Medieval German Texts in Bilingual Editions • II

AVA'S NEW TESTAMENT NARRATIVES

"When the Old Law Passed Away"

Introduction, Translations, and Notes by James A. Rushing Jr.

MEDIEVAL GERMAN TEXTS IN BILINGUAL EDITIONS • II

AVA'S NEW TESTAMENT NARRATIVES
"When the Old Law Passed Away"

MEDIEVAL GERMAN TEXTS IN BILINGUAL EDITIONS

MEDIEVAL GERMAN TEXTS IN BILINGUAL EDITIONS • II

AVA'S NEW TESTAMENT NARRATIVES

"When the Old Law Passed Away"

Introduction, Translation, and Notes
by James A. Rushing, Jr.

Published for TEAMS
(The Consortium for the Teaching
of the Middle Ages)

MEDIEVAL INSTITUTE PUBLICATIONS
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
2003

The text of Ava published here is that of Friedrich Maurer, from his *Die religiosen Dichtungen des 11. und 12. Jahrhunderts*, and is used with kind permission of Max Niemeyer Verlag.

The Library of Congress has already cataloged the paperback as follows:

Ava, d. ca. 1127.
[Dichtungen der Frau Ava. English & German (Middle High German). Selections]
Ava's New Testament narratives : when the old law passed away / introduction, translation, and notes by James A. Rushing, Jr..
p. cm. -- (Medieval German texts in bilingual editions ; 2)
English and Middle High German on opposite pages.
ISBN1-58044-037-1 (alk. paper)
1. Bible. N.T.--History of Biblical events--Poetry. 2. Ava, d. ca. 1127--Translations into English. 4. Jesus Christ--Poetry. I. Rushing, James A., Jr. II. Title. III. Series.
PT1501.A9 D53 2003
813'.1--dc21
2002151011

ISBN 978-1-58044-037-0
eISBN 978-1-58044-501-6

Cover design by Linda K. Judy

To Samuel and Peter
whose arrivals so wonderfully delayed the project
near the beginning and the end

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Probably some time in the early twelfth century, no later than 1127, a woman named Ava[1] wrote her poem or poems on the lives of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ, and on the coming of the Antichrist and the Last Judgment. Ava is the first woman whose name we know who wrote in German. Hrotsvit von Gandersheim was a German woman who wrote before Ava, but she wrote in Latin. And if in some instance or the other before Ava, "anonymous was a woman" (to use Virginia Woolf's phrase), we know nothing about it. But Ava wrote long narrative poems in German, at a time when this was still quite unusual for any author, man or woman, and she names herself at the end of her poems, thus earning for herself the status of "first." Just as remarkable as the fact that she was a woman who wrote is the fact that she was a layperson who wrote. She may have been a good deal better educated than the typical layperson, but unlike the authors of the *Ezzolied* and the *Annolied* and probably almost everyone else writing in Germany in the early Middle Ages, she was not a cleric.

The state of research on Ava, despite substantial achievements, leaves a good deal to be desired. Much of what has been written about her follows the worthy traditions of the Old Philology and the Old Historicism, concerning itself with her text and her sources, and much of what has been written about her sources has been badly handicapped by modern prejudices about the ignorance of the medieval laity. No one seems to have approached the question of Ava's learning, sources, and audience with a very nuanced understanding of the relations among reading, listening, and memory, on the one hand; or Latin and vernacular, on the other, in the

[1] That she is traditionally referred to as "Frau Ava," seems, in the early twenty-first century, a bit patronizing; she does not call herself that, and we do not typically refer to the authors of *Iwein* and *Tristan* as "Herr Hartmann" and "Meister Gottfried."

twelfth century. And not enough attention has been paid to Ava's works themselves, as autonomous works of art and/or rhetoric rather than as products of some sort of mechanical engagement with "sources." For all the knowledge of the *Patrologia Latina* that has been brought to bear on Ava's poems, the scholarship provides frustratingly little sense of the theology behind the poems, of Ava's preacherly message, or of how she looks at the stories of John, Jesus, and the end of time. It certainly cannot be my purpose to overcome all the problems of Ava scholarship in this short introduction to her work, or even to report fully its achievements. All I can hope to do is establish some sort of baseline of what is known and thought about her and her oeuvre, and to point out some of the directions that future inquiry might take.

AVA INCLUSA?

The first source of biographical information about the writer of our poems is the epilogue to *The Last Judgment*, in which the author informs us that she is the mother of two sons, one of whom has died, that the sons assisted her in some way by telling her "this meaning," and that she would like us, her readers, to pray for her and her sons. Her name is Ava. That is all she tells us, but we can reconstruct a bit more of her identity with reasonable certainty.

Our author is probably the anchorite Ava ("Ava inclusa") who died on February 6 or 7, 1127, presumably having lived in Austria, since her death day appears in the records of Melk, Klosterneuburg, Zwettl, Garsten, and St. Lambrecht. To be sure, the identification is "ultimately unprovable" ("letztlich unbeweisbar") (Gutfleisch-Ziche 148), but it is highly probable. The linguistic evidence of Ava's works appears to support a date in the early twelfth century and to indicate a dialect appropriate for the Melk area, although it is impossible to be very precise about the date or to say with certainty that the Bavarian of the Vorau manuscript is Ava's dialect.[2] The usual ways of dating Middle High German secular poems by references to historical events and to other poems do not get us very far with Ava, since the only history she is interested in is the history of salvation, and although her work shimmers with allusions and references to the Bible, the liturgy, and a variety of Christian texts, it is generally not possible to be

[2] The language of the poems in the Vorau manuscript does generally reflect the language of the authors rather than a scribal dialect (Schneider 1:37). For more on Ava's language, see below (18–19).

very certain about precisely which text she is referring to or how directly she knew it, and suggested sources often predate Ava by so many centuries as to be completely irrelevant to the dating of Ava's works. On the other hand, some proposed sources do point to a date in the early twelfth century, although the whole question of Ava's use of learned sources remains controversial (see below [5–6]). In the end, we have on the one hand religious poems in a Middle Bavarian dialect of no later than the early twelfth century, written by a woman named Ava, and on the other hand, we have an *inclusa* named Ava, attested from the early twelfth century in the Middle Bavarian dialect area. It is extremely likely that the writer and the recluse are the same person, and, based on present knowledge, there is no good reason to question the identification.

What was an *inclusa*? The best modern word is probably "anchorite," but that word does not say very much to modern people—even, probably, to most students of the Middle Ages. An *inclusa* was someone who had enclosed herself in a cell, withdrawing from the world, to devote herself to a religious life. Unlike the hermits who withdrew to the wilderness, *inclusae* closed themselves up in cells located in or attached to churches, monasteries, and towns. They withdrew from the world so completely that the Mass for the Dead was often part of the ceremony of enclosure (Doerr 45–47), but they remained in contact with the world, "surrounded by the communities on whom they depended for support, side by side with those with whom they had formed a compact to sustain them in their chosen life of reclusion and prayer" (Warren 1). In Ava's day, more women than men became recluses (Doerr 30–31; Warren 19–22), and male recluses were more likely to be clerics or monks who had "graduated," so to speak, from the communal to the solitary life (Warren 22–23). Ava, with her two sons, had certainly not spent her life before her enclosure as a nun. Since the surviving son is still "striving amid life's troubles," he would appear to be an adult, and since the two sons together are said to have given Ava "this meaning," it would appear that the other one had also reached more or less adult years before dying. It seems likely, therefore, that Ava had reached at least her forties before she wrote her poems. If our author is Ava the anchorite, she must have withdrawn from the world after living a worldly life well into adulthood, perhaps after being widowed, or after the death of her son—though this is pure speculation.

The cells of anchorites were generally attached to a church, often a monastery church. A Bavarian rule for anchorites (of uncertain date, but perhaps from the twelfth century) describes a square cell twelve feet by twelve feet, with three windows, one opening on to the choir, through which the recluse can take communion, one through which the recluse receives

food, and one through which light enters the cell (Doerr 39).[3] Other documents and scattered archaeological evidence suggest similar cells, sometimes somewhat larger, sometimes smaller, sometimes with rooms for servants, sometimes arranged in groups so that several anchorites can share a garden (Doerr 37–42; Warren 29–35).

The anchorite had to be financially provided for. If the *inclusa* had property, she would transfer it all to the institution that was to support her; otherwise, the cell might be endowed by the recluse's family or by some wealthy or noble patron (Doerr 34–48; Warren 41–52). Most anchorites were themselves noble or relatively well-to-do (Doerr 34).[4] We may thus imagine our Ava, who makes rather sharp remarks about wealth and power in *The Last Judgment*, as having, herself, withdrawn from a life of some wealth and power to become a recluse.

The *inclusa* devoted her life to God. Much of the day was devoted to the monastic *opus dei*—the mass, the divine office, prayer, contemplation. In an era when ordinary laypeople took communion only occasionally, some anchorites did so every day, or at least on Sundays and feast days; they confessed at least as often (Doerr 52–54).[5] But part of the recluse's time was also devoted to work—the ninth-century rule of Grimlaicus requires the anchorite to work every day from terce to nones[6]—and many earned their living by weaving, spinning, embroidering, carving, etc., and in some cases by copying manuscripts. Some *inclusae* taught: several saints' lives record in particular the teaching of girls by female anchorites (Doerr 57).

If Ava the poet is *Ava inclusa*, then we can imagine fairly clearly, in a general way, what her life was like: a contemplative religious life, watching and listening daily to the mass and the divine offices, spending much of the rest of the day in private prayer—and working perhaps two or three hours a day on her poems.[7] What this image does not provide is any clear

---

[3] This is the Baumburg rule, published in 1627 from an apparently lost source, and cited by Doerr (39). The seventeenth-century editor dated the rule in the twelfth century, but Doerr assumes it to be "sicher älter" (5).

[4] Warren finds a wider range of social backgrounds in her English sources—wider than for nuns, who were exclusively aristocratic (25).

[5] The Lateran council of 1215 made communion obligatory only on Easter, apparently capping a centuries-long decline in the frequency of communion for most laypeople (Reynolds, "Mass," 195).

[6] Grimlaicus's *Regula solitariorum* is published in *PL* 103: 574–664; the admonition to work from terce to nones is ch. 40, col. 631.

[7] Compare Hintz (*Learning and Persuasion* 104–05) on the importance of the

knowledge of Ava's educational level or the sources of the knowledge reflected in her texts.

The education of female anchorites—mostly, like Ava, laywomen—appears to have varied tremendously. The three thirteenth-century English recluses for whom the *Ancrene Riwle* was written presumably could read English and at least some Latin, and the great St. Albans Psalter, with its mixture of Latin and French, belonged to the recluse Christina of Markyate around the time of Ava's writing (Talbot 22–26). The presence of books in the cells of female anchorites can be documented (Doerr 42), as can the participation of anchorite women in the copying of books (Doerr 52). But it does not appear possible to make any general statements or assumptions about the education of *inclusae*. At least one writer (Doerr 57) uses Ava as evidence that anchorites were sometimes highly educated—for our purposes a uselessly circular argument.

Ava's status as an anchorite thus provides, in itself, no clear evidence as to her degree of literacy. But what it does mean, quite clearly, is that Ava heard the liturgy—the mass and the hours—several times every day of the year. The liturgy included not only extensive readings from the Bible but also homilies and sermons. And this may be of direct relevance to the much-discussed question of Ava's sources.

AVA'S SOURCES

Over many decades, Ava scholars have tended to divide themselves into those who agree with Schacks (7) that the poet worked "sicher ohne direkte Kenntnis der lateinischen Quellen" ("certainly without direct knowledge of Latin sources") and those who agree with Kienast (part 1: 27) in ascribing to Ava a much higher level of learning and postulating an immense variety of Latin sources for the details of her works. Up to a point, the facts are actually pretty clear, and the two camps may both be right, in different ways.

Ava's primary source in *John* and *The Life of Jesus* is clearly the Bible itself, and above all the Gospels. Although, as is almost inevitable in any Christian narrative of the life of Jesus, she is influenced by some material that is not strictly biblical, she incorporates relatively little apocryphal and legendary material directly into her narrative. One has only to compare Priester Wernher's *Maria*, based closely on the *Pseudo-Matthew*, to see how relatively close Ava stays to the Gospel account of Jesus' birth, for example.[8]

---

active life, including teaching, as well as the contemplative life, for anchorites.

[8] Ava is clearly familiar with some of the apocryphal material that Wernher draws on so extensively, but she generally alludes to this material rather than making it a

On the other hand, Ava makes rather frequent reference to ideas that do not come from the Gospels but from patristic texts. For one among many possible examples, in relating how Jesus recruited his disciples Ava says, "He brought from Bethsaida / a true Israelite. / Now a *gramaticus* says / it was Bartholomew" (*Life of Jesus* 52.5–8). The passage as a whole clearly refers to Nathanael of John 1.45–51, who is the "true Israelite." But this Nathanael poses a problem for commentators, since he appears to be a disciple, but does not appear in the lists of disciples or apostles in the synoptic gospels. Thus he has sometimes been identified with the Bartholomew of Matt. 10.3, Mark 3.8, and Luke 6.14. Eduard Schröder ("Gelehrsamkeit" 172) argued that Ava's comment here reflected the very latest in scholarly thought on the Nathanael question; indeed, that her "gramaticus" could be identified as Rupert von Deutz, who argued for the identification in a commentary written not long before Ava wrote. However that may be, for the "Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit," *The Antichrist*, and *The Last Judgment*, Ava clearly does not rely primarily on the Bible. The "Seven Gifts" and the story of Antichrist, though they have biblical roots, are primarily creations of patristic and other writers. Interestingly, Ava, who follows the Gospels so closely for the lives of John and Jesus, could have followed the Apocalypse of John for the Last Judgment but does not, instead devoting much of the text to the non-biblical Fifteen Signs of the Last Judgment.

In sum, then, Ava clearly has extensive knowledge of the Gospels, but she also knows a good variety of material from the writings of the Church Fathers, exegetes and commentators.[9] The question is: how does she know these things?

---

major part of her narrative. She mentions, for example, the idea that the young Mary had taken a vow of chastity; she alludes to the notion that Joseph was not an ordinary husband but an old man provided by God to care for Mary. But she does not tell the full stories behind these things.

[9] One possible source that has received some discussion over the years is the Latin Easter Plays. Schröder was the first to point out that some of the Latin words and phrases in Ava's works, such as "Ingressus Pilatus" (*Life of Jesus* 141.1), "noli flere" (*Life of Jesus* 176), "Rabboni!" (*Life of Jesus* 176) could have come from Easter Plays (Schröder,"Osterfeier"; Thoran). The first problem here is that the earliest Latin Easter Play manuscripts are later than the presumed *terminus ante quem* for Ava's works, 1127, but Schröder and others have argued that Ava's references prove an earlier date for the Easter Plays. The other problem is that most if not all of the passages that could come from Easter Plays could equally well come from the liturgy, including "Ingressus Pilatus" and "Rabboni!" (Greinemann 101 and 115). The whole matter no doubt requires additional consideration.

AVA'S LEARNING

Ava's learning has been the subject of considerable discussion, but the discussion has taken place on essentially modern terms, or, to put it more precisely, in terms of a rather simple model that has traditionally shaped modern understanding of medieval literacy and illiteracy. It is a model that does little justice to either medieval or modern reality. The educated elite of the Middle Ages developed a terminology that reinforced their elite status. To them, everyone was either *litteratus*—capable of reading and writing in Latin—or *illitteratus*—completely illiterate and uneducated. Thomasin of Zirclaria, for example, opposes the "cleric" ("pfaffe") to the "peasant and the child" ("der gebûre und daz kint") (1103 and 1098). Medievalists, including those writing on Ava, have long thought in those terms as well, and often still do, although it has been clear for some time that the medieval situation was far more complex than the binary opposition suggests.

Ava, in particular, absolutely explodes the literate/illiterate dichotomy. She produces a long written work in German at a time when this is still a relatively rare feat, and it is a work that, although it may have been mostly received by listening, certainly reckons with readers.[10] She clearly knows Latin; she knows the Vulgate, or at least parts of it, intimately well, and she displays knowledge of a wide variety of apocryphal and patristic sources. But there are some details that suggest her knowledge of Latin was largely passive and aural, a quite remarkable thing from a modern perspective, but probably not unusual in the Middle Ages.[11] We forget too easily that medieval Latin culture must have had a significant oral component, that not all monks and monk-like people were equally literate, and that even in the monasteries, the centers of learning, a great deal of Latin was read aloud, spoken, and sung or chanted. We can imagine Ava, if she was indeed an anchorite, listening to Latin for a good part of her day. Perhaps, in terms of the "four skills" of language learning, Ava was highly proficient in

---

[10] As Green notes (158 and 374), Ava's request for prayers at the end of *The Last Judgment* assumes readers: "swer dize buoch lese . . . ." Green (103) also points out evidence for a listening reception, including the reference to inner and outer ears at the beginning of the "Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit" (*Life of Jesus* 210.9–10: "Now open your inner ears! / The outer ones shall hear it.")

[11] Examples: the seemingly incorrect *de* instead of *trans* in "de torrente Cedron" (*Life of Jesus* 132.4); the seemingly out of place "antiquis in temporibus," where "dierum antiquus" would make more sense (*Life of Jesus* 197.9). Both might be scribal errors, of course, or have other explanations.

listening, fairly good at reading, and not very good at all at speaking or writing Latin. She may have known very little grammar, and thus have been "uneducated" by the standards of the day, and yet understood Latin to a very high degree.

To be sure, we cannot entirely rule out the possibility that Ava was at least modestly educated in the *litteratus* sense and may have read some of her source texts on her own. If Ava was a noblewoman before her enclosure, she quite likely learned in her youth at least enough Latin to read the Psalter. It is not difficult to imagine that, in her recluse's cell, immersed in Latin almost throughout her day, she might have developed this rudimentary knowledge into a fair scholarly competence. We do know, as mentioned above, that some female anchorites had books in their cells, and we can imagine that the monks of Melk, or whatever monastery Ava was attached to, might have loaned her books from time to time. Against the common assumption that Ava, as a woman and a layperson, could not have read her own Latin sources, it is important to protest that she *might* have been able to do so.

On the other hand, she could also have acquired much, if not all, of her knowledge orally/aurally, primarily through her exposure to the liturgy.[12] As an anchorite living in a cell attached to a monastic church, Ava would probably have heard, every day, one mass and as many as eight divine offices.[13] She would have heard almost all of the relevant portions of the Bible read aloud during the course of the Church year, for the liturgy included extensive Bible readings, divided up and spread over the year in "pericopes." The liturgy also included homilies and sermons and readings from the fathers, and Ava would have almost certainly heard homilies and sermons by Augustine, Gregory the Great, and many other Church fathers. It is clear from the work of Greinemann and Schacks that Ava did follow the pericopes in writing her *John* and *Life of Jesus*. Ava's intense exposure to the liturgy, with its biblical and patristic readings, and also its hymns, sequences, and so forth, could have provided her an oral source for a great deal of the knowledge reflected in her poems.

In this connection we must also remember the importance of memory in medieval culture. Whether or not we go as far as Mary Carruthers, who argues that medieval culture is neither oral nor literate, but "memorative,"

---

[12] On the liturgy as Ava's primary source, see Greinemann, whose dissertation is perhaps the best monograph yet written on Ava.

[13] For a good overview of the liturgy of the divine offices, see Reynolds, "Divine Office."

that "medieval culture was fundamentally memorial, to the same profound degree that modern culture in the West is documentary" (8), it is clear that medieval people relied more heavily on memory in their dealings with texts than we do in our world full of printed documents and data storage technologies. Even for learned clerics, texts were not so much read and re-read in the modern sense as remembered—and they were remembered *ad res*, not *ad verbum*. That is, medieval quotation was not expected to be the quotation of words so much as the quotation of substance. In these ways, if Ava is less literate than a male cleric, this was not so much a handicap as it might seem today.

It is also important to remember that if Ava did read the Bible, the physical Bible of the twelfth century was a very different thing from the handy desk-sized Bible of today. If Ava possessed a biblical manuscript at all, it is most likely to have been a Psalter,[14] which was the basis for the Divine Office and was read or said in its entirety in the course of a week. The Psalter contained not only the Psalms, but also the "Canticles," a series of poetic passages that were to be sung at certain times during the liturgical week. These included the "Benedictus" (Luke 1.68–79), the "Magnificat" (Luke 1.46–55) and the "Nunc dimittis" (Luke 2.29–32). Thus it is no surprise that Ava writes "she [Mary] sang the Magnificat" (*Life of Jesus* 10.2) or "Simeon sang 'nunc dimittis'" (*Life of Jesus* 30.18), without feeling any need to quote these passages in full. If Ava had a Bible manuscript other than a Psalter, it might have been an evangelistary or pericope book, which arranged the Gospel texts in the order that they were read in the liturgy throughout the year. Evangelistaries often arranged the readings into three cycles, beginning with the Proper of Time (the movable feasts of the Christmas and Easter-Pentecost cycles) and keeping the Proper of Saints and the Common of Saints (the readings for the fixed feast days of the greater and lesser saints) separate.[15] The reading of such an evangelistary could have provided a reason for Ava having based her *John* and *Life of Jesus* almost entirely on pericopes from the Proper of Time. One last point must be made about the manuscript Bible of Ava's day. If Ava read an actual Bible, its text probably would have been accompanied by marginal and interlinear glosses similar to, though not identical with, what is now known as the Glossa Ordinaria. Some of Ava's extra-biblical knowledge could have come from such glosses.

Ava herself may be telling us something about her sources when she writes that her sons "sageten ir disen sin" ("told her this meaning") (*Last*

[14] For a brief description of Psalters, see Calkins (207–09).

[15] On evangelistaries, see Calkins (148–50).

Judgment 35.3). This has frequently been taken as meaning that Ava's sons, who are presumed to have been clerics, helped Ava in some substantial way with her work, explaining the theology or informing her about Latin sources.[16] At the extreme, they are regarded as virtual collaborators (de Boor, quoted in Greinemann 2–3). Our understanding of the passage could surely be improved by study of the use of the word *sin* by Ava and her contemporaries. For now, I can only point out that we do not know exactly what Ava means by the line. She might mean that they helped her with the details of her poem, though that seems unlikely. It seems more likely that the line means that her sons helped her in a general way to understand the theology. But it might not even mean that: it might mean that they helped her to become a better Christian, that they taught her the meaning that is contained in her works. Or, finally, the line might be a sort of acknowledgment analogous to lines like Wolfram's "lantgrâve von Düringen Herman / tet mir diz mære von im [i.e., Willehalm] bekant" (*Willehalm* 3,8–9)[17] or Chrétien de Troyes's comment that Marie de Champagne gave him "matiere et san" (*Le Chevalier de la Charrete* 26)—roughly "the material and the meaning"—for his Lancelot romance. No one takes these lines as meaning that Landgrave Hermann helped Wolfram write *Willehalm* or that Countess Marie helped Chrétien with the *Charrete*.

Finally, it has been suggested that Ava drew inspiration from the visual arts. This is persuasive in some instances—as, for example, the kiss of Mary and Elizabeth (*Life of Jesus* 9), which is not mentioned in Luke—but was common in the visual arts of Ava's day (Greinemann 55; Schacks's note to *Leben Jesu* 93 ff.). The much broader attempt by Gutfleisch-Zische to argue that the structure of Ava's *Life of Jesus* and her selection of which scenes from Jesus' life to include was modelled on contemporary picture cycles is not convincing.

AVA'S AUDIENCE

Talking about Ava's place in the oral-written, Latin-vernacular dichotomies of the twelfth century leads to the question of her audience. Unfortunately, we cannot say with certainty exactly who her audience was. Surely

[16] For example, Hintz ("Frau Ava (?–1127)" 40); Gutfleisch-Ziche (142–44). Gössmann (198) sees the sons as "Vermittler von Material und Deutung" but also regards Ava's mention of their role as something of a feminine modesty topos.

[17] "Landgrave Hermann of Thuringia made me aware of this story about him [Willehalm]."

it was composed of people who were interested in understanding the story of Christian salvation but did not know Latin well enough to comprehend in that language the things Ava was telling them. On the other hand, these people had to have known *some* Latin and to have been familiar enough with the Christmas and Easter stories and the liturgy that they would know what it meant when they heard or read things like "she [Mary] sang the *Magnificat*."[18] "Laybrothers" has been suggested (Stein), and perhaps that is likely: men living a monastic life without being fully monks, without being clerics, without being literate. Then again, "laybrothers" seems to be one of the default suggestions when the question of audience arises for medieval German religious texts, and it is usually made without any explanation, and perhaps with little understanding of what laybrothers actually were.[19] I see no compelling reason to assume that Ava's audience could not have been found among the secular laity.[20] The secular laity certainly may have been the audience for the Vorau manuscript. At least one scholar suggests that the codex was written for Ottokar IV of Steiermark (Polheim xviii).[21] Of course, Ava did not write for the Vorau manuscript, which was compiled at least a half century later in the process of what Schultz (7) calls "productive reception," but surely no one should consider her audience without considering the only extant manuscript in which her work is preserved. And that manuscript itself may serve as a reminder that the religious and lay, vernacular and Latin worlds were not hermetically sealed off from one another, but existed in constant, intimate contact and interaction. For not only do many of its German texts represent attempts to make Latinate, biblical materials into vernacular texts, it also ends with a lengthy text in Latin about secular matters, the *Gesta Friderici imperatoris* (*Deeds of the Emperor Frederick*) of Otto of Freising.[22]

---

[18] It may be, however, that the class of people who knew as much Latin as Ava uses would have been very large.

[19] On laybrothers, see Knowles (63–65 and 73–74); Dubois.

[20] See also Hintz (generally *Learning and Persuasion* 119; more concretely, 125, 127, where he shows how Ava targets a noble audience in *The Last Judgment*.)

[21] This is based on the theory that the German parts of the manuscript were written by Bernhard, Propst of Vorau, who is said to have been Ottokar's secretary; Schneider (37) finds the idea that Bernhard was the scribe plausible but unprovable.

[22] This last part may have been part of the codex from the beginning, or it may have been added in a rebinding as late as the fifteenth century (Schneider 37).

Ava and the Development of German Narrative Poetry

In writing a long poem (or group of poems) about the lives of John and Jesus and the end of time, Ava was doing something highly unusual and almost unprecedented. Not only had a comparably ambitious New Testament narrative not been attempted in German since Otfried, some 250 years earlier, but long narrative poems in German on any subject were rare in Ava's day, at least in writing. Students of medieval German literature who spend most of their time dealing with texts from the *Blütezeit* of "around 1200" may need to stop and remind themselves of all the texts that had not yet been written when Ava wrote: Lamprechts's *Alexanderlied*, *König Rother*, and *Salman und Morolf* were all at least twenty years away.

How does a provincial recluse conceive of the idea of creating one of the most ambitious narratives ever put on parchment in her language? In the present context, the question can only be explored in a highly tentative way. But explorations of this kind are essential to moving the discussion of Ava's relationship to her predecessors beyond the traditional hunt for sources, and for approaching a fuller appreciation of Ava's achievement.

What could Ava have known that would help her come to the idea of creating a long poetic narrative in German about the coming of grace to the world? She may well have known worldly oral narratives—heroic epic, if we want to call it that—of the type alluded to at the beginning of the *Annolied* and elsewhere. Living along the *Nibelungenstraße*, Ava may have heard oral predecessors of the *Nibelungenlied*.[23] On the other side of the oral-literate divide, Ava might have known and been inspired by the classical epic, meaning primarily the *Aeneid*. At least one passage strikes me as suggesting a knowledge either of Virgil or of Virgilian references among the writings of the Church fathers: that is the line where it is said of Jesus that he "temperôte die vrechen" ("humbled the proud") (*Life of Jesus* 86.12), which might have been inspired by the famous "debellare superbos" ("to subdue the proud in war") of *Aeneid* 6.853, or by its not insignificant afterlife in patristic literature.[24]

---

[23] Here and there, Ava seems to echo the language of heroic epic, even specifically of the Nibelungen tradition ("Nibelungisch": see Curschmann). Consider, for example, *John* 20.10–11: "er hiez si vil wol leren / wunders also vil"; *John* 22.1–2: "Johannes der gewære, / der here toufære."

[24] Augustine quotes the phrase very prominently in *The City of God* (bk. I, preface). A search of the *Patrologia Latina* database reveals at least 22 occurrences of the phrase in patristic writing before or contemporary with Ava.

If Ava was inspired by vernacular written models, the most obvious possibilities are the *Annolied*, the *Ezzolied*, and the *Wiener* or *Altdeutsche Genesis*.[25] Certainly the evidence of the dates,[26] the works, their dialects, and the manuscripts makes it possible that the *Ezzolied* and the *Genesis* could have been known in the area where Ava lived. We know less about the *Annolied*, since no manuscripts survive, but it is not implausible that Ava might have known it, since the author of the *Kaiserchronik* did. Moreover, there are some passages in which, as scholars have noted, Ava seems to be directly adopting language from the *Ezzolied*. For example, in *The Life of Jesus*, she writes "do fuor er zuo dem Jordane, / getoufet wart er dare" (41.5–6).[27] This may be a borrowing from the *Ezzolied* (Kienast, Maurer, Schacks): "duo chom er zuo Jordane, / getoufet wart er dare" (17.9–10).[28] The correspondence is not exact—"chom" vs. "vuor"—and the phrasing in question is hardly so striking that it could not have been thought of independently by two poets, but the parallel certainly suggests that Ava had the *Ezzolied* in her ear, so to speak, as she composed her poems. Kienast (part 1: 33) has identified a number of correspondences between Ava's *Antichrist* and the *Altdeutsche Genesis,* again strongly suggesting that Ava knew the earlier poem. It may well be, however, that the primary importance of the earlier German texts for Ava is not the occasional direct inspiration or borrowing, but a more general service as model and inspiration. Indeed, Ava's work fits into the niche left open by the earlier German "Bible epics," as they are sometimes called, so neatly that it is tempting to think Ava knew that she was doing what her predecessors had not done.

The *Ezzolied* sets out to tell the whole history of the world, focuses on Old Testament events, and though it does move on (in the Vorau version, at least) to tell of Christ, it is more typological than narrative. Ava is more narrative than typological. The *Annolied* has a salvific component, of course, and seems at the beginning and the end to be the story of Bishop Anno, but it is largely devoted to the secular history of the Roman / German empire. And the *Genesis*, of course, is focused on Old Testament history, on the

[25] See Schultz for facing page texts and translations of the *Annolied* and the *Ezzolied*.

[26] *Genesis* 1060–80 (Hennig col. 281). The earlier version of the *Ezzolied* was composed between 1057 and 65 (Schweikle col. 671; Schultz 2), the *Annolied* between 1077 and 1081 (Nellmann col. 367) or 1101 (Schultz 4).

[27] "he went to the Jordan, / and there he was baptized"

[28] "he came to the Jordan. / He was baptized there" (Schultz's translation).

world *ante legem*. Ava's work is not world history, it is not primarily typology, it is not devoted to the Old Testament period—it is the salvation history of the world *sub gratia*, told as one fairly unified story.

This matter of Ava's vernacular inspirations and influences cannot be explored fully here, but I would like to suggest one more aspect of our poet's relationship to her German predecessors: her work is more narrative—indeed, more epic—than any of them. To be sure, Ava's work contains lyric or hymnic moments, preacherly moments, the long digression on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, and certainly it contains typological and other explanations of the meaning of events. But above all it is narrative, it is epic. Less historical than the *Ezzolied* and the *Annolied*, less a direct Bible paraphrase than the *Genesis*, Ava narrates with a real epic sweep and nearly constant forward movement from the coming of John the Baptist through the life of Jesus to the reign of the Antichrist and the end of the world. The point can only be suggested here, but it might be that Ava is far more than the first German woman writer whose name we know—she is the first epicist to write in the German language.

THE INTERPRETATION OF AVA'S WORK

To approach an understanding of Ava's work as a text we can begin with the overall structure of the poems, and then consider the principles according to which Ava has chosen what to include, especially in *The Life of Jesus*. For practical purposes here, we may consider Ava's poems as one work, without worrying too much about how they ought to be listed in bibliographies.[29] Ava's work as a whole, then, from the coming of John the Baptist to the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven, has been identified by Kienast (part 1: 34) as focusing on the history of the Church, and by Greinemann as emphasizing the divinity of Christ (esp. 131). Certainly both interpretations work in their ways, if only because the life of Christ and the future of salvation can be read allegorically as the story of the Church. The underlying master narrative is the story of salvation, the *Heilsgeschichte*, and I would suggest that Ava's primary goal is to tell the story of the coming of grace and salvation to the fallen world. After all, *John* begins with a reference to the coming of the New Age, which is in turn a clear reference to one of the main medieval ways of thinking about the history of the world. This is the division of history into three parts: *ante legem*

[29] On the overall unity of Ava's oeuvre, see, with varying arguments, Hintz ("Frau Ava" 209; *Learning and Persuasion* 103); Kienast (part 1: 34); Greinemann (14–19).

(before the Law, i.e., from the Fall to Moses), *sub lege* (under the Law, i.e., from Moses to Jesus) and *sub gratia* (under grace, i.e., from the coming of Christ on to the end of time).

Looking specifically at *The Life of Jesus*, critics have wondered why Ava includes the moments she does and no others. As has been noted (e.g., by Greinemann 50; Kienast, part 1: 35), *The Life of Jesus* tells the story of Jesus' birth and passion, but includes none of his teaching and few of his miracles. A reason has been sought in Ava's presumed following of the pericope cycles of Christmas and Easter. Certainly it is true that of the 2268 lines of *The Life of Jesus*, not counting the "Seven Gifts," some 1593 involve the birth and passion of Christ, and much of the rest involves pericopes read during the liturgical cycles of Christmas and Easter. The miraculous birth, self-sacrificial death, and resurrection of Christ are the core of Ava's poem. Ava is not much concerned with what Jesus said or taught or with the miracles he performed; she does not present Jesus as a moral philosopher or a teacher. She is concerned with what Jesus *was*: the redeemer of the sinful world.

But Ava's *Life of Jesus* is not just birth, death, and resurrection. Not every moment narrated comes from the pericope cycles of Christmas and Easter, and, more important, not every reading from those cycles is incorporated into Ava's work. Ava does include some of Christ's miracles—the healing of a blind man at Jericho (*Life of Jesus* 63–65), the casting out of demons from the daughter of a Canaanite woman (*Life of Jesus* 70–72), the healing of a man born blind (*Life of Jesus* 91–101). What all these have in common is the utter faith of the petitioner, the apparent undeservingness of the petitioner (the disciples tell the blind man at Jericho to go away, even Jesus at first tells the Canaanite woman that he has not come for the gentiles), and the miraculous granting of God's grace to the faithful person. The man born blind was not blinded as a punishment for anything he had done, as Ava's Jesus tells us (91.9–10); instead, I believe we are meant to recognize, his blindness is part of his human nature in the fallen world, and his sight is restored by God's grace alone. And Ava includes the episode of the adulterous woman whom Jesus forgives, saying (a bit differently from John 18.7), "whoever had kept the commandments, / he should stone her—he and no one else" (*Life of Jesus* 111–14). She too has done nothing to deserve forgiveness—it is simply granted to her from God's grace.

This, God's forgiveness and redemption of the sinful world, is the central theme not only of *The Life of Jesus*, but of Ava's work as a whole. She begins with John, the predecessor of Christ. She devotes most of her longest poem to the life of the Redeemer. She continues with the explanation of what we have been given by God and of what we might call the psychology of salvation. She continues with the fear-inspiring stories of the

Antichrist and of the coming of the Last Judgment. To fully understand why this is included, I think we have to consider that the first of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit is fear (*Life of Jesus* 211).[30] Fear is the beginning of salvation; it leads to penance, humility, and a prayerful spirit. But Ava's depiction of the Last Judgment does not end with fear; it ends with hope and the joy of the blessed:

> The unsayable reward
> in the heavenly throne
> have God's heirs
> who want to strive for it.
> If we flee sin here,
> we can be there faster than the wind. (*Last Judgment* 31.7–12)

And this is Ava's core message: salvation is available for those who want it.

AVA IN THE MANUSCRIPTS

The works of Ava are preserved in two manuscripts. The older one (V) is the great compilation of early Middle High German texts known as the Vorau manuscript, after the monastery in Styria, where it is kept.[31] It was made in Vorau or Regensburg, in, roughly, the last quarter of the twelfth century (Schneider 37–40). The manuscript is probably best regarded as a collection of "historical" texts. It begins with the *Kaiserchronik*, the *Chronicle of the Emperors*, a long chronicle of the emperors of the Roman and later the German empires, from Caesar to the twelfth century. The rest of the texts are arranged in what was probably thought of as rough chronological order: the "Vorau Books of Moses," the *Praise of Solomon*, the *Story of Judith*, and then the *Vorau Alexander*, which is followed by Ava's works (not including *John*); then the *Ezzolied*. A variety of short religious texts are omitted in this listing, but the overall organization is clear: After the general historical work, the *Kaiserchronik*, the manuscript starts over at the beginning of time and proceeds through history to the end of time. One of the last German poems is the "Heavenly Jerusalem." But then the manuscript turns back to secular history: the last text in the manuscript is the Latin life of Frederick. The codex thus brings together quite a variety of texts dealing with secular history and the history of salvation.

---

[30] On the *ascensus* pattern, a movement from fear of God to wisdom, as a unifying principle in Ava's works, see Hintz ("Frau Ava"; *Learning and Persuasion*).

[31] The manuscript is Vorau, Stiftsbibliothek, cod. 276. See the facsimile edited by Polheim.