

# Life of Saint Guthlac

Felix of Crowland



Idle Tidal Idyll

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A New Edition by Idle Tidal Idyll

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## Editor's Note

This work contains an unflattering description of Judaism that was no doubt common amongst Christians in 8th century Britain. The original language of the 1848 translation is retained here for the sake of precision - not as an endorsement. Your friends at Idle Tidal Idyll hope that people of any faith (or no faith) can communicate about other faiths (or lack thereof) in a respectful fashion.

# Prologue

To the truly-believing in our Lord for ever and ever to my dearest lord above all other men, earthly kings - Alfwold, king of the East-Angles, rightly and worthily holding the kingdom - I, Felix, have set forth the true belief, and the blessing of eternal salvation for all God's faithful people, and send greetings. Thy words and commands I have obeyed; the book which thou bespakest I have composed, concerning the life of Guthlac, of venerable memory, with clear words and testimonies. I therefore beg and beseech the learned and the faithful, if he here find any ridiculous phrase, that he blame us not therefore. But let each of these censorious and derisive persons reflect and consider that God's kingdom standeth not in [eloquence] but in steadfastness of the holy faith; and reflect and consider that the salvation of earth was not devised with light thoughts, but was preached and declared by fishermen. And if any man censure our attempt and work (as I know many in England wlio might have written this book themselves, gilded with fair letters, fairly and cleverly composed) , let him not blame us who have but obeyed compulsion and command, and fulfilled an order. Therefore, O! learner, if thou deridest me after the manner of censurers, take heed to thyself, lest whilst thou thinkest of laughter, thou become suddenly blinded by the obscurity of darkness. It is the manner of blind men when they are in the light, that they know not but that they wander in the dark. In the holy Scriptures folly is often called [blindness], because from thence comes the beginning of all evil. For this cause I admonish thee, O! learner, that thou censure not strangers, lest thou be afterwards as a stranger censured by others. But lest I longer weary the mind of learners by talking of the censure of strangers, I sail as it were over a strong and mighty sea, and now come to that most quiet haven, the life of Guthlac. As thou didst require of me that I should write and relate concerning the conversation of Guthlac and the example of his life, I have accordingly obeyed thee, and I write as those informants told me who knew his life most accurately; in the first place what was its beginning, and then to what end he brought it. For this cause I have composed this book, that as for those who knew the life of the blessed man they maybe the more abundantly reminded of his life; and that to others who knew it not before, I might as

it were point out a wide and straight way. The things which I here write, I learned from the relation of the venerable abbot Wilfrid. Also many others have related it to me who were with the blessed man, and saw his life with their own eyes. Nor doubt I aught that my informants were able to remember and relate all the wonders of this blessed man; they were very widely known and famous through England. I accordingly have obeyed thy commands, and have fulfilled thy word and will, and I have composed the text of this present book as I best might, with the wisdom of my predecessors and their elders; the beginning I have put in the beginning, and the end at the end.

# I

In the days of Aethelred, the famous king of the Mercians, there was a noble man of the province of Mercia, who was called Penwald. He was of the oldest and noblest family, who were named Iclings. He was in worldly things wealthy and had great riches, and when he was wealthiest and had the most riches, he desired to take to himself a wife. He chose from the multitude of maidens the one who was fairest, and of the noblest kin; she was called Tette. And they were together until the time that God ordained that the woman became with child. When the time came that she should give birth to the child, suddenly there came a sign from heaven, and clearly as with a seal marked out the child. Lo! men saw a hand of the fairest red hue coming from heaven; and it held a golden rood, and was manifested to many men, and it leaned forward before the door of the house wherein the child was born. Thereupon all the men who saw it hastened thitherward, that they might more clearly see and understand the sign. The hand then returned with the rood up to heaven. Then all the men who saw the sign, stretched themselves on the earth, and prayed God that he would show them what that sign and portent should be, which was there so unexpectedly displayed to them. When they had ended this prayer, a woman came in great haste running out of the house wherein the child was born, and said thus to the men:

“Be firm and of good heart, for a man of future glory is born here on this earth.”

When the men heard this word, they said among themselves, that it was a divine sign that was there showed to them, inasmuch as the child was born there. Some of them then said, that by divine providence the gift of eternal bliss was fore-ordained to him, in virtue of the holy sign that was shown to them at his birth. Men were much amazed at the matter and at the sign which was there displayed; and behold, ere the sun set it was known and famous over all the middle of England.

## II

About eight nights afterwards, when they brought the child to the holy layer of baptism, a name was given him from the appellation of the family and from the clan, Guthlac, as though it were done by divine providence, that he should be thus named. For thus the wise teachers in England say, that the name consists of two terms; the name Guthlac is in Latin, *Belli munus*; for that he not only endured many troubles with worldly labour, but also by conversion received the gift of eternal bliss with the victory of eternal life, saying thus with the apostle:

*“Beatus vir qui suffert temptationem, quia cum pro-batus fuerit accipiet coronam vite, quam repromisit Dominiis diligentibus se.”* That is in English:

“Blessed is the man,’ saith he, ‘who here in the world endureth manifold labours and troubles, for whereas he is tempted and tried, then receiveth he the ever-lasting reward; and this hath God promised to all who love him.’”

After he was washed in the layer of holy baptism, he was led to his father's hall and there nourished. When the age came that the child should speak in child-fashion, he was no whit dull, nor disobedient to his parents in their commands, nor to those who nurtured him, either elder or younger. Nor was he addicted to boyish levities, nor the vain talk of vulgar men, nor unseemly fawning, nor lying flattery. Nor did he study the various cries of birds, as childish age is often wont. But he grew up in sharpness, and was blithe in countenance, and pure and clean in his disposition and innocent in his ways. And in him was the lustre of divine brightness so shining, that all men who saw him could perceive in him the promise of what should hereafter happen to him. After a time, when his strength waxed and he grew up to manhood, then thought he on the strong deeds of the heroes, and of the men of yore. Then, as though he had woke from sleep, his disposition was changed, and he collected a great troop and host of his companions and equals, and himself took weapons. Then wreaked he his grudges on his enemies, and burned their city, and ravaged their towns, and widely through the land he made much slaughter and slew and took from men their goods. Then was he on a sudden inwardly



admonished of God, and taught that he should thus give command; of all things which he had so taken he bade give back the third part to those from whom he had taken it. It was about nine years that he was thus engaged in hostile raids, the blessed Guthlac, and he thus wandered amidst the tumult of this present world. It happened on one night when he had come from an expedition, and he rested his weary limbs, and thought over many things in his mind, that he was suddenly inspired with divine awe, and his heart within was filled with spiritual love; and when he awoke, he thought on the old kings who were of yore, who thinking on miserable death, and the wretched end of sinful life, forsook this world; and the great wealth which they once possessed, he saw all on a sudden vanish; and he saw his own life daily hasten and hurry to an end. Then was he suddenly so excited inwardly with godly fear, that he vowed to God, if he would spare him till the morrow, that he would be his servant. When the darkness of night was gone, and it was day, he arose and signed himself with the mark of Christ's rood. Then bade he his companions that they should find them another captain and leader of their company; and he confessed to them, and said that he would be Christ's servant. When his companions heard these words, they were greatly astonished, and very alarmed for the words which they had heard. Then they all bowed to him, and begged him that he never would perform the things which he had in words expressed. He however cared not for their words, but the same thing that he had first intended, that would he perform. God's love burnt so within him, that not only did he despise this world, but also his parents' wealth and his home, and even his companions he all forsook. When he was four and twenty-years old, he forsook all the pomps of the world, and set all his hope on Christ. And after that he went to a monastery, which is called Hrypadun, and there received the mystical tonsure of St. Peter the apostle, under abbess Aelfthrytha. And after he had taken the tonsure and the monastic life, lo! he would taste no liquid through which drunkenness comes. And for these things the brethren hated him, because he was so abstinent; but soon after, when they perceived the purity of his mind, and the cleanness of his life, they all loved him. He was in figure tall, and pure in body, cheerful in mood, and in countenance handsome; he was mild and modest in his discourse, and he was patient and humble; and ever in his heart was divine love hot and burning. When he devoted himself to letters and learning, he was desirous of learning his psalms. Then was the fruitful breast of the blessed man filled with God's

grace, and with the teaching of God the great master he became instructed and learned in divine discipline. When he had been two years on this study, he had learned his psalms, and canticles, and hymns, and prayers, after ecclesiastical order. Then began he to study the good observances of the virtuous in that life, gentleness and obedience, patience and long suffering, and abstinence of body; and he cultivated the virtues of all good men. After he had passed about two years of his life thus in the monastic state, he began to long for the wilderness and a hermitage. When he heard tell and learned concerning anchorites who of yore longed for the wilderness and hermitages for God's name, and passed their lives there, his heart was inwardly inspired with the love of God to long for the wilderness. So then not many days after, he begged leave from the servants [of God] who were the eldest there, that he might depart.

### III

There is in Britain a fen of immense size, which begins from the river Granta not far from the city, which is named Grantchester. There are immense marshes, now a black pool of water, now foul running streams, and also many islands, and reeds, and hillocks, and thickets, and with manifold windings wide and long it continues up to the north sea. When the aforesaid man, Guthlac of blessed memory, found out this uncultivated spot of the wide wilderness, he was comforted with divine support, and journeyed forthwith by the straightest way thither. And when he came there he inquired of the inhabitants of the land where he might find himself a dwelling-place in the wilderness.

Whereupon they told him many things about the vastness of the wilderness. There was a man named Tatwine, who said that he knew an island especially obscure, which oftentimes many men had attempted to inhabit, but no man could do it on account of manifold horrors and fears, and the loneliness of the wide wilderness; so that no man could endure it, but every one on this account had fled from it. When the holy man Guthlac heard these words, he bid him straightway show him the place, and he did so; he embarked in a vessel, and they went both through the wild fens till they came to the spot which is called Crowland; this land was in such wise (as he said) situated in the midst of the waste of the aforesaid fen, very obscure, and very few men knew of it except the one who showed it to him; as no man ever could inhabit it before the holy man Guthlac came thither, on account of the dwelling of the accursed spirits there. And the blessed man Guthlac disregarded the temptation of the accursed spirits, and was strengthened with heavenly support, so that he began to dwell alone among the fenny thickets of the wide wilderness. It fell out, by divine providence, that he came to the island on the day of St. Bartholomew the apostle; for he sought in all things his support. And he was enamoured of the obscurity of the place, and vowed that he would serve God on that island all the days of his life. When he had been there not many days, he looked about at the things which appertained to the place. Then he thought that he would return again to the monastery, and salute his brethren, for he had before gone away from them without taking leave. So in the morning, when it was day, he went back to the

monastery; there he remained with the brethren ninety nights. And after he had taken leave of them, he returned back again to the place of his beloved wilderness with two servants. It was the eighth day before the kalends of September, which is observed as the day of St. Bartholomew the apostle, when the holy man Guthlac came to the aforesaid place Crowland, for that he sought his support first in all things in regard to his solitary life. He was six and twenty years of age when, endowed with heavenly grace God's soldier first settled in the wilderness. Then straightway, that he might arm himself against the attacks of the wicked spirits with spiritual weapons, he took the shield of the Holy Spirit, faith; and clothed himself in the armour of heavenly hope; and put on his head the helmet of chaste thoughts; and with the arrows of holy psalmody he ever continually shot and fought against the accursed spirits. And now how greatly must we admire the secret might of our Lord and the judgments of his mercy; who can tell them all? As the noble teacher of all nations, St. Paul the apostle, whom our Lord Almighty God foreappointed to preach the gospel to his people; he was before a persecutor of his holy church, and whilst he journeyed to the city Damascus he was delivered from the dark errors of the Jews unbelief by the sound of a heavenly voice; so Guthlac of venerated memory was led from the tribulation of this world to the victory of eternal life.

## IV - Concerning the holy man, how he dwelt in the place

I begin now to speak of the life of the blessed man Guthlac as I have heard those relate who knew his life, Wilfrid and Cissa; and according thereto I tell it in order. There was on the island a great mound raised upon the earth, which same of yore men had dug and broken up in hopes of treasure. On the other side of the mound a place was dug, as it were a great water-cistern. Over this cistern the blessed man Guthlac built himself a house at the beginning, as soon as he settled in the hermit-station. Then he resolved that he would use neither woolen nor linen garment, but that he would live all the days of his life in clothing of skins; and so he continued to do. Each day, from the time that he began to dwell in the wilderness, the abstemiousness of his diet was such, that he never tasted aught but barley-bread and water; and when the sun was set, then took he his food on which he lived. Soon after he began to dwell in the wilderness, it happened one day, when he had, after his wonted custom, sung a psalm and fell to his prayers, that the old enemy of mankind (who, even as a roaring lion, scatters wide the venom of his temptations,) whilst he [was scattering abroad] the might of his wickedness and the venom of his cruelty, that he might wound the hearts of men therewith, suddenly, as from a bended bow, he fixed the dart of his temptation in the soul of Christ's soldier. When, therefore, the blessed man was wounded with the poisoned arrow of the accursed spirit, his soul (the blessed man's) was greatly troubled within him, about the undertaking he had begun, namely, to dwell thus alone in the wilderness. Then he turned himself hither and thither continually in his mind, and thought of his former sins and wickednesses which he had committed and wrought, and how that he himself had done greater and more enormous sins than he thought he could ever compensate for. Thus had the devilish arrow wounded him with desperation: the blessed man Guthlac was three days wounded with this despair, so that he himself knew not whither he would turn with his thoughts. It was upon the night following the third day that he firmly withstood these doubting thoughts; and thereupon with prophetic mouth he sang and cried to God, and said:

*"In tribulatione mea invocavi Dominum, et reliqua."* That is, in English:

“My Lord, in my trouble I cry unto thee, and hear thou me, and support me in my tribulations.”

It was soon after this that his faithful support, St. Bartholomew, came to him, and did not appear to him in sleep, but waking he saw and beheld the apostle in angelic beauty. And forthwith the blessed man Guthlac was right glad of the heavenly visitor; and his heart and mind was soon all enlightened, and he quickly let go the bad and desperate thoughts; and the heavenly visitor, St. Bartholomew, comforted him, and confirmed and strengthened him with his words, and bid him not despair, but be constant; and said that he would be his support in all his tribulations. When the holy Guthlac heard these words of his faithful friend, he was filled with spiritual joy, and strengthened and fixed his faith firmly upon God himself.

# V

It happened, also, on one occasion, when he was reflecting upon the conduct of his life, how he might live most acceptably to God, there came suddenly two devils to him, sliding down from the air, and they spoke plainly to him, and said:

“We are acquainted with thy life, and the firmness of thy faith we know, and also we know thy patience to be unconquered; and therein we tried and proved thee, whilst with manifold craft we directed our weapons at thee. We now henceforth will no longer trouble nor injure thee; not only will we now cease to hinder thee from that which thou didst first intend, but we will even tell thee respecting all those who of yore inhabited the wilderness, how they lived their lives. Moses first, and Elijah, they fasted, and also the Saviour of all the earth, he fasted in the wilderness; and also the famous monks who were in Egypt and dwelt there in deserts; they, through their abstinence, slew and quelled in themselves all corruption. Therefore, if thou desirest to wash from thee the sins thou didst once commit, thou shouldst afflict thy body with abstinence; because by how much the more severely thou afflictest thyself in this world, by so much the more firmly shalt thou be strengthened to eternity; and by how much thou sufferest more troubles in this present life, so much the more shalt thou receive in future; and when thou advancest here in the world in fasting, thou shalt then be exalted in God’s eyes. Therefore thy fasting must not be a space of two or three days, nor on each day, that thou shouldst exalt thyself thereupon as a very great abstinence, but it is necessary by a fast of seven nights’ duration to cleanse the man. As on six days God first formed and adorned the beauty of the whole earth, and on the seventh rested himself; so, also, beseems it thee in like manner by six days’ fast to adorn the spirit, and then on the seventh day to take meat and to rest the body.”

When the blessed man Guthlac heard these words, he arose and cried to God, and prayed, and thus said:

“Let my foes, my Lord God, be forever turned backwards, for I know and understand thee, that thou art my Maker.”

Immediately after these words the accursed spirit vanished from before his face like smoke. Then despised he the devilish doctrine, for he understood that it was all vain; and he took a moderate meal, that is, the barley loaf, and ate it, and supported his life. When the cursed spirits understood that he despised them all, and their doctrines, they bewailed with lamentable voice that they were overcome; and the blessed man was so victorious that he despised the blasphemies of their doctrines and of their temptations. Also it happened, on a time not many days after, that he was passing the night waking in holy prayers. Then in the stillness of the night it happened suddenly that there came great hosts of the accursed spirits, and they filled all the house with their coming; and they poured in on every side, from above and from beneath, and everywhere. They were in countenance horrible, and they had great heads, and a long neck, and lean visage; they were filthy and squalid in their beards; and they had rough ears, and distorted face, and fierce eyes, and foul mouths; and their teeth were like horses' tusks; and their throats were filled with flame, and they were grating in their voice; they had crooked shanks, and knees big and great behind, and distorted toes, and shrieked hoarsely with their voices; and they came with such immoderate noises and immense horror, that it seemed to him that all between heaven and earth resounded with their dreadful cries. Without delay, when they were come into the house, they soon bound the holy man in all his limbs, and they pulled and led him out of the cottage, and brought him to the black fen, and, threw and sunk him in the muddy waters. After that they brought him to the wild places of the wilderness, among the dense thickets of brambles, that all his body was torn. After they had a long time thus tormented him in darkness, they let him abide and stand a while; then commanded him to depart from the wilderness, or if he would not do so, then they would torment and try him with greater plagues. He, the blessed man Guthlac, cared not for their words, but with prophetic mouth he thus spake:

“The Lord is on my right hand, that I be not turned back from thee.”

After that the cursed spirits took him and beat him with iron whips, and after that they brought him on their creaking wings amidst the cold regions of the air. When he was at this height in the air he saw all the north part of heaven as it were surrounded by the blackest clouds of intense darkness. Then he saw suddenly an immense host of cursed spirits come towards him; and they soon



gathered together, and forthwith all led the holy man to the black places of torment, and brought him to hell's door. When he saw the foulness of the smoke and the burning flames, and the horror of the black abyss, he quickly forgot all the torments and the punishments which he had before suffered and endured from the accursed spirits. Then the cursed spirits rushed in and tumbled among the horrible flames, and there they tormented with manifold punishments the souls of unrighteous men. When the blessed Guthlac saw the greatness of the punishments, he was much terrified for dread of them. Then cried the cursed spirits with a great voice and thus spake:

“Power is given us to thrust thee into the torments of this abyss; and here is the fire which thou thyself didst kindle within thee, and for thy sins and crimes hell's door openeth before thee.”

When the accursed spirits had threatened him with these words, then answered he them thus, and said:

“Woe to you! children of darkness, and seed of destruction; ye are dust and cinders and ashes; who granted you, wretches, that ye should have power over me, to send me to these punishments! Lo! I am here present and ready, and await my Lord's will; wherefore should ye frighten me with your false threats?”

They then, the accursed spirits, motioned towards the blessed man as though they would push him in. There suddenly came the inhabitant of heaven, the holy apostle St. Bartholomew, shining with heavenly brightness and glory, amidst the dim darkness of the black hell. The accursed spirits were not able to abide there for the splendour of the holy visitor, but they hid themselves in the darkness. When the blessed man Guthlac saw his faithful friend he was greatly rejoiced with spiritual gladness and heavenly joy. After this the holy apostle St. Bartholomew bade and commanded them that they should be subject to him, and that they should bring him again with gentleness to the same place which they had before taken him from. And they did so, and brought him with all gentleness and care, and carried him on their wings, that he could not have been carried more pleasantly in a boat. When they came in the midst of the height of the air, there came towards him a troop of holy spirits, and they all sung and spake thus:

*“Ibunt de virtute in virtutem, et reliqua.”* That is in English:

“Holy men shall go from virtue to virtue.”

When it began to dawn in the morning they set him again in the place whence they had taken him. When he then was about to perform his morning prayers to God, he saw two of the cursed spirits standing there weeping and wailing greatly. When he asked them why they wept, they answered him and spake thus:

“We two weep because our power is all broken through thee, and we now may not come at thee, nor have any speech with thee; but in all things thou hast injured us, and altogether overcome our might.”

After those words the accursed spirits departed, even as smoke, from his face.



## VI - How the devils spake in British

It happened in the days of Cenred, king of the Mercians, that the British nation, the enemy of the Angle race, with many battles and various contests annoyed the English. It happened one night, when it was the time of cock-crowing, and the blessed man Guthlac fell to his morning prayers, he was suddenly entranced in light slumber. Then Guthlac woke from his sleep, and went immediately out and looked and hearkened; there he heard a great host of the accursed spirits speaking in British; and he knew and understood their words, because he had been erewhile in exile among them. Soon after that he saw all his house filled with fire, and they next struck him quite down with the points of spears, and hung him up in the air on the spears. Then understood the strong warrior of Christ that these were the terrors and the torments of the cursed spirits; he then soon fearlessly thrust from him the weapon of the accursed spirits, and sang the psalm:

*“Exurgat Deus et dissipentur, et reliqua.”*

As soon as he had sung the first verse of the psalm, they departed like smoke from his presence. When the blessed man Guthlac thus frequently fought and contended against the cursed spirits, they perceived that their power and work was overcome.

## VII - Concerning Beccel the priest

There was a priest whose name was Beccel; he came to the holy man and begged him that he would take him to him, and he promised that he would humbly live in God's service by his instructions. Then the accursed spirit sprinkled and watered over with the poison of his deceit the heart and mind of this same priest; the cursed spirit advised him that he should smite and kill Guthlac; and thus suggested to his heart: 'If I slay and kill him, then may I afterwards possess this same place after him; and men of the world will then honour me as they now do him.'

It happened one day that the same priest came to the holy man to shave him (as his custom was every twenty days to wash himself); then was he vehemently tempted to shed the blood of the blessed man. Guthlac soon perceived the persuasion of the cursed spirit (as all future things were through God's grace known to him, and also present things, and he could see and look through the man within as well as without); and he said thus to him:

"Oh! my Beccel, wherefore hast thou concealed under thy foolish breast the accursed fiend? Why wilt thou not spit out from thee the death-bearing waters of that bitter poison? I perceive that thou art deceived by the accursed spirit, and I see the wicked device of thy heart. The tempter of mankind and the enemy of earth hath begotten in thee the unrest of this evil intent; but turn thyself away from the evil teaching of the accursed spirit."

Then perceived he that he had been deceived by the accursed spirit, fell at the holy man's feet, and with tears confessed to him his sin. Thereupon the holy man Guthlac not only forgave him the sin, but also promised him that he would be his helper in all his trials.

## VIII - How the devils departed

It happened one night, when the holy man Guthlac fell to his prayers, he heard the howlings of cattle and various wild beasts. Not long after he saw the appearances of animals and wild beasts and creeping things coming in to him. First he saw the visage of a lion, that threatened him with his bloody tusks also the likeness of a bull, and the visage of a bear, as when they are enraged. Also he perceived the appearance of vipers, and a hog's grunting, and the howling of wolves, and croaking of ravens, and the various whistling of birds; that they might, with their fantastic appearance, divert the mind of the holy man. Then the holy man Guthlac armed himself with the weapon of Christ's cross, and with the shield of holy faith, and despised the temptation of the accursed spirits, and spake thus:

“O! thou wretched rebellious spirit, thy power is seen and thy might is made known: thou, wretched one, now displayest the forms of wild beasts and birds and creeping things, thou who once exaltedst thyself that thou mightest be equal to the eternal God. Now then I command thee, in the name of the eternal God, who made thee, and cast thee down from the height of heaven, that thou cease from this troubling.”

Immediately thereafter all the appearances of the accursed spirits went away.

## IX - How the writing was recovered

It happened one night that there came one to speak with the holy man. When he had remained some days there, it fell out that he wrote some writing on a sheet of paper. When he had written the writing he went out. There came a raven in; as soon as he saw the paper he took it and went with it to the fen. As soon as the aforesaid guest came back again, he saw the raven carrying the paper; thereat was he very vexed. It happened at that time that the holy man Guthlac came out of his church; there saw he the brother grieving. He consoled him, and said:

“Be not grieved, brother; but when the raven flies up through the fens row thou after him; so shalt thou recover the writing.”

Not long after he went into a boat, the same man namely who had written the writing. Having rowed through the fenlands, he came to a mere, which was very near the island; there was in the midst of the mere a bed of reeds; there hung the paper on the reeds, even as though man's hand had hanged it there; and he forthwith joyfully seized the paper, and brought it wondering to the man of God. And the blessed man Guthlac said that it was not the effect of his merit, but of God's mercy. There were settled on the same island two ravens, so greedy that whatsoever they could seize they would carry away; and notwithstanding he bore and endured their greediness, that he might give men the example of his patience. And not only were the birds subject to him, but also the fishes and wild beasts of the wilderness all obeyed him, and he daily gave them food from his own hand, as suited their kind.

## X - How the swallows sat upon him and sung

It happened on a time that there came a venerable brother to him whose name was Wilfrith, who had of old been united with him in spiritual fellowship. Whilst they discussed in many discourses their spiritual life, there came suddenly two swallows flying in, and behold they raised up their song rejoicing; and after that they sat fearlessly on the shoulders of the holy man Guthlac, and then lifted up their song; and afterwards they sat on his bosom and on his arms and his knees. When Wilfrith had long wondering beheld the birds, he asked him wherefore the wild birds of the wide waste so submissively sat upon him. The holy man Guthlac answered him and said:

“Hast thou never learnt brother Wilfrith, in holy writ, that he who hath led his life after God's will, the wild beasts and wild birds have become the more intimate with him. And the man who would pass his life apart from worldly men, to him the angels approach nearer. But he who frequently longeth for the converse of worldly men cannot meet with angelic discourse.”



## XI - Concerning the gloves which the ravens carried off

Also there happened on a time a prophetic miracle to this holy man. There was a distinguished man of noble king's-kindred in Mercia whose name was Athelbald. He wished to come to converse with the holy man. He prevailed upon Wilfrith that he should bring him to the man of God; and they went into a boat, and journeyed to the island whereon the holy man Guthlac was. When they had come to the holy man, behold Wilfrith had left his glove in the boat. And while they conversed with the holy man, he, the blessed man Guthlac, asked them whether they had left anything behind them in the boat (for God made known to him all secret things); then answered Wilfrith, and said that he had left his two gloves in the boat. Not long after, as soon as they had gone out of the house, there they saw the raven with his black beak tearing the glove upon the roof of a house. Then the holy man Guthlac rebuked with his word the raven for his mischief, and it obeyed his word, and the bird flew westward over the wilderness; whereupon Wilfrith reached the glove from the roof of the house with a stick. Also not long after there came three men to the landing-place, and there sounded the signal. Then went the holy man Guthlac out to the men with cheerful countenance and good humour, and there spoke with them. When they wished to depart they brought forth a glove, and said that it had fallen from a raven's mouth. The holy man Guthlac received it smiling, and gave them his blessing, and they then departed; and afterwards he gave the glove to him who before owned it.



## XII - How Hwaetred received his health

There was in the land of the East-Angles a man of noble kin, whose name was Hwaetred. Whereas he was daily reverently subject to his elders, it happened on a time, while he was at his father's house, that the accursed spirit entered into him, so that he went out of his wits, and the accursed spirit afflicted him so severely with this madness, that he bloodied and wounded his own body as well with iron as with his teeth; and not himself only did he wound with his ferocious teeth, but also whomsoever he could he in like manner tore. It happened on a time that there was a great multitude of men gathered together of his kinsmen, and also of other his near friends, that they might bind him and bring him into subjection. Thereupon he took an axe, and with it smote three men to death, and wounded many others with them. It was four years that he was sorely afflicted with this madness. Then was he last taken by his relations and brought to the holy monastery, to the end that mass-priests and bishops might wash and cleanse him from his madness. And they, however, with many expedients, could not drive out the evil powers of the accursed spirit. When at last they went home sorrowful with their relative, and they rather wished him dead than that he should longer annoy men, then at length the report was spread in the province that in the midst of the fen, on an island which was called Crowland, was an anchorite, who flourished before God with various virtues. Then they forthwith, when they heard of the holy man, thought that they would take the man thither, if it were God's providence that they might there find help. And they performed this, journeyed thither till they came to an island, which was very near that on which the man of God was, and they were there during the night with the sick man. When it was day on the morrow, they came to the aforesaid island; then in the usual manner sounded a signal. Then forthwith the holy man Guthlac went to them in the fervent power of God's love. When they weeping had told him their affair, he was filled with pity. He took the sick man and led him into his church, and there remained three days incessantly at his prayers. When the sun rose on the third day, he bathed him in holy water and blew in his face, and with that all the power of the accursed spirit upon him was shattered: and this same man was as though he had awoke

from a deep slumber, and he received his health again, and went home; and the illness never ailed him afterwards so long as he lived.

### XIII - Concerning Athelbald's follower

Also it happened on a time that a follower of the aforesaid exile Athelbald, whose name was Ecga, was disquieted by the accursed spirit. And he plagued him so severely that he had no recollection of himself. Then his relations brought him to the man of God. As soon as he came to him he girded him with his girdle. No sooner was he girded with the girdle than all the uncleanness departed from him, and the illness never after ailed him. Also the blessed man Guthlac flourished and prospered in the prophetic spirit, and he made known future things to men, as clearly as the present things.

## XIV - Concerning the abbot

It happened on a time that there came an abbot to him, who was formerly united with him in spiritual communion. While he journeyed thither his two attendants were with him; they supplicated him with a request for leave that they might go another way, and said that there was need and necessity for them to do this. Then the abbot granted them that which they begged of him. When the abbot came there to conversation with the blessed man Guthlac, whilst they mutually gave each other to drink from the well of the sacred scriptures, then amidst their talk of the sacred scriptures Guthlac said to him:

“But whither went the two that erewhile turned back from thee?”

Then answered he him, and said:

“They begged leave of me; they had another affair, so that they could not come hither.”

Then Guthlac answered him, (as God revealed to him all future things, which were as well known to him as the present,) and began to tell him the way of these brothers, and said to him:

“They went to the house of a widow, and were there intoxicated with too much drinking.”

And not only did he tell him of their road, but also concerning their fare, as also the very words which they there spake; he related it all to him in order. When the abbot had received his blessing he departed. When the aforesaid brothers again came to the abbot, he asked them where they had been. They answered him, and said that they had toiled much in their needful affairs. Then he asked them whether it were so. Then they swore stoutly that it was so. Then said he to them:

“Nay, but wherefore swear ye to a wicked lie; for ye were at the house of such a widow, and there passed your time in such wise, and spake there such words!”

Then they were conscious of their misdeeds, fell at his feet, and begged forgiveness of him, and confessed that it was as he said.

## XV - Concerning the brothers who came to him

Then came also to him two brothers on a time from a certain monastery. Whilst they journeyed thitherward they had with them two bottles filled with ale; then it was agreed between them that they should hide them under a turf, that, when they went home, they might have them with them. When they were come to him, he strengthened them with his counsel, and edified their hearts with his admonition. When they had spoken on many subjects amongst them, the blessed man Guthlac, with merry countenance and laughing words, said to them:

“Wherefore hid ye the bottles under a turf, and why brought ye them not with you?”

They were greatly amazed at these words of the holy man, and bowed to him, and begged his blessing. And he blessed them, and they returned home. It came to pass at that same time, that men of diverse conditions sought the holy man, as well nobles as bishops and abbots, and men of every condition, poor and rich. And not only men sought him from the province of Mercia, but also all who in Britain heard of this holy man, hied and hastened to him from all quarters: and those who were either in sickness of body, or plagued and possessed by the cursed spirit, or other evils, as mankind is compassed about with various griefs and pains: and of none of those whom they brought to him were the hopes thwarted; for there was no sick person that went from him unhealed; no possessed person that did not come to his right wits again; none afflicted with any disease that did not leave him cured.

## XVI - Concerning Athelbald's companion

It came to pass when many men came to him for diverse matters, among others came thither a companion of the before-mentioned exile Athelbald, whose name was Ova, that he might visit and converse with the saint. It happened on the second day that he was on the journey thither, that he walked over a thorn in the night: the thorn stuck into his foot, and so strong was the prickle of the thorn that it went through the foot, and he with difficulty proceeded on his way, and with much effort he arrived at the fore-mentioned island, whereon the blessed man Guthlac dwelt. And when he was there at night, his body swelled, above half of it from the loins to the feet, and he was so grievously afflicted with the pain, that he could neither sit nor stand. As soon as they told this to Guthlac, the man of God, he ordered that he should be brought to him: when he was brought to him, he told him the cause through which he was first so tormented, and how that pain first came upon him.

Thereupon Guthlac immediately stripped himself, and the garment which he wore next his skin he put upon the foresaid man. No sooner was he attired in the garment of so great a man, but the wound could not abide it: and lo! this same thorn, as an arrow speeds from the bow, so did it fly from the man, and go to a distance; and immediately at the same time all the swelling and all the wound departed from him, and he presently conversed with the holy man with blithe mood, and he afterwards went from thence without harm of any wound. And it came to pass that all men who heard these things wondered, and glorified and praised the God of heaven for them.



## XVII - Concerning the holy bishop St. Haedde

Also we must not pass over with neglect that wondrous thing, how that with prophetic power he knew and made things known. For through God's grace it was given him, that he should know the words of the absent as easily as those of the present which were uttered before him. It happened on a time that a bishop came to him, whose name was Haedda, as though he were counselled by a heavenly thought, that he should go to speak with the man of God. The bishop had with him in his company a learned man, whose name was Wigfrith. Whilst he journeyed thither among the other attendants of the bishop, they began to say many things about the holy man, and spoke much of his miracles. Some of them then spake of the severity of his life, the miracles which he wrought; some then spake doubtingly of his life, and said that they knew not whether he wrought these things in the strength of God, or through craft of the devil. While they spake these things among themselves, the philosopher said to them:

"I am able, said he, to try and find out whether he be a cultivator of divine piety; for I was long dwelling among the Scotch people, and I saw there many good men, who led their life well in God's service; and they shone through God's power before the eyes of men, with many miracles saw, I am able to judge of what kind this man's life is, whether he works these wonders through God's power, or doeth them through the devil's might."

When, therefore, the aforesaid bishop came to converse with Guthlac the man of God, they mutually refreshed each other with the nectar of evangelic sweetness. The brightness of the Lord's grace was so lustrous in the blessed man Guthlac, that whatsoever he preached and taught, it was as though he preached and spoke the words of angelic language. There was also so much wisdom in him, so much heavenly prudence, that whatsoever he taught he confirmed it with the divine [examples] of holy Scriptures. And suddenly the bishop, in the middle of the discourse which they held between them, bowed humbly to the man of God, and earnestly begged and besought him that he should through him receive the priestly office, that he might ordain him a mass-priest, and to the service of the Lord's altar. And Guthlac presently yielded to his prayers, and stretched himself on the earth, and said

that he would do that which was God's will and the bishop's. When they had performed the service, and he was consecrated, as I said before, then the bishop besought the holy man that he would take meat with him; and he did so, though it was at variance with his way of life. When they sat down to meat, as I before said, Guthlac looked at the bishop's attendants; then he saw the aforesaid brother Wigfrith, and spake thus to him:

“And now, brother Wigfrith, what sort of man seemeth thee now the priest is of whom thou saidst yesterday that thou wouldst try whether he were good or bad?”

Then Wigfrith arose, and bowed to the earth, and confessed his fault to him. Then the holy man was forthwith reconciled to him, and gave and granted him his pardon. The hallowing of the island of Crowland, and also of the blessed man Guthlac, took place at harvest-time, five days before St. Bartholomew's mass.

## XVIII - Concerning abbess Ecgburh

It happened also on a time that the venerable maid Ecgburh, abbess, the daughter of Aldwulf the king, sent to the venerable man Guthlac a leaden coffin, and winding-sheet thereto, and besought him by the holy name of the celestial King, that after his departure they should place his body therein. She sent the message by a brother of worthy life, and bid him ask him, who should be the keeper of the place after him. When he had kindly received the message of the venerable maid, then concerning that which he was asked— who should be the keeper of the place after him— he answered and said, that the man was of heathen race, and was not yet baptised; but notwithstanding, that he should soon come, and should receive the rites of baptism. And so it came to pass; for the same Cissa, who afterwards held the place, came to Britain a little time afterwards, and they baptised him there, as the man of God foretold.

## XIX - Concerning Athelbald the king

Also we must not pass over with neglect the wonder which this holy man Guthlac foretold and made known to men. It happened on a time that the before-mentioned exile Athelbald came to him; and Ceolred the king hunted him hither and thither, far and wide, and he fled from and shunned his persecutions and his malice. He had recourse then to the conversation of the holy man Guthlac; for when human help had failed him, notwithstanding divine support comforted him. When he came to the man of God, and related to him his troubles, Guthlac spake thus to him:

“O! my son, I am not forgetful of thy conflicts and thy troubles; for this cause I took pity on thee, and for thy troubles I prayed God that he would have pity on thee, and support thee; and he has heard my prayer, and he will give thee kingdom and rule over thy people, and they shall flee before thee who hate thee; and thy sword shall destroy all thy adversaries, for the Lord is thy support. But be thou patient, for thou shalt not get the kingdom by means of worldly things, but with the Lord's help thou shalt get thy kingdom. For the Lord shall bring down those who now hate thee, and the Lord shall remove the kingdom from them, and hath remembered and appointed thee.”

When he heard these words, Athelbald soon fixed his hope and faith on God himself, and he trusted and believed all the things which the holy man foretold,—how that kingdoms are overturned and taken away, and are evermore hastening to an end; and the rich and the poor, the learned and the unlearned, and young and old, —all these alike, strong death clutcheth and taketh.

## XX - Concerning the length of the holy man's life, and his departure

It happened, some while after this, that God's beloved servant Guthlac, after that he had led a life serving God for fifteen years,—then God pleased to lead his dear servant from the conflict of this world's miseries to the eternal rest of the heavenly kingdom. It happened on a time, when he was in his church at his prayers, he was suddenly attacked with illness. And he soon perceived that God's hand was sent upon him, and he right gladly began to prepare himself for his entry into the heavenly kingdom. He was seven days afflicted with the malady and on the eighth day he was brought to the utmost extremity. The malady attacked him on the Wednesday next before Easter, and on the same day of the Easter-week after he gave forth his life from his body. There was a brother with him whose name was Beccel, through whom I have been informed concerning the departure of the blessed man. When he came to him on the day when the sickness seized him, he asked him concerning certain things. And he answered him slowly, and drew the breath from his chest with long sighing. When he saw the holy man in so distressful mood, he said to him:

“What new thing has now happened to thee; has some sickness befallen thee on this night?”

Then he answered him and said to him:

“Sickness has befallen me this night.”

Then again he asked him:

“Knowest thou, my father, the cause of thy sickness, or to what end thinkest thou that this illness will come?”

Then again the holy man answered and said to him:

“The meaning of my illness is this, that the spirit must be taken away from this body; for on the eighth day there will be an end of my illness; therefore it behoves that the spirit be prepared, that I may go to God.”

When the aforesaid brother Beccel heard these words, he wept much and began to lament, and in great grief incessantly moistened his cheeks with tears. Then the man of God Guthlac comforted him, and said to him:

“My son, be not thou grieved, for to me it is no sorrow that I am going to the Lord my God.”

There was in him such a depth of holy faith, and so great love of God had he thereto, that the known and the unknown was entirely alike in his sight in respect of good deeds. When after four nights the first Easter-day arrived, the blessed man Guthlac in his sickness performed service to God, and sang mass, and after that he offered up the precious sacrifice of Christ’s blood, he began to preach the gospel to the aforesaid brother; and he penetrated him so deeply with his counsel, that he never before nor after heard the like. When the seventh day of his illness came, then came the aforesaid brother at the sixth hour of the day to visit him. He found him leaning in the corner of his oratory, against the altar. Notwithstanding he might not speak to him, for he saw that his malady violently afflicted him; however, afterwards he begged of him that he would leave his last words with him before he died. Then the blessed man Guthlac raised a little his weary limbs from the wall, and thus spake to him:

“My son, now is it very near the time, and do thou attend to my last commands. After my soul departs from the body, then go thou to my sister, and say to her, that I for this end here on earth avoided her presence and would not see her, that we two hereafter might see each other in heaven, before the face of God; and bid her that she place my body in the coffin, and wind it in the sheet which Ecgburh sent to me. I would not, whilst I lived, be clothed with a linen garment; but now, for love of the maid of Christ, the gift which she sent me I will put to the purpose for which I have kept it, namely, when my body and my soul part, let them wrap my body in the vestment, and lay it in the coffin.”

When the aforesaid brother heard these things, he thus spake:

“I beseech thee, my dear father, now while I behold and understand thy infirmity, and I hear that thou must leave this world, that thou explain to me concerning a matter which I never before durst ask thee about. From the time that I first dwelt with thee in this wilderness I have heard thee at

even and at daybreak speaking I know not with whom. Wherefore I beg and beseech thee that thou never leave me anxious and troubled about this matter after thy departure.”

The man of God with a long sigh drew the breath from his breast, answered him and said:

“My son, be thou not troubled,—the things which before I would tell to no man of the world while I lived, I will now reveal and make known to thee. The second year after I dwelt in this wilderness, at even and at daybreak God himself sent the angel of my comfort to me, who opened to me the heavenly mysteries, which it is lawful to no man to tell, and the hardness of my conflict he quite softened with heavenly angelic discourses; who also made known and revealed to me absent as well as present things. And now, my son, beloved one, keep thou my word, and tell these things to no other person except to Pege my sister and to Ecgberht the hermit, if it chance that thou speak with him.”

When he had spoken these words, he leaned his head to the wall, and with a long sigh drew the breath from his breast. When he turned himself again and recovered his breath, there came fragrance from his mouth like the odour of the sweetest flowers. And on the following night, when the aforesaid brother fell to his nightly prayers, he beheld all the house encompassed about with a great brightness; and this brightness remained there till day. When it dawned on the morrow, the man of God stirred again a little, and raised up his weary limbs. Then spake he thus to him:

“My son, prepare thyself to go on the journey which I bid thee; for now is the time that the spirit must leave the weary limbs and will go to the endless joy, the kingdom of heaven.”

When he had said these things, he stretched out his hands to the altar, and strengthened himself with the heavenly food, Christ’s body and blood. And after that he raised his eyes to heaven, and stretched out his arms, and then sent forth his spirit with joy and bliss to the eternal happiness of the heavenly kingdom. Amidst these things the aforesaid brother saw all the house perfused with heavenly brightness, and he beheld there a fiery tower, from the earth up to the height of heaven, whose brightness was unlike all other, and by its brilliance the sun itself at midday, —all its lustre was turned to paleness. And he heard angelic songs through the regions of the air; and all the island was profusely filled with the exceeding sweetness of a wondrous odour. Thereupon the aforesaid brother was smitten with great fear, went on board a boat, and travelled to the place which the man of God had

before bidden him seek; and there he came to Pege, and told her all these things in order as her brother had bidden him. When she heard that her brother was departed, she forthwith fell on the earth, and was filled with great sorrow, so that she could not speak a word. When she presently recovered herself, she drew from her breast within a long sigh, and gave thanks to the Lord for that he would have it so to be. Then they on the next day, according to the command of the blessed man, came to the island, and they there found all the place and the buildings filled with the sweetness of the herb ambrosia. She then for three days space, with holy hymns of praise commended the holy man to God, and on the third day, as the man of God had bidden, they buried the corpse in the church with solemnity. The divine goodness would openly display to men in how great glory the blessed man was after he was buried; as he erewhile, before the eyes of men, shone and was resplendent with so many miracles. After his death, when he had been buried twelve months, God put it into the heart of the servant of the Lord that she should remove her brother's body to another tomb. She assembled thither many of the servants of God, and mass-priests, and others of ecclesiastical order; and on the same day, on which, twelve months before, the departure of the blessed man took place, they opened the tomb, and there they found the corpse quite sound as it was at first, and as though he were yet living; and in the flexibility of the sinews and in all things, it was much more like a sleeping man than a dead one. Also the garments were of the same newness as when they were first put round the body. When they who were there assembled together saw these things, they were much amazed at what they saw; and they were so smitten with the fear thereof that they could say nothing. But when Pege the servant of Christ, beheld it, she was forthwith filled with spiritual joy; and she wound the holy corpse, with praises of Christ's honour, in the other sheet which Ecgbriht the anchorite formerly sent him, when alive, for that same service. Also the coffin they did not put into the earth again, but they set it in a memorable place and an honourable. The place has now since then been honourably distinguished by king Athelbald with manifold buildings, where the victorious body of the holy man spiritually rests: and the man who with all his heart seeks that place, through the intercession of the holy man he shall accomplish and bring about what he desires. The blessed man Guthlac was a chosen man in divine deeds, and a treasure of all wisdom; and he was steadfast in his duties, as also he was earnestly intent on Christ's service, so that



never was aught else in his mouth but Christ's praise, nor in his heart but virtue, nor in his mind but peace and love and pity; nor did any man ever see him angry nor slothful to Christ's service; but one might ever perceive in his countenance love and peace; and evermore sweetness was in his temper, and wisdom in his breast, and there was so much cheerfulness in him, that he always appeared alike to acquaintances and to strangers.

## XXI - Concerning king Athelbald

After these things Athelbald, the afore-mentioned exile, heard in far lands of the death of the holy man St. Guthlac for he alone was formerly his refuge and comfort. Then was he suddenly agitated with sorrow, and went thither to the place where the body of God's servant was, for he hoped that through the holy man God would grant him comfort in his conflict. When he came to the tomb of the holy man, weeping with tears, he thus spake:

“My father, lo! thou knowest my miseries, thou wast ever my support in my afflictions; whither shall I now turn myself; who shall comfort me if thou forsakest me?”

After he had with weeping said these things and much else at the tomb, when the hour of night came, he was in a house where he had often abode as a guest whilom when Guthlac was living. Whilst he was in this house, whilst he was turning his thoughts hither and thither in his sorrowful mind, his eyes were at length closed in sleep. Suddenly he woke up in a fright, and there he saw all the cottage filled within with heavenly light. Whilst he was in fear at the unusual sight, he saw the blessed man Guthlac in angelic aspect stand before him, and he spake thus to him:

“Thou shalt not be afraid, but be thou steadfast, for God is thy support; and I am therefore come to thee, for that through my intercession God hath heard thy prayer. But be thou not sorrowful, for the days are past of thy afflictions; for ere the sun shall have gone at twelve months' circuit round about, thou shalt wield this kingdom, which thou erewhile didst contend for.”

And not only did he prophesy to him his future kingdom, but he also related to him completely the length of his life. These signs God wrought through the holy man's merit after he was dead and buried.



## XXII

There was a boatman of the aforesaid exile Athelbald whose eyes had been for twelve months overspread with the white speck and dimness. When his physicians had long treated him with salves, and this no whit effected his healing, he was divinely admonished within, that if they brought him to Guthlac's resting-place he should recover his health and sight. Not long after his friends brought him to the place Crowland, and they spoke to Christ's servant Pege; and she was informed of the firm and fast faith of the man. Then she led him to the church wherein the venerable body of Guthlac was; she took some of the hallowed salt which Guthlac himself had formerly hallowed, and wetted it, and dropped it on his eyes; and ere she put a second drop on the second eye he was able to see with, that eye, and he readily perceived what there was in the room, and he went home whole and sound. Be praise and glory and honour to our Lord, and to the blessed man St. Guthlac, world of all worlds, for ever and ever, without end to eternity. Amen.

# Image Guide

V: Saint Anthony Tormented by Demons, Anonymous. Circa 1520. Wallraf-Richartz Museum WRM 0367. Public Domain.

XI: Corvus (raven) - miniature from folio 080v from *Der naturen bloeme* (KB KA 16) by Jacob van Maerlant (1260-1300). The image is in the public domain.

XXI: Roundel from the Guthlac Roll depicting Guthlac appearing to Athelbald in a dream. Circa 1200, Public Domain.