The Miracles of King Oswald from *Ecclesiastical History*¹ (late 9th c.²)

Bede

Contributed by Heide Estes

Introduction

The Old English *Ecclesiastical History* contains several passages describing saintly miracles in curing illness or impairment. The miracles of Oswald depict the cures of a horse and a young woman followed by a story of a great fire, in which dust from Oswald’s place of death, stored in the pocket of a cloak, keeps flames from consuming a single pillar of a house destroyed by fire. What is interesting in these narratives of saintly cures, and comes across particularly clearly here, is that the identity or any details of afflicted person or animal are unimportant. The narratives serve to demonstrate the curative powers of the individual saint. The miracles of St. Oswald provided here are not unique in the conflation of sick humans and sick animals; several other saints are demonstrated as miraculous in curing humans and animals alike. The quick succession of miracles in the passage translated below, from horse to woman to house, foregrounds the way in which the sick person serves as a prop in the narrative, indistinguishable from an animal or even an object. Mitchell and Snyder’s formulation of disability as functioning metaphorically is also already visible in the miracle-narrative’s elision of any differences between horse, human, and house-beam.³ The passages narrating saintly miracles suggest that those with illness and/or impairment, whether humans, animals or objects, are interchangeable in their utilitarian purpose to demonstrate the power of saintly intervention.

Bibliography


“The Miracles of King Oswald” (Book III, from Chapters 7, 8)

Chapter 7

Oswald the most Christian king of Northumbria ruled the kingdom for nine years, counting the year of the wild faithlessness of the king of the Britons and the hateful turning away from faith in Christ of the English kings, as we said before. When the course of these years was fulfilled, Oswald was killed. A great and heavy battle was advanced by the same heathen king and the heathen people of Mercia, by whom his predecessor Eadwin had also been killed, in the places that is called Maserfield. Oswald had lived thirty-seven winters of fleshly life when he was slain on the fifth day of the month of August.

What the king’s faith and the devotion of his mind to God had been were made known after his death through mighty wonders. For in the place where he fought for his land with his people and was slain by the heathens, until this present day, there are famous healings of diseased men and beasts. Then it happened that many men were taking the dirt from where his body fell and putting it in water and giving it to their diseased men and beasts to drink; and they immediately became well. And men so frequently took the dirt, little by little, until a pit had been dug so deep that a man could stand in it up to his neck. It is not a great wonder, that the place of his death gave health to the sick, since in life, he was always quick to give alms to the needy and the infirm, and was their helper in their afflictions. And it was said in days of yore that many great wonders occurred in that place as a result of that dirt, and also from the dirt that had been taken away from that place. But it will suffice us now to hear of two or three.

It happened, not much time after his death, that a man rode by that place. And then suddenly his horse began to grow weary and stand still, and laid his head on the ground, and foam came out of his mouth, and unmeasured pains grew and became bigger, until it fell on the ground. Then the rider alighted and took off the bridle, and waited there for a while, until his horse became better or he had to leave it there, dead. Then for a long time it suffered with heavy pain and it rolled and writhed in various places, until suddenly it came to that place, where the aforementioned king had been killed. Then there was no delay, until that pain was relieved, and it stopped its unhealthy agitation of its body, and as horses usually do after exhaustion began to roll around, and throw itself onto one side and the other, and soon it got up all healthy and sound, and began greedily to eat the grass. When the man saw that, then he understood with clear wisdom that there was something wondrously holy in that place, where his horse had been so quickly healed. And there, he set a token and marked the spot, and leapt on his horse and rode thither where he had previously intended. When he came there to the men whom he had previously sought, he met there a woman who was a niece [granddaughter] of the head of household: she had for a long time been badly afflicted, lying in bed [afflicted] with infirmity. When the household began to sigh before him about the grim sickness of the woman, then he started to tell them about the place where his horse was healed. Now they immediately readied a wagon and put the woman in it and carried her to that place, and set her there. When she had been set in that place, she became weary, and slept for a little while. As soon as she woke up, she perceived that she had been healed from her bodily infirmity, and asked for water, and washed herself and fixed her hair and wrapped herself in clothing, and with the men that had led her there, turned and walked home, healthy and sound.

Chapter 8

Similarly, in that same time another man came of whom men said he was of the Britons. He was traveling past that same place where the aforementioned fight had occurred. Then he saw part of one place that was greener and fairer than the other fields. Then with wise
mind, he began to think and consider, that there could be no other cause for the greenness and fairness of that place, except that there some man had been killed there, holier than anyone else in the army. He took some of the dirt from that place, wrapped in his clothing, because he thought that same dirt might be medicine and cure to sick men, and afterward he went forth on his way. Then in the evening he came to a house and went inside, where the household was all assembled to feast. He was received by the lord of that house, and they showed him a seat and he sat with them at that feast. He hung his garment with the dirt that he had carried on a pillar of the wall. There was a great fire in the middle of the house. When they had long been eating and drinking, sparks flew up on the roof of the house, and it was interwoven with twigs and covered over with thatch, and it happened that that house was all on fire and began suddenly to burn. When the guests saw that, then they fled out in fear, and there was no help that could be given to the burning house, but it burned completely down, except for the one pillar that the dirt was hanging on: that one stood sound and remained untouched by the fire. Then they wondered greatly at that, and carefully searched what that depended on. Then it was told to them that the dirt hung there, that had been taken from that place where the blood of Oswald the king had been shed. That wonder was celebrated and related far and wide, and many men since then sought that place every day, and began to take that gift of healing for themselves and their friends.
Endnotes

1 The Old English Version of Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, edited by Thomas Miller, Early English Text Society O. S. 95, 96 (Trübner, 1890). Translated by Heide Estes.
2 This date represents the date of the Old English translation of the Latin text. The Latin manuscripts date to the eighth century.