
Ælfric's *Three Estates*

Introduction

Following Ælfric's account of just war theory in the conclusion to his *Maccabees* (see previous item), he offers three further postscripts: the first gives a synopsis of the Maccabees' leadership and actions following Judas' death; the second tells of a miraculous intervention when King Seleucus attempts to appropriate the temple offerings; and the third, printed here, is a discussion of the three estates, i.e. the three classes of society as understood by medieval scholars. This passage occurs both independently and as an appendix to *Maccabees*, and where the two are found together the manuscripts separate them by means of an *amen*, a large initial, a section number, and/or a rubric, signalling a degree of independence. Ælfric took a strong interest in the notion of the three estates, as evidenced by his treatment of them in three additional compositions, and he is the earliest known author to have identified a class of *oratores*.¹ He is thought to have composed his *Three Estates*, the first of his four treatments of the subject, in the mid-990s, when Scandinavian raiders regularly extorted the English out of increasing sums of money, and the pressure to increase defensive forces was thus evident. As such, *The Three Estates* is one of Ælfric's most political pieces.

¹See Georges Duby, *Feudal Society*, esp. p. 104.

Manuscript

London, British Library MS Cotton Julius E. vii, fols. 152r–153r.

For a full account of witnesses, see Aaron J. Kleist's *Chronology and Canon of Ælfric of Eynsham* §3.2.3 (p. 145).

Text

(1) Is swaðeah to witenne þæt on þysre worulde synd þreo endebyrdnysse on annysse gesette: (2) þæt synd *laboratores, oratores, bellatores*. (3) *Laboratores* synd þa þe urne bigleafan beswincað; (4) *oratores* synd þa ðe us to Gode geðingiað; (5) *bellatores* synd þa ðe ure burga healdað and urne eard beweriað wið onwinnendne here.

(6) Nu swincð se yrðlincg embe urne bigleafan, (7) and se woruldempa sceall winnan wið ure fynd, (7) and se Godes þeowa sceall symle for us gebiddan, (8) and feohtan gastlice wið þa ungesewenlican fynd.

(9) Is nu forþy mare þæra muneca gewinn wið þa ungesewenlican deofla þe syrwiað embe us þonne sy þæra woruldmanna þe winnað wiþ ða flæsclican, and wið þa gesewenlican feohtað. (10) Nu ne sceolon þa woruldcepan to þam woruldlicum gefeohte þa Godes þeowan neadian fram þam gastlican gewinne, (11) forðan þe him fremað swiðor þæt þa ungesewenlican fynd beon oferswyðe þonne ða gesewenlican; (12) and hit bið swyðe derigendlic þæt hi drihtnes þeowdom forlætan, (13) and to woruldgewinne bugan þe him naht to ne gebyriað.

(14) Iulianus, se wiðersaca and se wælhreowa casere, wolde neadian preostas to woruldlicum gecampe,

(15) and eac þa halgan munecas, and het hi on cwearterne gebringan. (16) Þa wearð Appollonius se [egiptisca] abbod on þam cwearterne belocen mid his geleafullum gebroðrum. (17) Ac godes engel him com to to þam cwearterne nihtes mid heofonlicum leohte, and unlac þæt cweartern. (18) Eac se hundredes ealdor þe hi þærinne beleac com on ærnermen mid mycclum þrymme, (19) and sæde þæt his hus feolle færllice mid eorðstyrunge, (20) swa þæt his leofestan menn þær lagon ofhrorene, (21) and he bæd þa halgan þa þæt hi þanon ferdon. (22) And hi ða mid lofsangum siþedon eft to þam westene. (23) Godes þeowas sceolon unscæððignysse healdan, (24) swa swa Crist astealde þurh hine sylfne þa bysne þa þa he het Petrum behydan his swurd, (25) and gehælde þurh his mihte þæs mannes eare þe Petrus of asloh, (26) and geswutelode his godnysse.

(27) Nu se munuc þe bihð to Benedictes regole and forlæt ealle woruldðingc, (28) hwi wile he eft gecyrran to woruldlicum wæpnum, (29) and awurpan his gewinn wið þa ungesewenlican fynd his scyppende to teonan? (30) Se Godes þeowa ne mæg mid woruldmannum feohtan gif he on þam gastlican gefeohte forðgang habban sceall. (31) Næs nan halig Godes þeowa æfter þæs hælendes þrowunga þe æfre on gefeohte his handa wolde afylan, (32) ac hi forbæron ehtnysse arleasra cwellera, and heora lif sealdon mid unscæþþignysse for Godes geleafan, (33) and hi mid Gode nu lybbað, forðan þe hi furþon noldon ænne fugel acwellan.

Notes

2 *laboratores, oratores, bellatores*: workers, those who pray, those who fight (Latin).

8 **feohtan gastlice**: There is a rich tradition in Old English and other early medieval homiletics of

portraying the individual believer as a warrior who is to arm herself with the shield of faith and the armour of the virtues against the devil's attacks, as in Vercelli homily IV (ed. Scragg, *The Vercelli Homilies*, at ll. 308–344 [pp. 102–104]).

24 he het Petrum behydan his swurd: John 18:10–11; cf. Matthew 26:51–54; Luke 22:49–51.

26 godnyssse: Although the context might tempt one to read this word with a short stem vowel and interpret it as “divinity,” the word is only ever attested with a long vowel in the meaning “virtue, goodness,” so that is probably its intended reading here.

27 Benedictes regole: In Ælfric's day, the Benedictine Rule was the only monastic rule (i.e. set of guidelines for monastic living) with any sort of universal claim in the Latin West. We refer to communities that did not abide by it after the first onset of the Benedictine Reform in the later tenth century as “unreformed” monasteries, or unreformed “minsters” to acknowledge the pluriformity of communal religious practice among such communities.