

The Living God in Ælfric's *De Falsis Diis*

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'He always took great pleasure in instructing the young men and boys, in explaining Latin books to them in the English language, in teaching them the rules of grammar and metre, and exhorting them gently to strive for greater things.'¹ This was said of Æthelwold, bishop of Winchester 963–84, but the same and more could be said of his pupil, Ælfric, with the added proviso that linguistic competence was desirable, not merely as an end in itself, but as the means to a greater end, the propagation of the faith. Writing in English for the benefit of a non-Latinate audience, Ælfric addressed the problem of an inadequately educated clergy with realistic practicality by providing two collections of homilies for the Temporale and some supplementary pieces. For the monastic *schola* he produced a grammar based on Priscian, the first such work in English, a Latin–English vocabulary, and a colloquy to assist in learning Latin. In response to specific requests or requirements he also wrote an anthology of saints' lives for devotional reading, a condensed version of the *Regularis Concordiae*, several pastoral letters, and some translations from Scripture into the vernacular, this last being undertaken with the utmost reluctance on Ælfric's part. In each case the appropriate material is presented in a style both rich and lucid, innovative and apt, guiding understanding, correcting error, teaching the true faith.

The distinction of Ælfric's style has long been recognized, particularly with respect to the rhetorical and poetic value of his alliterative prose in the homilies and saints' lives. His lexical choice and usage have generally been considered in relation to that peculiarly Ælfrician device, that is, for their ornamental value rather than for their contribution to, and reinforcement of, the theme. To consider the rhetorical quality of his style as distinct from his pedagogical purpose, however, is to deny his adherence to the principle that style serves and is secondary to the single worthy aim, the proclamation of the faith in all its beauty and inspiration. Even at the level of lexical choice and usage that purpose is discernible. In Ælfric's usage certain words are made to do double duty, and they deserve recognition for their labour. First by judicious selection and then by restricting the application of a chosen word to a limited context, Ælfric sometimes chooses to endow a word in

¹From the *Vita Sancti Adelwoldi* attributed to Wulfstan, *Patrologia Latina*, 137, col. 95; translation by Helmut Gneuss, 'The Origin of Standard Old English and Æthelwold's School at Winchester', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 1 (1972), 73.

common currency with a theological connotation so that its employment then serves to support and enrich his argument.

A case in point is the word *lifiende*, for which he reserves a sense of 'eternally living', referring exclusively to God or members of the Trinity. For mortal men, including Christ in his human aspect, and for other creatures, Ælfric uses the alternative participial form *libbende* or, depending on the context, *cucu*. In *De Falsis Diis*,² Ælfric is directly concerned with exposing the error of pagans who adhere to false gods — classical, Danish, and Biblical — and with demonstrating the superiority of the Christian God by virtue of both his eternal nature and his power. This usage of *lifiende* is important in differentiating between the Christian God and the pagan gods Ælfric means to discredit; the lexis itself constitutes a theological statement, and this subtle semantic support gives his argument a quality of irrefutability by its insistent, subliminal message.

The presence of at least some part of *De Falsis Diis* in eight Old English manuscripts,³ including Wulfstan's revision,⁴ and in a free translation in an Old Icelandic sermon,⁵ attests to its wide dissemination and authority. Pope places *De Falsis Diis* among Ælfric's early pieces on the basis of manuscript evidence (I, 147) and infers, from the parenthetical assertion concerning the relationship of Jove and Óðinn, complete only in one manuscript, that the extant fragments represent more than one stage of composition, preserving revisions made by Ælfric himself (II, 673). If this is so, then one can assume that where Ælfric's lexical choice and application significantly reinforce the theme, and where this is retained in revised versions, this usage is conscious and deliberate.

The essential difference between God and the pagan gods lies in God's eternal existence. The origin of the gods can be traced to a particular source, and, since they are unable to transcend death, they can be destroyed, whereas God is 'æfre unbegunnen and ungeendod' (l. 21). The quality of eternal existence and the capacity to grant life to His creatures belong solely to God, and Ælfric's usage distinguishes between His eternal life and the mortal life that is His gift. The pagan gods and the various idols have an earthly origin, the former born of human imagination and the latter of the skill of men. Thus neither can be comparable with God. Ælfric dismisses Saturn and his progeny as being both base and foul by nature and devotes relatively little time to them, claiming that

²*Homilies of Ælfric: A Supplementary Collection*, edited by John C. Pope, 2 vols, EETS, o.s. 260 (1967). Pope notes the restricted sense of *lifiende* in his glossary, II, 883.

³See Pope, *Homilies of Ælfric*, II, 673–74, for a discussion of the extant manuscripts.

⁴*The Homilies of Wulfstan*, edited by Dorothy Bethurum (Oxford, 1957), p. 221–24.

⁵'Um ðat hvaðanotru hofst' in *Hauksbók*, edited by Eiríkur Jónsson and Finnur Jónsson (Copenhagen, 1892–96), p. 156.

Se syrwienda deofol, þe swicað embe mancyn, gebrohte þa hæþenan on þæt healice gedwyld. (ll. 159–60)

The plotting devil, who deceives mankind, brought those heathens into profound error.

Scandinavian heathenism is dealt with simultaneously by identifying Þórr with Jove, Óðinn with Mercury, and Frigg with Venus, and belief in these gods is encompassed in *þæt healice gedwyld*. The worship of idols is easily shown to be foolish and Ælfric wonders at the self-deception of the smith who

swa lange he sloh þone samworhtan god, and mid his græfseaxe holode hetelice þa eagan, ne stod him nan ege for þære anlicnysse; ac þonne heo geworht wæs, he wurpode hi for god. (ll. 206–09)

as long as he struck at the unfinished god, and, with his sculpting tool, violently hollowed out the eyes, there was no awe upon him of the image; but when it was finished, he worshipped it as a god.

He points out the use made by the devil of such idols, to the peril of the souls of the worshippers (ll. 197–201), but the case for the deification of idols seems, in Ælfric's view, too weak to require extensive rebuttal.

Ælfric diverges from his source⁶ in explaining the reason for pagan worship of natural elements such as the sun and moon, fire, water, and earth, emphasizing the supremacy of God as the creator of the world and all its parts, 'us mannum to bryce' (l. 91). His poetic expansion of Martin of Braccara's version suggests that the pagan devotion was inspired by the striking appearance of the sun, moon, stars, and fire, and by gratitude to the earth for food (ll. 82–98). Martin's explanation that the elements were believed to have emerged of their own accord is not taken up, except that the statement in lines 90–91 may refer to this belief as a misconception:

Ac hi mihton tocnawan, gif hi cuðan ðat gescead, þæt se is ana God þe hi ealle gesceop.

But they would know, if they had the power of reason, that it is God alone who created them all.

Both Wulfstan and the Icelandic homilist follow Ælfric rather than Martin in this explanation. Ælfric's treatment accords with the theme in this section that God the creator is superior to any part of his creation, and the simplicity of these grounds for

⁶Pope identifies the source as Martin de Braccara, *De Correctione Rusticorum*, ch. 6, p. 186: 'Alii adorabant solem, alii lunam vel stellas, alii ignem, alii aquam profundam vel fontes aquarum, credentes haec omnia non a deo esse facta ad usum hominum, sed ipsa ex se orta deos esse' (*Homilies of Ælfric*, II, 680–81). An English translation of this section is given by Ursula and Peter Dronke in *The Prologue of the Prose Edda: Explorations of a Latin Background* (Reykjavík, 1977), p. 155. See also Audrey L. Meaney, 'Ælfric and Idolatry', *Journal of Religious History*, 13 (1984), 119.

dismissal allows him to move quickly to the main part of his homily, dealing with false gods of the Old Testament. It is in this section that the significance of his exclusive application of *lifiende* is most apparent.

The *Microfiche Concordance to Old English*⁷ lists some one hundred and twenty-three occurrences of *lifiende*, or one of its inflected forms, in Ælfric's work, including the variant spellings *lifigende*, *lyfiende*, and *lyfigende*. The word is associated with *God*, *drihten* (referring to God), *gast*, *Hælend* and *Crist*, with only two exceptions, and occurs in homilies, saints' lives, and letters. Of the exceptions, one is the false attribution of eternal divinity to Bel in *De Falsis Diis* (ll. 371–72): 'Ne þinc(ð) þe, la, Danihel, þæt þes deorwyrða Bel sy *lifiende* g(o)d' ('Do not suppose, Daniel, that this precious Bel is a living god'). This is followed by a rebuttal and proof of its falsity. The other occurs in the *vita* of St Cecilia: 'Valerianus andwyrde hwæt bið æfre soðlicre oððe to gelyfanne ænigum *lifigendum* menn' (ll. 66–67) ('Valerius replied what is always true and to be believed by any living man').⁸ The explanation for the use of the collocation *lifigendum menn* is not immediately evident as in the previous example from *De Falsis Diis* but it is significant that Valerian is not at this time a Christian. Lines 69–70 read 'Se papa ða siððan hine sona gefullode and his geleafan hine tæhte' ('The Pope then immediately baptized him and taught him his faith'), and it is worth noting that, after his baptism and instruction, he later describes his brother as 'on þysum life wunigende' (l. 88). As both exceptional examples are spoken by non-Christians, it is possible that Ælfric's usage takes into account pagan ignorance of God's eternal existence. His restriction of the meaning of *lifiende* refers to a Christian concept which a pagan would not be expected to possess.

The *Microfiche Concordance* lists substantially more occurrences in Old English overall of *lifiendellyfiende* than of *libbendellybbende*, approximately four hundred of the former and two hundred of the latter; and only in Ælfric's work is there any reservation of either of these forms to a special use. In Ælfric, *libbende* is associated with a variety of nouns: *casere*, *folc*, *Cristen*, *apostas*, *bisceopas*, *mæssepreosts*, *englas*, *man*, *mancyn*, *Cuðbertus*, *stanas*, *gesceaft*, *cild*, *mæden*, *witegan*, *cyningas*, *godspellere*, *modor*, *eorþan*, *sawle*. Ælfric applies *libbende* a number of times to Christ in his mortal aspect, but only in one instance does the word refer to God: 'Nu todælde petrus swutelice þone soðan geleafan þa ða he cwæð, þu eart crist þas lifiendan godes sunu; se is *lybbende* god þe hæfð lif and wununge þurh hine sylfne buton anginne' ('Now Peter expressed the true faith

⁷Richard Venezky and Antonette diPaolo Healy, *A Microfiche Concordance to Old English* (Toronto, 1980).

⁸*Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, edited by W. W. Skeat, EETS, o.s. 76, 82 (1881, 1900; reprinted, 2 vols, 1966), II, 356.

clearly when he said, You are Christ, son of the living God; He is the living God who has life and being through himself, without beginning').⁹ Here the clause 'se is lybbende god . . . buton anginne' explains the eternal, independent nature of God's life as if in definition of the meaning of *lifiendan* in the previous clause. God lives, without beginning and without ever having been created; He is the sole creator. It is noteworthy that the form *Ælfric* chose to reserve as an epithet of God is the one that occurs most widely in the Old English *corpus* in its general sense, so that the familiar concept of life, normally comprehensible only in an earthly context, is linked by restricted usage to its source or creator.

In *De Falsis Diis* the restriction of *lifiende* to the divine attribute, 'eternally living', helps to reinforce the argument that the life of man and beast is different in quality from that of God, and that mortal life is conferred by the Trinity (l. 19): 'and purh þone Gast syndon ealle gesceafte geliffæste' ('and through the Spirit all creatures are brought to life'). There is thus an important distinction between the Christian God and the pagan gods of the Old Testament who are limited by mortality to a specific span of time and whom *Ælfric* describes as *cucu*.

While there are many instances elsewhere in Old English literature of *lifiende* associated with words for God, it is also commonly applied to mortals, frequently in material with which *Ælfric* was familiar, for example in the vernacular translations of Gregory and Bede, and in the contemporary works of Wulfstan. Many of the instances of *lifiende* occur in glosses, where the Latin word is usually a form of *vivare*. In these works, there is no differentiation between *lifiende* and the other forms of the present participle of *libban*. There is no inherent semantic distinction between the participial variants. In *De Falsis Diis*, wherever *Ælfric* preserves a close parallel with his source, his use of *lifiende* corresponds with some form of *vivare* also,¹⁰ but in line 436 the *Deus vivens* of the Vulgate source¹¹ is rendered *cucu*, *Ælfric's* preference distinguishing between the eternally living and the merely animate. The other instance of *cucu* (l. 548) corresponds, negatively, to *exanimus*.¹² This essential difference between the dragon and God implied by the epithets is emphatically demonstrated by the subsequent destruction of the dragon.

⁹Homily XXVII, 'Passis Apostatorum Petri et Pauli', *Catholic Homilies*, edited by B. Thorpe (London, 1844), First Series, p. 366, l. 31.

¹⁰Line 345: He is se lifigenda God and ece on weoruld (cf. 'ipse est enim Deus vivens et æternus sæcular', Daniel vi, 25–27, Pope, *Homilies of Ælfric*, II, 695). Line 367: 'ac ic gelyfe on þone lifigendan God' (cf. 'sed . . . viventum Deum', Daniel, xiv, 3, 4, Pope, II, 696). Lines 371–72: 'Ne þinc(ð) þe . . . þæt þes deorwyrða Bel sy lyfiende g(o)d' (cf. 'non videtur tibi esse Bel vivens deus', Daniel, xiv, 7, Pope, II, 697).

¹¹Daniel xiv, 22, 25: 'Deus vivens' (Pope, II, 700). The source continues; 'iste autem non est Deus vivens', but this clause is omitted by *Ælfric*, the distinction between Bel and God having been sufficiently drawn by his use of *cucu* and *lyfigende* respectively.

¹²'for þam þe he cucu næs', l. 548, corresponding to 'sicut exanimus', *Historia Ecclesiastica Tripartita*, ix, 28, attributed to Cassiodorus (Pope, II, 706 and 670).

On the sole occasion (l. 372) when *lifiende* refers to a being other than God, when Darius falsely attributes it to Bel, the application elicits the response, 'Ne dwela tu, cying' ('Do not err, King').

In Ælfric's work, as elsewhere, *cucu*, refers to mortal life, but there are three examples in which some related form of *cucu* refers to eternal life granted by God to those, otherwise mortal, whose faith earns them redemption:

(1) And we ealle cumað *cuce* to him togeanes of ure deaðe rærde þurh his drihtenlican mihte.¹³

And we all come towards him alive, raised from our death by his lordly power.

(2) Se þe soðlice gelyfð on þone lyfigende fæder and his ancennedan sunu and on þone halgan gast, þeah þe he dead beo, he bið swa þeah *cucu*.¹⁴

He who truly believes in the living Father and his incarnate Son and in the Holy Spirit, though he be dead yet he will be alive.

(3) He wæs ða dead þurh þa Iudeiscan and he *cwicede* us þe on hine lyfað.¹⁵
He was then dead because of the Jews and he gave life to us who believe in him.

In these instances, life, whether physical and temporal or spiritual and eternal, is clearly an attribute of a creature, granted by God, a familiar theological concept. Similarly, in the Lindisfarne Gospels:

(sicut enim pater suscitatur mortuos et uiuificatur sic et filius quos uult uiuificatur) swa forðon se fæder auecceð ða deaðo & inlihteð vel *cwicað* swa æc ðe sunu ðaða wil *cwicað*.¹⁶

for as the Father wakes the dead and enlivens or quickens so also the Son quickens whom he wishes.

In yet another homily Ælfric clearly attributes the gift of life to God's creative power: 'And ælc sawul bið gesceapen ðurh god and ælces mannes lichama, þe on life bið *cucu* and se ðe elles gelyfð, he gelyfð gedwyld' ('And each soul is created by God and the body of each man who is quick in life and whoever believes otherwise believes a falsehood').¹⁷ The notion of the soul as the essence of the life force originating in God appears in Gregory's *Dialogues* also: 'forðon swa swa þære sawle mægn cwicaþ and onstyreð þone lichaman swa þæt godcunde mægn gefyllað ealle gesceafta, þe he gesceop' ('because just as the power of the soul quickens and

¹³Letter to Wulfgeat, *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch*, edited by S. J. Crawford, EETS, o.s. 160 (1922; reprinted with additions, edited by N. R. Ker, 1969), pp. 15–75, l. 80.

¹⁴'The Forty Soldiers', Skeat, *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, II, 246, ll. 123–25.

¹⁵'On a Martyr's Day', *Twelfth-Century Homilies in MS Bodley 343*, edited by A. O. Belfour (London, 1904; reprinted, 1962), p. 75, l. 20.

¹⁶*The Four Gospels in Anglo-Saxon, Northumbrian, and Old Mercian Versions*, edited by W. W. Skeat (Cambridge, 1871–87; reprinted, Darmstadt, 1970), pp. 13–187, John 5. 21, p. 49.

¹⁷'Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary', *Angelsächsische Homilien und Heiligenleben*, edited by B. Assmann (Kassel, 1889; reprinted, Darmstadt, 1964), p. 37, ll. 319–21.

moves the body so the Divine power fills all the creatures which He created').¹⁸ Since *cucu* is usually employed as the antonym of *dead*, for example '*cuca* oððe dead'¹⁹ and 'ægðer ge þam *cucam* ge ðam deadum',²⁰ it may be assumed that, in Ælfric's usage, except in the specific examples given in which it refers to God-given eternal life, it always refers to mortal life deriving from God.

The eternal aspect of *lifiende* is not reflected in Wulfstan's revised homily based on *De Falsis Diis* nor in the Old Icelandic version in *Hauksbók*. Wulfstan's homily omits much of Ælfric's material, concentrating on the creation and worship of classical and Scandinavian gods. Thus he does not include the sections of *De Falsis Diis* dealing with the exposure of the priests of Bel, the slaughter of the dragon, and the destruction of the idol of Serapis where Ælfric's exclusive application of *lifiende* appears. However, Wulfstan's usage elsewhere suggests that he did not attribute to *lifiende* a concept of eternal life, but that it was considered simply as a variant of *libbende*: 'And ful micel hlaforðswice eac bið on worulde þæt man his hlaforð of life forræde oððe of land lifiendne drife' ('And it is very great treachery also if a man should deprive his lord of life or drive him, living, from the land').²¹

The homily in *Hauksbók*, which is based substantially on *De Falsis Diis*,²² retains more of Ælfric's material, but in only three places does the parallel text of Ælfric contain either *lifiende* or *cucu*. In line 440, Ælfric's 'se þe is lyfigande God' has no equivalent in *Hauksbók* which omits a brief section at that point, resuming a close paraphrase in the following clause. In none of those three cases where the Icelandic text retains a rendering of *cucu* or *lifiende* does it preserve the special denotation found in Ælfric:

(1) He is se *lifigenda* God. (Ælfric, l. 345)

He is the living God.

(2) Ne þinc(ð) þe, la, Danihel, þæt þes deorwyrða Bel sy *lifiende* g(o)d. (Ælfric, ll. 371–72)

Do not think, Daniel, that this precious Bel may be a living god.

Hann er guð almattegr. (*Hauksbók*, p. 162, l. 9)

He is God Almighty.

Eigi þickir þer sua Daniel sem Bel se *lifande* gud. (*Hauksbók*, p. 162, ll. 24–25)

Do not think, Daniel, that Bel may be a living god.

¹⁸'Gregory the Great Dialogues', *Bischof Waerferths von Worcester Uebersetzung der Dialoge Gregors des Grossen*, edited by H. Hecht (Leipzig and Hamburg, 1900–07; reprinted, Darmstadt, 1965), p. 268, l. 16.

¹⁹*King Alfred's Orosius*, edited by Henry Sweet (London, 1883; reprinted, 1959), p. 134, l. 23.

²⁰'Se læssa creda', *Homilies of Ælfric*, edited by B. Thorpe (London, 1844–46), Second Series, p. 596, l. 6.

²¹Bethurum, *Homilies of Wulfstan*, p. 263, ll. 79–81.

²²Arnold Taylor, '*Hauksbók* and Ælfric's *De Falsis Diis*', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 3 (1969), 101–09.

(3) Ne miht þu nu cweþan pæp þes ne sy
cucu god. (Ælfric, l. 436)
You cannot say now that this is not a living
god.

Mant þu þess dylia at þessi se *lifande* guð.
(*Hauksbók*, p. 163, ll. 10–11)
Will you deny that this is a living god?

In the first example, the *Hauksbók* homilist prefers a different epithet altogether, one that does convey a divine aspect but which does not preserve the sense of eternal existence of Ælfric's *lifigenda*. In the second, *lifiende* is translated by the cognate form *lifande* but, in the lines which follow, the *Hauksbók* author makes a terse reference to Bel's inability to eat and disregards Ælfric's 'Ne dwela þu, cyning'. In Ælfric, though Daniel proceeds to refute the king's specific claim that Bel eats, the accusation of error is a response to the claim 'þat þes deorwyrða Bel sy lifiende god', rather than to the circumstantial material in the following clause, 'nu . . . to lace?' and therefore contains a judgment of an error of faith which the Icelandic homily loses. In the third example, Ælfric's *cucu* is rendered as *lifande* in *Hauksbók*, as though the Icelandic homilist either did not see any significant difference between Ælfric's *cucu* and *lifiende* or that he did not regard it as worthy of preservation. A third possible explanation is that OI *kvikr*, while corresponding etymologically to *cucu*, may not have been judged appropriate in association with *guð*. *Kvikr* occurs generally as the antonym of *dauðr*, but is used most often with reference to animals. The *Icelandic–English Dictionary*²³ cites several cases where *kvikr* refers to men, but the collocation *kvikr guð* may have seemed unacceptable to the Icelandic writer and thus not available here as a translation of *cucu*. In fact, the brute association of *cucu*, common also in English, is entirely appropriate to Ælfric's purpose here. Most likely, the *Hauksbók* homilist was simply unaware of the significance of Ælfric's usage; the consistency of his restricted application cannot be discerned from only those two homilies with which the Icelandic homilist was demonstrably familiar.²⁴ To a native English speaker, however, Ælfric's semantic limitation of *lifiende*, occurring consistently in a specific context, would have provided a subtle, but insistent, reinforcement of his theme. By the simple device of reserving a word to denote the eternal life of God and thus distinguishing it from the temporal life of His creatures, Ælfric is able to incorporate a theological statement in support of his theme without interruption to his narrative.

²³Richard Cleasby and Guðbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic–English Dictionary*, with supplement by Sir William Craigie (Oxford, 1969), s.v. *kvikr*.

²⁴Taylor, 'Hauksbók and Ælfric's *De Falsis Diis*', p. 108.