

Ælfric of Cerne: A Literary Giant

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I. ÆLFRIC AS BIBLICAL TRANSLATOR AND HOMILIST

[1] Priests must explain the Gospel in English:

Se massepreost sceal secgan Sunnandagum and mæssedagum þæs godspelles angyt on Englisc þam folce. And be þam Pater Nostre and be þam Credan eac, swa he oftost mage, þam mannum to onbryrdnyse, þæt hi cunnon geleafan and heora Cristendom gehealdan. Warnige se lareow wið þæt, þe se witega cwæð: *Canes muti non possunt latrare*, ‘þa dumban hundas ne magon beorcan.’ We sceolon beorcan and bodigan þam læwedum, þe læs hy for larlyste losian sceoldan. Crist cwæð on his Godspelle, be unsnoterum lareowum: *Cecus si ceco ducatum prestat, ambo in foueam cadunt*, ‘Gif se blinda mann bið þæs oðres blindan latteow, þonne befeallað hy begen on sumne blindne seað.’ Blind bið se lareow, gif git he þa boclare ne cann and beswicð þa læwedan mid his larleaste.

(Ælfric’s Letter for Bishop Wulfsgige, ed. Fehr, 14, 64)

[The masspriest must explain the meaning of the gospel on Sundays and massdays in English to the people. And also the Pater Noster and the Creed, as often as he can, to inspire the people, so that they might know how to believe and to keep their Christian faith. The teacher warns against that, as the prophet said: *Canes muti non possunt latrare*, ‘the dumb hounds cannot bark.’ We must bark and preach to the unlearned, lest they should be lost for lack of instruction. Christ said in his gospel, concerning unwise teachers: *Cecus si ceco ducatum prestat, ambo in foueam cadunt*, ‘If the blind lead the blind, then they will both fall into a hidden ditch’. The teacher is blind, if he does not know book-learning and deceives the unlearned with his lack of instruction.]

[2] If everyone else is doing it wrong ...

Þa bearn me on mode—ic truwiged ðurh Godes gife—þæt ic ðas boc of Ledenum gereorde to Engliscra spræce awende, na þurh gebylde mycelre lare, ac forðan ðe ic geseah and gehyrde mycel gedwyld on manegum Engliscum bocum, ðe ungelærede menn ðurh heora bilewitnyse to micclum wisdomes tealdon, and me ofhreow þæt hi ne cuðon ne næfdon ða godspellican lare on heora gewritum, buton ðam mannum anum ðe þæt Leden cuðon, and buton þam bocum ðe Ælfred cyning snoterlice awende of Ledene on Englisc, ða synd to hæbbene.

For ðisum antimbre ic gedyrstlæhte, on Gode truwende, þæt ic ðas gesetnyse undergann, and eac forðam ðe menn behofiað godre lare, swiðost on þisum timan þe is geendung þyssere worulde, and beoð fela frecednyssa on mancynne ærðan þe se ende become.

[Then it came to my mind—I trust through God’s grace—that I should translate this book from the Latin language into English speech, not from the presumption of great learning, but because I saw and heard *great error* in many English books, which unlearned people in their simplicity have taken for great wisdom, and I regretted that they did not know or did not have the gospel teaching among their writings, except only for those who knew Latin, and except for those books which King Alfred wisely translated from Latin to English, which are available.

For this reason, I presumed, trusting in God, to undertake this task, and also because people need good instruction, especially at this time which is the ending of this world, and there will be many perils among humanity before the end comes [...].] (Emphasis added).

(Ælfric’s Old English Preface to *Catholic Homilies*, I, Liuzza, pp. 6–7).

[3] Ælfric's exegetical (interpretive) style:

“Maria wæs beweddod Iosepe ðam rihtwisan” (Mt. 1.18–19). Hwi wolde God beon acenned of beweddodan mædene? For micclum gesceade, and eac for neode. Þæt Iudeisce folc heold Godes æ on þam timan; seo æ tæhte, þæt man sceolde ælcne wimman þe cild hæfde butan rihtre æwe stænan. Nu ðonne, gif Maria unbeweddod wære and cild hæfde, þonne wolde þæt Iudeisce folc, æfter Godes æ, mid stanum hi oftorfian. Ða wæs heo, ðurh Godes foresceawunge, þam rihtwisan were beweddod, and gehwa wende þæt he ðæs cildes fæder wære, ac he næs.

[“Mary was betrothed to the righteous Joseph” (Mt. 1.18–19). Why would God be born of a betrothed virgin? For a great reason, and also of necessity. The Jewish people held God’s law at that time; the law directed that any woman who had a child out of lawful wedlock should be stoned. Now, therefore, if Mary had been unmarried and had a child, the Jewish people, according to God’s law, would have killed her with stones. And so she was, by God’s providence, betrothed to that righteous man, and everyone thought that he was the child’s father, but he was not.]

(Ælfric, *Old English Catholic Homilies*, ed. and trans. Liuzza, I.13, pp. 236–37; biblical citations supplied).

[4] A perilous task:

Ælfric munuc gret Æðelwærd ealdormann eadmodlice. Þu bæde me leof þæt ic sceolde ðe awendan of Lydene on Englisc þa boc Genesis. Ða þuhte me *hefigtime* þe to tiþiene þæs, and þu cwæde þa þæt ic ne þorfte na mare awendan þære bec, buton to Isaace, Abrahames suna, for þam þe sum oðer man þe hæfde awend fram Isaace þa boc oþ ende.

Nu þincð me, leof, þæt *þæt weorc is swiðe pleolic me oððe ænigum men to underbeginne*, for þan þe ic ondræde gif sum dysig man ðas boc ræt, oððe rædan gehyrþ, þæ he wille wenan þæ he mote lybban nu on þære niwan æ swa swa þa ealdan fæderas leofodon, þa on þære tide ær þan þe seo ealde æ gesett wære, oþþe swa swa men leofodon under Moyses æ.

(Ælfric’s *Preface to Genesis*, Marsden, ed., *Heptateuch*, I, p. 3, ll. 2–13)

[Ælfric the monk humbly greets Ealdorman Æthelweard. You bade me, dear sir, that I should turn the book of Genesis for you from Latin into English. Then it seemed *difficult* to me to grant you that, and you then said that I need not translate more of the book except as far as Isaac, the son of Abraham, because some other person had translated the book for you from Isaac until the end.

Now it seems to me, dear sir, that *that work is very perilous for me or any man to undertake*, because I fear, if some foolish person reads this book or hears it read, that he will think that he may live now in the New Law just as the patriarchs lived then in that time before the Old Law was appointed, or just as men lived under the law of Moses.] (Emphases added).

[5] Translating the Book of Genesis word-for-word:

^{1.1} In principio, creavit Deus caelum et terram. ^{1.2} Terra autem erat inanis et vacua, et tenebrae super faciem abyssi, et spiritus Dei ferebatur super aquas. ^{1.3} Dixitque Deus, “Fiat lux.” Et facta est lux.
(Vulgate Bible)

On anginne gesceop God heofenan and eorþan. ^{1.2} Seo eorðe soþlice wæs ydel and æmtig and þeostru wæron ofer þære niwelnisse brandnisse, and Godes gast wæs geferod ofer wateru. ^{1.3} God cwæþ þa: ‘Geweorðe leoht’, and leoht wearþ geworht.
(Ælfric’s *Genesis*, Marsden, ed., *Heptateuch*, I, p. 8).

[In the beginning God created heaven and earth. And the earth was void and empty, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God moved over the waters. God said then: ‘Be light made. And light was made.’]

[6] The Siege of London (Anglo-Saxon Chronicle MS C, AD 994):

Her on ðissum geare com Anlaf ond Swegen to Lundenbyrig on Natiuitas Sancte Marię mid .iiii. ond hundnigontigum scypum, ond hi ða on þa buruh fæstlice feohtende wæron ond eac hi mid fyre ontendon woldan, ac hi þær geferdon maran hearm 7 yfel þonne hi æfre wendon þæt him ænig buruhwaru gedon sceolde. Ac seo halige Godes modor on þam dæge hire mildheortnesse þære buruhware gecydde, ond hi ahredde wið heora feondum. ond hi þanone ferdon ond worhton þæt mæste yfel ðe æfre æni here gedon meahte on bænette ond heregunge 7 on manslyhtum ægþer ge be ðam særiman ond on Eastseaxum ond on Kentlande ond on Suðseaxum ond on Hamtunscire.

[In this year came Olave and Sweyn to London, on the nativity of St Mary, with ninety-four ships; and they then continued fighting stoutly against the city, and would also have set fire to it. But they there sustained more harm and evil than they ever supposed that any citizens would be able to do unto them. But the holy mother of God, on that day, showed her mercy to the citizens and delivered them from their foes. And they then went from there, and wrought the utmost evil that ever any army could do, by burning, and plundering, and by man-killing, both by the sea-coast and among the East-Saxons, and in the land of Kent, and in Sussex, and in Hampshire.]

[7] Lessons from the Book of Joshua (alliteration in bold, expansions in italics):

Joshua 10.5 Ða comon þa **fif** cynegas mid **firde** to Gabaon and **wicodon** þær onemn, woldon hi oferwinnan.

[Then the five kings came with armies to Gabaon and camped alongside there, they wished to conquer it.]

^{10.6} Iosue þa **ferde** mid his **fyrde** þiderweard,
[Joshua then went with his army there,]

^{10.7} Ða sende seo **buruhwaru** sona to Iosue, **biddende** þæt he come and *þa burh geheolde*.
[Then the citizens sent quickly to Joshua, asking that he should come and *rule the city*.]

^{10.8} and Drihten *him* cwæð to: ‘Ne ondræd þu *þe nan þing*: on þine **handa** ic **hi** betæce. Ne mæg **heora nan** þe wiðstandan.’

[And the Lord said *to him*: ‘Do not fear anything *for yourself*: I have delivered them into your hands. None of them will be able to withstand you.’]

^{10.9} Iosue him þa feng on *mid gefeohte*,
[Joshua came upon them *with battle*]

^{10.10} and Drihten hig aflymde *fram Israhela bearnum*. Hi feollon þa swiðe on þam fleame ofslagene.
[and the Lord put them to flight *from the sons of Israel*. Many of them died then, slain in that pursuit.]
(Marsden, ed., *Heptateuch*, I, p. 185)

[8] Obeying God’s laws:

Joshua 23.¹ Ða æfter langum fyrste siððan hig on friþe wunodon and Iosue ealdode, ² þa het he cuman him to Israhela bearn and þa yldostan heafodmenn ⁶ and manode hig georne þæt hig Moyses æ on eallum þingum heoldon, swa swa se ælmihtiga God him on Sinai dune gesette and dihte. ⁷ He bæd hig þa georne þæt hig bugan ne sceoldon fram Godes bigengum to þam bysmorfullum hæþengilde, on þæs folces wisan þe þær wearð ofslagen.

[^{23.1} When they had dwelt in peace for a long time since and Joseph had grown old, ² then he commanded the children of Israel to come to him and the oldest chief men, ⁶ and instructed them eagerly that they should keep Moses’ law in all things, just as the Almighty God had set it down for him on Mount Sinai and commanded. ⁷ He eagerly instructed that they should not turn from God’s practices to shameful heathen idolatry, in the manner of those people that were slain.]

[9] From Biblical Judges to English Kings:

On Englalande eac oft wæron cyningas sigefæste þurh God, swa swa we secgan gehyrdon. Swa swa wæs Ælfred cining þe oft gefeaht wið Denan, oþ þæt he sige gewann and bewerode his leode. Swa gelice Æðestan þe wið Anlaf gefeaht and his firde ofslah and aflimde hine sylfne and he on sibbe wunode siþþan mid his leode. Eadgar se æðela and se anræda cining arærde Godes lof on his leode gehwær, ealra cininga swiðost ofer Engla ðeode, and him God gewilde his wiðerwinnan a, ciningas and eorlas, þæt hi comon him to buton ælcum gefeohte, friðes wilniende, him underþeodde to þam þe he wolde. And he was gewurðod wide geond land.
(Ælfric’s *Judges*, Marsden, ed., *Heptateuch*, I, p. 200, ll. 327–38)

[There were also kings in England often victorious through God, just as we have heard said. So was King Alfred who often fought against the Danes until he achieved victory and protected his people. So also was Æthelstan who fought against Anlaf and slew his army and put him to flight and he dwelt in peace afterwards with his people. The noble and single-minded king Edgar raised up God’s praise everywhere among his people, the greatest of all the kings of the English, and God gave him power over his adversaries always, kings and nobles, so that they came to him without battle, suing for peace, submitting themselves to him as he wished; and he was honoured far and wide throughout the land.]

II. ÆLFRIC AS HAGIOGRAPHER

[10] Ælfric's "Old English Preface" to his *Lives of Saints*:

Ælfric gret ead-modlice Æðelwerd ealdor-man, and ic secge þe, leof, þæt ic habbe nu gegaderod on þyssere bec þæra halgena þrowunga þe me to onhagode on Englisc to awendene, forþan þe ðu, leof, swiðost, and Æðelmær, swylcera gewrita me bædon and of handum gelæhton, eowerne geleafan to getrymmenne mid þære gerecednysse þe ge on eowrum gereorde næfdon ær. Þu wast, leof, þæt we awendon on þam twam ærrum bocum þæra halgena þrowunga and lif þe angel-cynn mid freols-dagum wurþað. Nu ge-wearð us þæt we þas boc be þæra halgena ðrowungum and life gedihton þe mynster-menn mid heora þenungum betwux him wurðiað.

[Ælfric humbly greets Ældorman Æthelweard, and I say to you, beloved man, that I have now gathered in this book the passions of those saints that it was in my power to translate into English because you, beloved man, most particularly, and Æthelmær also, asked me for such writings and seized them from my hands in order to strengthen your faith with this account that you never had in your language before. You know, beloved man, that we translated, in the two earlier books, the passions and lives of those saints that the English people honour with feast days; now it has seemed fitting to us to compose this book about the passions and lives of those saints whom those who live in monasteries honour among themselves in their offices.]

(Clayton and Mullins, pp. 8–9)

[11] Ælfric's "The Prayer of Moses", *Lives of Saints*:

Nu doð menn swa-þeah dyslice foroft
þæt hi willað wacian and wodlice drincan
binnan godes huse and bysmorlice plegan,
and mid gegaf-spræcum godes hus gefylan.
Ac ðam wære betere þæt hi on heora bedde lagon
ðonne hi gegremedon god on þam gastlican huse.

(Clayton and Mullins, ll. 75–80)

[Now men, nevertheless, act foolishly very often, in that they will watch and madly drink within God's house, and play shamefully, and with foolish talking defile God's house; but it were better for them that they lay in their beds, than that they should anger God in the spiritual house.]

[12] Ælfric's "Life of St Swithun", *Lives of Saints*:

Is eac to witenne þæt menn unwislice doð
þa ðe dwollice plegað æt deadra manna lice
and ælce fulnysse þær forð teoð mid plegan,
þonne hi sceoldon swyðor besargian þone deadan
and ondrædan him sylfum þæs deaðes tocyme
and biddan for his sawle butan gewede georne

(Clayton and Mullins, ll. 307–12)

['It is similarly known that men behave unwisely, who foolishly amuse themselves near the bodies of dead people and utter every sort of filth in their play, when they ought rather to be

sorry for the dead person and fear for themselves the coming of death and diligently pray for his soul without foolishness’]

[13] **Ælfric’s “Passion of St Laurence”, *Catholic Homilies I*:**

Decius cwæð ða to þam Godes cyðere, “Geoffra nu urum godum.” Laurentius andwyrde, “Ic offrige me sylfne ðam ælmihtigan Gode on bræðe wynsumnysse; forðan þe se gedrefeda gast is Gode andfenge onsægednys.” Soðlice ða cwelleras tugon ða gleda singallice under þæt bedd, and wiðufan mid heora forcum hine ðydon. (Liuzza, p. 524, c. 11)

[Decius said to the martyr of God, “Offer now to our gods.” Laurence answered, “I offer myself to the almighty God in the odour of pleasantness; for the afflicted spirit is an acceptable sacrifice to God.” Truly the executioners kept pushing the burning coals under the bed [gridiron], and pierced him with their forks from above.]

efne ðu, earming, bræðdest ænne dæl mines lichaman, wend nu þone oðerne and et (Liuzza, p. 524, c. 11)
[‘Look, wretch, you roasted one side of my body, turn now to the other, and eat!’]

[14] **Ælfric’s *Nativity of St Clement the Martyr* (CH I.37):**

oft hwonlice gelyfede men smeagað, mid heora stuntan gesceade, hwi se ælmihtiga God æfre geðafian wolde þæt þa hæðenan his halgan mid gehwīlcum tintregum acwellan moston. (Liuzza, p. 686, c. 10.)

[People of little faith, with their foolish understanding, often wonder the almighty God would ever allow the heathen to kill his saints with all kinds of torments.]

[15] **Ælfric’s *Passion of St Cecilia*:**

Ic secge gif þu hæfst hwilce mihte þu hæfst,
Ælces mannes might þe on modignysse færð
is soðlice þam gelic swilce man siwige
ane bytte, and blawe hi fulle windes,
and wyrce siððan an þyrl þonne heo to-þunden bið
on hire greatnysse þonne togæð seo miht. (Skeat, 374, ll. 314–319)

[If you urge me, I will speak of the kind of might that you have. Each man’s might who goes in pride is truly like if someone had sewn up a bladder, blown it full of wind, and then afterwards, when it was swollen, to work a hole into it; then the might, in its greatness, goes away.]

[16] **Ælfric’s “Passion of St Vincent”, *Lives of Saints*:**

Pa aras seo ehtnys þæra arleasra cwelleræ
wide geond þas world wodlice swiðe
ongean Cristes geleafan and ongearn þa Cristenan menn,
forþan þe se deofol wolde adwæscan þone geleafan
mid þam mycelam ehtnessum and þam ormetum witum.
Ac swa man ma ofsloh þara martira þa,
swa þær ma gelyfdon þyrh þa mycclan wundra

þe þa halgan geworhtan þurh þæs helendes mihte,
forþam þe soða **geleafa** þæs soðfestan Godes
ne byð næfre **adwæsced** þurh þa **deofollican ehtnysse**.
ac byð swiðor geeacnod, swa swa us segað bec.

(Clayton and Mullins, ll. 10–20)

[Then a **persecution** by the wicked executioners
sprang up furiously throughout the world
against the faith of Christ and **against Christian** men,
because the **devil** desired to **extinguish the faith**
with the great **persecutions** and excessive torments.
But *the more* martyrs *killed there*,
the more believed through the great wonders
which the saints worked through the Lord's might,
because true **faith** of the just God
*may never be **extinguished** through **devilish persecution**,*
but will always be greatly increased, just as books tell us.]

[17] *Ælfric's Passion of St Edmund:*

Hwæt þa arleasan þa eadmund gebundon
and gebysmrodon huxlice and beoton mid saglum
and swa syððan læddon þone geleaf-fullan cyning
to anum eorð-fæstum treowe and tigdon hine þær-to
mid heardum bendum and hine eft swuncgon
langlice mid swipum and he symble clypode
betwux þam swinglum mid soðan geleafan
to **hælende** criste and þa **hæþenan** þa
for his geleafan wurdon wodlice yrr
for-þan-þe he clypode crist him to fultume.
Hi scuton þa mid gafelucum swilce him to gamenes to
oð þæt he call wæs besæt mid heora scotungum
swilce igles byrsta, swa swa sebastianus wæs.

[Then those **wicked** men bound **Edmund**,
and shamefully **insulted** him, and **beat** him with clubs,
and afterward they **led** the **faithful** king
to an earth-fast **tree**, and **tied** him there
with **hard** bonds, and afterwards scourged **him**
a long while with **whips**, and **constantly** he called,
between the **blows**, with **true** faith,
on the **saviour** Christ; and then the **heathen**
because of his faith **were** **madly** angry,
because he **called** upon **Christ** to help him.
They **shot** at him with **javelins** as if for their **amusement**,
until he was all beset with their **shots**,
as with a porcupine's bristles, even as Sebastian was.] (Skeat, pp. 320–23)

[18] *Ælfric's Letter to Brother Edward (Eating on the toilet):*

Ic bidde eac þe, broðor, forþam ðe þu byst uppā lande mid wimmannum oftor þonne ic beo, þæt þu him an þing secge, gif ðu for sceame swaþeah hit him secgan mæge; me sceamað þearle þæt ic hit secge ðe. Ic hit gehyrde oft secgan, and hit is yfel soð, þæt þas uplendiscan wif wyllað oft drincan and furþon etan fullice on gangsetlum æt heora gebeorscipum, ac hit is bysmorlic dæd and mycel higeleost and huxlic bysmor þæt ænig man æfre swa unþeawfæt beon sceole þæt he þone muð ufan mid mettum afylle and on oðerne ende him gange þæt meox ut fram and drince þonne ægðer ge þæt ealu ge þone stencg, þæt he huru swa afylle his fracodan gyfernysse. Ic ne mæg for sceame þa sceandlican dæde, þæt ænig mann sceole etan on gange, swa fullice secgan swa hit fullic is, ac þæt næfre ne deð nan ðæra manna ðe deah.

[I request also of you, brother, because you are up north with women more often than I am, that you should say something to them, such as you might say out of a sense of shame; it greatly shames that I should say it to you. I have often heard it said, and it is truly evil, that the northern women often will drink and furthermore eat foully on the privy and at their booze-ups, but it is a shameful deed and great disgrace and unseemly shame that any person should ever be so badly mannered that he should fill his mouth with food at one end and at the other end expel dung and drink when both the ale and the stench, that he should satisfy his evil gluttony. Out of a sense of shame, I cannot truly say how foul that shameful deed is, that any person shall eat on the privy, but that no other worthy person ever does that.]

[19] *Ælfric's Letter to Brother Edward (Danish fashion):*

Ic secge eac ðe, broðor Eadweard, nu ðu me þyses bæde, þæt ge doð unrihtlice þæt ge ða Engliscan þeawas forlsetað þe eowre fæderas heoldon and hæðenra manna þeawas lufiað, þe eow ðæs lifes ne unnon, and mid ðam geswutelīað þæt ge forseoð eower cynn and eowre ylðran mid þam unþeawum þonne ge him on teonan tysliað eow on Denisc, ableredum hneccan and ablendum eagum. Ne secge ic na mare embe ða sceandlican tylslunge buton þæt us secgað bec þæt se beo amansumod þe hæðenra manna þeawas hylt on his life and his agen cynn unwurþað mid þam.

[I also say to you, brother Edward, now that you requested this of me, that you unrighteously have abandoned those English customs that your fathers held and that you love the customs of heathen people, who wish you no good in life, and by this you show that you despise your king and your ancestors with those bad customs when you insult them by dressing yourselves in the Danish fashion, wish shaved necks and eyeliner (dark-eyes). I will say no more about that shameful fashion, except that books tell us that he shall be excommunicated who holds the customs of heathen people in his life and thereby dishonours his own kin.]

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We would be very grateful for your feedback!

Please tear off this page, fold and drop in the collection box at the door.

1. Please can you describe today's talk in three words?
2. What would like to learn more about? Anglo-Saxon Cerne? Ælfric? Old English language? Old English poetry? Old English prose?
3. What do you think is the future of medieval Cerne? What would you like to see happen in the community?
4. Are you a member of the Cerne Historical Society?
5. Do you live or near in Cerne?

This talk is part of a AHRC-funded research project *Writing Pre-Conquest England: A New History of Old English Prose* conducted by Francis Leneghan at the University of Oxford. We would be very interested in your thoughts about our work on Ælfric, Old English literature and Cerne. Your feedback could help us to develop our research further, including securing funding, and shape future activities and community engagement at Cerne.

We will share your responses with the Humanities research support team at Oxford University, and with the Cerne Historical Society.

Would you be happy for your comments to be shared in internal reports or for promoting the work of the research team and the Cerne Historical Society: **YES / NO** (please circle).

For more information on Ælfric,
as well as recordings of Old English prose texts,
see *ROEP: Resources for Old English Prose*: <https://roep.site.ox.ac.uk>

If you have any questions, please do get in touch with us!

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