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in the Anglo-Saxon period?*

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Abstract

This article challenges the contention that during the Anglo-Saxon period the English considered themselves God's specially chosen people, like the Old Testament Israelites. The texts upon which this interpretation has been based are re-analysed; particular attention is devoted to the writings of Gildas, Bede, Alcuin and Wulfstan, the prose preface of the Old English *Pastoral Care*, and the introduction to King Alfred's legislation. The English could see themselves as a Christian people, and thus among God's chosen, but they do not appear to have claimed to be the beneficiaries of a more particularist form of divine election.

Did the English really think they were God's elect in the Anglo-Saxon period?

After the Reformation, and especially from the seventeenth century, English writers and statesmen frequently asserted that God had singled out the nation of which they were part, much as He had once established a special covenant with Israel. Thus, for example, John Lyly averred that God had always had 'so tender a care...of that *England*, as of a new *Israel*, his chosen and peculier people'; Oliver Cromwell proclaimed that the English were without parallel, 'a people...that are to God as the apple of His eye'; and John Milton declared that England had been 'chos'n before any other, that out of her as out of *Sion* should be proclam'd and sounded forth the first tidings and trumpet of Reformation to all *Europ*'.¹

Sentiments of this nature are traditionally seen by historians as products of the Reformation, and particularly of the rise of Puritanism.² Now, however, it has come to be quite widely believed that such ideas had developed nearly a millennium before. Among historians, this view has been most forcefully expounded by Patrick Wormald, who contended that, long before the Norman Conquest, the notion that the English had a 'special relationship with the Almighty' was already firmly established, such that 'the idea of England as "an elect nation enjoying God's special favour" was not a Tudor coinage'.³

Approaching the topic from a literary perspective, Nicholas Howe arrived independently at a similar stance, arguing that the way in which the founding fathers of the United States compared themselves to the Israelites had been

foreshadowed in the Anglo-Saxon age.⁴ More generally, interpretations of this sort have gained considerable prominence in recent years: works on the period commonly refer to English self-identification as a ‘new Israel’;⁵ some theorists of nationalism and historians of more modern times have responded favourably;⁶ a sitting Archbishop of Canterbury has given his endorsement;⁷ and one of the United Kingdom’s most distinguished ecclesiastical historians has presented a television documentary on the early medieval origins of English claims to divine election.⁸ The reliability of Wormald’s and Howe’s conclusions is therefore a matter of some importance. My object in this article is to question their evidential foundations.

As a preliminary, it is important to be aware that there is more than one way in which chosen status can be conceived. In Christian theology, it is a commonplace that the original covenant between God and the descendants of Abraham (i.e. Israel) was replaced in the New Testament: all Christians are henceforth considered God’s chosen people, and thus successors to the Old Testament Israel. This is founded on statements like that of St Peter, who echoed the language of the Old Testament covenant with Israel, and proclaimed that believers in Christ are ‘a chosen generation, a kingly priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people...the people of God’.⁹ Similarly, St Paul declared that ‘if you are Christ’s, then you are the seed of Abraham, heirs according to the promise’.¹⁰ It is no surprise to find such standard ideas clearly articulated in the Anglo-Saxon period. Thus Bede (d. 735), the pre-eminent English exegete of his time, wrote that ‘we

have been adopted among the seed of the Israelites, since, although having a kind of flesh from other nations [*aliis de nationibus*], nevertheless by faith in the truth and purity of body and mind, we follow in the footsteps of Israel'.¹¹ Ælfric (d. c.1010), the most widely disseminated theological writer of the late Anglo-Saxon period, expressed similar sentiments, stating that 'through that grace by which the human Christ became God's child...is every Christian person chosen by God [*bið gehwilc cristenra manna gode gecoren*]'.¹² Neither writer's exegesis links chosen status with any particular earthly nation: Bede declared that the prophets had 'promised the kingdom and riches of God's city Jerusalem...in a spiritual sense to all peoples in Christ [*omnibus in Christo gentibus*]', and Ælfric wrote that Christ 'came into the world that he might gather his chosen from all peoples [*of eallum þeodum*]'.¹³

The view of divine election articulated by Lyly, Cromwell and Milton was quite different, however: they held that the English were distinguished from other nations by an unusually privileged relationship with God. Comparable claims have at different times been made for various other groups, such as the Afrikaners and the citizens of the United States, but we should not assume that it was normal for medieval peoples to consider themselves specially chosen by God: the Franks were long seen as a prime example of such thinking, but it has recently been shown that their self-identification with Israel was far more tentative and narrowly disseminated than is often supposed.¹⁴ In the light of this, the question arises of

whether during the Anglo-Saxon period a particularist conception of divine election was indeed as prominent as many modern historians suggest.

To the best of my knowledge, no text from the Anglo-Saxon period asserts English chosen status in a manner remotely similar to the extracts from Lyly, Cromwell and Milton quoted above. Nor, so far as I am aware, is *novus Israel* attested as a label for the English in any contemporary source; historians' use of the expression 'new Israel' is an unhelpful anachronism. The case for thinking that the English considered themselves to be the special successors of the Old Testament Israel is therefore unsupported by any statements to this effect. Rather, it is based on passages in which modern writers have thought such ideas to be implicit. Sometimes the interpretation proposed is exceedingly tenuous, with mere interest in the Old Testament being taken to reflect belief in English chosen status; thus, for example, Howe suggested that the Old English poetic version of Exodus identifies the migrations of the Israelites and the English, but there is no need to see it as anything more than the transformation into vernacular idiom of an important Biblical story.¹⁵ It would be tedious to conduct an exhaustive unpicking of each such line of speculation, and my focus will instead be on the texts that constitute the core of the argument advanced by Wormald and Howe. The emphases of the two scholars are not identical, but each constructed his interpretation around a small number of excerpts from the writings of Gildas (*fl.* fifth or sixth century), Bede, Alcuin (d. 804) and Archbishop Wulfstan II of York (d. 1023), with Wormald also drawing on two texts associated with the West

Saxon king Alfred (871-99): these sources form the fundamental basis for the claim that during the Anglo-Saxon period the English believed they were the special successors of Israel.

The first link in Wormald and Howe's argumentative chain is essentially a preliminary, since there is no suggestion that Gildas, a fifth- or sixth-century British scholar, regarded the English as divinely chosen; rather, his importance lies in his possible influence on later writers.¹⁶ Gildas wrote his *Ruin of Britain* in the context of attacks on the Britons by those who would come to be known as the English, whom he called *Saxones*; he saw this onslaught as well-merited punishment for his compatriots' wickedness.¹⁷ The Britons had apparently had some respite from external assault since winning a victory at *mons Badonicus*, but Gildas judged that they were still sinning, and he warned of the possibility of renewed divine wrath, buttressing his admonition with extensive quotation from both the Old and New Testaments.¹⁸ In so doing, Gildas drew explicitly and repeatedly on the example of the Israelites, who had been taken captive by the Babylonians as punishment for their sins: he asked rhetorically what would happen to 'the black blot of this era', given that previously God had not spared 'a people peculiar among all nations [*peculiari ex omnibus nationibus populo*], a royal stock, a holy race, to whom he had said: "Israel is my first-born son"'.¹⁹ That Gildas drew lessons from the Israelites' experience does not itself demonstrate that he believed that the Britons occupied a comparably special place in God's favour – it is entirely normal for Christians to study the Old Testament.

But one passage in particular does raise the distinct possibility that he thought along such lines: he stated that prior to *mons Badonicus* the fortunes of the Britons and their attackers had fluctuated ‘so that in that people the Lord might in His customary manner test present Israel [*ut in ista gente experiretur dominus solito more praesentem Israel*], whether it love Him or not’.²⁰ Precisely what Gildas meant by *praesens Israel* is uncertain. It could reflect a belief that the Britons resembled the Israelites in having a privileged relationship with God.

Alternatively, however, Gildas may have considered the Britons to be no more than one part of *praesens Israel*, this expression encompassing all Christians. But even if we assume that Gildas’s readers thought that he believed the Britons had some special covenant, this need not have prompted the English to conceive of themselves in analogous terms: there is no reason why the instruments of divine wrath upon a peculiarly chosen people must themselves become the elect.

While it does not necessarily follow from the *Ruin of Britain* that the eventual defeat of the Britons should make the English God’s elect, Wormald and Howe argued that this text helped kindle such ideas in the minds of Bede, Alcuin and Wulfstan, each of whom invoked Gildas by name. When the relevant passages are juxtaposed, one might form the impression that the *Ruin of Britain* was widely known throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, but caution is in order: while several seventh- and eighth-century English writers were indeed acquainted with the text, there is little reason to think that it circulated widely thereafter.²¹ So far as I am aware, the only secure evidence that it was known in England between c.800 and

the twelfth century is one mid-tenth-century manuscript, probably produced at Canterbury; it is not even clear that Wulfstan had seen the *Ruin of Britain*, since his allusion to it derives from a letter of Alcuin.²² Since Gildas's direct influence on the English appears to have been of quite limited duration, the ways in which his ideas were mediated by Bede and Alcuin are of considerable importance. It is to these authors that we now turn.

Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, completed in the early 730s, is especially significant, on account of its wide dissemination.²³ Both Howe and Wormald discussed it extensively, and it was particularly central to the latter's arguments, but the text needs only brief treatment here, since I have examined it in detail elsewhere.²⁴ The *Ecclesiastical History* begins with a description of Britain and its abundant resources, which Wormald (but not Bede) likened to those of Canaan, the Biblical Promised Land.²⁵ It then narrates the history of Britain since Julius Caesar, and describes how the English established themselves in large parts of the island; occasionally, their influx is presented as divine punishment for the sinfulness of the Britons, who are especially condemned for failing to evangelise their attackers and for using a heterodox method to date Easter.²⁶ Wormald inferred that Bede believed that divine favour had been transferred from the Britons to the English, and placed particular emphasis on the following passage:

To other deeds of indescribable wickedness, which Gildas their [i.e. the Britons'] own historian describes in doleful language, they added this, that

they never engaged in preaching the Word of faith to the people of the *Saxones* or *Angli*, who inhabited Britain with them. Nevertheless divine love did not neglect His people whom He foreknew [*non... diuina pietas plebem suam, quam praesciuit, deseruit*]; rather, He appointed much worthier heralds of truth [i.e. missionaries from Rome] to the aforementioned people, through whom it might believe.²⁷

Bede thus identified the English as God's people in a way that echoed Paul's declaration that the Almighty had not abandoned Israel, 'His people whom He foreknew [*plebem suam quam praesciit*]'.²⁸ While the Britons had proved undeserving of Britain, the English converted, accepted Roman norms, evangelised the Frisians and Continental Saxons, and brought the Irish and Picts to orthodoxy on Easter.²⁹ They might therefore have been regarded as fulfilling what Wormald saw as their special covenant, but, soon after completing the *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede stated in a letter to Bishop Ecgberht of York that people were offending against God, risking both temporal punishment and exclusion from salvation.³⁰ The *Ecclesiastical History* does not spell out such concerns, but its numerous moralising stories were very likely intended to promote virtue, and Wormald argued that Bede's anxieties were informed by a belief that the history of the English was patterned on that of the Israelites: the latter had been exiled from Canaan for their sins, and the English could potentially forfeit their own 'Promised Land' too.³¹

While one can hardly doubt that the promotion of good Christian conduct was among Bede's objectives in the *Ecclesiastical History*, there are serious difficulties with Wormald's interpretation. Both in the *Ecclesiastical History* and in his letter to Ecgberht, Bede gave greater emphasis to divine judgement on individuals than collective punishment of entire peoples, and he was at least as worried about what might happen in the next world as in this one.³² Anxiety about the possibility of divine wrath need not in any case reflect a belief in some special chosen status: God had punished Sodom and Gomorrah, as well as Israel. Nor is a notion of privileged election a necessary corollary of the belief that the English had been the means by which God exacted vengeance on the Britons for their sins. Moreover, the *Ecclesiastical History* rarely refers to the Israelites, and does not make any sustained comparison between them and the English, which is all the more notable given Bede's knowledge of Gildas: the *Ruin of Britain* could have inspired him to cite a catena of Old Testament prophecies, or even to call the English *praesens Israel*, but he did neither, seemingly preferring to foster virtuous behaviour by describing persons whom readers should seek to emulate.³³ Perhaps the most telling objection, however, is that Bede can hardly have seen Britain as an analogue for the Biblical Promised Land, since he described Ireland even more positively: he declared the latter to be superior in breadth, healthiness and climate, and associated it (but not Britain) with abundant milk and honey, the archetypal features of Canaan.³⁴

Far from portraying the English as the peculiar recipients of divine favour, Bede placed them within a broader narrative of the spread of Christianity throughout the world, in accordance with Biblical prophecies that God's Word would be made known 'to the ends of the earth'.³⁵ The theme of Christian universality is prominent in Bede's exegetical work, and he saw the conversion of the English as part of a much wider history of mission: thus, for example, when he noted in his commentary on the construction and fitting out of Solomon's Temple that the faith had recently been preached to unbelievers in Britain, he did so in the context of a passage about the swiftness with which the Gospels had 'filled all the regions of the world'.³⁶ Since Britain lay near the edge of the known world, Bede likely saw the evangelisation of its inhabitants as having particular significance, marking that the Word was reaching the earth's limits, as had been foretold; indeed, the *Ecclesiastical History* incorporates papal letters which associate the conversion of the English with such prophecies, and the text's geographical introduction stresses Britain's remoteness by presenting it as 'open to the boundless Ocean' and 'almost under the northern vertex of the world'.³⁷ It may well be, therefore, that one of Bede's aims in the *Ecclesiastical History* was to narrate what he regarded as an especially important phase in the development of the universal Church. This does not, however, indicate that he considered the English to enjoy some distinctive chosen status: it simply reflects that Britain's far-flung location meant that missionary activity there was significant in the scheme of Christian history.

The foregoing rebuttal does not dispose of Bede's reference to 'plebem suam, quam praesciuit'. These four words would, however, be an extremely flimsy peg on which to hang the theory that he considered the English to be God's special elect, especially given that elsewhere (as we have seen) he explicitly referred to 'all peoples in Christ' being promised the riches of Jerusalem. It is, moreover, very interesting that the vernacular version of the *Ecclesiastical History*, which was written sometime before about 900, omits the passage that alludes to the English as God's foreknown people.³⁸ Indeed, the translator abbreviated or cut many sections of historical narrative and theological analysis, including most extended treatments of the Britons' errors over Easter, probably in an attempt to produce a work tailored to providing elementary instruction in Christian virtue. The result is a text shorn of the features crucial to Wormald's interpretation: the idea that the English were the means by which God punished the Britons ceases to be a major theme (without disappearing entirely), and the *plebs sua* reference vanishes. This is significant for two reasons. First, it shows that one fairly early English reader of the *Ecclesiastical History*, namely the translator, did not regard the text as an exposition of the English as God's elect, or at least thought that such a theme was insufficiently important to merit preservation. Second, while it is unlikely that very many people outside the ecclesiastical elite would have been able to comprehend Bede's Latin, the translation would have been clear to anyone when read aloud: the *Ecclesiastical History* would therefore have been most widely accessible in a version that is even less amenable than the original to being interpreted as an account of a specially chosen people.

We move next to Alcuin, a late eighth-century Northumbrian clergyman. He is less prominent than Bede in the work of Howe and (especially) Wormald, but arguably came closer to suggesting that the English might have a special relationship with God, and was much more explicit that they were liable to collective punishment for sin.³⁹ Two passages require particular attention. The first extract occurs in a letter that Alcuin wrote to Archbishop Æthelheard of Canterbury after Scandinavians attacked Lindisfarne in 793. Having reminded Æthelheard of his duties as a bishop, Alcuin addressed him thus:

You are, as truth says, the light of all Britain, the salt of the earth, a city that is set on a hill, a candle raised up upon a candle-stick. Likewise as the blessed head of the apostles attests: 'But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood'. Indeed by the constancy of your preaching, we shall be that which follows in the same letter: 'a holy nation, a purchased people', so that through you His virtue is declared, He who called all of us out of darkness into His marvellous light, who in time past were not the people of God, but now are the people of God. Our fathers, by the dispensation of God [*Deo dispensante*], although pagans, first took this homeland [*patriam*] by pagan military prowess. What a great disgrace it is therefore, that we as Christians should lose what they as pagans acquired. I say this on account of the scourge that recently fell on parts of our island, which has been inhabited by our ancestors for nearly 350 years. Indeed, it is read in the book of Gildas, the wisest of the Britons, that the Britons themselves

lost the same homeland on account of the robberies and greed of chiefs, on account of the iniquity and injustice of judges, on account of the idleness and sluggishness in preaching of bishops, on account of the wantonness and wicked ways of the people. Let us take care lest these same vices become ingrained in our times, so that divine blessing may preserve this homeland for us in the good prosperity that He has in His mercy deigned to grant to us.

After more instructions on episcopal responsibilities, Alcuin enjoined Æthelheard to pray, and quoted passages from the Old and New Testaments. He began with a prayer of Moses: 'Look from your sanctuary, Lord, and from your high habitation of the skies, and bless your people Israel and the land, which you have given to us.' He next cited Joel: 'Lord, spare your people, and give not your inheritance to the gentiles in reproach.' Excerpts from the epistles of James, Peter and Paul on the importance of prayer then follow, and the letter concludes with a poem further emphasising the obligations of those in positions of ecclesiastical leadership.⁴⁰

The letter to Æthelheard could reflect a belief that the English had taken Israel's place as God's specially chosen people, but it does not have to be interpreted in this way. Such thinking is not inherent in a fear of divine punishment, and there is no need to read any claim to an unusually privileged relationship with God into a passing reference to the English having had divine dispensation when they invaded Britain. Nor do the Scriptural citations demonstrate particularist thinking on Alcuin's part. The quotation from the Sermon on the Mount, with which the

above extract begins, was not addressed to any particular earthly nation, but to Christ's disciples, among whom Æthelheard could be numbered. Similarly, when Peter wrote of a 'chosen generation' and the 'people of God', he was referring to all Christians: the English were thus part of God's chosen, but it is not clear that Alcuin was asserting that some more special status differentiated them from other Christian peoples. Likewise, the use of Old Testament prayers could simply reflect that, as Christians, the English were among the successors to Israel. In consequence, the letter does not demonstrate that Alcuin, let alone anyone else, considered the English to have a peculiarly close relationship with God.⁴¹

The second Alcuin passage comes from his poem on York:

It was decided by God's piety that the wicked people [the Britons] should on account of its sins vanish from the lands of its fathers, and that a more fortunate people [*populus felicior*] should enter its cities, a people that would serve the commands of the Lord [*qui servaturus Domini praecepta fuisset*]. This was abundantly done. By the gift of the Thunderer, new powers flourished with numerous victories and God's people who would come [*gens ventura Dei*] began to have from its own ranks powerful kings.⁴²

The allusion to the English as *gens ventura Dei* could imply that the English had some kind of special bond with God, but the reference is too imprecise and fleeting to bear any great weight of interpretation. Howe nevertheless singled out this passage as 'perhaps the most explicit statement to be found in any Anglo-

Saxon writer of the English as the new Israelites'; given that the Israelites are not even mentioned, this rather highlights the weakness of his overall argument.⁴³ The argument is further undermined by three additional points. First, Alcuin did not use Old Testament models solely with respect to the English. Rather, he addressed Charlemagne as David, and referred to the Franks as *beata gens* ('blessed people'), an echo of an expression used of the Israelites in the Psalms: in so far as Alcuin considered the English to resemble Israel, he did not think that they were unique.⁴⁴ Second, he did not invariably present the attack on Lindisfarne as punishment for sin, sometimes expressing the view that humans cannot discern God's purposes, and should emulate Job's patient endurance of inexplicable suffering: such uncertainty or flexibility about the meaning of earthly tribulation would be rather surprising if Alcuin had a firm belief that the history of the English closely mirrored that of Israel.⁴⁵ Third, even if Alcuin's writings were taken to reflect such a belief, they had limited lasting influence among the English: the meagre evidence that the York poem was known in Britain comes from Alcuin's lifetime or very soon after, and his letters were rarely quoted by later English writers.⁴⁶

There is, however, one significant exception to the last statement, namely Archbishop Wulfstan, who wrote in the context of the Scandinavian attacks of the early eleventh century. Those who contend that the English considered themselves God's specially chosen people cite one part of what is now the best known

recension of Wulfstan's *Sermon of the Wolf*, in which he drew on the letter of Alcuin to Æthelheard discussed above.⁴⁷ The relevant passage states:

There was a learned man in the times of the Britons, called Gildas. He wrote about their misdeeds, how they with their sins so very excessively enraged God that He at last allowed the army of the English to conquer their land and to destroy the host of the Britons entirely. And that came about, according to what he said, through robbery of the powerful and through the coveting of ill-gotten gains, through the lawlessness of the people and through unjust judgements, through the sloth of bishops and through the wicked cowardice of God's preachers, who were silent about the truth altogether too often and mumbled with their jaws where they should have cried aloud. Also through the foul wantonness of the people and through gluttony and manifold sins they destroyed their land and they themselves perished. But let us do what is necessary for us, take heed from such. And what I say is true, we know worse deeds among the English than we have heard of anywhere among the Britons.⁴⁸

Three points are significant. The first is how little use is actually made of Alcuin's letter to Æthelheard: had Wulfstan wished to assert that the English were a specially elect nation, his source would have offered some potentially relevant Biblical quotations, but he did not exploit them. Second, although the above passage is premised upon an Old Testament paradigm of sin attracting divine wrath, and Wulfstan elsewhere explicitly drew lessons from the experience of the Israelites, the latter go unmentioned in the *Sermon of the Wolf*: using Israel as an

exemplar is not inherently remarkable, but modern writers sometimes seem keener than Wulfstan himself to compare the English to the original chosen people.⁴⁹ Third, Wulfstan appears, like Alcuin, to have been uncertain about how to interpret tribulations, sometimes presenting Scandinavian attackers as a manifestation of God's wrath, but on other occasions treating them as a sign that the end of the world was nigh; these two interpretive schema sit rather awkwardly together, since the apocalypse affects the whole planet and occurs just once, while scourges are localised, cyclical and avertable. The excerpt quoted above appears only in the longest of the three extant versions of the *Sermon on the Wolf*; in the 'short' recension, the apocalyptic paradigm is predominant, and it is combined with passages about divine punishment in the other two.⁵⁰ There is debate about whether the three versions represent successive augmentations or abridgements, but either way Wulfstan did not have a consistent and unambiguous view that suffering was retribution for wrongdoing: expansions would indicate that this paradigm was not at the forefront of his mind when he first composed the homily, and contractions would imply that he considered the idea peripheral.⁵¹ This is hardly suggestive of someone who had a confident sense that the history of the English was peculiarly patterned on that of Israel.

To the evidence of Gildas, Bede, Alcuin and Wulfstan, Wormald added the prose preface to the Old English *Pastoral Care*, together with the introduction to King Alfred's legislation. The *Pastoral Care* preface, which runs in Alfred's name, begins by evoking a past golden age of 'happy times' among the English, when

wisdom flourished, morality was upheld, and kings enjoyed military success. It then describes how learning and Latin literacy had decayed, and identifies this neglect of wisdom as the cause of temporal punishment and loss of wealth, an apparent allusion to viking attacks. The preface concludes with Alfred stating his intention to reverse the decline in scholarship through the provision of vernacular translations of the *Pastoral Care* and other texts.⁵² For Wormald, the mention of punishment represented an implicit invocation of ‘the English Covenant’, but – as is by now a familiar refrain – a belief in liability to divine wrath need not indicate a claim to any special status.⁵³ Nor is such a notion a necessary corollary of Alfred’s drawing lessons from the example of Solomon, the archetype of a king who had gained wealth by way of wisdom.⁵⁴ The point is underlined when one notes Alfred’s statement that his proposed translation programme had been inspired by the way in which the Hebrew law had been rendered into other languages by the Greeks, the Romans, and ‘all other Christian peoples’ (‘ealla oðra Cristena ðioda’): far from suggesting that the English had some peculiarly close relationship with God, the text thus presents them as just one of many Christian peoples.⁵⁵

Much the same point can be made about the introduction to Alfred’s legislation. Wormald thought that it invited the English ‘to remodel themselves as a new Chosen People’, on the grounds that it begins with the Ten Commandments and excerpts from the next three books of Exodus, sometimes modified to suit contemporary circumstances.⁵⁶ This interpretation is, however, undermined by

what comes next. After noting that Christ came to augment rather than break the commandments of the Old Testament, the text describes how the apostles taught ‘throughout all the earth’ (‘geond ealle eorðan’) and converted ‘many heathen peoples’ (‘monega hæðena ðeoda’), who were only required to adhere to basic Christian precepts.⁵⁷ It then explains that, once ‘many peoples’ (‘monega ðeoda’) had received the faith, synods were assembled ‘throughout all the world’ (‘geond ealne middangeard’), including among the English, and that these synods mercifully permitted that most types of wrongdoing could be emended through payments.⁵⁸ The text then moves explicitly into Alfred’s voice: he states that he had reviewed the decrees of earlier kings, accepting some and rejecting others, and proceeds to declare his ordinances, many of which prescribe fines or compensation payments for various misdeeds.⁵⁹ As in the *Pastoral Care* preface, the English are here treated as but one of numerous gentile nations: nothing is said to imply that their position in relation to God or Israel was different to that of others of the ‘many peoples’ converted to Christianity ‘throughout all the earth’.

This does, however, raise a question: why might Alfred’s decrees have been prefixed with substantial excerpts from Exodus, if not to suggest that the English resembled the Israelites in having a special covenant? There are at least two alternative possibilities. The first is Irish influence, since medieval Irish legal texts drew extensively on the Old Testament.⁶⁰ Such influence is eminently plausible, as Alfred is known to have had contact with the Irish, and there are some grounds to think that the Mosaic laws prefacing his decrees may have been translated from

the Irish *Liber ex lege Moysi* (or a related text), rather than directly from the Vulgate.⁶¹ The second potential explanation, which is in no way mutually exclusive with the first, starts from the observation (made by Wormald) that the section of the introduction that describes the spread of Christianity includes echoes of a letter that Archbishop Fulk of Rheims had sent to Alfred.⁶² Fulk condemned the state of Christianity among the English, whom he said were ignorant or neglectful of ‘synodal decrees’.⁶³ The introduction does not repeat these allegations, but implicitly contests them: the assertion that synods were the basis for English legal practices looks like an attempt to rebut Fulk’s criticisms. The quotation of Mosaic Law may well have been intended as part of this defence: English customs had been impugned, so there was reason to assert Alfred’s legislative authority by linking his decrees to the history of divine lawgiving. Whatever the rationale for the introduction to Alfred’s legislation, however, it is most unlikely to have sprung from (or stimulated) a belief that the English enjoyed a peculiarly privileged bond with God: such a notion would be quite inconsistent with the clear presentation of them as just one among many Christian peoples.

From early in the Anglo-Saxon period, the idea of the English as a single people was well-established. Among its foundations were, as Wormald and Howe respectively demonstrated, recognition of Gregory the Great as apostle, and belief in a collective ancestral migration.⁶⁴ It was, however, in all probability not until very much later that this English identity came to be associated with a claim to a

peculiarly close relationship with God.⁶⁵ Given the general difficulties in proving a negative, especially with regard to a poorly documented age, we cannot exclude the possibility that during the Anglo-Saxon period certain individuals toyed with the idea that God was sometimes particularly beneficent to the English; indeed, the references in Bede and Alcuin to *plebs sua* and *gens ventura Dei* could be interpreted in such a light, as might Lantfred of Winchester's late tenth-century allusion to the discovery of St Swithun's relics being a gift from Jesus to 'His Anglo-Saxons' ('suis...Anglis-Saxonibus').⁶⁶ But there is no evidence of a clear, developed or widespread belief that the English had some specially chosen status, such that they were truer successors to the Israelites than any other Christian people. It might be suggested that the absence of any articulation of this idea reflects that it was sufficiently pervasive to go unstated, but such a proposition would be deeply unpersuasive.⁶⁷ The suggestion that silences in the sources should be filled with ideas transplanted from later periods is dubious in itself, but there is a deeper objection: far from being silent, extant texts repeatedly say things counter to any notion of the English as the beneficiaries of some special divine election, instead presenting them as one of many Christian peoples, and declaring all Christians to be God's chosen. As Christians, the English could see themselves as among the chosen, along with every other Christian people. This, however, is fundamentally different to the notion that they were the peculiar successors to the Old Testament Israel, and thus 'an elect nation enjoying God's special favour'. The contention that this more potent claim was already prevalent in the Anglo-

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Saxon period should be treated with the deepest of scepticism, and probably rejected entirely.

I am very grateful to George Garnett for commenting on drafts of this article.

¹ *The complete works of John Lyly*, ed. R. W. Bond, Oxford 1902, ii. 205; *The writings and speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, ed. W. C. Abbott, M. R. Gleason and C. D. Crane, Cambridge MA 1937-47, iv. 389; *Complete prose works of John Milton*, ed. D. M. Wolfe and others, New Haven CT 1953-82, ii. 552.

² H. Kohn, 'The genesis and character of English nationalism', *Journal of the History of Ideas* i (1940), 69-94 is a clear statement to this effect.

³ P. Wormald, 'The Venerable Bede and the "Church of the English"', in G. Rowell (ed.), *The English religious tradition and the genius of Anglicanism*, Oxford 1992, 13-32 especially pp. 23-8; P. Wormald, 'Engla lond: the making of an allegiance', *Journal of Historical Sociology* vii (1994), 1-24 especially pp. 14-18.

⁴ N. Howe, *Migration and mythmaking in Anglo-Saxon England*, New Haven CT 1989.

⁵ A. Thacker, 'Monks, preaching and pastoral care in early Anglo-Saxon England', in J. Blair and R. Sharpe (eds), *Pastoral care before the parish*, Leicester 1992, 137-70 at p. 169; S. Foot, 'The making of Angelcynn: English identity before the Norman Conquest', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6th ser. vi (1996), 25-49 at p. 32; B. O'Brien, 'Authority and community', in J. Crick and E. van Houts (eds), *A social history of England, 900-1200*, Cambridge 2011, 76-97 at p. 82. Examples could be multiplied.

⁶ A. Hastings, *The construction of nationhood: ethnicity, religion and nationalism*, Cambridge 1997, 35-43, 51, 59; J. C. D. Clark, 'Protestantism, nationalism, and national identity, 1660-1832', *Historical Journal* xliii (2000), 249-76 at pp. 266-7; A. D. Smith, *Chosen peoples: sacred sources of national identity*, Oxford 2003, 115-18, 144-5.

⁷ R. Williams, 'Chosen people', *Times Literary Supplement* (6 July 2012), 13-15.

⁸ D. MacCulloch, 'How God made the English: a chosen people?', broadcast on BBC2, 17 Mar. 2012.

⁹ 1 Pet. ii. 9-10. Cf. Exod. xix. 6. Quotations are from the Vulgate.

¹⁰ Gal. iii. 29.

¹¹ *Bedae Venerabilis homeliarvm evangelii libri II*, ed. D. Hurst (Corpus Christianorum Series Latina cxxii, 1955), 124.

¹² *Ælfric's catholic homilies: the second series: text*, ed. M. Godden (Early English Text Society supplementary ser. v, 1979), 301.

¹³ *Bedae Venerabilis opera. Pars II: opera exegetica 2A*, ed. D. Hurst (Corpus Christianorum Series Latina cxix A, 1969), 262; *Ælfric's catholic homilies: the first series: text*, ed. P. Clemoes (Early English Text Society supplementary ser. xvii, 1997), 192. For further references, see L. Grundy, *Books and grace: Ælfric's theology*, London 1991, 150-75; G. Molyneaux, 'The *Old English Bede*: English ideology or Christian instruction?', *English Historical Review* cxxiv (2009), 1289-1323 at pp. 1318-19 and n. 162.

¹⁴ D. H. Akenson, *God's peoples: covenant and land in South Africa, Israel, and Ulster*, Ithaca NY 1992; W. R. Hutchison and H. Lehmann (eds), *Many are*

chosen: divine election and western nationalism, Minneapolis MN 1994; M.

Garrison, 'The Franks as the new Israel? Education for an identity from Pippin to Charlemagne', in Y. Hen and M. Innes (eds), *The uses of the past in the early middle ages*, Cambridge 2000, 114-61; M. Garrison, 'Divine election for nations – a difficult rhetoric for medieval scholars?', in L. B. Mortensen (ed.), *The making of Christian myths in the periphery of Latin Christendom (c.1000-1300)*, Copenhagen 2006, 275-314. Wormald's theory that the English claimed to be God's elect may have been stimulated by his supervisor's contention that the Franks considered themselves 'the New Israel': J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic kingship in England and on the Continent*, Oxford 1971, 98-100.

¹⁵ Howe, *Migration*, 72-107.

¹⁶ Ibid. 8-71; Wormald, 'Venerable Bede', 24-5; Wormald, 'Engla lond', 14, 16. See also D. Howlett, 'Early Insular Latin poetry', *Peritia* xvii-xviii (2003-4), 61-109 at pp. 84-6.

¹⁷ *Gildas: the Ruin of Britain and other works*, ed. M. Winterbottom, Chichester 1978. T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons, 350-1064*, Oxford 2013, 202-19 tentatively dates the text to 530×45. On the process by which *Angli*, rather than *Saxones*, became the standard collective term for the Germanic inhabitants of Britain, see P. Wormald, 'Bede, the *bretwaldas* and the origins of the *gens Anglorum*', in idem, D. Bullough and R. Collins (eds), *Ideal and reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon society: studies presented to J. M. Wallace-Hadrill*, Oxford 1983, 99-129 especially pp. 120-9; M. Richter, 'Bede's *Angli*: Angles or

English?', *Peritia* iii (1984), 99-114; Wormald, 'Venerable Bede', 18-23; Foot, 'Making of *Angelcynn*', especially pp. 38-45.

¹⁸ *Gildas: the Ruin of Britain*, passim. The reference to *mons Badonicus* (an unidentified location) is at pp. 98-9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 88.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 98.

²¹ D. Howlett, *Cambro-Latin compositions: their competence and craftsmanship*, Dublin 1998, 49-54; M. Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon library*, Oxford 2006, 176, 181, 208-9, 304. There appears to have been a significant decline in scholarship during the ninth century: M. Lapidge, *Anglo-Latin literature, 600-899*, London 1996, 409-54.

²² H. Gneuss, *Handlist of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts: a list of manuscripts and manuscript fragments written or owned in England up to 1100*, Tempe AZ 2001, no. 396; G. Mann, 'The development of Wulfstan's Alcuin manuscript', in M. Townend (ed.), *Wulfstan, Archbishop of York*, Turnhout 2004, 235-78 especially pp. 245-6. It is possible, but far from certain, that the *Ruin of Britain* was known to Asser (d. 909), a Welshman who entered King Alfred's service. Even if Asser was acquainted with the text, he could have encountered it in Wales (where it was known in the ninth century) rather than England. See Howlett, *Cambro-Latin Compositions*, 69-73; Charles-Edwards, *Wales*, 464-5.

²³ *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English people*, ed. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, Oxford, 1969 (hereinafter cited as *EH*). On the text's dissemination, see D. Whitelock, *After Bede*, Jarrow 1960; R. H. C. Davis, 'Bede after Bede', in

C. Harper-Bill, C. J. Holdsworth and J. L. Nelson (eds), *Studies in medieval history presented to R. Allen Brown*, Woodbridge 1989, 103-16.

²⁴ Howe, *Migration*, 49-71; Wormald, 'Venerable Bede', 23-7; Wormald, 'England', 14; Molyneaux, 'Old English Bede', especially pp. 1299-1302.

²⁵ *EH*, 14-16. P. Wormald, 'BL, Cotton MS. Otho B. xi: a supplementary note', in D. Hill and A. R. Rumble (eds), *The defence of Wessex: the Burghal Hidage and Anglo-Saxon fortifications*, Manchester 1996, 59-68 at p. 62 explicitly calls Bede's Britain a 'Promised Land'.

²⁶ *EH*, 48, 52, 68, 134-42, 204, 300, 316, 514, 554, 560.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 68. Bede also quoted a papal letter that mentions God wanting the English to be chosen ('*eligi uoluit*'), but this could simply mean 'chosen to be Christians': *ibid.* 108.

²⁸ Rom. xi. 2. W. T. Foley and N. J. Higham, 'Bede on the Britons', *Early Medieval Europe* xvii (2009), 154-85 at pp. 169-71 suggest that *plebs sua* refers to the Britons rather than the English. I am unconvinced, but this interpretation would only reinforce my argument.

²⁹ *EH*, 294-308, 474-86, 504-6, 532-54.

³⁰ *Venerabilis Baedae opera historica*, ed. C. Plummer, Oxford 1896, i. 405-23.

³¹ On Bede's didactic aims, see J. Campbell, *Essays in Anglo-Saxon history*, London 1986, 10-27.

³² *Ibid.* 38.

³³ *Ibid.* 10-27; Molyneaux, 'Old English Bede', 1301. Bede came closest to a comparison between the English and the Israelites when he likened the

Northumbrian king Æthelfrith to Saul, ‘sometime king of the Israelite people’, but the analogy is of individuals, not peoples. The comparison focuses specifically on the two men’s military successes, and Bede notes that, unlike Saul, Æthelfrith was ignorant of divine religion. See *EH*, 116.

³⁴ *EH*, 18-20. Contrast Wormald, ‘*Engla lond*’, 14, where Bede’s Britain is characterised as ‘effectively another land of Milk and Honey’.

³⁵ This paragraph draws on G. Tugène, ‘L’histoire “ecclésiastique” du peuple anglais: réflexions sur le particularisme et l’universalisme chez Bède’, *Recherches augustinienes xvii* (1982), 129-72; A. H. Merrills, *History and geography in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge 2005, 229-309 especially pp. 235-9, 249-82; J. O’Reilly, ‘Islands and idols at the ends of the earth: exegesis and conversion in Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica*’, in S. Lebecq, M. Perrin and O. Szerwiniack (eds), *Bède le Vénérable entre tradition et postérité*, Lille 2005, 119-45.

³⁶ *Bedae Venerabilis opera. Pars II: opera exegetica 2A*, 217-18. For further references, see Merrills, *History and geography*, 238 and n. 33.

³⁷ *EH*, 14-16, 158-60, 318-20. The remoteness of Britain and Ireland is also emphasised at *EH*, 198, 300, 306, 506.

³⁸ *The Old English version of Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English people*, ed. T. Miller (Early English Text Society, xcv-xcvi, cx-cxi, 1890-8). For this, and what follows, see Molyneaux, ‘*Old English Bede*’.

³⁹ Howe, *Migration*, 20-8; Wormald, ‘Venerable Bede’, 25; Wormald, ‘*Engla lond*’, 16.

⁴⁰ *Epistolae Karolini aevi tomus II*, ed. E. Dümmmler, Berlin 1895, no. 17. Cf. Matt. v. 13-15; 1 Pet. ii. 9-10; Deut. xxvi. 15; Joel ii. 17; Jas v. 16; 1 Pet. iii. 8 (with reference to prayer inserted); 1 Tim ii. 1-2. *Epistolae*, no. 129 has a comparable invocation of Gildas, but with less Biblical citation. Alcuin complained in this letter of divisions among the English; his point appears to have been that they should live in amity, not that they needed a single ruler. Howe also cited *Epistolae*, nos 16, 122, in which Alcuin similarly expressed concern that the sinful English might lose their land.

⁴¹ Contrast M. Garrison, 'The Bible and Alcuin's interpretation of current events', *Peritia* xvi (2002), 68-84 at pp. 74-6.

⁴² *Alcuin: the bishops, kings, and saints of York*, ed. P. Godman, Oxford 1982, lines 71-8.

⁴³ Howe, *Migration*, 26.

⁴⁴ For a few examples of Alcuin calling Charlemagne David, see *Epistolae*, nos 118, 136, 229, 261. *Beata gens: Epistolae*, no. 229; Ps. xxxii. 12; Garrison, 'Franks', 159-61; Garrison, 'Bible', 82-3; Garrison 'Divine election', 300-6. It is not necessary to conclude that Alcuin considered either the English or the Franks to be special successors to Israel, but one could postulate (and Garrison comes close to suggesting) that he initially thought this of the English, and then came to believe that the Franks had taken their place. If so, this would imply that his putative belief in privileged English status was far from firm.

⁴⁵ See in particular *Poetry of the Carolingian renaissance*, ed. P. Godman, London 1985, no. 10, especially lines 85-6, 191-240, with Garrison, 'Bible'; D. A.

Bullough, *Alcuin: achievement and reputation*, Leiden 2004, 410-18. In arguing for a fundamental change in Alcuin's thinking in 796, Garrison arguably gives a strained reading of *Epistolae*, no. 16.

⁴⁶ On knowledge of the poem, see *Alcuin: the bishops, kings, and saints of York*, pp. xlv-xlv, xci-xciii, cxiii-cxxix; M. Lapidge, 'Aediluulf and the school of York', in A. Lehner and W. Berschin (eds), *Lateinische Kultur im VIII. Jahrhundert. Traube-Gedenkschrift*, St Ottilien 1989, 161-78. On the transmission and use of Alcuin's letters, see Bullough, *Alcuin*, 43-102; Mann, 'Development'.

⁴⁷ Howe, *Migration*, 8-32; Wormald, 'Venerable Bede', 25; Wormald, 'England', 16-17; P. Wormald, *The making of English law: King Alfred to the twelfth century. Volume I: legislation and its limits*, Oxford 1999, 462-3.

⁴⁸ *The homilies of Wulfstan*, ed. D. Bethurum, Oxford 1957, XX (E I), lines 176-89.

⁴⁹ On the intellectual background to the quoted passage, see J. E. Cross and A. Brown, 'Literary impetus for Wulfstan's *Sermo Lupi*', *Leeds Studies in English* new series, xx (1989), 271-91. For instances where Wulfstan drew on the Israelites' example, see M. Godden, 'Apocalypse and invasion in late Anglo-Saxon England', in idem, D. Gray and T. Hoad (eds), *From Anglo-Saxon to early Middle English: studies presented to E. G. Stanley*, Oxford 1994, 130-62 at pp. 154-5.

⁵⁰ Godden, 'Apocalypse', 142-56. J. T. Lionarons, *The homiletic writings of Archbishop Wulfstan*, Woodbridge 2010, 43-74, 147-63 emphasises that Wulfstan's thought did not progress neatly from one paradigm to the other. The

inconsistency may not have troubled him, since the same behavioural improvements were needed, whether to avert temporal punishment or to prepare for the Last Judgement. The idea that Scandinavian attacks were a scourge that might be overcome through moral reform is expressed in legislation that Wulfstan drafted for Æthelred, especially V Atr 26; VI Atr 30, 40.1; VII Atr 7.1; VIIa Atr prol, 8. Legal texts are cited from *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, ed. F.

Liebermann, Halle 1903-16, using the system of reference detailed at vol. i, p. xi. Wulfstan's contemporary Ælfric variously characterised the Scandinavian onslaught as a punishment, a portent of the apocalypse, and a diabolic test of faith: Godden, 'Apocalypse', 132-42.

⁵¹ Ibid. 143-6; S. Keynes, 'An abbot, an archbishop, and the viking raids of 1006-7 and 1009-12', *Anglo-Saxon England* xxxvi (2007), 151-220 at pp. 203-13; Lionarons, *Homiletic writings*, 147-63.

⁵² *King Alfred's West-Saxon version of Gregory's Pastoral Care*, ed. H. Sweet (Early English Text Society xlv, 1, 1871-2), 2-9. The reference to 'happy times' evokes Bede's description of Theodore's archiepiscopate (668-90): *EH*, 334. On the authorship of the Old English *Pastoral Care* and other texts traditionally ascribed to Alfred, see M. Godden, 'Did King Alfred write anything?', *Medium Ævum* lxxvi (2007), 1-23.

⁵³ Wormald, 'Venerable Bede', 25; Wormald, 'Engla lond', 15.

⁵⁴ *Asser's Life of King Alfred together with the Annals of Saint Neots erroneously ascribed to Asser*, ed. W. H. Stevenson, Oxford 1904, 60-1 explicitly compares Alfred and Solomon. See also J. L. Nelson, 'Wealth and wisdom: the politics of

Alfred the Great', in J. T. Rosenthal (ed.), *Kings and kingship*, Binghampton NY 1986, 31-52; D. Pratt, *The political thought of King Alfred the Great*, Cambridge 2007, 151-66.

⁵⁵ *King Alfred's West-Saxon version of Gregory's Pastoral Care*, 4-7.

⁵⁶ Af El pro.-48; Wormald, 'Venerable Bede', 25; Wormald, 'Engla lond', 15; Wormald, *Making*, 416-29 especially pp. 426-7. On the text's adaptation of Mosaic Law, see M. Treschow, 'The prologue to Alfred's law code: instruction in the spirit of mercy', *Florilegium* xiii (1994), 79-110 at pp. 90-102. Treschow does not subscribe to the 'Chosen People' interpretation.

⁵⁷ Af El 49-49.6. Cf. Matt. v. 17; Acts xv. 23-29.

⁵⁸ Af El 49.7-49.8.

⁵⁹ Af El 49.9-49.10.

⁶⁰ D. Ó Corráin, L. Breatnach and A. Breen, 'The laws of the Irish', *Peritia* iii (1984), 382-438 especially pp. 394-417.

⁶¹ *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, 60, 89; *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a collaborative edition. Volume 3: MS A*, ed. J. M. Bately, Cambridge 1986, *sub anno* 891; Wormald, *Making*, 419, 421; Pratt, *Political thought*, 230. See also *ibid.* 248-50.

⁶² Wormald, *Making*, 423-6. What follows is stimulated by Pratt, *Political thought*, 223-8.

⁶³ *Councils and synods with other documents relating to the English Church, I, A.D. 871-1204*, ed. D. Whitelock, M. Brett and C. N. L. Brooke, Oxford 1981, no. 4.

⁶⁴ Wormald, 'Bede, the *bretwaldas* and the origins of the *gens Anglorum*'; Howe, *Migration*. A third foundation, perhaps the most important, was a common language: T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'The making of nations in Britain and Ireland in the early middle ages', in R. Evans (ed.), *Lordship and learning: studies in memory of Trevor Aston*, Woodbridge 2004, 11-37 at pp. 12-24.

⁶⁵ Even in the sixteenth century, the idea was less widely articulated than has sometimes been claimed: R. Bauckham, *Tudor apocalypse*, Appleford 1978, 12-13, 71-3, 86-7, 235; K. R. Firth, *The apocalyptic tradition in Reformation Britain, 1540-1645*, Oxford 1979, 106-10, 252.

⁶⁶ M. Lapidge, *The cult of St Swithun*, Oxford 2003, 258.

⁶⁷ Such thinking is implied by Howe's assertion that 'fine writers rarely announce the central myth of their culture': Howe, *Migration*, p. ix.