# Angels in Early Medieval England

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CHAPTER FOUR

# The rules of the otherworld

In the last days before the end of the world, said one Anglo-Saxon homilist, the skies would break open and the race of men would look up to see the whole host of angels staring down at them through the opening. A terrified mass of humanity would then run to the mountains, shouting up to the lofty peaks and asking them to 'fall on us, cover and hide us so that we might no longer endure the terror of the angels; for now everything which we used to keep hidden is being made manifest'.[1] Archbishop Wulfstan would have said that this was naive, and that no-one had ever truly been able to hide their deeds from the watchers in heaven. But there was nothing unrepresentative about the homilist's basic sense that the End Times would be accompanied by the dissolution of the old barriers between the human and angelic realms. His own vision of the End had been inspired chiefly by his study of an early Christian apocryphon, known as the Apocalypse of Thomas, but even the canonical account of the world's end found in the Bible made just as much of the activities of angels.[2] The book of Revelation furnished medieval imaginations with a rich store of apocalyptic imagery, in which angels featured prominently as heralds and agents of the End. Even if one could not recall the precise sequence of events—from the four angels who would hold back the winds, to the seven whose trumpets would ring out over the crumbling world, and the numberless multitudes who would be led by the archangel Michael into a great battle in heaven—the activities of angels were so central to the story of the End that the merest nod to them could conjure up a whole apocalyptic scene. Medieval writers needed to do no more than to speak of the time 'when the heavenly Judge shall come in awful majesty amid hosts of angels and archangels' for an entire Doomsday landscape to be evoked.[3] Images of trumpet-blowing angels in artwork, or of celestial ranks marching down from heaven behind the returned Christ, served the same purpose as a kind of visual shorthand for a much grander scene.[4] This was what our unknown homilist meant when he said that, after the skies had been opened up to show reveal the terrible faces of the angels,

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[1] Blickling VII (ed. Morris, p. 93). For other homilists' perspectives, cf. Bazire-Cross III (p. 50), CCCC 41, homily III, ed. Max Förster, 'A new version of the Apocalypse of Thomas in Old English', *Anglia* 73 (1955), 6–36, at p. 25; Vercelli XV (ed. Scragg, p. 258).

[2] A full edition of the Apocalypse of Thomas by Charles Wright is forthcoming; for his preliminary remarks, see '*The Apocalypse of Thomas*: some new Latin texts and their significance for the Old English versions', in *Apocryphal Texts and Traditions*, ed. Powell and Scragg, pp. 27–64; 'Vercelli Homily XV and *The Apocalypse of Thomas*', in *New Readings*, ed. Zacher and Orchard, pp. 151–84; and 'Rewriting (and re-editing) *The Apocalypse of Thomas*', in *Écriture et réécriture. La reprise interpétative des traditions fondatrices par la lttérature biblique et extra-biblique*, ed. C. Clivaz, C. Combet-Galland, J.-D. Macchi and C. Nihan (Leuven, 2012), pp. 441–54.

[3] Ælfric, *CH*, II.38 (ed. Godden, p. 324). For similar statements, cf. Bede, *De dei iudicii*, lines 57–8, 64–5, 142–5, ed. J. Fraipont, CCSL 122 (Turnhout, 1955), pp. 441, 444; Bede, *VCP*, ch. 42 (ed. Colgrave, p. 294); Alcuin, *Ep.*, CCLXXX (ed. Dümmler, p. 438); *Christ and Satan*, lines 597–607, ed. Robert Emmett Finnegan, *Christ and Satan: A Critical Edition* (Waterloo, ON, 1977), p. 86; *Christ III*, lines 12–32, 58b–63, ed. Bernard J. Muir, *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry: An Edition of Exeter Dean and Chapter MS 3501*, 2 vols. (2nd ed., Exeter, 2000), i, 79, 81; Cynewulf, *Elene*, lines 1280–81a (ed. Gradon, p. 74); Vercelli VIII (ed. Scragg, pp. 143–5).

[4] For one particularly striking example, see the image of the Second Coming in the Benedictional of St Æthelwold, 6v, edited in facsimile by Andrew Prescott, *The Benedictional of Saint Æthelwold: A Masterpiece of Anglo-Saxon Art* (London, 2002). Cf. also the Eyam Cross, above p. 000.

'everyone will then see what it will be like at the end of this world'.[5] The promised future for mankind was a future in which angels would be terrifyingly present.

If there was any comfort at all to be gained from this knowledge, it came in the fact that mankind had been so fully prepared for these Last Days. Although Christians were warned that it was impossible to predict the *time* of the End (even if many, in reality, possessed a keen interest in trying to do just that), their religion furnished them with a remarkably detailed account of the *manner* of the End.[6] A great deal of medieval Christian teaching sought to equip the faithful with the means to contemplate this future with expectation and certainty. Bede, in fact, attributed much of Christianity's success in winning converts in new lands to that very sense of certainty about the future. When he thought about the conversion of his own kingdom of Northumbria, as he composed his *Historia ecclesiastica*, Bede imagined the merits of the new religion being discussed at royal councils, and pictured pagan noblemen suddenly overcome with newfound understanding about the world and its destiny. With a memorable turn of phrase, Bede tried to capture their wonder by describing one Northumbrian lord likening the experience of mortal life to the short flight of a sparrow through a fire-lit hall:

> For the few moments the bird is inside, the storm and wintry tempest cannot touch it; but after the briefest moment of calm, it flits from your sight—it flies out of the wintry storm, and then back into it again. In the same way, this life of men is visible for a moment; but as to what might follow after, or even what went before, we have no idea. So if this new teaching brings something more certain, it seems right that it be followed.[7]

Whether or not this really was the sort of thing which a seventh-century nobleman might really have said after a first encounter with the Christian religion, Bede's words expressed the confidence which early medieval churchmen felt when they looked to the future. They found plenty to ponder and to discuss, of course, but the debates of theologians about the end of time had largely progressed to the level of detail by Bede's day. It was well established, for instance, that a final persecution would have to be suffered as the world neared its end, instigated by Antichrist but to be endured only until he himself was defeated and killed. A curious Anglo-Saxon Christian might reasonably, therefore, speculate about the manner of Antichrist's destruction, only to find that the evidence appeared to be equivocal as to whether it would be the returned Christ or the archangel Michael who would deal the fatal blow. Yet no-one would have felt that this ambiguity shook their confidence in the general shape of Christian teaching about the Last Days, for it was hardly the kind of question upon which an entire vision of the future depended. Even theologians were content to keep their options open about questions like this, as Bede himself did when he wrote elsewhere about the destruction of Antichrist, and how it would be done '*either* by the Lord himself *or* by the archangel Michael, as some teach'.[8] One

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5    Blickling VII (ed. Morris, p. 93).
6    The most convenient point of entry into these issues is now James Palmer, *The Apocalypse in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2014).
7    Bede, *HE*, II.13 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 182–4).
8    Bede, *De temporum ratione*, ch. 69, ed. C.W. Jones, CCSL 123B (Turnhout, 1977), p. 539: my emphasis. The two notions derive ultimately from 2 Thess 2.8 and Dan 12.1 respectively, although one of Bede's earlier

could admit uncertainty about the details without feeling that one's whole eschatological outlook was thereby compromised. Over the centuries, Anglo-Saxon Christians permitted themselves to speculate about matters such as the number of angels that would accompany Christ (five thousand, according to one Old English sermon), or the manner in which the angels would dress themselves (the archangel Michael would don a garment made from a cloth with angels called *spiritum paraclitum*, alleged one purveyor of esoteric wisdom).[9] But these were small innovations, and they simply fitted into a framework that was well understood and universally accepted.

This sense of certainty about the shape of the Last Days might induce some to terse aphorisms, of the kind that delighted Old English poets. 'It is going to happen', declared one in a poem devoted wholly to the theme of the Judgement: 'The day is coming when we will bring forth all our sins, deeds and thoughts'.[10] But such forthright utterances tended to dry up when the topic shifted away from that distant End, and towards a different sort of future which lay more immediately to hand. Not all who came to the ultimate Judgement would have lived through the Last Days for themselves since, as the New Testament declared, 'the Lord himself will come down from heaven with commandment, and with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead who are in Christ shall rise first'.[11] Statements like this rather begged the question of where the dead might be found *before* their resurrection, and here the poets' sense of certainty failed them. It was obvious enough that the bodies of the dead remained physically present in the world, but what of their immortal souls? The unknown writer responsible for the poem we now call *Maxims II* felt that he could not say:

> Only the Ruler knows which way the soul will turn afterwards, and all the spirits who go before God after their death-day wait for judgement in the Father's embrace. The shape of the future is dark and hidden; the Lord alone knows, the saving Father.[12]

The poet's words are revealing. Early medieval Christians possessed a curious sense of time, in which the further ahead one looked, the easier it was to be certain of what awaited.

We tend not to set much store in such early medieval professions of uncertainty about the fate of the soul after death; or rather, we have tended to see in them only one *kind* of

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letters attributed the idea that Michael would defeat Antichrist to Gregory the Great: *Epistola* XV, ed. Migne, *PL* 94, col. 707.

[9] *Be heofonwarum and be helwarum*, ed. Loredana Teresi, '*Be heofonwarum ⁊ be helwarum*: a complete edition', in *Early Medieval English Texts and Interpretations: Studies Presented to Donald G. Scragg*, ed. Elaine Treharne and Susan Rosser (Tempe, AZ, 2002), pp. 211–44, at p. 226; *Solomon and Saturn I*, prose section, ed. Anlezark, *Old English Dialogues*, p. 74. The prose Solomon and Saturn dialogue on the Pater Noster is traditionally separated by editors from the poetic section which precedes it in the manuscript, and often considered as a separate piece entirely; but I find the arguments for the unity of the verse and prose compelling: see Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 68–9; Wright, *Irish Tradition*, pp. 233–4.

[10] *Judgement Day I*, lines 1a and 34b–36a, ed. T.A. Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 120.

[11] 1 Thess 4.15.

[12] *Maxims II*, lines 58b–64a, ed. Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems* (New York, 1942), p. 57.

uncertainty. Late antique and early medieval Christians possessed no single, uniform vocabulary to describe the shape of the otherworld, nor any mental picture which looked much like the strictly tripartite otherworld—comprising Heaven, Hell and Purgatory—to which later medieval Christians adhered. Instead, their writings revealed a variety of notions about the place, or places, to which the souls of the dead would go to await the coming Judgement. A pioneering attempt to map these imagined geographies of the afterlife was made in Jacques Le Goff's *La naissance du Purgatoire*, and a productive vein of scholarship has continued to refine many of the contours it sketched. Most of this work of redefinition has been concerned with returning to the documents which preceded the putative 'birth' of Purgatory in the twelfth century, and which Le Goff himself was content to treat more or less as a backdrop to the developments of the central Middle Ages which were his major focus.[13] The result has been a greater sensitivity to the ways that early medieval authors wrote about and thought about the geographical shape of the otherworld, encouraging us neither to judge them by later medieval standards nor to overlook the meaning which these alternative visions of the afterlife held in their own time and place.[14] Nonetheless, if early medieval opinions about the otherworld differed from those of later centuries, they often also differed one from another. There were recurring images, of course—fiery pits, boiling rivers, paradisiacal fields, and so on—but when early medieval writers tried to imagine how these various images might combine to make up a single otherworldly landscape, the results were radically dissimilar. It rather depended on one's views about the possibility of post-mortem atonement for sin, about the nature of the soul, and about time itself—and since individuals often held quite different opinions on these matters, their mental maps of the otherworld were often idiosyncratic and deeply personal. If the spatial arrangement of the places in which the dead awaited their fate were our chief concern, as it was for Le Goff and as it remains for many of his later critics, then we can only affirm that 'early medieval theologians failed to agree on a geography of the afterlife'.[15]

But the inability of early medieval ecclesiastics to agree upon a definitive 'map' of the otherworld seems not, in fact, to have been at the heart of the uncertainty expressed by our Old English poet in *Maxims II*. He was quite content in his understanding of where souls went to await the Judgement: they rested 'in the Father's embrace', and that knowledge appears to have been enough for him. It was rather the matter of the soul's journey towards that fatherly embrace which eluded him, the period *between* the death of the body and the arrival into the otherworld, and he denied that anyone other than God could really know 'which way the soul

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[13]   Jacques Le Goff, *La naissance du Purgatoire* (Paris, 1981). For immediate responses to Le Goff's treatment of the early texts, see: R.W. Southern, 'Between heaven and hell', *Times Literary Supplement*, 18 June 1982, pp. 651–2; Adriaan H. Bredero, 'Le moyen âge et le Purgatoire', *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 78 (1983), 429–52, esp. pp. 450–2; Aron J. Gurevich, 'Popular and scholarly medieval cultural traditions: notes in the margin of Jacques Le Goff's book', *Journal of Medieval History* 9 (1983), 71–90, esp. pp. 79–84; Graham Robert Edwards, 'Purgatory: "birth" or evolution?', *JEH* 36 (1985), 634–46.

[14]   Of particular relevance here are Ananya Jahanara Kabir, *Paradise, Death and Doomsday in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Cambridge, 2001); Marina Smyth, 'The origins of purgatory through the lens of seventh-century Irish eschatology', *Traditio* 58 (2003), 91–132; Sarah Foot, 'Anglo-Saxon "Purgatory"', in *The Church, the Afterlife and the Fate of the Soul*, ed. Peter Clarke and Tony Claydon (Woodbridge, 2009), pp. 87–96; Helen Foxhall Forbes, '*Diuiduntur in quattuor*: the interim and judgement in Anglo-Saxon England', *JTS*, n.s. 61 (2010), 659–84; Isabel Moreira, *Heaven's Purge: Purgatory in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2010).

[15]   Foot, 'Anglo-Saxon "Purgatory"', p. 89.

would turn' after it left the body. This was partially a literary pose, intended to emphasize that human wisdom (of the kind that had dominated the rest of his poem) could never rival the knowledge possessed by the heavenly Creator; and perhaps that is why modern scholars have been content to speak about the things that the poet *ought* to have believed about the transit of the soul.[16] We are accustomed to think of Anglo-Saxon deathbeds as spiritual battlegrounds, at which 'it was widely believed that angels and demons fought over the soul as it left the body, the winners taking it to the place to which it belonged by right'.[17] Human souls were spiritual beings, after all, and their exit from the body could hardly have failed to attract the attention of the other spirits who dwelt in that incorporeal world. In later medieval and early modern Europe, the faithful were instructed to prepare themselves for their encounter with the creatures of heaven and hell, and to seek guidance from books about 'the art of dying well'. Such books were not hard to come by after the fifteenth century, and were typically furnished with a series of striking woodcuts in which supernatural friends and foes clustered around the bed of a dying man, trying to move him either to repentance or to despair and waiting with open arms for the inevitable departure of the soul.[18] These arresting scenes were obviously dramatic, but not theologically innovative. They drew upon ideas which had first emerged many centuries earlier, in writings produced in the late antique east. Among the things which had been granted to the apostle Paul during his apocryphal tour of the heavens, in the influential third-century *Vision of St Paul* which we encountered in the previous chapter, was permission to bear witness to 'the manner in which the souls of just men and of sinful men go out of their bodies'. Paul watched as dying men were visited 'by both holy and impious angels', each host striving to 'find a place of habitation in the man' before 'taking possession of his soul and guiding it until it left the body'.[19] Similar visions had been granted to the first monks of Egypt, alleged one of St Pachomios' fourth-century hagiographers who promised that a gentle death overseen by heavenly attendants awaited pious souls, in marked contrast to the violent extraction of evil men's souls which would be undertaken by 'merciless angels' with the assistance of a fish-hook and a spirit-horse.[20] These examples could be easily multiplied. Clearly the idea of the deathbed as a place of supernatural strife haunted Christian imaginations for an extremely long time.

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[16] For other examples of the 'God only knows' theme, see Paul Cavill, *Maxims in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 53–7. Victoria Thompson sees its function in *Maxims II* as 'a stubborn refutation of the power of Church and State to predict or engineer either salvation or damnation': *Dying and Death*, pp. 100–101.

[17] Helen Foxhall Forbes, 'Sealed by the cross: protecting the body in Anglo-Saxon England', in *Embodied Knowledge: Perspectives on Belief and Technology*, ed. Marie Louise Stig Sørenen and Katharina Rebay-Salisbury (Oxford, 2013), pp. 52–66, at p. 58. Cf. also Morton W. Bloomfield, 'Patristics and Old English literature: notes on some poems', *Comparative Literature* 14 (1962), pp. 36–43, at p. 38; Foxhall Forbes, *Heaven and Earth*, pp. 111–25; Jill M. Fitzgerald, '*Angelus pacis*: a liturgical model for the masculine "fæle friðowebba" in Cynewulf's *Elene*', *Medium Ævum* 83 (2014), 189–209, at p. 199.

[18] On the genre and its development, see Mary C. O'Connor, *The Art of Dying Well: The Development of the Ars Moriendi* (New York, 1966); and Nancy Lee Beaty, *The Craft of Dying: A Study in the Literary Traditions of the 'Ars moriendi' in England* (New Haven, 1970).

[19] *Visio Pauli* (Long Latin), chs. 14–15 (ed. Silverstein and Hilhorst, pp. 86–97).

[20] *Bohairic Life of Pachomios*, ch. 82, trans. Armand Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia*, 3 vols. (Kalamazoo, MI, 1980–82), i, 105–10. On the relationship of this Life to the other early hagiographies about Pachomios, see Philip Rousseau, *Pachomius: The Making of a Community in Fourth-Century Egypt* (Berkeley, 1999), pp. 37–48.

The combined weight of all these textual and pictorial representations has, I think, induced us to overlook alternative perspectives into how early medieval men and women thought about the process of death. The problem is not that they offered no words of their own on the subject, but rather that we have not always succeeded in reading those words as carefully as they deserve. Like their late antique and early modern counterparts, early medieval Christians spoke about death as a transition from an earthly to a spiritual plane, and naturally expected that the progress of human souls through this unseen world might attract the attention of whatever creatures dwelt within it. Any encounter with angels or demons in this place could prove critical for the newly disembodied soul. But in Anglo-Saxon England at least, and perhaps in other parts of the early medieval West as well, such encounters were far from guaranteed or predictable. Unlike the earlier creator of the *Vision of St Paul* or the later writers of *ars moriendi* handbooks, who all spoke uncomplicatedly about the way that a person's conduct in life determined the reception which awaited the soul when it parted with the body, many Anglo-Saxon Christians looked towards the deathbed with far less certainty. Their worries were precisely those of the Old English *Maxims II*: where would the soul turn after death; how would it find its way into 'the Father's embrace'; what sorts of dangers might await the unwary soul on the way, and how could they be overcome?

To be clear, I do not mean to imply that these anxieties were unique to the Anglo-Saxons. The same questions about the transit of the soul ultimately underlay the creation of the *ars moriendi* literature in later centuries. What was different, however, was that those later guides to 'the art of dying well' could allay such fears with the reassurance that every soul would be provided with a psychopomp, a supernatural guide which took responsibility for the soul's passage into the next world. One obviously hoped that the psychopomp would turn out to be an angel sent to carry the soul to bliss, rather than a demon pointing towards the road to hell—but either way, the fate of the soul after death was now out of one's own hands. This was a way of thinking that was not generally shared in Anglo-Saxon England, at least until the tenth century. There, in contrast, it was thought likely that angels and demons alike reserved their energies for the deaths of only the most meritorious or reprehensible individuals. Less remarkable souls received no such assistance in their own departure from life, and faced an altogether less predictable journey as a result. Yet over time, these beliefs underwent a slow transformation. Preachers felt increasingly able to reassure their congregations that they, too, might hope to receive the assistance of angels in their final hour. Bound up with that seemingly small mental shift were all kinds of further ramifications: about the purpose of prayer for the dead, about how to search for evidence of sainthood, and about the nature of supernatural power more generally. Ideas were changing in subtle but far-reaching ways; and perhaps that is why the anonymous poet of *Maxims II* felt that 'the shape of the future is dark and hidden'. He bemoaned a lack of incontrovertible, first-hand testimony. Drawing his poem to a close, he noted bitterly that 'no-one comes back here under our roofs to tell men for sure what the Ruler's

destiny is, the dwelling of the victorious folk where he himself lives'.[21] But in this, the poet was mistaken.

<div align="center">BREAKING THE RULES OF DEATH</div>

One night in the 690s, a Northumbrian man named Dryhthelm died. To the alarm of his mourners, he rose again the next day. Not given to excessive speech in general, he was unwilling to speak indiscriminately about the things he had seen during that night. Only through repeated questioning did a priest named Hæmgils succeed in piecing together the man's experiences, and it was from these conversations that Dryhthelm's death and return to life came to be known by Bede. Whether by the efforts of Hæmgils, Bede or some combination of the two, Dryhthelm's discontinuous answers to Hæmgils' questions were brought together to produce a seamless account of one man's journey through the otherworld. By the time the story was incorporated into the final book of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*, a great deal of careful polishing had made it ring with echoes of Virgil and of early Christian vision-literature.[22] But for all these literary flourishes, Bede recognized that the story gained real power when told in the first person, as if it were the unmediated account of man recently returned from a remarkable journey. So it was that the longest first-person speech in Bede's History came not from any king or prelate, but from an ordinary man who had briefly glimpsed the world to which all souls must come.

As if remembering a dream, Dryhthelm's recollections began hazily with the memory that he had not been alone when he had left his body: 'There was someone who was leading me, someone of shining appearance and bright attire'. Walking for the most part in silence, the figure never openly disclosed his identity. One later tenth-century reader of Bede, composing his own Old English version of Dryhthelm's story, was little inclined towards such ambiguities and felt it necessary to add that this 'someone' was in fact 'a shining angel'.[23] But in truth, even in Bede's version, the figure's radiant form and dress left little uncertainty.[24] The angel did not initially reveal why he was there, either, but it soon became obvious that he was acting as Dryhthelm's guide (*ductor*) on a tour around the otherworld. Dryhthelm himself expressed no shock or surprise at this; indeed, he was evidently aware that he no longer numbered among the living, for he had begun to wonder whether a deep valley which he had seen filled with souls caught between raging fires and intolerable frost might be hell, and whether a peaceful sunlit meadow populated by joyful souls at rest might be heaven. As he did, the angel refuted his silent thoughts ('"You should not presume so," he said, "for this is not hell as you think." . . . "No, this is not the kingdom of heaven as you assume."'), for in the darkness beyond the valley, a dark pit spewed forth fire, smoke and foul vapours; and beyond the meadow, songs

[21]  *Maxims II*, lines 64b–67 (ed. Dobbie, p. 57).
[22]  Bede, *HE*, V.12 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 488–98). On the quotation from Virgil, *Aeneid*, VI.268 and other literary echoes, see further Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, pp. 260–61; Andrew Rabin, 'Bede, Dryhthelm, and the witness to the other world: testimony and conversion in the *Historia ecclesiastica*', *Modern Philology* 106 (2009), 375–98, at p. 396.
[23]  Ælfric, *CH*, II.21 (ed. Godden, pp. 199–200).
[24]  For other implicit angels in Bede's History, compare *HE*, I.19, III.8 and IV.11 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 60, 238 and 367).

and wondrous fragrance emanated from some more distant abode of light. Only at the conclusion of the tour did the angel explain the nature and relationship of these four distinct realms and the souls they contain: the inescapable fiery pit was hell, holding the souls of the irredeemably sinful; the valley of fire and ice held those who died sinful but repentant and who would yet be judged on Doomsday; the souls in the meadow were kept from torment, but were not perfect enough to have gained immediate entry into the kingdom of heaven, which Dryhthelm had seen as a bright light ringing with the songs of the saints. The lesson over, the angel instructed Dryhthelm to return to his body, there to attend to his own soul better now that he knew what it would face in the world to come.

Dryhthelm's story was not unique. Accounts of death, seeming-death and other unearthly visions formed a genre, and as a genre they shared conventional elements. The figure of an angelic interpreter or instructor was one of those conventions. The regularity with which angelic guides appear in vision-literature is doubtless to be explained by the ease with which they could be turned into mouthpieces for didactically-minded writers. Angels were God's messengers, after all, and they could be depended upon to appear unprompted with ready explanations about the many enigmatic things witnessed during the course of a vision. They had been fulfilling this role since the earliest Jewish and Christian apocalypses, and the writers of late antique and early medieval vision-literature often did little to disguise the convenient artificiality of these interpreter-angels who accompanied this or that visionary on their various travels through the otherworld.[25] The apocryphal journey of Paul the apostle through the heavens, in the third-century *Vision of St Paul*, therefore began as a solitary venture but ended as a guided tour, an angelic guide having stepped forward unobtrusively to provide ready answers after only a few chapters.[26] Likewise a Merovingian abbot who received a dreaming glimpse of the otherworld, and whose tale was told in the sixth century by Gregory of Tours (d. *c.* 594), found himself in the presence of knowledgeable bystanders as soon as they became necessary. The abbot, Sunniulf—a man remembered for being too lenient with his monks—had seen a vision of souls negotiating a burning river in front of a house painted white. Most of the souls were painfully submerged, but a few had managed to make it across a narrow bridge. Uncertain of what he saw, 'he asked those who were with him what they thought this meant'. He received his answer straightaway and was told that this was the bridge by which souls crossed over into bliss, a path which could only be taken by those who had kept good discipline over their flocks. The answer was straightforward enough; but who were Sunniulf's companions? Gregory had neither mentioned them before, nor bothered to identify them now. As mysterious interlocutors speaking to a sleeping abbot through his dreams, they should probably be understood as angels.[27] But they had emerged only when Gregory needed an

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[25]   See Richard Bauckham, 'Descent to the underworld', in his *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Leiden, 1998), pp. 9–48, at p. 36. Even the angelic figure in the book of Revelation seems to have been meant 'to legitimate prophetic messages addressed to early Christian communities': see Loren T. Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration and Christology: A Study in Early Judaism and in the Christology of the Apocalypse of John* (Tübingen, 1995), pp. 260–61.

[26]   *Visio Pauli* (Long Latin), ch. 11 (ed. Silverstein and Hilhorst, pp. 82–3).

[27]   Gregory of Tours, *Libri historiarum*, IV.33, ed. Bruno Krusch and Wilhelm Levison, MGH, SS rer. Mer. I.1 (Hanover, 1951), p. 166.

authoritative, and appropriately otherworldly, outside voice to give didactic instructions to the visionary—and, more importantly, to the reader.

Dryhthelm's angelic guide was no less eager to offer instructions of this kind. At the conclusion of his tour, the angel made sure to ask Dryhthelm: 'Do you know what all these things are, which you have seen?'. A long explanation soon followed, in which the four realms of the otherworld were identified in turn, along with moralizing comments about the sorts of people who populated them. As Helen Foxhall Forbes has shown, the content of the angel's speech corresponds precisely to Bede's own sermons on the subject of the posthumous fate of souls.[28] In those sermons, Bede took as his starting-point an observation made by Gregory the Great, about the way that the human race was comprised of four kinds of people: 'for some people are judged and perish, others are not judged and perish. Some are judged and reign, others are not judged and reign'.[29] Building upon the pope's concise formulation, Bede sought to say a little more about the different states of these four groups in the interim period between death and Judgement Day. He reasoned that if there were four kinds of people, then the otherworld must therefore consist of four separate places: with the saints already assigned to heaven, the less-than-perfect waiting until Judgement in 'paradise', those of mixed moral worth purged in fire before coming to that Judgement, and the unbaptized and the apostate consigned immediately to eternal torment.[30] This was the same vividly segregated landscape through which Dryhthelm had walked, and Dryhthelm's angel ensured that there would be no misunderstanding about it. The spirit's words might as well have been taken from an abbreviated copy of a Bedan homily, so closely did they follow the scheme outlined in the Jarrow monk's sermons. Whatever the angel had said in Hæmgils' version of events, let alone in anything that Dryhthelm may himself have attributed to that night in the 690s, the angel in the *Historia ecclesiastica* speaks with Bede and for Bede.

While there can be no doubt that Bede considered Dryhthelm's angel to be a useful didactic tool and intended its final exposition to serve a generally instructive purpose, the spirit ultimately spoke to Dryhthelm only of his own conduct: 'if you seek to watch your actions with greater care and keep your ways and words righteous in singleness of heart, you yourself will receive a place after your death among the joyous bands of the blessed'. Although the narrative encourages the reader to place themselves in the dead man's shoes (not least because Bede had refrained from giving the visionary a name until the vision had ended), Dryhthelm's journey had in fact never been archetypal. From the moment he had stepped into the otherworld, he had stood out as an exception in this rigidly rule-bound land of the dead—not least because of the way that he was told finally to leave it, and to correct his life before returning to it better prepared. This was emphatically not the experience which all souls would share. Nor can it go unnoticed that Dryhthelm's journey had been a curiously unhindered one. Even a potentially

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[28] Foxhall Forbes, '*Diuiduntur in quattuor*', pp. 667–73. These parallels between the angel's explanation and Bede's homilies go some way to answering earlier suggestions by Andrew Rabin 'that to assume a transparency between the author and his narrative voice obscures the extent to which Bede's narrator serves as a fictional personal designed to implicate the reader in his narrative of penance and conversion': Rabin 'Bede, Dryhthelm, and the witness'.

[29] Gregory, *Mor. in Iob*, XXVI.xxvii.50 (ed. Adriaen, p. 1304).

[30] Bede, *Hom.*, I.2 and 13 (ed. Hurst, pp. 12–13 and 89–90).

perilous encounter with a band of demons placed the dead man in no real danger. Dryhthelm recalled the way that the evil spirits had risen from the mouth of hell, beside which he had briefly been left alone while his angel went to carry out some sudden and unannounced mission, and remembered that 'although they terrified me, they did not dare to touch me'. We might suspect that it was only Bede's editorial hand that held them back, and that maybe this was a scene that could have played out differently in Hæmgils' version of events. Perhaps Bede, aiming for consistency between the narrative and his theology, felt compelled to make sure that Dryhthelm was never in danger of being dragged into the eternal hell without having committed some cardinal sin. Elsewhere, however, Bede spoke of the threat of demons waylaying even the most meritorious of souls, and stated that only with God's help could a soul overcome them.[31] Dryhthelm alone had managed to travel unopposed, in a way that made him seem more like a privileged guest on a guided tour than an archetypal sinner on the brink of damnation.

If some power preserved Dryhthelm from any real danger, the angel escorting the dead man professed to be unaware of it. When the spirit finally revealed why it had escorted Dryhthelm to the mouth of hell only to vanish into the noisome air, its explanation was simply: 'I did it so that I could find out what should happen to you' (*ut quid de te fieri deberet agnoscerem*). This was not always the case. Other people's angelic guides were quite content to admit that they had been sent on a special mission, which involved showing a human visitor around the otherworld while ensuring that the road back to the land of the living remained open. That was the experience of an eighth-century Irishman named Laisrén, who received a vision of the otherworld as he fasted in an oratory in Connacht. Angels lifted him from the body, and met with an immediate challenge from a band of armed demons who reeled off a list of unconfessed sins. Laisrén's angels dissented not at all from the demons' accusations, but observed that 'this plea will have no power over us, . . . for this man has not come to remain [but to] carry a warning from us to his fellows'.[32] The demons departed and the tour commenced, safe in the knowledge that an exemption had temporarily been made for Laisrén in order that he would return to tell the tale. Unlike Dryhthelm, he had not even been required to suffer bodily death before seeing the next world; Laisrén's journey had simply begun when 'sleep overcame him at the end of the third three-day period' of fasting, and his angels spoke openly about the fact that he still had time 'before leaving the body' for real.[33] Angels might continue to grant special favours to their chosen visionaries, in order to provide them with full access to the pleasures and pains of the afterlife without becoming ensnared in them. Readers of the seventh-century Life of St Fursa, another Irish ascetic remembered for undertaking

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[31]  See the imagined transit of Benedict Biscop's soul in Bede's *Historia abbatum*, ch. 14, ed. Grocock and Wood, *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, p. 54.

[32]  *Fis Laisréin*, chs. 5–6, ed. and trans. John Carey, 'The Vision of Laisrén', in *The End and Beyond: Medieval Irish Eschatology*, ed. John Carey, Emma Nic Cárthaigh and Caitríona Ó Dochartaigh, 2 vols. (Aberystwyth, 2014), i, 435. In the surviving manuscript, the angels specify that Laisrén 'has not come to remain *among demons*', but persuasive grounds have been offered for judging this to be an misunderstanding made by a later copyist: see Carey, 'Vision of Laisrén', pp. 441–2; and Charles D. Wright, 'Next-to-last things: the interim state of souls in early Irish literature', in *The End and Beyond*, ed. Carey, Nic Cárthaigh and Ó Dochartaigh, i, 309–96, at pp. 370–71.

[33]  *Fis Laisréin*, chs. 1–6 (ed. and trans. Carey, i. 434–7). For another visionary extracted by angels with 'hope [of recovery] left here in his body', cf. *Visio Baronti monachi Longoretensis*, ch. 3, ed. Wilhelm Levison, MGH, SS rer. Merov. V (Hanover, 1910), p. 380.

remarkable soul-journeys while his body lay motionless 'as if it were dead', discovered that a great wall of fire separated the material world from the spiritual realms beyond.[34] Fursa had seen this in one of several out-of-body experiences, and his angels told him that all souls must pass through the flames in order to have their misdeeds burned away in its purging heat. But no sooner had Fursa been told this, then his angels parted the fire for him and formed themselves into an armed escort to protect his soul from the fire (*ab igne defendebant eum*) in order that he might pass through it untested. The tour on which they then conducted Fursa thus took place in borrowed time. The normal procedures of the otherworld had been suspended for a moment to allow one chosen soul to travel through the impassable fire, there to meet the celestial hosts who come forward from 'the secret part of heaven' to meet him.[35]

Although Dryhthelm was not initially aware of it, special access was clearly being to him as well. After receiving instructions about what to do with Dryhthelm's soul, his angel led his charge out of the darkness until the pair stood at the foot of an enormous and impregnable wall. But even this presented no obstacle to the tour, for Dryhthelm soon found himself on top of it—'by what means I know not'. His angel was permitting him entry into places that would otherwise have been barred to him, temporarily breaking the rules that governed this otherworld in order to complete Dryhthelm's lesson. Exemptions and exceptions of a similar kind were permitted to yet another traveller through the early medieval otherworld: the anonymous monk of Wenlock, whose experiences were reported by Boniface in the letter we discussed in the previous chapter.[36] Like Fursa, the monk's soul came first to an immense fire encircling the world and was shielded from it by an angel which 'touched my head with a protecting hand and brought me safe from harm in the flames'.[37] On the other side, he gathered with other souls in a place where their worldly deeds were inspected while angels and demons consider the merits of each one in turn. Although both the monk's sins and his virtues were made known there, the tally of his life's works remained uncounted. His entire vision seems to have taken place as he stood at 'that assembly' (*illum conuentum*), but although the fate of a certain abbot's soul was decided in front of him, his own worth was never reckoned before he was returned to the body by his angels.[38] Boniface's account of the monk of Wenlock's

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[34] There is frustratingly no single critical edition of the whole *Vita S. Fursei*: Bruno Krusch's edition omits the larger part of the Life given over to the saint's visions, while Maria Pia Ciccarese's edition of the visions omits the biographical conclusion. Supplement, therefore, Ciccarese, 'Le visioni di S. Fursa', *Romanobarbarica* 8 (1984–5), 231–303 with Krusch, 'Vita Sancti Fursei', MGH, SS rer. Merov. IV (Hanover, 1902), pp. 436–40.

[35] Our sense of Fursa's privileged status in the otherworld need not be undermined by the fact that the fires through which he first passed unharmed still burned him as he made his return (*Vita Fursei*, ch. 16), for other saints were said to have borne visible scars from supernatural trauma if their wounds might help to convince others of some urgent message: cf. Bede, *HE*, II.6 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, p. 154); Adomnán, *VC*, III.5 (ed. Anderson and Anderson, pp. 188–90).

[36] *Die Briefe*, X (ed. Tangl, pp. 8–15).

[37] On this detail, see Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, pp. 252–4.

[38] The place at which the monk stood during his vision is explicitly named as an 'assembly' only late in the letter, when the abbot's soul is brought 'ad illum conuentum'. Boniface had nevertheless spoken of souls 'assembling' around the monk ('illuc, ubi ipse fuit, conuenisse'). The repeated terminology should encourage us to identify Boniface's third reference to a *conuentum* of souls—from which holy souls travel to enter heaven ('Ad quod sanctae gloriosaeque animae ab illo secedentes conuentu properabant')—as this same place of judgement, even though it follows his description of an interim paradise. This has typically been misunderstood, with the effect of making Boniface's theology of the afterlife seem more theologically peculiar

experiences tacitly acknowledges that, at every turn, exceptions were being made for a chosen soul, just as Dryhthelm and Fursa had discovered on their own journeys through the otherworld.


THE ROAD OUT OF LIFE

These stories about men who had gained brief glimpses of the afterlife held an obvious value for early medieval readers, who were encouraged to think of their own immortal souls as they read them. A note in one manuscript of the Old English translation of Bede's History singled out the story of Dryhthelm for the reader's special attention, observing that this was 'some good man's vision of the kingdom of heaven and the punishment of hell. Read it and understand well, and you are the better'.[39] This was commonsensical advice; but there were nevertheless limits to the lessons which one could take from such stories, as soon as one recognized that their central characters were not the everymen they first appeared to be. That was obvious enough in the case of St Fursa, a holy ascetic accustomed to out-of-body journeys through the heavens in the manner of the apostle Paul in his apocryphal *Vision*. But Bede's account of Dryhthelm and Boniface's letter about the monk of Wenlock claimed to report the experiences of people who had actually died and which might therefore have a claim to universal validity. Instead, for all the authority with which these resurrected men spoke about the rules governing the otherworld, the progress of their own souls through it had explicitly contravened those rules at every stage. Any reader seeking to gain more than a general sense of the pleasures and pains of the world to come was therefore faced with the difficult task of trying to separate which of the visionaries' experiences were supposed to be typical of every human death, and which had happened to them alone.

This is as true for the modern reader as for the medieval, and the singular problem in fact remains the role of the angels. By the end of a vision-narrative, no reader could hardly fail to notice that almost everything has happened according to their volition—including, of course, a visionary's final return to the body 'by the angel's command'.[40] But why were they present at all? From the texts themselves, it is not quite possible to know whether these angels had come in accordance with some general law of death, performing duties that were endlessly replayed beside every human deathbed; or whether their arrival in fact marked the first of the exceptions made for these chosen visionaries.

At first sight, this problem would seem easily answered. The earliest evidence for the liturgy of the sick and the dying, first attested in mid-eighth-century Francia but drawing upon older traditions that might have their origins in fifth- or sixth-century Rome, prescribes three

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than it really is: cf. Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, pp. 263–4; Kabir, *Paradise*, pp. 88–9, 99–101; Foot, 'Anglo-Saxon Purgatory', pp. 92–4; Foxhall Forbes, '*Diuiduntur in quattuor*', pp. 673–4.

[39] Cambridge, University Library, Kk.3.18, 87v: ed. Neil Ker, 'Old English notes signed "Coleman", *Medium Ævum* 18 (1949), 29–31, at p. 30.

[40] *Die Briefe*, X (ed. Tangl, p. 15); cf. *Vita Fursei*, ch. 17 (ed. Ciccarese, p. 302). Dryhthelm professed ignorance about the means by which he returned to life, but his return nevertheless followed an angelic command that he 'must now return to the body': *HE*, V.12 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, p. 494).

antiphons to be intoned in the moments after death.[41] Interspersed with psalmody, these antiphons called directly upon the powers of heaven to assist the deceased:

> Come to [their] aid, saints of God; run to meet [them], angels of the Lord, receiving their soul and presenting it in the sight of the Most High.

> May Christ who created you receive you, and may angels lead you into the bosom of Abraham.

> May a choir of angels receive you and place you in the bosom of Abraham so that with Lazarus, he who was once a poor man, you may have eternal rest.[42]

While there is little unambiguous evidence for the liturgical forms in use in early England before the tenth century, it has been thought likely that these formulae were known to the Anglo-Saxons from at least the mid-eighth century.[43] Certainly by then, similar wishes were being voiced in private devotion, at least by the users of the personal prayerbooks which survive from eighth- and early ninth-century Mercia. Amidst a much longer litany of petitions to named intercessors found in two of these prayerbooks, for instance, is an appeal to 'the holy and glorious archangel Michael, who took the power to guard souls, that he might deem my soul worthy to be taken up when it leaves my body'.[44]

It would, however, also be a mistake to read prayers like this as if they constituted a road-map for the individual soul, for these petitions deliberately tell only half of a less certain story. The liturgical ritual for the deathbed modelled itself around the story in the gospel of Luke about the rich man and the beggar, Lazarus, whose fortunes were reversed after death: 'And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom. And the rich man also died: and he was buried in hell'.[45] Wherever this 'bosom of Abraham' was, and whatever its relationship with Paradise, the Kingdom of Heaven and other possible or eventual locations of dead souls, the story assured that Lazarus was now in a place of peace, and the rich man in torment.[46] The funeral antiphons were therefore petitioning that the particular circumstances of this one biblical death would now be replicated in the present, for

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[41] *Ordo* XLIX, ed. Michel Andrieu, *Les 'Ordines romani' du haut moyen âge*, 5 vols. (Leuven, 1931–61), iv, 529–30. The most detailed study of the funeral rites remains Damien Sicard, *La liturgie de la mort dans l'église latine des origines à la réforme carolingienne* (Münster, 1978); but see also Frederick S. Paxton, *Christianizing Death: The Creation of a Ritual Process in Early Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, NY, 1990), pp. 37–44; Kabir, *Paradise*, pp. 113–22. While Andrieu's *ordo* XLIX is generally considered to be of Roman origin, Bernard Moreton has expressed doubts which have still not yet been properly addressed: see his review of Sicard, *Liturgie de la mort*, in *JTS*, n.s. 31 (1980), 231–7.

[42] Most of the early liturgical manuscripts give only the incipits of their prescribed orations; these are the fullest forms of the antiphons, as collated from later witnesses by Sicard, *Liturgie de la mort*, pp. 66–71.

[43] Kabir, *Paradise*, p. 114; developing Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, p. 274.

[44] The petition is part of a longer prayer structured as a litany: Royal Prayerbook, 18r–19v (ed. Kuypers, p. 208); Cerne, 40v–41v (ed. Kuypers, pp. 80–82 [no. 1]).

[45] Luke 16.19–31.

[46] On relationship between these possible destinations of the soul according to the different theologies of patristic and early medieval writers, see variously: Joseph Ntedika, *L'évolution de l'au-delà dans la prière pour les morts. Étude de patristique et de liturgie latines (IVᵉ–VIIIᵉ s.)* (Louvain, 1971), pp. 136–225; Le Goff, *Naissance*, pp. 70–74; Charles E. Hill, *Regnum caelorum: Patterns of Future Hope in Early Christianity* (Oxford, 1992), esp. pp. 9–40; Kabir, *Paradise*, esp. pp. 15–48, 113–22.

every Christian soul in turn. But they stop short of simply tracking the soul's invisible progress through a series of otherworldly checkpoints. The moment of death was not to be accompanied with words of gentle mourning, but with imperative commands—*subuenite! occurrite!*—asking to angels to come and help the soul, and to run to intercept it. Everything else that the antiphons said about the immediate fate of the soul depended on the arrival of that escort, and the ritual deliberately held back from saying anything about what might happen if it did not appear. Personal prayerbooks, which did not have to be mindful of a community's grief at the moment of death, did not have to be so delicate. They do not hold back from saying precisely what might happen to the souls of the dead without an angel's guidance. One asked that the archangel Michael would 'free the soul from the power of the infernal ones and from the way of darkness, so that it may not come before the lion and the dragon who is accustomed to drag off wretched souls and lead [them] to eternal torment'.[47] Another asks God to 'send an angel of peace who might guard my soul and lead it into the place of rest, making it pass through the dominions and powers of darkness undaunted'.[48]

A certain effort of will is now required to read these petitions on their own terms. Their talk of rival bands of angels and demons, each able to exert some power over the departed soul, can easily put us in mind of those ancient and early modern images of deathbeds swarming with warring spirits struggling for mastery over the souls of the dead. But that is not quite the situation that these short texts imagine. The *ars moriendi* handbooks of the later Middle Ages were written to assure believers that human deaths followed a pattern, and that the spirits of heaven and hell followed an orderly protocol to determine which host might claim the soul as their own. One could derive a certain comfort from that knowledge, for if one knew the manner in which angels and demons fought over the soul, one could hope to influence the outcome of the contest in one's own favour. In contrast, when the prayers of the eighth- and ninth-century Anglo-Saxons looked ahead to the death of the body, they worried that there might be no benevolent gatekeepers waiting to usher the soul into its place of rest. The presence of angelic helpers had to be secured in advance, otherwise the soul faced an unaided journey 'through the dominions and powers of darkness'. Rather than thinking of the soul emerging into the waiting arms of a waiting psychopomp, Anglo-Saxon writers suggested that the death of the body simply marked the soul's first step along a road which led out of the world. That at least was what Alcuin suggested in a story about a Northumbrian hermit named Balthere, who had saved a soul as it made the difficult journey out of life.[49] Alcuin described how the soul had fallen from the sky while Balthere sat at prayer, and had explained that it had been a deacon in its earthly life. The deacon had recently died, but since he had once touched a woman's breasts and failed to confess it,[50] his soul had spent the last thirty days running through the otherworld

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47  Cerne, 57r–57v (ed. Kuypers, pp. 113–14 [no. 18]). The imagery comes ultimately from Ps. 90.13, although Carol Neuman de Vegvar suggests a more direct debt to Gallican liturgy: 'The doors of his face: early hell-mouth iconography in Ireland', in *Aedificia Nova: Studies in Honor of Rosemary Cramp*, ed. Catherine E. Karkov and Helen Damico (Kalamazoo, MI, 2008), pp. 176–97, at p. 186, n. 51.

48  Royal Prayerbook, 34r (ed. Kuypers, p. 215).

49  Alcuin, *VdP*, lines 1319–62 (ed. Godman, pp. 104–6).

50  Michael Gleason suggests that Alcuin, a deacon himself, might have been trying to associate this *leuita* rescued from torment with the state of his own soul: 'Water, water, everywhere: Alcuin's Bede and Balthere', *Mediaevalia* 24 (2003), 75–100, at p. 91. Unless we assume that the deacon's admission is the veiled

trying to evade capture by demons. The demons followed him still, but when one of them insulted St Peter in Balthere's presence, the hermit interceded 'with tears for the soul's guilt . . . until he saw with his own eyes that it had been carried high over the stars of heaven by angelic arms'.

It is easy to think nothing of this story with its rather naive idea that a soul might fall back to earth from the otherworld, but its basic sense that the dead faced a short period of indeterminacy after their exit from the body was more widely shared than we might expect. It was in fact what the monk of Wenlock had seen during his time in the otherworld, for although he had been escorted by angels directly from his body into a meeting-place at which the fates of the dead were decided, he had nevertheless watched other souls having to make the journey on their own, without the aid of any guiding spirit. Even this could prove a dangerously capricious place for an unaccompanied soul. In the assembly of gathered spirits, the semblance of legalistic efficiency soon degenerated into a scramble over the soul of an abbot, whom the monk of Wenlock saw being seized 'unjustly' (*sine iure*) by demons.[51] The fear of souls being intercepted by dread forces before they found their 'rightful' place in the afterlife also found voice in prayers which asked for higher powers to watch over the soul's progress and 'snatch me from the hands of my enemies'.[52] Whatever the funeral liturgies said about the hope for an angel to guide the soul on its way, Anglo-Saxon Christians spoke at other times about the very real possibility that the dead would have to make their way through unfamiliar places on their own.

One such unclaimed soul belonged to a man named Merhtheof, a lay-brother connected with an unidentified Northumbrian monastery in the middle of the eighth century.[53] The man's experiences after death became known because Merhtheof had happened to return to the body and tell the tale; and in the early years of the ninth century, an Anglo-Latin poet named Æthelwulf (fl. 801–21) incorporated the man's story into a verse history of the monastery. Summarized in those terms, Merhtheof sounds little different to Dryhthelm or the monk of Wenlock before him. In fact, Merththeof's journey into and out of the otherworld took place under very different circumstances.[54] He had been alone as he 'departed from the world, and

confession of a guilty conscience, it seems unlikely that Alcuin would have chosen only to identify himself with the one character in the poem noted for his lasciviousness.

51  *Die Briefe*, X (ed. Tangl, pp. 9, 12–13).

52  Royal Prayerbook, 36v–37r (ed. Kuypers, pp. 216–17). The petition is here directed to God, but forms part of an abecedary sequence of prayers in which an earlier entreaty had already asked that an 'angel of peace' lead the soul after death. The degree to which the compiler intended the individual petitions in the sequence to interlock is unclear, especially since some parts of the sequence are also found individually in Nunnaminster, 25v–26r, 27r, 28r–28v (ed. Birch, pp. 70, 72 and 74): see Barbara Raw, 'A new parallel to the prayer *De tenebris* in the Book of Nunnaminster (British Library, Harl. MS. 2965, f. 28rv)', *Electronic British Library Journal* (2004), art. 1, pp. 1–9, at <http://www.bl.uk/eblj/2004articles/pdf/article1.pdf>.

53  Crayke and Bywell have been proposed as the site of Æthelwulf's monastery, but the question remains open: cf. D.R. Howlett, 'The provenance, date, and structure of *De abbatibus*', *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 5th ser., 3 (1975), 121–30; Michael Lapidge, 'Aediluulf and the school of York', in *Lateinische Kultur im VIII. Jahrhundert: Traube-Gedenkschrift*, ed. Albert Lehner and Walter Berschin (St Ottilien, 1989), pp. 161–78, rptd in his *Anglo-Latin Literature, 600–899* (London, 1996), pp. 381–98.

54  Æthelwulf, *DA*, lines 321–94 (pp. 27–33). Hans Joachim Kamphausen suggests that Merhtheof's 'death' might be entirely metaphorical, standing for his state of moral sin before being spiritually reborn into 'a second, clean life': *Traum und Vision in der lateinischen Poesie der Karolingerzeit* (Bern, 1975), pp. 90–98. Æthelwulf

rested his steps in unknown lands'. The otherworld he wandered through was gloomy and shaken by storms, filled with indistinct and malevolent faces that terrified him. Through the dire crowd, he saw the spirits of his children, who had died from disease; but although they now appeared in a blessedly angelic state—dressed in white and shining with light—they offered him no explanatory tour of the otherworld. They only accompanied him to 'the judgement, which the supreme magistrate from his high throne decides for every departing soul'. There, this *pretor maximus* condemned Merhtheof for breaking an oath made to his wife that neither of them would remarry if the other died and, heedless of the excuses made by Merhtheof's sons, the judge decreed that he would meet with whatever fate his dead wife should deem appropriate. His wife, as radiant as her children and dwelling in a shining mountaintop house, ordered him 'to go to the shades of the prison to be swallowed up amidst the dark flames', but finally took pity as her children begged that he be returned to life to correct his ways.

No angel took Merhtheof from his body. Although his sons served as his guides for part of his journey, they could make no exceptions for him when his soul came to the *pretor*'s judgement. His whole experience was utterly unlike the visions recounted by Bede and Boniface. The monk of Wenlock had somehow avoided his life's worth being reckoned so that he might tell of his what he had seen; Merhtheof's judgement, on the other hand, was real and unavoidable. His return to the body happened not because his posthumous journey was a privileged guided tour, but because of a technicality: the immutable sentence of the *pretor* was that his wife should choose his fate, and she finally chose to return him to life. In Merhtheof's story, therefore, we come closest to an account of what might face an 'ordinary' soul in the afterlife. Heavenly and hellish realms linger imperceptibly in the background, but everything that really mattered was decided before any soul even reached them. The importance of this place that is no place, through which souls do not remain but only travel, is easy to overlook. Yet it was through this less defined space that Dryhthelm walked for hours until his angel found out what to do with him, and in which Alcuin's lascivious deacon searched for shelter from his demonic pursuers. In our efforts to map the mental geographies of the early medieval otherworld, inspired as we have been by Le Goff and his focus on the variously purgatorial places it might contain, we have perhaps overlooked precisely that part which made our eighth- and ninth-century Anglo-Saxons most anxious. The soul's time in this indeterminate place constituted an absolutely critical period for the soul, a brief window of time during which an individual's status in the otherworld was not yet fixed. The transit of the unaided soul was arduous and apparently hostile. Æthelwulf did not dwell on the terrors of the road, but the 'threatening faces' who blocked Merhtheof's way with gloomy battlelines (*tristes phalanges*) were doubtless demonic in nature, for elsewhere Æthelwulf described how evil spirits awaited the souls of the dead with 'snares set for many people; they never cease to bear the wicked

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doubtless intended Merhtheof's experiences to convey a moral lesson to others, but his note that the man's soul eventually came back to its body (line 386: 'peruenit ad corpus') is poorly suited to Kamphausen's metaphorical reading, and seems sufficient to indicate that Æthelwulf believed that Merhtheof really had died and then returned to the world.

along the hard road, where eternal toil brings no rest to the traveller'.[55] So Merhtheof's death was not utterly devoid of the agency of spiritual forces, but they lay in wait for him as his soul made his way through this strange and indistinct land. As much as Anglo-Saxon Christians in eighth- and ninth-century England hoped that their own departing souls might be entrusted to the steady hands of helpful spirits, they accepted that there was a very real possibility that they might have to make the journey unaided.

## THE CHOSEN FEW

It may seem obtuse to privilege the story of Merhtheof, and to insist that the early Anglo-Saxon men and women who intoned prayers asking for heavenly spirits to meet them after death, or who wrote about visionaries who had been led out of the body by angels, did not therefore expect that the angels were present at each and every deathbed. After all, their contemporaries in seventh- and eighth-century Ireland seem to have regarded it as common knowledge that angels would make at least a token appearance in the final moments of even the most sinful person. According to a series of Hiberno-Latin writings, and vernacular pieces dependent on them, St Augustine had revealed that two hosts of rival spirits attended each and every human death. Several Irish homilists took the opportunity to dramatize their meeting, some supposing that the two hosts would conduct an orderly inspection of the soul and tacitly decide upon its fate with minimal fuss, while others imagined violent battles taking place to determine which gained custody of the soul.[56] The first of those two scenarios was probably the more traditional, and had certainly been shared by the third-century writer of the influential *Vision of St Paul*, who spoke of 'both the holy angels and the impious angels' descending upon the souls of the dead in order to see which could 'find a place of habitation therein'.[57] But the thought of heavenly and hellish armies joined together in the spirit of co-operation increasingly jarred with early medieval understandings of angels, demons and their implacable opposition to one another. Irish monastics like Admonán, abbot of Iona (d. 704), found it easier to imagine the two hosts engaging in aerial combat over newly-emerged souls. He praised his abbatial predecessor, St Columba (d. 597), for having intervened with prayer in many such struggles to thwart the demons and to ensure that the forces of heaven emerged victorious.[58]

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[55] Æthelwulf, *DA*, lines 159–82 (ed. Campbell, pp. 14–16). The activities of this *turba nefanda* have sometimes been taken as a reference to an earthly band of human robbers, since these are described in an account of the monastery's foundation on a wild hilltop; but since Æthelwulf explicitly contrasts them with the angels which visited the site after the monastery's construction, he seems to have had demonic assailants in mind. Hagiographical accounts of the eviction of demons from sites chosen by the professional religious are well known: Adomnán, *VC*, III.8 (ed. Anderson and Anderson, pp. 192–4); *VCA*, III.1 (ed. Colgrave, p. 96); Bede, *VCP*, ch. 17 (ed. Colgrave, pp. 214–6); Felix, *VG*, chs. 25–34 (ed. Colgrave, pp. 88–110); see also David F. Johnson, 'Spiritual combat and the land of Canaan in *Guthlac A*', in *Intertexts*, ed. Blanton and Scheck, pp. 307–17.

[56] The Latin and vernacular texts are edited, with translation and commentary, by John Carey, Katja Ritari and Charles D. Wright in *The End and Beyond*, ed. Carey, Nic Cárthaigh and Ó Dochartaigh, i, 43–137.

[57] *Visio Pauli* (Long Latin), chs. 14–15 (ed. Silverstein and Hilhorst, pp. 86–97). Other early Christian texts expressing similar ideas are conveniently summarized by Daley, *Hope of the Early Church*, pp. 117–18, 174, 185; cf. also Charles D. Wright, 'Next-to-last things', pp. 312–24.

[58] Adomnán, *VC*, III.6, 10 and 13 (ed. Anderson and Anderson, pp. 190, 196 and 200). See Smyth, 'Origins of purgatory', pp. 115–24; Katja Ritari, *Saints and Sinners in Early Christian Ireland: Moral Theology through the Lives of Saints Brigit and Columba* (Turnhout, 2009), pp. 148–72; Wright, 'Next-to-last things', pp. 335–7.

Such stories were hardly unknown to the Anglo-Saxons. The *Vision of St Paul* was read as widely in England as anywhere in early medieval Europe, and Anglo-Saxon scribes working on the Continent were among those who recopied the Hiberno-Latin sermons about the reception of the soul into the afterlife.[59] Yet when they retold these sorts of stories in their own words, Anglo-Saxon writers gave them a very different emphasis. Take, for instance, the cautionary tale which Bede appended to his account of Dryhthelm in the *Historia ecclesiastica*. It concerned the ignominious death of a thegn in the service of Coenred, king of Mercia, who had been visited by angels and demons shortly before his death. The unnamed man had accrued only a handful of good deeds in his life, as he discovered when a pair of angels came to his sickbed and presented him with 'a very beautiful but exceedingly small book' in which they were written. There then followed a numberless army of demons brandishing 'a volume of horrible appearance, enormous size and unbearable weight' which listed his sins. Thus claimed by the demons, the man watched as the angels vanished and 'two extremely wicked spirits who had blades in their hands' approached, pushing the weapons into his head and his foot. He endured an agonizing wait, for the daggers were 'creeping inside my body with great torment, and as soon as they meet, I will die'. Death and damnation followed swiftly after, of course; and aside from the unusual cause of death, there seemed little to differentiate the story from those found in the *Vision of St Paul* or Adomnán's Life of St Columba, which spoke of angels and demons measuring the worth of every person shortly before taking their souls.[60]

And yet, as he brought his tale to a close, Bede went out of his way to specifically reject this apparently obvious meaning. While he claimed to be retelling the story *simpliciter* ('just as I learned it from the venerable Bishop Pehthelm'), Bede followed his account with a carefully judged explanation that was intended to make his readers interpret the tale in a particular way. What the doomed thegn had experienced was not universal death. The thing he had seen had been shown to him so that he could tell others about what lay in store for them—but at Doomsday, and not before:

> As for the different books he saw presented to him by good and evil spirits, this was done by divine providence, so that we may remember that our thoughts and deeds do not melt away into the wind but are all kept for the examination of the high Judge [*ad examen summi iudicis*], and will be shown to us in the End [*in fine*] either by friendly angels or by our foes.[61]

Whether or not this was how Bishop Pehthelm had interpreted the story when he himself had

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[59] A full edition and study of the exemplum and its influence is in preparation by Charles D. Wright. His preliminary comments suggest that the earliest witness to the exemplum is an eighth-century manuscript from Freising written by the Anglo-Saxon scribe Peregrinus (Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, clm 6433), which is edited in Charles D. Wright, 'Latin analogue for *The Two Deaths*: *The Three Utterances of the Soul*', in *The End and Beyond*, ed. Carey, Cárthaigh and Ó Dochartaigh, i, 115–37.

[60] For the cause of death, cf. Hall, *Elves*, p. 110.

[61] Bede, *HE*, V.13 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, p. 502). That Bede's reference is to Judgement Day, rather than the moment of death, has generally gone unnoticed by translators and commentators: Colgrave and Mynors (trans.), *Ecclesiastical History*, p. 503; Aron J. Gurevich, 'Au Moyen Age: conscience individuelle et image de l'au-delà', trans. Joanna Pomian, *Annales. Économies, sociétés, civilisations* 37 (1982), 255–75, at p. 264; Pierre Monat and Philippe Robin (trans.), *Histoire ecclésiastique du peuple anglais*, 3 vols. (Paris, 2005), iii, 89.

told it to the Jarrow monk, Bede's disarmingly matter-of-fact explanation attempted to ensure that a cautionary tale about one man's damnation would not appear to undercut the singular importance of the final Day of Judgement. Similar thoughts emerge from his previous exegetical writings. In a commentary on the seven catholic epistles, Bede said that even demons already cast out of heaven await their sentence on that day, since they await renewed condemnation for the evils done by humanity at their instigation.[62] He did not deny that there were some who would be consigned to eternal torment even before Judgement Day, and he openly hoped that relating their miserable deaths in his History would move his readers to confess their own sins.[63] But it seemed to Bede more acceptable to conclude that the thegn's death had therefore followed some strange and particular pattern through which God had intended to deliver a message to the faithful, rather than that the man had seen death as it would come to every soul.

Bede grasped for the exceptional where previous generations had sought the universal because for him, as for many of his contemporaries, death was no longer the great leveller. A sense that God took a keener interest in the remarkable deaths of a few chosen souls pervaded Latin Christendom and early Anglo-Saxon hagiographers, Bede included, spent an extraordinary amount of time relating the miraculous things that accompanied the deaths of the holy saints. Their hope was to find some tangible sign that the souls of these chosen few had not simply slipped away into the unknown, but had been decisively claimed by the powers of heaven. These signs would not be subtle or ambiguous, such as might easily be missed at an ordinary person's deathbed. St Guthlac's hagiographer, Felix (fl. 713–49), told of the heavenly fire that engulfed Guthlac as he raised his dying hands to heaven, the air thundering with the songs of angels so sublime that the saint's awestruck companion fled the fens in terror.[64] Scenes of this kind were inspired in large part by the writings of the Gregory the Great, especially the *Dialogi* ('Dialogues on the Miracles of the Italian Fathers') in which Gregory returned time and again to matters of the deathbed and of the grave, showing his readers how miraculous signs witnessed at those locations could be taken as indicators of a dead person's state in the afterlife. The extent to which Gregory's attitude to posthumous signs shaped the outlook of all later Christian thinkers in the Latin West has been explored in detail by Peter Brown, who found it surprising, even paradoxical, to observe how early medieval Christians used stories of marvellous deaths to assert the *in*equality of death rather than some universal glory which would be bestowed on all believers.[65] But even Gregory had hinted that this might be the case. All kinds of men and women, he said, 'often [heard] the sound of heavenly singing' as they slipped away from life, but such sounds were not to be taken as an indication that a crowd of supernatural undertakers stood nearby. The songs simply served as an anaesthetic, a sound from afar which could be heard only by the person on the brink of death, 'so that while they

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[62]  Bede, *In epist. sept. cath.*, III.ii.4 and 11 (ed. Hurst, pp. 269–70 and 273).

[63]  Cf. Bede, *HE*, V.14 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 502–4). Bede had already described how Dryhthelm saw the irredeemably sinful dragged into the eternal hell: *HE*, V.12 (pp. 490–92).

[64]  Felix, *VG*, ch. 50 (ed. Colgrave, p. 158).

[65]  Peter Brown, '*Gloriosus obitus*: the end of the ancient other world', in *The Limits of Ancient Christianity: Essays on Late Antique Thought and Culture in Honor of R.A. Markus*, ed. William E. Klingshirn and Mark Vessey (Ann Arbor, MI, 1999), pp. 289–314.

listen to it, they might be preserved from feeling pain at the separation of soul and body'.[66] The actual arrival of a heavenly psychopomp to collect the souls of the blessed was an altogether more dramatic event. Gregory told the story of one Italian abbot, Stephen of Reiti, whose friends had had to flee from his bedchamber during his final hours, after angels suddenly appeared to receive his soul. Even those who were incapable of seeing the angels with their own eyes felt compelled to run from the room, shaking in terror like St Guthlac's companion. As Gregory said, 'the power that received this soul at death must have been mighty indeed, for no human being could endure its presence'.[67]

These stories reinforced, in their own way, the sense that the deaths of ordinary Anglo-Saxon Christians were not in fact moments when the spirits necessarily clustered around the body, struggling and inspecting and assessing. Stephen of Ripon was quick to say that the melodious sound of wings heard at St Wilfrid's passing was 'without a doubt' the sound of the angels arriving for his soul—and that this in turn 'proved that our holy bishop stood in the presence of the Lord and among his saints'.[68] An absence of signs meant therefore an absence of angels: if their presence could only be observed at a few exceptional deaths, then the quieter deaths of ordinary people suggested that their souls had simply slipped away unaided. This was a long way from the idea that every person's death was the location of a violent struggle or meticulous inspection undertaken by supernatural beings to determine the post-mortem state of the soul. It meant that the moment in which soul and body parted company took on a curiously inconsequential quality in the Anglo-Saxon imagination. Nothing was really decided when a person reached the end of their earthly life. The tribunals witnessed by the monk of Wenlock or by Merhtheof lay some way off, and there were long roads and purging fires to negotiate before any soul arrived to hear its sentence being passed. The saints too experienced death as the merest transition from one mode of existence to another. True, there were signs and marvels which attended their final hour; but these were for the benefit of bystanders, who were being offered proof of God's great love for these chosen souls. The saints themselves had received their own assurances hours, days or even years in advance of that moment. Thus was it said that the angels sent to collect the saintly seventh-century princess Eorcengota came early with news of their mission to ensure that the virginal princess would be prepared for their final arrival. Chad, bishop of Lichfield, received a similar summons a full week before his death, while St Wilfrid had been made privy to the timing of his last days four years before they arrived.[69] As a result, the final meeting of angel and soul in the moment of bodily death came not as a triumphal act of personal affirmation, but with all the hallmarks of a character of a promise being quietly kept. 'I will lead you', one eighth-century poet imagined an angel telling the newly disembodied soul it had been sent to meet, 'the ways will be gentle'.[70]

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[66]  Gregory, *Dialogi*, IV.15, ed. Adalbert de Vogüé, *Grégoire le Grand. Dialogues*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1978–80), iii, 58. The image of angels as 'supernatural undertakers', passively awaiting but not participating in human death, is gratefully borrowed from Peter Marshall, 'Angels around the deathbed: variations on a theme in the English art of dying', in *Angels in the Early Modern World*, ed. Marshall and Walsham, pp. 83–103, at p. 95.

[67]  Gregory, *Dial.*, IV.20 (ed. de Vogüé, iii, 76); *Hom. in euang.*, XXXV (ed. Étaix, pp. 327–8).

[68]  Stephen, *VW*, ch. 66 (ed. Colgrave, p. 142).

[69]  Bede, *HE*, III.8, IV.3 (ed. Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 238–40, 338–44); Stephen, *VW*, ch. 56 (ed. Colgrave, p. 122). See also below, p. 000.

[70]  *Guthlac A*, lines 6–8a (ed. Roberts, p. 83).

For the rest of humanity, with no signs that their souls were received immediately by the powers of heaven, a short but critical period seemed to open between life and afterlife. It was into this yawning gap that the living poured prayers and supplications on behalf of the dead. A petition in the Royal Prayerbook looked ahead to that crucial moment and tried to ensure that any prayers offered just after death would be as effective as any angelic guide, making sure that 'all the prayers sent for me in that hour might come to your open ears of mercy, my Lord Jesus Christ'.[71] If the assistance of angels seemed only guaranteed for the deaths of the holy saints, then the necessity of prayer for the rest of humankind must have seemed ever more crucial.

THE SILENT UNDERTAKERS

The deacon Alcuin did not know precisely where his soul would go when he died, but it did not greatly trouble him. Like the others raised at York in the latter half of the eighth century, he knew that there existed a beautiful and joyous place reserved for the cathedral community in the afterlife. He knew this because a young boy from the community had once visited it and returned to describe the place to the brethren. Alcuin remembered the boy and had composed a poeticised version of his story to conclude his metrical history of York.[72] He was reminded of it a second time when he wrote to the cathedral from his new home on the Continent, sometime around 795:

> And even if another place is assigned to my body, I still believe that my soul—whatever kind of place it is to have—will be granted peace with you, God willing, through your prayers. For I believe that the souls of our brotherhood will be brought together in a place of happiness, just as our boy Seneca's vision testifies.[73]

Professing to be uncertain of one's eventual place in the afterlife was perhaps little more than a show of humility, but clearly Alcuin took more comfort in considering the future reward than dwelling on the mechanics of how his soul might reach it. It was ultimately of little consequence when the Resurrection would eventually 'grant eternal blessedness to all the righteous in the kingdom of heaven'. Many of Alcuin's contemporaries probably shared his optimism that 'whatever kind of place' they might find themselves in, they would be safe if they had attended to their soul during life and if the proper rites were enacted as they died.[74] But outright certainty about the things that awaited after death remained possible only for those saints and sinners to whom foreknowledge had been granted. That made it rather easier for Anglo-Saxon Christians to talk about the kind of death that would *not* come to them than the kind that would.

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[71]  Royal Prayerbook, 34r (ed. Kuypers, p. 215).

[72]  Alcuin, *VdP*, lines 1597–1648 (ed. Godman, pp. 128–32). For the boy and his vision, see below, p. 000.

[73]  Alcuin, *Ep.*, XLII (ed. Dümmler, p. 86).

[74]  On optimism, see Paxton, *Christianizing Death*, p. 44; Helen Foxhall Forbes, 'The Development of Notions of Penance, Purgatory and the Afterlife in Anglo-Saxon England' (unpublished PhD thesis: University of Cambridge, 2008), pp. 125–31.

This was a somewhat unsatisfactory position for preachers and homilists. If hagiographers tended to polish every fragment of heavenly grace so that it shone upon a single holy individual, homilists had an equally natural tendency to try to find some universal principle in even the most exceptional event. Their efforts sometimes led them into remarkable inconsistency. The tangle that one insular homilist got into when writing about Christ's temptation in the wilderness is instructive. He was modelling his comments closely on those of Gregory the Great, who had dealt with the subject in one of his own sermons. Gregory had drawn attention to the angels who attended Christ after his temptation, and argued that their appearance clearly proved the divinity of Jesus, 'because if he had not been the God who stands above all things, then angels could hardly have ministered to him'.[75] The insular homilist repeated the same observation, but then added an additional note of his own which utterly undercut his original Gregorian argument, remarking: 'In this way it is shown that angels look after all believers when they have defeated the devil'.[76] He made no attempt to explain how these two statements could be squared, and it is clear that in this instance, his search for relevance and universal applicability had taken precedence over consistency.

Faced with an obvious need to talk to their congregations about death, and a shortage of material which dealt explicitly with the souls of ordinary people, Anglo-Saxon homilists did what they could. A number of them turned to the early Hiberno-Latin sermons about the 'two hosts which come to every person's death', which we have already met briefly and which now deserve a closer examination.[77] One group among these Hiberno-Latin texts shares a common exemplum, known as 'The Three Utterances of the Soul' since it is framed around an account of a good soul and a bad soul crying out as they leave the body, each making three exclamations about the hardship or delight which now faced them in the afterlife. These utterances were unsophisticated but evocative: the wicked soul shrank before the darkness, the roughness of the road and the pain which came with it, while the good soul remarked upon the light, the easiness and the sweetness of its passage. Each soul's utterances met with an appropriate answer from either a band of angels or a band of demons, whichever had won custody of the soul at the moment of death.[78] We have already noted how the Irish exemplum's understanding of death was strikingly at odds with mainstream opinion in eighth- and ninth-century England, but the overall story held an obvious attraction for any Anglo-Saxon preacher in search of a blunt instrument with which to convey a basic reminder that the manner of one's life dictated the shape of things to come. The result was that among the corpus of Old English homilies, produced in England during the tenth and eleventh centuries, are several revised versions of Three Utterances sermons prepared for the instruction of Anglo-Saxon congregations.

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[75]   Gregory, *Hom. in euang.*, XVI (ed. Étaix, pp. 112–13).
[76]   Blickling III (ed. Morris, pp. 33–5). Given the connections between the homily and Hiberno-Latin biblical commentaries, it is impossible to determine whether the remark is that of the Old English translator himself or his lost Irish source: cf. Charles D. Wright, 'Blickling Homily III on the temptations in the desert', *Anglia* 106 (1988), 130–37.
[77]   Above, p. 000.
[77]   Above, p. 000.
[78]   'The Three Utterances of the Soul', ed. Wright, 'Three Utterances', i, 113–37.

It would have been possible for the homilists who produced these revised sermons to have used the story like Bede used his collected tales of predestined saints and prematurely damned sinners. That seemed to be what the original author of the Three Utterances exemplum had in mind, since the most common Latin recension stated that as soon as the souls of the dead had been fought over, 'the impious go into eternal fire, and the just into eternal life'.[79] Despite initial appearances, then, the Three Utterances exemplum had little to say about ordinary souls after all, those who were still waiting to receive entry into heaven or hell after the Last Judgement. But the Anglo-Saxon redactors of the exemplum evidently sought to rectify the situation and tried to universalize the story's message. One did so by relocating the whole story from the deathbed to Doomsday, where references to souls being sent into 'eternal fire' or 'eternal life' raised fewer problems.[80] Others saw greater value in retaining the focus on the hour of bodily death, and sought instead only to make small adjustments to the souls' destination: a second redaction therefore indicated that it was to the interim paradise rather than the eternal heaven that angels brought good souls, and that the ordinary good were left in the place 'where the souls of holy men rest until Doomsday'.[81] In yet another version, an abbreviated Latin redaction of the original sermon and an Old English translation dependent on it, it was the scene of two hosts of spirits struggling for mastery over the soul which was done away with, as the redactor sought only to describe in turn the deathbed experiences of a 'sinful man' and a 'holy man'.[82] That decision might have allowed the redactor to turn this into the tale of a saint winning his eternal reward and a man with no hope of future salvation, if he had so wished; but Ananya Kabir has drawn attention to the careful way that this abbreviated homily also distinguishes paradise, to which the soul is immediately led, from the eternal heaven, which the angels proclaim is still to come.[83] Whenever the exemplum was reworked, therefore, it was rewritten in such a way as to allow homilists to talk about things that awaited relatively ordinary, although undoubtedly meritorious, souls. Although a number of Anglo-Saxon homilists had clearly found problems with the theology of the Three Utterances exemplum, each had sought to rework its story rather than to relinquish it.

As they did, any sense that death came differently to the exceptional few than to the ordinary good dissolved. None of these homiletic redactors sought to complicate their message by trying to differentiate the truly saintly from other good souls. Nor did the late Anglo-Saxon homilist Ælfric of Eynsham whose own exhortatory writings, produced around the turn of the

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[79]  *Ibid.*, ch. 8 (p. 126), quoting a statement from Matt. 25.46 which originally applied to Judgement Day. An exceptionally useful discussion of the theology of this text and related writings is provided by Wright, 'Next-to-last things', esp. pp. 334–45.

[80]  *Be heofonwarum and be helwarum* (ed. Teresi, p. 227). On the inconsistencies caused by the compiler's treatment of his material, see Rudolph Willard, *Two Apocrypha in Old English Homilies* (Leipzig, 1935), pp. 68–74; and Loredana Teresi, 'Mnemonic transmission of Old English texts in the post-Conquest period', in *Rewriting Old English in the Twelfth Century*, ed. Mary Swan and Elaine M. Treharne (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 98–116, at pp. 105–7 and 114–15.

[81]  Bazire-Cross IX (p. 123). On other changes made to the fate of the soul in this homily, see also Kabir, *Paradise*, pp. 53–5.

[82]  The Latin text is edited by Mary F. Wack and Charles D. Wright, 'A new Latin source for the Old English "Three Utterances" exemplum', *ASE* 20 (1991), 187–202, at pp. 189–90; they reproduce alongside it an emended version of the Old English version, Fadda I (pp. 19–23).

[83]  Kabir, *Paradise*, pp. 51–3.

first millennium, displayed the same universalizing tendencies. He too sought to turn material which talked only about the most exalted souls, those who gained immediate entry into heaven, to more general use. Writing about the assumption of the Virgin Mary and sticking closely to the argument of a ninth-century sermon by Paschasius Radbertus (d. *c.* 865), for instance, Ælfric found that his source was leading him into a discussion of saintly deaths. Paschasius was doing so in order to draw out a contrast between the passing of the Virgin and the deaths of other Christian saints, asking his congregation to remember the stories about 'the angels which came to the burials and tombs of whatever saint you like, and which carried the souls of the elect all the way to heaven with hymns', and to imagine how the assumption of the mother of God must have outshone them all.[84] Ælfric found a different way to plant the message in the minds of his hearers. He asked them to compare the assumption of the Virgin not to the death of another saint, but to their own departure from life. 'We read everywhere in books,' he said, 'that angels have very often come to the passing of good men (*to goddra manna forðscipe*), and with spiritual hymns led their souls to the heavens'.[85] The death-scenes found in hagiographies were clearly what Ælfric had in mind, when he said that these things could be 'read everywhere in books', but the message had been universalized to include any 'good man' who might have been present in his audience that day. In a later piece for the season of Lent, he spoke again about the deaths of 'good men', distinguishing them from the holy saints yet intimating that they shared essentially the same post-mortem state until Doomsday: 'What is the death of good men [*godra manna deað*] but a transition and a passage from death to everlasting life? The body turns to earth and awaits the resurrection, and feels nothing during that time. The pure soul also awaits the eternal resurrection, but it dwells in glory in that interval with the saints'.[86]

And in so doing, of course, these homilists had at last brought the angels down to the deathbeds of ordinary men and women, there to perform the duties which were once reserved for the holy saints. They still maintained that the saints were treated somewhat differently after their entry into the next world, for Christ himself had stated that 'in my Father's house there are many dwellings', and his words had generally been taken to imply some sense of a meritocracy within the society of heaven.[87] But this was no longer coupled with a conviction that death itself came differently to the exceptionally pious and the merely good. In a later sermon for the octave of Pentecost, Ælfric assured his congregation that all good men would be guided to their dissimilar places in the afterlife by exactly the same means. An angelic escort, he declared, would be provided for them all:

> God sends his angels to the passing of good men [*to goddra manna forðsciþe*], to take their souls at their departure and lead them to rest, as we learn in books, and Christ offers them a dwelling according to their works.[88]

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[84] Paschasius Radbertus, *De assumptione S. Mariae uirginis*, ch. 49, ed. Albert Ripberger, CCCM 56C (Turnhout, 1985), p. 130.
[85] Ælfric, *CH*, I.30 (ed. Clemoes, p. 432).
[86] *Ibid.*, II.13 (ed. Godden, p. 132).
[87] John 14.2.
[88] Ælfric, *Supp.*, XI (ed. Pope, i, 424–5). Ælfric did not always hold to a consistent line about the meritocratic organization of the afterlife: see Kabir, *Paradise*, pp. 38–43.

The 'books' which Ælfric had in mind included the seventh-century *Prognosticum futuri saeculi* ('Foreknowledge of the Age that is to Come'), the compilation of biblical and patristic wisdom made by Julian of Toledo (d. 690) which had done much to shape Ælfric's eschatological thought. Ælfric had made notes on the *Prognosticum* earlier in his career, and he used them now as he pieced together this new sermon.[89] As he reread his notes, Ælfric might have been surprised to see that Julian could only cite the biblical story of Lazarus as proof for his claim that angels attend 'the separation of holy souls [*sanctarum animarum*] as they leave the body'.[90] Ælfric himself knew of dozens more such stories, and had retold many of them in his own *Lives of the Saints*.[91] One might have expected that Ælfric's long study of hagiography would have encouraged him to differentiate sharply between the awesome spectacle of a saint's demise and the quiet stillness of the ordinary person's death. It did not. In his efforts to instruct his hearers about their own futures, Ælfric had succeeded instead in equating the two and in bringing the angels to the bedsides of every 'good man' in his congregation.

The ways in which these Anglo-Saxon homilists, both Ælfric and the anonymous redactors of the Three Utterances exemplum, grappled with their source material to make it speak to the needs of ordinary people would count for little if their congregations failed to take their words to heart. We cannot now interrogate the beliefs of the Anglo-Saxon laity directly, nor know what they made of their preachers' advice. Yet there are indications from other quarters that the Anglo-Saxons' understanding of death was indeed changing during the tenth and eleventh centuries. We find it reflected, for instance, in the new wave of saints' Lives produced in England at that time. The churchmen responsible for this explosion of hagiographic writing showed remarkably little interest in the sorts of deathbed wonders which had impressed their predecessors. The various Lives and *lectiones* written around the year 1000 in honour of Dunstan, archbishop of Canterbury (d. 988), stand as good examples of this new tone in late Anglo-Saxon hagiography. They spoke of no thunderous signs witnessed in the saint's final hour, but described only the quiet dignity which he had displayed at the end of his life. Dunstan's first hagiographer—an unknown cleric who signed himself only as 'B.'—said that the saint had sent forth his spirit like 'an old man, full of happy days'.[92] An eternal state of bliss awaited him in the next world, of course, since God had decided that 'he would take his reward in heaven, among the blessed hosts of angels'. That sentiment was taken up by another of Dunstan's devotees, a monk at the monastery of St Peter's in Ghent named Adelard (fl. 1006–11), who thought it likely that each of the citizens of heaven had welcomed Dunstan into heaven as one of their own, saying that the saint 'had turned out to be an angel among

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[89]   The series of excerpts from Julian's *Prognosticon* made by Ælfric are among his earlier extant writings, and are edited as an appendix in Milton McC. Gatch, *Preaching and Theology in Anglo-Saxon England: Ælfric and Wulfstan* (Toronto, 1977), pp. 134–46. For their influence on his later works, see Enid M. Raynes, 'MS. Boulogne-sur-Mer 63 and Ælfric', *Medium Ævum* 26 (1957), 65–73; and Milton McC. Gatch, 'MS Boulogne-sur-Mer 63 and Ælfric's First Series of *Catholic Homilies*', *JEGP* 65 (1966), 482–90.

[90]   Julian, *Prognosticum futuri saeculi*, I.10, ed. J.N. Hillgarth, CCSL 115 (Turnhout, 1976), p. 24.

[91]   Ælfric, *Lives of the Saints*, XX, XXVI, XXVIII, XXXIV and XXXVI, ed. Walter W. Skeat, *Ælfric's Lives of the Saints*, 2 vols. (London, 1881–90), i, 440; ii, 142, 162, 372 and 408.

[92]   B., *VD*, ch. 38 (ed Winterbottom and Lapidge, pp. 106–8).

angels, a patriarch among patriarchs, a prophet among prophets, an apostle among apostles, a martyr among martyrs (having suffered greatly for justice), a co-heir among confessors, and the purest virgin among holy virgins'.[93] But if any of those holy orders had descended to earth to stand beside Dunstan's deathbed, they had left no discernible sign of their presence. Adelard thought that the angels had probably been there all the same, since one of Dunstan's clerics had previously experienced a vision of the saint turning away a group of angels a few days before his eventual death, asking them to postpone their services for two more days until Dunstan had completed his necessary duties for the Ascension Day celebrations.[94] But when death did finally come, it remained a quiet and unremarkable affair. Devoid of signs or miracles, B. said that it had simply played out according to 'the age-old laws of death' (*leges auitae mortis*).[95]

Somehow, the old conviction that dying saints passed into fellowship with the angels no longer required proof. Hagiographers working in late Anglo-Saxon England merely asserted that this or that saint now enjoyed the posthumous company of heavenly beings, and saw no need to support that claim with evidence of miraculous signs witnessed at the deathbed. That freed some of them to indulge their imaginations to the fullest, as Byrhtferth of Ramsey did in honour of St Oda, in an exuberant piece of unsupported assertion which described how 'the power of God made Oda's soul ascend above the orbit of the Milky Way, above the solar and lunar spheres, enabled him to behold all the mysteries of the heavenly region and to see the joys of eternal bliss as well as to join in with the blessed throngs'.[96] There was more to this than a single writer being unconcerned about the absence of evidence for his claims; for even when first-hand testimony *was* available, some hagiographers thought it unnecessary to appeal to it. A long tenth-century retelling of the Life of St Wilfrid, for instance, made no mention of the strange and beautiful sound of beating wings heard at the saint's death and burial, despite the emphasis that the original *Vita Wilfridi* had placed upon the sound as evidence 'that the choirs of angels had come with Michael to lead the holy bishop's soul into paradise'.[97] It was not that the rewriter, Fredegaud, doubted that angels had been present: he still maintained that the archangel Michael had been at hand 'to take up the blessed man's spirit with hymnody'.[98] It was just that Fredegaud had deemed it unnecessary to prove his claim by recourse to the reports of others, as if the actual evidence of deathbed visitations carried little weight in the eyes of his readers.

There are perhaps two ways of explaining why the attention of hagiographers had drifted from the deathbed in this way. The first might be to see it as a symptom of Continental influence on the religious culture of Anglo-Saxon England. Frankish hagiographers had once

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[93] Adelard, *Lectiones in depositione S. Dunstani*, XII, ed. Winterbottom and Lapidge, *Early Lives of Dunstan*, p. 144.
[94] Adelard, *Lectio* X (ed. Winterbottom and Lapidge, pp. 136–8).
[95] B., *Vita Dunstani*, ch. 38 (ed. Winterbottom and Lapidge, pp. 104–8). Adelard's emphasis was little different: cf. *Lectio* XI (ed. Winterbottom and Lapidge, p. 138–40).
[96] Byrhtferth, *VO*, II.1 (ed. Lapidge, p. 32).
[97] Stephen, *VW*, ch. 66 (ed. Colgrave, p. 142).
[98] See Fredegaud, *Breuiloquium*, lines 1293–1308 and 1354–9 (ed. Campbell, pp. 57–8 and 60). On the identity of the author of the *Breuiloquium* and a speculative, but compelling, reconstruction of his career, see Michael Lapidge, 'A Frankish scholar in tenth-century England: Frithegod of Canterbury/Fredegaud of Brioude', *ASE* 17 (1988), 45–65.

been as keenly interested in demonstrable signs of angels attending saintly deaths as were their counterparts in eighth-century England,[99] but by the Carolingian period it had become common to find Frankish writers claiming that a saint 'had been received by an angelic chorus into the company of the saints' after their death, with not the slightest piece of evidence to support their claim.[100] Since a number of the hagiographers at work in late Anglo-Saxon England (like the monk Fredegaud) were recent arrivals from the Continent, we might find it unremarkable that these overseas scholars wrote about deathbed miracles in ways which differed from earlier Anglo-Saxon writers in the age of Bede. Yet if this accounts for some relatively superficial changes in the style and presentation of miracles in Anglo-Saxon hagiography, it does not explain why even English hagiographers seem to have changed their mind about the underlying significance of angels attending the dead. We have already seen how eighth-century Anglo-Saxon hagiographers deemed the arrival of an angelic psychopomp to be an infallible sign of the sanctity of the individual whose soul was being receiving. Even if one knew nothing else about a person and their way of life, to know that their soul had been collected by angels after death was to know that God had looked upon them as one of his chosen saints. When Bede, for instance, read in the earliest eighth-century *Vita Cuthberti* that a young shepherd named Hadwald had been seen 'being carried to heaven in the hands of angels and set amid the choirs of angels, saints and martyrs', Bede concluded at once that this obscure Hadwald must therefore have been a secret holy man himself. Retelling the story of Hadwald's angelic death in his own versions of the *Vita Cuthberti*, Bede honoured the shepherd's memory by identifying him as both 'a saint' and 'a chosen soldier of God' (*praelectus miles*).[101] This was a logic which tenth-century English hagiographers did not share. When St Dunstan saw angels collecting the soul of a dead boy from Glastonbury, his hagiographers took it as evidence of Dunstan's sanctity (since the story showed his powers of spiritual sight) but not the boy's. So unremarkable was the youth that his death was immediately forgotten by Ceolwig, prior of Glastonbury, until Dunstan reminded him the next day. Even then, neither the prior nor the hagiographer (who we know only as 'B.') saw fit even to make a note of the dead boy's name.[102] Seeing angels taking an interest in human death might once have commanded both awe and reverence for the person receiving their ministrations, but evidently no longer.

Rather than attributing this new attitude to the influence of ideas and personnel from the Continent, we should instead see the hagiographers' reinterpretation of angelic

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[99] Venantius Fortunatus, *Vita S. Radegundis*, II.22, ed. Bruno Krusch, MGH, SS rer. Merov. II (Hanover, 1888), p. 392; *Vita Aldegundis*, ed. 29 (ed. Levison, pp. 89–90).

[100] *Vita Ansberti*, ch. 24, ed. Wilhelm Levison, MGH, SS rer. Merov. V (Hanover, 1910), p. 636. Cf. also *Vita Lantberti abbatis Fontanellensis et episcopi Lugdunensis*, ed. Levison, MGH, SS. rer. Merov. V, p. 609; *Vita Condedi*, ch. 10, ed. Levison, MGH, SS. rer. Merov. V, p. 651; *Vita S. Vulframni*, ch. 13, ed. Levison, MGH, SS rer. Merov. V, p. 672; *Vita Sigiramni abbatis Longoretensis*, ch. 33, ed. Bruno Krusch, MGH, SS rer. Merov. IV (Hanover, 1902), p. 625; *Vita prosaica Landelini Crispiensis*, ch. 8, ed. Wilhelm Levison, MGH, SS rer. Merov. VI (Hanover, 1913), p. 444; *Vita secunda S. Arnulfi*, ch. 23, ed. Peter Boscho, AASS, July IV (Antwerp, 1725), p. 444; *Vita S. Chlodulphi*, ch. 17, ed. Godfried Henschen, AASS, June II (Antwerp, 1698), p. 132.

[101] Respectively *VCA*, IV.10 (ed. Colgrave, p. 126); Bede, *VCP*, ch. 34 (ed. Colgrave, pp. 260–4); and Bede, *Vita metrica S. Cuthberti*, line 667, ed. Werner Jaager, *Bedas metrische 'Vita sancti Cuthberti'* (Leipzig, 1935), p. 109.

[102] B., *VD*, chs. 20, 34–5 (ed. Winterbottom and Lapidge, pp. 64, 96–100); cf. Adelard, *Lectio* V (ed. Winterbottom and Lapidge, pp. 122–4).

psychopomps as a necessary reaction to those growing numbers of homilists who, as we have seen, were now promising their congregations that 'God sends his angels to the passing of good men, to take their souls at their departure and lead them to rest'.[103] Their promises had been born out of the challenge of providing their flocks with concrete instruction about death, when only the passing of the very good and the very bad could really be known with any certainty. Rather than probe the more complicated grey area between these two extremes, an unclear middle ground about which some eighth- and ninth-century writings were noticeably anxious, homilists preferred to find ways of reducing the uncertainty. They did so either by deliberately recasting old material about 'saints' in the more expansive language of 'good men'; or instead by making clear that when they spoke of 'holy men' (*halgan menn*), they meant only individuals who had performed small and achievable works of piety during their lives. According to one eleventh-century sermon, the defining characteristics of these *halgan menn* amounted to little more than a charitable and obedient disposition, a love for Christian teaching and a willingness to give alms.[104] And by playing down the difference between the exalted saints and the ordinary good in this way, the homilists had brought the angels away from the tombs of the holy dead and towards the deathbed of the average believer. They did not always agree about precisely what the angels might do there: perhaps angels fought with demons to gain custody over departing souls (a popular choice); or perhaps the decision rested with God, who measured the worth of a soul before arranging a suitable escort for its journey.[105] Each homilist had his own opinion, conditioned by his sources and perhaps also by his optimism. But they shared a common intent to make their message apply to as many of their audience as possible. By simply refusing to talk about the difference between the exceptionally saintly and the averagely pious, every one of these varied and even incompatible sermons available to Anglo-Saxon preachers in tenth- and eleventh-century England drew the angels closer to the deaths of ordinary people. That necessarily reduced the utility of the deathbed for hagiographers, too, for if heavenly psychopomps were not now thought to be the exclusive privilege of the holiest men and women, then sightings of angels at the moment of death could no longer been used as an infallible marker of a person's sanctity. The dwindling interest of Anglo-Saxon hagiographers in proving the presence of angels in a saint's final hour stands, therefore, as an indication of the mutual influence that sermons and saints' Lives exerted upon one another. The more that homilies drew upon hagiographic tropes, reworking them to make them applicable to the circumstances facing ordinary Christians, the more too did hagiographies need to adjust their criteria for sanctity to maintain the special reverence owed to the 'very special dead'. Through this almost unnoticed process of redefinition, successive generations of Anglo-Saxon Christians had managed to rewrite the rules of the otherworld.

This chapter has involved itself less with what the angels were believed to do, than with exactly when and for what reasons they were believed to do it. Behind it all lies a single biblical verse, which told how 'it came to pass, that the beggar died and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom. And the rich man also died, and he was buried in hell'. The

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[103] Ælfric, *Supp.*, XI (quoted above, p. 000).
[104] Napier XLVI (pp. 237–8).
[105] Compare Napier XLVI (pp. 235–6); Byrhtferth, *Enchiridion*, postscript (ed. Baker and Lapidge, p. 246); Ælfric, *Supp.* XI (ed. Pope, i, 424–5). See also Wright, 'Next-to-last things', pp. 315–16, 335–40.

shifting emphases of successive Anglo-Saxon writers essentially form an extended gloss on the fate of Lazarus and the meaning of his death. It was never particularly a question of the angels themselves, only the significance of their actions. But perhaps the pursuit after significance helped, in its own small way, to redefine the kind of world that the Anglo-Saxons believed they inhabited. The spirits who walked abroad in early Christian England could disguise their appearance but not their presence. There was always some sign that showed their utterly different nature to the mundane sphere which they occasionally visited. Simply by manifesting themselves in the human world they distorted its natural laws and sent a palpable ripple through this temporary, transitory place. The rarity with which such signs appeared at human deaths might have contributed to a sense of unease about what awaited the soul, but it also reinforced the notion that angelic intervention, if it could be attained through prayer, came with awesome power. But the efforts of tenth-century preachers to find some system in death, to discern laws that governed the soul in its last moments, meant that they talked about angels simply as part of that system. There was little consensus about the details—maybe the angels would come to inspect the dying, perhaps they only came for the good—but the moral standards required before an angel might show an interest in one's death had slipped. That which they had once done only for the saints, accompanied by heavenly fire and thunderous singing, was now being done silently and invisibly at less exalted deathbeds. But that silence now made angels more akin to the mundane natural forces of the world. They worked without discernible trace, and the world carried on without noticing. It was a small step towards a different kind of mental universe, in which the supernatural might not necessarily be less powerful but was certainly more subtle in its workings.

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The cumulative impression offered by the last two chapters is not only that beliefs about angels did indeed undergo gradual transformation over the course of the early Middle Ages, therefore, but also that the powers ascribed to angels by Anglo-Saxon Christians had become increasingly circumscribed as a result of that transformation. Some might choose to see in this an affirmation of the notion of a 'disenchantment of the world'—a concept coined by Weber to describe slow diminution of old beliefs about the place of the supernatural and the sacral in the physical world.[106] Certainly, we have witnessed a community of believers growing increasingly reluctant to ascribe any meaningful power to the invisible guardian spirits in which they had once placed so much emphasis; and we have also now charted gradual disappearance of the numinous manifestations which were once thought to accompany the deaths of certain people. But Weber defined his notion of 'disenchantment' as the 'great historic process in the development of religions', whereby a belief in the irrational and the supernatural might come to be progressively ousted by the spread of rational thought. This has proved to be an alluring paradigm for historical scholarship, perhaps chiefly due to the comforting way that it equates

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[106] Max Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*; trans. Talcott Parsons, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, 1958), p. 105.

the advance of reason with the approach of modernity.[107] Yet if we can see that the Anglo-Saxons' world was indeed, in some small respects, becoming less overtly 'enchanted' than it had once been, it is by no means clear that it was some new wave of scepticism which was stripping the angels of their old significance. Quite the contrary, in fact, for at the same time as the status of angels was diminishing, early medieval Christians were witnessing the rise of miracle-working saints and their cults, as well as continued attempts to enlist the aid of the higher powers through prayer, benediction and supplication. Nevertheless, if it can hardly be said that the early Middle Ages were hostile to the supernatural, ancient beliefs about angels did not always sit easily amongst these emerging ideas about saints' cults and correct patterns of prayer. As the final part of this book seeks to show, it was perhaps chiefly through the writing of prayers and of saints' Lives that the Anglo-Saxons' came to rethink much of what they had always thought they knew about the place of angels in their world.

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[107] For a cogent critique of the influence of Weber's 'disenchantment' on historians of religion, see Alexandra Walsham, 'The Reformation and the "disenchantment of the world" reassessed', *The Historical Journal* 51 (2008), 497–528.