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AELFRIC'S SAINTS' LIVES AND THE PROBLEM OF MIRACLES

By M.R. GODDEN

In his homily for Ascension Day Ælfric states firmly that the age of physical, visible miracles has ended, and he goes on to draw a contrast between those older miracles, which affected only the body and were no necessary sign of virtue in the miracle-worker, and the superior spiritual transformations of the present, which affect the moral self:

The Lord said, "These signs will follow those who believe. In my name they will drive out devils; they will speak with new languages; they will drive away snakes; and although they drink poison, it will not harm them; they will set their hands on sick men, and it will be well with them".

These miracles were necessary at the beginning of Christianity because through these signs the heathen folk were turned to the faith. The man who plants trees or herbs waters them until they are firmly rooted, and when they are growing he stops the watering. Similarly, Almighty God showed his miracles to the heathen folk until they believed; after the faith spread over the whole world, the miracles ceased. But God's Church still daily performs spiritually the same miracles which the apostles performed physically. When the priest christens the child, he drives the devil out of the child . . . The spiritual miracles are greater than the physical ones were, because these miracles heal a person's soul, which is eternal, and the earlier signs healed the mortal body. The earlier miracles were performed by both good men and evil. Judas, who betrayed Christ, was evil, yet he had earlier performed miracles through God's name. . . . My brethren, do not love the miracles which can be common to the good and the evil, but love the signs which are exclusive to good men, that is, the signs of true love and piety . . . These signs are hidden and unperilous, and they receive the greater reward from God in as much as their reputation is less among men.¹

Ælfric's source was a homily by Gregory the Great² and much of what he has to say, including the imagery, is from there, but

the explicit assertion that visible miracles all belong to the past and have now ended (especially the sentence beginning "Similarly") is his own. Indeed, St Gregory's persistent use of the present tense with reference to visible, physical miracles ("the evil can do them too", *illa habere et mali possunt*) suggests that, despite the plant-imagery, he did not mean to imply that such miracles belong only to the past.

St Gregory's argument is also used by Bede, in his commentary on Mark xvi,³ but he too avoids committing himself to any statement that external miracles have ceased. Ælfric's firmer statements have more in common with St Augustine, who repeatedly asserted in his earlier writings that physical miracles no longer happened and denigrated them in favour of the present age of inner, spiritual miracles.⁴ But there is no evidence that Ælfric knew of this earlier scepticism, whereas he did know Augustine's later testimonies to a complete faith in contemporary miracles, after the saint had changed his views.

The difficulty which this passage by Ælfric presents for us is that stories of miracles and the lives and passions of saints form a substantial part of his literary work, and they include several references to miracles of present and recent time. In his Latin life of St Athelwold he records miracles from his own lifetime and refers to the saint elsewhere as one "who now works miracles through God".⁵ His piece on St Swithin describes healing and freeing miracles which occurred at Winchester during Ælfric's own time there and concludes with a reference to Dunstan and Athelwold and the good done by them "as the miracles which God performs through them testify".⁶ His life of St Audrey of Ely opens with a perhaps slightly defensive insistence that God could just as easily perform the miracle of preserving this saint's virginity through her three marriages as He could and did with saints of earlier times, "and the miracles which she often performs" show that she did indeed remain a virgin.⁷ In his life of St Andrew he remarks: "we have heard and also seen many miracles of God".⁸ The conclusion to the life of St Edmund stresses both the continuance of miracles and their reliability as a sign: "There are many saints among the English, who perform many miracles . . . Christ shows to men through His saints that He is Almighty God who causes such miracles, although the wretched Jews forsook him . . . No miracles are performed at their tombs, because they do not believe in Christ".⁹

The difference of views does not, as with St Augustine, reflect a subsequent change of heart. One of Ælfric's clearest statements of belief in external miracles, and reliance on them, comes in the homily on the Catholic Faith, which immediately precedes the Ascension Day homily in Ælfric's first collection and almost certainly belongs to the same time:

We have the faith which Christ himself taught to his apostles, and they to all mankind; and God has strengthened and established that faith with many miracles. First Christ through himself healed dumb

and deaf, lame and blind, mad and leprous, and raised the dead to life; afterwards he performed these same miracles through his apostles and other holy ones. Now too in our time, wherever holy ones lie buried, God performs many miracles, in order to strengthen the folk's belief with these miracles. God does not perform these miracles at the tomb of any Jew or other heretic, but at the tombs of true believers, those who believe in the Holy Trinity and in the true Unity of one divinity. (Thorpe I, p.292)

Ælfric revised and re-issued these homilies some ten or fifteen years later, without altering what he had to say about miracles. It must have been possible for him to articulate both views at the same time.

The wording of the passage quoted above from his homily on the Catholic Faith suggests a careful distinction: in the beginning God worked miracles through His own person; subsequently He performed them through the apostles and saints; in the present, He performs them at the tombs of saints (not, that is, through the living saint). It is in fact true that many of the recent or contemporary miracles which Ælfric elsewhere describes are post-mortem events. This is the case with all the miracles of Edmund and Swithin, for instance. It is also so with St Audrey, unless one counts her virginity as a miracle. Only two of the miracles which Ælfric describes in his life of St Athelwold occur after the saint's death, yet it is perhaps significant that the others are not, in the strict sense, performed or worked by the saint. Three of them are experienced by his mother before or soon after his birth; others involve the monastic community rather than the saint himself; only one is even a response to his prayer. They are all miracles performed by God as a testimony to the status and favour of Athelwold, not performed through him. Similarly, the recent miracles which Ælfric elsewhere reports as told to him by Athelwold are direct actions by God, not performed by a miracle-worker. It is miracles worked by men that Ælfric has particularly in mind when he insists in the Ascension Day homily that miracles have ceased. That particular kind of personal holy power is not to be expected of present-day clergy or, he perhaps means to suggest, to be trusted if it does appear. "Christ did not command us to work miracles like him - which we cannot do", he remarked in a later homily.¹⁰

Yet if the Ascension Day passage is the only one in which Ælfric explicitly states that miracles have ceased, and his views there may have been conditioned by the context, the other point, that physical miracles are of dubious value and origin, is quite widely voiced in Ælfric's work:

It is a greater miracle that Almighty God feeds the whole world every day than was the miracle that he filled five thousand people with five loaves at that time, but people marvelled at that, not because it was a greater miracle, but because it was uncommon. Who in the present gives fruit to our fields, and

multiplies the harvest from a few seeds, but Him who multiplied the five loaves? (Thorpe I, p.184)

It is a greater miracle that Christ wished to become man in this life, and redeem us through Himself, than were the miracles which he performed amongst men; and the invisible miracles by which he extinguished the hidden sins of our souls were better for us than the visible miracles by which were healed those who afterwards died.¹¹

The notion that external miracles could be worked by the wicked as well as the holy is supported by the example of Judas in the Ascension Day homily (the example is Ælfric's own). Further examples occur elsewhere in his work: Simon Magus engages in a miracle competition with Peter and Paul; St Bartholomew acknowledges that the devils who inhabit pagan idols do miracles of healing; Satan is said to have produced miraculous signs which look like God's; in the future, Antichrist will perform miracles that will make men think him God, while God's own servants will lack that power.¹² Ælfric does in fact pause several times to make the point that these miracles do not have the same origin: the fire from the sky produced by Satan and Antichrist does not come from Heaven, though it appears to; the diseases healed by devils and Antichrist are only those previously induced by them; the Egyptian magicians' ability to imitate the plagues sent by God is probably only exploiting the ordinary phenomena of natural history.¹³ But these distinctions are not visible to ordinary men, and it is safer, Ælfric argues, to distrust the physical miracles. Ælfric's essential ambivalence about miracle stories and saints' lives is well illustrated by piece xxi in his *Lives of Saints* collection: the legend of St Swithin, replete with dream-visitations by the dead saint and physical miracles, is interrupted by a warning against trusting in dreams, and followed without comment by a discussion of witchcraft and illusions produced by the devil.

Two questions in particular about Ælfric's saints' lives arise from these contradictions and uncertainties: what kind of authenticity would Ælfric have claimed for such legends, and what function did he think they performed? Problems about the relationship of history and hagiography have also been raised with reference to Bede, and resolved by appealing to distinctions of genre:

Much that Bede records is true; his main aim, however, was not historical accuracy but imaginative truth within the framework of a conventional literary form, the saint's life . . . One should beware of taking Bede too seriously in the preface to *Cuthbert* when he protests the trustworthiness of his material; he was writing, as he himself says, with unconscious irony, 'iuxta morem'. The references to miracles in his theological works bear out the view that in filling the Life of Cuthbert with wonders Bede was satisfying the demands of genre-writing rather than those of faith.¹⁴

Yet this cannot be used to explain Ælfric, for some of his firmest statements on the value and authenticity of miracle-stories occur in his homilies, like his expressions of doubt. The relation between hagiography and historical truth in Ælfric's work is in practice a subtle and delicate thing that deserves attention. Gregory of Tours and the Whitby monk who wrote the first life of St Gregory the Great could acknowledge that the miracles which they described may not have happened, at least to the saint in question,¹⁵ but Ælfric is a long way from admitting such a possibility. In the life of St Edmund he begins by explaining the transmission of the story from an eyewitness down through St Dunstan and Abbo; reproduces Abbo's detail of a hidden observer watching Edmund's last moments; and adds a chronological reference to the life of King Alfred, placing the events in historical time.¹⁶ The legends of St Andrew and of Simon and Jude are similarly traced back to eye-witnesses of their fate.¹⁷ More commonly, Ælfric mentions the nearly-contemporary authorities who first recorded the stories and are his sources: Gregory the Great for St Benedict, Bede for Cuthbert, Oswald and Audrey; Jerome for the discovery of the Cross and the life of St John; Augustine for the post-mortem miracles of Stephen; Ambrose for St Agnes.¹⁸ St Athelwold is cited as oral source for miracles associated with his predecessor, while his successor Ælfheah is cited for miracles of Athelwold himself.¹⁹ Ælfric prides himself on getting the historical details right. "Take note", he says in the preface to the *Lives of Saints* collection, "that I do not make the mistake of citing two emperors reigning at the same time".²⁰ He interpolates an explanation of the chronology into his account of the martyrdom of Saints Peter and Paul, and explains at length the chronological anomalies in the traditional account of the martyrdom of the innocents.²¹

All this could be no more than the story-teller's carapace of verisimilitude. More telling, perhaps, for Ælfric's belief in some kind of truth for these legends is his concern with distinguishing between true and false legends of the saints. He rejects the apocryphal legend of the Assumption of the Virgin in favour of Jerome's careful account of what could be known or surmised²² (in fact the account appears not to be by Jerome, but it went under his name in Ælfric's time). He rejects the Vision of St Paul as a "false story" on Augustine's authority²³ and gives instead the similar Vision of Fursey, authenticated by Bede. Again on St Augustine's authority, he repudiates an episode in the legend of St Thomas, as unbelievable, *ungeleaflic*. In telling the stories of John the Baptist and St George he notes in passing the existence of false stories about these two saints.²⁴ The ability to distinguish true and false, and to act on it, suggests something more than the "demands of genre writing". Whether the authenticity thus claimed or implied for Ælfric's narratives is that of historical fact is perhaps not quite so clear. False stories are, in general terms, those which fools or heretics (*gedwolmen*) write from their own invention or from dreams:

If I say any more about this feastday [the Assumption]
than I read in the holy books which were written at

God's dictation, I would be like the heretics who wrote many false narratives at their own dictation or from dreams; but the faithful teachers Augustine, Jerome, Gregory and many others overthrew them through their wisdom. Those heretical books still exist however, both in Latin and in English, and unwise men read them. It is enough for believers to read and speak what is true, and there are few people who can thoroughly penetrate all the holy books which were dictated by God's mouth or His spirit. Let everyone put aside the heretical lies which lead the unwary to ruin.²⁵

The criterion is authority rather than historicity. False stories come from the imagination of the unorthodox. True stories are inspired by God and authenticated by the same patristic figures whom Ælfric had earlier cited as guarantors for the ideas in his homiletic and exegetical writings: Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine, Gregory, Bede. "I will not feign such stories with lies, for the faithful fathers and holy teachers wrote them down in Latin", Ælfric says in the preface to the *Lives of Saints*.²⁶ The importance of known and written authority is underlined in his life of St Edmund, where he deliberately confines himself to the miracles reported by Abbo; he has heard of many other miracles in popular report (*folclicre spræce*), he says, but does not want to include them.²⁷ The point is not specifically that they are untrue or even doubtful. It is again authority, that of Augustine and Jerome, which he invokes when rejecting stories as false. This distinction between authorised stories and unauthorised fantasy may, in Ælfric's opinion, have coincided with the distinction between historical fact and fiction, but that aspect is not often raised. When Ælfric remarks that a story really (*soðlice*) happened, it is always with reference to a Biblical story which he is about to interpret allegorically; the force of the term is perhaps 'literally' rather than 'actually'.²⁸ We should perhaps recall that Sir Thomas Malory could similarly invoke the distinction between authorised truth and imaginative fantasy, to defend his own imaginative 'facts':

And somme Englysshe bookes maken mencyon that they wente never oute of Englonde after the deth of syr Launcelot - but that was but favour of makers! For the Frensshe book maketh mencyon - and is auctorysed - that syr Bors, syr Ector, syr Blamour and syr Bleoberis wente into the Holy Lande.²⁹

Two examples suggest that for Ælfric the question of true and false stories was more subjective than might at first appear. In his Second Series of homilies he apologised for his failure to include the life of St Thomas the Apostle:

I leave the passion of Thomas unwritten, because it was translated from Latin into English long ago, in verse. However, the wise Augustine said in an exposition

of his that one thing set down in that narrative was unbelievable, that is, about the cupbearer who struck the apostle on the ear, and about the dog who brought his hand back in. Augustine said about that: "Those who love revenge read this with great enthusiasm, but we are allowed to doubt that the apostle would have avenged his insult so cruelly". Because of this doubt I did not want to touch his passion. It is, however, all wholly believable, apart from the one thing that Augustine repudiates.

(CH II, p.298)

In the episode in question, St Thomas prophesies that the hand which has just struck him will before long be brought to him by a dog. The cupbearer leaves the feast, is killed by a lion and dismembered by dogs, one of which carries the cupbearer's hand back into the hall. Augustine discussed the episode in three of his works, his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount and two of his tracts against the Manichaeans.³⁰ The word 'exposition', *trahnung*, suggests the commentary as Ælfric's source, and this is confirmed by the Latin preface to his later life of St Thomas, in the *Lives of Saints*, where he quotes the relevant sentences from Augustine's commentary verbatim while reiterating his doubts.³¹ Yet Ælfric's account of Augustine's views is remarkably different from what the saint actually wrote. Augustine does not reject the single episode, indeed he is happy to draw a moral truth from it, but he does remark that it is permitted to doubt the work itself ("cui scripture licet nobis non credere") because it is not in the canon. It is clear from the context, and from his other references to the episode, that he meant the whole work. He nevertheless appealed to the legend because, as he says, it was accepted and admired by those (that is, the Manichaeans) who raged against the vengefulness of the Old Testament, even though this episode showed the same spirit of revenge. Augustine went on to argue that the incident was justifiable because vengeance was taken on the man's body that his soul might be saved. Ælfric, in contrast, argues that the incident itself is incredible, because of the unbelievable cruelty shown by the apostle, though the rest of the story is wholly believable (*full geleaflic*), and says it is "those who love revenge" who read the story with enthusiasm, not those who repudiate it. Perhaps this was indeed true of those who read the (lost) Anglo-Saxon poetic version of the life to which Ælfric refers, but it is clearly not what Augustine had said. Ælfric's words are so far from what Augustine wrote that one can only assume that he was relying on memory. Yet when he wrote the preface to his life of St Thomas, a few years later, he had clearly checked Augustine's commentary, or at least his notes from it, since he now quotes verbatim and avoids the error about the Manichaeans, but he still insists that Augustine had rejected the single incident of the cupbearer and then goes on to tell all the rest of the story:

I hesitated for a long time to translate into English the Passion of St Thomas the apostle, for various reasons, and especially because the great Augustine

rejects the account of the cupbearer whose hand was said to have been carried into the feast by a black dog. Augustine himself, contradicting this story, wrote in these words: "We are permitted to disbelieve this writing (*cui scripture*), because it is not in the catholic canon. It is nevertheless read and respected as wholly incorrupt and true by those who blindly and bitterly rage against the bodily punishments which occur in the Old Testament, altogether ignorant of the spirit and the difference of times in which they took place". Therefore I mean to pass over this and translate the other things which are included in his Passion, as the venerable lord Athelweard has insistently urged me. (Skeat xxxvi 1-12)

It is conceivable that Ælfric had seen no more than the brief extract from Augustine's commentary which he quotes, excerpted somewhere. His other borrowings from Augustine on the Sermon on the Mount are few and could virtually all have been found in Paul the Deacon's homiliary and taken from there.³² Just possibly, then, Ælfric had no way of knowing that Augustine's *scripture* referred to the whole legend and that Augustine thought the apostle's cruelty acceptable. Even so, Ælfric has clearly turned a bibliographical doubt (the work may not be authentic because it is not in the canon) into an ethical criterion for rejection (that episode is morally incredible and rejected, the rest is acceptable and credible). It looks suspiciously as if the citation of Augustine is a cover for a rather different mode of assessing legends and a very different conclusion.

Ælfric had in fact independent evidence against the legend of St Thomas. The Gelasian decree (a copy of which occurs in a collection of material closely associated with Ælfric³³) lists the Acts of Thomas among the apocryphal books which are not accepted in the catholic canon.³⁴ In the case of the Passion of St George, similarly excluded by the decree, Ælfric seems to have assumed that this referred to some other legend than the one he used:

Heretics wrote error (*gedwyld*) in their books about the holy man who is called George. I will now tell you what is true about him, so that their error does not secretly harm anyone. (Skeat xiv 1-4)

He may have done the same with St Thomas and with the legends of other saints (Peter, Andrew, Philip) excluded by the decree and used by him. But he can hardly have missed the implication that Augustine was questioning the whole legend of St Thomas, not just one incident.

The other example is Ælfric's life of St John the Evangelist in his First Series of homilies. Some details and ideas are drawn from homilies by Bede and Haymo but the main source is a *Passio* of St John purporting to be by one Mellitus and preserved in legends of Ælfric's time.³⁵ Ælfric says nothing about the source or authority of his account at this point, but in a later work, his

treatise *On the Old and New Testament*, he returns to the story, citing Jerome as authority and guarantor of its authenticity:

Jerome, the revered and wise writer, who translated our Bible from Greek and Hebrew books into Latin, wrote about John the holy evangelist, Christ's cousin, in the ecclesiastical book *Ecclesiastica Historia*, thus saying about him: "*Audi fabulam, non fabulam sed rem gestam de Iohanne apostolo, & cetera.* Hear this story, not as a false saying but a thing which happened, concerning John the apostle", and well worth remembering for all the faithful, which took place concerning him in the old days.
(Crawford, *Old English Heptateuch*, p.61, 1017-1025)

Elfric then goes on to recount briefly the apostle's persecution and exile under the Emperor Domitian, as described at length in his earlier life, before telling in detail, over the next 110 lines, a further episode from St John's life, involving a young man who became an outlaw but was reclaimed by the saint. This episode does indeed come from the *Ecclesiastical History* which went under the name of Jerome³⁶ (it is in fact a translation and continuation by Rufinus of the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius), and it is introduced there by the words which Elfric quotes, but the rest of the story, covering the persecution and exile, comes from the *Pseudo-Mellitus Vita* and from Bede, and is not to be found in the *Ecclesiastical History* at all. It is possible that Elfric meant only to claim 'Jerome' as source for the outlaw story and was simply summarising the rest as background, drawing on memory of the sources used for his earlier *Life*, but the effect of his wording is to extend 'Jerome's' statement of authenticity from the unmiraculous episode of the outlaw to the saint's miraculous escape from a vat of boiling oil.

Elfric was not in fact the first to mislead in this fashion. Jerome himself (the real Jerome), in his commentary on Matthew's gospel, had wrongly attributed the episode of St John's immersion in boiling oil to the *Ecclesiastical History*, as had Bede, while Haymo cited the *History* as source for another episode which it does not contain.³⁷ Elfric had read the texts by Bede and Haymo at least, but he had also read the *Ecclesiastical History* for himself and need not have been misled by them. Consciously or not, he claimed more authority for his story of St John than he knew to be justified, and his verbatim quotation of 'Jerome's' opening words shows that both authority and historical authenticity mattered to him. The particular reason in the case of St John is perhaps that doubt had been cast on his story by another work known to Elfric. Mary Clayton points out, in her recent study of the cult of the Virgin in Anglo-Saxon England,³⁸ that the Pseudo-Jerome epistle which Elfric used as source for his homily on the Assumption voices reservations over the legend of St John's fate as well as that of the Virgin's; Elfric notes and indeed exaggerates the doubtfulness of the legend of the Virgin but says nothing of the St John legend, which he had himself reproduced in his earlier homily. The

failure of 'Jerome' to mention this part of the St John legend in the *Ecclesiastical History* ought to have confirmed for Ælfric the doubts expressed by 'Jerome' in the epistle. The ethical value of the story, or the weight of tradition, apparently counted for more. It perhaps follows that when Ælfric did reject a legend as false, the criteria which he mentions, historical authenticity and patristic authority, are not the only ones in play.

Ælfric's treatment of the legends themselves shows a similar interplay of historical truth and ethical value. He will freely omit and re-arrange material to sharpen the moral structure, sometimes giving a different impression of what actually happened, especially when dealing with historical works which do not already show the requisite hagiographical pattern. Professor Cross has shown how Ælfric handles Bede's account of St Oswald in such a way as to leave the distinct impression that Oswald and Edwin were allies (not deadly enemies), leagued in defence of Christendom against the heathen forces led by Penda and Ceadwalla (whereas the latter was a Christian and paganism probably had little to do with the conflict with Penda).³⁹ Something similar happens with the account of Gregory the Great and Augustine's mission to England.⁴⁰ The evidence of weakness in Augustine, the need for renewed impetus and a second mission, disappears; the Pope's letter to Augustine, urging him not to abandon his mission in Gaul, becomes a general encouragement before the group of missionaries set out. Yet in neither case does Ælfric actually change the facts that he presents, or add new ones. He has a strong sense of fidelity to the *matière*, the inherited events, even though reinterpretation and reshaping are free.

When Ælfric published his first work, he announced as his guiding principle the distinction between true, orthodox doctrine, authenticated by the Fathers, and false ideas promulgated by fools or heretics too widely current in England.⁴¹ He probably always knew that matters were not as simple as that; he would want to depart from the views of his authorities on a number of issues. When it came to a question of saints' lives and miracle stories, matters were much more complicated. The rigorous scepticism about contemporary miracles voiced in the Ascension Day homily had to give way to a more believing spirit (which may have been an equally genuine part of himself), perhaps because the contemporary crises in England desperately called for a continuing belief in sanctity. The scholarly creed of distinguishing true and false came under pressure. Ælfric clearly wanted his saints' legends to be seen as historically authentic, or at least as in some vaguer sense authoritative, and perhaps wanted to see them in that light himself too. He still needed criteria for rejecting false teaching, and the case of the cupbearer episode in the *Life of St Thomas* shows that saints' lives presented just as much danger as the Old Testament stories whose perils he discusses in his preface to Genesis;⁴² vengeance was no doubt as big a problem as concubinage in tenth-century England, and Ælfric's statement that "those who love revenge" read the episode with enthusiasm may be no accidental misrepresentation of Augustine. The scholar is evident in the frequent references to contemporary witnesses, chronological details

and historical contexts, in the appeal to patristic authority and in the reliance on historical sources and fidelity to historical fact. Yet if Ælfric was to present stories of sanctity and the supernatural in any substance, he had to rely on many legends of dubious or anonymous origin and abandon his scholarly sensitivities. There were clearly some moments, at least, when he could not have wholly believed in the authenticity of the miracle-stories which he was narrating.

If physical miracles were inferior to spiritual ones, and untrustworthy as signs of holiness in the miracle-worker, what kind of purpose did Ælfric mean to serve when he wrote the stories of saints and miracles which largely make up his *Lives of Saints* collection? Dorothy Bethurum has argued that Ælfric's intention was "to tell the stories of saints to laymen"; his interest was in "effective story-telling" to provide pious equivalents to the secular narratives which the laity were used to.⁴³ Ælfric does rather frequently associate stories of saints and miracles with the *folc* as distinct from the educated. "We have expounded in this book", he says in the preface to his first series of homilies, "not only expositions of the Gospels but also the passions or lives of the saints, for the use of the uneducated people (*idiotarum*) of this nation".⁴⁴ In the Ascension Day homily, miracles are said to have been necessary to turn the *hæðene folc*, the heathen folk, to the faith, and in the homily on the Catholic Faith God performs miracles to strengthen *folces geleafan*, the faith of the folk.⁴⁵ The same terminology appears, in a more explicit context, in the Shrove Sunday homily on the healing of a blind man, where Ælfric contrasts the wonder of the literal event with the understanding of its symbolic significance:

The miracles which Christ worked revealed one thing through their power and signified another thing through their mystery. He worked the miracles literally (*sodlice*) by divine power, and with those miracles strengthened the faith of the folk (*bæs folces geleafan*); but there was something else hidden in those miracles, according to the spiritual sense.
(Thorpe I, p.154)

This contrast between mere wonder and understanding is developed in the Mid-Lent homily on the feeding of the five thousand already quoted, where wonder at miracles is associated by analogy with the illiterate:

Often someone sees beautiful letters written down, and praises the scribe and the letters without knowing what they mean. Someone who knows the function of the letters praises their beauty and reads the letters and understands what they mean. We look at a picture in one way, at letters in another. All that is necessary for a picture is that you should see it and praise it; it is not enough to look at letters, unless you also read them and understand the

meaning. It is the same with the miracle which God worked with the five loaves: it is not enough that we should marvel at the sign, or because of it praise God, unless we also understand the spiritual meaning.

(Thorpe I, p.186)

The distinction is important here because Biblical miracle-stories also carry an allegorical meaning, but Ælfric nowhere suggests that saints' legends and recent miracles will bear a sustained figurative interpretation; possibly, then, such stories offer no more than wonder for the *folc*. Certainly, as Dorothy Bethurum pointed out, Ælfric tended to pare down historical material and doctrinal debate in his saints' legends so as to concentrate on the narrative of events. Yet the disparaging tone in which he refers to mere wonder at miracle-stories should not be ignored. Ælfric wrote his saints' lives for bishops and monks and for highly educated laymen like Athelweard and Athelmær, not just (if at all) for the ordinary laity. For such readers, it was probably not enough to "marvel at the sign, or because of it praise God".

One important piece of evidence on the interests served by the *Lives of Saints* collection is the fragment *Wyrðwriteras*, written some years later. In this Ælfric sets out to justify the practice of kings sending their armies out under generals rather than leading them out themselves, and draws on both Old Testament and later story in support. Significantly, he cites briefly an Old Testament story told at more length in a *Lives of Saints* text, *De Oratione Moysi*, and refers back explicitly to a saint's legend from the same collection:

Constantine, the emperor who first turned to Christianity, had a general called Gallicanus, whom he often sent with a great expedition against the opposing nations who fought against the emperor, and he always reduced them to the emperor's will. This Gallicanus afterwards became so holy that he worked miracles and was martyred for Christ, as I wrote in English in a narrative once. (Pope xxii 51-8)

The reference is to *Lives of Saints* vii, an appendix to the story of St Agnes. Clearly the *Lives of Saints* were to be read, in part at least, as providing important political and ethical lessons for the present.

A passage in a late homily shows that Ælfric did see a close parallel between the times of the early Martyrs and the troubles of his own time with the Vikings:

So many men turn with the elect to the faith of Christ, in his Church, that some evil ones break out again, and lead their lives in error, as do the English people who turn to the Danes and mark themselves in the service of the devil, and do his works, to their own ruin, and betray their own people to death . . . So did also some Christians, once, at the

beginning of Christianity. When the holy martyrs were scornfully slaughtered with torments, for the faith of Christ, very many people showed their disloyalty and denied Christ and forsook him, so that they might live, but their life afterwards was worse than death.

(Pope xiv 128-46)

Ælfric's earliest writings, the *Catholic Homilies*, are remarkably free of reference to the current troubles. Even when expounding the Gospel text on war and civil strife Ælfric makes no mention of the present.⁴⁶ It is only the Latin preface to the Second Series, written after the series was completed, that mentions the attacks of the "pirates" which had hindered work on the homilies. When he was working on the *Lives of Saints* a few years later, civil strife and Viking raids clearly impinged on his thoughts much more. There is the nostalgic backward glance at the end of St Swithin, to the blessed times of King Edgar, when no *scip-here* was heard of, bishops were worthy and miracles were performed.⁴⁷ *De Oratione Moysi* ends with a passage linking (like Wulfstan's *Sermo ad Anglos*) contemporary dissension with the end of the world: "these are the last days of the world, and there is father against son, and brother against brother".⁴⁸ The *Forty Soldiers* ends with a long discursive section discussing apostasy, attempting to reconcile the successes of the heathen with belief in divine justice, and referring to the current troubles: "the heathens oppress and harry the christians, and with cruel deeds anger our Lord, but they will have their reward for this in the eternal punishments".⁴⁹ The *Exaltation of the Cross* notes the parallel with the present: "it came about because of evil, as it still very often does, that the heathen nations harried that land".⁵⁰ A relevance to contemporary troubles is strikingly evident in the non-hagiographical pieces which Ælfric included in his *Lives of Saints* collection, and may have prompted their selection: *Maccabees*, with its interest in warfare against the invading heathens attempting to impose their own faith; *Kings*, with its stories of the impious kings who fell and just prophets who warned of the dangers of idolatry; the *Prayer of Moses*, on warfare against unbelievers, the importance of invoking divine aid and God's punishment of unbelieving nations by destruction; the curious piece on Absalon and Achitophel, touching on lord-betrayers (*hlaford-swican*), false counsellors and corrupt judges; and *De Falsis Deis*, on the gods of the pagans, including the Danes.⁵¹

Ælfric's comment on Gallicanus not only uses him as an example of delegating military command but also makes the point that he was both a successful general and a man of sanctity. The point is of some relevance to the *Lives of Saints* since they were commissioned by Athelweard, a man of considerable piety and a staunch supporter of monasticism, but also an ealdorman responsible for the defence of the south-west against the Vikings. As Professor Cross has already pointed out,⁵² the *Lives of Saints* collection contains the most explicit statement of the Christian doctrine of the just war that is extant in Anglo-Saxon, and it does so with reference to the Vikings. In fact, quite a number of pieces in the collection have a clear reference to the issue of warfare and Christianity. Edmund

and Oswald are Anglo-Saxon kings confronted with heathen armies. Martin, Maurice and his companions, and the Forty Soldiers are all soldier-saints. *Maccabees* concludes with a long epilogue on the three orders of society, distinguishing between the *bellatores* whose role is to defend our cities and protect our land against the invading here and the *oratores* or clergy who are not to take up arms, or to be compelled to do so by the *bellatores*. As Professor Cross has shown, Ælfric and his contemporaries accepted the doctrine of the just war, but there was also some lingering sense of guilt incurred by those who participated in such a war. Some delicacy over the matter is suggested in Ælfric's handling of it. Oswald overcomes Ceadwalla as the champion of God and miracles take place at the cross which marks the site of victory, but Edmund is perhaps superior in following the example of Christ by throwing aside his weapons and allowing the Vikings to capture and murder him (though he does so only after it has been shown that warfare is impossible because his troops have been killed, and we are perhaps invited to suppose that Edmund's sacrifice more effectively defends his people by diverting the Viking assault upon himself). Gallicanus makes a point of remarking that he neither killed any of the opposing army after his conversion nor ordered any killing.⁵³

Other implications of some moment to contemporaries are evident in the saints' lives too. Indeed, it is noticeable that Ælfric's comments and extrapolations tend to relate less to the dogmatic matters of Christ, the Church, sin and salvation which occupy his homilies than to questions of ethics and moral doctrine. Sometimes the implications of narratives are dangerous. Ælfric's remarks on this in his preface to Genesis and his worries about the cupbearer episode in the legend of St Thomas have already been noted, but another incident in the same legend also prompts a warning:

The wife was allowed to leave her husband, then,
because he was a heathen and a cruel persecutor,
but the canons state and command that no wife is
to leave her husband as if out of piety unless they
both agree. (Skeat xxxvi 385-9)

More commonly, it is such matters as clerical chastity and the damnation of heathens and those who betray their lords that arise from the narratives, or the canonical rules against clerical involvement in judicial business. Some of the beliefs which Ælfric finds it necessary to refute suggest rather alarming pictures of intellectual and moral disarray among his contemporaries. "Sometimes", he remarks, "priests claim that Judas will not be condemned at the Last Judgement, but will be able to excuse himself, as if he committed that treachery from necessity".⁵⁴ He goes on to explain that good consequences proceeding from evil actions do not save the sinners from damnation, a point he had also felt it necessary to insist on in his piece on the Forty Soldiers. Similarly, his epilogue to the legend of St Alban begins with the rather surprising statement that the sufferings which dishonourable criminals and treacherous thieves receive as punishment for their plundering do not bring them heavenly rewards, and he goes on to add that lord-betrayers perish in the end, as the example of

Absalon and Achitophel demonstrates. It is difficult to imagine what circumstances prompted such statements but it looks as if the unsettled conditions of warfare and heathen pressure had created a climate of moral uncertainty in which appeals to necessity and sympathy-cults for those outside the law were rife.

Many of these comments and extrapolations spring exceedingly abruptly from the hagiographical narratives which are the main concern of the *Lives of Saints* collection, but their frequency suggests that there is even so a connection, of the kind made explicit in some of Ælfric's later comments. He clearly did see a similarity between the times of the early martyrs under persecution and the contemporary pressure, or at least temptation, to side with the Vikings, which he interpreted as abandoning the faith. He also saw both Old Testament history and the quasi-history embedded in saints' legends as providing parallels and precedents for the lay nobility and the clergy in the face of the troubles of his own time.

It is clear that miracle-stories presented Ælfric with a serious dilemma. The inherited legends were of doubtful authenticity, some of them proffered rather dangerous precedents for the present, and the necessary distinctions between miracles deriving from God and His elect and illusions emanating from the devil and his disciples were easily forgotten. On the other hand, miracles had once been necessary for the conversion of the heathen, as signs of God's power and the true faith, and perhaps still were, at least for the ordinary *folc*, in the face of heathen pressure. If Ælfric chose, despite his misgivings, to devote his energies for a time to the translation and composition of saints' legends, it was perhaps because they offered something more than mere wonder, something of value to the clerics and literate laity who also read them. The legends had much to say to a nation troubled by apostasy and enemy invasion. Ælfric's concern with authenticity is perhaps less an anxiety to validate the miraculous than an interest in relating hagiography to the real world of his own time.

NOTES

- 1 *The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church. The First Part, containing the Sermones Catholici or Homilies of Ælfric*, ed. B. Thorpe, 2 vols. (London, 1844-6) I, pp.304-6. (Translations are my own.)
- 2 PL 76.1215.
- 3 *In Marci Evengelium Expositio*, ed. D. Hurst, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 120 (Turnhout, 1960) p.645.
- 4 See F. van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, trans. B. Battershaw and G.R. Lamb (London, 1961) pp.539-57.
- 5 *Three Lives of English Saints*, ed. M. Winterbottom (Toronto, 1972); *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, ed. W.W. Skeat, EETS OS 76, 82, 94, 114 (London, 1881-1900; repr. as 2 vols., 1966) item xii line 66.
- 6 Skeat xxi 463.
- 7 Skeat xx 3-4.
- 8 Thorpe I, p.578.
- 9 Skeat xxxii 264-76.
- 10 *Angelsächsische Homilien und Heiligenleben*, ed. B. Assmann, Bibliothek der Angelsächsischen Prosa III (Kassel, 1885; repr. Darmstadt, 1964) item i line 253. A similar discounting of miracle-workers by St Bernard is cited by Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind* (London, 1982) p.177.
- 11 *Homilies of Ælfric: A Supplementary Collection*, ed. John C. Pope, EETS 259, 260 (London, 1967-8) item ii lines 98-104.
- 12 Thorpe I, pp.370-84; Thorpe I, p.454; Thorpe I, pp.4-6; Pope xviii 347ff.
- 13 Thorpe I, pp.4-6 and 454; Pope i 258.
- 14 J.F. Webb, *Lives of the Saints* (Harmondsworth, 1965) p.23ff. See also C.W. Jones, *Saints' Lives and Chronicles in Early England* (New York, 1947). A similar duality of views on miracles is noted in the work of Ordericus Vitalis by Benedicta Ward (op.cit. p.204).
- 15 Ward, p.210; Jones, p.118.
- 16 Skeat xxxii.
- 17 Thorpe I, p.598; *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies, Second Series: Text*, ed. M. Godden, EETS SS 5 (London, 1979) (hereafter cited as *CH II*) item xxxiii 275ff.
- 18 *CH II* xi 326; *CH II* x 3-6; Skeat xxvi 272; Skeat xx 24; *CH II* xviii 3-5; "On the Old and New Testament" lines 1017-25 (in *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch . . .*, ed. S.J. Crawford, EETS OS 160 (London, 1922, repr. 1969) p.61); *CH II* ii 1-3; Skeat vii 1-5.

- 19 Skeat xii 65-8; Winterbottom p.29.
- 20 Skeat pp.2-4.
- 21 Thorpe I, p.374 and p.80.
- 22 Thorpe I, pp.436-8; *CH II* xxix 1-4, 119-33.
- 23 *CH II* xx 14-18. Cf. Augustine, PL 35.1885. Ælfric's source is the anonymous *Vita Fursei*, but the account of the saint in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* would have given authority to the legend.
- 24 Thorpe I, p.486; Skeat xiv 1-4.
- 25 *CH II* xxix 119-31. Cf. the similar discussion at the end of Skeat xv.
- 26 Skeat p.6.
- 27 Skeat xxxii 247-9.
- 28 Cf. *CH II* xxx 231-4.
- 29 *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. E. Vinaver, 3 vols. (2nd edn., Oxford, 1967) p.1260. As Vinaver notes, the French book says nothing about the knights leaving England.
- 30 "De Sermone Domini in Monte", PL 34.1263; "Contra Adimantum Manichaei discipulum", PL 42.158; "Contra Faustum Manichaeum", PL 42.452.
- 31 See below p.90.
- 32 The part of "De Sermone Domini" used as source for homily xxxvi in Ælfric's First Series was available as an excerpt in Paul the Deacon's homiliary (see C.L. Smetana, "Ælfric and the early medieval homiliary", *Traditio* 15 (1959) p.194). Pope cites the "De Sermone Domini" as source for his homily xv, where the appropriate part is again present in Paul the Deacon's homiliary, and also suggests a possible influence on a short passage in homily xxx.
- 33 See E.M. Raynes, "MS Boulogne-sur-Mer 63 and Ælfric", *Medium Aevum* 26 (1957) pp.65-73.
- 34 Ed. E. von Dobschütz, *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Altchristlichen Literatur* 38 (1912).
- 35 See P.H. Zettel, "Saints' Lives in Old English: Latin Manuscripts and Vernacular Accounts: Ælfric", *Peritia* 1 (1982) pp.17-37.
- 36 Ed. T. Mommsen, III, 23, 6ff., in *Eusebius Werke; II Die Kirchengeschichte*, ed. E. Schwartz (Leipzig, 1903).
- 37 See Jerome, PL 26.149; Bede, *Homilia* I, 9, 126, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL 122 (Turnhout, 1955); Haymo, PL 118.73.
- 38 Mary Clayton, "The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England, with

- Special Reference to the Vernacular Texts", D.Phil. thesis (Oxford University, 1983) pp.345-6.
- 39 J.E. Cross, "Oswald and Byrhtnoth", *English Studies* 46 (1965) pp.93-109.
- 40 CH II ix. On the sources, see my article "The Sources of Ælfric's Homily on St Gregory", *Anglia* 86 (1968) pp.79-88.
- 41 Thorpe I, pp.1-2.
- 42 "Ælfric's Preface to Genesis", lines 12-23, in Crawford, *Old English Heptateuch*, pp.76-7. Christ's words on loving one's enemies, at Matthew v 43ff., which prompted St Augustine's defence of vengeance in the Old Testament and in the legend of St Thomas, are used by Ælfric in support of his argument against the Old Testament law of revenge (CH II xii 443ff.). Cf. also, on vengeance, CH II xxxiii 52ff., and Thorpe I, p.522.
- 43 D. Bethurum, "The Form of Ælfric's *Lives of Saints*", *Studies in Philology* 29 (1932) pp.515-33.
- 44 Thorpe I, p.1.
- 45 See above, pp.84-5.
- 46 Cf. especially CH II xxxvii 27-40. Similarly, the references to contemporary apostasy and alliance with the Vikings seen in Pope xiv are quite absent from Ælfric's earlier discussion of the same Gospel passage (CH II xvi 160-72).
- 47 Skeat xxi 443-63.
- 48 Skeat xiii 294-7.
- 49 Skeat xi 279-364.
- 50 Skeat xxvii 20-1.
- 51 The piece on Absalon and Achitophel is an appendage to Skeat xix; "De Falsis Deis" is not in Skeat's edition (it is edited by Pope as item xxi in his edition) but seems to have formed part of the collection originally.
- 52 "The Ethic of War in Old English", in *England before the Conquest: Studies presented to Dorothy Whitelock*, ed. Peter Clemoes and Kathleen Hughes (Cambridge, 1971) pp.269-82, esp. pp.272-3. The text in question is Skeat xxv 705-17.
- 53 Skeat vii 365.
- 54 Skeat xxvii 157-61.