

Wulfgar and the Vikings



The picture we have of what Christianity was like in Britain in the time of Alfred is one of puzzling contradictions. On one hand there is what we might call the “official” version in which Alfred, after a childhood pilgrimage to Rome, becomes a good Christian king in the Catholic mould, founding monasteries and convents, eager above all things to spread learning among his subjects. He is capable of penning passages such as his concluding prayer at the end of his translation of Boethius *Consolations of Philosophy* which is couched in terms which any Catholic would recognise as devotional:

“Lord God Almighty... I beseech you... through the sign of the Holy Cross, and through St Mary's maidenhood, and through St Michael's obedience, and through the love and merits of all Your saints, that you guide me... according to your will...”

This view of Alfred comes not only from his own writings but from from the life of Alfred by Asser, who knew him personally, and also later medieval writings where (among other things) the story about the cakes also originates. This is the Alfred of twentieth century children's literature such as Carola Oman's *Alfred King of the English* (London, 1939) or R. J Unstead's *People in History I From Caractacus to Alfred* (London, 1955). It is a settled, clear cut picture but to the Evangelical mind it is disturbing.

But there is also another view.

It was in the eighteenth century that Alfred was first called “the Great.” In the nineteenth century there was an awakened interest among the Christians of the revivals and their successors in church history. This produced a view of Alfred that contrasted in many ways with the “official” version outlined above. This was the era of the great missionary endeavours which must have given Christians a fresh insight into the times when Christianity was something new in Britain itself. Most unwilling to accept a view of history in which the Catholic church laid claim to every good institution and development in Britain before Wycliffe, Christian historians in the Victorian era set about drawing a new picture of the early church in Britain in general and of Alfred in particular. What they came up with was startlingly different. In the hands of Merle D'aubingne and other writers the Celtic church became a kind of proto-Protestantism that was persecuted and all but destroyed by the arrival of the Catholic Augustine of Kent who misguidedly converted the Anglo-Saxons to a form of Christianity that was already fast becoming debased. To fit Alfred into this picture as a proto-Protestant was not impossible despite his post Augustinian position in the timeline. His use of the ten commandments as the basis for his *Dooms* was emphasised and a case was made for a view of early monasticism and monastic life that was so different from later practice that it could be viewed as excusable if not admirable.

This latter view is still current today in books designed for general Christian reading e.g. Peter Master's *Men of Destiny* (London, 1968) or Roland Burrows' *A Miscellany of Church History* (Stoke-on-Trent, 2014). That Christians should take this view of the early British church in general

and Alfred in particular is very understandable. It is not only hard to stomach the idea that a cruel and deviant form of Christianity held sway in these islands for over a thousand years before the light of the truth shone out, it is unlikely as well. It has to be said, however, that anyone reading the actual source documents (and this has never been so easy for anyone and everyone to do as it is now) would have difficulty in finding much in what survives of Alfred's own words or those of Asser to support the character of Alfred the Evangelical.

In contrast to both the positions outlined above most twenty-first century historical research into the religious life of the period is at base neither Catholic or Protestant: it is atheistic. The most recent historians have no interest in upholding what we might call the traditional Catholic view and no understanding of the purpose and meaning of history itself to drive them to search for genuine Christianity amidst the rubble of archaeology and the cryptic puzzles of Anglo-Saxon documents. This does not look promising at first sight. The Christian shudders to read research that painstakingly strives to expose the extent of Pagan religious practice in the period, its mixture with newer "Christian" ideas and the political driving forces behind the to and fro of traditional power structures and the new ecclesiastical hierarchy. Even more so does he recoil from the idea that Pagan and Christian practices and ideas were not so much mingled as infinitely changing variants of one another over time and location. This new picture is one of religious variety in which a form of Christianity is blended seamlessly into the pagan heritage, often as an outer wrapper or surface over an unchanged core.

It is true that Christians are the only ones who have the key to history because they are the only ones who understand the *purpose* and *end* of history. Nineteenth century Evangelicals had the key but not they did not have the techniques and tools and their enthusiasm led to an over egging of the pudding. They should perhaps have understood though that the critical question is not so much how the Anglo Saxon church in general and Alfred in particular related to the Pope or to paganism. It is how did they relate to and understood *the Bible* that is the vital issue.

In the middle ages as a whole the Bible was a rare expensive book consisting of two or three large folio volumes. Parish priests generally knew only single books of the Bible and extracts – for instance those contained in service books. Indeed there was some confusion as to what actually constituted the Bible. Scholars such as Bede, Aldhelm and Aelfric protested against the widespread and popular use of some apocryphal books but were happy to use others themselves. Often all religious writings whether actual Scripture or not were treated as sacred and on an equal footing. It was not at all easy at this period therefore to read the Bible or even to discover what it was. Should you manage to do so however, there was another layer of difficulty to confront.

In the middle ages an attitude to Scripture grew up that became so entrenched and was so misleading that it almost turned the Bible itself into a barrier to grasping the meaning of its contents. To the medieval mind Scripture was The Word just as Christ was God incarnate. Scripture therefore had a body (the literal words) and a soul (the spiritual sense of those words). The body was a veil to the spiritual sense which, being spiritually discerned was only able to be understood by scholars. This idea put the *meaning* of Scripture forever beyond the reach of the ordinary man – even of a king – and left him at the mercy of the scholarship of the clerical system. It was there that a man was supposed to go to find out what Scripture said to him personally.

And what did Scripture say according to the scholars? Pretty much whatever they wanted it to at the time. This kind of exegesis "generally consists of pious meditations on religious teaching for which the text is used merely as a convenient starting-point."¹ By means of the intricate pseudo science of allegorical interpretation, writers in the middle-ages made almost any point on any topic from how you should look after your beard to the authority of the Pope appear as the meaning of biblical texts.

1 Smalley, Beryl, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1941) p. 2.

Every verse of the Bible became a "...cluster of meanings provided by tradition out of the fathers. Any reading of the Bible implied acceptance of a huge network of orthodox associations."² It was as though the reader had to don a special pair of spectacles when reading the Bible which dimmed its actual words and replaced them with a host of contemporary ideas many of which were contrary to the plain meaning of Scripture. In fact the idea that the literal meaning of the Scripture was of little importance compared to its allegorical meaning gave room (startling as the idea might seem) for disbelief in the literal meaning of the text altogether. There were respected scholars who doubted such things as whether Jesus was literally taken up into a high mountain when the Devil tempted him, and (as in the present day) that early part of Genesis was literal history.

These difficulties beset the would-be Bible student of the time even without the problem of translation. Hebrew and Greek scholarship declined in the West with Latin predominating as the common language of scholarship. The Old Latin Bible was itself a translation of a translation as far as the Old Testament was concerned as it was translated from the Septuagint, not the original Hebrew. There was a general view that vernacular languages such as Anglo-Saxon were not adequate to express the Bible and would, if used for translation, weaken the meaning. Knowledge of Latin in Alfred's day was in decline, as he himself lamented, yet there was therefore no movement to provide plentiful Anglo-Saxon translations – even of a translation of a translation.

The Word of God was not just scarce, mangled, distorted, diluted by other contradictory writings and badly translated. There was a war and Viking invasion going on as well. Alfred was not likely to stumble upon the actual unencumbered content of the Bible and if he had he was not likely to understand its plain ordinary sense.

But of course in the chaotic and muddled times in which he lived there is no reason why *some* people should not have had an understanding of God's Word and even been able by God's grace to separate its wholesome grain from the surrounding chaff of allegory. The modern picture of a wide variety of religious beliefs and practices in this period surely adds rather than detracts from this hope. It is this idea which has inspired the Wulfgar books.

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2 Smalley, p.372.