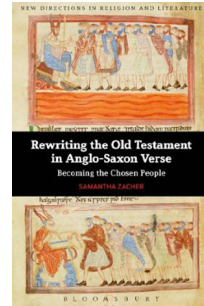# Book Review

Samantha Zacher.
Rewriting the Old Testament in Anglo-Saxon Verse: Becoming the Chosen People. New Directions in Religion and Literature. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013) ISBN 978-1-4411-8560-0, Pp. 189, $30, paperback.

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Old Testament imagery is deeply rooted in medieval Anglo-Saxon culture and history. The Anglo-Saxons in many ways saw themselves as imagined spiritual descendants of Israel, which was a fairly common medieval mentality. In this book, Zacher provides a detailed examination of just how medieval Old English Old Testament poems were written as theologico-political documents intended to reinforce this Anglo-Saxon spiritual and politically-motivated superimposition.

Zacher's introduction explains the goals and intentions of this book. She addresses three Old English, Old Testament poems: *Exodus*, *Daniel* and *Judith*, due to the breadth in artistic and cultural responses to these canonical and deuterocanonical books. Anglo-Saxon culture developed a politico-theological approach of "divine election" (also called *replacement theology*), in which they believed themselves (i.e. the new Israel), to be called by God to invade England (i.e. Canaan), because of England's immorality. This notion of the Anglo-Saxons becoming the chosen people, the New Israel, was generated by the Venerable Bede who inherited this theologico-political superimposition from theologians of Late Antiquity such as Eusebius, Orosius, Salvian and Paulinus of Nola. Jewish election and covenantal relationship with God, presented a model to be both imitated and transcended simultaneously by the Anglo-

Saxons. Each of the three chapters presents an example of Old Testament poetry through the lens of Anglo-Saxon political theology, which shall be described below.

In chapter one, Zacher examines the Anglo-Saxon poem *Exodus*, as an Anglo-Saxon theologico-political document which looks retrospectively on the chosen nation of Israel leaving Egypt and entering into the Promised Land, and portrays the German migration to Britain as its double. The *Exodus* poem employs Anglo-Saxon military language and war imagery to describe the tribes of Israel crossing the Red Sea, and in particular the tribes of Rueben and Judah. These two tribes are described as *flotan* and *saewicingas* ("sailors" and "sea Vikings" 331, 333) and all the Israelites are collectively called "spear troops" decorated with embossed shields and clad in iron (pp. 56-7) which are obvious superimpositions on the part of the Anglo-Saxon poet. Throughout this poem, the writer repeatedly refers to covenantal language, which was employed by Anglo-Saxon writer as a theologico-political literary tool, in order to superimpose the Anglo-Saxon race as God's new covenantal community.

In chapter two, Zacher reveals that the Old English Old Testament poem of *Daniel* was also used as theologico-political support for Anglo-Saxon "divine election." In the biblical book of *Daniel*, the large statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dream represents the succession of empires, ending eventually in a mysterious fifth empire

yet to be determined, but one that would be an indestructible and spiritual successor to the kingdom of Israel. The central them of the Daniel poem is that this *translatio imperii* ("translation of power") from ancient Babylon onward, eventuates in the translation electionis ("translation of election") of the poet's Christian Anglo-Saxon audience. The Anglo-Saxon poet of Exodus applies the concept of translatio electionis to the poem's audience, in order to declare that they as Anglo-Saxon Christians have replaced the Jews as the special covenantal people of God, with included some anti-Semitic annotations referring the Jews' disobedience and wickedness against God.

The third and final chapter is attributed to the Old English, Old Testament poem *Judith*. In this chapter, Zacher explores the development of Israelite animosity towards the enemies of God (i.e. the Assyrians in this poem) and associates this to the Anglo-Saxon's impression of their enemies. The Old English Anglo-Saxon poem *Judith*, serves as an object lesson for the concept of holy war (or Augustinian "just war"), that was certainly introduced from Anglo-Saxon writers through Augustinian theological influence. The poet rewrites and revises the biblical, and specifically Pentateuchal concept of holy war (Heb. *herem*) in order to make it coincide with patristic and medieval conceptions of Augustinian "just war" theory.

Zacher superbly illustrates the tremendous influence of theologico-political interpretation of Old Testament narratives upon Anglo-Saxon writing. This kind of reuse and revision of Old Testament narratives and deuterocanonical texts for theologico-political purposes was hardly unique to the medieval period, and has been sustained from Late Antiquity, through Colonial America. This type of interpretation creates significant sociological and anthropological

hermeneutical concerns. However, scholars will continue to contextualize these narratives for theologico-political purposes in order to contextualize the Old Testament.

Zacher skillfully builds upon the scholarship of, while simultaneously offering criticism on both contemporary medievalists such as Malcolm Godden and Harold Bloom, as well as political theologians Carl Schmitt and Oliver O'Donovan. Zacher postulates that these Anglo-Saxon Old Testament poems are "strong translations" (as defined by Bloom) because they "radically reframe, change, and embellish them in order to give expression to new ideas" (xv) rather than simply being translated reproductions. As for Godden, Zacher expounds on his positing that the Old Testament narratives have greater appeal to an Anglo-Saxon audience than their New Testament counterparts because of shared thematic elements with the Germanic hero-ethos. Zacher employs O'Donovan's *The Desire of Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* as a methodological guide, and Schmitt's theologico-political philosophy as another, finding relevant information as well as offering critique on Schmitt's theologico-political focus on National Socialism, employing his methodology upon medieval theologico-political writings instead.

Zacher provides an outstanding overview of the three Old English Old Testament poems: *Exodus*, *Daniel* and *Judith*, and their theologico-political impact on Anglo-Saxon cultural and religious development. Zacher's book *Rewriting the Old Testament in Anglo-Saxon Verse*, is an important development in, and vibrant examination of the study of political theology.