Name Patterns in Aelfric's *Catholic Homilies**

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A COLLECTION OF ANGLO-SAXON HOMILIES does not seem to be the most likely place to search for name patterns. It is not that names were less common in Old English than in present day English, but sermons or homilies as they were more often called would appear to draw sparingly upon names other than those of sacred figures or of the celestial regions. However, Aelfric's homilies cover the calendar dates of ecclesiastical feasts through the Christian year and they introduce a number of idionyms (a term I have coined for personal names) and toponyms (land or place names), which are of interest for their patterns and the use Aelfric makes of them. Aelfric was a monk and masspriest in southern England from the year 987 until 1005, during which period he wrote two series of sermons, one of forty titles, another of forty-five, all of them honoring saints of special events in the story of Christianity. After he became abbot of Ensham in the last named year, administrative duties apparently sapped his scholarly production.[1] Since the sermons begin with the creation of the world, leading to an explication of the text in *Genesis,* and then proceed through many dramatic events before and after the crucifixion of Jesus, including the doctrines of the Church and the narrative of the Gospel, Aelfric covers a good deal of territory, both in literal and theological terms. The names he draws upon are made to serve his homiletic themes.

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[1] Aelfric was born in Wessex ca. 955 and studied in Bishop Aetholwold's monastery at Winchester. He became a priest in 987, serving for two years at the monastery in Cernel, Dorchester. He may have returned to Winchester for two years and then resumed his life at Cernel until the year 1005, when he was appointed abbot for the Benedictine establishment at Ensham near Oxford. He remained there until his death sometime between 1015 and 1020. He wrote *The Catholic Homilies* between 990 and 994. His other works include *Lives of the Saints,* 996; translations of the Old Testament, 997–98; treatises on astronomy, physics, monastic life, and his *Colloquies* a reader in Latin and English for school boys.

In preaching a sermon for December twenty-fifth, which he entitled "On the Nativity of Our Lord," Aelfric praised Bethlehem, the birthplace of the Messiah, saying: "*Bethlehem* is interpreted 'Bread House,' and in it was Christ, the true bread brought forth, who saith of himself 'I am the vital bread, which descendeth from heaven, and he who eateth of this bread shall not die to eternity'."[2] The Hebrew "bayth leh' khem" does mean "house of bread," probably in relation to the showbread prepared for the priests to eat in the sacred tabernacle.[3] Bethlehem's ancient name was *Ephrata*, meaning "fruitful."[4] Aelfric certainly adapted the literal meaning, "Bread House," to the Lord's Supper, which became celebrated as the Catholic rite of the Mass. Thus, as a Catholic pastor, he was able to turn the etymology to religious persuasion, which could be termed indoctrination as well as enlightenment.

"Bread House" as a place name fits into the basic category called Incident naming, since the making of bread is a happening, and so is the act of consuming it. I shall, therefore, capitalize Incident whenever the word is used in order to set it apart as a pattern which Aelfric draws upon in his use of names.

When he preaches upon "The Passion of St. Stephen, Proto-martyr," Aelfric tells the congregation that "*Stephen* is a Greek name, which was translated in Latin as *Coronatus* and which we express in English by 'Glory-crowned.'" He then confirms the etymology by stating that Stephen earned an eternal crown of glory, as his name foretold he would. I find here that Aelfric's Greek is sound even though his semantics may be questionable. The original pattern, as a personal name, could be called, if I may again be permitted to devise a phrase, Intentional Description, since the parents of the child chose the name to indicate a quality which they intended the baby to possess or, in due time, to earn. Aelfric's multilingual analysis of the name, from Greek to Latin to English, is an early polyglot practice in name analysis, which certain-

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[2] *Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church*, The First Part containing the *Sermones Catholici* or *Homilies of Aelfric*. In the Original Anglo-Saxon, with an English Version. By Benjamin Thorpe, F.S.A. London: Printed for the Aelfric Society, MDCCCXLIV, Vol. II, p. 35.

[3] *People's Bible Encyclopedia*, ed., Rev. Charles Randall Barnes (Chicago, 1910), II, 1072. See, also, *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York, 1940), II, 252.

[4] *People's Bible Encyclopedia*, I, 139, 325.

ly falls back upon the primitive theological concept that all langu-
ages sprang from a single basic stock passed on to mankind from
God.[5]

In one of Aelfric's later sermons, he speaks of two blind men who
sat by the wayside as Jesus rode out from Jericho (Matt 20.30;
Mark 10.46; Luke 18.35). They called upon Him to open their
eyes, and the Biblical account reports that they received their
sight. Aelfric explains their blindness by his etymology for the
place name *Jericho*, "yer-ee-kho," which he announces was inter-
preted as meaning "moon" or "moon city." Then by metaphorical
analogy, he points out how the moon waxes and wanes, thus
betokening mortal life with its decay. Christ released these blind
men in Jericho from the physical blindness conferred upon them
by their place of residence as indicated by the name. Although
Aelfric's etymology is not supported today by other authorities,
we would classify it as a kind of Incident identification, presumably
because men noticed the moonlight at Jericho.[6]

In the "Palm Sunday Sermon," the toponym *Sion*, "har see ohn"
in Hebrew and *Zion*, "see-own" in Greek, is called "a place of
contemplation," as *Jerusalem*, "yer-oo-shaw-lame," is described as
"view or sight of peace."[7] These names give added confirmation to
the statement made by Professor George R. Stewart in his Presiden-
tial Address to the American Name Society in 1957. He showed
that the Hebrews used place names chiefly to mark an incident or
happening rather than to commemorate individuals.[8] Mount Zion
was a spot where men felt the call to contemplate and Jerusalem
was a community where the people looked for peace.[9]

Aelfric demonstrates that the Romans imitated the Greeks
rather than the Jews by employing many personal commemoratives
in the name patterns. When he preached on "The Fourth Sunday
After Pentecost," he quoted the great English scholar Saint Bede

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[5] *Homilies*, I, 35; Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s. v. στεφανάω,
-ωμα, p. 1642: *stephanoma* is a crown or wreath, also a crown as the prize of victory.

[6] *People's Bible Encyclopedia*, I, 570: *Jericho* means "fragrant"; *Universal
Jewish Encyclopedia*, VI, 67: perhaps "moon city."

[7] *Homilies*, I, 211.

[8] "And Adam Gave Names," *Names*, VI (March, 1958), pp. 2–7.

[9] *People's Bible Encyclopedia*, II, 1196: *Zion*, "sunny or fort"; I, 573: *Jerusa-
lem*, "founded peaceful."

as authority for the naming of Caesarea Philippi. Bede explained that Philip the Tetrarch (who was the brother of Herod the Great, king of the Jews from 37 to 4 B.C.) built the city of Caesarea in honor of the Roman emperor Caesar Tiberius, during whose reign, A.D. 14–37, the tetrarch held power. Then he added his own name, as Philippi, to honor himself.[10] I first noticed this pattern of multiple commemoration when I was writing an article on Spanish place names in the American Southwest. Coming across it as a first century Latin practice suggests that the pattern was employed, perhaps initiated, by the Romans and perpetuated in Spanish countries. It was exactly the process used when Don Franscisco Cuervo y Valdez, thirty-fourth Spanish governor of New Mexico, named the city of Alburquerque, which has been my home for a good many years. The provincial governor established a settlement in the north central part of the Rio Grande Valley and named it San Francisco Xavier de Albuquerque, in honor of his patron saint, Francis Xavier (whose given name he wore), adding the name of the viceroy of New Spain, the tenth duke of Alburquerque. However, the viceroy had to approve the name and give official recognition to the founding of the villa, and when word reached him in Mexico City, he discovered that there was already a decree for a new villa but it was intended to honor the king of Spain, Philip V. The name was therefore changed to San Felipe de Alburquerque, to honor the king, his patron saint, and the viceroy. The governor lost out in the switch. So did his patron saint, who became honored at a later time by the beautiful mission near Tucson. The parish church in Albuquerque is still titled as a double commemorative, i.e., San Felipe de Alburquerque, but the new city commemorates only the viceroy and he has lost one of the *r's* in his title.[11]

Medieval mysticism has been illustrated by Aelfric's reading of St. Stephen's life in terms of his name, both becoming "crowned with glory." The same approach appears in Aelfric's interpretation of the name *Ananias*, which he says signifies "sheep" in the Hebrew tongue.[12] In Acts 9 there is a man called Ananias to whom Jesus

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[10] *Homilies*, I, 365. *Philippi* is a Gk. compound from *philos*, "loving" and *hippos*, "horse," meaning therefore "lover of horses."

[11] T. M. Pearce, "Spanish Place Name Patterns in the Southwest," *Names*, III (December, 1955), 207.

[12] *Homilies*, I, 365.

appeared and then counselled to go into a street called *Straight* and seek out Saul of Tarsus, who was persecuting the Christians. Ananias carried out the mission and confirmed Saul in a new way of life, that of serving Jesus Christ. For these reasons, Aelfric sees in Ananias a gentle sheep, who comforted a new convert and baptized him. According to modern dictionaries and encyclopedias, the name *Ananias* is not Hebrew but Greek and means "protected by Jehovah."[13] Furthermore, Aelfric does not mention the two other Biblical characters who bear the same name. One of these was a member of the early Christian church who conspired with his wife Saphira to defraud the brethren by withholding part of his wealth from use in their church. The third Ananias was a high priest who ordered St. Paul to be given a blow in the face when he failed to show that official the proper respect (Acts 23). Perhaps Aelfric could adapt his etymology by calling the last two bearers of the name "black sheep" as the first Ananias was a "gentle white" one.

On the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Aelfric makes reference to a city called *Nain,* "nah-in," where St. Luke reports (7.11 ff.) that Christ approached the bier of a dead man as the body was being carried through the gate of the city. Jesus learned that he was the only son of the mourning widow who followed the bier and he restored the young man to life. *"Nain,"* writes Aelfric "according to the expositor Bede is interpreted 'inundation' or 'agitation.'"[14] Using this etymology, Aelfric then develops an elaborated allegory telling how the city was in a state of wordly disturbance which Christ cleared up by his presence. Aelfric again was betrayed by his sources, for the toponym is Greek and means "pleasantness" and "beauty," just the opposite of "agitated" or "disturbed."[15]

The pattern of Intentional Description, previously shown by Aelfric's treatment of the idionym *Stephen,* is extended by the significance he reads into the idionyms of four more apostles: *Peter, Andrew, James,* and *John.* He points out that Peter's original name was *Simon,* which Aelfric interprets with the meaning "obedient." He says that Christ gave Simon the new name *Peter*

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[13] *People's Bible Encyclopedia,* I, 47–48. *Aan Ananias,* Gk. form of Hebrew *Anani* or *Ananiah,* "Ja covers," (protects).

[14] *Homilies,* I, 477.

[15] *Homilies,* I, 477.

because it means "acknowledging" and was conferred because Peter acknowledged Christ with true belief when he proclaimed "Thou art Christ the Son of the living God." *James* is interpreted "withering," and *John* means "God's grace." Since Aelfric does not indicate whether these four etymologies are from Hebrew, Greek, or Latin, the listener or reader would have to examine terms in any or all of the three for confirmation of his sources. Examining the names in reverse order, we can agree that *John* is a contraction of Hebrew *Johanan*, "yokhaw-nawn," which denotes "God-given" or "Jehovah favored." *James* is an Anglicized diminutive for the Hebrew *Jacob*, "yah-ak-obe," meaning "heel catcher" or "supplanter." This does not seem to be related to the idea of withering. *Andrew* is Greek for "manly," which could be considered a synonym for Aelfric's "bold." However, one wonders at Aelfric's reading of the name *Peter* into "acknowledging," for in both Greek and Latin the designation means "a rock."[16]

With the evidence of these twelve names, five toponyms and seven idionyms, as Aelfric explained them, we may conclude that a medieval preacher was free to illuminate his listeners as much with what he considered revelation as the demonstrable facts in names. The monastic Jacobus de Voragine, who in 1285 compiled his lengthy *Legenda Aurea* (*The Golden Legend*) was accustomed to begin the biography of almost every saint with an etymology of the personal name and to then explain it in terms of the saint's accomplishments. Such etymologies led to sermons in virtue and fortitude. We may conclude that Jacobus viewed every personal name as a form of Divine intention which operated through the parents to stamp upon particular individuals a set of ideas to be exemplified in the pattern set by the name. Aelfric anticipates this semantic attitude toward every idionym with which he deals.

Some justification for both men can be found in Hebrew naming practices, where events occurring at the birth of a child were frequently considered portentous. A chance word, a pious or hopeful exclamation by the mother or relative, some condition of the mother or peculiarity of the child – all could offer a suggestion for a name. Jewish names frequently illustrated awareness of a supernatural

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[16] *People's Bible Encyclopedia*, II, 774: Simon seems to be a contraction of Hebrew *Simeon*, "hearing." *Ibid.*, p. 1033. *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, VI, 5: *'akeh*, "heel."

world surrounding human life. Such names as *Zechariah*, "God has remembered," *Joseph*, "God has added another child," *Matthew*, "Gift of Jehovah," express the spiritual relationships between God and man. Even when the Hebrew names seem purely descriptive, as *Aaron*, "light," *Adam*, "red," or *Esau*, "hairy," there may also be a figurative value, as in the case of Adam meaning "formed from red earth," or Aaron, "the light of widsom." [17]

Thus, the nature of language, whether used in onomastic patterns or in other forms of communication, never forsakes completely the world of associative meaning. Perhaps Aelfric pushed some associations a little far, but so long as a word and an image relate to a person and his activities, each will join to enlarge the meaning of the name. Aelfric simply explored the frames of reference in which Biblical names appeared. For his purposes, onomastics reinforced theology. Since he was a monastic preacher, one could hardly expect him to view onomastics in any other way.

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[17] *People's Bible Encyclopedia*, II, 775–76.