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Renewal and Miracles: The Lives of St. Oswald and St. Aidan

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Dr. Beebe

God draws upon individuals to beget his will. A brief analysis of Scripture, and a glance at history will demonstrate this point. Men and women such as King David, Queen Esther, Alexander the Great, and Martin Luther King Jr. are a few examples of the way God can work through individuals. It is no surprise then to see that God employed individuals to generate the salvation of the British Isles. While Christianity first visited what is now England via Roman merchants and explorers, the Gospel consolidated its hold through the work of men such as St. Augustine of Canterbury and St. Patrick of Ireland. In the same manner, God used the lives of St. Oswald and St. Aidan to reignite and spread Christianity through 7<sup>th</sup> century Northumbria, and he performed miracles operating through Oswald and Aidan during and after their lives.

Before analyzing the lives of these two figures, it is important to address the issue of hagiography. As defined by *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, hagiography is, “The writing of the lives of the saints... The primary sources include martyrologies, passions, calendars, biographies, prose and verse compositions, and liturgical texts.”<sup>1</sup> It is necessary to define the term “hagiography” because the primary source revealing the lives of St. Oswald and St. Aidan, Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, is hagiographical. Various critics argue that hagiographic writing is unreliable due to the inclusion of miracles. However, hagiography can be used to recount an accurate history.

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<sup>1</sup> "Hagiography," *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, edited by Cross, F. L., and E. A., (Livingstone: Oxford University Press, 2005), <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780192802903.001.000/acref-9780192802903-e-3085>.

The reason for this is two-fold. First, Bede, multiple times throughout his writings, provides sources that his original audience could verify. For example, he supplies the name of a priest who observed a certain miracle.<sup>2</sup> This witness establishes Bede's credibility, and in turn the credibility of hagiography. Secondly, supernatural reports align with Scriptural accounts. Jesus and the Apostles performed countless miracles in the New Testament. While it is good to critically analyze writings, it is important to recognize that the perspective of a 21<sup>st</sup>-century reader could influence views on hagiographical writings.

St. Oswald and St. Aidan were born in the British Isles at a time of turmoil and uncertainty. Oswald spent his early years in exile at the monastery of Iona. His father, Ethelfrith was ousted by a man named Edwin, who in turn was killed in 633 A.D. by a ruthless man called Cadwallen<sup>3</sup> The country was then divided into two, with Edwin's cousin, Osric, ruling Deira, and Oswald's older brother, Eanfrid, reigning in Bernicia. Both men apostatized, and reverted to their pagan roots. Soon after, the "savage tyrant"<sup>4</sup> Cadwallen defeated both Osric and Eanfrid, and gained control of Northumbria. It was during this dismal time that Oswald gathered a small army from the north and attacked Cadwallen.

The battle took place on a field called *Hefenfelth* (Heavenfield) near Hexham, Northumberland.<sup>5</sup> On the eve of the battle, Oswald called for the construction of a wooden

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<sup>2</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Translated by Leo Sherley-Price (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 168.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 143.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 144.

<sup>5</sup> Gallyon, Margaret, *The Early Church in Northumbria* (Lavenham: Terence Dalton Limited, 1977), 25.

cross and placed it in the battlefield. Bede writes that Oswald himself held up the cross while they set the post into the ground.<sup>6</sup> He then ordered the whole army to kneel and pray before the most High God, and asked God to bless them in their just battle against the godless Cadwallen. Additionally, Adomnán, the writer of the *Life of St. Columba*, describes a vision Oswald had in which St. Columba blessed Oswald and foretold his victory.<sup>7</sup> This revelation strengthened the army, and at first light Oswald advanced and defeated his enemies. This victory provided Oswald the opportunity to impart his Christian faith upon Northumbria.

After Oswald established himself as king of Northumbria, he secured his position as Bretwalda, high king of England. He created an alliance with Wessex, traditionally an enemy, by marrying the daughter of King Cynegils.<sup>8</sup> Soon after, he ascertained power among “all the peoples and provinces of Britain speaking the four languages, British, Pictish, Irish, and English.”<sup>9</sup> Once this was completed, Oswald sent for missionaries to revive and spread Christianity amongst his empire. Naturally, Oswald turned to Iona, where he was reared. The monks in Iona sent a bishop to Northumbria. Unfortunately, he did not connect well with the people. The commoners found him stern and austere, and he described them as “an ungovernable people of an obstinate and barbarous temperament.”<sup>10</sup> The monks of Iona decided instead to send St. Aidan, after the previous

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<sup>6</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 144.

<sup>7</sup> Adomnán of Iona, *Life of St. Columba*, Translated by Richard Sharpe (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 111.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret, *The Early Church in Northumbria*, 26.

<sup>9</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 152.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 151.

monk's unsuccessful encounter. Subsequently, Aidan was consecrated as bishop in 634 A.D.,<sup>11</sup> and departed for Northumbria. Aidan was a man of "gentleness, holiness, and moderation,"<sup>12</sup> and who "was particularly endowed with the grace of discretion, the mother of virtues."<sup>13</sup>

Aidan's arrival to Northumbria marks the onset of spiritual flourishing in England. Oswald granted Aidan the island of Lindisfarne (Holy Island) as a place for his episcopal seat.<sup>14</sup> With a similar environment to the windswept Iona and near to Oswald's capital of Bamburgh, Lindisfarne became the heart of Northumbrian Christianity. Additionally, Oswald granted Aidan large swaths of land to build churches and monasteries.<sup>15</sup> Aidan soon brought new missionaries from Iona who helped in the "good work." In a time racked with political instability and spiritual decay, Oswald and Aidan's work touched people who had never experienced the truth of Christ.

Before detailing the physical examples of Oswald and Aidan's undertakings, it is important to discuss the theological implications that specifically Aidan imparted on Northumbria. Originating from Iona, Aidan observed the Celtic practices of Christianity, differing from the Roman observations.<sup>16</sup> The three primary distinctions between Celtic and Rome Christianity are the date of Easter, tonsure, and baptism. The Celtic Christians celebrated Easter on a different day than the Romans. Additionally, the Celtic monks based their tonsure off of St. Patrick. They shaved the top of their heads and wore their hair long

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<sup>11</sup> Margaret, *The Early Church in Northumbria*, 26.

<sup>12</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 146.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 147.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 147.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 146.

in the back. The Rome monks, on the other hand, shaved their hair in a halo style. Finally, regarding the application of water in baptism, the Celts only applied water once, while the Romans did it three times. With the previous years of spiritual oppression, the Roman observations of Christianity had weakened. Therefore, Celtic Christianity spread across northern England, and had great influence on her kings. Arguably, Aidan and Oswald's Celtic conviction was the root of the Synod of Whitby, an ecclesiastical dispute over which form of Christianity Britain should observe. If not through Aidan's Celtic influence, there would have been no need for the Synod of Whitby.

Oswald and Aidan did not only have a doctrinal influence on England, but also a spiritual sway. Even though Oswald was the most powerful man in England, he was "humble, kindly and generous to the poor and strange."<sup>17</sup> Bede tells of an Easter feast that Oswald shared with Aidan. The servants brought out the food on a silver platter, and as Oswald began to pray a servant rushed in. The servant informed the men that there was a throng of poor and hungry people outside the castle. When Oswald heard this, he ordered that the feast be sent to the beggars, and for the silver plate to be divided amongst them.<sup>18</sup> Not only was he generous, but Oswald was a servant. When Aidan first arrived in Northumbria he did not speak the language, so Oswald joined him in his missions and acted as Aidan's interpreter.<sup>19</sup> God worked through Oswald in incredible ways that shook Northumbria.

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<sup>17</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 152.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 152.

<sup>19</sup> Moorman, John R. H., *A History of the Church in England* (Connecticut: Morehouse-Barlow Co., 1976), 18.

While God employed Oswald, he also utilized Aidan in a powerful manner. Aidan “never sought or cared for any worldly possession,”<sup>20</sup> but instead bestowed this wealth upon the poor. With the gifts he received from King Oswald or the rich, Aidan gave to those in need. In tune with his heart for the less fortunate, Aidan preferred to walk on foot. Whenever he saw a person he would stop and reach out to them. Bede relays that, if Aidan met a pagan he would urge the person to turn toward Christ, and if the person was a Christian he would encourage them in their faith.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, when he walked with people he required them to meditate on Scripture. Aidan was so influential, that people began to fast and pray in a manner similar to him.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, the missions that Aidan and his followers founded, such as Jarrow and Whitby, influenced figures such as Bede and St. Hilda<sup>23</sup> Bede provides a powerful summary of the impact of Aidan. He writes, “Such then was the bishop who brought the knowledge of the Faith to King Oswald and the English people under his rule.”<sup>24</sup>

Oswald and Aidan worked together in partnership for nine fruitful years, but throughout this period the pagan king, Penda of Mercia, plagued Oswald’s kingdom. Bede recounts a specific attack that nearly destroyed Bamburgh. The Mercian army was outside the gates of the royal city, and they set fire to the wooden structures outside the wall.

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<sup>20</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 150.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 150.

<sup>22</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 150.

<sup>23</sup> Cavill, Paul, “A Dangerous, Wearisome, and uncertain Journey,” In *Not Angels but Anglicans: A History of Christianity in the British Isles*, edited by Allison Ward, 17-24 (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2010), 19.

<sup>24</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 152.

Aidan, at Lindisfarne, saw the royal city ablaze, and cried out to God for deliverance.

Immediately the wind turned directions and the fire turned upon the Mercian soldiers.<sup>25</sup>

Unfortunately, Oswald entered into battle with Penda at Maserfelth (possibly Oswestry, Shropshire), and was killed by the pagan on August 5<sup>th</sup>, 642 A.D.<sup>26</sup> Oswald's head and limbs were hacked off, and his head is now buried with St. Cuthbert in Durham Cathedral.<sup>27</sup> Aidan lived for another nine years, and continued sharing the Gospel in England until his death in 651 A.D.<sup>28</sup> Aidan fell ill during a mission tour, and supposedly took his last breath leaning against a wooden buttress at the local church<sup>29</sup>.

Even though the physical work of St. Oswald and St. Aidan finished at their deaths, God continued to use these two righteous figures in sustaining Christianity in England. This was done through miracles. In the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Bede recounts several miracles that occurred after the death of Oswald. The first narrative Bede relates is of a man who was riding his horse near the location of Oswald's death. Suddenly the horse started foaming at the mouth and collapsed to the ground. The horse withered in pain until it touched the spot where Oswald was slain, and it returned to its normal state of health. The man departed and told of the wonders of that spot, and many came and took the dust from the ground for healing.<sup>30</sup> Another miracle Bede details is a spiritual healing at the abbey of abbess Ethelhild. Ethelhild visited the place where Oswald's bones were held. There, she received some dust that the bones had touched, which supposedly had healing

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 168.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 157.

<sup>27</sup> Margaret, *The Early Church in Northumbria*, 29.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 169.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 169.

<sup>30</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 158.

powers. When Ethelhild returned to her abbey, a man who was demon-possessed visited. The monks tried an exorcism, but to no avail. Ethelhild then remembered the dust, and fetched it. Once the casket where the dust resided entered the room, the possessed man became silent and the demons fled.<sup>31</sup> All who saw were amazed at the power of God and the holiness of St. Oswald.

God also used Aidan in the form of miracles, but these miracles more often occurred while Aidan was living. Bede writes of a time where Aidan foretold a great sea storm, and gave a sailor a bottle of holy oil to calm the sea. Just as Aidan had predicted, a mighty storm broke out and all seemed lost. The sailor then remembered the oil, and when he poured it into the sea, the storm died down and the men were saved.<sup>32</sup> It is evident from these examples that God used the supernatural through Oswald's body and Aidan to heal, protect, and bless the people of England. With a 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective that is skeptical about the supernatural, it is easy to think that God makes himself known only through living individuals. Nevertheless, the miracles Bede illustrates show how God utilized Oswald in death and Aidan in life.

The 7<sup>th</sup> century was a tumultuous time for the British Isles, but God brought two men into the fray. St. Oswald and St. Aidan lived exemplary lives that instituted the spread of Christianity not only in Northumbria, but across the breadth of the island. Beginning in exile, Oswald returned to his homeland, reestablished his crown, and furthered Christianity in his kingdom. However, the success of Oswald would not have been possible without the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 161.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 167.

work and influence of St. Aidan. God used these two individual both while living and in death, to continue the grand story of Christianity for all people.

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