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Protecting the “Ungelæredan Preostas”: Sexuality and Censorship in the Old English Heptateuch

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Protecting the “Ungelæredan Preostas”

Sexuality and Censorship in the Old English
Heptateuch



MA Thesis Literary Studies

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INTRODUCTION

The Bible may be the single most influential text in history; in Anglo-Saxon England, it most certainly was. As such, it may be surprising that while many Old English adaptations of biblical material were produced throughout the early Middle Ages (homilies and poems, for example), a somewhat substantial translation of the Latin Vulgate into Old English only appeared as late as the early years of the eleventh century.¹ Until that time, the text of the Bible, though indispensable to medieval thinking, had to be mediated through educated clergymen who knew Latin and dispensed their interpretation of God's word to the masses.² The Church's monopoly on biblical truth naturally gave it a lot of power; hence, a vernacular translation of the Bible carried the risk of undermining the Church as an institution: "The very words of Scripture, the Word of God, were considered inviolable, and translation was potentially a heretical undertaking... any challenge to the hegemony of Latin as a scriptural and devotional language was also a challenge to the Church itself as an institution".³ Be that as it may, the first large-scale English Bible translation came from within the institution itself. This translation would become known as the Old English Heptateuch.

Translating the Bible elicited unease, and necessitated a defense of the undertaking. Parts of the Old Testament had been translated before the OE Heptateuch's creation, but on a much smaller scale. At the end of the ninth century, King Alfred defended his decision to translate short sections of the Bible by arguing that the Vulgate was also a translation, authoritative though it was.⁴ At the same time, he expressed worries over the possibility of tampering with the Word of God, an anxiety that he shared with both Jerome, who created the Vulgate, and Ælfric of Eynsham, one of the translators of the Old English Heptateuch.⁵ Bible translation could be dangerous for two somewhat opposing reasons: on the one hand, the inevitable change that translation entails could change the Word of God, and on the other, laymen's access to the actual text could lead to overly literal interpretations. A tightrope had to be walked, so as not to interfere with God's Word nor encourage incorrect, surface-level understandings of the text.

¹ Benjamin C. Withers, *The Illustrated Old English Hexateuch, Cotton Claudius B.iv: The Frontier of Seeing and Reading in Anglo-Saxon England* (London: The British Library, 2007), 6.

² Withers, *The Illustrated Old English Hexateuch*, 180.

³ Richard Marsden, "The Bible in English in the Middle Ages," in *The Practice of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, ed. Susan Boynton (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 273.

⁴ Marsden, "The Bible in English in the Middle Ages," 281.

⁵ Withers, *The Illustrated Old English Hexateuch*, 140-1.

According to the translators, the unmediated Word could easily be misread, with disastrous consequences. In his preface to the OE Heptateuch, Ælfric expressed anxiety over the prospect of translating a text which, without exegesis, could be misinterpreted as endorsing polygamy and even incest.⁶ He seemed particularly preoccupied with the possibility of laymen and uneducated clergy coming to errant conclusions surrounding sexual behavior: “ic ondræde gif sum dysig man ðas boc ræt, oððe rædan gehyrþ, þæt he wille wenan þæt he mote lybban nu on þære niwan, æ swa swa þa ealdan fæderas leofodon” [I dread that if some ignorant person reads the book, or hears it read, that he will think that he is allowed to live now, as the patriarchs lived before].⁷ The way these patriarchs lived, he goes on to say, involved incestuous and polygamous marriages.⁸ Since Ælfric was so concerned about the possibility of bible-induced debauchery, I have chosen to investigate how this concern manifested itself in the Old English translation. My research question is: How did the translators of the Old English Heptateuch represent biblical sexuality through their translation choices?

Given Ælfric’s anxieties surrounding biblical translation, it may not be surprising that at certain points, Vulgate passages were omitted or even changed in the Old English translation. Rebecca Barnhouse has outlined several changes that were made in the translation, and it is noteworthy that some of these changes pertained to stories dealing with aspects of sexuality. For example, a passage in which Rachel steals a number of idols and prevents being searched by claiming she is menstruating is nowhere to be found in the Old English Heptateuch.⁹ Furthermore, one of the spouses of Tamar is not included in the translation, perhaps because he is described as ejaculating outside the female body.¹⁰ In some instances, the meaning of a verse was changed: for example, in Genesis, a verse is inserted to condemn homosexuality.¹¹ Ælfric and his contemporaries could not allow transgressive sexuality unchanged, even when it was already present in the Bible.

Changing the word of God carried a great risk, and faithful translation can be explained by that fact. However, it is clear that at certain points, the translators did risk emendations to the Old Testament. Thus, it is also important to discuss passages that were not changed; the

⁶ David Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 49.

⁷ Ælfric of Eynsham et al., *The Old English Heptateuch and Ælfric’s Libellus de Veteri Testamento et Novo*, Vol. 1, ed. Richard Marsden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.

⁸ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 3.

⁹ Rebecca Barnhouse, “Shaping the Hexateuch Text for an Anglo-Saxon Audience,” in *The Old English Hexateuch: Aspects and Approaches*, ed. Rebecca Barnhouse and Benjamin C. Withers (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), 96-97.

¹⁰ A. Joseph McMullen and Chelsea Shields-Más, “Tamar, Widowhood, and the Old English Prose Translation of Genesis,” *Anglia (Tübingen)* 138.4 (2020), 589.

¹¹ Malcolm R. Godden, “The Trouble with Sodom: Literary Responses to Biblical Sexuality,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 77.3 (1995), 102.

changes made to the Vulgate expose the faithful translations as deliberate choices. By examining passages concerning sexuality, and considering which of these passages were deleted, changed, or retained, it will become clear what biblical material the translators found too objectionable to present to the public, and how they sought to control laypeople's perception of the contents of the Bible.

Chapter 1 of this thesis will lay the groundwork for the subsequent chapters by discussing the treatment of sexuality in Anglo-Saxon literary texts, especially ones with biblical or religious sources. Particular attention will be paid to Ælfric's views on gender and matters of the flesh, as these themes are central to the analysis of the OE Heptateuch in the following chapters. The second chapter will discuss the ways in which the Old English translators dealt with Old Testament sexuality that was generally condoned by the Church: these include procreative sex within marriage, the bodily fluids that are related to procreative sex, and the pregnancies that result from it. The third chapter will address the representation of sexual violence in the Old English translation. Lastly, Chapter 4 concerns the translation strategies for Old Testament passages that deal with forms of transgressive sexuality, such as sex work, incest, homosexuality and polygamy.

Despite the changes that were made to the Old English Heptateuch, and its relevance to the field of medieval studies, no full translation of the work has yet been published. One reason for this may be a perceived lack of necessity: since the translation is mostly faithful to the Vulgate, it could be argued that a modern English translation is not necessary. However, this thesis will show that, in creating the Old English Heptateuch, the translators produced a work that is worthy to be analyzed in and of itself, one which can shine light on the sexual mores and politics of the Late Anglo-Saxon period.

CHAPTER 1 – TEXT AND CONTEXT

Before we look at the OE Heptateuch itself, its material context will briefly be explored. It is a composite text, and understanding how the work came to be is relevant to comparisons between translators that will be made in subsequent chapters. The OE Heptateuch's preface, written by Ælfric and frequently employed to interpret the translation, will also be given ample attention. Lastly, Anglo-Saxon monastic notions of gender, sexuality and bodily purity will be discussed, focusing on Ælfric's writing.

Hexateuch or Heptateuch?

The text discussed in this thesis is called either the Old English Hexateuch or Old English Heptateuch, depending largely on the manuscript one chooses to discuss. The text exists in its entirety in two manuscripts: British Library, Cotton Claudius B.iv and Bodleian Library, Laud MS Misc. 509.¹² The former is usually referred to as the Old English Illustrated Hexateuch, as it contains only six Old Testament books and is lavishly illustrated; the latter also contains a homily on Judges which, while not entirely a Bible translation, does contain segments that are directly translated Old Testament material.

In this thesis, the text will henceforth be referred to exclusively as the Old English Heptateuch for several reasons. First, the main focus will be on the contents of the translation, not the images in Cotton Claudius B.iv. Second, the representation of Samson in the book of Judges will also briefly be explored; as this portion is not included in the Old English Illustrated Hexateuch, this thesis will focus mainly on the Old English text as it appears in the OE Heptateuch.

Ælfric did not translate the Old Testament on his own. While he was responsible for portions of Genesis, Numbers, Joshua and Judges, three other translators were involved in the making of the text. Their identities remain obscure. For some time it was believed that, other than Ælfric, only one anonymous translator was involved in the creation of the OE Heptateuch. However, Richard Marsden has since persuasively argued that as many as three anonymous translators were involved (see Table 1).¹³ Whether Ælfric worked together with these

¹² Withers, *The Illustrated Old English Hexateuch*, 8.

¹³ Richard Marsden, "Translation by Committee? The 'Anonymous' Text of the Old English Hexateuch," in *The Old English Hexateuch: Aspects and Approaches*, ed. Rebecca Barnhouse and Benjamin C. Withers (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), 83.

translators, or whether the other contributors simply filled in the lacunae in the abbot’s work, is unclear, though Marsden speculates that the latter is more likely.¹⁴

Text portion	Translator
Genesis 1-3	Ælfric
Genesis 4-5:31	Anonymous 1
Genesis 5:32-9	Ælfric
Genesis 10-11	Anonymous 1
Genesis 12-24:14	Ælfric
Genesis 24:15-50	Anonymous 1
Exodus 1-17	Anonymous 1
Exodus 18-35 (36 onwards omitted)	Anonymous 2
Leviticus	Anonymous 2
Numbers 1-12	Anonymous 2
Numbers 13-26 (27 onwards omitted)	Ælfric
Deuteronomy	Anonymous 3 (possible revision of Ælfric)
Joshua	Ælfric
Judges	Ælfric

Table 1 Richard Marsden’s subdivision of Heptateuch translators.¹⁵

Since most of its translators have remained anonymous, many mysteries remain around the creation of the OE Heptateuch. For contextualization of translation choices made in this text, scholars can only rely on the works of the only named individual involved, who also wrote a preface to the work: Ælfric of Eynsham.

Ælfric’s Preface

The preface of the Old English Heptateuch provides some insight into the motivations of the text’s one named translator. Ælfric was certainly qualified enough to produce an accurate translation, but he did not undertake the task lightly. Melinda Menzer argues that in the OE Heptateuch’s preface, Ælfric speaks with significantly less authority than in his other prefaces, and does so because of his reluctance to alter the Word of God.¹⁶ In the preface, he gives examples of unlearned clergymen who did not understand that the Old Testament must be interpreted through the light of the New, explaining his great hesitancy in embarking on his translation assignment. Unlearned men could interpret the Bible text too literally and come to the wrong conclusions, and so he warns: “We secgað eac foran to, þæt seo boc is swiþe deop

¹⁴ Marsden, “Translation by Committee,” 84.

¹⁵ Summarized by Benjamin C. Withers, *The Illustrated Old English Hexateuch*, 8.

¹⁶ Melinda Menzer, “The Preface as Admonition: Ælfric’s Preface to Genesis,” in *The Old English Hexateuch: Aspects and Approaches*, ed. Rebecca Barnhouse and Benjamin C. Withers (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), 21.

gastlice to understandenne, and we no writað na mare buton þa nacedan gerecednisse” [We also say beforehand, that this book is very spiritually deep to understand, and we do not write more than the naked history].¹⁷ The consequences of his work troubled Ælfric: he even asked not to be given any other biblical translation assignments in the future.¹⁸

At the same time, as Withers points out, Ælfric also seems to imply that his translation is authoritative: he stresses the importance of accuracy in copying his translation.¹⁹ Despite Ælfric’s scruples, he claims that his translation would be accurate to the original, and that further steps away from the Vulgate (through copyists’ errors) would be unacceptable: “I ask now in God’s name, if someone desires to copy [lit. *awritan*, ‘write’] this book that he corrects it well according to the original because I do not have control although someone brings it [the book] to error through false writers”.²⁰ He did not seem to entertain the idea that his translation could be improved upon.

Ælfric’s preface is somewhat deceptive. In reality, fidelity to the text often had to make way for Anglo-Saxon social mores.²¹ Perhaps safe in the knowledge that laymen would not notice the discrepancies between the Vulgate and the translation, Ælfric and his fellow translators omitted many passages.²² For example, in Deuteronomy 28, parents are described consuming their own newborn children and their afterbirths because they have nothing else to eat.²³ This visceral image may have been deemed inappropriate or unnecessary by the translator and was therefore left out.

Other textual elements were rephrased, such as the description of the fruit of the tree of knowledge in Genesis. In the Vulgate, the fruit is described as “pulchrum oculis, aspectuque delectabile” [fair to the eyes, and delightful to behold].²⁴ *Delectabilis* can be translated as “delightful”, but also as “delicious”.²⁵ Ælfric translated the phrase as “wlitig on eagum, lustbære on gesihðe” [beautiful to the eyes, and desirable to sight].²⁶ Using *lustbære* to describe the fruit introduces a sexual dimension: the fruit is desirable not because of its potential taste, but because of its physical beauty, described by a word partly composed of the word *lust*. By changing a single word, Ælfric could steer his reader towards a particular interpretation.

¹⁷ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 4.

¹⁸ Withers, *The Illustrated Old English Hexateuch*, 142-3.

¹⁹ Withers, *The Illustrated Old English Hexateuch*, 144.

²⁰ Ælfric of Eynsham, “Preface to Genesis,” quoted in and translated by Withers, *The Illustrated Old English Hexateuch*, 144.

²¹ McMullen and Shields-Más, “Tamar, Widowhood,” 587.

²² Barnhouse, “Shaping the Hexateuch Text,” 91.

²³ Deuteronomy 28:57.

²⁴ Genesis 3:6.

²⁵ Online Latin Dictionary, s.v. “delectabilis,” <https://www.online-latin-dictionary.com/>.

²⁶ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 12.

Thus, it could be argued that Ælfric bent the truth somewhat in his preface; after all, he did not admit to making any changes, only claiming that he tried to be as accurate as possible, altering word order only when English syntax made word-for-word translation impossible.²⁷ The abbot appears to have been stuck between a rock and a hard place: he could not admit that he had changed the Word of God, nor could he unleash an uncensored Old English Bible upon a populace that, he believed, would certainly misinterpret its meaning. Thus, Ælfric (and his fellow translators) had to strike a delicate balance between what the text said, and how they thought it should be interpreted. If the meaning of the Bible was hidden, and needed exegesis, then adding that meaning would not be heretical; it would simply reveal what was already there, and explain it to those who did not stand as close to God as the clergy.

The preface's core argument, that translation would inevitably lead to misinterpretation, is accompanied by an attempt to prevent this very misinterpretation. Scholars have tried to explain why Ælfric's preface is so much less clear than his other prefaces, which usually aimed to explain the subsequent main text in relatively simple terms.²⁸ Menzer argues that Ælfric deliberately complicated his preface to the translation in order to discourage his audience from believing that they fully understood the Old Testament text.²⁹ An unlearned reader, confused by the seemingly incomplete exegesis in the preface, may have then been motivated to seek a more informed person to explain both the preface and the following Bible stories.

It is not entirely clear whether Ælfric, or the other translators, had a particular audience in mind, other than his ealdorman Æthelweard and the "ungelæredan preostas" who, Ælfric feared, would misinterpret the text.³⁰ The existence of the Illustrated OE Hexateuch seems to indicate that one of the intended audiences was the aristocracy: even in its unfinished state, it is an extensively decorated manuscript.³¹ There is also the possibility of a monastic audience, though it is unclear whether the text was ever actually read in that context, since the Latin-speaking monks may not have needed to read from an Old English translation.³²

Women and the Benedictine Reform Movement

It is also important to point out that the translation was created in the context of the Benedictine Reform, and that Ælfric was an important reformer of this movement. Thus, in

²⁷ Menzer, "The Preface as Admonition," 32.

²⁸ Menzer, "The Preface as Admonition," 34.

²⁹ Menzer, "The Preface as Admonition," 37.

³⁰ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 4.

³¹ Marsden, "The Bible in English in the Middle Ages," 282.

³² Marsden, "The Bible in English in the Middle Ages," 282-283.

analyzing the representation of biblical sexuality in the OE Heptateuch, it is important to understand the consequences of this monastic reform on early medieval English views on sexuality and gender.

The realities of life for women in the Anglo-Saxon period have been hotly debated for some time. In the past, it was believed that women's rights significantly diminished as a result of the Norman Conquest, which introduced a new primogeniture-based inheritance system. Life before the Norman Conquest was imagined as a "Golden Age for women" in which they were respected and even revered for their chastity and work in the home.³³ Pauline Stafford has questioned this supposition, arguing that Anglo-Saxon women did not enjoy the equality that earlier scholars had made "something of an orthodoxy".³⁴ Historical narratives that described the supposedly exalted status of women in Anglo-Saxon England had a political dimension to them, starting from the very first description of Germanic life: Tacitus' Germanic women "were a foil to the decadence of contemporary Rome".³⁵ Hundreds of years later, feminist and anti-feminist scholars alike used England's Germanic past to advocate for certain views of womanhood, representing Anglo-Saxon women as either powerful landowners or chaste homemakers.³⁶ The appropriation of the historical conditions of women can thus lead to oversimplification.

Still, it has been argued that the Benedictine Reform movement sought to create social change that would impact the lives of religious as well as laywomen. The movement sought to re-emphasize several types of hierarchies, especially religious and sexual ones. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars were not the only ones to romanticize an Anglo-Saxon past: the clergy's desire to reinforce these hierarchies stemmed, in part, from a sense of nostalgia for an earlier Anglo-Saxon Golden Age "with its firmly entrenched monastic episcopacy and freedom from Danish invasions".³⁷ The movement led to an increase in anxiety around the female body, sexuality and its purported dangers. These dangers were not limited to the clergy: gradually, secular individuals were also expected to be more sexually pure, as much as that was possible within marriage.³⁸

³³ See, e.g., Christine Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England and the Impact of 1066* (London: British Museum Press, 1985). Cf. Pauline Stafford, "Women and the Norman Conquest," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 4 (1994), 222.

³⁴ Stafford, "Women and the Norman Conquest," 223.

³⁵ Stafford, "Women and the Norman Conquest," 224.

³⁶ Stafford, "Women and the Norman Conquest," 224-225.

³⁷ Stacy Klein, *Ruling Women: Queenship and Gender in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 69.

³⁸ Klein, *Ruling Women*, 182.

If the Bible was thought to allow certain impure sexual behaviors, this apparent endorsement could influence the highest layer of society: the royal court. Anglo-Saxon kings were wont to ignore religious rules around marriage when it was convenient to them. Several Anglo-Saxon kings practiced “serial monogamy” in that they disposed of a wife when, for example, a more advantageous connection could be made elsewhere.³⁹ Furthermore, royal marriage between kin was so prevalent that it was the most common reason for dissolution of marriage, as such relationships would, according to Church doctrine, never have been valid in the first place. While this technically should have disinherited children produced in these marriages, this technicality was frequently ignored.⁴⁰ J.L. Laynesmith argues that the royal practice of incest, “railed against” by a figure as significant as St. Paul, is a sign that “the Church was not as powerful as chroniclers often implied”.⁴¹ Unlearned men were not the only ones who could use literal readings of the Old Testament as justification for deviant sexual behavior.

Royal flouting of Church doctrine would certainly explain why Ælfric felt the need to address the topic of polygamy and incest in his preface: if kings already had a history of disobeying the church when it came to marriage, the idea that the Bible endorsed polygamy and incest could have taken much more authority from the Church, seemingly disagreeing with the Holy Word. Seeing as Ælfric’s writing is marked by his “desire to impose monastic standards upon the whole of society, from the secular clergy to the laity”, it is no wonder that he had his reservations when he was asked to expose uneducated minds to the sexuality of the Old Testament.⁴²

Ælfric, Gender and Sexuality

Hugh Magennis argues that two general attitudes towards sexuality prevailed in Anglo-Saxon England: disinterest and outright rejection.⁴³ Vernacular poems, such as *Beowulf* and *Widsith*, were not interested in sexual titillation, and religious writing often downplayed the beauty of female saints, changing episodes that would have pointed to sexual activity: “It is the attitude of ‘sexual pessimism’ which is the ideologically dominant one in Anglo-Saxon England,

³⁹ J.L. Laynesmith, “Queens, Concubines and the Myth of Marriage *More Danico*: Royal Marriage Practice in Tenth and Eleventh-century England,” in *Medieval Marriage: Selected Proceedings of the 2013 Postgraduate Conference*, ed. Charlotte Pickard (2013), 3.

⁴⁰ Laynesmith, “Concubines,” 5.

⁴¹ Laynesmith, “Concubines,” 6.

⁴² Catherine Cubitt, “Virginity and Misogyny in Tenth- and Eleventh-Century England,” *Gender & History* 12.1 (2000), 2.

⁴³ Hugh Magennis, “‘No Sex Please, we’re Anglo-Saxons?’ Attitudes to Sexuality in Old English Prose and Poetry,” *Leeds Studies in English* 26 (1995), 14.

representing a powerful consensus within the text-producing community of the period”.⁴⁴ In other words, Old English writing seldomly contains sexuality of any kind.

Ælfric’s views on sexuality were of distrust and rejection, fully embracing the Anglo-Saxon “sexual pessimism” that Magennis describes. In a homily based on the Book of Judith, for example, Ælfric significantly tones down the heroine’s sexual attractiveness in a story about manipulation and seduction. Magennis states:

The asexual virgin saint presents a type of femininity easier to handle for an Anglo-Saxon monastic writer like Ælfric than the threatening Old Testament figures of Esther and Judith, who are, in Clayton’s phrase, ‘sexually autonomous’ and who achieve power over men through exploitation of their own sexuality.⁴⁵

In order to make Judith and Esther’s stories safe and palatable for an Anglo-Saxon audience, their physical descriptions and actions had to be altered.

Ælfric’s anxieties about sexuality in religious texts also manifested themselves in many of his other works, among which his *Lives of Saints*. The torture scenes of the female martyrs in particular, Renée Trilling argues, are toned down when it comes to violence and sexuality.⁴⁶ At the same time, Ælfric could not leave out sexual danger entirely, as the narrative of martyrdom demanded it, and the sanctity of sacrifice carried little meaning without the bodily suffering that it consisted of. Trilling argues that the way these female bodies are represented, and the problems that they pose to an aristocratic, male lay audience, “may tell us something about the perception and valuation of real women’s bodies in late Anglo-Saxon England”.⁴⁷ She concludes that Ælfric’s “reluctance to engage with the erotics of sanctity inherent in narratives of martyrdom” – a reluctance that is typical of his writing in general – removed agency from the female martyrs by presenting them as not much more than a body to be sacrificed on the altar of masculine dominance.⁴⁸ While their defiance could be read by some as rebellion against the social order, the *Lives* nevertheless “remind audiences of women’s place in the various hierarchies of social exchange by focusing attention on their highly sexualized, fully feminine, and wholly material bodies”.⁴⁹ Put differently, while some of the heroines of Ælfric’s homilies may seem transgressive, their purpose is to confirm the status quo.

⁴⁴ Magennis, “No Sex Please,” 15. For a discussion on an exception to the Anglo-Saxons’ aversion to discussing sex, see D.K. Smith, “Humor in Hiding: Laughter Between the Sheets in the Exeter Book Riddles,” in *Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. Jonathan Wilcox (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer Limited, 2012).

⁴⁵ Magennis, “No Sex Please,” 10.

⁴⁶ Renée Trilling, “Heavenly Bodies: Paradoxes of Female Martyrdom in Ælfric’s *Lives of Saints*,” in *Writing Women Saints in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Paul Szarmach (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 254.

⁴⁷ Trilling, “Heavenly Bodies,” 254.

⁴⁸ Trilling, “Heavenly Bodies,” 272-273.

⁴⁹ Trilling, “Heavenly Bodies,” 273.

Another scholar who discusses Ælfric's writings on virginity, sexuality and women is Catherine Cubitt, who concludes that he was far more concerned with male chastity than female chastity. This is not to say that he accepted unchaste women: licentiousness was still unacceptable, but he also seemed suspicious of women's chastity, as it could actually produce sin. This sin was not lust, but pride: in one of his writings, he states that it is better to be a devout married woman than a virgin who prides herself on her purity.⁵⁰ Furthermore, nearly all of Ælfric's writings were addressed to men, and with a wider male audience in mind; his only acknowledgement of a possible female readership of his work appears towards the end of his homily on Judith.⁵¹ Shortly after his address to women reading the text, urging them to be inspired by Judith's chastity, he "admonishes contemporary *nunnan* for sexual laxity and reminds them of the gravity of the sin of fornication".⁵² Despite his tendency to ascribe great value to male chastity, he does not seem to think that his male readership would (or should) be that inspired by Judith's sexual purity: he wrote in a letter that he expected men to be inspired to fight heroically, rather than to remain chaste.⁵³ As Catherine Karkov points out, Ælfric expected women reading the story to interpret it literally, while men are expected to see the deeper meaning and apply it to the troubles of the day.⁵⁴ These facts imply a few things about Ælfric's views on women: first, that he did not seem to think of them very often at all; second, that when he did, he did not expect them to comprehend the spiritual meaning of his writings.

Elaine Treharne also spots a misogynist tendency in Ælfric's writings on women: while he did not overtly characterize women as more sinful than men, he hardly addressed women's spiritual edification and systematically erased women from his adaptations, perhaps to appeal more to a male audience. Ælfric evidently did not imagine the general reader of his works to be anything other than male, as even language that at first glance may appear gender neutral (*mann* was not exclusively male in Old English) was couched in assumptions of the reader having a wife and children, who were represented more as property than anything else.⁵⁵ Additionally, Ælfric erased female characters from the narrative in his adaptations of hagiographies. While one of his exemplars, the monk Lantfred, wrote saint's lives that included worthy women being

⁵⁰ Cubitt, "Virginity and Misogyny," 14.

⁵¹ Cubitt, "Virginity and Misogyny," 14.

⁵² Cubitt, "Virginity and Misogyny," 14.

⁵³ Catherine Karkov, "The Anglo-Saxon Genesis: Text, Illustration, and Audience," in *The Old English Hexateuch: Aspects and Approaches*, ed. Rebecca Barnhouse and Benjamin C. Withers (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), 204.

⁵⁴ Karkov, "The Anglo-Saxon Genesis," 204.

⁵⁵ Elaine Treharne, "The Invisible Woman: Ælfric and his Subject Female," *Leeds Studies in English* 37 (2006), 192. For an analysis of the use of *mann* in Old English, see Christine Rauer, "Mann and Gender in Old English Prose: A Pilot Study," *Neophilologus* 101 (2017), 139–158.

healed of many ailments, Ælfric's versions deleted these women from his narrative in almost every single case.⁵⁶ As Treharne herself puts it, "[w]omen seem to have had little place in Ælfric's scheme of salvation".⁵⁷

Ælfric's writing did not always exhibit a disinterest in women: sometimes, he showed disgust towards them. Alice Jorgensen notes that Ælfric more often depicted disgusting male bodies than disgusting female ones; however, this does not mean that he saw men's bodies as more abject than women's bodies.⁵⁸ Ælfric concerned himself with male spiritual edification, and that could be achieved through bodily purity. Male abject bodies served as cautionary tales: "Ælfric presents cases of the abuse and corruption of masculine power, secular and ecclesiastical, and prompts revulsion towards heresy, paganism, tyranny, and sin, all of which are associated with filth and excess of the body".⁵⁹ Ælfric's female abject bodies, Jorgensen argues, did not serve this same purpose. At several points, Ælfric made mention of bodily functions in women that signal disgust: one example can be found in his *Letter to Brother Edward*, in which Ælfric berates women who eat and drink on the toilet.⁶⁰ Another example can be found in his Christmas homily, in which he mentions the "filth" that accompanies childbirth and how it was cleansed in the case of Mary's immaculate conception, which Jorgensen argues is a sign that "deep down [Ælfric] does view women as fundamentally dirty".⁶¹ Ælfric depicted both male and female abject bodies, but their purposes were vastly different.

If Ælfric's feelings towards women ranged from indifference to revulsion, the question is whether he, when translating portions of *Genesis*, *Joshua*, *Numbers* and *Judges*, would have given much thought to the possibility that women would also be exposed to his translations. His preface is directed to Æthelweard, his patron, and only mentions ways in which men would be likely to misinterpret the Bible for their own licentious benefit. This risk did not exist in the same way for women: there are no examples of women taking multiple husbands in the first seven books of the Bible, for example, and women's wanton sexuality is usually (though not always) forbidden and punished in the text. Additionally, Ælfric's lack of writing directed at women and disbelief in their spiritual edification may indicate that he was not particularly concerned with women's interpretation of the Heptateuch.

⁵⁶ Treharne, "The Invisible Woman," 199-200.

⁵⁷ Treharne, "The Invisible Woman," 200.

⁵⁸ Alice Jorgensen, "Shame, Disgust and Ælfric's Masculine Performance," in *Feminist Approaches to Early Medieval English Studies*, ed. Robin Norris, Rebecca Stephenson and Renée Trilling (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 143.

⁵⁹ Jorgensen, "Shame, Disgust," 152.

⁶⁰ Jorgensen, "Shame, Disgust," 144.

⁶¹ Jorgensen, "Shame, Disgust," 161.

The fact that the most well-known, or only known, contributor to the OE Heptateuch was a man who seemed to write almost exclusively for men must inform our analysis of the representation of sexuality and the body in the Old English Heptateuch. The three anonymous translators came from the same monastic milieu as Ælfric and likely shared his views. Thus, the Old English Heptateuch is a men's translation of the Bible.

Conclusion

The Benedictine Reform led to changes in the ways biblical and other saintly women were represented; furthermore, an already present disinterest towards sex and sexuality was further emphasized when sexual purity became a defining feature of the Reform movement. Ælfric, a central figure in this movement and the only name that we can attach to the OE Heptateuch, cared deeply about male chastity and the spiritual edification it would lead to, but did not show a similar level of interest in female holiness. These views are important context for interpreting translation choices made in the creation of the OE Heptateuch: translation choices were made with a male audience in mind.

CHAPTER 2 – PROCREATION AND CHILDBIRTH

This chapter will focus primarily Old Testament stories related to aspects of sexuality that were not considered inherently licentious: procreative sex, pregnancy, and bodily fluids. All translation techniques that the translators employed will be considered: omission, adjustment, and inclusion. Given Ælfric’s emphasis on male celibacy and bodily purity, sexually charged passages may have prompted him and his fellow translators to make alterations to the original text.

Taming the Words

In the Vulgate, the physical act of procreative sex is often described through the verb *ingredere*, which in the Douay-Rheims translation is translated as “going into”. The various patriarchs of the Bible “go into” women at various points, and the Old English translators of the Heptateuch rephrased these instances to be less literal (see Table 2.1). The physical act of sex is consistently absent in the Old English translation.

Vulgate	OE Heptateuch	Translator
Genesis 6:4 “For after the sons of God went in to the daughters of men”	Adjusted: “æfter þam þe Godes bearn tymdon wið manna” [afterwards the sons of God had children with the daughters of men]. ⁶²	Ælfric
Genesis 16:2 “go in unto my handmaid”	Adjusted: “Nim nu mine þinene to þinum bedde” [Now take my handmaid to your bed]. ⁶³	Ælfric
Genesis 16:4 “And he went in to her”	Adjusted: “Abram þa dyde swa swa him dihte Sarai” [Abram did as Sarai told him]. ⁶⁴	Ælfric
Genesis 29:21 “for now the time is fulfilled, that I may go in unto her”	Omitted	Anonymous 1
Genesis 29:24 “Now when Jacob had gone in to her according to custom”	Omitted	Anonymous 1
Genesis 30:2 “go in unto her”	Omitted	Anonymous 1

⁶² *The Old English Heptateuch*, 18.

⁶³ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 36.

⁶⁴ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 36.

Genesis 30:5 “When her husband had gone in unto her”	Omitted	Anonymous 1
Genesis 38:2 “taking her to wife, he went in unto her”	Omitted	Anonymous 1
Genesis 38:8 “Go in to thy brother's wife and marry her”	Omitted	Anonymous 1
Genesis 39:14 “he came in to me, to lie with me”	Adjusted: “He eode into me to þam þæt he me ofername” [He went into me to take me by violence]. ⁶⁵	Anonymous 1
Deuteronomy 22:14 “and going in to her, I found her not a virgin”	Omitted	Anonymous 3
Judges 16:1 “He went also into Gaza, and saw there a woman, a harlot, and went in unto her.”	Omitted	Ælfric

Table 2.1 Translation of (sexual) *ingredere* in the OE Heptateuch.⁶⁶

As shown above, verses that mention men going into women are either omitted or adjusted so that they no longer mention penetration; the only exception can be found in Genesis 39:14, when the Pharaoh’s wife is disingenuously describing her rape. It is possible that the translators chose to remove and rephrase even tame mentions of penetration so that no potentially titillating material would be present in the final product. This manner of rephrasing is paralleled by other instances of Anglo-Saxon authors who made religious material less tantalizing. As Magennis has shown, texts such as the anonymous *Life of St. Euphrosyne* and a version of the *Life of St. Margaret* follow their Latin exemplars closely, but omit any references to physical beauty.⁶⁷ When beauty was mentioned, it was often related to a saint’s chastity or heavenly radiance.⁶⁸ While mentions of physical beauty are different from descriptions of penetrative sex, both textual elements could be seen as evoking lust. Alice Jorgensen argues that to Ælfric, “[b]odily purity, orthodox belief, and priestly authority are intertwined”; thus, if one were to be instructed by the Bible, physical descriptions of beauty and sex would be a barrier to true belief.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 69.

⁶⁶ Some of these instances, namely Genesis 38:8 and Deuteronomy 22:14 and Judges 16:1, were likely omitted for different reasons than their use of *ingredere*; these will be discussed further in this chapter and Chapter 3 and 4.

⁶⁷ Magennis, “No Sex Please,” 4.

⁶⁸ Magennis, “No Sex Please,” 7.

⁶⁹ Jorgensen, “Shame, Disgust,” 152.

Bodily fluids are also removed from the translation, even when their mentions are not to be taken literally. In the translation, the word *semen* is rephrased in ways that are less sexually loaded. *Semen* is frequently used in the Bible to refer to a man’s progeny. In some instances, Ælfric translated Latin *semen* as *ofspring*, though not always (see Table 2.2). The anonymous translators never translate *semen* as *sæd*, with one exception in Deuteronomy. However, Deuteronomy may have originally been translated by Ælfric and revised by Anonymous 3, so it is possible that this instance of *sæd* was also Ælfric’s doing (see Table 1).

OE Heptateuch	Ælfric	Anonymous 1	Anonymous 2	Anonymous 3
<i>Ofspring</i>	15	5	0	5
<i>Sæd</i>	3	0	0	1
<i>Cynn</i>	1	3	2	0
<i>Sunu</i>	0	1	0	0
Omitted	7	3	16	5

Table 2.2 Instances of *semen* and their OE translations.⁷⁰

Three instances of *semen* were translated as *sæd* by Ælfric (see Appendix). In Genesis 16:10, when Hagar has run away from Sarai (not yet Sarah) after being beaten by her, God reassures her that the child she carries in her womb will be the progenitor of a great people: “Ic secge þæt þin sæd byð swa swiþe gemenigfild þæt man hit geriman ne mæg for þære meniu” [I say that your seed will be multiplied so much that people will not be able to count it because of its multitude].⁷¹ The other instances of *semen* being translated as *sæd* occur in Genesis as well, in verses 21:12-13. Abraham is aggrieved by Sarah’s request to cast out Hagar and her son. In the Vulgate, God comforts Abraham and promises he “will make the son also of the bondwoman a great nation, because he is [Abraham’s] seed.”⁷² This verse was translated quite faithfully by Ælfric: “ic eac swilce do þære wylne sunu micelre mægþe, for þan þe he ys eac of þinum sæde” [I also will make the son of the maid-servant very powerful, because he is of your seed].⁷³ Thus, while Ælfric generally translates *semen* as *ofspring*, he is not afraid to occasionally translate literally.

The other translators avoided discussing *semen* almost entirely, opting for words less reminiscent of carnal relations. Anonymous 1 uses several terms to translate *semen*; Anonymous

⁷⁰ See Appendix for a list of all instances of *semen* and their translations. Table 2.1 does not include Genesis 4:25, as it appears differently in two versions of the OE Heptateuch: in British Library B.iv, *semen* is translated as *sunu*, but in Cambridge University Library Ii 1.33, it is translated as *ofspring*.

⁷¹ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 36-37.

⁷² Genesis 21:13.

⁷³ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 45.

2 omits almost every instance, including the Laws in Leviticus that reference semen and uncleanness. Anonymous 3 mostly uses *ofspring* and *sæd* in one instance, exhibiting a clear similarity to Ælfric’s approach.

The censorship of Latin verbs like *ingredere* and *semen* is peculiar, as in most of their instances no illicit sex is taking place. Still, even if the patriarchs were not doing anything sinful, exact descriptions of their sexual acts could have led to sinfulness. The anonymous translators equate sexual lust with sin itself: on multiple occasions, fornication was simply translated as *singian* [to sin] (see Table 2.3).

Vulgate	OE Heptateuch	Translator
Exodus 20:14 Thou shalt not commit adultery [Non <i>moechaberis</i>].	Ne <i>synga</i> þu [do not sin]. ⁷⁴	Anonymous 2
Exodus 34:16 “... lest after they themselves have committed fornication [<i> fuerint fornicatae</i>], they make thy sons also to commit fornication [<i>fornicari faciant</i>] with their gods.”	... þe læs þe hig gedon þæt þine bearn <i>singion</i> on hira godas, æfter þam þe hig <i>singiað</i> . [lest they make your children sin with their gods, after they have sinned]. ⁷⁵	Anonymous 2
Deuteronomy 31:16 “... this people rising up will go a fornicating [<i>fornicabitur</i>] after strange gods in the land.”	... þis folc arist and <i>syngað</i> and folgaþ fremdum godum on þam lande [this people will rise and sin and follow strange gods in the land]. ⁷⁶	Anonymous 3

Table 2.3 Instances of fornication being translated as sin.

Most peculiarly out of these three, “thou shalt not commit adultery”, one of the Ten Commandments, appears as “Ne synga þu” [you shall not sin], an instruction so blatantly obvious it borders on comedic. Illicit forms of sexuality were considered so sinful that they became synonymous with sin itself; therefore, the translators censored anything that could be considered even remotely pornographic, even in contexts in which the sex described was not forbidden.

⁷⁴ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 116.

⁷⁵ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 127.

⁷⁶ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 172.

Rewriting Matriarch Pregnancies

Ælfric accurately translated that the dangers and pain of pregnancy are a punishment for Eve's first sin: "on sarnysse þu acenst cild" [you will bring forth children in bodily pain].⁷⁷ When the danger of childbirth appear later in the OE Heptateuch, the translators de-emphasize this pain. Genesis 35:17-18 describe Rachel's grueling labor and death in childbirth:

By reason of her hard labour, she began to be in danger, and the midwife said to her: Fear not, for thou shalt have this son also. And when her soul was departing for pain, and death was now at hand, she called the name of her son Benoni, that is, the son of my pain: but his father called him Benjamin, that is, the son of the right hand.

The translation summarizes these verses, stating "Soþlice Rachel forþferde, þa heo gebær hire sunu Beniamin" [Truly Rachel died, when she gave birth to her son Benjamin].⁷⁸ The pain Rachel endures, which is central in the biblical text, was omitted; while it can be inferred from the fact she died in childbirth, it apparently was not important enough to be mentioned outright. Rachel initially naming her son Benoni, another sign of her pain, was also removed. It is possible that the translator was uncomfortable with this vivid description of the pain of childbirth, but he might have summarized this sequence simply because he did not find it relevant enough to include: thus, a woman's role in the process of childbearing is reduced in the OE Heptateuch.

In some instances, it is more difficult to ascertain whether the translators omitted or rewrote passages, as multiple versions of the translation exist. Eve's births, for instance, are represented differently between copies of the OE Heptateuch. In Genesis 4:17, "Cain knew his wife, and she conceived, and brought forth Enoch". Cotton Claudius B.iv and Cambridge University Library Ii 1.33 each present this verse slightly differently, allowing for different interpretations. Eve's pregnancies and births are described as follows: the former states that "Soðlice Adam gestyrynde Cain be Euan his gemæccan... Eft he gestyrynde Abel" [Truly Adam brought forth Cain by Eve his companion... afterwards he begat Abel];⁷⁹ the Cambridge fragment reads: "Adam soðlice æfter þisum breac his wiues and heo eacnode and acende Cain... Eft heo acende his broðor Abæl" [After this Adam truly enjoyed his wife and she grew and brought forth Cain... afterwards she brought forth his brother Abel].⁸⁰ These translations describe the process of conception very differently: the first makes no direct allusion to sexual

⁷⁷ Genesis 3:16 and *The Old English Heptateuch*, 13.

⁷⁸ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 63.

⁷⁹ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 14.

⁸⁰ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 15.

activity, and de-emphasizes Eve's role in the child's creation, since Adam is the subject of both sentences. He is the one to bring forth his sons and Eve is a secondary party, acting as a vessel. The latter translation, on the other hand, not only describes the act of conception as potentially pleasurable (though *brucan* can also mean "use"), but also mentions the developing pregnancy itself. Additionally, it foregrounds Eve giving birth rather than her role in the child's life being passive, a translation more accurate to the Vulgate original.⁸¹

At the same time, the text in Cotton Claudius B.iv objectifies Eve less than the Cambridge fragment. In the complete text, Eve is described as Adam's *gemæca*, an equal companion. The two translations focus on different aspects of Adam and Eve's relationship: the Cambridge version emphasizes Eve's sexual nature and role in childbirth, whereas the full text diminishes this role, focusing instead on Eve's role as a companion to Adam.

Since different versions of the text exist, it should be asked which one may have been closest to Ælfric's original text. Richard Marsden argues that, even though Cambridge Ii. I. 33 is a twelfth century manuscript, it may be the closest to Ælfric's original translation: it is the most accurate to the Vulgate and other texts in the manuscript are mostly Ælfrician⁸² If this is true, Ælfric was more faithful to the original text than may have been expected.

Spilling Semen, not Ink

Most of the references to *semen* in the Vulgate appear in contexts of desirable sexual behavior: occurring within marriage (or otherwise divinely sanctioned relationships) and producing children. The most important reference to *semen* in an unsanctioned context occurs in the second half of Genesis; this instance was left out of the OE Heptateuch. Genesis 38 concerns the story of Tamar, who is married to Juda's firstborn son. This man, Her, is killed by God, upon which Juda instructs his second son Onan to marry Tamar and sleep with her, which would then be considered his deceased brother's children. Because he does not want to raise children in Her's name he ejaculates on the ground during the consummation of the marriage.⁸³ Onan is then killed by God, as what he did was abominable: though the man is punished for his actions, Onan's entire existence is erased in the OE Heptateuch.⁸⁴

A. Joseph McMullen and Chelsea Shields-Más argue that, while it may be tempting to ascribe Onan's absence to the translator's discomfort with spilled semen, the translator could

⁸¹ Genesis 4:1-2.

⁸² Richard Marsden, "Introduction," in *The Old English Heptateuch and Ælfric's Libellus de Veteri Testamento et Novo*, lxxii-lxxiii.

⁸³ Genesis 38:9.

⁸⁴ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 66.

also have chosen to only omit the act, rather than the whole character. They offer an alternative explanation: Onan's absence is related to Anglo-Saxon laws and customs around marriage. At that time, a widow who wished to remarry had to wait a year before she could do so; in Genesis, Tamar is remarried almost immediately upon her former husband's death.⁸⁵ Furthermore, her remarriage happens within her kin group, which was forbidden by several law codes from around the time of the OE Heptateuch's creation.⁸⁶ Lastly, Ælfric did not view remarriage favorably, as widows and widowers should devote their lives to God in his eyes; second marriages were permitted, but would not happen in an ideal world.⁸⁷ He does not mention third marriages, but bishop Wulfstan, whom he was corresponding with, states that they are unacceptable.⁸⁸ Ælfric did not translate this portion of Genesis, but his views on translation and representation resonate throughout the OE Heptateuch; and so, McMullen and Shields-Más argue, the omission of Onan may have more to do with clerical views on marriage than disgust at the man's actions.

It is possible that remarriage was a concern for the translator: he also did not include Abraham's second wife Cetura in his translation.⁸⁹ However, there are issues with McMullen and Shields-Más's argumentation: primarily that the rest of the story, which concerns practices more frowned upon than remarriage, *is* present in the OE Heptateuch. After all, Tamar tricks Juda into sleeping with her, and while they do not marry at the end of the chapter, she is not killed and allowed to give birth to her twins. Furthermore, Tamar has sexual relations, outside of marriage, within her kin group, as Juda is her father-in-law; it would be strange if these elements were less objectionable to the clergyman translating Genesis than a remarriage. Moreover, Tamar never actually marries Juda's third son: why would this marriage *not* taking place be an issue for the translators?

McMullen and Shields-Más may also be too quick to discard the argument that Onan was not included because of the spilling of his semen. As we have seen, the translators made a concerted effort to change nearly all instances of *semen* to *ofspring* or other more appropriate synonyms, indicating that even in licit cases of sexual activity, the translators avoided talk of *sæd*. Furthermore, if Onan's actions were the only element removed from Genesis 38:8-10, not much of his character would be left. Translated thus, the story would go like this: Onan was to marry Tamar, so that he could raise her children. He does not want to do this; then what? He

⁸⁵ Genesis 38:8.

⁸⁶ McMullen and Shields-Más, "Tamar, Widowhood," 600.

⁸⁷ McMullen and Shields-Más, "Tamar, Widowhood", 607.

⁸⁸ McMullen and Shields-Más, "Tamar, Widowhood", 608.

⁸⁹ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 52. See also Genesis 25:1.

refuses to marry Tamar? He goes into her, but they do not produce children, and then God kills him for some other wickedness? Not only would this change Onan's story so much that it would significantly alter the original, it would make Onan's interactions with Tamar almost identical to those of Her, and McMullen and Shields-Más say themselves that the translators often simplified the material.⁹⁰ If the translators did not want to include Onan's spilling seed, it would have been easiest to leave him out entirely. Thus, it is still likely that the translators' discomfort and scandalization at the biblical narrative was the main motivation to leave out Onan's character.

Conclusion

In the Vulgate, many of the patriarchs engage in sexual activity with their spouses, and these instances lead to pregnancy and childbirth. These instances are not illicit, but the translators nevertheless changed the text to be less explicit. Words and phrases referring to sexual activity and fluids were omitted: rather than refer to the patriarch's progeny as "seed", as the Vulgate does, the translators often opt for less explicit words like *offspring*, though Ælfric translated *semen* literally a handful of times. Pregnancy and childbirth were rewritten, but in the case of Eve and her pregnancy, it is unclear whether Ælfric rewrote her birthing process, or whether this was changed by another contributor. Lastly, when *semen* did occur in a taboo context, namely when Onan ejaculates on the ground, it was removed. As will become clear, the translation techniques of adjustment and omission were employed throughout the OE Heptateuch.

⁹⁰ McMullen and Shields-Más, "Tamar, Widowhood," 588.

CHAPTER 3 – SEX AND BODILY HARM

In this chapter, I will discuss how violence and sexuality are related in the Old Testament, and how the translators of the OE Heptateuch handled this combination. Sexual violence and circumcision are intertwined in Genesis 34, which one of the anonymous translators omitted. Other references to circumcision in other parts of the Vulgate will also be explored in this chapter, as well as the ways in which Ælfric and the anonymous translators differed in their representations of it.

Rape and its Consequences

In Book 34 of Genesis, a young Israelite woman named Dina is raped by prince Sichem of the Hevites. Afterwards, the prince wishes to marry Dina, who seems unwilling as she was “sad” after the deed had taken place.⁹¹ Sichem’s father Hemor approaches Jacob, Dina’s father, asking for her hand; when her brothers hear of what has transpired, they are enraged at the crime that was perpetrated against their sister. They deceitfully agree to a truce between the Hevites and the Israelites, but only if the men of the Hevites are circumcised. On the third day after the Hevites’ circumcision, “when the pain of the wound was greatest”, Simeon and Levi, two of Dina’s brothers, kill all the men of the Hevites and take her back home.⁹² Afterwards, Jacob confronts his sons, as their actions may have seriously impacted their reputation among other tribes; the men answer, “Should they abuse our sister as a strumpet?”⁹³ The entirety of this chapter, which centers on rape and violent retribution, cannot be found in the OE Heptateuch.⁹⁴

The omission of Chapter 34 in its entirety may be somewhat unsurprising, given the Anglo-Saxon “sexual pessimism” that was discussed in Chapter 1.⁹⁵ Yet, notably, this is the only chapter of Genesis that is entirely absent from the OE Heptateuch, though it is not the only one that contains questionable material. Not even a summary, or a mention of Dina’s name, is given. The story of Genesis 34, may have been so objectionable to the anonymous translator that not even a heavily abridged summary could salvage it.

In order to speculate on why Dina’s rape was left out of the OE Heptateuch, it is useful to look at the cultural understanding of rape in Anglo-Saxon England. Anglo-Saxon law codes

⁹¹ Genesis 34:3

⁹² Genesis 34:25

⁹³ Genesis 34:31

⁹⁴ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 62.

⁹⁵ Magennis, “No Sex Please,” 14.

indicate that rape was considered a grave crime deserving grave punishment.⁹⁶ In the first Anglo-Saxon law codes from seventh-century Kent, abduction and rape were considered the same crime, as in Roman law; they were represented as more of a damaging of property than a crime against a person.⁹⁷ By the time of King Alfred, however, English law not only distinguished between different forms of sexual assault, but also charged the perpetrator with a heavy fine: the victim of the crime would be paid a sum equal to the wergild for the murder of a young man.⁹⁸ This law not only indicates that rape was seen as a crime against a woman (since she was the one being compensated for the act), it also shows that it was taken as seriously as murder. While Anglo-Saxon law codes were likely not used in actual legal proceedings, Corinne Saunders rightly points out that the laws recorded in them do point to the “intellectual attitudes of the period towards rape”.⁹⁹ The law codes therefore indicate that rape was considered a very serious offence.

In the early eleventh century, views on rape and sexual assault would change again with the Benedictine Reform. Bishop Wulfstan, in his *Sermo Lupi*, represented rape as a humiliating crime against the husband of the victim, rather than the woman being assaulted: Saunders suggests that this view may have been an institutional one, as Wulfstan was involved in reforming Anglo-Saxon law codes at that time.¹⁰⁰ Thus, through the Church’s influence, rape came to be understood less as a crime against women and more as a sexual sin.

This context, while valuable to understanding the institutional influences on the OE Heptateuch, does not fully explain why Genesis 34 was entirely left out of the OE Heptateuch. The story, after all, chronicles an illicit sexual act being gravely punished by other men, and the woman in question is a virgin before the assault; the punishment, while not to be taken literally as the required course of action, accords with the idea that giving into lust carries great consequences. The chapter would hardly have inspired anyone to commit fornication of any kind; the question remains why it was removed in its entirety.

Barnhouse argues that the chapter was omitted because of the large role that circumcision plays in the narrative: she notes that most instances of the practice are censored in the OE Heptateuch.¹⁰¹ In addition, Genesis 34 presents the practice more viscerally than other parts of the Bible: its painful nature is exploited by Simeon and Levi in order to make the deaths

⁹⁶ Corinne Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2001), 40.

⁹⁷ Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment*, 34.

⁹⁸ Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment*, 41.

⁹⁹ Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment*, 37.

¹⁰⁰ Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment*, 45.

¹⁰¹ Barnhouse, “Shaping the Hexateuch Text,” 104.

of the Hevite men more excruciating than they already were. This pain is located in the penis, the bodily part that Sichem offended with; it also prevents similar crimes being committed in the days preceding the massacre. Even though circumcision is meant to act as a covenant with God, here it plays an entirely different role.

However, while circumcision is important to the narrative, it is not indispensable. The translator could have summarized the story without mentioning circumcision. For example: Dina was raped by a Hevite, this angered her brothers, and they killed all the Hevites in retribution for the crime. While it may very well have been an important factor, it is unlikely that the role of circumcision in the story was the only reason for the tale's omission.

It is also possible that Genesis 34 is not present because it contradicts a law concerning rape found further in the OE Heptateuch. Deuteronomy 22 lists, among other rules, laws pertaining to instances of marital unhappiness and also sexual crimes. The translator of Deuteronomy preserves some of these, but many of the laws are left out.

Vulgate	OE Heptateuch
13-19 If a man slanders his wife's name so that he can divorce her, and it's proven that he lied, "the ancients of that city shall take that man, and beat him, Condemning him besides in a hundred sicles of silver, which he shall give to the damsel's father... and he shall have her to wife, and may not put her away all the days of his life."	Omitted
22 "If a man lie with another man's wife, they shall both die, that is to say, the adulterer and the adulteress"	Retained
25 "But if a man find a damsel that is betrothed, in the field, and taking hold of her, lie with her, he alone shall die"	Omitted
28-29 If a man rapes a virgin who is not betrothed, and the matter comes to judgment, he shall pay her father 50 sicles of silver, marry her, and never put her away.	Retained
30 "No man shall take his father's wife, nor remove his covering."	Omitted

Table 3.1 Deuteronomy 22's retained and omitted laws in the OE Heptateuch.¹⁰²

As seen in Table 3.1, two of these laws were retained by the translator: the ban on adultery and the rules pertaining to the rape of an unbetrothed woman. Since the translators deleted large portions of the original, it could be argued that the laws that they chose to include indicate what

¹⁰² *The Old English Heptateuch*, 165.

they would have thought to be the most important; the others, apparently less important, were omitted.

It should be noted that the omitted laws have something in common: they punished the misconduct of men who victimized women in harsh bodily manners. The rape of a virgin is punished by marriage in the OE Heptateuch, but the capital punishment for the rape of a married or betrothed woman is absent from the text. The law prescribing bodily punishment to a man unjustly slandering a woman is also not present. Deuteronomy 22:30, which forbids marrying one's own stepmother, does not fit into this emerging pattern. However, this law could have been removed for another reason: perhaps the translator did not want to bring up the topic of incest (as will be seen in Chapter 4, the different translators' approach to this topic varied). Generally, the translator removed laws harshly punishing men for misconduct against women.

If the translator was concerned about contradictions within the Bible, he may have decided to exclude Genesis 34 because it contradicts Deuteronomy 22:28-29, which state that a man who has raped a woman must marry her to restore her honor. The translator of Deuteronomy felt this law was important enough to retain in the translation, but Dina's story calls the justness of this law into question. Sichem, after all, is very willing to marry Dina after he raped her: his infatuation with her was the reason for his conduct. Dina is aggrieved after her assault, but Sichem "comforted her with sweet words".¹⁰³ It is not entirely clear whether Dina is completely comforted, as the reader does not get any further impressions of her mental state after verse 34:3. Her feelings are unclear, but Sichem's are not: he does as the law would later state is the best course of action. Despite his seeking marriage, Sichem and his entire tribe are punished for his crime, "because he had done a foul thing in Israel, and committed an unlawful act, in ravishing Jacob's daughter".¹⁰⁴ It is not a contradiction, because the laws written in Deuteronomy may not have been in place by the time that the events described in Genesis transpired, but it may have been confusing to laymen, and was thus not included.

Perhaps the most obvious explanation is the one that holds the most water: that Genesis 34 was discarded in translation simply because it made the translator immensely uncomfortable.¹⁰⁵ It would not be the only instance of genital mutilation being removed in translation: Numbers 25:8, in which Phineas stabs a sex worker and her client through the genitals, was also omitted from the text.¹⁰⁶ The role of bodily pain of circumcision must have

¹⁰³ Genesis 34:3.

¹⁰⁴ Genesis 34:7.

¹⁰⁵ Barnhouse, "Shaping the Hexateuch Text," 104.

¹⁰⁶ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 152.

contributed to this discomfort, but as argued before, it is no reason to delete the section completely. The story of Dina's rape represents sexual assault as a crime that is particularly heinous, even when the perpetrator is in love with his victim. It paints men in a particularly bad light.

The translator's omission of Genesis 34 can be contrasted with the treatment of another Old Testament chapter that deals with an accusation of rape: Genesis 39. In this chapter, Joseph is pursued by the wife of the Pharaoh, but he refuses her advances as it would be a sin against God. As he flees her grasp, Joseph leaves behind a garment of his; the woman, in revenge, accuses Joseph of rape and presents the garment he left behind as proof.¹⁰⁷ Joseph is then imprisoned by the Pharaoh because of this false accusation. In stark contrast to Genesis 34, Genesis 39 is fully translated in the OE Heptateuch. By omitting Genesis 34 but retaining Genesis 39, the translator effectively represents women accusing men of rape as disingenuous. In the Vulgate, Dina's rape is narrated first, with Joseph's unjust imprisonment appearing five chapters later; the concept of actual rape is represented before a false accusation is explored. In the OE Heptateuch, rape is first discussed in the context of a false accusation fueled by a slighted woman's ego, leaving the impression that a woman who accuses a man of rape may very well be lying.

Circumcision

Circumcision was an important topic to Ælfric, who did not shy away from it in his translation stints for the OE Heptateuch nor in his other works. In his homily for the New Year, Ælfric considered circumcision and its meaning for Christians. He felt the need to explain the practice, as some listeners may not even know of it, but right after explaining it, he states that circumcision is a practice that is no longer performed by Christian men.¹⁰⁸ Circumcision was mentioned because it was still relevant for its spiritual significance; otherwise he would not have mentioned it at all.¹⁰⁹ This significance is directly tied to the Christian man's responsibility to not succumb to his libido. According to Ælfric, the purpose of literal circumcision was to decrease sexual appetite; similarly, spiritual circumcision entailed living "according to human reason" and being able to suppress sexual urges.¹¹⁰ Spiritual purity was thus directly tied to

¹⁰⁷ Genesis 39:15-16.

¹⁰⁸ Ælfric of Eynsham, "The Octaves and Circumcision of Our Lord," in *The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church: The First Part Containing the Sermones Catholici, or Homilies of Aelfric in the Original Anglo-Saxon, with an English Version*, ed. Benjamin Thorpe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 93-95.

¹⁰⁹ Ælfric, "Circumcision of Our Lord," 95.

¹¹⁰ Ælfric, "Circumcision of Our Lord," 97.

sexual purity. Once again, Ælfric seems to mainly have been addressing men, as he adds women only as an afterthought, stating that they should obey their husbands as Sarah obeyed Abraham.¹¹¹ To Ælfric, both spiritual and literal circumcision were mostly relevant to men.

Circumcision appears several times in the Heptateuch, but is in many cases absent in the translated text. Ælfric is not the culprit for these absences. He does not shy away from describing circumcision in his translation; rather, the anonymous translators remove all mentions of circumcision they come across (see Table 3.2).

Vulgate	OE Heptateuch	Translator
Genesis 17:10-11 “All the male kind of you shall be circumcised: And you shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin”	Retained	Ælfric
Genesis 21:4 “And he circumcised him the eighth day, as God had commanded him.”	Retained	Ælfric
Genesis 34 – Dina’s rape; Circumcision of the Hevites	Omitted	Anonymous 1
Exodus 4:25 “Immediately Sephora took a very sharp stone, and circumcised the foreskin of her son”	Omitted	Anonymous 1
Exodus 6:12 “I am of uncircumcised lips”	Adjusted: “Ic eom ungetinge on spræce” [I am not eloquent in speech]. ¹¹²	Anonymous 1
Exodus 12:44 “But every bought servant shall be circumcised, and so shall eat.”	Omitted	Anonymous 1
Exodus 12:48 “all his males shall first be circumcised... but if any man be uncircumcised, he shall not eat thereof.”	Omitted	Anonymous 1
Deuteronomy 10:16	Omitted	Anonymous 3

¹¹¹ Ælfric, “Circumcision of Our Lord,” 99.

¹¹² *The Old English Heptateuch*, 45.

“Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and stiffen your neck no more.”		
Deuteronomy 10:36 “The Lord thy God will circumcise thy heart, and the heart of thy seed”	Omitted	Anonymous 3
Joshua 5:3 “He did what the Lord had commanded, and he circumcised the children of Israel in the hill of the foreskins.”	Retained	Ælfric
Judges 14:3 “thou wilt take a wife of the Philistines, who are uncircumcised?”	Omitted	Ælfric

Table 3.2 The OE Heptateuch’s different approaches to translating circumcision.

As seen above, Ælfric generally translates instances of circumcision faithfully, with just one exception. In Judges 14, Samson’s parents object to his marrying a woman of the Philistines because they are an uncircumcised people; Ælfric leaves this conversation out of his homily.¹¹³ However, he leaves out the episode of Samson’s potential marriage entirely, possibly to simplify the narrative. In the rest of the OE Heptateuch, he consistently includes the passages that reference the practice. The anonymous translators, on the other hand, remove circumcision every time it is mentioned in the text, either by paraphrasing or, in most cases, omitting reference to circumcision outright. This difference clearly shows that Ælfric and the anonymous translators did not always have the same approach to biblical translation.

Barnhouse has also addressed the matter of circumcision in the OE Heptateuch, but mistakenly argues that Ælfric was also wont to remove mentions of the practice: “both Ælfric and the anonymous translators delete many examples of circumcision”.¹¹⁴ She goes on to contradict her own point: all the examples she provides of deletion of biblical circumcision were translated anonymously.¹¹⁵ She does not mention Ælfric’s homily on Judges, but as has been argued here, that chapter’s mention of circumcision may have been left out to simplify the narrative. In other words, Ælfric’s attitude towards circumcision in the Bible is patently different from that of the other translators.

¹¹³ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 195.

¹¹⁴ Barnhouse, “Shaping the Hexateuch Text,” 103.

¹¹⁵ Barnhouse, “Shaping the Hexateuch Text,” 103-4.

Since the anonymous translators' approach to biblical circumcision is so different from Ælfric's, it should be asked whose treatment of circumcision is most surprising. Was Ælfric refreshingly open about the topic, or were the translators uncommonly anxious, even by Anglo-Saxon standards? Karkov argues that Ælfric, though retaining concerns about the topic's appropriateness, "does not refrain from tackling it head on".¹¹⁶ She points out that he does not only interpret circumcision as a symbol for sexual restraint, but also as "a sign of rebirth... the cutting off of an old way of life and inclusion in (or exclusion from) a new and clearly defined community".¹¹⁷ She likens circumcision to the act of translation itself, which Ælfric reluctantly performed: "Translation for Ælfric is demonstrably a cut akin to circumcision in that it is a snipping off of or around material".¹¹⁸ Ælfric regarded circumcision as an important practice to at least spiritually grasp, even though he stressed himself that Christians should not perform it.¹¹⁹

It appears that Ælfric's insistence on retaining circumcision was particular to him: the illustrators of the Illustrated Old English Hexateuch did not depict it.¹²⁰ The poetic paraphrase of Genesis found in the Junius manuscript similarly censors Isaac's circumcision, stating that Abraham left a mark on his son without specifying what it is.¹²¹ Even though Ælfric thought that the spiritual significance of circumcision outweighed the confusion and shock it might elicit, his contemporaries did not seem to share the sentiment.

Conclusion

Once again, Ælfric and the anonymous translators differed in their approach to biblical sexuality. Ælfric did not shy away from circumcision, while the anonymous translators did so at every turn. None of the portions that Ælfric translated deal with sexual violence, but as has been shown before, his text generally omits much less than that of the anonymous translators. At the same time, even Ælfric would have had trouble translating Genesis 34, which interlinks sexual violence and circumcision and uses the latter as a method of torture.

¹¹⁶ Catherine Karkov, "The Circumcision and Weaning of Isaac: The Cuts that Bind," in *New Readings on Women and Early Medieval English Literature and Culture*, ed. Helene Scheck and Christine E. Kozikowski (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 115.

¹¹⁷ Karkov, "The Cuts that Bind," 115.

¹¹⁸ Karkov, "The Cuts that Bind," 120.

¹¹⁹ Karkov, "The Cuts that Bind," 119.

¹²⁰ Karkov, "The Cuts that Bind," 117.

¹²¹ Karkov, "The Cuts that Bind," 115.

CHAPTER 4 – TRANSGRESSIVE SEXUALITIES

This final chapter will focus on types of sexuality that were considered deviant, but did not inherently include violence. As discussed before, Ælfric mentioned two of these types in his preface to the translation: incest and polygamy, which were forbidden to engage in by Christian men. This chapter will show that, even though Ælfric specifically highlighted these illicit sexualities, he and the other translators often retained these in their work. Other taboo biblical topics, which are not referenced in the preface but were illicit nonetheless, are sex work, homosexuality, incest and concubinage: their representations will also be discussed in this chapter.

Sex Work

There are a few instances in which mentions of sex work and its practitioners were removed, but sex workers are far from absent from the Old English text. Their presence usually signals sinfulness, but one particular story which presents a sex worker in a positive light was kept surprisingly intact.

Sex Work and Biblical Law

The anonymous translators were not entirely consistent in removing mentions of sex work from their translation. For example, when Tamar disguises herself as a sex worker to trick Juda into giving her children, it dutifully says that “Ða Iudas hig geseah, þa wende he þæt hit wære sum myltystre” [When Juda saw her, he thought that she was some harlot].¹²² This fact is rather crucial to the narrative, as it explains why Juda would sleep with an unknown woman he suddenly met. Other portions of the text that contain mentions of sex work, however, *were* omitted. Several laws that mention sex workers in Deuteronomy 23, for example, do not appear in the OE Heptateuch: the translation of Deuteronomy skips over verses 23:1-18, several of which mention sex work. These laws are not in favor of their existence: in fact, they state that their existence is an abomination, and that their children cannot enter temples. Despite this, the translator did not retain these laws.

¹²² *The Old English Heptateuch*, 67.

Vulgate	OE Heptateuch	Translator
Genesis 38 Juda and Tamar	Retained	Anonymous 1
Deuteronomy 23:2 “one born of a prostitute, shall not enter into the church of the Lord, until the tenth generation.”	Omitted	Anonymous 3
Deuteronomy 23:17 “There shall be no whore among the daughters of Israel, nor whoremonger among the sons of Israel.”	Omitted	Anonymous 3
Deuteronomy 23:18 “Thou shalt not offer the hire of a strumpet”	Omitted	Anonymous 3
Leviticus 19:29 “Make not thy daughter a common strumpet, lest the land be defiled, and filled with wickedness.”	Adjusted: ““Ne læt þu þine dohtor beon myltestre, þe læs þin land sig mid mane gefylled” [Do not allow your daughter to be a harlot, lest your land fills itself with wickedness]. ¹²³	Anonymous 2

Table. 4.1 Anonymous translation and representation of sex work.

As seen in Table 4.1, one law that is relevant to sex work *is* present in the OE Heptateuch: Leviticus 19:29. The way this law is phrased in Latin implies that a parent (likely the father) may have incentive to have their daughters do sex work, and that these daughters have little say in the matter. Leviticus’s anonymous translator subtly reworded this law, changing the implications around the crime: one must not “let” their daughter be a sex worker. This phrasing allows for an alternative interpretation, in which hypothetical daughters are choosing to do sex work themselves. Women can be lecherous, wanting to be “harlots”, and their fathers must exert power over them if the need arises.

Leviticus 19:29’s translation points to a possible reason for why Deuteronomy 23:17-18 are skipped over: the Bible does not just say that Israelite women cannot be sex workers, but

¹²³ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 134.

also that no Israelite man can be a “whoremonger”.¹²⁴ In the OE translation of Leviticus, men’s involvement in sex work is diminished; in Deuteronomy, a law that implies that men sometimes force women into sex work is deleted. These changes would fall within a wider pattern of the OE Heptateuch, in which the patriarchs are presented as more virtuous than they are in the original text.¹²⁵

Good and Bad Sex Workers

In one instance, the presence of sex workers is emphasized to show the sinfulness of a particular people. Numbers 25:1-8, translated by Ælfric, tell that the Israelites “committed fornication with the daughters of Moab”, leading to their participation in heathen sacrifices. Only one of them visits a sex worker, and both she and her client are murdered by Phineas, who stabs them through the genitals, after which “the scourge ceased from the children of Israel”.¹²⁶ Originally, it is unclear whether all the Moabite women who commit fornication are sex workers, as it is only outright stated about one of them. In the OE Heptateuch, however, all the women involved become “harlots”: “And hig eodon þa to manega of þam folce to þam miltistum and wið hig hæmdon and to þam hæðengilde bugon” [And many of the people went to the harlots and had intercourse with them and bowed to idols].¹²⁷ In the original text, the cause of heathen worship was the fact that the Moabite women reverted the Israelites to their religion; in the translation, however, the Moabite women are not just women, but sex workers, and are inextricably linked with pagan rituals. Ælfric’s association between sex and ungodliness comes to the forefront.

Since he further emphasized sex workers’ sinfulness in Numbers, it may be surprising that Ælfric chose to translate Joshua 2-6 the way he did. In this story, Joshua sends two men to the Promised Land to act as spies, so they can conquer the city of Jericho. The men lodge with a sex worker named Rahab, but they are discovered by a man in service of the king of the city. The king sends a messenger to Rahab, who hides the Israelites lodging with her, claiming they were there before but have since left. She tells the men that she knows who they are and why they are there, and asks for mercy for her and her family in exchange for her protection, which the men agree to. They give her a red cord to hang in her window, so that they will know not to attack the house when the Israelites invade the city. Both parties adhere to the agreement, and Joshua instructs his army: “Let only Rahab, the harlot, live, with all that are with her in the

¹²⁴ Deuteronomy 23:17.

¹²⁵ Barnhouse, “Shaping the Hexateuch Text,” 92.

¹²⁶ Numbers 25:8.

¹²⁷ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 152.

house: for she hid the messengers whom we sent”.¹²⁸ The story thus prominently features a sex worker helping God’s chosen people live in the Promised Land, and she is characterized not just as resourceful and intelligent, but loyal as well.

It would have been easy for Ælfric to leave out the fact that Rahab was a sex worker, but he did not. He translates: “Hig ferdon þa and comon to anre miltistran huse, seo wæs Raab gehaten, and gereston hig þær” [they then went there and came to a harlot’s house, she was named Raab, and rested themselves there].¹²⁹ Rahab’s profession could easily have been omitted from the story without damaging the narrative; thus, Ælfric’s fidelity to the story is remarkable. Evidently, Ælfric found this aspect of Rahab’s character important enough to include in his translation.

Instance of sex work	OE Heptateuch
Numbers 25:1-8 (Daughters of Moab)	Adjusted
Joshua 2-6 (Rahab)	Retained
Judges 13 and 16:1 (Samson)	Omitted

Table 4.2 Ælfric’s translation and representation of sex work

Ælfric took another approach in his homily on Judges, in which he adapted the story of Samson and Delilah. This section differs from the rest of the OE Heptateuch, as it is a homily containing translations of the book of Judges rather than only a translation. Ælfric frequently summarized and adapted religious narratives in his homilies, and so he may have been less afraid to misrepresent the meaning of Bible in his adaptations.¹³⁰ Nevertheless, his homily can give an indication as to how he thought Samson and his story should be represented.

In the Vulgate, Samson is not only characterized by his strength, but also by his lust. Before he meets Delilah, Samson falls in love with another (unnamed) woman; later, he goes to Gaza and sleeps with a sex worker there.¹³¹ Ælfric left Samson’s escapades out of his narrative, focusing only on his relationship to Delilah. It is possible that he mainly removed these elements of the story to simplify it, since he often simplified the material he based his

¹²⁸ Joshua 6:17.

¹²⁹ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 177.

¹³⁰ Jonathan Wilcox, “A Reluctant Translator in Anglo-Saxon England: Ælfric and Maccabees,” *Enarratio* 2 (1993), 3.

¹³¹ Judges 14:2 and 16:1.

homilies on; at the same time, this does not change the fact that Samson's character has been altered and made to be less preoccupied with women.

Incest

Of all the questionable practices that appear in the Old Testament, incest is one of two that Ælfric decided to address in his preface to Genesis:

On anginne þisere worulde nam se broþer hys swuster to wife, and hwilon eac se fæder tymde be his agenre dehter... Gyf hwa wyle nu swa lybban æfter Cristes tocyme swa swa men leofodon ær Moises æ, oþþe under Moises æ, ne byð se man na cristen.

[In the beginning of this world the brother took his sister as a wife, and meanwhile also the father had a child by his own daughter... if someone now, after Christ's coming, would live like the men lived before Moses' time, or during Moses' time, that man is no Christian.]¹³²

Ælfric is referring to the relationship between Sarah and Abraham, who are half-siblings, and Lot, who is taken advantage of by his daughters in a drunken stupor. He worried that laymen would come to the conclusion that, since these instances of illicit sexuality are not punished in the Bible, incestuous relationships were permissible to Christians.

Ælfric only mentions the most extreme cases of incest in his preface, but marriage between cousins was also strictly forbidden. Aneta Pieniądz-Skrzypczak argues that in early Germanic societies, these kinds of unions were uncommon but socially accepted; Gregory the Great even permitted the Angles "marriage even if they were related by the third or fourth degree of kinship" to make their conversion go more smoothly.¹³³ However, matters had changed by Ælfric's time. One of Æthelred's law codes forbids most forms of incest: "it must never occur that a Christian man marries within six degrees of his own kin, that is, within the fourth generation".¹³⁴ It should be noted that this phrasing is similar to Ælfric's in his preface: a man's Christian identity was directly tied to his avoiding consanguinity.

¹³² *The Old English Heptateuch*, 3.

¹³³ Aneta Pieniądz-Skrzypczak, "Incest in Early Medieval Society," *Acta Poloniae Historicae* 99 (2009), 48.

¹³⁴ Lindy Brady, *The Origin Legends of Early Medieval Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 148.

If Ælfric was so concerned with biblical incest, how did he and his fellow translators approach instances of it? The answer to this question depends on what manuscript is seen as the most accurate to the original translation. In Chapter 2, it was discussed that one of the text's extant fragments, Cambridge University Library Ii. I. 33, was a more accurate translation than the complete texts when it came to representations of childbirth. Once again, the fragmented text is closer to the Vulgate, this time in relation to marriages within families (see Table 4.3).

Instance of incest	Cambridge Ii. I. 33	Full texts (Misc. 509 and B.iv)	Translator
Genesis 11:29 “the name of Nachor's wife, Melcha, the daughter of Aran, father of Melcha, and father of Jescha”	Retained	Adjusted: “Abrames wif hatte Sarai and Nachores wif Melcha” [Abram’s wife was named Sarai and Nachor’s wife was named Melcha]. ¹³⁵	Anonymous 1
Genesis 20:12 “she is truly my sister, the daughter of my father, and not the daughter of my mother, and I took her to wife.”	Retained	Retained	Ælfric
Genesis 24:4 “thou go to my own country and kindred, and take a wife from thence for my son Isaac”	Omitted	Adjusted: “ac far to þam lande þe ic of com and nim him þær wif” [also travel to the land that I came from and take a wife for him there]. ¹³⁶	Ælfric

¹³⁵ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 29.

¹³⁶ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 50.

Genesis 24:15 “Rebecca came out, the daughter of Bathuel, son of Melcha, wife to Nachor the brother of Abraham”	Adjusted: “þa com Rebecca, Bathueles dohter” [There came Rebecca, Bathuel’s daughter]. ¹³⁷	Omitted	Ælfric
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Table 4.3 Different translation choices (concerning incest) of Cambridge Ii. I. 33 and the full texts.

Some instances of incest are omitted from both versions of the text, but not consistently. In Genesis 11:29, Abraham’s brother Nachor marries his other brother Aran’s daughter Melcha: in the Cambridge fragment, the fact that Melcha is Nachor’s niece is mentioned, but in the full manuscripts, this fact is left out.¹³⁸ Isaac and Rebecca’s relationship does seem to have been censored in both manuscripts: the fact that they are cousins is de-emphasized by omitting both Bathuel’s family ties and the fact that Abraham asked his servant to bring him a wife of his own kin. If one were to discover that Isaac and Rebecca are related, they would have to know Latin.

Nevertheless, the full Heptateuch did not consistently erase incestuous relationships from its narrative. Esau’s marriage to his cousin Mahalath was omitted,¹³⁹ but Jacob’s marriages to Lia and Rachel remain incestuous in the translation. Rebecca tells Jacob to flee Esau by going to her brother Laban, and the reader is reminded of the familial relation in Genesis 29:

“Broþu, hwanon synd þe?”
Hig answeredon and cwædon: “Of Aran.”
þa cwæð he: “Cunne ge Laban, Nachores sunu?”

[“Brother, where are you from?”
They answered and said: “From Aran.”
Then he said: “Do you know Laban, Nachor’s son?”].¹⁴⁰

This exchange emphasizes that Aran, Nachor and Abraham are brothers, and thus that Lia and Rachel are Jacob’s cousins. Since the translators omitted some instances of incest and not others, a clear pattern does not emerge for them.

¹³⁷ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 51.

¹³⁸ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 28-29.

¹³⁹ Genesis 28:8 and *The Old English Heptateuch*, 56.

¹⁴⁰ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 57.

The most obvious example of an incestuous relationship in the Bible is the one between Lot and his daughters. Their relationship was altered in one of the most obvious changes that any of the translators made. In the Bible, two angels come to visit Lot in Sodom; however, their visit is interrupted by the city's men, who demand to have access to the visitors so that they may "know" them.¹⁴¹ To protect his guests, Lot offers the men of Sodom his daughters instead and states: "abuse you them as it shall please you, so that you do no evil to these men".¹⁴² Ælfric, rather than relating this exchange, replaced Lot's offer with a short rant about what is likely homosexuality.

Malcolm Godden argues that incest as it appears in the Bible, while taboo and forbidden, was a more acceptable sin to Ælfric than homosexuality was; this allowed him to describe it and even "pardon" it.¹⁴³ While it is true that Ælfric does not omit the incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughters, "pardon" may be an overstatement: if incest could be pardoned, Ælfric would not have mentioned it in his preface. As will be shown now, Ælfric unequivocally considered the sin of Sodom to be sex between men, not Lot's problematic relationship to his daughters.

Homosexuality

In the Vulgate, Genesis 19:4-11 describe how the men of Sodom demand to have access to Lot's guests, to which Lot replies that they can have his virgin daughters instead. The men of Sodom do not accept and attempt to force their way in, but the visitors, who are revealed to be angels, blind the men so they cannot find the door. This incident leads to the destruction of Sodom, and Lot and his family are forced to flee the city. Ælfric paints a somewhat different scenario: he leaves out the attack on Lot's house and his offer to have them abuse his daughters, and replaces these verses with an allusion to homosexuality:

Se leodscipe wæs swa bysmorfull þæt hig wolden fulllice ongean gecynd heora galnysse gefyllan, na mid wimmannum ac swa fulllice þæt us sceamað hyt openlice to secgenne, and þæt wæs heora hream þæt hig openlice heora fylþe gefremedon.

¹⁴¹ Genesis 19:5.

¹⁴² Genesis 19:8.

¹⁴³ Godden, "The Trouble with Sodom," 103.

[That nation was so shameful that they would foully against nature satisfy their lust, not with women, but so foully that we are ashamed to say it openly, and that was their "noise", that they openly practiced their filth].¹⁴⁴

Thus, not only is Lot's offering his daughters to be sexually abused absent from the translation, the violence of the men of Sodom is removed as well. To Ælfric, male-on-male sexuality is enough to warrant the destruction of an entire city.¹⁴⁵

Ælfric was almost certainly condemning homosexuality here, but it should be noted that he did not explicitly state the "abominable" actions of the inhabitants of Sodom; the reader is left to fill in the gaps. Alice Jorgensen calls Ælfric's vagueness concerning the Sodomites, coupled with expressions of disgust elicited by their actions, "rhetorical hygiene", as it allowed him not to touch on the subject while still discouraging it.¹⁴⁶

Ælfric's reluctance to define the sin of Sodom may have to do with his audience: in other texts aimed at the laity, he exhibited a similar "reluctance to be explicit about same-sex acts".¹⁴⁷ While the allusion to same-sex sexual activity may be obvious now, David Clark writes that the Anglo-Saxons may not have been as privy to the meaning of "against nature".¹⁴⁸ If this is the case, and most Anglo-Saxons would not have immediately thought of homosexuality but other forms of biblically forbidden sexuality (such as bestiality and masturbation), Ælfric may have left the allusion vague on purpose in order to shield the populace against thoughts concerning homosexuality.

Cristopher Monk disagrees that Ælfric's audience may not have known what Ælfric was alluding to: "incorporation of the overtly gendered 'not with women' would serve most readers as a pointer to the opposite: 'but with men'".¹⁴⁹ He argues that Ælfric thought that the sin of Sodom was not simply illicit sexuality in general, but specifically homosexuality, and that his allusion to it provides enough clues to its meaning.¹⁵⁰ Perhaps both Clark and Monk are both correct, and Ælfric was taking into account that his text would be widely dispersed. Ælfric's preface makes it clear that he knew lesser-learned men would be exposed to his translation, but

¹⁴⁴ Quoted in and translated by Godden, "The Trouble with Sodom," 102.

¹⁴⁵ Christopher Monk, *Sodom in the Anglo-Saxon Imagination* (self-pub., *Rounded Globe*, 2017), <https://roundedglobe.com/html/5cbebf8-b3ea-4bb9-b1b4-eaf4234099c3/en/Sodom%20in%20the%20Anglo-Saxon%20Imagination/#c1>, "Ælfric: Inference and Euphemism".

¹⁴⁶ Jorgensen, "Shame, Disgust," 163.

¹⁴⁷ David Clark, *Between Medieval Men: Male Friendship and Desire in Early Medieval English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 87.

¹⁴⁸ Clark, *Between Medieval Men*, 88.

¹⁴⁹ Monk, *Sodom in the Anglo-Saxon Imagination*, "Ælfric: Inference and Euphemism."

¹⁵⁰ Monk, *Sodom in the Anglo-Saxon Imagination*, "Ælfric: Inference and Euphemism."

that does not mean these men were his *only* audience. By vaguely alluding to non-heterosexual intercourse, Ælfric was both shielding the uninitiated and communicating his true meaning to those who were better informed.

Another translator of the Heptateuch seems to have shared the idea that homosexuality was so awful and taboo that it could not even be named in condemnation. Leviticus 18:22, which states “Thou shalt not lie with mankind as with womankind”, is absent from the Old English translation.¹⁵¹ The same is true for Leviticus 20:13, which states that men who have sex with men should be put to death.¹⁵² As such, the anonymous translator also practiced rhetorical hygiene: male-on-male sex could not even directly be forbidden, as that would necessitate speaking of its existence. If their intent was to keep the thought of homosexuality from the laity, a law forbidding it would only remind the populace of its existence. The OE translators would not have called it such, but they may have feared what is now called the Streisand effect: discouragement of undesirable behavior could encourage this behavior.

Multiple Women in Multiple Ways

Christian men were not permitted to have multiple wives; thus, the Bible’s representation of polygamy was problematic to Ælfric. Still, there seems to have been a type of polygyny that, to the translators, was even worse, and its censorship gives insight into the issues with Bible translation.

Polygamy

The other topic that Ælfric expressed concerns about in the preface to the OE Heptateuch is polygamy, which was also not permitted for Christians. It is therefore somewhat odd that Ælfric’s portions of the translation never mention polygamy: the closest he comes to tackling it is in his translation of Genesis 16, the story of Sarah, Abraham and Hagar. When it comes to actual polygamy, only the anonymous translators contributed.

While it may have been expected that the anonymous translators would censor instances of polygamy, this was not the case in practice.

¹⁵¹ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 134.

¹⁵² *The Old English Heptateuch*, 134.

Vulgate	OE Heptateuch	Translator
Genesis 4:19 “[Lamech] took two wives”	Retained	Anonymous 1
Genesis 26:34 “Esau being forty years old, married wives”	Retained	Anonymous 1
Genesis 36:2 “Esau took wives of the daughters of Chanaan”	Omitted	Anonymous 1
Genesis 36:6 “And Esau took his wives”	Retained	Anonymous 1
Genesis 37:2 “Joseph was with the sons of Bala and of Zelpha his father's wives”	Retained	Anonymous 1
Exodus 21:10 “And if he take another wife for him, he shall provide her a marriage, and raiment, neither shall he refuse the price of her chastity.”	Adjusted: “If he oðre him nymð, he sceal foresceawian þa mædene [gyfta and] reaf and hire mægdhades wurð, þæt synd twelf scillingas be twelf penigon” [If he takes another, he shall provide the maiden with gifts and raiment the price of her virginity, which is twelve shillings and twelve pennies].	Anonymous 2
Deuteronomy 17:17 “He shall not have many wives, that may allure his mind, nor immense sums of silver and gold.”	Omitted	Anonymous 3
Deuteronomy 21:15-17 If a man has two wives, and he hates one of them, and the firstborn son is of the hated wife, he cannot choose the son of his favorite as his firstborn.	Omitted	Anonymous 3

Table 4.4 Translation of polygamy in the OE Heptateuch.

As can be seen in Table 4.2, most mentions of polygamy were retained in the OE translation. Esau is mentioned to have multiple wives, and the translator diligently records their

and their father’s names in Genesis 26:34.¹⁵³ Even though it would have been irrelevant to the Anglo-Saxons, as they were not permitted to marry multiple women, the price of a maiden’s virginity that is to be paid is added to the text. Deuteronomy’s laws pertaining to polygamy were removed, but one of these laws states that a man shall not have many wives, a statement which could very well have been used by the translator to discourage wanting multiple partners. Ælfric expressed concern about biblical polygamy, but the other contributors chose to include it nonetheless.

One apparent exception is found in Genesis 36, but the translation is not as censorious as it may seem. Anonymous 1 translated 36:6 as follows: “Esau nam his wif and his suna and his dohtra ... on Chanaan lande” [Esau took his wife and his sons and daughters ... to the land of Chanaan].¹⁵⁴ On first glance, it seems that the translator omitted Esau’s polygamy in this instance. However, the grammatical construction of the sentence makes it difficult to ascertain whether the translator meant for Esau to have one or multiple wives in this passage. *Wif* is a strong neuter noun with a long stem, meaning that its singular accusative form is the same as its plural accusative form. “Esau nam his wif” could thus mean both “Esau took his wife” and “Esau took his *wives*”. The translator was not erasing Esau’s polygamy, but simply following correct grammar. The preface to the translation may have warned against the dangers of representing polygamy in a widely dispersed text, but that does not mean that the translators went so far as to remove its presence from the text.

Concubinage

Having multiple wives at once may not have been permitted by the medieval English Church, but it is present in the OE Heptateuch. Concubines, on the other hand, are almost completely absent from the translation (see Table 4.5).

Vulgate	OE Heptateuch	Translator
Genesis 16 The story of Sarah, Abraham and Hagar	Retained	Ælfric
Genesis 22:24 “And his concubine, named Roma”	Omitted	Anonymous 1
Genesis 25:6 “And to the children of the concubines he gave gifts”	Omitted	Anonymous 1

¹⁵³ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 54.

¹⁵⁴ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 63.

Genesis 35:22 “Ruben went, and slept with Bala the concubine of his father”	Omitted	Anonymous 1
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Table 4.5 Translation of concubinage in the OE Heptateuch.

As seen above, every time a concubine is mentioned in the Heptateuch, she has been omitted in the translation. In the Vulgate, a woman named Bala is initially only Jacob’s concubine, and later becomes his wife.¹⁵⁵ She is omitted from the text when she is mentioned as a concubine, but *is* mentioned once she is one of Jacob’s wives (see Table 4.4). The translators seem to have been much less willing to acknowledge the existence of concubinage than that of polygamy.

The only instance of concubinage in the OE Heptateuch appears in the story of Sarah, Abraham, and Sarah’s handmaiden Hagar, which was translated by Ælfric. In Genesis 16, Sarai, not yet named Sarah, is unable to conceive, and so she tells her husband Abram to sleep with her handmaid so that she can have children of her. Abram obliges, but Hagar becomes angry with Sarai when she discovers her pregnancy. Sarai abuses Hagar, upon which the servant runs away to the desert, where God tells her that her unborn son Ishmael will bring forth a great many tribes. In Chapter 17 of Genesis, God tells the newly renamed Abraham that he will receive another son, this time by his wife Sarah. She gives birth to Isaac in Chapter 21, after which Sarah demands that Hagar and Ishmael be cast out, as she does not want Ishmael to be heir alongside her son. Cast out, Hagar attempts to abandon her child under a tree, but is once more convinced by God to not despair, and gives water from a well to drink.

Ælfric’s text does not deviate greatly from the Bible, but does make one subtle change. First, Ælfric removed the insinuation that Hagar’s child would literally be Sarai’s: “Nim nu mine þinene to þinum bedde þæt ic huru underfo sum fostercild of hyre” [Now take my female servant to your bed so that I at least may receive a fosterchild of her].¹⁵⁶ “Filius” may have been translated as “fostercild” to prevent confusion, as the concept of a woman literally giving birth to another woman’s child may have raised a few eyebrows. On the whole, Ælfric translated these chapters very closely, and left very little out of the narrative.

Ælfric’s inclusion of Hagar may be seen as breaking the pattern of omitting concubinage, but it should be noted that there is a difference between Hagar and the Vulgate’s other concubines. Hagar is a central figure in Sarah and Abraham’s lives: Ælfric could not have removed this narrative without making an egregious, obvious change to the original text.

¹⁵⁵ Genesis 37:2.

¹⁵⁶ *The Old English Heptateuch*, 36.

Furthermore, while Hagar fulfills the role of a concubine, she is never explicitly stated to be one: she is Sarah's handmaiden, and only performs the role she's been given because Sarah cannot have children, not because Abraham decided to share his bed with another woman. When other patriarchs have concubines, they are consistently omitted.

The different ways in which the translators approached polygamy and concubinage should be further contextualized. Polygamy and concubinage are related concepts, but were legally distinct from each other in Anglo-Saxon England. Both familial structures involved a sexual relationship between one man and multiple women, but polygamy would have involved more legal protections for women and their children. Marriage was a formal contract in which a bride payment was made and the union became a legal entity; concubinage, on the other hand, involved no such formal exchange. Margaret Clunies Ross speculates that concubines are mostly absent in early Anglo-Saxon law codes because their relationships did not exist in a legal context.¹⁵⁷ Even without legal protections, however, the children of concubines were able to inherit in early Anglo-Saxon England if the father acknowledged the child and wished for them to receive an inheritance.¹⁵⁸

Later in the period, the Church sought to eradicate the practice of concubinage by making it illegal and branding the children of concubines as illegitimate.¹⁵⁹ Why the later Church wanted to end concubinage - and polygyny in general - is unclear, though it has been suggested that the promotion of monogamous and rejection of polygamous relationships may have been an attempt to prevent "tensions within houses and across social strata".¹⁶⁰ Despite the Church's condemnation of the practice, concubinage never entirely disappeared from Anglo-Saxon society.¹⁶¹

It is important to note that Ælfric's main concerns in the *Prefatio* are polygamy and incest: men marrying multiple wives or their own daughters and sisters.¹⁶² These practices, while unacceptable to the translators, were not consistently censored by them. Concubinage, on the other hand, seems to have troubled the translators more, since they removed most references to concubines, while retaining most examples of incest and polygamy.

It should be asked why the translators felt the need to erase the concubines of these men, but not their multiple wives. I propose the difference came down to social control. As mentioned

¹⁵⁷ Margaret Clunies Ross, "Concubinage in Anglo-Saxon England," *Past & Present* 108.1 (1985), 14.

¹⁵⁸ Ross, "Concubinage in Anglo-Saxon England," 15.

¹⁵⁹ Conor McCarthy, *Marriage in Medieval England* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2004), 130.

¹⁶⁰ McCarthy, *Marriage in Medieval England*, 129.

¹⁶¹ McCarthy, *Marriage in Medieval England*, 130.

¹⁶² *The Old English Heptateuch*, 3.

before, the Anglo-Saxon Church disallowed polygamy in the later Anglo-Saxon period. A man who argued that the Bible allowed polygamy could not simply change the laws and customs that he was subject to: he could have this opinion, but he would not suddenly be able to acquire a second, officially sanctioned marriage. A man who argued that the Bible allowed concubinage, however, would not have to jump through these hoops: if he wanted, he could seek out a woman willing to fulfill this role without needing official permission. Thus, the clergy would have had much more trouble controlling the sexual behavior between a man and a concubine. In fact, the clergy may have had more trouble controlling their own men: “a large number of the priests in early medieval England” had concubines.¹⁶³ In this way, concubinage may have been a much more pressing issue than polygamy, and the translators may have had more incentive to erase its existence than the practice of having multiple wives.

Conclusion

Unsurprisingly, the translators retained the Bible’s negative representations of sex work in the OE Heptateuch. Ælfric did not shy away from the fact that Rahab is a sex worker, but that does not take away from the fact that the translation as a whole is negative about sex work. This was to be expected, unlike the other findings presented in this chapter.

If Ælfric’s preface to Genesis is to be believed, biblical incest and polygamy were the greatest concerns of the translator, and of the anonymous contributors as well. I have demonstrated that this is not entirely the case: while the translators did find these topics to be an issue, they, more often than not, did not censor them in their translation. Incestuous relationships remain in the original text’s closest extant manuscript witness, and mentions of polygamy were generally retained in the translation as well.

The illicit sexualities that the translators had most issue with seem to be those that are not mentioned in the preface, such as concubinage and homosexuality. These topics differ somewhat: one is endorsed by the Vulgate, but the other is not. Still, neither of them dared to be mentioned by the translators. The translators’ omissions and adjustments highlight that the Preface was not all-encompassing in identifying what Ælfric and the other translators found most unacceptable: more objectionable material lurks beneath the surface.

¹⁶³ Jorgensen, “Shame, Disgust,” 152.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has set out to explore how the translators of the Old English Heptateuch represented biblical sexuality through their translation choices. As has been shown, the translators made many changes to the Vulgate text, but these changes were not always what one would expect based on the text's preface and Anglo-Saxon rules around sexuality.

First, Ælfric appears to have been much more preoccupied with edifying a male audience than a female one; this claim was based on analysis of Ælfric's other writing. Yet, it seems that those who decentered women in the narrative of the Bible were the anonymous translators. For example, Rachel's death in childbirth was made less visceral. The representation of Eve in childbirth is more difficult to discern, as it differs between manuscript copies, but in the full OE Heptateuch, Eve does not give birth as much as she is a vessel for Adam's progeny. Furthermore, Genesis 34, in which a violent sexual crime perpetrated against a woman is thoroughly punished, was entirely removed from the text; conversely, a false accusation of rape in Genesis 39 was allowed to remain. Through changes like these, the translators made the text subtly more misogynistic than before.

Furthermore, analysis of Ælfric's and the other contributors' text portions has shown that Ælfric and the anonymous translators differed in that Ælfric showed a higher level of accuracy to the original text. The anonymous contributors changed as many mentions of male *semen* they could find; Ælfric followed a similar pattern, but literally translated three (possibly four) instances of *semen* as *sæd*. Sex work was treated as forbidden by all translators, but Ælfric retained a positive representation of a sex worker in Joshua, when he could easily have omitted the woman's profession: this naturally does not mean that he approved of sex work, but it does show that in this instance, accurate Bible translation was more important than propriety. Ælfric's translation of biblical circumcision also differs from the other translators. He finds the practice important enough to leave in the text, while the anonymous contributors remove it. Thus, throughout the translation, Ælfric shows a higher level of fidelity to the original than the other contributors.

Nevertheless, Ælfric also made adjustments to the meaning of certain words and passages, just as the anonymous translators did. These changes were expected to concern polygamy and incest, since Ælfric expressed the dangers of these relationship types in his preface to the translation. However, several instances of incestuous and polygamous relationships were allowed to remain, even those that had not already been mentioned in the preface and thus would not have been missed by an unlearned person. Some incestuous

relationships were censored, like that of Isaac and Rebecca, but others could remain: Jacob, Lia and Rachel's relationship was not censored and, in one version, neither was Nachor and Melcha's. Polygamists are even more present: Lamech, Esau and Jacob each have multiple wives in the translation. Thus, representation of incest and polygamy were not as much of a concern as Ælfric's preface implied they were.

In fact, other kinds of unlicensed sexuality were the ones that were removed from the translation. One of these is homosexuality: Ælfric inserted its presence into the narrative of the destruction of Sodom, but kept the reference vague enough that only some readers, who were already familiar with the implications around the Sodomites, would understand. Laws that forbade male-on-male sexuality were omitted, so as not to remind unlearned laymen of its existence.

Concubinage received a similar treatment to homosexuality, in that almost every mention of it was removed in the translation. The one exception, the story of Sarah, Abraham and Hagar, was retained; its importance may have saved it from being omitted. Still, while Hagar mostly fits the description of a concubine, the text does not refer to her as one, and Abraham only sleeps with her on request of Sarah. Concubines who were chosen by the patriarchs, and who were not strictly necessary because their wives could also conceive, were all omitted from the OE Heptateuch. The topics that truly could not be broached in the translation could similarly not be addressed in the preface, giving medieval laymen the impression that the only forms of unwanted sexuality in the Bible were polygamy and incest. In the translators' eyes, other deviant types of sexuality could not be exposed to them.

The Old English Heptateuch is a complex translation, and its many omissions and adjustments require further study. Several scholars have stated that Ælfric and the other contributors did not significantly differ in their approach to translating the Bible:¹⁶⁴ this thesis has shown that this is not the case, and that identifiable differences between the translators' techniques do, in fact, exist. Further analysis of the text's translation choices, in areas not concerned with sexuality, would illuminate the various individuals who contributed to the translation.

The present work has shown that the OE Heptateuch presented various kinds of sexuality differently than the Latin Bible. The translators made a concerted effort to remove sexual themes and actions that could make men uncomfortably aware of injustices women had to face in sexual contexts. Sexual themes that could make men *too* comfortable, encouraging

¹⁶⁴ McMullen and Shields-Más, "Tamar, Widowhood," 588;

lust and deviant sexual practices, also had little place in the OE Heptateuch. Ultimately, the translators created a text that sought to control everyday people's sexual practices, in the same way the Church had been doing for centuries already.

APPENDIX – TRANSLATION OF *SEMEN* IN THE OE HEPTATEUCH

Vulgate	OE Heptateuch	Translator
Genesis 3:15 “thy seed and her seed”	<i>Ofspring... ofspring</i> [offspring]	Ælfric
Genesis 4:25 “God hath given me another seed.”	<i>sunu</i> [son]; <i>ofspring</i>	Anonymous 1
Genesis 9:9 “your seed after you”	<i>Ofspring</i>	Ælfric
Genesis 12:7 “To thy seed will I give this land”	<i>Ofspring</i>	Ælfric
Genesis 15:3 “But to me thou hast not given seed”	Omitted	Ælfric
Genesis 15:5 “so shall thy seed be”	<i>Ofspring</i>	Ælfric
Genesis 15:13 “thy seed shall be a stranger in a land not their own”	<i>Ofspring</i>	Ælfric
Genesis 15:18 “to thy seed will I give this land”.	<i>Ofspring</i>	Ælfric
Genesis 16:10 “He said: I will multiply your seed exceedingly”	<i>sæd</i> [seed]	Ælfric
Genesis 17:7 “between thy seed after thee in their generations... and to thy seed after thee”	<i>Ofspring... ofspring</i>	Ælfric
Genesis 17:8 “and to thy seed”	<i>Ofspring</i>	Ælfric
Genesis 17:9 “thy seed after thee in their generations”	<i>Ofspring</i>	Ælfric
Genesis 17:10 “your seed after you”	<i>Ofspring</i>	Ælfric
Genesis 17:19 “and with his seed after him”	<i>Ofspring</i>	Ælfric
Genesis 19:32 “that we may preserve seed of our father”	<i>Cynn</i> [kind]	Ælfric
Genesis 19:34 “that we may save seed of our father”	Omitted	Ælfric
Genesis 21:12 “for in Isaac shall thy seed be called”	<i>Sæd</i>	Ælfric
Genesis 21:13 “he is thy seed”	<i>Sæd</i>	Ælfric

Genesis 22:17 “I will multiply thy seed as the stars of heaven... thy seed shall possess the gates of their enemies”	<i>Ofspring... ofspring</i>	Ælfric
Genesis 22:18 “And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed”	<i>Sæd</i>	Ælfric
Genesis 24:7 “To thy seed will I give this land”	Omitted	Ælfric
Genesis 24:60 “may thy seed possess the gates of their enemies”	Omitted	Ælfric
Genesis 28:4 “thy seed after thee”	Omitted	Anonymous 1
Genesis 28:13 “I will give to thee and to thy seed”	<i>Ofspring</i>	Anonymous 1
Genesis 28:14 “And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth... in thee and thy seed all the tribes of the earth shall be blessed.”	<i>Ofspring... ofspring</i>	Anonymous 1
Genesis 32:12 “multiply my seed like the sand of the sea”	<i>Ofspring</i>	Anonymous 1
Genesis 35:12 “to thy seed after thee”	<i>Ofspring</i>	Anonymous 1
Genesis 38:8 “that thou mayst raise seed to thy brother”	Omitted	Anonymous 1
Genesis 38:9 “he spilled his seed upon the ground”	Omitted	Anonymous 1
Genesis 46:6 “he came into Egypt with all his seed”	<i>Cynn</i>	Anonymous 1
Genesis 48:4 “to thy seed after thee”	<i>Cynn</i>	Anonymous 1
Genesis 48:11 “God hath shewn me thy seed”	<i>Sunu</i>	Anonymous 1
Genesis 48:19 “his seed shall grow into nations”	<i>Cynn</i>	Anonymous 1
Exodus 28:43 “to his seed after him”	Omitted	Anonymous 2
Exodus 30:21 “to his seed by successions”	Omitted	Anonymous 2

Exodus 32:13 “I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven... I will give to your seed”.	<i>Cynn</i>	Anonymous 2
Exodus 33:1 “To thy seed I will give it”.	<i>Cynn</i>	Anonymous 2
Leviticus 12:2 “If a woman having received seed shall bear a man child”	Omitted	Anonymous 2
Leviticus 15:2 “The man that hath an issue of seed”	Omitted	Anonymous 2
Leviticus 15:10 “whatsoever has been under him that hath the issue of seed”	Omitted	Anonymous 2
Leviticus 15:15 “he may be cleansed of the issue of his seed”	Omitted	Anonymous 2
Leviticus 15:16 “The man from whom the seed of copulation goeth out”	Omitted	Anonymous 2
Leviticus 15:32 “This is the law of him that hath the issue of seed, and that is defiled by copulation”	Omitted	Anonymous 2
Leviticus 18:20 “nor be defiled with mingling of seed”	Omitted	Anonymous 2
Leviticus 18:21 “Thou shalt not give any of thy seed”	Omitted	Anonymous 2
Leviticus 21:17 “Whosoever of thy seed”	Omitted	Anonymous 2
Leviticus 21:21 “Whosoever of the seed of Aaron”	Omitted	Anonymous 2
Leviticus 22:4 “The man of the seed of Aaron, that is a leper, or that suffereth a running of the seed... and he whose seed goeth from him as in generation”	Omitted	Anonymous 2
Numbers 5:2 “whosoever hath an issue of seed”	Omitted	Anonymous 2
Numbers 14:24 “his seed shall possess it”	Omitted	Ælfric

Numbers 16:40 “any one that is not of the seed of Aaron	Omitted	Ælfric
Numbers 25:13 “both to him and his seed”	Omitted	Ælfric
Deuteronomy 1:8 “to their seed after them”	<i>Ofspring</i>	Anonymous 3
Deuteronomy 4:37 “their seed after them”	Omitted	Anonymous 3
Deuteronomy 10:15 “their seed after them”	Omitted	Anonymous 3
Deuteronomy 11:9 “to their seed”	Omitted	Anonymous 3
Deuteronomy 25:5 “raise up seed for his brother”	<i>Sæd</i>	Anonymous 3
Deuteronomy 28:46 “on thy seed for ever”	<i>Ofspring</i>	Anonymous 3
Deuteronomy 28:59 “the plagues of thy seed”	Omitted	Anonymous 3
Deuteronomy 30:6 “the heart of thy seed”	Omitted	Anonymous 3
Deuteronomy 30:19 “both thou and thy seed”	<i>Ofspring</i>	Anonymous 3
Deuteronomy 31:21 “out of the mouth of their seed”	<i>Ofspring</i>	Anonymous 3
Deuteronomy 34:4 “I will give it to thy seed”	<i>Ofspring</i>	Anonymous 3

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