

**THE SAXON SAVIOR: THE GERMANIC
TRANSFORMATION OF THE GOSPEL IN
THE NINTH-CENTURY HELIAND**
(G. RONALD MURPHY)

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Immediately before the Ascension, the last command of Christ to the Apostles was to “make disciples of all nations.” Ever since, at least until very recently, proselytizing has been a core goal of all Christians. This work has often not been easy. Christianity is always counter-cultural, opposed to the inherent dubious tendencies of mankind. Moreover, the history narrated in the Gospels is embedded in the world of first-century Palestine, and that world is starkly alien to most cultures that have been the target of conversion. Such challenges have been met in various ways by Christian missionaries, and by Christianizing conquerors. The *Heliand*, a ninth-century “gospel harmony” used to persuade the pagan Saxons defeated by Charlemagne to accept Christianity, was one such way.

A gospel harmony is a book written combining, and synthesizing, the four canonical Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) into one account. The Christian tradition of creating such harmonies began with Tatian’s creation in the second century of the *Diatessaron*. Tatian’s book, very popular and used for centuries, omitted duplicative material and smoothed out the minor differences between the Gospels. This was not heterodoxy; Tatian did not add any significant text or modify the context, since his goal was to provide a useful document to Christian communities at a time when what was “canonical” was not yet fixed. No doubt the *Diatessaron* served to proselytize as well, though that was not its main purpose.

The *Heliand* is also a gospel harmony, one that is quite different in key ways from the *Diatessaron*. The author of the *Heliand* was probably a monk at Fulda, the monastery founded by Saint Boniface in 744. His purpose was, it appears, to persuade the restless and rebellious Saxons of the truth of the Good News, by writing a gospel that would resonate with them, in their own language, Old Saxon. The author’s problem was that the Gospels do not exactly exude a Germanic warrior ethos, which utterly pervaded the Saxons. He solved this problem by making his work an epic poem, deftly recasting scenes and events to depict Christ

as a Germanic war lord, *drohtin*, and the disciples as his *comitatus*, a loyal war band. Described this way, it sounds faintly ridiculous. But as this book relates, it was actually amazingly successful, and done without corrupting the original message of the Gospels.

This book, *The Saxon Savior*, is not a translation of the *Heliand*, but a gloss on it, which discusses key aspects and serves as an introduction. The author, G. Ronald Murphy, a Jesuit priest teaching at Georgetown University, separately wrote a translation of the *Heliand* (parts of which appear here). Reading the whole poem is for the truly dedicated—it's nearly 6,000 lines. For most people, this relatively short book provides all the information necessary to learn about the poem, which is called the *Heliand*, although it is not itself titled, because that is the word the poem uses for Christ—the Saxon word for "Savior." Murphy's goal is to discuss aspects of the *Heliand* in the context of their times—namely, the reign of Louis the Pious, successor to Charlemagne, who had forcibly converted the pagan Saxons to Christianity.

It is hard to imagine a culture more distant from first-century Palestine than North Germanic warrior cultures of the ninth century, although certainly today's decaying neo-pagan West is also very distant, if on a different axis. The Germans had gradually been converted to Christianity through the aggressive and fearless efforts of men like Boniface (who was ultimately martyred for his trouble), and as Charlemagne consolidated his empire, the last Germanic holdouts were the Saxons, against whom Charlemagne fought a long and brutal series of campaigns. By the time the *Heliand* was written, the Saxons had been subdued, at least on the surface, but they were not happy about it, and the decentralization of the Saxon nation made rebellion somewhere a constant possibility. The author of the *Heliand* thus not only wanted to persuade the Saxons of the truth and beauty of the story of Christ, but to show that submission to Christ was not dissimilar to submission to the Franks. Christ had submitted himself to his enemies, and in the same way both Christ and the Franks should be accepted. That is to say, there is a distinct but subtle element of propaganda in how the *Heliand* casts episodes in the life of Christ, given the political situation of the early ninth century. For example, the *Heliand* implies that the position of the Jews in first-century Palestine under Rome was similar to the position of the Saxons of the ninth century. Murphy contrasts this

sympathetic propaganda as an alternative, based in persuasion, to the more aggressive earlier approach of such as Boniface, or of Charlemagne, who massacred the Saxons and chopped down their sacred trees.

The *Heliand* is a largely original document, though it relies on earlier writings for its core. It is in part a synthesis of Latin and Old High German versions, or rescensions, of the *Diatessaron*, combined with material taken from commentaries such as those of Alcuin, along with descriptive interpolations meant to set and condition the scene, and interpretive interpolations meant to condition the listener. And the *Heliand* takes quite notable liberties with scene-setting, especially. Most landscapes are turned into scenes familiar to Saxon listeners, with cold water, large waves, and gravel beaches. Christ recruits young men for his retinue in and near the forest, not in the Judean desert, and they gladly follow Christ, the “generous mead giver.” Christ walks on water near where the disciples are struggling to cross the Sea of Galilee—in a Viking longboat. And so on, transposing the original Gospel scenes, in effect, to the North Sea.

It’s not just scene-setting, though. Some more substantive modifications are also made. In the Nativity, the baby Christ is wrapped not in swaddling clothes, but jewels, as befits a Saxon lord. Saint Joseph is a noble Saxon; the angels sing not to shepherds, but to the grooms tending his horses. And the famous line “there was no room for them at the inn” simply disappears—no doubt the author thought his Saxon audience would not swallow that the Lord of All would not be given a place to lay his head, in an honor culture obsessed with hospitality. Similarly, when Christ is baptized by John the Baptist, where the Bible (and the *Diatessaron*) merely say the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove was over Christ, the *Heliand* says “a magnificent dove . . . sat upon our Lord’s shoulder,” creating an echo of Odin with the ravens Nunin and Hugin always on his shoulders, whispering to him knowledge of all things. In the Beatitudes, where Christ emphasizes humility, a totally alien concept to the Saxons, the author does not shy away from Christ’s commands, but emphasizes Christ revealing secret knowledge in the same way as runes were said to grant hidden knowledge, but far better and more powerfully. And the injunction of the Lord’s Prayer to “give us this day our daily bread” is changed to “give us support each day.” Murphy points out that perhaps “the author’s listeners would have

thought it lazy to ask heaven for bread, so the expression was broadened to include more practical support, the support of a lord.”

The Saxon Savior emphasizes how the author of the *Heliand* manages to work into the Gospel the overriding Germanic theme of Fate, without undercutting the supremacy of the Christian God. In numerous spots, Fate is mentioned, but typically as a servant or emanation of God, ultimately operating by his choice and usually in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, not blindly or randomly, as the old Germanic view would have it. God wills that John the Baptist be born; Fate determines he will be a beautiful child. At the same time, it is always made clear that Christ dictates to Fate—thus showing he is, indeed, God, not subject to Fate as all men are.

The *Heliand* also elevates Peter as the crucial figure among the disciples. Peter is the disciple the most like a Saxon warrior, of course, culminating in his severing of the ear of Malchus, the high priest's servant, in the Garden of Gethsemane. The *Heliand* does not wholly rewrite Peter's role, but it pumps up some of his actions, including turning the ear-severing into a major incident where Peter squares off against “the first man of the enemy” and chops half his face off, only to be rebuked by Jesus, not only because “he who lives by the sword will die by the sword,” but because “we cannot by our deeds avert anything,” again adding an element of Fate, but Fate as dictated by the Father. Nor does the poem shy away from showing Peter deserting the Lord, a grave failing in Saxon culture—but one that happened often enough, as other epic poems show. The *Heliand* has an explanation, though—not only was it so fated, but also in this way Peter was prepared, by understanding human frailty and the importance of forgiveness, to be the leader of the new Church. By such devices does the *Heliand* seek to resonate with its audience and still convey the gospel truth.

Finally, the *Heliand* has to deal with the Crucifixion, a humiliating death not at all in keeping with Saxon concepts of glory. The Passion is therefore depicted as a type of battle, in which Christ suffers war-wounds. And “The death of Christ is brilliantly treated as an *escape* of a prisoner of war from his captors, and the resurrection as the return of a warrior leader to his own people.” Interestingly, this has much in common with the Eastern Orthodox view of Christ's death and resurrection, emphasizing not defeat but victory. In Orthodox icons, often

the inscription above Christ's head is not the biblically-accurate INRI, the acronym for "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews," but "The King of Glory." This evokes Christ's descent to Hades and his defeat of Satan, smashing the doors of Hades and releasing his people while flagellating the demons. No doubt the Saxons would have thought highly of that vision of Christ, which was already receding at this point in the West in favor of the concept of Christ as sacrificial victim.

Murphy's overarching claim for the *Heliand* is that it played a key role in reimagining what Christian discipleship meant, recasting it in soldierly terms, and that this recasting not only pacified the Saxons, but played a key role in later European history, "a founding element of the culture of Europe." As is well known, for most of its first thousand years, Christianity was largely pacifist, and only around the turn of the millennium, in Europe, did soldiering for Christ become a comprehensible, and then civilizational, concept. Although martial imagery appears a few places in the Gospel, the *Heliand* was the first complete re-imagining of the Gospel in terms compatible with a warrior culture, and Murphy suggests its effects were felt far beyond the land of the Saxons. In support of this, he notes how the *Heliand* was widespread in its day, although later forgotten and only published again in the nineteenth century. So Murphy's claim is plausible, though unprovable. In effect, this draws a causal line connecting the *Heliand* and the Crusades, and onward to a millennium of Western muscular Christianity.

Proselytizing is no longer a core Christian goal, at least not in this age—we will see about in the next, as this age crumbles to dust. Yes, some evangelical Protestants still go in for it, and Pentecostals, but mainline Protestants reject it. Catholics too—last year that servant of Antichrist, Pope Francis, who rejects the commands of Christ here as in most things, informed his flock that anyone who proselytizes "is not a disciple of Jesus." Why Francis rejects it is not clear, as with all of his grossly heretical pronouncements. Why mainline Protestants reject it, on the other hand, is clear. They correctly see conversion as historically tied to colonialism—that is, tied to the West's global improvement of primitive cultures, of which Christianity was a glorious pillar. Now, collapsing into a singularity of self-hatred, they reject proselytizing, along with actual Christianity itself. No matter—all such milksops will be gone soon. The vibrant, if quasi-Christian, Mormons till proselytize,

it is important to notice, and I predict the future of conversion efforts will be like the past, once we've scrubbed the stupidity of the modern age from off the globe. The *Heliand* itself will remain a curiosity, but if we survive, new ways of preaching the Gospel in new cultures will arise. Who knows, perhaps if mankind throws off the chains of stupid and manages to flourish, conquering Space, how preaching to asteroid miners or colonists of Jupiter's moons might be best done? Or, even how preaching to aliens might be done? A vigorous and confident religion finds ways to address these questions, learning lessons from its past, and we can hope that will be our future.