

Maranatha Baptist Bible College

PATRICK OF IRELAND: WAS HE A ROMAN CATHOLIC PRIEST?



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PATRICK OF IRELAND:
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INTRODUCTION

Although there is much legend centered around the life of Saint Patrick of Ireland, it must be conceded that he was a real, historical person. There is good historical evidence to support this fact.

Not only was he a real person, but he was most certainly a real Christian. He had a definite conversion experience and throughout his life he gave his first allegiance to God. The story of his life, when studied in its simplest form, without the trappings of all the legends and mystery that came later, is inspiring.

It is the purpose of this paper to show the strong possibility that Patrick was simply a Christian missionary obeying the call of God and not a Roman Catholic Priest.

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Patrick, whose name is derived from the Latin Patricius, was also known in his native country as Succath.¹ He was born in Britain. According to his own writings the place was Bonnaven, but the exact location of this town remains a mystery. Some sources say that it was in present-day Scotland while others claim Wales. It is agreed, at least, that it was in Britain.

The date of his birth is also obscure but one historian, F. G. Llewellyn, sets his birth between 375 and 380 A.D.² This was during the time of Roman occupation.

Both his father and his grandfather were married clergy. Although celibacy of the priesthood was not an enforced doctrine at this time it was a Roman practice. His father was also a decurio which means that he held a secular political position.³

In his Confessions Patrick tells how, as a boy of sixteen, he was taken captive in an Irish raid on his village. He was taken to Ireland and was, for the next six years, the slave of a chieftain named Milchu.⁴

During this time of captivity Patrick realized his need of a personal Savior. He did not try to depend on his parents' salvation but rather trusted Christ for himself and was genuinely converted. His own testimony in his autobiography is simple and beautiful.

“I, Patrick, a sinner, the rudest and the least of all the faithful, and most contemptible to very many...was taken captive. I did not know the true God; and was taken in captivity to Ireland with many thousand men, in accordance with our deserts, because we were living far from God, and did not observe His commandments...”⁵

¹Joseph Torrey, trans., General History of the Christian Religion and Church, Vol III, by Augustus Neander (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1851), p. 172.

²F. G. Llewellyn, The Early British Church and the Roman Occupation of Britain, (London: The Protestant Truth Society, n.d.), p. 100.

³S. Cheetham, A History of the Christian Church During the First Six Centuries, (London: MacMillan and Company, 1894), p. 436.

⁴Llewellyn, op. cit., p. 100.

⁵James Heron, The Celtic Church in Ireland, (London: Service and Paton, 1898), p. 68.

He also went on to say that after his conversion he felt called to pray many times a day and at night also with seemingly no concern for cold weather, snow, frost, or rain.

At the end of six years of captivity, he felt compelled to escape Ireland and return to his native Britain. This he did, although not directly, since he evidently spent several years in France (Gaul) at this time. Some Catholic sources would like to insert at this point an audience with the pope and a commissioning by the Holy See.⁶

To this James Heron replies, “It is no matter of surprise that while Prosper of Aquitaine

records in his Chronicle that ‘Palladius was ordained by Pope Celestine’ he says nothing of Patrick. Prosper was the panegyrist of Celestine and the chronicler of his doings. His silence with respect to Patrick is a good proof that the Irish apostle was not sent by Celestine, that Patrick’s mission had no connection with Rome, and that records that Prosper consulted at Rome had no reference to him.”⁷

When Patrick did get back to Britain he found his parents who were happy to see him and probably even happier to hear of his conversion. It was at this point in his life that he felt called to preach in Ireland. His call was directly from God, and he makes no mention of a church hierarchy in relating his call. During his captivity, the Lord had implanted in his sensitive heart a desire to serve God and also a love for the people of Ireland.

His friends and loved ones tried to persuade him against his mission but he could not be persuaded to disobey the Divine call. “It was not in my own power,” says Patricius, “but it was God who conquered in me, and withstood them all.”⁸

When he reached Ireland Patrick began at once to preach the gospel. Unlike many modern missionaries, he did not need to go to “language school,” God had already prepared His servant. Many of the pagan chieftains came to listen to him, and many were saved and baptized. Wherever he preached people forsook their Druid worship and followed the true God. Some of the chieftains gave him land upon which he built church buildings. Some of the land he used to establish monasteries. About this development Harry R. Boer says, “A distinctive and influential type of

monasticism developing in Ireland. It was introduced by Patrick, an English

⁶Charles G. Herbermann, ed., The Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. XI, (New York: The Gilmary Society, 1939), p. 554.

⁷Heron, op. cit., p. 55.

⁸Torrey, op. cit., p. 173.

Christian who was also the founder of Irish Christianity. It was Egyptian in form, a mixture of Antonian severity and Pachomian communal life. It developed in the fifth century and was intensely mission-minded and civilizing in character. Between 500 and 800, Irish monks and evangelized Ireland, Scotland and northern England. They also went as missionaries to Europe. The most educated men during this period were trained in Irish monasteries.”⁹

This would suggest that although Patrick was not an highly educated man himself he valued education, and particularly education which served the purpose of furthering the gospel. Another historian says, “he established a cloister, as the foundation of a system of Christian popular education, and gave the Irish a written language.”¹⁰

All was not easy for Patrick. He left his homeland and then sacrificed opportunities to return to it. As far as we know he remained in Ireland to his dying day. He suffered many hardships to take the gospel all over the island nation. Once, some of his new converts, newly baptized, were carried off in a British pirate raid. Patrick wrote a scolding letter to the supposedly Christian captain of this raid and this letter has been preserved.¹¹

He and his followers also suffered persecution at the hands of the Druid priests. Many times his life was endangered and some of his number were killed by them. Nevertheless he remained true to the end. He was willing to accept martyrdom if that was God’s will. He said, “I pray God that

He would grant me perseverance to enable me to approve myself a faithful witness, for the sake of my God, to the end. And if I have ever laboured to accomplish anything good for the sake of my God, whom I love, may He grant that, with those converts and captives of mine, I may pour out my blood for His Name!”¹²

Like his birthplace, the place of his death is obscured in history. The place most often pointed to is a place in Ireland know as Saul. It really matters little where his bones rest in light of the fact that he is eternally with his Lord.

⁹Harry R. Boer, A Short History of the Early Church, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), p. 132.

¹⁰Henry E. F. Guericke, Manual of Church History. (Andover: W. F. Draper, 1857), p. 261.

¹¹Torrey, op. cit., p. 177.

¹²Ibid.

The best sources of information about Patrick's life come from his own writings. Among these the most well-known is his Confessions--an autobiography. He also wrote an Epistle and a hymn which is popularly known as "St. Patrick's Breast-Plate." Within the limits of these writings we see no Romanish influence.

F. G. Llewellyn says, "Points from St. Patrick's biography are worthy of notice. He

claims no acquaintance with the Pope nor with the See of Rome; and makes no allusion to any ordination received therefrom. He never speaks of the seven Sacraments, nor of the mystery of the Mass, nor of the doctrine of Transubstantiation. He never alludes to the invocation of saints or angels, nor does he mention the Blessed Virgin Mary. He made no use of images; indeed, he declares with gratification that 'the people who worshipped images up to his day in Ireland are now the people of God,' and he clearly desires no return of such useless things into Christian worship. He never alludes to the doctrine of Purgatory, nor the offering of masses for the dead.

In the matter of the Holy Scriptures, he is just like the teachers over the sea in Wales; his writings abound with quotations from the Holy Scriptures. He appeals to no human authority, to no Church Father, but only to God and the Scriptures."¹³

This sounds more like a Baptist preacher than a Roman priest! Judging from his own writings alone it would be very difficult to prove this man to be a Roman Catholic priest.

What other sources of information are there of Patrick? Other biographies of his life were written at least two hundred years after his death. Legend has added much confusion to the story of his life. Especially fantastic is the story that he drove all the snakes out of Ireland and into the sea. Yet, this is probably the most well-known story about Patrick in Ireland today. Roman Catholic artists have even painted pictures of this supposed event. Many other miracles have been attributed to him. It must be kept in mind that the best historical source is a primary source.

Another question could be raised at this point. Did Patrick establish Roman churches in Ireland or did he establish independent churches? According to Neander, the Irish churches remained independent of Rome long after Patrick's time. He says the origin of Irish Christianity could be more easily traced to Britain.¹⁴

This brings another question. Did British Christianity come from Rome or could the British have received the gospel from another source? Neander says that the ancient British church

¹³Llewellyn, op. cit., p. 101.

¹⁴Torrey, op. cit., p. 174.

“struggled against the yoke of Roman ordinances.”¹⁵

Heron says, “Many indications make it probable that it was to her kinsmen of the same race

in Gaul that Britain chiefly owed her knowledge of Christian truth. Early British Christianity, just like early Irish Christianity, differed in many of its usages from the Roman type, and had close affinities with Eastern Christianity...there is hardly any room to doubt that from Gaul it passed into Britain.”¹⁶

If Patrick’s father and grandfather were clerics of independent churches, is it not easy to believe that Patrick established the same type of churches in Ireland? In his own conversion testimony he makes no mention of baptism by a priest, use of sacraments or any other Romanish way of salvation.

Judging from his life and testimony, Patrick must have been a man of God, preaching the gospel and scripturally baptising new converts. It would be historically difficult to prove that he was a Roman Catholic priest.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Heron, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

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