *Gloria*, *Creed*, and *Lord’s Prayer*, consists of texts that could only exist in a Christian, post-New Testament context. The Old English poet makes no attempt to highlight Old Testament figures over New Testament themes, and, indeed, it would have been difficult to do so. Even in the *Advent Lyrics*, which are based for the most part on the ‘O’ antiphons sung at Vespers during Advent (with the exception of Lyric XI, which is based on the Common Preface to the *Sanctus*, as well as on the *Sanctus* and *Benedictus* themselves), there is far less of an interest in Old Testament figures or in finding similitudes with the present day.  

In general, the lyrics expand and elaborate upon their sources far more than the Prose and Metrical Psalms do, but the *Advent Lyrics* focus on the moment of bringing Old Testament prophecy to a Christian fulfilment. Accordingly, St Joseph is identified in Lyric VII as ‘Iacobes bearn, / mæg Dauides’ (‘Jacob’s son, kinsman of David’, ll. 164-5), but his relationship with the Virgin Mary is the sole reason for his presence in the lyric.  

Likewise, Isaiah is described in Lyric IX as ‘so Ḟ[Æ]st’ (‘righteous’, l. 302) and a ‘wisfæst witga’ (‘wise prophet’, l. 306), but he earns these plaudits not by virtue of his status as an admirable Old Testament figure, but by his ability to gaze prophetically forward to the time when ‘nergend god’ (‘God the Saviour’, l. 324)
would unlock the gates of humanity’s eternal home.\footnote{Muir, ed. *The Exeter Anthology*, 56–7.} By contrast, as we have seen, the introductions and the rubrics in the Paris Psalter hold up individual Old Testament kings and prophets, within their own ancient world, as fitting objects of contemplation and emulation for Christian Anglo-Saxons. This may reflect the status of the psalms as not only features of Mass, but also as crucial elements of every Office and of individual devotion, when the individual and empathetic qualities of the Prose Psalms would serve to heighten the experience for the worshipper.

The Prose Psalms encourage a deeply personal reliance on the moral exempla of Old Testament kings and prophets, without requiring a fuller knowledge of the Hebrew language and without offering any comment on contemporary Judaism. Nevertheless, the stance of the Prose Psalms and their apparatus testify again that Augustine’s views on the relations between Christians and Jews were compatible with Anglo-Saxon conceptions of Judaism and the reception of Hebrew scripture. As careful source-studies have demonstrated, the Old English introductions and the Latin rubrics did not contain original material, but the paraphrast of the Prose Psalms and the compiler of the Paris Psalter both chose to embrace specific elements of their source. Moreover, O’Neill’s demonstration of the paraphrast’s interpretative shaping of the material reinforces this sense that the Paris Psalter reveals a conscious embrace of material that struck a chord, both for Alfred and for the later compiler who expanded on the project.

O’Neill has argued convincingly that the Prose Psalms favour David in their interpretative schema, but this only reinforces the need for Anglo-Saxon readers to identify with and emulate the Old Testament figures presented. The way that the other interpretations are modelled on the Davidic, and the reminder of this with the ‘and swa’ that begins so many of them, drive home the cyclical nature of salvation history. This produces a layering effect every time another person—Hezekiah, Christ, an Anglo-Saxon reader—finds himself or herself in the same position, facing the same painful emotions as David. If anything, David’s prophetic foretelling of the other interpretations in the Old English introductions enhances the poignancy and the sense of solidarity or sympathy in them, much as the Christological interpretations enhance the devotional experience by focusing primarily on Christ’s sufferings.\footnote{For the Davidic focus and the devotional qualities of the Christological interpretations, see O’Neill, ‘The Prose Translation’, 266–9 and 277–80.} That the sufferings Christ laments are frequently identified as at the hands of the Jews suggests again that what should be embraced and emulated in the lives of Old Testament figures are their qualities of faithfulness and devotion to God, rather than specific practices of worship or creed.

It might be tempting to situate the Old English introductions to the Prose Psalms exclusively within the specific historical and political context of the Viking incursions during the reign of Alfred, because of their frequent references to captivity or to the state of being under siege, but if we are correct about the later
date of the rubrics, then a later writer has chosen to perpetuate and extend this pattern of interest in and respect for Old Testament figures. By contrast with other blatantly antisemitic texts of the later Middle Ages, the Prose Psalms seem to liken the Old Testament Jews to the Anglo-Saxons, not to Viking ravagers or to any other enemies of either the Anglo-Saxons or the church of God. Given an author writing in Old English for an Anglo-Saxon audience, it seems most likely that a comparison with the Anglo-Saxons suggests a sympathetic perspective, rather than an antagonistic one. The Prose Psalms represent a mindset of accepting, and even continuing to shape, an identity of the Anglo-Saxons as a people who were not merely ‘chosen’, but who could also think of righteous Old Testament figures as their forebears, whatever their genealogical descent had been.

In the Prose Psalms, the authority of the vernacular is presented not so much in opposition to the tres sacrae linguae, as it is in confident succession to these ‘sacred’ languages. The Anglo-Saxons had been ready to translate spiritual texts from early in the period—going back at least as far as the interlinear psalter glosses from the early eighth century, for example—placing the Prose Psalms squarely in a robust tradition of laying vernacular claim to texts that were viewed as significant elements of the heritage of the Anglo-Saxons, whether that heritage was on the basis of genealogical, ecclesiastical, or spiritual descent. Nevertheless, the Prose Psalms represent a significant departure from much of that earlier tradition, with far more substantial engagement with the content and style of the psalms than mere glossing allows. One consequence of this engagement is that along with texts in various genres (poems, homilies, Biblical exegesis), the Prose Psalms participate in a broader literary tradition of giving nuanced treatments of the populus Israhel, and laying claim not only to texts, but also to a way of conceiving of Anglo-Saxon identity.

Significantly, the Prose Psalms reinforce the authority of righteous leaders not only in spiritual matters, but also in both political and military spheres. For a king like Alfred, with direct authority over a fairly small segment of England, the Prose Psalms would contribute significantly to a project of putting forward a vernacular corpus of texts that might ultimately promote a mentality of ‘Englishness’, particularly in the face of threats from Scandinavian armies. Alfred’s laws may only have applied to Anglo-Saxons living within the kingdom of Wessex, but his promotion of the vernacular may have appealed to him as a strategy for expanding the influence of Wessex, by situating the Anglo-Saxons not only with respect to contemporary geopolitical forces, but also with respect to a much older and more enduring antagonism. The conflict between the people of God and those who oppressed them gave the Anglo-Saxons a place in the history of the people of God. Seen in this light, a translation of the Psalms into Old English is not so much an appropriation of a foreign tradition, as the reclamation of a natural, native heritage.

In the context of the debate over Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards Jews, the Prose Psalms provide an insistent alignment of the concerns of Hezekiah and other Old Testament figures with those of Alfred and the Anglo-Saxons of the late ninth century. Moreover, the later compiler of the Paris Psalter has extended this
approach nearly two centuries later, suggesting that Hezekiah’s experiences still resonated in an Anglo-Saxon context. In drawing on the examples of Hezekiah and other Israelites, the apparatus of the Prose Psalms focuses the reader’s attention on the need for empathy and emulation of the people of God in the pre-Christian era. By using rhetoric that emphasizes the likenesses between historical figures and contemporary experience, the Prose Psalms situate Anglo-Saxon national and religious identity as part of a community of the faithful that stretched from the righteous leaders of the Old Testament to the faithful but embattled Anglo-Saxons of the eleventh century.