ÆLFRIC’S TREATMENT OF SOURCE MATERIAL IN HIS HOMILY ON THE BOOKS OF THE MACCABEES*  

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Ælfric’s homily on the Old Testament books of the Maccabees¹ is tentatively dated as between 992–1002² as part of the Lives of Saints series as a whole.³ In the homily the author directly tackles the discussion of warfare in all its forms, be it siege warfare, field-battles, cavalry, infantry, as well as the spiritual conflict faced by his monastic audience. With a direct reference to the Viking raids that were ravaging the countryside around him at the time ('ða redan flot-menn', line 708) Ælfric seeks to explain and justify the violence of war in the homily, as well as engaging in a clearly related examination of the order of society (section XII, the ‘Item Alia’, lines 812–62). Discussion of one of Ælfric’s most interesting (and lengthy) of homilies is overdue. This article can do no more than present a brief account of previous attempts to identify the source material for the homily, exploring both the Vulgate materials used and other possible outside sources, together with a short analysis of Ælfric’s manipulation of his source materials.

Previous attempts to identify the source materials used by Ælfric for the Maccabees have generally been made in the most cursory of terms. Because the Old Testament material is central, the easiest assumption is that Ælfric used the Vulgate (which he unquestionably had access to) as his main source and that any discrepancies between the homily and the Vulgate source material are merely a matter of authorial selection and presentation. Given

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* I am indebted to Professor Jane Roberts of King’s College, London, for her constructive comments and suggestions throughout the composition of this article.


³ It should be noted that only the first part of the Maccabees, lines 1–204, detailing the passion of the seven martyred sons and their mother, refers to an actual feast day – 1 August or Lammas Day. For ease of reference, however, the text will be referred to throughout this article as a ‘homily’. 
the changing emphasis in modern scholarly methods, so summary
an account is no longer sufficient.

Obviously, when identifying the sources for the *Maccabees*
homily, scholars have looked immediately to the Vulgate. Using
Books I and II of the Maccabees (hereafter referred to as I Macc
and II Macc respectively), they attempt to match biblical verses with
corresponding Old English passages. Skeat’s is the earliest attempt
to identify the sources:

Skeat 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Source</th>
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| I       | I Macc 1:1-64 (ll.1-31)  
          | II Macc 6:18-7:42 (ll.32-204) |
| II      | I Macc 2:1-70 (ll.205-73) |
| III     | I Macc 3:1-26 (ll.274-327) |
| IV      | I Macc 3:27-4:54 (ll.328-84) |
| V       | I Macc 5:1-68 (ll.385-458)  
          | II Macc 12:39-45 (ll.459-80) |
| VI      | II Macc 10:24-38 (ll.481-529) |
| VII     | I Macc 6:1-7:4; II Macc 9:1-11 (ll.530-95) |
| VIII    | I Macc 7:5-8:17 (ll.596-646) |
| IX      | I Macc 9:1-22 (ll.647-714) |
| X       | I Macc 9:28-16:24 (ll.715-44) |
| XI      | II Macc 3:1-40 (ll.745-811) 5 |

As can be seen from this list Skeat treats the study of source
material rather sparingly, noting no possibility other than the
Vulgate. Furthermore, he separates off the final ‘Item Alia’ on the
grounds that there is no corresponding passage in the Old
Testament. He summarizes his discussion by saying (p. 444): ‘Thus
the whole of Book I is sufficiently represented, together with
portions of chapters III, VI, VII, IX, X and XII of Book II’. G.
Loomis goes into rather more detail (1931, p. 5):

Loomis 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lines</th>
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<tr>
<td>1-31</td>
<td>I Macc 1:1-64</td>
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<tr>
<td>32-6, 85-107</td>
<td>II Macc 6:18-31</td>
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<tr>
<td>108-99</td>
<td>II Macc 7:1-42</td>
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1 See Skeat, II, 449.
5 See M.M. Dubois, *Ælfric, sermonnaire, docteur, et grammairien: contribution à l'étude de
la vie et de l'action Bénédictines en Angleterre au xer siècle* (Paris: Librairie E. Droz, 1943), 93-4,
where Skeat’s original source study is accepted and repeated.
6 G. Loomis, ‘Further studies of Ælfric’s saints’ lives’, *Harvard Studies and Notes in
Philology and Literature*, 13 (1931), 1-8.
Of these two presentations of the sources, Loomis's is by far the more useful. One of the main advances of his study is that he looks beyond the Vulgate, suggesting possible sources for particular passages. He draws attention to 'explanatory additions' and 'doctrinal additions', which he suggests were written by Ælfric. These are, by and large, the gaps in his table. Yet even these oversimplified correspondences are open to question, and one should have the same reservations which Micheline-Maurice Larès employs when using Skeat's original analysis:

Les coordonnées textuelles de cette très longue homélie sont indiquées par SKEAT. Il faut préciser toutefois qu'à l'intérieur même de ces indications, la traduction est syncopée par rapport à la source. ([Footnote] Par exemple, le passage circonscrit par SKEAT comme "I MACC I.1-64" ne se réfère qu'aux versets 1, 10, 24, 41, 44, 52, 64.)

Nevertheless, acceptance of the fact that the Vulgate was the ultimate source for the Maccabees, with additions and embellishment where appropriate, does not constitute a solution to all of the questions concerning the Maccabees. It is of course possible that Ælfric used an intermediate source text which had already drawn together the biblical verses with the other material used in the paraphrase.

By virtue of the fact that the martyrs detailed in the first section of the Maccabees (II.1-204) are generally recognized as saints (see 7 M.-M. Larès, *Bible et civilisation Anglaise* : Lille: Service de Reproduction des Theses, Université de Lille, III. 1975), 379.
note 3), one must consider the possibility that Ælfric drew from the 'Cotton-Corpus Legendary' or some similar compilation. When turning to his Lives of the Saints series Ælfric was following in a long tradition of Christian hagiographical studies. Past scholars have sought to identify source material for each life from a variety of areas; however, since Patrick Zettel's exploration of the sources for Ælfric's Lives of the Saints,8 less scattered originals are sought. Zettel develops Smetena's original observation that a large number of sources for the Catholic Homilies are to be found in the homiliary of Paul the Deacon,9 and applies it to the Lives of the Saints. After assembling his own 'Cotton-Corpus Legendary', Zettel argues that Ælfric had at his disposal a complete schedule of hagiographical writings, running from St Martina on 1 January, to St Silvester on 31 December, from which he drew chosen lives.10

Of all the manuscripts identified by Zettel as witnesses to the 'Cotton-Corpus Legendary' only British Library, Cotton MS Nero E.i (part 2) contains material relevant to the Maccabees, with a section on the passion of the seven sons and their mother. This is contained in fos 208v–209v, but is clearly not related to the 'legendary' or indeed to Ælfric's own version. The section of the manuscript used by Zettel to compile the 'legendary' occupies part one and up to fo. 186v of part two, and is written in Anglo-Saxon minuscule; whereas the text detailing the martyrdom of the seven sons appears in the latter part of the manuscript (fo. 189r to the end of part two), which is written in a much later hand, clearly separating the Maccabees text in British Library, Cotton MS Nero E.i from Zettel's 'legendary'. Furthermore, comparison of translation method and of biblical verses covered, etc., makes it clear that the homily in Nero E.i bears no resemblance to Ælfric's own version.

Zettel himself (p. 42) does not attempt to link the Maccabees to any of the lives in the 'legendary':

On the basis of the analytical lists of Ælfric's writings given in these studies, I propose to include the following texts in this investigation: all the lives of the apostles given in the first two series of Catholic Homilies, together with thirteen other translations from these series which deal primarily with the lives of the early martyrs and popes; all the texts included in Skeat's edition of the Lives of Saints,

10 It should be noted that Zettel does not claim that this legendary was Ælfric's exact source. However, he convincingly shows that something very similar was available to the author.
with the exception of numbers XXIII, XXIIIb, XXX, and XXXIII, which are not by Ælfric, numbers I, XII, XVI, XVII and the Item Alia sequels to numbers XV and XXV which are not hagiographic, and numbers XIII, XVIII, XXV, and the sequel to XIX, which are based on the Bible.

The ‘Cotton-Corpus Legendary’, therefore, can be discounted as a source for the Maccabees. Nevertheless, one must still explore further. Although hagiographical writings on the Maccabees were common in the Middle Ages none bears a strong enough resemblance to Ælfric’s own homily to be named as a possible source. Although Ælfric opens his work with the most commonly known section of the story – the passion of the seven sons – he then proceeds to expand the text by adding historical details of the rebellion. The resulting structure is not extant in any of the medieval homilies on the Maccabees. For example, in the *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina* (in 2 vols, ed. Socii Bollandii, Brussels, 1900–01 – hereafter *BHL*) there are several references to passion of the Maccabees (nos 5106–11). Cross, in his article on patristic sources for the *Old English Martyrology*, examines several of these texts, concluding (p. 128):

London, BL Add. 11880 17r–20v, is a free narration based on II Maccabees vi. 18–vii.41; Vienna, Nationalbibliothek, lat. 371 (s.ix in.), 129r–32v, is abstracted from Josephus’s *De Maccabaeis*; Rome, Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, lat. 5771 (s.ix and x) 95r–6v, reads from II Maccabees vi.12–vii.42; Paris, BN lat. 2179 (s.xi, but a manuscript of the Spanish Passionary composed, reputedly, before 806), 255r–7r, has the same section of scripture as BL Add. 11880 but is quite different in wording; and Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm.14418 (s.ixmed, for these folios), 35r–7r, has a brief introduction and is then abstracted from II Maccabees vii.1–32 with omissions. It is difficult to assign these accounts to *BHL* numbers, since only one such subdivision is in print by Mombritius (*BHL*, no.5106) and there is no ready means of comparison.

Further consultation of *BHL* and R. Grégoire’s *Les homéliaires du moyen âge* (Rome: Rerum ecclesiasticarum documenta, series maior, Fontes 6, 1966) and *Homéliaires liturgiques médiévaux analyse de manuscrits* (Spoleto: Bibl. degli ‘Studi Medievali’, 12, 1980) reveals numerous other homilies, some of a later date, akin to that of the text found in British Library, Cotton MS Nero E.i. However, none of those seen bears a sufficient relationship to Ælfric’s homily in terms of context to warrant a direct comparison. True, they cover the events of the passion of the seven sons, but, as with the material in British Library, Cotton MS Nero E.i (part 2), their method and

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11 One must stress at this point that the possibility remains that there was originally a source-homily, now lost, that shared structure and length with Ælfric’s.


scope of translation differs from Ælfric's. Not surprisingly, when one recalls that these homilies were concerned with the events applicable to 1 August only, they also stop short of the range of episodes covered by Ælfric. All of them deal with the events relating to the feast day (found in II Maccabees 6–7), which is unsurprising when one recalls that this was the section of the story that held most interest for a Christian audience. That a people should accept death rather than relinquish the laws of their religion was a stirring model of behaviour. Ælfric on the other hand, devotes only section I of his homily (approximately a quarter of the whole) to the true passion. Sections II–XI centre on the military exploits of the Maccabean tribe in their rebellion against the hellenists, concluding with Ælfric's own discussion of the three classes of men: 'Oratores, Laboratores, and Bellatores'. The battles and campaigns waged by Judas and his brothers did not apparently interest compilers of legendaries, although Judas himself held a heroic appeal throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. Therefore, a medieval writer who chose to construct a homily concerning the Maccabees for a legendary would have been interested only in the passion of the martyrs, and would have ignored the historical sections. This is clearly not the case with Ælfric.

Although Cross is dealing with a considerably smaller text, it is appropriate to quote in comparison his conclusion (p. 128) that: '... If the martyrologist felt he should have an entry for the Maccabees because he saw these saints in his legendary, on present evidence he went to his Bible for his fuller account'. In this sense then, the martyrologist and Ælfric chose similar directions. As no surviving homily has been identified that bears enough similarity to Ælfric's own, one is forced back to the general assumption that the main source for Ælfric's homily was the Vulgate itself. A complete listing and discussion of all the corresponding passages from the Old Testament corresponding with the Old English homily has been made available for the *Fontes Anglo-Saxonici* project, based on preliminary findings in Lee (1992, see note 1).

At the end of the homily is the 'Item Alia' concerning the three orders of society. Skeat, as noted above, possibly viewed this as a separate section: 'This piece was probably introduced by way of apology for the militant tone of the homily and unlike other 'Item Alia's it has its own title' (Skeat, II, 449). It should be noted, nevertheless, that he falls short of giving it its own number (i.e. XXVI) and continues the lineation from the end of the main text (1.811). There are, moreover, several good reasons for viewing this final section as integral to the homily as a whole. First, in other lives, for example *Abdon and Sennes*, the 'Item Alia' is clearly

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related to the main text. Second, the three manuscripts containing complete texts of Ælfric's Maccabees all have the 'Item Alia' (i.e. British Library, Cotton MS Julius E.vii and Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MSS 303 and 198). Most importantly of all, this final section provides an excellent conclusion to the homily (see later).

In short, no single source text for the 'Item Alia' has so far been identified. Ælfric presents a similar elaboration on the three orders of society in his Letter to Sigeweard.15 Comparable too is Wulfstan's discussion in the Institute of Polity;16 and a precedent for the topic can be found in Alfred's version of the Consolation of Philosophy.17 Contained also in the 'Item Alia' is a discussion of the 'ungesewenlican' as applied to the 'gesewenlican fynd' (II.823–32) which may reflect parallels in a sermon by Augustine (Patrologia Latina, 39, col. 1905). Furthermore, the incident concerning Julian and Apollonius (II.833–45) bears resemblance to Rufinus's Historia Monachorum: De Appolonio (Patrologia Latina, 21, col. 410ff). Still, as stated earlier, no single source text for the concluding section of the homily can be identified. These parallels are of interest only in so far as they allow comparison of style and it cannot be known if Ælfric made direct reference to any of these in the composition of the Maccabees.

In summary then, and as indicated earlier by Skeat and Loomis, the Old Testament books of the Maccabees I and II18 serve as Ælfric's main source for his homily. However, at times, as noted originally by Loomis, he uses other material to help with the explanation and elaboration of some particular theme. For example, in lines 37–84 the discussion of clean and unclean meats arises. This follows on from the incident at the beginning of the homily where the heathens are attempting to force the elderly scribe, Eleazarus, to eat pork (II.32–6). Realizing that the importance of this torture would be lost on a Christian audience, Ælfric states 'We moton nu secgan swutelicor be dysum hwylce mettas waeron mannum forbodene on daere ealdan æ þe mann ett nu swa-deah' (lines 37–9: 'We must now say more clearly about this: which meats

18 Ælfric alternates with considerable skill between the two books, although mostly he uses the more detailed and better structured, first book of the Maccabees.
were forbidden to men in the old law which a man eats now however') and he draws on chapter 11 of Leviticus to help with his explanation. Similarly, when attempting to describe the elephants which appear in one of the battles waged by Judas and his followers (ll.564–73) the homilist turns for help to Isidore's *Etymologiarum* XII (*Patrologia Latina*, 82, cols 14–16), paraphrasing his description of the creature. Finally, perhaps in recognizing the bellicose nature of his material, Ælfric pauses to use Isidore in order to justify certain types of war in lines 705–14 (based on *Etymologiarum* XVIII.i, *Patrologia Latina*, 82, cols 2–4), clearly indicating that the rebellion waged by Judas and his brothers was just.

Having established that Ælfric drew predominantly on the Vulgate when compiling his homily (with additional interpolations drawn from other texts when necessary), some discussion should now be given as to how the author manipulates his source material. Jon Wilcox notes Ælfric's skill in this matter: 'Ælfric shows exceptional concern for how his audience will interpret or misinterpret the implications of those texts which he translates'.

One must bear in mind the important underlying premise that the homily should not be viewed as a pure translation, but instead as a highly personalized and complexly structured paraphrase. In the light of this, there are four categories under which the Old English can be examined: (i) expansion of the Latin (including the addition of extra material not found elsewhere, i.e. personal comments); (ii) omission of much of the Vulgate material in use for a particular episode; (iii) loose paraphrase of the Vulgate and other sources; (iv) direct translation. The most common reason for Ælfric's adoption of any of these strategies must stem from a desire to treat his audience with respect and understanding. Realizing the limitations of their knowledge, he chooses, where necessary, to explain unfamiliar material, as, for example, with the elephants in lines 499–507 noted above.

The first category then is the expansion of the Latin material found in the Vulgate. Although his Old Testament source provided Ælfric with substantial information, it was written for an audience familiar with the flora, fauna, and theology of pre-Christian Israel, and not for the Northern-European Anglo-Saxons. In order to make the material more acceptable to his audience Ælfric often turns to other writers and texts when framing his explanations (as above with the use of Leviticus and Isidore), and he can even be
seen to insert details contemporary to the time of writing (i.e. as noted earlier with the reference to the Vikings in 1.708).

The author also reveals a tendency to condense or omit major parts of the Latin (the second category). This practice is very common, and often entails the substitution of one Old English sentence for several Latin ones. For example, the whole of chapter 8 of the first book of the Maccabees, detailing the correspondences between Judas and the Romans, is condensed into a few lines of Old English. In the Old Testament Judas hears of the various Roman victories and conquests (I Maccabees 1:1-13), their loyalty, and above all their humility and fairness of government (I Maccabees 1:14-16). Judas sends an ambassador to the Senate and a mutually supportive alliance is declared. However, in the homily these thirty-two verses are reduced to the comment: ‘and Judas then sent with peace chosen messengers to Rome. He wished to become friendly with them because the Roman counsellors were then mighty and wise in deeds and they subdued their enemies’). Omission then, when required, is used extensively by Ælfric.

The third category, that of loose paraphrase, is by far the most frequent mode employed by Ælfric in the Maccabees. In contrast, the final category - those Old English lines which can be identified as direct translations of the Latin - occurs very rarely, although the line between translation and paraphrase must always be a subjective one. Examination of those sections 'translated', in its strictest sense, by Ælfric does not, however, suggest any respect on Ælfric's part for certain themes or details. Instead, it seems that Ælfric found the chosen sections of the Latin to be clear and succinct, and therefore supplied a fairly close translation. The implication of this is important. Ælfric did not simply alter the source material just to appear 'different'; but instead only did so where he deemed it necessary.20

Perhaps it is at this point that one should suggest a note of caution when using the standard source tables presented in Loomis or Skeat, and in indeed when using the more detailed form adopted for the Fontes Anglo-Saxonici database. Although such resources are invaluable to the researcher they can, if used incorrectly, be somewhat misleading. A simple example from the Maccabees illustrates the sort of problem that may arise. In lines 530-53 ('Betwux þysum ferde... he sylf wolde') the strict ordering of the source material shows that Ælfric moves between the first and second books of the Maccabees, using the sequence: I Maccabees 6:1, 6:3-5, 6:7-9, 6:12-13; then to

1 For a full analysis of the translation methods used by Ælfric in relation to the four categories outlined in this article see Lee (1992. see above note 1), 305-51.
II Maccabees 9:9–10, 9:28; and finally back to I Maccabees 6:17, with lines 549–53 being Ælfric’s own. This clinical approach presents the image of a highly methodical author working through the Vulgate ticking off chapter and verse which he then semi-translated one by one. This, I am sure, is not the case. Instead, it is far more probable that Ælfric simply read through the episodes presented in both books, mulled them over in his mind, and then produced an overall paraphrase. Therefore, when referring to the entries for the Maccabees under the Fontes Anglo-Saxonici system the user should realize that the sources cited at best represent an attempt to sift through a highly personalized homily for specific details which are to be found in the Vulgate verses identified. Anyone who examines these citations will note, as in the example presented above, that the order in which material is presented in the homily does not necessarily follow the biblical narrative. Ælfric skips verses, refers back to details which he previously overlooked, adds his own explanations, or simply changes facts as he sees fit. This then is an author with a clear view as to how his homily should progress, retaining an overall structure of the text (or section) in his head at all times. In other words, this is a paraphrase – not a clinical verse by verse translation. No matter which strategy he adopted, Ælfric’s objective was, in all cases, simply to enhance the clarity of the story.

An attempt such as this, seeking to perform a detailed line by line source analysis, can also obscure the larger structure of the work in question. In the case of the Maccabees the overall structure is of particular importance, for it reveals the skill in composition possessed by Ælfric. The homily is divided into twelve sections (I–XI and the ‘Item Alia’), which, under close examination, reveal the following disposition of materials:

I  Passion of the seven martyrs
II  Start of the rebellion
III  Judas defeats Apollonius & Seron
III  Judas defeats Lisias
V   Defeat of Timothy, the disloyal city, and the hiding of the treasure by Judas’s troops
VI  Timothy defeated again, appearance of the five angels, digression on angelic intervention and the Jews’ attitude to Christ
VII  Death of Antioch and succession of Eupator; digression on elephants
VIII  Defeat of Nicanor
IX  Judas defeated; digression on heavenly/worldly contest and the four types of warfare
X   Jonathan succeeds Judas
XI  Heliodorus and Onias
Item Alia  Oratores, Laboratores, Bellatores
Despite the clear indication that these sections together form a whole, shown in the use of such phrases as 'We wyllaj) eac awritan . . .' (line 205) and ‘Hit saegô on þære æfran bec . . .' (line 481) at the beginning of sections, the feeling that they are still episodic is heightened by the fact that each has at its focus a particular event (usually associated with the rebellion). Each new peril faced by Judas is presented in such a manner that the adventure is brought to a close within that section; and overall the sense is one of a series of short stories linked together. The episodic structure is heightened by the fact that there are numerous enemies and challenges for Judas Maccabees and his followers to overcome, and that these appear at regular intervals. The fact that these enemies sometimes meet their destiny in a subsequent section, hence linking the episodes, strengthens the homogeneity of the overall structure (i.e. although Antiochus first appears in line 7, he is not killed until lines 544–8).

Finally, the symmetrical structure of the homily should be noted. The partitioning into twelve sections points that way but more importantly its structure is completed with the inclusion of the 'Item Alia'. This counter-balances Section I, because it details events removed from the main action by location and character. That is to say, whilst Section I details the martyrdom of the seven sons and the final section deals with Julian and Apollonius, neither episode is directly relevant to the rebellion waged by Judas and his brothers nor makes any mention of it. However, both are united in presenting stories of the righteous keeping their faith in the face of cruel torment, a motivating force, of course, behind the Maccabean revolt. After all, Mathathias, Judas's father, started the campaign in response to the attempts to enforce hellenization on the Jews. Furthermore, the 'Item Alia' acts as an excellent epilogue to the whole homily, addressing as it does the topic of war in relation to the three orders of society, that is the Oratores, Laboratores, and the Bellatores. The 'laboratores' (line 819) and 'bellatores' (line 820), as symbolized by Judas and his brothers, reflect the physical struggle against nature and the heathen enemies. The 'oratores' represent the

21 The 'enemies' and the respective dénouements are: Antiochus, killed by God through disease; the Blasphemous Jew and Antiochus's thane, killed by Mathathias; Apollonius, killed by Judas; Seron, routed by Judas; Lisias, routed twice by Judas; City of Bosor, destroyed by Judas; Timotheus, routed and killed, along with his brother, by Judas and the five angels; the 'mycel burh' (line 440), destroyed by Judas; Eupator, killed by Demetrius; Alcimus, struck dumb and destroyed by God; Nicanor, killed by Judas; Bacchides, killed by Jonathan; and Heliodorus, struck dumb by angels.

22 At first glance this may seem somewhat contradictory to the previous statement that each adventure is brought to a close within the respective section. However a distinction should be made between characters and incidents. Individual antagonists may survive from section to section, but individual story-lines are always completed within the section they begin.
struggle against the 'ungesewenlican' enemy (l.821–2), or spiritual conflict, as illustrated by Apollonius (l.836–45), and, of course, by the resistance of the martyrs in Section I at the beginning of the homily.

In *The Oxford companion to the Bible* (eds B.M. Metzger and M.D. Coogan, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) Ælfric is described as 'the most important English biblical writer before Wycliffe' (756). In this brief article I have sought to demonstrate, by concentrating on his longest biblical paraphrase – the homily on the books of the Maccabees – why he should be singled out for such praise.