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“In the Language to which They Were Born”: A Study of Audience for the Vernacular Catholic Homilies of Aelfric

In the final decade before the year 1000, an Anglo-Saxon abbot named Aelfric wrote and distributed three series of homilies in the Old English language, all, or nearly all, of which have survived. David Knowles, in his monumental volume, *The Monastic Order in England*, describes Aelfric’s place in early English church history as “second only to Bede and in direct spiritual descent from him.” (63) Aelfric appears to clearly state his purpose for the composition of his homilies in two prefaces attached to the first series of forty homilies, with the first preface written in Latin and the second in Old English. These homilies, he states, have been compiled and translated from the works of church fathers such as Augustine, Jerome, and Bede, and are to be read by priests in English churches to the unlearned, who cannot understand the Latin of the Scriptures and liturgy, but only their own native tongue. However, there is considerable debate among scholars as to the suitability of the homilies as written, with their frequent insertions drawn from erudite theologians, for a completely uneducated lay audience. This project will closely examine the prefaces and a selection of the homilies themselves, attempting to determine how they may in fact have been used in the dissemination of the faith within the Anglo-Saxon church.

Born near the middle of the tenth century, Aelfric was a product of the Benedictine Reform Movement that swept English monasteries at that time, one of whose emphases was on monks as educators. He seems to have been educated by Bishop.
Aethelwold, one of the Reform Movement’s founders, at the cathedral school at Winchester. This institution was the preeminent site for scholarly and ecclesiastical training in England at the time, and a rival in quality with most contemporary Continental schools. In 987, Aelfric joined the monastery of Cerne Abbas in Dorset, where he was appointed head of the monastery school. Here he composed his surviving homiletic works, consisting of a first series and second series of Catholic Homilies, followed by a collection of Lives of the Saints. Later in life, Aelfric was appointed abbot of a monastery at Eynsham, near Oxford, in which post he served until his death.

The two series of Catholic Homilies each contain forty homilies written in the Old English vernacular, nearly all of which are linked to the appointed lectionary readings for specific Sundays or feast days. The Lives of the Saints contains additional homilies for saints’ days, though Aelfric specifies in its preface that he has already written homilies for all of the chief saint’s days celebrated in England in his day in his earlier two collections; here he adds devotions for such saints as are more likely to be remembered by monastics than by the laity. Surviving manuscript evidence indicates that all three collections, but the first two series of Catholic Homilies in particular, were widely copied and disseminated during the subsequent century. Literary historian Kathy Lavezzo writes, “manuscript copies of the series circulated throughout England, from Canterbury to Exeter to Worcester and as far north as Durham” (34).

Vernacular homilies such as these are nearly unique to England in the early Middle Ages. The residents of most other regions of Western Europe where the message of the Christian Church had spread spoke vernacular dialects that were derived from Latin, and the language of the Church was therefore not wholly unintelligible to them.
The English, with their Germanic language, required vernacular translation and exposition of the Church’s Scriptures and doctrines, and much of this was done by the English clergy of the day. According to legend, the Venerable Bede even on his deathbed was dictating the final passages of his Old English translation of the gospel of John. Aelfric’s mentor Aethelwold was a firm supporter of vernacular dissemination of Church teachings, and Aelfric himself famously translated the book of Genesis at the behest of his patron, Ealdorman Aethelweard, though he states in his preface to the translation of Genesis that he believes uneducated lay readers should not attempt to read the Holy Scriptures unaided by clergy and orthodox commentary, lest they fall into heretical error. Though his homilies often contain translation of the gospel reading for a particular day, they also provide this explanation and commentary.

The term “homily” has been applied to Aelfric’s writings here by modern scholarly consensus. The Latin titles found in the manuscripts use the Latin term “sermons” instead. In his introduction to his edited collection of Aelfric’s Prefaces, Jonathan Wilcox explains the distinction between the Latin terms “sermo,” or “sermon,” and “homilia,” or “homily.” A homily referred to an explication of the Scriptural text assigned to be read, in Latin, on a given liturgical occasion. Homilies of this sort were not expected to be original in content, but instead were ideally drawn from summary or paraphrase of the writings of the Church Fathers. A “sermon,” on the other hand, did not necessarily refer to the Scriptural text appointed for the service, but instead consisted of what Wilcox calls “a piece of general moral or didactic explanation, often with a catechetical intent (that is, designed to explain the fundamentals of the Christian faith).” Wilcox points out that most of Aelfric’s writings fit the definition of “homilia,” but a few
seem to be “sermones” instead (15-16). Aelfric himself, in his Latin preface to the First Series, labels his works “sententias,” which simply means “discourses.” (l.18) In the Latin preface to the Second Series, he refers to his works interchangeably by both “sermones” and “sententias.” (l.16)

The Latin Preface to the First Series is addressed by the monk and scholar Aelfric to Sigeric, Archbishop of Canterbury, seeking the approval of the church hierarchy for the dissemination and use of the collection of homilies he has produced. Aelfric begins with his scholarly credentials, identifying himself as a pupil of the great reformer Aethelwold, and explains that he has formed the following book by translating the Latin of the Holy Bible and of the great Church scholars:

into our usual everyday language, for the edification of the simple who know only this language, whether for reading or for hearing…so that it may more easily reach to the heart of those reading or hearing, to the advantage of the souls of those who are unable to be taught in any other language than that to which they were born. (I.4-9)

Aelfric is acutely aware that Latin, the language of the Church, is unintelligible to the vast majority of his countrymen. He describes his intended audience of non-Latin speakers here as “simplices,” “the simple” (I.5), but elsewhere in the Preface calls them “idiotae,” “the uneducated” (I.17) and “seculares,” “laymen.” (I.24) Almost by definition, in this period, “layman” would have been synonymous with “uneducated.” Not only would Latin have been beyond the understanding of the average layperson (and even of some ordained clergy), but many must have had only a tenuous grasp of the basic doctrines of Christianity.
Aelfric posits that the forty “sententiae” he has provided in this book will be sufficient for one year’s worth of worship services if they are read out loud to the people in their entirety by “the ministers of God.” (ll.18-19) Though he has not provided a meditation on all of the gospel narratives that will be read in the course of a year, he states that he has chosen to expound upon those readings that are most suited to “the simple, for the improvement of their souls, for laymen cannot take in all things, even though they hear them from the mouth of the learned.” (ll.23-24) He proposes to supplement this book with a second collection of “tractatus vel passiones” (sermons or saints’ lives, l.21), so that the two books may be read in the church during alternate years. Father Eugene A. Green has determined that the resulting collections provide “a homily for approximately every second Sunday in a two-year cycle…in order that a congregation might listen to a homily twice monthly.” (62)

Following the initial Latin preface addressed to the archbishop, Aelfric writes a second preface in Old English, apparently addressed to readers in general. Here, he begins by introducing himself as “Aelfric, monk and mass-priest,” rather than as a distinguished scholar. (l.1) He derives his authority both from the spiritual support of Bishop Aelfheah, who placed him in his current monastery, and from the temporal thane Aethelmar, son of the local lord, who seems to have specifically requested Aelfric to be assigned there. His role as “mass-priest” indicates that he did preside and presumably preach at celebrations of the mass that would have been attended not just by monks but by local laity as well. Wilcox points out that no local parish church existed at Cerne Abbas in Aelfric’s day, and observes that “the mixed audience that would have assembled there is in keeping with the implied audience of the Catholic Homilies.” (12)
Scholars have often assumed that the homilies later published and disseminated by Aelfric were initially delivered by him to a congregation at this time, though we have no evidence for this. While he may or may not have actually preached himself the homilies we now have, we can fairly safely assume that his homilies as written at least reflect Aelfric’s own experience in the pulpit.

In this preface, Aelfric explains that he was prompted to translate these homilies from Latin to English (nowhere does he claim originality) because he is aware of other vernacular books that are spreading great error among their readers. He does not specify what these books may be, though he specifically exempts from this charge those books translated from Latin to English at the behest of King Alfred the Great a century before. Most scholars today posit that he is criticizing other collections of vernacular homilies from the period, such as those we now call the Blickling Homilies and the Vercelli Homilies, both anonymous. Such vernacular homily collections seem to have been popular at this time, but Aelfric’s are unique among those that survive for their scholarly and patristic emphasis. Most of the rest of this preface is devoted to Aelfric’s insistence that he and his readers are living in the end times and must therefore be especially vigilant against false prophets. Aelfric, by writing these homilies, is fighting falsehood with true book-learning, which he argues is able to strengthen and preserve the faithful.

Aelfric’s own description in his initial preface of his homilies being read by a monk or priest to a congregation not fluent in Latin may seem very clearly to prescribe the homilies’ intended use. Nevertheless, Aelfric’s modern editor Malcolm Godden maintains, “what the Catholic Homilies were for is surprisingly difficult to say” (xx-xxi). Scholars today continue to question whether his real intended audience for the homilies
was laypersons or clergy. Certainly Aelfric himself suggests that the *Lives of Saints*,
despite being written in Old English, is intended primarily for the use of monastics.
Professor Milton Gatch calls the homilies “central to the author’s intention to provide
material useful for the education of the clergy and the performance of the duties of their
vocation” (13). Godden suggests that potential readers of the homilies could include “a
substantial body of ordinary laity who could read English and had access to books, or the
secular clergy” (xxiii), not all of whom had been adequately instructed in Latin. The end
of the Old English Preface to the first series of homilies contains a brief note in Latin to a
scribe giving specific instructions about the copy of the text that is to be made and sent to
Ealdorman Aethelweard, indicating that he, at least, intended to use the book for private
devotional reading. “The level of discussion” in the homilies, says Godden, “often seems
more appropriate to advanced understandings of theology than the ordinary laity, though
there are also many occasions in which discussion is explicitly or implicitly directed at
the meanest level of understanding” (xxvi). Gatch, while acknowledging that subsequent
manuscript distribution of Aelfric’s homilies certainly indicates their use by priests
celebrating Mass for lay congregations, also posits that the monastery school at Cerne
Abbas may have had tracks for both Latin scholars and those who were being trained to
become literate in the vernacular only. Therefore, even within a completely monastic
setting, vernacular homilies would have been needed (53).

For purposes of this talk, the first two homilies from Aelfric’s first series may be
taken as representative examples of the entire collection. Homily I is entitled in Latin
“De Initio Creaturae,” or “Concerning the Beginning of Creation.” It follows the
“sermo” discourse model, in that it is not identified with any particular liturgical occasion
or even a specific Biblical passage, though its opening words “An angin” (“One beginning”) do invoke the opening passage of Genesis. The purpose of this homily seems to be catechetical, acquainting its audience in the space of 296 lines with what Aelfric apparently considered the fundamentals of the Christian faith: the existence and power of the Christian God, the creation of all things, including angels, the fall of some of the angels and subsequent creation and fall of humankind, Noah and the flood, the tower of Babel, and the position of the Hebrews as a chosen people, followed by the story of Jesus from the Annunciation to the Resurrection, Ascension, and Second Coming.

Homily II is a Christmas homily entitled “Nativitas Domini” (The Birth of the Lord”). It follows the “homilia” model of first providing an Old English translation of Luke 2:1-20, and then an exposition of the passage, in this case concentrating on the visit of the angel to the shepherds. In neither homily does Aelfric make specific reference to any source material other than the Bible (though he will make such references from time to time in later homilies), though editor Godden has identified material taken from Alcuin, Augustine, Bede, Cassiodorus, Haymo of Auxerre, and Martin of Braga in Homily I and Augustine, Bede, Gregory the Great, Hericus, and Isidore in Homily II.

The opening of Homily I will provide some idea of its tone and content:

There is one beginning of all things, and that is God Almighty. He is the beginning and the end. He is the beginning because He always existed; He is the end without any ending, for He is forever unended. He is king of all kings and lord of all lords. He holds with His might the heavens and the earth and all created things without effort, and He beholds the abysses that are under this earth. He lifted up all the mountains with His own
hands, and He encompasses all of the earth with His hands, and nothing may withstand His will. Nor may any created thing fully ponder or understand about God. The angels have more knowledge of God than men, and yet they may not fully understand about God. He made the created things as He wished; through His wisdom He made all things, and through His will He endowed them with life. This Threeness is one God: that is the Father and His wisdom eternally brought forth from Himself, and the will of both that is the Holy Ghost. He is not given birth to but He goes from the Father and the Son alike. These three persons are one almighty God, who made the heavens and the earth and all created things.

(ll.1-21)

Notice that this homily seems designed to speak even to those who may know little or nothing about Christian belief. The sentence structure and vocabulary employed are simple yet poetic. However, the depiction of the Judeo-Christian God given here moves within a few lines from the anthropomorphic “He lifted up all the mountains with His hands” to the sophisticated explication of the Trinity (“þrynnes”/Threeness, l. 18) as the Father, His wisdom, and His will. Godden’s commentary here does not cite a source for this Trinitarian doctrine but rather states that this view is typical of the teachings of Aelfric, a scholar who has read and pondered much on this crucial theological detail. (9).

From here, the homily moves on to the creation of the angels. Aelfric tells us that there are ten hosts of angels: “angels, and high-angels (archangels), throni, dominationes, principatus, postestates, virtutes, cherubim, seraphim” (ll. 22-23). The tenth is the portion who fell. Note that of the nine orders listed, six names are in Latin and two in
Hebrew—an odd catalogue to cite if the homily is truly designed to impart only the basics of the Christian faith to the uninitiated. Later in the homily, however, Aelfric is careful to explicate Latin-derived terms such as “disciples” and “apostles.” “Apostolas,” he says, are “messengers” (literally “errand-doers”/”ærendraern,” l.253), and “discipuli” are “students” (literally “learning-boys”/”leornungcnihtas,” l. 253). Godden characterizes this entire homily as “a simple and summary account of salvation history” (xxvii).

The second homily is specifically dated December 25th (VIII Kalendas Januarii), and begins with a pronouncement that indicates it was to be delivered orally and on that date:

We will, for the strengthening of your faith, tell you of the birth of the Savior, according to the gospel narrative: how He on this very day was born in true humanness, He who was forever without end born of the almighty Father in godliness. (ll. 1-7)

Note the consciousness of both a speaker, “we,” and the audience, addressed in the plural as “you.” There follows what Godden characterizes as “a fairly close rendering” of Luke 2:1-20 in Old English (12). In his explication of this passage, Aelfric expounds on the dual nature of Christ as human and divine, using at one point a simile, apparently original, that attempts to explain how these two natures could co-exist in one body by the image of an egg, which contains both white and yolk, unmingled, yet one egg (ll. 181-85).

At two points in this homily, he makes references to the act of preaching. First, he states:
Just as at that time by the decree of Caesar each individual declared concerning himself in their cities, so also now teachers declare Christ’s decree to us that we assemble ourselves in His holy church and there give to him our tribute of faith with devout spirit, so that our names will be written in the book of life with his chosen ones. (ll. 72-75)

While it is not necessarily clear that teaching will continue in the church assembly from this passage, “lareowas,” which can be translated either as “teachers” or “scholars,” have the role here of making the decrees of God known to the faithful, who might not otherwise understand them, especially as Christ’s decree here is reached by an allegorical interpretation of the original text.

Later, in his extensive discussion of the role of the shepherds in the Nativity, Aelfric says:

The shepherds who watched over their flock at Christ’s birth signify the holy teachers in God’s church. They are the spiritual shepherds of faithful souls, and the angel declared Christ’s birth to herdsmen because to the spiritual shepherds that are teachers it is the most clearly revealed concerning Christ’s humanness, through their book learning. And they shall zealously preach to those placed under them that which is revealed to them. Just as the shepherds reported widely their heavenly vision, it is appropriate for the teacher that he should be continually vigilant over God’s flock, that the invisible wolf does not scatter God’s sheep. (ll. 103-11)
Godden tells us that the association of the shepherds with learned men of the church is probably taken from Bede’s second homily on the nativity, as the association of the city with the church in the previous passage was taken from Bede’s first homily on this topic, “but the development of this to stress the lareow’s crucial role as mediator between God and his flock, so characteristic of Ælfric, seems to be his own” (18). It is perhaps significant that Aelfric does not use the Old English word “preost” (priest) in either of these passages, but instead maintains that the shepherd (presumably Latin “pastor”) of the faithful (the “underþeoddum,” literally “those placed under him”) should be a “lareow,” a scholar and/or teacher, someone in possession of learning derived from books (“boclicere lare”). This scholar/teacher, who could be a priest, monk, or bishop, has the responsibility to preach (“bodian”) to those placed under him, presumably by God. The emphasis seen here on learning taken from books appears also in Aelfric’s Old English preface to the first collection of homilies (l. 68).

Certainly Aelfric sees himself in the role of the scholar/teacher, disseminating the learning he has gained for the good of the faithful. Those God has placed under him would include his students at the monastery, the congregation of those he presumably preached to there, both lay and clerical, and all those who potentially read or hear read the books he has written. He speculates himself in the Latin preface to his first volume that others will encounter his words either by reading or by hearing (“sive legendo sive audiendo”, l. 6). The readers would presumably include educated laypersons, monks beginning their education, and the parish priests, no doubt having highly varying levels of training and theological understanding, whom Aelfric hopes will transmit these homilies to their congregations. Some of the hearers may have had little to no previous acquaintance with
the Scriptures or with Christian doctrines beyond what was contained in the Creed and the Pater Noster. In the end, the answer to the question of whom these homilies were for appears to be a wide variety of the learned and unlearned. The shifts in the register of discourse that seem so strange to many modern readers result from Aelfric’s need to address so many different audiences at once. He himself gives us the clue in the preface’s reference to both readers and listeners—in these volumes, the shepherd Aelfric is attempting to provide fodder for a large and varied flock.

Works Cited


