

Strange gods and idolatry in the thought of the Venerable Bede

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Hilary Term 2025

Thesis submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy in Ecclesiastical History

Word Count: 99,867

Short Abstract

This thesis examines Bede's thinking about strange gods and idolatry, revealing his fears over the threat of idolatrous belief and observance, internal and external to Anglo-Saxon England in his own day. By exploring the areas where he demonstrated that concern, the thesis draws out themes which indicate the prominent overlap between Bede's study of Scripture (especially the Old Testament) and his observations of idolatry in eighth-century England and Europe.

The Introduction previews Bede's concern through a passage in his *In Samuhelem* commentary, supported by a review of his exegetical style, language, and an overview of the historiographical context. Chapter One examines Bede's attitudes towards those he called strange gods, indicating the influence of Scripture but also classical and English explanations of the origin and nature of the gods, whom Bede felt powerless and thus worthless in comparison to 'the true God'. Chapter Two similarly shows how Bede's desire for the total and immediate destruction of idol places in convert societies arose from his positive reception of such iconoclasm in Israel – something he recalled in his attitude towards English idol places. In contrast, Bede's study of idol makers, the subject of Chapter Three, demonstrates his apparent willingness to deviate from Scripture in light of his own unease over the veneration of fine metalworkers in England. Chapter Four reveals Bede's belief that pagan thought – secular literature, *fabulae*, and portents – carried risk and reward to English clerics. Bede saw kings as spiritual leaders who must rule and in turn be ruled, as demonstrated in Chapter Five. He examined idolatrous English kings through their Old Testament equivalents, shown in his treatment of rulers themselves but also their consorts and spiritual ministers. Chapter Six explores Bede's knowledge of contemporary idolaters, revealing his sense of the need for teachers to correct German, Saracen, and English idolaters. A coda shows how Bede's ideas were echoed in English and European treatments of strange gods and idolatry in the century following his death, closing with the proposal that scholars should now consider Bede as a spiritual watchman of the English Church.

Long Abstract

The thesis argues that the Venerable Bede, 672/673-735, was a spiritual watchman preoccupied with the threats facing the Church in his time. It concerns itself with one such threat in the apparent prevalence of strange gods and idolatry, exploring Bede's fears about idolatrous belief and observance in England and Europe. The thesis understands Bede as a member of a convert society where elements of idolatrous belief and observance were still found after the initial conversion, it considers his response to this threat as an important but neglected part of his wider theological thought. Other studies focus on Bede's brief provision of information about English paganism in select works, but this thesis investigates the broad architecture of Bede's thinking about strange gods and idolatry as he knew it from Scripture, classical and patristic literature, and his own insular context. It reads Bede's works as an internally coherent whole, interpreting his exegesis through the lens of his historical writings, and vice versa. It argues that Bede saw strange gods and idolatry as representing a continued threat to the English Church and parts of Europe in his own day.

Introduction

All studies of Bede need to emphasise the Scriptural perspective within which he interpreted his world, thus, this thesis begins with discussion of Bede's belief in Scripture and his particular view that its words spoke truth into his own time. A discussion of Bede the exegete complements this material and provides the context for the introduction of a passage in Bede's *In Samuhelem*, which was chosen since it familiarises readers with some of the fundamental elements of Bede's thought about strange gods and idolatry. This passage, which the thesis terms 'Christ strangles the strange gods', reveals Bede's belief that strange gods were worthless in comparison to 'the true God', but nonetheless, that these gods and their worshippers would remain a threat to the Church until Christ returned to make his final overthrow of the devil.

Historiographical Overview

The study of Bede and strange gods and idolatry has been fragmentary at best. An overreliance on several reports in Bede's *Historia* and the limited engagement with his exegesis have created the impression that Bede had little interest in the subject of this thesis

or that his interest was restricted to the past (since, as most scholars contend, no significant cases of idolatry remained in Bede's England). The thesis seeks to redress this imbalance.

Chapter One: Strange gods

Nature and origin of the gods

Chapter One examines Bede's treatment of strange gods, indicating that Bede followed Scriptural, patristic and perhaps English tradition when studying their nature and origin. He presented the classic Judeo-Christian juxtaposition between the 'false gods of the nations' and his own deity, 'the one true God'. The former had euhemeristic origins, with demons inciting the idolatrous worship of a renowned mortal. This meant that there were multiple paganisms, with each nation making its own god or gods, something Bede contrasted to the oneness of faith in his own tradition. Of English gods, Bede provided few specific examples, being constrained by the limits of his own knowledge but also his adherence to Mosaic prohibitions concerning the memorialisation of paganism. He did however implicitly recognise that Woden was considered the father of the English gods and people.

Dagon

Bede showed a particular interest in Dagon, the principal god of Philistia. His exploration of the literal Dagon observed how the latter's nature and person shared the same characteristics as other water demons in Scripture and their ultimate manifestation in the devil. Bede showed more interest in the allegorical treatment of Dagon, shaping his exegesis of the Philistine deity into a commentary on the Christian conversion and subsequent consolidation of Christianity in England. He made several points relevant to convert societies and in particular their relationship with their former religion, indicating his sense of the threat of strange gods in English society.

Chapter Two: Idol places

Scripture's idol places

Bede took a keen interest in the treatment of idol places, with several of his works presenting the firm conviction that pagan infrastructure should face immediate and total ruin on the conversion of a Gentile people. He observed the blasphemous erection of idol places in Israel, examining three sites in consecutive responses made to Nothhelm in *In Regum*: Topheth; the Mount of Scandal; and the Jerusalem Temple complex. Exploring these, Bede emphasised the temporal and eternal punishment that awaited idolaters and the devil. In the Israelite

kingdoms, this meant temporal exile from the Promised Land, with both Judah and Samaria conquered and taken to foreign lands. This prefigured the permanent exile in Gehenna that awaited all those who chose to disregard the correct treatment of idol places.

English idol places

Bede drew on his treatment of Scripture's idol places when considering English idol places. His writings suggest that not all pagan infrastructure in England had been destroyed in line with Old Testament (and English) legislation. In this regard, Bede's report of the burning of the Northumbrian idol place at old Goodmanham served as the exemplar of his preferred treatment of idol places. Moreover, the ruin of this site became a metaphor for how King Edwin, his court, and Northumbria renounced their idolatrous belief and practice. The preservation of English idol places might have resulted from Gregory the Great's permission that certain sites be consecrated as churches. Bede rejected this concession and instead emphasised his own rule that pagan infrastructure be ruined as soon as a people had converted to Christianity. The same motivation perhaps led Bede to celebrate the transformation of the Pantheon in Rome from pagan temple to church since the site was located in Christian Rome which no longer had to contend with its idolatrous past.

Chapter Three: Idol makers

Metalworking in Scripture and the idol maker

Bede reproduced the Old Testament censure of the idol maker and his idol, denouncing these craftsmen as 'fabricators of errors'. He made further condemnation of fine metalworkers and their craft, connecting these to Tubal-Cain, the father of metalworking and descendant of the cursed Cain. Bede even omitted the example of God-ordained smiths from Scripture, preferring to reinterpret these and other craftsmen as a figure for teachers. Bede's own ideal held that metalworking was permissible only for essential needs in the temporal life, influenced, it seems, from his reading in Revelation that all such crafts and trades would cease to exist in the end times. Of New Testament idol makers, Bede saw these as persecutors of the early Church, shown in his consideration of the Ephesian Demetrius.

Metalworking in England and the idol maker

Bede's aversion towards fine metalworkers was not so much influenced by Scripture as it was by his disapproval of the veneration of these craftsmen in Northumbrian society. He had some notion that skilled metalworkers were revered in English ecclesiastical centres, which

would be strengthened were it proven that Bede knew the contemporary Northumbrian memorialisation of the English god-smith Weland. He presented an extraordinary criticism of a monk-smith in Bernicia, known personally to Bede, a man whom he condemned for neglecting the spiritual rhythm of monastic life in favour of the crude hammering of the forge. Bede's criticism of the jewellery worn by certain English virgins, exemplified in his treatment of Æthelthryth, might reveal further his aversion to fine metalworking.

Chapter Four: Pagan thought

Secular literature

Bede held notable worries over the influence of pagan thought. He condemned how certain English scholars and teachers had abandoned the heights of Scripture to taste instead of the sweetness in secular literature. His own study of secular literature led him to conclude that its content should only be read by noble teachers, characterised as ruminators and the virtuous. He highlighted two specific merits of secular literature for noble teachers: oratorical improvement and the countering of pagan error, suggesting his knowledge of classical rhetoric and his sense of the ongoing need for teaching that countered pagan error in England.

Fabulae

Bede knew Greco-Roman, Jewish, and English *fabulae*, 'tales'. Classical and English variants were popular in eighth-century England; however, Bede protested the incidence of only the second of these. Bede identified only one set of English *fabulae*, still, he condemned the preference of clerics and lay congregations for tales from England's pagan past over those regaling the heroes of Scripture. In seeking to redress this idolatrous trend, Bede promoted one of his own tales – Cædmon the cowherd – whose songs about Christian creation and other themes Bede seemed to hope would influence the English to swop vernacular tales for wholesome counterparts in Scripture.

Portents

Bede took a practical approach to portents. Scripture provided little information about these phenomena and so Bede turned to sources far removed from the Judeo-Christian tradition, namely, the Roman natural historian Pliny the Elder. Bede interpreted astrological and meteorological portents, occasionally in response to English superstitions of these same signs. He omitted the event of an eclipse and plague that appeared to influence the outcome

of the Synod of Whitby in 664, thereby ensuring that this triumph of orthodox Christian doctrine would not be conflated with pagan folly.

Chapter Five: Idolatrous kings

Kings and the law

The role of kings proves central to much of Bede's theological thought, including his study of idolatry. For Bede, Christian rulers were occupants of a spiritual office, the *ministerium*, at once 'exalted to rule ... and to be ruled and subject to divine laws.' Bede found several laws relevant to Israelite and Christian kings, none more so than the royal requirements in Deuteronomy. Yet, the pattern of Old Testament kings showed Bede how power corrupts and visibly so in relation to idolatry. He noted the frequent failure of kings to uphold the responsibilities of their office and stressed how this had caused Israelite and English rulers to lose both their temporal and spiritual crown, leading to the suffering of the wider kingdom.

Foreign consorts

Bede saw the influence of foreign consorts, that is, pagan females who married Judeo-Christian kings, as a contaminant to faith in the true God. He cited Old Testament legislation against such females on several occasions and lamented the fact that foreign consorts had lured even Solomon, 'the wisest of kings', into worshipping strange gods. He saw a similar problem in the idolatrous marriages that had once been prevalent in England, concerning both kindred marriages and unions between pagans and Christians.

Spiritual ministers

Bede's kings were guided by spiritual ministers, who often held considerable influence over the religious inclination of the kingdom. He noted various sorts of pagan practitioners but said less of English examples. Idolatrous kings often persecuted Christ's ministers and Bede praised those who suffered martyrdom for speaking truth to power. In turn, he regretted the lack of priestly martyrs from England's conversion.

Rædwald

Bede's treatment of the East Anglian king Rædwald highlights his concern with the three earlier headings: kings and the law; foreign consorts; and spiritual ministers. Bede condemned Rædwald for his betrayal of Christ, comparing him to the faithless Samaritans in the Old Testament. He manipulated the role of the East Anglian queen, turning her into a tool

for Christian conversion. Bede probably understood Rædwald's 'perverse teachers' as holding a similar role to other English pagan practitioners.

Chapter Six: Contemporary idolaters

Bede himself might not have preached to the 'stony hearts' of pagans; nonetheless, his writings indicate his knowledge of these in his day. Christ had commissioned the disciples to take the Gospel to the Gentiles; Bede, too, reiterated teaching as the primary means of conversion. In Paul's sermon on the Areopagus, Bede found a framework for preaching to pagan converts and implemented the apostle's points in encouraging English readers to follow in the footsteps of this single-most important Christian endeavour: teach, baptise, and continue teaching.

Germans and Saracens

From Wearmouth-Jarrow, Bede learned of the presence of idolaters in continental Europe. He believed the English missions to Germany fulfilled Christ's command: 'the fame of the Gospel must spread through the farthest borders of the world.' In his report of these missionaries, Bede emphasised the correct procedure for evangelism, highlighting the importance of papal permission and, more locally, the critical need for bishops and teachers to convert the population and prevent the restoration of idolatry. In the tribe that he called *Sarraceni*, 'Saracens', Bede saw an idolatrous people who took descent from Ishmael but now worshipped Lucifer and Venus. He was worried about the Saracen incursion into Europe, but shared his hope that this tribe would be converted and thus take up their inheritance as true children of Abraham.

English

Bede expressed his belief that idolaters were also found in eighth-century England, perhaps connecting this problem with the shortage of bishops and teachers in several convert kingdoms. In his exegesis, Bede claimed the poor standards of catechesis had resulted in 'bloody converts', that is, Christians who were still contaminated with idolatrous belief, being incorporated into the Church. He noted how some in England had forsaken the renunciation made as part of their baptismal vows in order to return to 'erroneous dogmas' and 'Gentile tales'. Bede may have situated these idolaters in rural parts of Northumbria, complementing his wider sense that these congregations had received too few Christian teachers and were thus most at risk from the threat of strange gods and idolatry.

Coda: after Bede

English horizons

After Bede, the English Church and its continental offshoots cited his thought and concern with strange gods and idolatry. In England, ecclesiastical legislation and penitential literature, most prominently, the Council of *Clofesho* canons of 747, the *Penitential* and *Dialogue* of Archbishop Egberht, and the *Legatine Capitulary* canons of 786, reveal the continued presence of idolatrous belief and observance and pagan practitioners in English kingdoms. These texts often make explicit the implicit in Bede's writings that some in England had not received baptism and were then considered pagan or had foregone the baptism of tears either to maintain or return to part or all of their former religion. Several particular reforms within this literature recall comments that Bede had made to Acca and Egberht, showing how Bede identified both the problem of strange gods and idolatry and its possible correction.

European horizons

The need to convert pagan peoples hitherto without firm knowledge of Christ led English missionaries to Germany and two of these, Boniface and Lul, requested copies of Bede's writings from Wearmouth-Jarrow and York. These works could have inspired the missionaries, such as in their treatment of idol places, which emulated Bede's instruction much more so than the Gregorian approach. Bede's teaching also influenced Alcuin and Rabanus Maurus. Both men cited Bede's thought when shaping the Carolingian ideal of conversion and conquest, sometimes in a manner antithetical to Bede's beliefs.

Conclusion: Bede the spiritual watchman

The importance of Bede's thought about strange gods and idolatry and its reflection in subsequent generations of Englishmen at home and abroad means he can be considered a 'watchman of the English Church'. In Scripture, the watchman or watchtower motif was one applied to the prophet who scanned the spiritual horizon for threats and was charged with reporting these to Israel. Bede fulfilled this type by perceiving the presence of strange gods and idolatry and warning his superiors of its ongoing threat to the Christian faith at home and abroad.

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Acknowledgements

I remember well the first time that I ever heard the name ‘Bede’. I sat in an Oxford lecture room as part of a course that had raised more questions than answers, wondering what would come next. I walked Regius Professor Sarah Foot, a guest lecturer to talk about *The Venerable Bede*. It is sufficient to state that I hurried after Professor Foot once the lecture had concluded, and somewhat breathlessly asked whether she would supervise a paper on Bede.

Years later, I still ponder the significance of that encounter and my ensuing meeting with Professor Foot at ‘Tom 8’. I have been most privileged in my supervisor, now known as Dean Foot, but who remains ‘Professor’ to me. Sarah’s correction and encouragement has benefitted me throughout this period, even as her own vocation underwent such enormous transformation. I am extremely grateful and must admit to being rather saddened that our shared time at ‘The House’ now draws to its inevitable end.

There are others at Oxford who must also be mentioned. Professor Anna Sapir Abulafia persuaded me to stay put in a time of transition – I have not forgotten her kindness over tea and a fabulous rug – and, near to the close, Professor Carol Harrison shared similarly warm words from a Wearmouth pew. Warm thanks are due also to Professors John Blair, Phil Booth, Conor O’Brien, Dr. Sian Mosford-Foster, and, from Cambridge, Professor Rosalind Love. I am indebted to the staff at Christ Church: especially the librarians past and present who facilitated purchases and were swift to share a knowing smile; the porters, without whom access to college would be so challenging; and of course, a succession of scouts, most recently, Phophi, whose laughter will be sorely missed. For most of my time in Oxford, I have lived at 12 Abbey Road beside the River Thames and I am indebted to the many friends that I have met here – Boris, Dani, Daniel, Madeleine, Provence, Jessie, Sangwon, and Yuliia – not to mention those furred and feathered companions whose appearances have been a constant source of delight to me.

Outside of Oxford, I wish to recognise the discernment of Edwin Ewart, Dr. Peter Firth and Dr. David Luke, who knew where I should (and should not) go. I am much obliged to Dr. Jenny Horner whose forensic proofreading of my errant prose saved me from several rather embarrassing errors. Her inspiration was most welcome as I turned into the final straight. I

am fortunate in my friends, none more so than Neil, who, since our shared childhood in South County Dublin, has been a veritable rock to me. His life in Kyiv is a reminder of the privilege it is to study in peace – I am beyond thankful that, for all the pressures on him, he still found time to visit me and cheer me on in my research.

I remain somewhat at a loss to explain the presence of Céline, in whom elegant radiance seems so natural. Her support has been invaluable. I cannot thank her enough for staying the course with me, here in the very place where we met. I look forward to returning the favour and trust that we will soon have the time needed to visit our friends together.

The final word must go to my family and, in particular, my parents, Ferran and Jean. It was no doubt a surprise to all parties that the middle child who had long protested against formal education intended to go to Oxford, but I have known nothing other than support from each member of my immediate and wider family. The love of my parents has sustained me in this intensely challenging but rewarding experience, and I hope now to repay their tireless provision. The words in this thesis are as much their achievement as they are mine, and, as a result, I gladly dedicate this final submission to them.

Abbreviations

NB: Full bibliographic details can be consulted in the Bibliography.

ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
<i>Alcuin, Epistolae</i>	<i>Alcuin, Epistolae</i> , ed. Dümmler, MGH Epistolarum IV, Karolini Aevi II, pp. 1-481
<i>ASE</i>	<i>Anglo-Saxon England</i>
<i>ASSAH</i>	<i>Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History</i>
Augustine, <i>DCD</i>	Augustine, <i>De ciuitate dei</i> , ed. Dombart and Kalb, CCSL 47 (Libri I-X) – CCSL 48 (Libri XI-XXII); trans. Babcock, <i>Augustine: The City of God</i> , 2 vols., vol. 1, Books I-X, vol. 2, Books XI-XXII
Augustine, <i>Enarrat.Psalms</i>	Augustine, <i>Enarrationes in Psalmos</i> , ed. Dekkers and Fraipont, CCSL 38-40; trans. Boulding, <i>Expositions of the Psalms</i> , WSA III/15-20
BAR	British Archaeological Reports
Bede's writings	
<i>Abacuc</i>	Bede, <i>In canticum Abacuc</i> , ed. Hudson, CCSL 119B, pp. 381-409; trans. Connolly, <i>Commentary of Bede the Priest on the Canticle of Habakkuk</i>
<i>Apocalypsis</i>	Bede, <i>Expositio Apocalypseos</i> , ed. Gryson, CCSL 121A; trans. Wallis, <i>Bede: Commentary on Revelation</i>
<i>Cant.Canticorum</i>	Bede, <i>In Cantica canticorum VI</i> , ed. Hurst, CCSL 119B, pp. 167-375; part trans. Holder, <i>On the Song of Songs</i>

- DeTab.* Bede, *De tabernaculo et vasis eius ac vestibus sacerdotum libri III*, ed. Hurst, CCSL 119A, pp. 1-139; trans. Holder, *Bede: On the Tabernacle*
- DeTemp.* Bede, *De templo libri II*, ed. Hurst, CCSL 119A, pp. 141-234; trans. Connolly, *Bede: On the Temple*
- DNR* Bede, *De natura rerum liber*, ed. Jones, CCSL 123A, pp. 192-234; trans. Kendall and Wallis, *On the Nature of Things*
- DST* Bede, *De schematibus et tropis*, ed. and trans. Kendall
- DTL* Bede, *De temporibus liber*, ed. Jones, CCSL 123C, pp. 585-611; trans. Kendall and Wallis, *Bede: On Times*
- DTR* Bede, *De temporum ratione*, ed. Jones, CCSL 123B; trans. Wallis, *Bede: On the Reckoning of Time*
- Epist.Catholicae* Bede, *In epistulas septem catholicas*, ed. Hurst, CCSL 121, pp. 181-342; trans. Hurst, *Bede the Venerable: Commentary on the Seven Catholic Epistles*
- Ep.Ecg.* Bede, *Epistola ad Ecgberhtum episcopum*, ed. and trans. Grocock and Wood, in *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, pp. 124-161
- Ex.Actuum* Bede, *Expositio Actuum apostolorum*, ed. Laistner, CCSL 121, pp. 3-99; trans. Martin, *The Venerable Bede: Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*
- Ezra-Neemia* Bede, *In Ezram et Neemiam libri III*, ed. Hurst, CCSL 119A, pp. 235-392; trans. DeGregorio, *Bede: On Ezra and Nehemiah*

- Genesis* Bede, *Libri quatuor in principium Genesis usque ad nativitatem Isaac et eiectionem Ismahelis adnotationum*, ed. Jones, CCSL 118A; trans. Kendall, *Bede: On Genesis*
- HA* Bede, *Historia Abbatum*, ed. and trans. Grocock and Wood, in *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, pp. 22-75
- HE* Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors
- Homelia* Bede, *Homeliarum euangelii*, ed. Hurst, CCSL 122, pp. 1-403; trans. Martin, *Bede the Venerable: Homilies on the Gospels: Book 1, Advent to Lent and Book 2, Lent to the Dedication of the Church*
- Lucas* Bede, *In Lucae euangelium expositio*, ed. Hurst, CCSL 120, pp. 1-425; trans. Kendall and Wallis, *Bede: Commentary on Luke*
- Marcus* Bede, *In Marci euangelium expositio*, ed. Hurst, CCSL 120, pp. 427-648
- Quaest.Regum* Bede, *In Regum librum XXX quaestiones*, ed. Hurst, CCSL 119, pp. 289-322; trans. Foley, *Thirty Questions on the Book of Kings*, in *Bede: A Biblical Miscellany*, pp. 89-143
- Retract.Actus* Bede, *Retractatio in Actus apostolorum*, ed. Laistner, CCSL 121, pp. 101-163
- Salomonis* Bede, *In prouerbia Salomonis libri III*, ed. Hurst, CCSL 119B, pp. 23-163

<i>Samuhel</i>	Bede, <i>In primam partem Samuhelis libri IV</i> , ed. Hurst, CCSL 119, pp. 5-287; trans. DeGregorio and Love, <i>Bede: On First Samuel</i>
<i>Tobias</i>	Bede, <i>In librum beati patris Tobiae</i> , ed. Hurst, CCSL 119B, pp. 1-19; trans. Foley, <i>On Tobias</i>
<i>VCP</i>	Bede, <i>Vita prosa Sancti Cuthberti</i> , ed. and trans. Colgrave, <i>Vita Sancti Cuthberti Auctore Beda (Bede's Life of St. Cuthbert)</i> , in <i>Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert: A Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede's Prose Life</i> , pp. 141-307
Caesarius, <i>Sermones</i>	Caesarius of Arles, ed. Morin, CCSL 103 (Sermo I-CXLIII) and 104 (Sermo CXLIV-CCXXXVIII); trans. Mueller, FOTC 31, 47, and 66
<i>Capit. Legatorum</i>	<i>Capitulatio Legatorum</i> , 786, in Alcuin, <i>Epistola III</i> , pp. 19-29
CCCM	Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis (Turnhout: Brepols)
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina (Turnhout: Brepols)
<i>Clofesho</i>	<i>Concilium apud Clouesho</i> , 747, H&S III, pp. 360-376
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum (Vienna: Hahn, 1887-2004)
CSS	Cistercian Studies Series
<i>Dial. Ecgberhti</i>	<i>Dialogi Ecgberhti</i> , H&S III, pp. 403-413
<i>DMLBS</i>	<i>Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources</i>

EETS	The Early English Text Society
<i>EHD</i>	<i>English Historical Documents, c.500-1042</i> , ed. Whitelock
<i>EME</i>	<i>Early Medieval Europe</i>
FOTC	Fathers of the Church, Washington, D.C., Catholic University of America Press
Gregory, <i>Hom.Euangelia</i>	Gregory the Great, <i>Homiliae in Euangelia</i> , ed. Étaix, CCSL 141; trans. Hurst, <i>Gregory the Great: Forty Gospel Homilies</i>
Gregory, <i>Moralia in Iob</i>	Gregory the Great, <i>Moralia in Iob</i> , ed. Adriaen, CCSL 143 (Libri I-X), 143A (Libri XI-XXII), and 143B (Libri XXIII-XXXV)
Gregory, <i>Registrum</i>	Gregory the Great, <i>Registrum epistularum</i> , ed. Norberg, CCSL 140 (Libri I-VII) and 140A (Libri VIII-XIV); trans. Martyn, <i>The Letters of Gregory the Great</i>
H&S	<i>Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents relating to Great Britain and Ireland</i> , ed. Haddan and Stubbs, 3 vols.
Jerome, <i>Esaias</i>	Jerome, <i>Commentariorum in Esaiam</i> , ed. Adriaen, CCSL 73 (Libri I-XI), CCSL 74 (Libri XII-XVIII); trans. Scheck, <i>St. Jerome: Commentary on Isaiah</i>
Jerome, <i>Hieremias</i>	Jerome, <i>In Hieremiam libri VI</i> , ed. Reiter, CCSL 74; trans. Graves, <i>Jerome: Commentary on Jeremiah</i>
Jerome, <i>Matheus</i>	Jerome, <i>Commentariorum in Matheum libri IV</i> , ed. Hurst and Adriaen, CCSL 1969; trans. Scheck, <i>St. Jerome: Commentary on Matthew</i>

Jerome, <i>Nom.Hebraica</i>	Jerome, <i>Liber Interpretationis Hebraicorum Nominum</i> , ed. de Lagarde, CCSL 72, pp. 59-161
JL	Jarrow Lecture (Jarrow: St. Paul's Church, 1962-2017)
LCL	Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann and Harvard University Press)
Liebermann	<i>Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen, Herausgegeben im Auftrage der Savigny-Stiftung</i> , ed. Liebermann, vol. 1, Text und Übersetzung
LP	<i>Liber Pontificalis</i> , ed. Duchesne, vol. 1; trans. Davis
LXX	Septuagint (Greek Old Testament)
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
MGH AA	MGH Auctorum Antiquissimorum
MGH SRG	MGH Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum
MGH SRM	MGH Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum
Oliver	<i>The Beginnings of English Law</i> , ed. Oliver
OMT	Oxford Medieval Texts
Orosius, <i>Historiae</i>	Orosius, <i>Historiae Aduersus Paganos</i> , ed. with French trans. Arnaud-Lindet; trans. Fear, <i>Seven Books of History against the Pagans</i>
<i>Paenit.Ecgberhti</i>	Ecgberht of York, <i>Paenitentiale Ecgberhti</i> , ed. Wassersleben, <i>Die Bussordnungen der abendländischen Kirche</i> , pp. 231-247

- Paenit.Theodori* Theodore, *Paenitentiale Theodori, Discipulus Umbrensi-um*, ed. Finsterwalder, *Die Canones Theodori Cantuariensis und ihre Überlieferungsformen*, pp. 285-334
- PL Patrologiae cursus completus, Series latina, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris)
- Pliny, *NH* Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia (Natural History)*, ed. and trans. Rackham, LCL 330, 352-353, 419
- Ps.Hebraicum* *Psalterium Hebraicum*
- Ps.Romanum* *Psalterium Romanum*
- RB* *Revue Bénédictine*
- SC Sources chrétiennes (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf)
- Settimane* *Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di studi sull'alto Medioevo* (Spoleto)
- Tangl Boniface (Wynfrith), *Epistolae*, ed. Michael Tangl, *Die Briefe des heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus*, MGH, *Epistolae selectae I*; trans. Emerton, *The Letters of Saint Boniface*
- TTH Translated Texts for Historians
- Vergil, *Aeneid* Vergil, *Aeneid*, ed. and trans. Fairclough, rev. edn. Goold, LCL 63-64
- VW* Stephen, *Vita Sancti Wilfridi*, ed. and trans. Colgrave, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus*

WSA

The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st
Century

On Scriptural and non-Scriptural Citations

Unless otherwise stated, Scriptural citations follow the Latin Vulgate with an English translation from the Douay-Rheims version. The Vulgate numbering of the Psalms and Song of Songs is followed by the modern version in parentheses. Most non-Scriptural citations, i.e., classical or patristic sources, take the following convention. First comes the title of the critical edition in Latin, then, where appropriate: the book number (uppercase Roman numerals); chapter (lowercase Roman numerals); paragraph or verse number; line number; and page number. Page numbers from relevant English translations follow in parentheses. Translations that I have amended are marked *emend.* Embedded citations considered of secondary importance are indicated by [em.cit.].

Introduction

In late 716 or early 717, the Venerable Bede, c.672-735, completed what at that point represented his most innovative work, *In primam partem Samuhelis*.¹ An exegetical commentary, Bede's *In Samuhelem* concerned the narrative of 1 Samuel, the first of four Old Testament volumes that he called the Book of Kings, that is, 1-4 Kings, corresponding to 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings in modern versions of Scripture. Bede was the first Christian writer to produce a complete commentary on 1 Samuel, a book which occupies a critical juncture in Scripture, recording Israel's choice to replace its ruling judges with a king and introducing such seminal characters as David, from whose house was born the Messiah, Jesus Christ.² Bede saw the cause of Israel's rejection of the eponymous Samuel and subsequent election of Saul as king in the stunning request of the people, "Make us a king, to judge us, as all nations have."³ Interpreting this interaction in his commentary, Bede impersonated the Israelite elders who had put this request before Samuel,

‘Look’, they say, ‘your faith and love have grown old in us, and the sons whom you have brought up and raised, they have despised you, and so we would rather be like the Gentiles who did not know you and the kingdoms that have not called on your name, and remain foreigners to your leadership, than be deprived of a kingdom and homeland for the sake of faith in you.’⁴

For Bede, Israel's request served more than a rejection of Samuel. As God had revealed when comforting his prophet, "they have not rejected you, but me, that I should not reign over them."⁵ Bede took this to mean that Israel had preferred their own rule – in this, as in other

¹ Bede began working on this text in 713 or 714; see Scott DeGregorio and Rosalind Love, 'Introduction' to *Bede: On First Samuel*, pp.1-93, pp.2-10.

² Isaiah 9:6-7, 11:1; Matthew 1:1; Revelation 22:16.

³ 1 Samuel 8:5. For Samuel's authorship of 1 Samuel, see 1 Chronicles 29:29; Isidore, *Etymologiae*, VI.ii.9-10, pp.218-219 (p.136).

⁴ *Samuhel*, II.155-160, p.71 (p.210).

⁵ 1 Samuel 8:7.

cases, imitating the pagan Gentiles – to that of the Lord. He perceived in this example a figure of later examples of faithlessness, including, the Jewish rejection of Christ and the spiritual crime of certain Christian societies, including, it seems, his own race, the English.⁶

The full conversion, if it may be called as such, of England to Christianity had not been effected when the infant Bede was born somewhere in the *sunderlonde* of the River Wear, in the Deiran part of the kingdom of Northumbria.⁷ Under King Edwin, r.616-633, Northumbria had received Christ in 627, but thereafter suffered reversion to idol worship and raids from neighbouring pagan kingdoms which saw churches sacked and converts scattered.⁸ From the reigns of Kings Oswald (r.c.634-642) and Oswiu (642-670) the kingdom experienced sustained Christian rule, facilitating the spread of Christianity throughout Northumbria.⁹

Despite this, Bede shared in commentaries such as *In Samuhelem* his sense of the weakening of Christian faith in Northumbria, ‘little by little I see the times approaching which were once predicted, in which as iniquity abounds, the love of many grows cool.’¹⁰ There were many reasons for this increase in faithlessness, but we shall explore only one of these. For it is the argument of this thesis that Bede held a notable concern with the subject of strange gods and idolatry, and, moreover, that he believed certain English in his own day had chosen to become foreigners to God by returning to the errors of the Gentiles. This is not to say that idolatrous belief and observance were rife in eighth-century Northumbria or England – Bede was not, I judge, reporting the reconsecration of major idol places or return of pagan practitioners to

⁶ *Samuhel*, II.98-106, p.70 (p.207) [em.cit.], ls.142-146, p.71 (p.209), ls.322-338, pp.75-76 (pp.216-217) [em.cit.].

⁷ Charles Plummer, ‘Bede’s Life and Works’, *Venerabilis Baedae Opera Historica*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1896; rpt. as 1 vol., 1946), pp.ix-lxxix, p.ix, n.2.

⁸ *HE*, II.14, pp.186-187, III.1, pp.212-215.

⁹ *ibid.*, III.9, pp.240-243, III.14, pp.254-255; Thomas Pickles, *Kingship, Society, and the Church in Anglo-Saxon Yorkshire* (Oxford, 2018), pp.103-117.

¹⁰ *Samuhel*, IV.424-428, p.222 (p.449), cit. Matthew 24:12; compare *Cant.Canticorum*, III.v.182-204, p.276 (pp.145-146) [em.cit.]; *Genesis*, I.1193-1202, pp.38-39 (p.104) [em.cit.]; *Homelia* ii.24, ls.28-38, p.359 (p.242) [em.cit.].

formal society. The contention is that Bede, in his exegesis of Samuel's book and the rest of Scripture, was exploring its relevance for the Church in his own day. His observations, preserved in his exegetical commentaries, indicate his sense that the evil of idolatry represented a threat to Christian faith that merited no little consideration.

How it was that a monk-priest living at the dual house of Wearmouth-Jarrow in Northumbria came to read the words of an Ancient Near Eastern prophet as relevant to his own situation is best explained by Bede himself. Addressing Acca, Bishop of Hexham (r.709-c.731) and recipient of this and other Bedan commentaries, Bede expressed his belief that Samuel had prophesied of Christ and his Church.¹¹ By this, Bede meant that 1 Samuel and indeed the rest of Scripture were texts that could be read as speaking to the English Church and its Northumbrian province. This notion, so puzzling to modern readers, was not original to Bede, belonging instead to the Apostle Peter. Commenting on Peter's influence helps to explain how Bede came to see 1 Samuel and the rest of Scripture as texts that could be read as prophetic of eighth-century Northumbrian society – a tenet central to Bede's interpretative lens, and, in turn, the approach of this thesis. In 710, Bede had sent Acca a commentary on Luke's Acts of the Apostles.¹² Reading Acts 3, Bede learned how the Apostle Peter had taught the Jews assembled for Passover in Jerusalem how, beginning with Samuel, the prophets had foretold the coming of Jesus Christ: "And all the prophets, from Samuel and afterwards, who have spoken, have told of these days."¹³ Quoting these words in the opening prologue to *In*

¹¹ *Samuhel, prol. i*, ls.43-47, p.10 (p.103). In the *Historia*, Bede celebrated Acca, who, in turn, has been credited with enabling Bede to flourish as a scholar. Cf. *HE*, V.20, pp.530-533; Albert Stanburrough Cook, 'The Old English Andreas and Bishop Acca of Hexham', *Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences* 26 (1924), pp.245-332, pp.298-306; Paul Hilliard, 'Acca of Hexham through the eyes of the Venerable Bede', *EME* 26:4 (2018), pp.440-461; Clare Stancliffe, 'Bede and Bishop Acca', *Cities, Saints, and Communities in Early Medieval Europe: Essays in Honour of Alan Thacker*, ed. Scott DeGregorio and Paul Kershaw (Turnhout, 2020), pp.171-194, p.187.

¹² George Hardin Brown and Frederick M. Biggs, *Bede: Fascicles*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam, 2017-2018), vol. 2, pp.128-129.

¹³ Acts 3:24. The entire Old Testament foretold Christ and the Church, but Bede felt this was most overt in the prophets, with Samuel first among these, *Exp.Actuum*, iii.55-61, pp.24-25 (p.45).

Samuhelem, together with complementary sentiments from Paul's letters to the churches in Rome and Corinth, Bede professed his sincere belief that the entire canon was written 'for our correction, instruction, or consolation', that its words 'make known these days, that is, the days shining with the light of new grace',¹⁴ and that, consequently, 'that which has been written for our benefit should not pass us as irrelevant because of our torpor or carelessness.'¹⁵

Thus, Bede could claim that Samuel, Israel's last judge and first prophet, and so too the other canonical authors, made known his own days in Northumbria. This sense lies at the forefront of Bede's entire corpus of writings but would seem most impressive in his *In Samuhelem*. In the opening prologue, Bede made fourfold repetition of Peter's expression *isti dies*, 'these days'; while equivalent terms in the wider commentary – *hodie*, 'today', and *nunc*, 'now' – would seem confirmation that Bede wrote *In Samuhelem* with his mind bent towards his own day.¹⁶ Events in Northumbria between 713-717 have led scholars to propose various theories as to Bede's contemporary observations in 1 Samuel, ranging from political issues within the kingdom to the menace of British heretics in neighbouring Strathclyde.¹⁷ As Scott DeGregorio and Rosalind Love observed in their recent English translation of *In Samuhelem*, a number of these theories, while intriguing, pass into the realm of speculation and require sterner examination within the wider context of Bede's life and writings.¹⁸ Our own interest with *In Samuhelem* and Bede's wider writings seeks to reintroduce the subject of strange gods

¹⁴ That is, the period of the sixth age of the world, beginning with Christ's Incarnation and lasting until the seventh age of judgement. For the eight ages in Bede, see *Genesis*, I.1093-1225, pp.35-39 (pp.100-105); *DTR*, lxvi-lxxi, pp.463-544 (pp.157-249); Bede, *Liber Hymnorum*, ed. and trans. Lapidge, XII, pp.418-429 [hereafter, *Lib.Hymnorum*].

¹⁵ *Samuhel*, *prol. i*, ls.1-23, p.9 (pp.101-102), quot. Romans 15:4, 1 Corinthians 10:11, Acts 3:24.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, ls.14, 20, 60, 63, pp.9-10 (pp.101-102, 104).

¹⁷ Alan Thacker, 'Bede, the Britons and the Book of Samuel', *Early Medieval Studies in Memory of Patrick Wormald*, ed. Stephen Baxter et al. (Farnham, 2009), pp.129-147, cit. Clare Stancliffe, *Bede and the Britons*, Whithorn Lecture 14 (Whithorn, 2007), pp.19-34; Scott DeGregorio, 'Bede's Midlife Crisis: The Commentary on First Samuel', *Cities, Saints, and Communities*, pp.241-263, pp.245-247.

¹⁸ DeGregorio and Love, 'Introduction', pp.47-49.

and idolatry which has been curiously absent from studies of Bede and his world. It seems critical to establish this concern, and here, we can let Bede speak for himself, for he had much to say about strange gods and idolatry, especially between 709-717. In several works from this period, Bede included many more examples of nouns such as *idolon*, ‘idol’, or *idolatriae*, ‘idolatry’, than can be found in his remaining commentaries combined, and, towering over all these, stands *In Samuhelem*.¹⁹ Thus, while Bede considered the subject of strange gods and idolatry throughout the broad expanse of his writings; it was perhaps in his commentary on 1 Samuel that he voiced his clearest anxieties with this theme, both in its historical and present expression, internal and external to Anglo-Saxon England.

‘The priest Bede ... a venerable and admirable teacher’

Let us begin by situating Bede within his context as Northumbrian monk-priest and Scriptural exegete. Doing so assists our sense of Bede and helps explain a little the neglect of Bede’s interest with strange gods and idolatry in recent times. At the age of seven, Bede joined the *monasterium* at Wearmouth as an oblate under the care of Benedict Biscop (c.628-689).²⁰ According to Bede, Biscop, a Northumbrian nobleman turned monk, founded Wearmouth in c.673 and then Jarrow in c.681, with King Ecgrith, r.670-685, the sponsor for both houses.²¹ Bede spent the remainder of his life at the dual-house of Saints Peter and Paul at Wearmouth and Jarrow, seldom venturing elsewhere, save for occasional visits to other ecclesiastical

¹⁹ *Expositio Actuum* (c.709); *In Lucam* (c.711-715); *In Regum librum* (c.715); *In Samuhelem*.

²⁰ *HE*, V.24, pp.566-567; Mayke de Jong, *In Samuel’s Image: Child Oblation in the Early Medieval West* (Leiden, 1996), pp.48-50; Patrick Wormald, ‘Bede and Benedict Biscop’, *The Times of Bede: Studies in Early English Christian Society and its Historian* (Patrick Wormald), ed. Stephen Baxter (Oxford, 2006), pp.3-29; Michelle P. Brown, *Bede and the Theory of Everything* (London, 2023), pp.14-48.

²¹ *HA*, i-iv, pp.22-33; *Homelia* i.13, pp.88-94 (pp.125-132). For a revised proposal to Jarrow’s foundation, see Ian Wood, ‘Bede’s Jarrow’, *A Place to Believe In: Locating Medieval Landscapes*, ed. Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing (University Park, PA, 2006), pp.67-84, p.68f; *idem*, *The origins of Jarrow: the monastery, the slake and Ecgrith’s minster* (Jarrow, 2008), p.3ff.

centres in Northumbria, notably, Lindisfarne and York.²² At Wearmouth-Jarrow, Bede was instructed in the observance of the monastic rule.²³ He received an education in the traditional monastic curriculum which, taught in Latin, provided for lessons in the liberal arts of the *trivium* – grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic – and the wider body of learning in Scripture, patristics, and classical or, as Bede called it, ‘secular’, literature, *litterae saeculares*.²⁴ He learned enough Greek to interact with the Septuagint, perhaps from the inspiration of Theodore, a native of Tarsus (like St. Paul), who Pope Vitalian, d.672, consecrated as Archbishop of Canterbury in 669, a position he retained until his death in 690.²⁵ Under Theodore, the English Church experienced a marvellous period of learning and reforms, as some (including Bede) have seen it, a golden era.²⁶ In contrast, Bede often lamented the ‘sloth’, *segnitia*, of his own period, where pastorally-minded teachers such as Bishops Aidan (d.651) and Cuthbert (d.687) were in short supply as were the scholars responsible for raising the next generation of clergy.²⁷

Bede recalled several of his teachers in his writings, including: Ceolfrith, the beloved abbot (r.673-716) whose shock departure from Wearmouth-Jarrow in 716 Bede lamented in *In*

²² Richard Morris, *Journeys from Jarrow*, JL (2004), pp.17-18; Michelle P. Brown, ‘Bede’s life in context’, *The Cambridge Companion to Bede*, ed. Scott DeGregorio (Cambridge, 2010), pp.3-24, p.10.

²³ Sarah Foot, *Monastic Life in Anglo-Saxon England, c.600-900* (Cambridge, 2006), pp.3-5, 20-25 [hereafter, *Monastic Life*].

²⁴ Jean Leclercq [trans. Catharine Misrahi], *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, 3rd edn. (New York, 1982; rpt. 2000), pp.71-88, pp.112-150; Martin Irvine, ‘Bede the grammarian and the scope of grammatical studies in eighth-century Northumbria’, *ASE* 15 (1986), pp.15-44; Foot, *Monastic Life*, pp.226-232.

²⁵ *HA*, iii, pp.28-29; *HE*, V.8, pp.472-475; Anna Carlotta Dionisotti, ‘On Bede, Grammar, and Greek’, *RB* 92:1-2 (1982), pp.111-141, p.121ff.

²⁶ Michael Lapidge, ‘The Career of Archbishop Theodore’, *Archbishop Theodore: Commemorative Studies on his Life and Influence*, ed. *idem* (Cambridge, 1995), pp.1-29, pp.26-29.

²⁷ ‘Would that some Nehemiah (i.e. a “consoler from the Lord”) might come in our own days and restrain our errors’, *Ezra-Neemia*, III.833-837, p.360 (p.184), quot. with comment in Paul C. Hilliard, ‘*Quae res Quem sit Habitura Finem, Posterior Aetas Videbit*: Prosperity, Adversity and Bede’s Hope for the Future of Northumbria’, *Bede and the Future*, ed. Peter Darby and Faith Wallis (Farnham, 2014), pp.181-205, pp.200-201f. Cf. *Apocalypsis, prol.*, ls.140-145, p.233 (p.106); *HE*, III.5, pp.226-227; *Ep.Ecg.*, ix-xvii, pp.138-161; Alan Thacker, ‘Bede’s Ideal of Reform’, *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies presented to J.M. Wallace-Hadrill*, ed. Patrick Wormald et al. (Oxford, 1983), pp.130-153, pp.132-133, 136-139, 144-145; Scott DeGregorio, ‘Visions of Reform: Bede’s Later Writings in Context’, *Bede and the Future*, pp.207-232, pp.220, 224-228.

Samuhelem; Sicgfrith, d.689, remembered as a man of profound Scriptural wisdom; and Trumberht, a disciple of Bishop Chad, d.672, and priest of the minster at Lastingham, who was ‘one of those who taught me the Scriptures’.²⁸ Bede also shared how, in 680, Biscop had secured the services of John the arch-chanter from St. Peter’s in Rome, who trained the Wearmouth brothers in the Roman fashion of psalmody.²⁹ Together, these teachers instilled in Bede a lifelong love of learning, foremost in Scripture. In his autobiographical statement at the end of the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 731, Bede indicated his wish to be remembered as ‘a servant of Christ’, *famulus Christi*, who, ‘amid the observance of the discipline of the rule and the daily task of singing in the church’, delighted in ‘learning, teaching or writing.’³⁰

John of Beverley, the bishop of Hexham, c.687-705, and then York, 705-717, ordained Bede as deacon in c.692 and, ‘on the direction of Ceolfrith’, as priest in c.703.³¹ While never promoted to senior church office, Bede maintained good relations with several important figures in the English Church, including, besides Acca, Nothhelm, ‘a godly priest of London’ and later the Archbishop of Canterbury, r.735-739; and Ecgberht, Bishop and later Archbishop of York, r.c.732-766, who in 734 received Bede’s last extant work, his *Epistola ad Ecgberhtum*.³² Bede’s prodigious capacity for writing meant that he outshone even these luminaries of the English Church. He inserted a catalogue of most of his writings in the *Historia*, starting, of course, with his cherished Scriptural commentaries.³³ The fame of these and Bede’s other works spread from England to Europe, where, within two generations of his

²⁸ *Samuhel*, *prol. iv*, ls.1-12, p.212 (p.433); *HA*, x, pp.46-47; *HE*, IV.3, pp.342-343; Benedicta Ward, ‘Preface’ to *Bede: A Biblical Miscellany*, pp.xi-xxvi, p.xvii.

²⁹ *HA*, vi, pp.34-37; *HE*, IV.18, pp.388-389.

³⁰ *HE*, V.24, pp.566-567; Peter Darby and Máirín MacCarron, ‘The Autobiographical Statement of Bede the scholar in *Ecclesiastical history* 5:24’, *Bede the Scholar*, ed. Peter Darby and Máirín MacCarron (Manchester, 2023), pp.7-32, pp.10-15, 24-29.

³¹ *HE*, V.24, pp.566-567.

³² *ibid.*, *praef.*, pp.2-7; Benedicta Ward, *The Venerable Bede* (London, 1990; rpt. 1998), pp.11-13.

³³ *ibid.*, V.24, pp.566-569; Brown and Biggs, *Fascicles*, vol. 2, pp.39-146.

death, Bede received the honorific title *Venerabilis*: ‘the priest Bede, in these current times a venerable and admirable teacher’.³⁴

Increasingly, students of Bede are conscious of the ways in which the physical environment of Northumbria shaped his thinking. Bede’s home minster at Jarrow was situated on a bend in the River Don with its northern reaches bordered by the River Tyne.³⁵ Eastward sat the vast expanse of the North Sea, while, to the south lay salt marshes and six miles beyond, Wearmouth, on the near side of the River Wear.³⁶ Bede fondly mentioned local flora and fauna as diverse as shellfish to sea birds such as the now extinct great-auk, organising, too, pioneering investigations of tides on the British coastline.³⁷ Dedicating the magnificent pandect now known as *Codex Amiatinus* to Pope Gregory II, d.731, Ceolfrith described himself as ‘an abbot from the far-off lands of the Angles’.³⁸ Bede, too, conceived of England and Britain as a place precariously positioned in a remote corner of the world, influenced, in part, by the writings of the British historian, Gildas.³⁹ In the Old Testament (especially in Isaiah), the islands were seen as Gentile nations who were isolated in their worship of idols, but who would later be called to worship the true God.⁴⁰ By the rolling seas and labyrinth of marshes at Jarrow, Bede could have recalled the idolatrous motions and shifting beliefs of the

³⁴ *Concilium Aquisgranense A.836*, ed. Werminghoff, III, ls.17-18, p.759.

³⁵ Rosemary Cramp, *Wearmouth and Jarrow Monastic Sites*, 2 vols. (Swindon, 2005-2006), vol. 1, p.5ff.

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ *Genesis*, I.604-611, 653-667, pp.21-22 (pp.86-87), cit. *Genesis* 1:20-23 [em.cit.]; *DTR*, xxix, pp.366-371 (pp.82-85); *HE*, I.1, pp.14-17; see Wesley M. Stevens, *Bede’s Scientific Achievement*, JL (1985), pp.10-18.

³⁸ *Codex Amiatinus*, Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, MS Amiatino 1, f.1v, compare *Vita Ceolfridi*, ed. and trans. Grocock and Wood, xxxvii, pp.116-119.

³⁹ *HE*, I.1, pp.14-15, V.15, pp.506-507, compare Gildas, *De excidio Britanniae*, ed. and trans. Winterbottom, iii.1, pp.16, 89. As Sarah Foot noted, Gildas and Bede both drew on the classical notion of Britain’s remote situation and its later Christian reproduction; see, Pliny, *NH*, LCL 352, IV.xvi.102-103, pp.196-199, Solinus, *Collectanea rerum memorabilium*, ed. Mommsen, xxii.10, p.102, and Orosius, *Historiae*, vol. 1, I.lxxv-lxxvi, p.31 (pp.44-45), cit. with comment in Sarah Foot, ‘Mental Maps: Sense of Place in Medieval British Historical Writing’, *Medieval Historical Writing: Britain and Ireland, 500-1500*, ed. Jennifer Jahner et al. (Cambridge, 2019), pp.139-156, pp.139, 142-144.

⁴⁰ Isaiah 42:10, 49:1, 60:9, 66:19; Jennifer O’Reilly, ‘Islands and idols at the ends of the earth: exegesis and conversion in Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica*’, rpt. in *History, Hagiography and Biblical Exegesis: Essays on Bede, Adomnán and Thomas Becket*, ed. Máirín MacCarron and Diarmuid Scully (Abingdon, 2019), pp.36-64, pp.36-52.

Gentiles, the horse-like waves that crashed onto Britain's shoreline the holy preachers sent to tame its restless peoples.⁴¹

Bede the exegete

Today, Bede is celebrated as one of the most important Latin writers in England before the Conquest. After the Reformation, interest in Bede shifted from his exegetical commentaries to his historical writings, in particular, his *Historia Ecclesiastica gens Anglorum*, dedicated in 731 to King Ceolwulf (r.729-731, 731-737).⁴² In recent times, scholars have started to reconsider Bede's exegesis, helped in no small measure by the improving number and standard of editions and translations of his work.⁴³ In turn, we have learned more about the remarkable collection of patristic and classical works available to Bede at Wearmouth-Jarrow, which played a critical part in establishing his career.⁴⁴ As with other early English writers, Bede esteemed four Church Fathers over all others: Ambrose (339-397); Jerome (c.347-419/420); Augustine (354-430); and Gregory the Great (c.540-604).⁴⁵ He was pleased to point out his intent to 'follow in the footsteps of the fathers', *patrum uestigia sequens*, though, as

⁴¹ *Genesis*, I.1126-1129, pp.36-37 (p.102), quot. Augustine, *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, CSEL 91, I.xxiii.37.2-5, p.105 (trans. Hill, p.63); *ibid.*, III.310-318, p.151 (p.226), quot. Genesis 10:5a; *Abacuc*, ls.335-346, p.393 (pp.78-79), cit. Habakkuk 3:8, ls.556-575, p.401 (pp.87-88), cit. Habakkuk 3:15 and quot. Psalm 63(64):9-10(9).

⁴² *HE, praef.*, pp.2-3; Wilhelm Levison, 'Bede as Historian', *Bede: His Life, Times, and Writings. Essays in Commemoration of the Twelfth Centenary of his Death*, ed. A. Hamilton Thompson (Oxford, 1935; rpt. 1969), pp.111-151, pp.132-151; F.M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edn. (Oxford, 1971; rpt. 2004), pp.185-188; David P. Kirby, 'King Ceolwulf of Northumbria and the *Historia Ecclesiastica*', *Studia Celtica* 14 (1979), pp.168-173.

⁴³ Roger Ray, 'What Do We Know about Bede's Commentaries?', *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 49 (1982), pp.5-20; Arthur G. Holder, 'Bede and the tradition of patristic exegesis', rpt. in *Biblical Exegesis and Mystical Theology in the Venerable Bede* (Abingdon, 2024), pp.11-22, pp.15-22.

⁴⁴ Michael Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford, 2006), pp.191-228 [hereafter, *ASL*]; Rosalind Love, 'The library of the Venerable Bede', *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain: Volume 1, c.400-1100*, ed. Richard Gameson (Cambridge, 2012), pp.606-632.

⁴⁵ *Lucas, prol.*, ls.97-102, p.7 (pp.99-100); Mary Prentice Barrows, 'Bede's Allegorical Exposition of the Canticle of Canticles: A Study in Early Medieval Allegorical Exegesis' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1962), pp.42-59; Lapidge, *ASL*, p.69f; Rosalind Love, 'The world of Latin learning', *Cambridge Companion to Bede*, pp.40-53, pp.43-45.

scholars have shown, Bede was no mere compiler of florilegia.⁴⁶ He tackled less-traversed books in Scripture, creating new pathways for future generations to follow. Books with prior commentaries were often refreshed or revised. The meticulous treatment, creative intent, and pastoral concern reflects a brilliant author who remained conscious of the times in which he lived, open to relevant lessons, and, perhaps rarest of all, wise to his own limits and those of his readership.

Scripture, Bede imagined, was like a fountain, and this image helps to explain how he read its canon as a unified whole. In Genesis 7:11, at the onset of the flood in Noah's time, he found written, "all the fountains of the great deep were broken up, and the flood gates of heaven were opened."⁴⁷ For Bede, this revealed the fulfilment of the Old Testament in Christ, who brought forth 'the most abundant fountains of the knowledge of salvation to the Church.'⁴⁸ The authors of the New Testament openly proclaimed the mysteries of Christ, showing, as Bede stressed elsewhere, how both Testaments made sense of one another, and that neither should be studied in isolation.⁴⁹ In a sermon to the brothers at Wearmouth-Jarrow, Bede illuminated the inter-Testament agreement with reference to a second Old Testament passage. Drawing on Numbers 13:24, Bede likened Christ to a bunch of grapes on a pole that was borne at either end by a man.⁵⁰ Each man represented a Testament: the one in front, the Old;

⁴⁶ *Samuhel, prol. i*, ls.52-54, p.10 (p.104); *Quaest.Regum, praef.*, ls.23, p.293 (p.90); *Cant. Canticorum, praef.*, ls.502-503, p.180; *Homelia ii.11*, ls.191-192, p.258 (p.105); *DTR*, v.86-87, p.287 (p.22); *DeTemp.*, I.1753-1754, p.191 (p.62). See Paul Meyvaert, 'Bede the Scholar', *Famulus Christi: Essays in Commemoration of the Thirteenth Centenary of the Birth of the Venerable Bede*, ed. Gerald Bonner (London, 1976), pp.40-69, p.42.

⁴⁷ Compare John 7:38.

⁴⁸ *Genesis*, II.1576-1585, p.117 (p.188); compare Ambrose, *Explanatio Psalmorum XII*, CSEL 64, Ps.I.xxxiii, pp.28-30 (trans. Ní Riain, pp.20-22) [em.cit.]; Jerome, *Esaias*, XIII.xlix.8/13.55-60, p.540 (p.620) [em.cit.]; and a gloss from the Canterbury school, Bernhard Bischoff and Michael Lapidge, *Biblical Commentaries from the Canterbury School of Theodore and Hadrian* (Cambridge, 1994), PentI.76, p.319. See also Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: Les quatre sens de l'écriture*, 2 parts in 4 vols. (Paris, 1959-1964); part. trans. Mark Sebanc and E.M. Macierowski, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh, 1998-2009), vol. 1, p.79.

⁴⁹ *Genesis*, II.1585-1588, p.117 (p.188); de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale*, vol. 4, pp.106-123.

⁵⁰ *Homelia ii.15*, ls.19-46, pp.280-281 (pp.136-137) [em.cit.], compare Caesarius, *Sermo CVII*, 1, pp.443-444 (trans. Mueller, FOTC 47, pp.131-132).

he in the rear, the New. The orientation of the front man prevented his seeing the grape bunch save for an occasional backward glance, thus, the Old Testament authors spoke of Christ ‘in figurative and cryptic utterances’.⁵¹ The rear man could see both the grapes and the front man, representing the New Testament authors who proclaimed Christ in the fullness of revelation. The single pole and its even weight distribution signified the inter-Testament agreement, something that Bede was reminded of whenever he entered the church of St. Paul’s at Jarrow where a series of panel paintings exhibited this same concord.⁵²

Exegetes were considered as deer ‘drinking continuously from the fountain of life ... driving out the serpents of heretical discourse ... ruminating on the word of life, and in all things keeping their steps safely within the bounds of discretion.’⁵³ Here, Bede could well have recalled his image of the devil (who often strove to divert Christians from reading Scripture) as the hunter who ‘places the snares of his deceits in the forest of this world ... and hunts to the death men who, like stags and roes, are innocent of his nature and cleverness’.⁵⁴ When taking his own steps in Scripture, Bede employed what has since widely become known as ‘the senses of Scripture’.⁵⁵ First came the historical or literal *littera*, ‘letter’, that is the basic meaning of the text in its immediate context. Next was *allegoria*, ‘allegory’, ‘a trope which means something other than what it says’.⁵⁶ Allegories of all manner of shapes and sizes are encountered in Bede’s writings, but each shared a common function in permitting him to interpret a Scriptural text as taking on a sense beyond its original setting.⁵⁷ Thus, where Solomon had exclaimed *Et nubes rore concresecunt*, “And the clouds thicken with dew”, Bede

⁵¹ *Homelia* ii.15, ls.38-41, p.281 (p.136).

⁵² Biscop had brought these and other images back from Rome and Vienne, *HA*, vi, pp.36-37, ix, pp.44-45

⁵³ *Cant. Canticorum*, I.ii.352-360, especially ls.354-358, p.220 (p.75), cit. Psalm 28(29):9.

⁵⁴ *Genesis*, III.142-144, p.146 (p.220).

⁵⁵ de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale*, vol. 1, pp.92-93, 97, 127; vol. 2, p.38; Barrows, ‘A Study in Early Medieval Allegorical Exegesis’, pp.60-79.

⁵⁶ *DST*, II.xii, pp.192, 199, quot. Donatus, *Ars maiora*, ed. Holtz, III.vi.14, p.671.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, pp.192, 194, 196, 198-199, 201, 203, 205, 207 [em.cit.].

allegorised *nubes*, ‘clouds’, as *magistri ecclesiae*, ‘teachers of the church’.⁵⁸ These ‘water their listeners’ and they “thicken with dew” when increasing in virtues.⁵⁹ The third sense of Scripture, *tropologia*, ‘tropology’, signified the moral lesson of the text, while the fourth and final sense, *anagoge*, ‘anagogy’, concerned the future promise of heaven when the elect would reign with Christ. Bede collected all four senses together in a passage found in his commentary *In Cantica Canticorum*, possibly composed between 712-715.⁶⁰ His text was Song of Songs 4:11a, “Your lips are dripping honeycomb, [my] bride”, which Bede explained with more than a little help from the *Collationes* of John Cassian, d.435.⁶¹

A honeycomb is honey in wax, and honey in wax is the spiritual sense of the divine Scriptures in the letter that is rightly called a dripping honeycomb. For a honeycomb drips when it has more honey than its wax chambers can hold, doubtless because the fecundity of the holy Scriptures is such that a verse that was written in a short line fills many pages if one squeezes it by careful examination to see how much sweetness of spiritual understanding it contains inside. As only one example, the Psalmist says: *Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem!*⁶² According to *litteram*, this surely exhorts the citizens of that city in which God’s temple was found to sing praises to him; but according to *allegoriam*, Jerusalem is the church of Christ spread throughout the whole world; again, according to *tropologiam*, every holy soul is rightly called ‘Jerusalem’; again, according to *anagogen* Jerusalem is the dwelling place of the heavenly homeland that comprises holy angels and mortals.⁶³

It is in the interpretation of Bede’s allegorical or as we shall call it figural exegesis that modern readers can find themselves overwhelmed. Bede had a remarkable eye for figural exegesis, and it is obvious that he took pleasure in threading various ideas together in his commentaries. He could overturn these interpretations, sometimes replacing one figure with

⁵⁸ *Salomonis*, I.iii.169-170, p.42, cit. Proverbs 3:20b.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, ls.170-174.

⁶⁰ Holder, ‘Introduction’ to *Bede: On Song of Songs*, pp.1-32, p.28, n.95.

⁶¹ As one of the earliest theologians to interpret Scripture in this manner, Cassian became a major inspiration to Bede. Cf. Stephen Lake, ‘Knowledge of the writings of John Cassian in early Anglo-Saxon England’, *ASE* 32 (2003), pp.27-41, pp.39-41.

⁶² Psalm 147:1(12).

⁶³ *Cant. Canticorum*, III.iv.610-625, p.260 (pp.125-126), cit. John Cassian, *Collationes*, CSEL 13, XIV.viii.3-4.8-24, p.415 (trans. Ramsey, p.510); compare *DST*, II.xii, pp.200, 207 [em.cit.].

another in the same passage.⁶⁴ Ian Wood has referred to these as ‘contradictions’, but perhaps ‘progressions’ is more in keeping with the nature of Bede’s exegesis. Certainly, Bede was no excessive typologist like the Gnostics, being closer to their fiercest critic, Origen, in tethering figural interpretations to the literal text; thus, his ‘progressions’ mostly follow the fluid narrative of Scripture. A case in point is Bede’s treatment of David’s relationship to the Gentile Philistines in 1 Samuel. As enemies of Israel, the Philistines were considered ‘bad’, thus becoming a figure for the wicked.⁶⁵ Yet, when in 1 Samuel 27 David allied himself with the Philistine prince Achish, Bede saw Christ making his covenant with the Gentiles, and thus, for a little while, this tribe became ‘good’ and a figure for the Church.⁶⁶ Once more, the fountain image commends itself to us, now reconceived as Bede’s exegetical style. Each fountain has its source, that is, the Scriptural text and its literal sense. The various plumes that rise from this source can be imagined as the allegorical (figural), tropological, and anagogical interpretations, sometimes visible together, at other times, in twos or individually. From experience, the reader needs only to return to Bede’s source in the literal text of Scripture and thereafter begin to work out the course of his exegesis.⁶⁷

Declining standards of Scriptural literacy in our own time mean that the modern student must work hard to fathom those core texts that left such a marked impression on Bede.⁶⁸ Still, we can remember that although Bede’s exegesis was esoteric and primarily intended for a clerical audience well-versed in Scripture, he plainly envisaged that many of his lessons

⁶⁴ Ian Wood, ‘Who are the Philistines? Bede’s readings of Old Testament peoples’, *The Resources of the Past in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. Clemens Gantner et al. (Cambridge, 2015), pp.172-187, p.175f.

⁶⁵ *Samuהל*, I.1198-1204, p.40 (p.156-157) [em.cit].

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, IV.1574-1708, pp.249-252 (p.448-492) [em.cit.].

⁶⁷ Or, as Paul Meyvaert described, the ‘scriptural pegs’ on which Bede hung his ‘doctrinal thoughts’, revealing ‘the inner preoccupations of the writer’, ‘Bede the Scholar’, p.46.

⁶⁸ Later, we will learn how Bede himself complained of the ill-effect that secularisation could have upon the study of Scripture. See ‘Chapter Four: Pagan thought’, p.149f.

would be passed on to others in the Church, including lay congregations.⁶⁹ Approaching the “fountain of wisdom” in Scripture, Bede thus became a cup-bearer who saw his purpose as providing what he once explicated as *flumina scientiae salutaris*, ‘streams of wholesome learning’.⁷⁰ As we shall see, the teaching of Bede the exegete flowed far and wide from its humble source at Wearmouth-Jarrow. One later Northumbrian cleric, Alcuin, c.735-804, who rejoiced over his compatriot’s contribution, perhaps summarises best Bede the exegete: ‘Master Bede, our teacher, composed in simple language but with a subtle sense.’⁷¹

Bede and the threat of strange gods and idolatry

Our ‘Master Bede’ was much more than a teacher of cloistered communities. Indeed, he possessed an acute sense of the problems threatening Northumbria and England. Scholars often trace these fears and Bede’s related reforming impulses to the 720s, but this timeline rather overlooks the anxieties that Bede expressed in his pre-720 commentaries, including, strange gods and idolatry. Still, it seems incongruous nowadays to conceive of Bede as a theologian worried by false deities and idolaters. While Bede may have shown some curiosity about pagan peoples in Frisia and elsewhere in Europe, it is generally thought that closer to home he held no more than an historian’s interest in idolatrous belief and observance. This is mostly because scholars view paganism in Bede’s England as essentially reduced to the odd superstitious practice, with little to no serious manifestations of the old religion remaining to

⁶⁹ Twice, Bede identified the purpose of his exegetical pursuits as providing for the needs of ‘me and my own’, *meae et meorum*, which can be taken to imply the brothers at Wearmouth-Jarrow and then other Christians in Northumbria and the wider English Church. See *Cant. Canticorum, praef.*, ls.501-513, p.180; *HE*, V.24, pp.566-567; Arthur G. Holder, ‘Introduction’ to *Bede: On the Tabernacle*, pp.xiii-xxvi, p.xiv.

⁷⁰ Bede was writing of Theodore and Hadrian’s school at Canterbury, cf. *HE*, IV.2, 332-333. For the teacher washing and watering his listeners through “the fountain of wisdom”, see *Salomonis*, II.xvii.8-15, p.97, cit. Proverbs 18:4.

⁷¹ Alcuin, *Epistola* CCXVI, ls.17-18, p.360; see also Bernard Capelle, ‘Le rôle théologique de Bède le Vénérable’, *Studia Anselmiana, Fasciculus VI: S. Beda Venerabilis* (Rome, 1936), pp.1-40, p.17ff.

trouble the hold of Christianity. Yet, much of this view rests on a singular reading of Bede's *Historia*, a work that, as we shall later see, Bede himself cannot have intended to present as a definitive report of religious inclinations in eighth-century England.

Modern perceptions of what constituted an idolater may also have coloured historians' views. In our era, it is normal to subscribe to a range of beliefs and practices. This cultural shift has often benefitted certain studies of the past, not least the increasing care taken with collective (and sometimes pejorative) labels, such as 'Christian' or 'pagan', that sometimes obscure the complexities of individual belief.⁷² Bede's vocabulary for strange gods and idolatry might well be challenging; nonetheless, it remains his language and should be reproduced if we are to write of his thinking in this area.⁷³ Of course, as Robert Markus pointed out in the case of Gregory the Great, many early Christian writers were themselves reluctant to define a pagan or an idolater.⁷⁴ In Bede, the matter is susceptible to a ready explanation. Reading how Simon of Cyrene (Libya) had helped Christ shoulder the weight of the cross, having come to Jerusalem 'from the country', Bede outlined his understanding of the origins of the noun *paganus*, 'pagan',

Villa [country] is called πᾶγος in Greek, from which they derived the word *paganos*, because they are aliens from the city of God and ignorant as it were of the urban manner of life.⁷⁵

⁷² For discussion, see: Ludo J.R. Milis [trans. Tanis Guest], 'Introduction: The Pagan Middle Ages – a contradiction in terms?', *The Pagan Middle Ages*, ed. *idem* (Woodbridge, 1998), pp.1-12, especially pp.5-9; James T. Palmer, 'Defining paganism in the Carolingian world', *EME* 15:4 (2007), pp.402-425, especially pp.403-410; Beate Freudenberg and Hans-Werner Goetz, 'The Christian Perception of Heathens in the Early Middle Ages', *Millennium* 10:1 (2013), pp.281-291, pp.282-287; Christopher P. Jones, *Between Pagan and Christian* (London, 2014), pp.2-8.

⁷³ For a list of Bede's vocabulary, see 'Appendix', p.287.

⁷⁴ Robert A. Markus, 'Gregory the Great's Pagans', *Belief and Culture in the Middle Ages: Studies Presented to Henry Mayr-Harting*, ed. Richard Gameson and Henrietta Leyser (Oxford, 2001), pp.23-34, pp.24-26.

⁷⁵ Luke 23:26; *Lucas*, VI.1450-1453, p.399 (p.616), compare *Marcus*, IV.1329-1335, p.629, and, with minor variation, *Cant.Canticorum*, V.vii.641-643, p.332 (p.217).

This explanation is consistent with *paganus* as a classical Roman expression for criticising rustics (in the sense of both class and religion), which Bede probably learned from Orosius.⁷⁶ Bede's wider vocabulary included *gentilis*, 'Gentile', *ethnicus*, 'heathen', and *rusticus*, 'country dweller', the latter two sometimes used with reference to idolatrous communities in England. Defining *idolatrae*, 'idolaters', Bede returned readers to the fundamentals of worship, explaining how:

Λατρεία [*latria*] is the word for that service which is owed solely to the worship of the Divine, and which is not to be shared with any creature. Hence those who offer to idols [*idola*] vows, prayers, and sacrifices [*uota, preces et sacrificia*], which ought to have been owed to the one God, are called 'idolaters' [*idolatrae*].⁷⁷

Later, we will examine cases where Bede, so too, his successors in England and Europe, spoke in terms that suggest the presence of *idolatrae* in England in the eighth century.

Christ strangles the strange gods

We can continue our consideration of Bede, strange gods and idolatry with an excerpt from Book Three of *In Samuhelem*, chosen since it seems best-placed to introduce some of the basic elements of Bede's thinking about strange gods and idolatry and his broad fears with the same in 'these days', that is, his time of writing.⁷⁸ This passage contains most of Bede's exegesis of 1 Samuel 17:33-37, verses which, in the literal text, serve as the prelude to David the shepherd-boy facing the Philistine champion Goliath. Responding to King Saul's

⁷⁶ Orosius, *Historiae*, vol. 1, *prolog.*, ix, p.8 (p.32); compare Filastrius, *Diuersarum hereseon liber*, CCSL 9, cxi pp.276-277; Isidore, *Etymologiae*, VIII.x.1-2, p.327 (p.183). For discussion, see, Pierre Chuvin, 'Sur les origines de l'équation *Paganus* = Païen', *Impies et païens entre Antiquité et Moyen Age*, ed. Lionel Mary and Michael Sot (Nanterre, 2002), pp.7-15.

⁷⁷ Lucas, I.3059-3062, pp.96-97 (p.216), compare Augustine, *De Trinitate libri XV*, CCSL 50-50A, I.vi.117-118, p.43 (trans. Hill, p.73). See also Lucas, IV.2345-2347, p.289 (p.470), quot. Augustine, *Quaestiones euangeliorum*, CCSL 44B, II.xxxiii.39-41, p.75 (trans. Teske, p.394), cit. Luke 15:16b-17; compare Gildas, *De excidio Britanniae*, xxxviii.5, pp.37, 106.

⁷⁸ *Samuhel*, III.783-803, pp.155-156 (pp.348-349) [em.cit.].

opposition to his meeting Goliath in battle, David argues that he had caught and strangled both a lion and a bear which had snatched a sheep from his father's flock, thus proving his fitness to confront "this uncircumcised Philistine, who has dared to defy the armies of the living God".⁷⁹ Bede reimagined these events to produce an extraordinary impersonation of Jesus Christ in first-person speech, celebrating how the latter had triumphed over strange gods.

...I [Christ], by bringing to light and making plain their blasphemy [of wicked spirits] through my prophets, I reduced to absolutely nothing all the rite of idolatry [*ritus idolatriae*],⁸⁰ and catching the wise in their own craftiness, I strangled the throats of wicked pronouncements,⁸¹ saying, *For all the gods of the Gentiles are demons, but the Lord made the heavens*,⁸² and *The idols of the Gentiles are silver and gold, the works of the hands of men; they have mouths and speak not*,⁸³ and so on, but also through another prophet: *The gods that have not made heaven and earth, let them perish from the earth and from among those places that are under heaven*;⁸⁴ for I also powerfully emptied out all the virtue and prudence of the profane which is wont to be vaunted by themselves or by the men they have deceived, I who, while always remaining in divinity as God's virtue and wisdom,⁸⁵ for a time appeared in humanity, to serve men's salvation. Therefore he, the inventor and origin of all evil [the devil], will be, as it were, one of his own followers, that is, will be caught in his own snares, he who has dared to provoke to the cursing of their Maker not only once upon a time the angels in heaven, but also afterwards men on earth, and has dared to inflict those who have stood firm in the faith of their Maker with the darts of an ever-unjust curse, so to speak, that they do not serve the true God, they who are the votaries and worshippers of the one concerning whom it is said, *For as the Father has life in himself, so he has given to the Son also to have life in himself*.⁸⁶ Through the Gentiles, Jews, and heretics, he will never cease to say this to them.⁸⁷

⁷⁹ 1 Samuel 17:26c.

⁸⁰ Compare *Samuhel*, IV.1350-1353, p.244 (pp.480-481), cit. Jerome, *Nom.Hebraica*, ls.20, p.102; *HE*, V.19, pp.524-525. For a possible patristic inspiration, see Augustine, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, CSEL 25/1, XXII.93, pp.699-700 (trans. Teske, pp.368-369).

⁸¹ 'Wicked pronouncements', *ora nefanda*, apparently derived from the *Contra Varimadum* of Vigilius. Hwætberht, Ceolfrith's replacement as abbot, r.716-747, employed the same expression in his *aenigma* about the chimaera (when illustrating the monster's mouth, similar to Bede's sense above). Cf. Vigilius of Thapsus, *Contra Varimadum*, CCSL 90, I.liii.13-17, p.64, quot. Isaiah 14:13-14; Eusebius (Hwætberht), *Aenigmata*, CCSL 133, LII.2, p.262.

⁸² Psalm 95(96):5 [*Ps.Romanum*].

⁸³ Psalm 134(135):15-16a [*Ps.Hebraicum*].

⁸⁴ Jeremiah 10:11.

⁸⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:24.

⁸⁶ John 5:26.

⁸⁷ *Samuhel*, III.783-803, pp.155-156 (pp.348-349), cit. 1 Samuel 17:34-37a.

Where David seized fierce predators with his hands, Christ strangled false deities and rites of idolatry through the mouths of his prophets. Illuminating this potent image, Bede inserted three examples of what we can characterise as ‘prophetic strangulations’, issued in the words of Psalms 95(96):5, 134(135):15-16a, and Jeremiah 10:11. Bede’s choice of these verses underscored his principal teaching in this passage: his god, the Christian God, was, as he pronounced a little later on, ‘the one and true God’.⁸⁸ The ‘prophetic strangulations’ revealed Christ’s humiliation of strange gods and the foolishness of their idolatrous rites. For who, Bede plainly supposed, could worship deities that were nothing more than ‘devils’, *daemonia*, their ‘idols’, *idola*, encased in precious but insensible metals? It was then natural that Bede espoused Jeremiah’s injunction that these be eliminated from all places under heaven. This process had begun, for Christ’s strangling of strange gods had seen many onetime idolaters become integrated into his Church. Despite this, Bede conceded that idols and idolaters remained a threat to the faith of the Church. Christ spoke through the prophets and the Church, whereas Satan, identified here as ‘the devil’ and ‘the inventor and origin of all evil’, blasphemed through wicked spirits and his own congregation, listed as ‘Gentiles, Jews, and heretics.’⁸⁹ The blasphemy of the Gentiles was trusting in many gods (in opposition to ‘the one and true God’), something that Bede explored through the image of Babylon in his commentary *In Genesim*. Babylon represented ‘the city of the devil’, its inhabitants comprising his congregation, ‘Jews, Gentiles, and heretics’, who warred against the spiritual Jerusalem, that is, the Church.⁹⁰ Drawing on the Apostles Creed, Bede contrasted pagan pluralism with his own monotheistic tradition,

⁸⁸ *Unum et uerum Deum*, John 17:3b, cit. in *Samuhel*, III.933, p.159 (p.354), IV.1732-1735, p.253 (p.493). Elsewhere, Bede stated how ‘the fullness of wisdom is to know the one and true God and the one whom he sent, Jesus Christ’, *Salomonis*, Ii.102-104, p.25, cit. Proverbs 1:7.

⁸⁹ The rage of pagans against the Church is an obvious theme in Bede’s writings. In one memorable passage, he observed how the former ‘despised the life, fellowship, and teachings of the Church’, *ibid.*, IV.1988-1989, p.259 (p.502), compare *ibid.*, I.1210-1218, p.40 (p.157) [em.cit.], I.1308-1313, pp.42-43 (p.160).

⁹⁰ Babylon was the capital city to where Nebuchadnezzar’s Chaldeans had exiled Israel’s southern kingdom (Judah). Bede envisioned Damascus in similar terms, since, as Amos had foretold, it was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, whose forces captured and exiled the northern Israelite kingdom (Samaria). Cf. 2 Kings 24-

The Lord is one, faith is one, baptism is one, and God is one, in whom is the salvation of the elect; but there are many lords of the reprobate, diverse twistings of heresy, diverse wallowing-places of defilements, and diverse gods of the pagans, by which all the wretched are dragged to the one destruction of damnation.⁹¹

Until that time when the ‘wretched’ would receive their final punishment, Bede held that Satan and his followers would continue to resist Christ and his Church.⁹² One of their chief weapons was the incitement of Christians to turn back from God in order to venerate strange gods. As wild beasts snatched sheep from David’s flock, Satan cast ‘wicked pronouncements’ at Christians, poisoning their belief ‘with the darts of an-ever unjust curse’ – the lie that God was not the ‘true God’. Or, as Bede wrote in an earlier part of *In Samuhelem*, ‘[The Gentiles], instructed by unclean spirits, showed off examples of depraved worship and deeds in order to put a stumbling block before the people of God’.⁹³ Thus, Christ’s strangling of strange gods had not completely eliminated their threat, for these continued to entice the Church away from worshipping the Lord.

I propose that Bede’s innovative interpretation of David’s battle with wild beasts reflected his particular concern with the threat of strange gods and, it follows, the necessary response of the Church.⁹⁴ This concern was not original to Bede, having formed a central part of the Christian message ever since the inception of the Church, as John’s warning exemplifies:

25:21; *Genesis*, III.542-709. pp.157-162 (pp.233-238) [em.cit.]; Amos 5:27; 2 Kings 17:6; *Cant. Canticorum*, IV.vii.312-334, pp.323-324 (pp.205-206) [em.cit.]. For discussion of the spiritual warfare between Jerusalem and Babylon, see Conor O’Brien, *Bede’s Temple: An Image and its Interpretation* (Oxford, 2015), pp.132-144.

⁹¹ *Sed unus Dominus, una fides, unum baptisma, unus Deus, in quo electorum salus est; multi autem domini reprobatorum, diuersi anfractus perfidiae, diuersa pollutionum uolutabra, diuersi sunt dii gentium quibus ad unum damnationis interitum omnes miseri pertrahuntur*, *Genesis*, III.560-565, p.158 (p.233), cit. Ephesians 4:5-6; compare *Lucas*, V.1904-1907, p.343 (pp.541-542) [em.cit.].

⁹² Bede outlined this punishment in *In Samuhelem*, reiterating his lesson to Acca a short time later in *Quod ait Isaias*, cf. Revelation 20:9-10; 21:8; *Samuhel*, III.983-1016, pp.160-161 (pp.358-359) [em.cit.]; *Quod ait Isaias*, PL 94, col.702-710 (trans. Holder, pp.39-51).

⁹³ *Samuhel*, I.1210-1218, p.40 (p.157) [em.cit.].

⁹⁴ Bede sustained some of his theme when expounding David’s resulting victory over Goliath at 1 Samuel 17:37-51, *Samuhel*, III.898-911, 914-920, 924-934 pp.158-159 (pp.352-354) [em.cit.].

“Little children, keep yourselves from idols [*simulacra*].”⁹⁵ Indeed, Bede probably borrowed from earlier commentators some of the content in his ‘Christ strangles the strange gods’ passage. Cyprian of Carthage, c.210-258, and Gregory of Tours, c.538-594, both quoted Psalms 95(96):5, 134(135):15-16a, and Jeremiah 10:11 when condemning idol worship within their own contexts.⁹⁶ If Bede took inspiration from these, he reordered Cyprian’s sequence, and, in contrast to Gregory, preferred the *Psalterium Hebraicum* for Psalm 134. A few commentators had conceived of wild beasts as Gentile nations and more saw in David’s victory over Goliath the conquering Christ defeating Satan and death itself, but none of these read the events of 1 Samuel 17 (whether David versus the wild beasts or Goliath) in the manner that Bede came to interpret them in early eighth-century Northumbria.⁹⁷ Interestingly, one Northumbrian contemporary, Stephen of Ripon, c.670-730, had invoked David and Goliath in his biography of Bishop Wilfrid, c.634-709. Describing Wilfrid’s battle in 666 with the South Saxon ‘chief of the pagan priests’, *princeps sacerdotum idolatriae*, Stephen reported how this idolatrous practitioner hurled curses at the bishop from an elevated position until one of Wilfrid’s companions felled him with a well-aimed slingshot.⁹⁸ Artistic impressions might suggest a wider Northumbrian interest in David’s battles from 1 Samuel 17. A magnificent folio in the *Durham Cassiodorus* (Northumbria, c.725-750), depicts Christ in the figure of David bearing a spear and treading triumphantly on an amphisbaena (a fabled

⁹⁵ 1 John 5:21.

⁹⁶ Cyprian of Carthage, *Ad Quirinum*, CCSL 3/1, III.lxxix, pp.146-150, ls.16-17 [em.cit.]; Gregory of Tours, *Libri Historiarum X*, ed. Krusch and Levison, II.10, pp.59-60 (trans. Thorpe, pp.125-127) [em.cit.] [hereafter, *Historia Francorum*]; see Lapidge, *ASL*, p.212.

⁹⁷ The nearest patristic relative might be the view of Cassiodorus (490-c.585) that the Philistine soldiers who fled at the subsequent fall of Goliath symbolised ‘the scattering of those who were once devoted to the worship of idols into the folds of the Catholic Church’, cf. Cassiodorus, *Expositio Psalmorum*, CCSL 97-98, CXLIII.151-153, p.1284 (trans. Walsh, vol. 3, p.417) [em.cit.] [hereafter, *Exp.Psalmorum*]; see also Ambrose, *De apologia prophetae David*, SC 239, VI.xxvi.3-10, pp.106-107 (trans. Dunkle, p.119) [em.cit.]; Augustine, *Enarrat.Psalms*, CXLIII.i-iv, pp.2072-2075 (pp.360-363) [em.cit.].

⁹⁸ *VW*, xiii, pp.26-29, cit. 1 Samuel 17:45-50a. For possible pagan connections, see Thomas J.T. Williams, “‘For the Sake of Bravado in the Wilderness’: Confronting the Bestial in Anglo-Saxon Warfare”, *Representing Beasts in Early Medieval England and Scandinavia*, ed. Michael D.J. Bintley and Thomas J.T. Williams (Woodbridge, 2015), pp.176-204, pp.193-194.

serpent with a head at either end of its body).⁹⁹ Beasts, including serpentine figures, formed part of the architectural sculpture at Wearmouth-Jarrow.¹⁰⁰ Such examples could then reflect a peculiarly Northumbrian interest in 1 Samuel 17 and its christological interpretation, which, in Bede's case, reveals his striking concern regarding the threat of strange gods and idolatry. Having introduced Bede's sense of this threat, we can now explore in more detail his understanding of its expression in Scripture, the early Church, and England in the sixth to eighth centuries.

Strange gods and idolatry in Scripture and the early Church

From the report of Joshua, Bede held that the first named idolater in Scripture was none other than Terah, parent to Abraham, the latter named by Paul as the spiritual father of all believers.¹⁰¹ When observing Abraham's exit of the land of his fathers in obedience to God's call, Bede noted how at this time 'the nations were rooted in the worship of demons'.¹⁰² When God later rescued the Hebrews from Egypt, overcoming in the process the Egyptian deities, he promulgated his Law and its famous command in the Decalogue, "You shall have no strange gods before me."¹⁰³ In *De tabernaculo*, c.721-725, Bede stated that this commandment must be observed forever.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, he knew that even as Moses received the Law on Sinai, the Israelites at the foot of the mountain placed their idolatrous

⁹⁹ *Durham Cassiodorus*, Durham, Cathedral Library, MS B. II. 30, f.172r, compare Psalm 90(91):13.

¹⁰⁰ Cramp, *Wearmouth and Jarrow*, vol. 2, pp.171-174, 179-183; see also Jane Hawkes, 'Symbolic Lives: The Visual Evidence', *The Anglo-Saxons From the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. John Hines (Woodbridge, 1997), pp.311-344, pp.323-326.

¹⁰¹ *Genesis*, III.816-820, p.165 (p.241), quot. Augustine, *DCD*, XVI.xii.9-14, p.516 (p.203), cit. *Genesis* 11:27-28, and Joshua 24:2. Bede also noted that Haran, Abraham's brother, was immolated before his father in the flames sacred to the fire gods of Ur, cf. *Genesis*, III.837-851, p.166 (p.242), quot. Jerome, *Hebraicae quaestiones in libro Geneseos*, CCSL 72, 11/28, p.15 (trans. Hayward, p.43), and cit. Josephus, *Antiquitates*, I.vi.5.151. For Paul and Abraham, see Romans 4:16; Galatians 3:6-9.

¹⁰² *DTR*, x.15-19, p.310 (p.40).

¹⁰³ Exodus 20:3.

¹⁰⁴ *DeTab.*, I.1263-1268, p.37 (p.40), quot. Deuteronomy 6:5, Mark 12:30. For the date of this commentary, see Holder, 'Introduction' to *Bede: On the Tabernacle*, p.xvi.

request before Aaron: “make us gods, that may go before us”.¹⁰⁵ Aaron fashioned the infamous golden calf, crediting it with Israel’s liberation: “These are your gods, O Israel, that brought you up out of Egypt.”¹⁰⁶ Following Nehemiah and patristic tradition, Bede identified this as the moment when Israel began its habitual worship, or, as he sometimes named it, ‘fornication’, with strange gods.¹⁰⁷ Evil increased when the wandering tribes became the kingdom of Israel, with Bede, preaching to the brothers at Wearmouth-Jarrow, likening Israel’s faith in that later period to the vacillating flight of the locust, ‘borne up and down between the Lord and idols’.¹⁰⁸

Israel’s crimes seem to have impressed upon Bede the ease with which the people of God spurned his commands to pursue strange gods and idolatry. He studied carefully God’s punishment of these fornicators as was enshrined in the Mosaic Law.¹⁰⁹ The worship of the golden calf in the Sinai wilderness instituted a pattern by which idolaters were slain for their blasphemy – Moses and the other Levites killed most of the revellers who had feasted in honour of the golden calf, while plague claimed the survivors.¹¹⁰ Under Israel’s kings, a host of prophets warned how the foreign cults that corrupted Israelite worship would see God withdraw his protection of Israel.¹¹¹ The faithful example of the prophets and the righteous reign of those few kings who observed the Law proved insufficient to overturn Israel’s habitual disobedience, and thus it came about that Samaria (Israel’s northern kingdom) and

¹⁰⁵ See Exodus 32:1-4, compare 1 Samuel 8:6-8.

¹⁰⁶ *Samuhel*, IV.1862-1863, p.256 (p.498).

¹⁰⁷ Nehemiah 9, especially v.18; *Exp.Actuum*, vii.85-92, p.36 (p.73), quot. Jerome, *Commentariorum in Amos prophetam*, CCSL 76, II.v.841-849, pp.296-297 (trans. Soenksen and Scheck, pp.360-361) [em.cit.] [hereafter, *In Amos*]. For idolatry as fornication in Bede, see *Apocalypsis*, I.iv.78-79, p.257 (p.120), cit. Revelation 2:14; *Lucas*, II.453-456, p.111 (p.236), quot. Colossians 3:5; *Cant.Canticorum*, V.viii.328-329, p.346 (pp.233-234), cit. Numbers 25:1-9; *DeTemp.*, II.147-152, p.195 (p.70), cit. Acts 15:22-29.

¹⁰⁸ *Homelia* i.1, ll.108-110, p.4 (p.5), cit. Ambrose, *Expositio euangelii secundum Lucam*, CCSL 14, II.923-930, p.61 (trans. Ní Riain, p.53) [hereafter, *Exp.Lucam*]; compare *Ezra-Neemia*, I.766-779, p.260 (p.36), quot. Jeremiah 2:28.

¹⁰⁹ Exodus 22:20; Deuteronomy 13; 17:2-7; 29:9-29; *Ezra-Neemia*, II.1557-1573, pp.326-327 (pp.137-138), quot. Malachi 2:11-12.

¹¹⁰ Exodus 32.

¹¹¹ For example, see Isaiah 44:6-23, 57; Jeremiah 10-13; Ezekiel 6; Hosea 4:12-6:11, 8:1-9:17; Micah 1:6-7.

then Judah (the southern kingdom) were conquered and exiled, a consequence, as Bede spelled out in relation to Samaria, of trusting in strange gods, *quia non erant dii sed idola*, ‘because these were not gods, but idols’.¹¹²

The New Testament era heralded what had been foretold by the prophets; now, the nations started to renounce their idols to worship the “God of gods in Zion”.¹¹³ Bede explored this transformation in several exegetical passages, including one notable example in his *In Lucam*, when considering Luke 8:42b-48 where Christ heals the woman suffering from constant bleeding. This ritually impure woman became a figure for the Gentiles, who, before the Incarnation had been ‘defiled throughout the world by the bloody matter of idolatry ... separated from the faithful [Israel]’.¹¹⁴ Like ‘fornication’, ‘blood’ and ‘pollution’ were for Bede synonyms of paganism, indeed, he incorporated all three in this passage.¹¹⁵ The woman’s unceasing flow of blood was likened to ‘the prostitution of idolatry’, while her blood recalled the battle between David and Goliath since that Old Testament event had taken place at ‘Dommim’, which Bede interpreted to mean ‘blood’.¹¹⁶ Combining these meanings, Bede observed how when Christ (David) confronted the devil (Goliath) in the Incarnation, he beheld ‘the Gentiles devoted not only to fruitless works, but also a religion of filth’, i.e., pagan peoples inhabiting the spiritual Dommim in the thrall of the devil.¹¹⁷

¹¹² *Quaest.Regum*, XXIV.4-6, p.316 (pp.127-128), XXX, pp.320-322 (pp.136-138); *DTR*, lxvi.513-516, 562-571, pp.479, 481 (pp.177, 179) [em.cit.].

¹¹³ Psalm 83(84):8(7).

¹¹⁴ *Lucas*, III.907-909, p.189 (p.337).

¹¹⁵ Compare, for instance, Bede’s treatment of leprosy as a figure for paganism, *ibid.*, II.704-717, pp.117-118 (pp.244-245) [em.cit.].

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*, ls.916-921, p.189 (p.338); compare *ibid.*, IV.2551-2555, p.294 (p.477), quot. Augustine, *Quaestiones euangeliorum*, II.xxxiii.178-180, p.82 (p.397).

¹¹⁷ *Lucas*, II.919-924, p.189 (p.338), cit. Jerome, *Nom.Hebraica*, p.103, ls.11.

The New Testament authors often spoke of idol worship as a metaphor for spiritual idols of the heart; nevertheless, physical idols remained a threat to the Gospel.¹¹⁸ Bede read of pagan conversions in Acts of the Apostles and learned how the apostles corrected malignant strains of idolatry in the nascent Gentile churches scattered across the Mediterranean seaboard.¹¹⁹ The patristic successors of the New Testament authors sustained the critique of strange gods and idolatry, often with regard to cults from their immediate context. Indeed, Bede expressed his belief that Gentile converts such as Dionysius the Areopagite and Cyprian of Carthage were more effective than the apostles at countering the pagan error whose arguments the converts had known from childhood.¹²⁰ Through men and women such as these, Bede believed that Rome was eventually turned from imperial ‘persecutor’ into ‘the holy Roman and apostolic Church’.¹²¹ True, Rome’s first convert emperors, Philip the Arabian, r.244-249 (Bede, following Eusebius and Orosius, believed Philip had confessed his sins to Christ), and Constantine the Great, r.306-337, had been followed by men who restored the worship of strange gods.¹²² Nonetheless, Rome later made true its conversion and became central to the evangelism of the nations, including, less than eight decades before Bede’s birth, the *gens Anglorum*.

Strange gods and idolatry in England

The conversion of the English to Christ represents the single-most important theme of what is now Bede’s best-known work, the *Historia Ecclesiastica gens Anglorum*.¹²³ Bede told us that

¹¹⁸ Matthew 4:8-11; Colossians 3:5; Galatians 5:19-21; compare Jeremiah 9-10; Ezekiel 16.

¹¹⁹ Acts 14:7-17, 17:16-34; Romans 1; 1 John 5:21

¹²⁰ *DeTemp.*, I.80-96, 117-127, pp.149-150 (pp.7-9), cit. 1 Kings 5.

¹²¹ *Homelia* i.13, ls.137-138, p.92 (p.130).

¹²² *DTR*, lxvi.1253-1256, p.504 (pp.206-207), quot. Orosius, *Historiae*, vol. 3, VII.xx.2, p.55 (p.353), compare Eusebius [trans. Rufinus], *HE*, ed. Schwartz et al., VI.xxxiv, pp.589, 591 (trans. Amidon, p.268), cit. Jerome, *Chronicon*, ed. Helm, ls.12-15, p.242.

¹²³ Ian Wood, *The Missionary Life: Saints and the Evangelisation of Europe 400-1050* (Harlow, 2001), pp.42-45. Bede often reminded readers (such as when introducing the *capitula* for each book) that his was an

the three continental tribes, the ‘Jutes, Angles, and Saxons’, who, migrating to Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries and became known as *Angli*, were *pagani*, ‘pagans’.¹²⁴ His writings offer little information about English paganism, probably as a result of his own limited knowledge but also perhaps his self-restraint. Given England’s recent history, it might have been sensible for Bede to be cautious about memorialising pre-Christian religion, especially if he was conscious of idolatrous strains in the eighth century. Perhaps it is then significant that Bede read with enthusiasm the proscriptions of remembering strange gods in the Mosaic Law. Indeed, the severe treatment of paganism in the Old Testament often coloured Bede’s outlook; nevertheless, he tempered the old covenant zeal for eradicating strange gods and idolatry with Christ’s lesson that non-Christian societies should not be coerced but persuaded into converting by holy teachers.¹²⁵

It then comes as no surprise that Bede regarded preaching as the instrument that had effected England’s conversion. Writing in his *Historia*, Bede recorded how in 596, Pope Gregory the Great ‘sent a servant of God named Augustine, and several more God-fearing monks with him to preach the word of God to the English people.’¹²⁶ Bede celebrated Gregory as ‘our apostle’,¹²⁷ crediting him with the English conversion: ‘[it was] by his efforts ... [that] the English nation was converted from the power of Satan to the faith of Christ ... [he] made our nation, till then enslaved to idols, into a Church of Christ.’¹²⁸ Landing at Thanet in in 597, Augustine preached Christ to the pagan king of Kent, Æthelberht, d.616, who was later

‘Ecclesiastical History’, the Church being central to its governing theme. For discussion of Bede and the Church, see Sarah Foot, *Bede’s Church*, JL (2012), p.5ff.

¹²⁴ *HE*, I.15, pp.48-53, II.1, pp.132-133, II.4, pp.146-147, V.9, pp.476-477; Ian Wood, ‘Before and After the Migration to Britain’, *Anglo-Saxons From the Migration Period to the Eighth Century*, pp.41-64.

¹²⁵ Cf. *Samuhel*, II.179-181, p.72 (p.211); *HE*, I.26, pp.76-79, II.15, pp.188-189, III.22, pp.280-283.

¹²⁶ *HE*, I.23, pp.68-69, compare *DTR*, lxvi.1762-1764, p.523 (p.226), both cit. *LP*, lxvi.3, p.312 (p.60); see also, *DeTemp.*, II.1041-1048, p.218 (p.98), cit. 1 Kings 7:30; H.M. Chadwick, ‘Gregory the Great and the Mission to the Anglo-Saxons’, rpt. in *Studies on Ancient Christianity* (Aldershot, 2006), pp.199-212.

¹²⁷ *Lucas, prol.*, ls.99-100, p.7 (pp.99-100), cit. 1 Corinthians 9:2.

¹²⁸ *HE*, II.1, pp.122-123, 133-135; Henry Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edn. (London, 1991), pp.51-61.

baptised along with some but not all of his followers.¹²⁹ The Gregorian mission was not the first endeavour to convert the English (as James Campbell observed); however, its impact was the most significant, especially for Bede.¹³⁰ In the *Historia*, Bede reported the involvement of Britons (who had formerly neglected the English), and, more favourably, Irish and Frankish participation in England's evangelism. However, he maintained throughout, the God-ordained primacy of the Roman missionaries, seeing these as the Lord's 'worthier heralds'.¹³¹ From Æthelberht, the Roman missionaries and their insular successors converted each English kingdom, a ninety or so years process that ended with the conversion of the South Saxons in the 680s and forced conversion of the Isle of Wight between 686-687.¹³²

Historians agree that Bede never intended his *Historia* to present a transparent account of faith in England.¹³³ Nevertheless, most scholars seem satisfied with the report that the English conversion was essentially completed before the end of the seventh century.¹³⁴ This interpretation means that there is little incentive to reconsider the English conversion and the related potential for idolatrous belief and observance in Bede's time. Yet, the report in the

¹²⁹ *HE*, I.25-26, pp.72-79, compare *DTR*, lxvi.1764-1768, p.523 (p.226). For the conversion of English kings, see Clare Stancliffe, 'Kings and Conversion: some comparisons between the Roman mission to England and Patrick's to Ireland', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 14:1 (1980), pp.59-94, pp.69-76; Barbara Yorke, 'The Reception of Christianity at the Anglo-Saxon Royal Courts', *St Augustine and the Conversion of England*, ed. Richard Gameson (Stroud, 1999), pp.152-173.

¹³⁰ James Campbell, 'Observations on the Conversion of England', *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History* (London, 1986), pp.69-84, pp.69-73.

¹³¹ *HE*, I.22, pp.68-69. For discussion of the various parties involved in England's conversion, cf. Rob Meens, 'A background to Augustine's mission to Anglo-Saxon England', *ASE* 23 (1994), pp.5-17; Alan Thacker, 'Bede and the Irish', *Beda Venerabilis: Historian, Monk and Northumbrian*, ed. L.A.J.R. Houwen and A.A. MacDonald (Groningen, 1996), pp.31-59; Clare Stancliffe, 'The British Church and the Mission of Augustine', *St Augustine and the Conversion of England*, pp.107-151, pp.108-111ff; Thomas Charles-Edwards, 'Conversion to Christianity', *After Rome*, ed. *idem* (Oxford, 2003), pp.103-140, pp.129-139.

¹³² Although as late as 685 the unbaptised Cædwalla came to power in Wessex, only receiving his baptism as he was dying in 688, *HE*, IV.13-16, pp.370-385, V.7, pp.470-471.

¹³³ James Campbell, 'Bede I', *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History*, pp.1-27, pp.1-2, 24-27; see also Roger Ray, 'Bede's *Vera Lex Historiae*', *Speculum* 55:1 (1980), pp.1-21; Walter Goffart, 'Bede's *uera lex historiae* explained', *ASE* 34 (2005), pp.111-116.

¹³⁴ Barbara Yorke, *The Conversion of Britain: Religion, Politics and Society in Britain c.600-800* (Harlow, 2006; rpt. Abingdon, 2014), p.122f; but see, for an alternative conclusion, John Hines, 'Religion: The Limits of Knowledge', *Anglo-Saxons From the Migration Period to the Eighth Century*, pp.375-410, especially pp.375-396.

Historia is sometimes remote from Bede's wider treatment of strange gods and idolatry. Consider, by way of example, Bede's impression of conversion, a concept essential to the *Historia* and our related discussion. The Latin *conuersio*, meaning, 'to turn', is better understood in Bede as *transitus*, 'passing over', in the sense of the Hebrew festival Pasch.¹³⁵ In the Great Commission, Christ provided his followers three instructions: teach all nations, baptise these in the name of the Trinity, and continue teaching new converts to observe the faith.¹³⁶ Bede, too, saw conversion as this same threefold process. Teachers preached the Gospel and instructed those willing to become Christians in the catechumenate.¹³⁷ This prepared catechumens for the baptismal sacrament, whereby sins were forgiven through Christ's sacrifice – 'the blood of that Immaculate Lamb' – in 'the fountain of regeneration', enabling the candidate 'to pass over, as it were, from the power of Satan to the portion allotted to the saints.'¹³⁸ In order to ensure a true passing over from Satan to Christ, candidates were publicly interrogated in the solemn rites of renunciation: the rejection of Satan and former ways; and profession: the confession of Christ and the new faith; whereafter came the immersion or sprinkling of water.¹³⁹

Here, we can note Bede's special interest in the renunciation of Satan or, as it is sometimes referred, to the *abrenuntio Satanae*, a term derived from the liturgical formula of this

¹³⁵ *DTR*, lxiii, pp.454-456 (pp.149-151) [em.cit.], compare Exodus 12:1-28; A.D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford, 1933), pp.3-7.

¹³⁶ Matthew 28:19-20.

¹³⁷ Catechesis should involve both Testaments, with Bede seemingly finding it preferable for the Law to be taught first, perhaps for its simple instruction to worship God and God alone. See Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Leviticus 19:18b; Matthew 22:35-40; *Lucas*, III.1298-1303, p.199 (pp.351-352) [em.cit.].

¹³⁸ *DTR*, lxiii.31-37, 57-59, p.455 (p.151), compare *Samuhel*, III.2493-2502, p.195 (p.408). For the broader baptismal tradition and Bede's place in it, see Josef A. Jungmann [trans. Francis A. Brunner], *The Early Liturgy: To the Time of Gregory the Great* (Notre Dame, IN, 1959; rpt. London, 1960), pp.74-96; J.D.C. Fisher, *Christian Initiation: Baptism in the Medieval West* (London, 1965), pp.78-85; Peter Cramer, *Baptism and Change in the Early Middle Ages, c.200-c.1150* (Cambridge, 1993), pp.153-154; Sarah Foot, 'By water in the spirit': the administration of baptism in early Anglo-Saxon England', *Pastoral Care Before the Parish*, ed. John Blair and Richard Sharpe (Leicester, 1992), pp.171-192; Susan Cremin, 'Bede, Baptism and his Homily for the Octave of Pentecost', *RB* 130:1 (2020), pp.74-111.

¹³⁹ Hugh M. Riley, *Christian Initiation* (Washington, DC, 1974), pp.22-142.

baptismal rite, “I renounce Satan”.¹⁴⁰ According to the Brepols’ Latin Writers Database, Bede restated one common formula for this rite on three occasions (more than any other pre-twelfth-century source): *abrenuntiare Satanae et omnibus operibus eius et omnibus pompis eius*, ‘to renounce Satan and all his works and all his pomp’.¹⁴¹ Additional, near-identical variants of this formula emerge elsewhere in Bede’s writings.¹⁴² With each noun, candidates made a progressive rejection of former ways: *Satanas*, ‘Satan’, father of all evildoers; *opera*, ‘works’, meaning that which belonged to Satan, including those spirits masquerading as gods; and *pompa*, ‘pomp’, that is, all worldliness, embracing the practise of idolatry.¹⁴³ As a member of one Gentile tribe, it is surely natural that Bede often mentioned the renunciation rite with reference to converts from paganism. In Naaman, the Assyrian commander who became an Israelite proselyte, Bede perceived an Old Testament forerunner to English and other Gentile converts.¹⁴⁴ Heeding the wisdom of his wife’s Israelite slave girl, Naaman sought healing for his leprosy from Elisha. The prophet ordered Naaman to wash in the Jordan, and, when convinced to do so, Naaman’s skin becomes new and he vows to never again sacrifice to “strange gods”, only to Israel’s God. In Luke’s Gospel, Christ taught Naaman as a figure for the Gentiles coming to faith, encouraging patristic writers and later Bede to see Naaman’s words as a proto-renunciation and confession: ‘in order that you might

¹⁴⁰ Henry Ansgar Kelly, *The Devil at Baptism: Ritual, Theology, and Drama* (Cambridge, 1985), pp.94-105; Foot, ‘Water in the spirit’, p.177.

¹⁴¹ *Samuhel*, I.304-306, p.18 (p.118), III.1028-1030, p.161 (p.358); *Tobias*, viii.2-7, p.11 (pp.68-69). Compare with the formulas in *Liber sacramentorum Romanae Aeclesiae ordinis anni circuli: Cod. Vat. Reg. lat. 316/Paris Bibl. Nat. 7193, 41/56 (Sacramentarium Gelasianum)*, ed. Mohlberg, I.lxxii, p.94; *Sacramentarium Gregorianum, Supplementa (textus diuersi)*, ed. Deshusses, 3929, p.97; *Liber sacramentorum Gellonensis*, CCSL 159, 670, p.91, 2306, pp.331-332, 2373, p.345; *Ordo Romanus XV*, ed. Andrieu, 114, p.119; *The Stowe Missal*, ed. Warner, p.25. For liturgical traditions in England, see Foot, ‘Water in the spirit’, pp.173-175; Richard Pfaff, *The Liturgy in Medieval England: A History* (Cambridge, 2009), pp.32-45.

¹⁴² *Genesis*, II.2224-2228, p.135 (p.208); *Ezra-Neemia*, I.1061-1064, 1377-1386, pp.267, 275-276 (pp.47, 59-60); *HE*, III.19, pp.272-273. In the *In Genesim* example, Kendall thought Bede was citing Gregory the Great. However, the pope’s remarks bear only a thin resemblance to what Bede said in *In Genesim*, cf. Gregory, *Hom.Euangelia*, XXIX.iii.63-65, p.247 (p.228).

¹⁴³ See, for Bede’s treatment of: Satan’s relationship to the wicked, *Epist.Catholicae*, 11o.iii.149-160, 167-185 pp.304-305, (pp.190-191) [em.cit.]; Satan’s works, *Lucas*, IV.146-182, pp.234-2355 (p.398-399) [em.cit.]; and pomp, *Quaest.Regum*, XVI.12-20, p.309 (p.116) [em.cit.]; *Ezra-Neemia*, II.1027-1033, p.313 (p.119), quot. Colossians 3:5.

¹⁴⁴ 2 Kings 5:1-19.

have knowledge of all the sacraments foreshadowed here, where we are commanded to renounce Satan and confess our faith, Naaman says that he will no longer sacrifice to *strange gods*, but that he will serve the Lord alone in every way.’¹⁴⁵

The third stage of conversion required converts to continue observing the faith, a process that Bede once spoke of as ‘the baptism of tears’, *baptisma lacrimis*, whereby true believers would show their intent to “‘go out” from their former way of life’ and enter ‘their new way of life’.¹⁴⁶ In no respect was this second baptism a replacement for the first – Bede insisted on the ecclesiastical tradition that baptism, provided it was performed correctly, was a one-time event – but instead provided a means through which to offer penance for sins committed after baptism.¹⁴⁷ It saw Christians ‘examine their consciences by scrutinising them ... pour forth broader streams of tears from the inmost font of their hearts, and because they apprehend themselves to be less perfect, they wash away the stains of their weakness with the waves of repentance.’¹⁴⁸ Here, Bede possibly took inspiration from the Hellenist thought of Gregory of Nazianzus, 329-390, whose teaching concerning ‘the baptism of tears’, *baptismum lacrimarum*, Archbishop Theodore had introduced into England.¹⁴⁹ Tears of compunction required pastoral correction and encouragement, and perhaps then this third stage of

¹⁴⁵ Luke 4:27; *Lucas*, II.316-319, p.108 (p.231); compare Ambrose, *De Sacramentis*, SC 25, I.v.13-16, pp.66-69 (trans. Deferrari, pp.273-274); *ibid.*, *Exp.Lucam*, IV.587-631, pp.123-124 (pp.106-107).

¹⁴⁶ *Homelia* i.1, ls.62-78, p.3 (pp.3-4) [em.cit.], compare *Lucas*, IV.1550-1556, p.270 (p.444) [em.cit.]; *Ezra-Neemia*, II.683-707 p.305 (pp.105-106) [em.cit.].

¹⁴⁷ *Exp.Actuum*, x.189-207, p.55 (pp.103-104), cit. Acts 10:48, quot. Ambrose, *De spiritu sancto libri tres*, CSEL 79, I.iii.43-45.55-56, 63-74, pp.32-33 (trans. Deferrari, pp.50-51), quot. Acts 10:38, 1:5, 1 Corinthians 12:13; and quot. Romans 6:3.

¹⁴⁸ *Homelia* i.1, ls.75-78, p.3 (p.4).

¹⁴⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus [Latin trans. Rufinus], *Orationes*, in *Orationum Gregorii Nazianzeni novem interpretatio*, CSEL 46, III.xvii.19-13, p.130-131. Compare Isidore, *De ecclesiasticis officiis*, CCSL 113, II.xxv.2-3.22-36, pp.102-103 (trans. Knoebel, p.109); *Paenit.Theodori* II.iv.4, p.317; Anonymous, *Vita Gregorii*, xxix, pp.126-127; Thomas O’Loughlin and Helen Conrad-O’Briain, ‘The “baptism of tears” in early Anglo-Saxon sources’, *ASE* 22 (1993), pp.65-83.

conversion offers the closest Bedan equivalent to what in the literature is sometimes referred to as ‘consolidation’, or, increasingly, ‘Christianisation’.¹⁵⁰

It can be said that Bede’s *Historia* focuses on the ‘first baptism’ or ‘conversion’ of the English kingdoms, i.e., their turning away from strange gods and idolatry, but often neglects the ‘second baptism’ or ‘consolidation’.¹⁵¹ He knew England’s coming to faith was no seamless process, reporting, for instance, incidences of reversion to idol worship in several seventh-century kingdoms.¹⁵² In narrating these reversions, Bede was less interested in their impact than he was the necessary punishment of the apostates. When recounting Edwin’s conversion, Bede told how the Roman missionary Paulinus (d.644) spent thirty-six days catechising and baptising new converts in the River Glen, near to Edwin’s palace at Yeavinger.¹⁵³ In 633, Edwin died in battle against the pagan King of Mercia, Penda (d.655), whereafter, Paulinus and Edwin’s Christian queen, Eanflæd, fled south to Christian Kent.¹⁵⁴ The exiles Osric and Eanfrith took power, and promptly apostatised, while Penda and a British king, Cædwalla, ‘a barbarian more cruel than the pagan [Penda]’, raided Northumbria.¹⁵⁵ Bede said little about the fate of Northumbria’s Christian converts in this period, relating instead the suffering of Osric and Eanfrith whom he labelled ‘faithless kings’, *perfidi reges*, for renouncing Christ and returning to the old gods.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁰ Judith McClure, ‘Bede’s *Notes On Genesis* and the Training of the Anglo-Saxon Clergy’, *The Bible in the Medieval World: Essays in Memory of Beryl Smalley*, ed. Katherine Walsh and Diana Wood (Oxford, 1985), pp.17-30, p.29; James C. Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity: A Sociohistorical Approach to Religious Transformation* (Oxford, 1994), pp.30-31ff; Carole M. Cusack, *Conversion among the Germanic Peoples* (London, 1998), pp.15-18.

¹⁵¹ For discussion, see Huw Pryce, ‘Conversions to Christianity’, *A Companion to the Early Middle Ages: Britain and Ireland c.500-c.1100*, ed. Pauline Stafford (Chichester, 2013), pp.143-159, especially pp.148-155; and O’Reilly, ‘Islands and idols at the end of the earth’, pp.41-52.

¹⁵² *HE*, II.5, pp.152-155, II.15, pp.188-191, III.1, pp.212-215, III.30, pp.322-323; Barbara Yorke, ‘From Pagan to Christian in Anglo-Saxon England’, *The Introduction of Christianity into the Early Medieval Insular World: Converting the Isles I*, ed. Roy Flechner and Máire Ní Mhaonaigh (Turnhout, 2016), pp.237-257, p.240f.

¹⁵³ *HE*, II.14, pp.188-189.

¹⁵⁴ Paulinus assumed the vacant bishopric of Rochester and there is no record of his returning to Northumbria, *ibid.*, II.20, pp.204-205.

¹⁵⁵ *ibid.*, pp.202-205, III.1, pp.212-215.

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*, III.1, pp.214-215.

Reversion was, in one sense, to be expected in the nascent English Church. The rejection of Christianity was plainly obstructive; nevertheless, in most cases, its impact appeared relatively short-lived. Greater challenges for the English Church included the shortage of bishops and, as a result, clergy and trained teachers. Certainly, this problem seemed to be pronounced in several kingdoms in the seventh and eighth centuries.¹⁵⁷ As Bede noted in his prose life of the English saint Cuthbert, *Vita sancti Cuthberti* (c.721), several prominent reversions occurred in the vicinity of the minster at Melrose (Roxburghshire), found in an isolated, mountainous region of northern Bernicia.¹⁵⁸ Clerics seldom mention rural congregations and it is then noteworthy that Bede recorded how these Bernicians reverted to paganism in response to an outbreak of plague in 664, and, that, even before the onset of this pestilence, ‘many’ had ‘profaned the faith ... by wicked deeds’.¹⁵⁹ He celebrated how, as Abbot of Melrose (664-676), Cuthbert spent weeks or longer abroad from the monastery in order to restore to faith those *plebs rusticus* who inhabited ‘villages that were far away on steep and rugged mountains [where] other teachers feared to visit on account of their poverty and ignorance.’¹⁶⁰ When later made Bishop of Lindisfarne in 685, Cuthbert continued to visit such communities where Christ was less known, and, it follows, idolatrous belief and observance prevailed.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ The presence of bishops was vital to ordain clerics and train teachers who in turn represented to Bede the primary practitioners of pastoral care, critical to the preaching that encouraged prospective converts right through to the correction and exhortation of existing congregations. See *HE*, V.11, pp.484-487; Alan Thacker, ‘Monks, preaching and pastoral care in early Anglo-Saxon England’, *Pastoral Care Before the Parish*, pp.137-170, pp.137-138, 152f; Thomas Pickles, ‘Church Organization and Pastoral Care’, *Companion to the Early Middle Ages*, pp.160-176, p.165f.

¹⁵⁸ For Melrose in relation to Hexham diocese, see David Rollason, *Northumbria, 500-1100: Creation and Destruction of a Kingdom* (Cambridge, 2003), pp.44-52.

¹⁵⁹ *VCP*, ix, pp.184-185. For class stratification and conversion in Anglo-Saxon England, cf. Rosalind Hill, ‘Bede and the Boors’, *Famulus Christi*, pp.93-105; Roy Flechner, ‘Investigating “Peasant Conversion” in Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England: A Preliminary Enquiry’, *Transforming Landscapes of Belief in the Early Medieval Insular World and Beyond: Converting the Isles II*, ed. Nancy Edwards et al. (Turnhout, 2017), pp.429-456.

¹⁶⁰ *VCP*, ix, pp.186-187, xii-xiii, pp.194-199.

¹⁶¹ *ibid.*, xxxii, pp.256-259.

In his letter sent in 734 to Bishop Ecgberht, Bede raised the plight of rural congregations who seldom received visits from the clergy.¹⁶² He proposed reforms such as creating smaller, more manageable dioceses (in order that bishops might make annual visitation to each parish) and better numbers and standards of priests (partly intended to ensure the provision of pastoral care for those hamlets and farmsteads that had been neglected).¹⁶³ The want of pastoral care in such places recalls the situation in Melrose more than half a century earlier, suggesting a larger, ongoing problem (at least from Bede's perspective) with Christian consolidation in parts of Northumbria. Within this much broader concern, Bede seemed to think there existed specific issues with extant idolatrous belief and observance. His complaint to Ecgberht that certain Northumbrian priests were incompetent at providing catechetical instruction echoes earlier observations he made about catechesis in *In Samuhelem*, where Bede claimed to Acca how some converts had been incorporated into the Church without properly renouncing their past belief.¹⁶⁴

By placing the fears raised in the Ecgberht letter within the wider context of Bede's writings, we can then see the latter's sense of the threat of strange gods and idolatry in eighth-century Northumbria and perhaps elsewhere in England.¹⁶⁵ Interlinear readings of Bede's historical and exegetical writings reveal other interactions between these genres, including some which seem especially relevant to our study. Reports of English idol places in the *Historia* often mirror Bede's earlier comments from his exegesis concerning the threat and correct treatment of similar sites in Israel. Tales of a pre-Christian nature, both classical and English, were seemingly favoured over Scriptural narratives in certain eighth-century contexts. In the

¹⁶² *Ep.Ecg.*, v, vii, pp.130-137.

¹⁶³ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ See 'Chapter Six: Contemporary idolaters', pp.236-243.

¹⁶⁵ See also Lutz E. von Padberg, *Die Inszenierung religiöser Konfrontationen: Theorie und Praxis der Missionspredigt im frühen Mittelalter* (Stuttgart, 2003), pp.327-331.

Historia, episodes such as the council that King Edwin held with his ealdormen, or the fascinating conversation between the prisoner-of-war Imma and the Mercian *gesith* holding him captive, proclaim a message consonant with that broadcast in Bede's exegesis, 'strange gods are worthless in comparison to Christ'.¹⁶⁶ Subtle variations nevertheless emerge between Bede the exegete and historian of England. If Christ strangles false deities in the exegesis, he more often simply replaces them in the *Historia*, perhaps suggesting Bede's reluctance to openly ridicule English traditional religion before secular elites.¹⁶⁷ Note, too, how Bede in the *Historia* preferred placing criticisms of idolatry within the mouths of pagans in his *dramatis personae*, thereby creating a more compelling witness; for, like Dionysius in Greece, who better to illustrate the follies of English paganism than the one-time English idolater?¹⁶⁸

Here, we can explain our method of reading in interlinear fashion Bede's historical and exegetical writings, an exercise which has served the basis for several of the proposals set out in this thesis. In choosing this methodology, the thesis has taken inspiration from Bede's own conviction that Samuel and the other authors of Scripture had spoken of his day and age in Northumbria with the express purpose of exhorting those who professed faith in God and reaching those still remote from this faith. Written to senior members of the Northumbrian and English Church, whose primary pastoral concern was the oversight of the priests who provided for the instruction and correction of local congregations, it is natural that Bede wrote his commentaries with lessons that were tailored to the needs of his local Church.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁶ *HE*, II.13, pp.182-185, IV.22, pp.400-403.

¹⁶⁷ Here, we might wonder whether Bede suspected that Ceolwulf would be less than pleased to read a clerical take on how Christ had throttled the gods of his forefathers (and maybe one god who had been the Northumbrian king's ancestor). See 'Chapter One: Strange gods', pp.55-56.

¹⁶⁸ *ibid.*, II.12, pp.174-181, read with II.15, pp.188-191, II.13, pp.182-187, IV.22, pp.400-405.

¹⁶⁹ George Hardin Brown, *Bede the Educator*, JL (1996), p.6ff.

As such, Bede's exegesis can with care be used to inform our impression of what he experienced in English society (once believed to be the exclusive domain of his historical writings), indeed, the commentaries sometimes reveal a more nuanced religious landscape in his lifetime. This is not to say that Bede wrote purely of events in Northumbria or England. The Scriptural books presented a universal application and in many parts of Bede's exegesis we encounter themes that he felt were relevant to those external to England. Still, the thesis recognises the principal importance to Bede of Northumbria and then England, followed by Europe and onto "the ends of the earth".¹⁷⁰ Accordingly, as Peter spoke of "these days" in first-century Jerusalem, Bede produced his exegesis with regard to *his days* in eighth-century Northumbria. In turn, we can with care recognise in certain passages of his exegesis a contemporary application, including, but not limited to, his sense of idolatrous belief and observance in eighth-century Northumbria.

Historiographical Overview

For centuries, Bede's views on strange gods and idolatry have been studied with interest, predominantly for the light he shed on English paganism. Few authors have considered Bede's wider thought about strange gods and idolatry, a curious oversight given his belief that the English shared the same Gentile stock as the Greek or Roman pagan, not to mention Bede's habit of borrowing from Scripture when writing about English paganism.¹⁷¹ Bede saw England's conversion and Christianisation as one episode in the much larger, ongoing conflict between the city of God and the city of the devil. Thus, he read past interactions between Israel, the Church, and pagans as offering prophetic commentary for his own context. In turn,

¹⁷⁰ Acts 1:8.

¹⁷¹ Genesis 9:18-19; 10:1-5; *Genesis*, III.1-60, pp.142-143 (p.215-217) [em.cit.]; Calvin Kendall, 'Introduction' to *Bede: On Genesis*, pp.1-61, pp.22-24.

Bede's knowledge of English paganism shaped some of what he wrote about other pagan peoples. The existing literature on Bede and English paganism remains limited in not having engaged with Bede's wider understanding of strange gods and idolatry. Most attention has focussed on a handful of reports in Bede's *Historia* and his chapter explaining the English pagan calendar, *De mensibus anglorum*, in *De temporum ratione*, completed 725.¹⁷² Thus, the evidence of other passages within these works, and, more conspicuously, that of his wider corpus, remains neglected.

One, rather more problematic element in studies of Bede and strange gods and idolatry lies in the claim and counter-claim concerning the value of sources external to pre-Viking Anglo-Saxon England. Beginning with German scholarship in the increasingly nationalistic milieu of the nineteenth century, it became commonplace to read Bede's reports about insular paganism as an English branch of a Germanic tree which spread over much of north and north-western Europe, in particular, Scandinavia and Iceland. Thus, Jacob Grimm in his immensely influential *Deutsche Mythologie*, first published in 1835, reckoned Bede one of several historians who 'had sucked German milk [but] were soon weaned under Roman training from memories of home, and endeavoured not to preserve, but to efface the last impressions of detested paganism.'¹⁷³ Following in Grimm's footsteps, the Englishman, J.M. Kemble, claimed that Bede's 'incidental notices' of paganism were proof that 'the faith of the island Saxons was that of their continental brethren.'¹⁷⁴ It mattered not that Bede's account

¹⁷² See, for example, Peter Hunter Blair, *An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edn. (Cambridge, 2003), pp.121-123; Nicholas J. Higham and Martin J. Ryan, *The Anglo-Saxon World* (London, 2013), pp.149-150. In a rare study conducted outside the *Historia* and *DTR*, Jacques Elfassi has shown how Bede redacted pagan references when borrowing material from Isidore for his own *Chronica minora*, *idem*, 'L'occultation du paganisme dans la Chronique mineure de Bède le Vénérable', *Bède le Vénérable: Entre tradition et postérité*, ed. Stéphane Lebecqz et al. (Lille, 2005), pp.63-69. See 'Chapter One: Strange gods', p.50.

¹⁷³ Jacob Grimm [trans. James Steven Stallybrass], *Teutonic Mythology*, 4 vols. (London, 1880-1888; rpt. Cambridge, 2012), vol. 3, preface, pp.v-lv, p.ix.

¹⁷⁴ John Mitchell Kemble, *The Saxons in England: A History of the English Commonwealth till the Period of the Norman Conquest*, 2 vols. (London, 1849; rpt. Cambridge, 2011), vol. 1, pp.327-334.

often bore little resemblance to these erstwhile relations of the English. Proponents of the shared northern mythology solved this and other issues through the *deus ex machina* of their ideology, explaining Bede and English religion in the fifth to eighth centuries through works so removed from the insular world as that moral-political text of Tacitus, *Germania*, c.98, and the *Prose Edda*, c.1220, credited to the Icelandic historian and poet Snorri Sturluson. Bede named only two English deities, the goddesses Hretha and Eostre, and, although neither share an obvious equivalent within northern mythology, Grimm, impervious to such constraints, pointed out that while certain details might have varied in each society, ‘the characteristics and cultus [still] corresponded to one another.’¹⁷⁵ Hretha, Kemble proposed, was ‘in some form or other’, the English equivalent to Frigg.¹⁷⁶

The notion of Bede as contributing to shared northern mythology was carried over into the twentieth century by scholars such as Karl Helm and Richard Jente, although these exercised more caution than Grimm and company.¹⁷⁷ Others were firmer in testing fantastical foundations. Ernst Alfred Philippson drew clearer boundaries between Bede’s England and Scandinavia.¹⁷⁸ His treatment of Bede retains much value, particularly in relation to the latter’s discussion of idol places.¹⁷⁹ Frank Stenton and Jan de Vries showed similar prudence, noting, for instance, the influence of Scripture on Bede’s report, and reading his words for their own merit.¹⁸⁰ A more subtle method manifested itself in studies that claimed the later

¹⁷⁵ Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, vol. 1, p.289.

¹⁷⁶ Kemble, *Saxons*, vol. 1, pp.374-375. For a reconsideration of Frigg’s presence in England, see: Margaret Gelling, *Signposts to the Past: Place-Names and the History of England*, 3rd edn. (Chichester, 1997; rpt. 2010), p.259; Ethan Doyle White, ‘The Goddess Frigg: Reassessing an Anglo-Saxon Deity’, *Preternature* 3:2 (2014), pp.284-310.

¹⁷⁷ Karl Helm, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte* (Heidelberg, 1913), pp.82-83; Richard Jente, *Die mythologischen Ausdrücke im altenglischen Wortschatz: Eine kulturgeschichtlich-etymologische Untersuchung* (Heidelberg, 1921), pp.103-107.

¹⁷⁸ Ernst Alfred Philippson, *Germanisches Heidentum bei den Angelsachsen* (Leipzig, 1929), pp.148-163, 165-167, 180-183, 183-193.

¹⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p.184f.

¹⁸⁰ Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp.97-98, 185; Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, 2nd edn., 2 vols. (Berlin, 1956-1957; rpt. 1970), vol. 1, p.30.

corpus of Old English literature could explain Bede's report of pre-Viking England, which seems sensible in only a handful of select cases.

The romance of northern mythology continued to captivate scholars into the latter twentieth century. H. R. Ellis Davidson, schooled under the influential Hector and Nora Chadwick, saw Coifi's cast spear as proof in Bede that Edwin worshipped Odin/Woden the god of war of Snorri's *Ynglinga Saga*.¹⁸¹ Gale R. Owen joined Venus, Frigg, Mary, and Bede's reference to the pagan festival of 'Mother's Night', *Modranect*, in an intriguing but speculative reading that owed much to Kemble.¹⁸² Richard North cautioned against the Tacitean master narrative though he was perhaps over reliant on Scandinavian and Icelandic evidence to reconstruct pre-Christian English belief.¹⁸³ James Campbell later commended North for his 'most remarkable book', and, building on the latter's foundations, proposed connections between Coifi's illegal introduction of a weapon at a Northumbrian idol place with both Tacitus' report that arms were prohibited in the presence of Nerthus and a late Old Norse legend which contained a similar prohibition concerning a temple of Freyr.¹⁸⁴ North and Campbell have identified a handful of potential parallels; nonetheless, these rare instances should not necessarily colour the wider consideration of English pre-Christian religion.

Most scholars now seem wise to the risk in turning to writers so removed from Bede as Tacitus or Sturluson, though some still read their Bede a little too closely with their *Beowulf*.¹⁸⁵ Eric Stanley can be credited with this volte-face in studies of English paganism

¹⁸¹ H.R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (Harmondsworth, 1964), pp.50-51, also 112-113; see also Chadwick, 'Gregory and the Anglo-Saxons', pp.199-201f.

¹⁸² Gale R. Owen, *Rites and Religions of the Anglo-Saxons* (London, 1981), pp.23, 34, 37, 48-49, compare Kemble, *Saxons*, vol. 1, pp.374-376.

¹⁸³ Richard North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature* (Cambridge, 1997), pp.10ff, 304-342.

¹⁸⁴ James Campbell, 'Some Considerations on Religion in Early England', *Collectanea Antiqua: Essays in Memory of Sonia Chadwick Hawkes*, ed. Martin Henig and Tyler Jo Smith (Oxford, 2016), pp.67-73, pp.67-68.

¹⁸⁵ Marilyn Dunn, *The Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons c.597-c.700: Discourses of Life, Death and Afterlife* (London, 2009), pp.57-83; compare John D. Niles, 'Pagan survivals and popular belief', *The Cambridge*

and, in turn, Bede. Concluding his review of the evidence as it was presented in secondary literature, Stanley observed how ‘the unknown – as I think, the unknowable unknown ... has been firmly used to explain the known’.¹⁸⁶ This verdict and its sizeable claim has since contributed to the pervasive sense that Bede has little to offer studies of paganism in pre-Viking England. Accordingly, it has become normal to trust Bede’s curated report in the *Historia* that the English conversion was complete and conclude that idolatrous belief and observance had essentially ceased to exist by Bede’s time.¹⁸⁷ This represents the first of three common views concerning Bede’s evidence for English paganism. A second view contends that even if some semblance of paganism remained in his lifetime, Bede, as a man of the cloister, either knew little about its occurrence or was much more concerned with the serious stuff of the English Church, which need have no fear of vanquished gods.¹⁸⁸ Where Bede had something to report of English paganism, the first two claims often seem insensible. In such cases, a third view has been offered: that Bede and/or his sources were either inventing their report or were simply mistaken.¹⁸⁹

Several monographs exist on Bede and English paganism. David Wilson’s study contributed some useful material and extracted Bede from the clutches of Tacitus, though one reviewer, Patrick Wormald, felt that Wilson’s caution had lessened the potential for conclusions.¹⁹⁰ R. I.

Companion to Old English Literature, ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 2013), pp.120-136. The poem *Beowulf* is plainly considerably older than its manuscript, but researchers have not at this stage shown that it was composed in a period contemporaneous with or indeed prior to Bede’s age. For an overview of the main arguments, see Leonard Neidorf, ‘Introduction’, *The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment*, ed. *idem*, (Cambridge, 2014), pp.1-18.

¹⁸⁶ Meaning, the corpus of Old English writings and charms had been used to interpret the earlier report of Bede and his contemporaries, E.G. Stanley, ‘The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism’, rpt. in *Imagining the Anglo-Saxon Past* (Cambridge 2000), pp.1-110, quote on p.110.

¹⁸⁷ John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford, 2005), pp.166-168f; Yorke, *Conversion of Britain*, pp.127-128; Rory Naismith, *Early Medieval Britain, c.500-1000* (Cambridge, 2021), pp.295-298.

¹⁸⁸ S.D. Church, ‘Paganism in Conversion-Age Anglo-Saxon England: The Evidence of Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* Reconsidered’, *History* 93:2 (2008), pp.162-180, especially p.169ff.

¹⁸⁹ John D. Niles, ‘Pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon religion’, *The Handbook of Religions in Ancient Europe*, ed. Lisbeth Bredholt Christensen et al. (Durham, 2013; rpt. Abingdon 2014), pp.305-323, pp.307-309.

¹⁹⁰ David Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (London, 1992), pp.28-36, reviewed by Patrick Wormald, *Antiquity* 67:257 (1993), pp.939-940.

Page produced the most substantial contribution made to our subject since Philipsson.¹⁹¹

Page's study of English paganism mostly investigated the events surrounding Edwin's council and the subsequent conflagration of the idol place at old Goodmanham, concluding from these and other episodes that while Bede probably knew more about pagan belief in England than once thought, his evidence remained too tenuous to offer serious value to scholarship.¹⁹² Other scholars felt that Bede had more to contribute, among them, Audrey Meaney, whose thoughtful study of the evidence for English paganism has contributed to this thesis.¹⁹³ Her contention that Bede's report should either be trusted or considered invention remains mostly sensible, with careful studies needed to scrutinise the evidence and discern its credibility.¹⁹⁴

The work of Wilson, Meaney, and Page was inter-disciplinary, in that each examined Bede's written evidence with reference to other evidence, such as archaeology, legislative and penitential texts, and toponymy. For Henry Mayr-Harting, this approach made sense of the 'crumbs from the literary table'; and, in respect to Bede, several studies have shed light on English paganism with reference to his report.¹⁹⁵ However, in some cases, the inter-disciplinary approach prompted a renewed interest in the northern mythology. Finds in the material culture inspired related thematic studies, as, for instance, the treasures excavated in the princely burial ground at Sutton-Hoo (Woodbridge, Suffolk) which saw scholars

¹⁹¹ Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, pp.28-32.

¹⁹² R.I. Page, 'Anglo-Saxon Paganism: The Evidence of Bede', *Pagans and Christians: The Interplay between Christian Latin and Traditional Germanic Cultures in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. T. Hofstra et al. (Groningen, 1995), pp.99-129.

¹⁹³ Audrey L. Meaney, 'Bede and Anglo-Saxon Paganism', *Parergon* 3 (1985), pp.1-29, p.7; *idem*, 'Anglo-Saxon Idolators and Ecclesiasts from Theodore to Alcuin; A Source Study', *ASSAH* 5, ed. William Filmer-Sankey et al. (Oxford, 1992), pp.103-125.

¹⁹⁴ For an opposing assessment, see Ronald Hutton, *Pagan Britain* (London, 2013), p.444, n.77.

¹⁹⁵ Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity*, pp.22-30. See, in particular, the place-name evidence as discussed in Margaret Gelling, 'Further Thoughts on Pagan Place-Names', *Otium et Negotium: Studies in Onomatology and Library Science presented to Olof von Feilitzen*, ed. Folke Sandgren (Stockholm, 1973), pp.109-128; *idem*, *Signposts to the Past*, pp.108-109, 112-113, 156-163, 259-260; Lance J. Bronnenkant, 'Place-names and Anglo-Saxon paganism' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Cambridge, 1982), pp.1-119, 136-140.

reconsider Bede's East Anglian kings.¹⁹⁶ The Scandinavian influences in the burial assemblage led to bold readings of English, Germanic, and Scandinavian kingship, with 'the pagan North' seen to burst through Bede's writings and strengthen the shared northern mythology.¹⁹⁷ As more information is released of the excavations ongoing at Rendlesham, just four miles north-east from Sutton-Hoo, where preliminary reports suggest the remains of a 'pre-Christian cult building', commentators might benefit from considering Bede's possible contribution within the wider framework of his thinking about idol places.¹⁹⁸ Indeed, the evidence of Rendlesham could herald a positive change in fortune for Bede, who, based on the limited material evidence for English temple sites, is sometimes said to have fabricated the existence of pagan temples in England based on his knowledge of similar sites from Scripture.¹⁹⁹ Moreover, the impression that Bede left concerning the continued presence of idol places in England (which were neither ruined nor converted into churches), seems now to correlate to current material evidence, even though some scholars have proposed that these sites had vanished or were transformed into churches.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁶ H.M. Chadwick, 'The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial VIII: Who Was He?', *Antiquity* 14:53 (1940), pp.76-87; Rupert Bruce-Mitford, *The Sutton-Hoo Ship Burial: Volume 1: Excavations, Background, The Ship, Dating, and Inventory* (London, 1975), p.683f.

¹⁹⁷ William A. Chaney, 'Paganism to Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England', *The Harvard Theological Review* 53:3 (1960), pp.197-217; *idem*, *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England: The Transition from Paganism to Christianity* (Manchester, 1970) pp.77-80, 83, 152-153, 251.

¹⁹⁸ Christopher Scull et al., 'Excavations at Rendlesham, Suffolk, 2021-2023: Investigating an Early-Medieval Royal Settlement', *Medieval Archaeology* 68:2 (2024), pp.203-228, pp.211, 220-221.

¹⁹⁹ Niles, 'Pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon religion', p.309.

²⁰⁰ Ken Dowden, *European Paganism: The realities of cult from antiquity to the Middle Ages* (London, 2000), pp.147-148; Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, pp.183-191; but see Philipsson, *Germanisches Heidentum*, pp.184-185; Dorothy Whitelock, *The Beginnings of English Society*, 2nd edn. (Harmondsworth, 1954; rpt. 1976), pp.23-24.

In the interest of furthering our understanding of Bede and his times, this thesis adopts a fresh approach in its examination of his thought about strange gods and idolatry. In relation to the three views discussed above, we will neither reject Bede's report in the *Historia* that the English conversion was complete, nor will we take the view that any residual idolatrous belief and observance was of little consequence to the English Church or that Bede's description of pre-Christian religion in England was fanciful or mistaken. Rather, history and exegesis are read together, opening a window into Bede's sense of the threat of strange gods and idolatry in his world.

Our study is divided into six thematic chapters, chosen to help the reader appreciate part of the broad architecture of Bede's treatment of strange gods and idolatry. The themes selected represent the chapter headings, starting with strange gods and then moving to idol places, idol makers, pagan thought, idolatrous kings, with a final theme exploring contemporary idolaters (that is, idolaters known to Bede in the period of his lifetime). A coda shows the reflection of Bede's fears towards the threat of strange gods and idolatry in the writings of his successors in England and Europe, finding these a stronger interpretative lens to his historical writings than those voices belonging to much later or earlier periods in the history of England, Germany, and Scandinavia.

Chapter One: Strange gods

To understand Bede's attitude towards those deities that he, following Scripture, sometimes termed *dei alieni*, 'strange gods', we can turn to the Book of Kings and its record of an event that occurred around fifteen-hundred years before Bede's lifetime.¹ During Hezekiah's reign in Judah, the Assyrian Empire, having captured and exiled the northern Israelite kingdom, Samaria, seized Judah's garrison towns and encircled the capital, Jerusalem.² From his imperious position, 'Rabshakeh', Assyria's commander, stood before the city and hurled insults in the Hebrew tongue at Israel's god, claiming the latter would shortly become vanquished like the many gods that were worshipped in Samaria.

Where is the god of Hamath and Arpad? Where is the god of Sepharvaim, Hena and Ivvah?
Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand?³

In Bede's brief exposition of this event, he first observed that Rabshakeh had 'blasphemed God'.⁴ It was an obvious point that required no elaboration – Rabshakeh had reduced God to the level of strange gods and his words were thus blasphemous. Rabshakeh was nonetheless correct in his poor esteem of Samaria's gods, for, as Bede wrote, *quia non erant dii sed idola*, 'because these were not gods but idols', the northern Israelites, or, as Bede labelled them, 'the worshippers of vanities', *cultores uanitatum*, were 'deservedly overthrown'.⁵

¹ *Lucas*, II.316-319, p.108 (p.231), cit. 2 Kings 5:17b; *Samuhel*, I.2047-2049, p.60 (p.190), cit. 1 Samuel 7:3, IV.1524-1531, p.248 (p.486), cit. 1 Samuel 26:19-20; *Genesis*, III.816-821, p.165 (p.241), quot. Augustine, *DCD*, XVI.9-14, p.516 (p.203), cit. Joshua 24:2; *DeTab.*, I.1263-1266, p.37 (p.40), quot. Exodus 20:3; *DeTemp.*, II.844-856, p.213 (p.92), quot. Exodus 20:3-5; *Ezra-Neemia*, II.1557-1564, p.326 (pp.137-138), quot. Malachi 2:11-12. See also Bede's *dei falsi*, 'false gods', *Samuhel*, I.1210-1212, p.40 (p.157), I.1308-1313, pp.42-43 (p.160), I.1522-1525, p.48 (p.169); *Homelia* i.20, ls.48-51, p.142 (p.198); *Ezra-Neemia*, I.766-779, p.260 (p.36), quot. Jeremiah 2:28.

² 2 Kings 17:1-23, 18:9-12, 17; Isaiah 36:1-2; *DTR*, lxvi.513-516, p.479 (p.177).

³ 2 Kings 18:18-35; Isaiah 36:3-20.

⁴ *Quaest.Regum*, XXIV.1-4, p.316 (p.127). For Bede and Rabshakeh, cf. Foley, 'Thirty Questions', p.127, n.2; compare Jerome, *Esaias*, XI.xxxvi-xxxvii, pp.428-442 (pp.507-521).

⁵ *Quaest.Regum*, XXIV.4-6, p.316 (pp.127-128).

Bede never related the ending of Rabshakeh's siege (suggesting that he considered it too well-known to recall), but its event helps consolidate our initial point which is so integral to Bede's theological perspective. Having taken counsel with the prophet Isaiah, Hezekiah prostrated himself in sackcloth before the altar in the Jerusalem temple, his prayer, "O Lord our God, save us from his [Assyria's] hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know, that thou are the Lord the only God."⁶ According to Scripture, that very night, God sent an angel who slew the Assyrians in their hundreds of thousands and Jerusalem was, at that time, preserved.⁷

God's triumph over Assyria represented but one episode that convinced Bede of the total power of his God and the powerlessness of strange gods.⁸ Here, it is critical to note Bede's belief that strange gods possessed some power – Assyria had captured Samaria, and, much earlier, the Egyptian magicians had performed wonders by the gods – and that this was sufficient to entice mortals into their worship.⁹ But as Rabshakeh's blunder showed, the power of strange gods was nothing when compared to Bede's God, thus, when placed beside this God, strange gods were shown to be powerless and therefore worthless. Bede habitually returned to this evaluation when writing of strange gods in Scripture and beyond the Scriptural era. However, as is often true in matters of faith, impressions seem most influential in relation to the worshipper's own context. Thus, Bede reported how the Christian king of Northumbria, Oswiu, persuaded his pagan East Anglian counterpart Sigeberht, 'they are not gods that are made by the hands of men', but solely He that was 'omnipotent, eternal, Creator of heaven and earth'.¹⁰ Or, in Northumbria's own conversion, we find the memorable

⁶ 2 Kings 19:14-19; Isaiah 37:14-20.

⁷ 2 Kings 19:20-35, 20:6; Isaiah 37:21-36; compare *DeTab.*, III.1555-1558, p.133 (p.155).

⁸ By way of comparison, see *Lucas*, II.1556-1562, pp.139-140 (pp.273-274), quot. 1 Kings 18:27.

⁹ Exodus 7:1-22.

¹⁰ *HE*, III.22, pp.280-283.

dialogue between King Edwin and Coifi, the pagan ‘high-priest’, who served as Bede’s mouthpiece for criticisms of the Northumbrian pantheon.¹¹ Listening to the new teaching of the Roman missionary Paulinus, Coifi was reported by Bede to have shared how, the more he sought truth in his own gods, the less he found it, concluding that ‘our religion is worthless’ and shortly thereafter proclaiming the new god as ‘the true God’.¹²

Such episodes exemplify English recurrences of Rabshakeh’s blunder, not to mention other Scriptural passages and their various patristic interpretations. In this chapter, we will examine the ideas that shaped Bede’s treatment of strange gods. An initial exploration of Bede’s concept of the nature and origin of these deities is followed by a reconsideration of the extent of his knowledge about England’s pantheon. We will then assess what Bede said of the Philistine deity, Dagon, and observe how the latter might be read as a figure for strange gods and conversion in England.

Nature and origin of the gods

Bede offered no single, comprehensive explanation of the nature and origin of the gods, such as we can read in Isidore or in a later English generation, Ælfric.¹³ Nonetheless, his view can be reconstructed from relevant examples, a process that should begin with Bede’s sense that strange gods were not really gods but demons masquerading as such. As David had pronounced, in words included in Bede’s passage ‘Christ strangles the strange gods’, “all the gods of the Gentiles are *daemonia*.”¹⁴ Duly inspired, Bede frequently replaced *dei* with

¹¹ *HE*, II.13, pp.182-185.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Isidore, *Etymologiae*, VIII.xi, pp.327-342, pp.327-328 (pp.183-190); Ælfric, *De falsis diis*, in *Homiliae*, ed. Pope, OS 260, pp.676-712.

¹⁴ Psalm 95(96):5 [*Ps. Rom.*], quot. in *Samuhel*, III.786-787, p.155 (p.348). Cf. Deuteronomy 7:4, 11:6, 13:6, 13, 17:3, 28:36, 64, 29:26, 32:16; Joshua 23:16, 24:2, 16, 20; Judges 2:17; 1 Samuel 8:8, 26:19; 2 Kings 22:17; 2

daemonia or *spiritus*, sometimes paired with adjectives such as *immundus*, ‘impure’, or *malignus*, ‘wicked’.¹⁵ Bede subscribed to the traditional Judeo-Christian teaching that the demons were those angels who had fallen with Satan and now tricked mortals into worshipping them as gods.¹⁶ Rufinus had laid bare the devices of Serapis, while Jonas of Bobbio exposed Woden’s penchant for hiding in vats of beer, but no such explanation materialises in Bede’s writings.¹⁷ Two passages in his exegesis concerning similar manifestations must offer satisfactory replacements. In the case of the serpent who tempted Eve in Eden, Bede followed Augustine’s interpretation that the devil had inhabited the reptile (lest God’s creation be considered evil).¹⁸ The same passage proposed a similar possession occurred with pagan seers, something that Bede studied elsewhere in the practitioner known as the Endor *pythonissa*, ‘pythoness’.¹⁹ According to 1 Samuel 28:3-20, King Saul requested this pythoness raise the deceased Samuel in order to learn the fate of his reign. Bede, once more indebted to Augustine, remarked that the shade that then spoke to the terrified Saul had either been Samuel or a demonic imitation.²⁰ It seems sensible to presume that Bede envisioned an equivalent masquerade in those demons who manifested themselves as gods, whether via animate or inanimate hosts.

Chronicles 7:19, 34:25; Jeremiah 1:16, 7:18, 16:13, 16:20, 19:4, 13, 32:29, 44:5,8,15; Psalm 85:8, 95(96):4-5; Baruch 1:22, 2; 1 Corinthians 10:19-20; Augustine, *DCD*, I.29, p.30 (pp.31-32); Cassiodorus, *Exp.Psalmodium*, XCV.5, pp.863-864 (vol. 2, pp.417-418) [em.cit.].

¹⁵ *DeTemp.*, I.507-529, pp.159-160 (pp.21-22) [em.cit.]. For *spiritus*, see *Samuhel*, III.898-900, p.158 (p.352); *spiritus immundi*, see *Lucas*, III.928-935, pp.189-190 (p.338) [=*Marcus*, II.320-327, p.497], IV.44-49, p.232 (pp.394-395) [em.cit.] [=*Marcus*, I.1482-1486, p.475]; *Cant.Canticorum*, V.viii.53-76, p.339 (p.225) [em.cit.]; *Samuhel*, I.1210-1218, p.40 (p.157), [em.cit.]; and *spiritus maligni*, see *Salomonis*, II.xxi.87-88, p.110 [em.cit.]; *Ezra-Neemia*, I.42-48, p.242 (pp.7-8).

¹⁶ *Apocalypsis*, xx.11-12, p.393 (p.193), quot. Primasius, *Commentarius in Apocalypsin*, CCSL 92, III.xii.130-132, p.184; see also, *DCD*, XI.11-20, pp.332-339 (pp.12-19).

¹⁷ Rufinus, *HE*, XI.23, pp.1026-1028 (pp.466-468); Jonas of Bobbio, *Vitae Columbani libri II*, ed. Krusch, I.27, ls.18-3, pp.213-214.

¹⁸ Genesis 3:1-15; *Genesis*, I.1875-1883, p.59 (p.125), quot. Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*, CSEL 28/1, XI.ii.2-10, p.336 (trans. Hill, pp.430-431).

¹⁹ Bede believed these seeresses were servants of Apollo, *Exp.Actuum*, xvi.29-31, p.69 (p.136), cit. Isidore, *Etymologiae*, VIII.ix.21, p.325 (p.182).

²⁰ *Samuhel*, IV.1890-1919, pp.256-257 (pp.499-500), cit. Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum*, CCSL 44, II.iii.1-2, pp.81-84 (trans. Ramsey, pp.225-227).

Euhemerism, the philosophy that supposes the gods were once heroic mortals, is also found in Bede's thinking. In Western thought, the concept is traced to the Greek philosopher Euhemerus, fl.c.311-280 BC, and the Roman historian Ennius, c.239-169 BC, whose epic, *Annales*, introduced euhemerism into Latin literature. The *Annales* narrated the tale of Rome from mythical beginnings to Ennius' lifetime in the Republic and survives now only in fragments quoted by later authors. One such fragment is contained in Bede's comment in *Expositio Actuum* that Jupiter was *divum pater atque hominum rex*, 'father of gods and king of men', probably transmitted to him through either Vergil or Macrobius.²¹ Euhemerism is implicit in the apocryphal book of Wisdom (14:10-27), but it was the classical report that became so popular a target to early Christian writers, notably, Arnobius, d.c.330.²² Bede's critique of euhemerism took inspiration from Jerome, Augustine, and Isidore. The latter provided Bede his date for the beginnings of euhemerism in the year 1787 of the Second Age: 'At this time, temples were first constructed, and certain *principes gentium* [rulers of the nations] were adored as gods.'²³ From Jerome, Bede learned of the earliest recorded deity in the Hellenic princess Io, whom the Egyptians worshipped as Isis.²⁴ His wider remarks against euhemerism focussed on its Roman expression, scorning, for instance, the error of Romulus for believing himself a son of Mars.²⁵ He condemned, too, the *cultus imperatorius*, finding it 'blasphemous',

²¹ Ennius, *Annales*, LCL 294, VI.203-204, pp.212-213. Cf. *Exp. Actuum*, xiv.30-31, p.65 (p.126), cit. Vergil, *Aeneid*, LCL 63, I.65, pp.266-267, II.648, pp.360-361, LCL 64, X.2, 743, pp.172-173, 224-225; Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, LCL 512, VI.i.10, pp.8-9.

²² Arnobius, *Adversus nationes*, ed. w/ Fr. trans. Champeaux, IV.xxix.1-2, pp.30-33; Augustine, *De consensu euangelistarum libri IV*, CSEL 43, I.xxiii.32, p.30-31 (trans. Paffenroth, p.154), compare *idem*, *DCD*, VI.vii.24-26, p.175 (p.195) VII.xxvii.3-5, 8-10, p.209 (p.233).

²³ *DTR*, lxvi.210-211, p.469 (p.164), quot. Isidore, *Chronicon*, CCSL 112, xxiv, pp.24-25; compare *DTL*, xviii.8, p.602 (p.120), quot. Isidore, *Etymologiae*, V.xxxix.6.12, p.210 (p.130).

²⁴ *DTR*, lxvi.252-253, pp.470-471 (p.166), quot. Jerome, *Chronicon*, ls.10-15, p.27b; see also Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, LCL 42, I.568-747, pp.42-55; Augustine, *DCD*, XVIII.iii.34-41 p.596 (p.283).

²⁵ *DTR*, xii.12-14, p.320 (p.46), compare Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, LCL 510, I.xii.5, pp.136-137. Bede criticised the euhemerism of other nations besides Rome, such as the Persians, see *Ezra-Neemia*, II.991-993, p.312 (pp.117-118), cit. Ezra 7:12.

For they say that their kings are gods after they are dead, and so to speak translated into heaven amongst the other gods, and even on earth they are called *Augusti*, which is a name of godhead, or so they hold.²⁶

Intriguingly, Bede knew the slander of ‘certain Jews and Gentiles’ that Christians were euhemerists who worshipped as god a man who had died, something he rejected on several occasions.²⁷

The gods of the nations

Addressing Nothhelm in *In Regum librum*, Bede quoted 2 Kings 17:29, “Each nation made its own god”, and it is plain from his wider writings that he believed the various Gentile peoples had their own distinctive pantheons.²⁸ Critics of Bede who have found his treatment of paganism homogenous seem to have overlooked this detail, which he illustrated on several colourful occasions.²⁹ Consider the Gerasene man, who, in the Synoptic Gospels was reported as being possessed with a “legion” of demons, and later came to serve Bede his image for how ‘the people of the nations were enslaved not to one but innumerable and diverse cults of idolatry.’³⁰ Large cities, such as Athens or Rome, hosted ‘many different

²⁶ *Apocalypsis*, xxi.14-17, p.401 (p.198); compare *Samuhel*, IV.1481-1486, p.247 (p.485), cit. Josephus, *Historiae antiquitatis iudaicae*, ed. and trans. Pollard et al., XVIII.viii [hereafter, *Antiquitates*], and Eusebius [trans. Rufinus], *HE*, II.5-6, pp.116-123 (pp.67-70); *DTR*, lxvi.1030-1031, p.497 (p.197), cit. Jerome, *Chronicon*, ls.17, p.177; *Homelia* i.20, ls.48-50, p.142 (p.198), cit. Jerome, *Matheus*, III.40-42, p.140 (p.191); compare *idem*, *Commentariorum in Daniele libri III*, CCSL 75A, II.vi.383-385, p.835 (trans. Archer, p.68) [hereafter, *Daniel*], cit. Daniel 6:20b; Augustine, *Sermo XXIV*, in *Sermones de Vetere Testamento*, CCSL 41, 2.24-31, pp.326-327 (trans. Hill, pp.72-73), quot. 1 Peter 2:5.

²⁷ *Lucas*, III.691-699, p.183 (pp.330-331) [em.cit.], repeated in *Marcus*, II.134-142, p.492.

²⁸ 2 Kings 17:29-31, quot. in *Quaest.Regum*, XXIII.2-7, p.315 (p.126). Cf. 2 Kings 18:33-35, 19:12-13; 2 Chronicles 32:13-15, 17; Psalm 95(96):5; Isaiah 36:18-20; 37:12-13; Jeremiah 2:11; *Lucas*, IV.2334-2337, p.289 (pp.469-470), quot. Augustine, *Quaestiones euangeliorum*, II.xxxiii.29-32, p.74 (p.394); *Genesis*, III.560-565, p.158 (p.233), cit. Ephesians 4:5-6.

²⁹ Eoghan Ahern, *Bede and the Cosmos: Theology and Nature in the Eighth Century* (Abingdon, 2020), p.19.

³⁰ Matthew 8:23-34; Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-39; *Lucas*, III.750-753, p.185 (p.332), repeated with minor changes in *Marcus*, II.160-162, p.493. From Jerome, Bede knew that one legion comprised 6,000 men, a number that seems captured in his expression of the *innumeri cultus* of idolatry, cf. Jerome, *Matheus*, IV.1345-1346, p.258 (p.304). See Georges Tugène, *L'idée de nation chez Bède le Vénérable* (Paris, 2001), p.12f.

kinds of idolatry'.³¹ In the Introduction, we noted Bede's impression that the polytheism of paganisms opposed Christian monotheism, and here, we can extend the point to show Bede's recognition, shared with earlier commentators as in Tertullian's case, of the Gentile apprehension that their traditional cults would be replaced with a religion of the nations.³² Bede articulated this fear with broad respect of all pagan nations in *In Samuhelem*, but later noted its localised emotion within England and Germany.³³ Watching a party of monks be carried helplessly out to sea, a crowd of Tyneside villagers jeered, 'Let no man pray for them, and may God have no mercy on any one of them, for they have robbed men of their old ways of worship, and how the new worship is to be conducted nobody knows.'³⁴ The strange rites of two English missionaries, who sought to convert the Old Saxons in Germany, led to the pair being murdered and their bodies thrown into the Rhine, since, Bede asserted, the tribe was afraid that 'the land would be compelled to change its old religion for a new one'.³⁵

From his sources, Bede had access to ample information concerning various Gentile pantheons. Yet, in contrast to Jerome, Augustine, or his older English contemporary, Aldhelm, d.709/710, Bede chose not to broadcast the identities of strange gods, preferring neutral nomenclature such as *dei*, *daemonia*, etc.³⁶ His choice probably took inspiration from Old Testament prohibitions of memorialising gods, and, I suspect, his feeling that some among his readership needed no such encouragement to commemorate their own divinities or come to

³¹ Acts 17:22-23; *Epist. Catholicae*, 1Pt.v.120-121, p.259 (p.119), cit. Jerome, *De Viris Illustribus*, ed. w/ It. trans. Ceresa-Gastaldo, viii.2. pp.90-91 (trans. Halton, p.18); *idem*, *Nom.Hebraica*, ls.18, p.62; see also Eusebius [Rufinus], *HE*, II.xv.2, pp.140-141 (p.78); *HE*, II.4, pp.148-149.

³² Tertullian, *Ad Nationes*, CCSL 1 (1954), I.1-4, p.11; *Samuhel*, IV.2001-2008, p.259 (p.503); *Marcus*, III.1477-1480, p.579, quot. Jerome, *Esaias*, XV.lvi.8/9.32-34, pp.635-636 (p.713), quot. Isaiah 56:7c; Lesley Abrams, *Bede, Gregory, and Strategies of Conversion in Anglo-Saxon England and the Spanish New World*, JL (2013), p.3f. See 'Introduction', pp.18-19.

³³ 'The pagans were afraid, recognising the coming of the true God into the world ... and they sighed that the worshippers of their many and false deities [*numina*], together with their ways of worship, were going to be destroyed', *Samuhel*, I.1308-1312, pp.42-43 (p.160); for discussion, see Yorke, 'Pagan to Christian', p.240f.

³⁴ *VCP*, iii, pp.160-165; Bede, *Vita metrica Sancti Cuthberti*, ed. and trans. Lapidge, iii, pp.200-205 [hereafter, *VCM*].

³⁵ *HE*, V.10, pp.482-483.

³⁶ *HE*, V.18, pp.514-515.

know classical counterparts.³⁷ This is best shown in Bede's redaction of gods from his sources, as Jacques Elfassi was the first to observe. Noting Bede's reliance on materials in Isidore's *Chronica* for his own *Chronica minora*, Elfassi demonstrated how Bede systematically omitted the names of gods and other pagan references found in Isidore's text.³⁸ Other, similar instances occur elsewhere in Bede's writings. Preaching on the Chair of St. Peter, Bede quoted Jerome's critique of euhemerism but redacted the names of Saturn, Jupiter, Ceres, Liberus, and Hercules, preferring the label 'dead men'.³⁹ Hagiographical source material, too, was excised through Bede's editorial impulse, with references to gods or idolatrous rites removed from Bede's *vitae* of SS Felix, Anastasius, and Alban.⁴⁰ Thus, where Paulinus of Nola, in one of several *carmina* that became the basis for Bede's *Vita Felicis*, had written 'I shall not summon Castalian Muses ... nor rouse deaf Phoebus from the Aonian rock', Bede preferred to let sleeping gods lie (unnamed).⁴¹

In this context it is somewhat surprising that scholars have rejected the notion that Bede deliberately suppressed references to English strange gods and idolatry. John Blair, surely the most respected proponent of this view, has said of the evidence for paganism in Bede's world,

³⁷ Exodus 23:13b; Deuteronomy 7; Zechariah 13:2; Hosea 2:16-17.

³⁸ Elfassi, 'Paganisme dans la *Chronique mineure* de Bède', pp.63-69, especially 66ff. As Elfassi noted, Arnaud Knaepen had earlier made a similar finding (with less emphasis on paganism) concerning Bede's *Chronica*, see Arnaud Knaepen, 'L'histoire Greco-Romaine dans les *Chroniques* de Bède le Vénérable', *The Medieval Chronicle* 3 (2004), pp.76-92, pp.79-81. Notwithstanding these findings, it remains the case, as Rosalind Love has shown, that Bede trusted Isidore for much of his own learning, Love, 'The world of Latin learning', pp.47-48.

³⁹ *Homelia* i.20, ls.48-50, p.142 (p.198), cit. Jerome, *Matheus*, III.40-42a [ls.42b-43 redacted], p.140 (p.191).

⁴⁰ Bede, *Acta et passio beati Anastasii martyris* (BHL 409[p] Redaction), ed. Carmela Viricillo Franklin, *The Latin Dossier of Anastasius the Persian: Hagiographic Translations and Transformations* (Toronto, 2004), pp.387-416 for text, and pp.162-228, 362-386 for discussion [hereafter, *PA*]; Bede, *Vita Felicis*, ed. Thomas William Mackay, 'A critical edition of Bede's *Vita Felicis*' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Stanford University, 1972), pp.1-33 for text, pp.lv-lx for sources [hereafter, *VF*]. In Bede's *Passio Albani*, he removed various snippets from his Gallic source, including the particulars of the sacrifice that the Verulamium *iudex* had offered to the gods. Additionally, Bede incorporated a favourite title, 'the true and living God', one that he repeated elsewhere when speaking of the Christian deity and strange gods. See Wilhelm Meyer, 'Die Legende des h. Albanus des Protomartyr Angliae in Texten vor Beda', *Abhandlungen der Königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen* (Berlin, 1904), pp.3-82, pp.50-53, compare *HE*, I.7, pp.30-31; for Bede's source, see Richard Sharpe, 'Martyrs and Local Saints in Late Antique Britain', *Local Churches and Local Saints in the Early Medieval West*, ed. Alan Thacker and Richard Sharpe (Oxford, 2002; rpt. 2008), pp.75-154, p.113f.

⁴¹ Paulinus of Nola, *Carmina*, CSEL 30, XV.30-31, p.52 (trans. Walsh, p.83).

In England the most remarkable fact about pagan worship is indeed how seldom it is mentioned, either in historical texts describing its survival or in prescriptive ones urging its suppression. To invoke a clerical conspiracy of silence is inadequate...⁴²

Setting aside the legislative and penitential evidence for English idolatry, we can see how Bede's relative silence was based on a rule that had its inspiration in Scripture and Bede's own status as a member of a recently converted society.⁴³ For Bede, recent converts should be encouraged to reject idolatry, to which end, the mention of traditional cults represented a stumbling-block, particularly among the wider populace. This sense rises to the surface throughout Bede's writings, such as Wilfrid's reported words to Bishop Colman that 'all new converts need abandon their idols which are of devilish origin' or the similar emphasis in Bede's version of the *Passio Anastasii*.⁴⁴ In her edition of Bede's text, Carmela Franklin has shown how Bede made several changes to his source material, including Anastasius' response to his pagan interrogator.

Source

But you, who worship fire and other things that I blush even to name [*dicere erubesco*]...⁴⁵

Bede

But you, who worship fire and other things that are wrong even to name [*dici nefas est*]...⁴⁶

⁴² Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, p.167.

⁴³ Meaney, 'Idolators and Ecclesiasts', pp.103-111; *idem*, 'Old English legal and penitential penalties for "heathenism"', *Anglo-Saxons: Studies presented to Cyril Roy Hart*, ed. Simon Keynes and Alfred P. Smyth (Dublin, 2006), pp.127-158, pp.128-130, 154; Helen Foxhall Forbes, 'Searching for Conversion in the Early English Laws', *Converting the Isles II*, pp.145-174.

⁴⁴ *HE*, III.25, pp.300-301.

⁴⁵ Franklin, *Anastasius the Persian*, p.169.

⁴⁶ *PA*, xxxiii.492-493, p.410. Bede surely took inspiration from Exodus 23:13b, "And by the name of strange gods you shall not swear, neither shall it be heard out of your mouth."

Bede's impulse here, as Franklin observed, was to stress how it was 'a sacrilege even to name the Persians' false gods', a model for other converts that will become increasingly important to our discussion.⁴⁷

Bede permitted certain exceptions to his rule. Where a Scriptural passage identified a named god, Bede was content to include said god(s) in his exegesis of that particular passage. Thus, we read of Jupiter and Mercury in *Expositio Actuum* since both were mentioned at Acts 14:11-12.⁴⁸ Equally, Bede identified the Sidonian Baals and Astaroth in *In Samuhelem* in response to their inclusion in 1 Samuel 7:4.⁴⁹ Spontaneous examples such as Bede's naming of Serapis in *In Marcum* without prior identification in Mark's Gospel, seem rare. Indeed, even in that case, Bede omitted what his source, Rufinus' continuation of Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica*, had related of Serapis' cult, ensuring English readers learned nothing other than the demon's name.⁵⁰ Bede also tended to name more gods in his works on natural history and time. Here, Bede's motivation seemed the desire to educate readers over the calendar or cosmos which were inseparable from the pantheons of Greece, Rome, and, at least regarding the calendar, of England. Still, students of Bede must take care to separate the divine from the non-divine in these works. Take, for instance, Bede's use of Jupiter, who, according to the Brepols Latin Writers Database, appears in twenty-two sentences of seven Bedan works. Fifteen of these sentences belong to Bede's *De temporibus liber*, *De natura rerum*, and *De temporum ratione*, but in nine of these, Bede was referring to *sidus Iovis*, 'the star' or 'planet Jupiter', which, perhaps following Isidore, Bede isolated from *divus Iovis*.⁵¹ It

⁴⁷ Franklin, *Anastasius the Persian*, pp.166-169f.

⁴⁸ *Exp.Actuum*, xiv.27-36, p.65 (p.126).

⁴⁹ *Samuhel*, I.2060-2062, p.60 (p.190), cit. Jerome, *Nom.Hebraica*, ls.26, p.103, ls.4-5, p.90; see also Lucas, IV.44-48, p.232 (pp.394-395), cit. 2 Kings 1:2 [=Marcus, I.1482-1486, p.475]; *Quaest.Regum*, xxiii, p.315 (pp.126-127), cit. 2 Kings 17:29-31.

⁵⁰ *Marcus*, II.811-825, pp.509-510, cit. Rufinus, *HE*, XI.23, 27-30 pp.1025-1030, 1033-1036 (pp.466-469, 474-477).

⁵¹ Isidore, *Etymologiae*, III.lxxi.21, p.161 (p.105).

seems significant that in Bede's last work within this oeuvre, *De temporum ratione*, he removed what he had earlier said about the zodiac in *De natura rerum*, c.703. The novice Bede had been pleased to explore the zodiac with mention of Greco-Roman deities and their associated *fabulae*, but the elder Bede removed all trace of these, stressing instead that the order of the signs ought to be memorised through the solar and lunar movements that God had ordained in Creation.⁵² As we shall now see, Bede embraced the same rule when it came to England's pantheon.

English gods

Bede referred to English gods in *De temporum ratione* and the *Historia*; and, as I have indicated beforehand, they seem implicit within certain passages of Bede's exegesis. First, we will explore Bede's explicit identifications. He mentioned two goddesses, Eostre and Hretha, in his chapter *De mensibus Anglorum* in *De temporum ratione*.

Hrethmonath [March] is named for their goddess Hretha, to whom they sacrificed at this time. *Eosturmonath* [April] has a name which is now translated 'Paschal month', and which was once called after a goddess of theirs named Eostre, in whose honour feasts were celebrated in that month. Now they designate that Paschal season by her name, calling the joys of the new rite by the time-honoured name of the old observance.⁵³

Bede remains our sole source for these goddesses, encouraging some to suspect him of fabricating their identities, but no serious motive has been produced in support of this claim.⁵⁴

As John Hines suggested, the presence of two goddesses could infer females were

⁵² Compare *DNR*, xii, pp.208-210 (p.84) [em.cit.], with *DTR*, xviii, pp.339-343 (pp.60-63) [em.cit.]; Kendall and Wallis, 'Commentary on *DNR*,' p.148.

⁵³ *DTR*, xv.35-341, p.331 (p.54).

⁵⁴ Page, 'Anglo-Saxon Paganism', pp.124-126; Dunn, *Christianization*, pp.62-63; but see, in support of Bede's identification, Kenneth Harrison, *The Framework of Anglo-Saxon History to A.D. 900* (Cambridge, 1976), pp.3-4; Meaney, 'Bede and Anglo-Saxon Paganism', pp.6-8; Philip A. Shaw, *Pagan Goddesses in the Early Germanic World: Eostre, Hreda and the Cult of Matrons* (London, 2011), pp.49-97.

particularly venerated in English paganism.⁵⁵ The matriarchal ‘ceremonies’ that Bede reported had coincided with the 8th kalends of January (25th December) lends support to this sense, which would be strengthened further were the ‘creating goddess’ alluded to in an earlier chapter of *De temporum ratione* shown to be of English origin.⁵⁶

This nature was created by the one true God when He commanded that the stars which He had set in the heavens should be the signs of seasons, days and years; it is not, as the madness of the heathens [*ethnicorum dementia*] asserts, a creating goddess [*dea creatrix*], one amongst many.⁵⁷

Charles Jones thought a passage from Lucretius’ *De natura rerum* was Bede’s source here, but Faith Wallis pointed out the improbability that Bede had ever seen this work.⁵⁸ Bede could have been citing from a separate Lucretian fragment, possibly known to him through Nonius Marcellus’ *De compendiosa doctrina*.⁵⁹ Aldhelm’s riddle about the sun and moon might also have inspired Bede. It had ridiculed Roman belief in Leto’s birth of the sun (Apollo) and moon (Cynthia/Diana), and maybe Leto then embodied to Bede a ‘creating goddess’.⁶⁰ It might then be significant that Bede’s chapter in *De temporum ratione* was itself concerned with the sun and moon. Yet, since these classical connections offer nothing more than a tenuous connection, is it then so implausible to wonder whether Bede had instead an English ‘creating goddess’ in mind, perhaps one of Hretha or Eostre?⁶¹

⁵⁵ Hines, ‘Religion: The Limits of Knowledge’, p.380.

⁵⁶ *DTR*, xv.15-18, p.330 (p.53).

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, ii.26-31, p.275 (p.14), cit. Genesis 1:14.

⁵⁸ Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, LCL 181, I.629, pp.52-53; Wallis, *Bede: On the Reckoning of Time*, p.14, n.19.

⁵⁹ Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, II.1117, pp.180-181, quot. in Nonius Marcellus, *De compendiosa doctrina*, ed. Lindsay, vol. 1, II.15, p.236; see Lapidge, *ASL*, pp.101-105.

⁶⁰ Aldhelm, *Ænigmata*, CCSL 113, lxxix.3-4, pp.494-495.

⁶¹ An invocation of ‘Erce, mother of earth’, *Erce, eorðan modor*, surviving in a Christian ceremony for blessing of fields found in several English folios from the late tenth or early eleventh century is too late to provide firm support to Bede’s ‘creating goddess’. Nevertheless, its example could suggest that such deities were known in an earlier period of Anglo-Saxon England, cf. Godfrid Storms, *Anglo-Saxon Magic* (The Hague, 1948), ls.49-87, pp.174-177, and commentary, p.178ff.

Bede seemed conscious that, even in his lifetime, some in England remembered Woden as their ancestral god. This recognition seems clearest when we read the record in Bede's *Chronica maiora* as to the origins of the gods – *principes gentium* – together with his report in the *Historia* that Hengist and Horsa, the leaders of the migrating Angles, were 'the sons of Wihtgisl, son of Witta, son of Wecta, son of Woden, from whose stock the royal families of many kingdoms claimed their descent.'⁶² It would seem extraordinary to suspect Bede of stating the one without believing in the other and therefore it can reasonably be inferred that he knew Woden was considered the first or principal god of the pagan English.⁶³ Other early proponents of English euhemerism included Daniel, Bishop of Winchester, r.705-744, who outlined this belief in a letter to the West Saxon missionary, Boniface (c.675-754); and, much earlier, Gregory the Great.⁶⁴ Writing to the convert Æthelberht, Gregory cited the exemplar Constantine the Great, who, the pope claimed, had by his conversion and support of the Church outshone his imperial predecessors (themselves gods), promising the Kent king that he too would 'surpass the ancient kings of your race in praise and merit'.⁶⁵ Calvin Kendall has shown how Bede saw less worth in the Constantinian example than Gregory; nevertheless, the Northumbrian still included the same promise in the words of 'the stranger' who encouraged the then-pagan Edwin to convert and 'surpass in power all of his ancestors'.⁶⁶ One possible incentive for Æthelberht, Edwin, and perhaps other English kings to convert was the promise that confessing Christ would see them rise in stature over Woden. It is significant that secular readers would not stumble perchance on euhemerism in Bede's

⁶² Compare *DTR*, lxvi.210-211, p.469 (p.164), quot. Isidore, *Chronicon*, xxiv, pp.24-25, with *HE*, I.15, pp.50-51.

⁶³ In support of this view and for further analysis of the Woden genealogy, see Eric John, 'The Point of Woden', *ASSAH* 5, pp.127-134, pp.129-130.

⁶⁴ *Tangl* 23, ls.8-3, pp.39-40 (pp.26-27).

⁶⁵ *HE*, I.32, pp.112-113.

⁶⁶ *HE*, II.12, pp.178-179; Calvin B. Kendall, 'Modelling Conversion: Bede's "Anti-Constantinian" Narrative of the Conversion of King Edwin', *Conversion to Christianity from Late Antiquity to the Modern Age: Considering the Process in Europe, Asia, and the Americas*, ed. Calvin B. Kendall et al. (Minneapolis, MN, 2009), pp.137-159.

Chronica maiora – Woden’s inclusion in the *Historia* reduced that which was once worshipped and perhaps still remembered as a god into a mere mortal ancestor.⁶⁷

In searching for English Woden, some scholars have turned to external voices in Tacitus, Jonas of Bobbio (d. after 659), or Paul the Deacon (c.720-799). We have already addressed the inherent risk of interpreting Bede’s England through external writers and here we can note how Tacitus, Jonas, and Paul each equated the German Woden with Roman Mercury. This seems distant from Bede’s suggested presentation of Woden as heroic ancestor. Bede knew that the Romans had venerated Mercury as ‘giver of speech and language’ – something he mocked when drily insulting the eloquence but nonetheless foolishness of classical literature.⁶⁸ The Old English etymology of Woden, ‘leader or lord of the *wōd*’, or his supposed representation in finds from the material culture such as the Finglesham gilt-bronze buckle, would seem to support Bede’s impression of Woden as heroic ancestor, less the non-English connection of Woden with Mercury.⁶⁹ Indeed Bede, in contrast to Jonas, Paul, Martin of Braga and Gregory of Tours, never identified an English god with a Roman equivalent.⁷⁰ Bede included other English deities in the *Historia*, and, based on his report of those passages, it could be argued that he knew of at least a few more names than Eostre, Hretha, and Woden. This seems most true in relation to Northumbria’s pantheon. For instance, Bede seemed well-informed about the events surrounding the birth of Edwin’s daughter, Eanflæd, which prompted the king ‘in the presence of Bishop Paulinus, to give thanks to his gods’

⁶⁷ Patrick Wormald, ‘Bede, *Beowulf* and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy’, *The Times of Bede: Studies in Early English Christian Society and its Historian Patrick Wormald*, ed. Stephen Baxter (Oxford, 2006), pp.30-105, pp.66-68.

⁶⁸ *Exp.Actuum*, xiv.29-30, p.65 (p.126), cit. Acts 14:12a; *Salomonis*, III.xxvi.48-50, p.132, cit. Proverbs 26:8.

⁶⁹ D.H. Green, *Language and History in the Early Germanic World* (Cambridge, 1998; rpt. 2000), p.79-80; Charlotte Behr, ‘The origins of kingship in early medieval Kent’, *EME* 9:1 (2000), pp.25-52, pp.39ff; Sonia Chadwick Hawkes et al., *The Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Finglesham, Kent* (Oxford, 2006), p.80.

⁷⁰ Martin of Braga, *De correctione rusticorum*, ed. w/ Sp. trans. Clols, vii, pp.26-29; Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum*, II.29-31, pp.74-77 (pp.141-144) [em.cit.]. See Palmer, ‘Paganism in the Carolingian world’, p.405f; Hans-Werner Goetz, *Die Wahrnehmung anderer Religionen und christlich-abendländisches Selbstverständnis im frühen und hohen Mittelalter (5.-12. Jahrhundert)* (Berlin, 2013), pp.139-140.

(while Paulinus, Bede added, ‘began to thank the Lord Christ’).⁷¹ Edwin’s gods were presumably those whom Bede had Coifi renounce as ‘worthless’ and whose idols were ruined in the conflagration at old Goodmanham.⁷² Perhaps these nameless gods include those known from evidence from England other than Bede’s – in particular the Old English weekday names for Tiw (*tiwesdæg*, ‘Tuesday’), Woden (*wōdnesdæg*, ‘Wednesday’), and Thunor (*þursdæg*, ‘Thursday’), and place-name evidence for these and other English gods – but the point here is that Bede, keeping faith with his wider rubric, simply elected against naming England’s pantheon, save what seems to be two obscure goddesses in a textbook for clerics.⁷³

Dagon

Of all Bede’s strange gods, the principal Philistine deity, Dagon, was the most frequently named.⁷⁴ Bede mentioned Dagon fifteen times, all within the fifth chapter of his *In Samuhelem* where he considered Dagon’s role in 1 Samuel 5.⁷⁵ In 1 Samuel 4, Philistia had captured the ark of the Lord, the object which, in pre-temple Israel, signified God’s presence in Israel. Accordingly, 1 Samuel 5 begins with the Philistines placing the ark in Dagon’s temple at Azotus.⁷⁶ The next morning, Dagon’s statue was found prostrated before the ark.⁷⁷ The image was restored, but, the next morning, Dagon was once more found prostrate, this time with severed head and hands strewn on the temple threshold – his stump alone remaining in place. Outside the temple, a plague of haemorrhoids struck Azotus and the other

⁷¹ *HE*, II.9, pp.164-167.

⁷² *ibid.*, II.13, pp.182-187.

⁷³ Green, *Language and History*, pp.236-253, especially pp.249-251; Sarah Semple, ‘In the Open Air’, *Signals of Belief in Early England: Anglo-Saxon Paganism Revisited*, ed. Martin Carver et al. (Oxford, 2010), pp.21-48, pp.25-29.

⁷⁴ Judges 16:23; 1 Samuel 5:2-5, 7; 1 Chronicles 10:10, compare 1 Samuel 31:9-10; 1 Maccabees 10:84; 11:4; see also LXX Isaiah 46:1. The existence of other Philistine gods is implied in Judges 10:6.

⁷⁵ *Samuhel*, I.1453-1753, pp.46-53 (pp.167-173) [em.cit.].

⁷⁶ 1 Samuel 5:1-2.

⁷⁷ 1 Samuel 5:3.

coastal cities of Philistia, while mice infested the countryside. The Azotians sent the ark to inland cities, but these too suffer from haemorrhoids, leading the Philistine diviners to counsel restoring the ark to Israel.⁷⁸

In this dramatic encounter between ark and idol, in its setting of a pagan temple, Bede saw a miniature of the triumph of the true God over strange gods. As we shall see, Bede seems to have based much of his figural exegesis of Dagon on events known to him from England's conversion and the ongoing challenges of consolidating English faith. Dagon's temple became Gentile England; his statue, English gods; and the Azotian attendants, the *gens Anglorum*. The placing of the ark inside Dagon's temple symbolised the coming of Christ to England, which, as it had with Dagon, precipitated the collapse of England's gods.⁷⁹ In Dagon's restoration, Bede perceived those reversions in England that saw the return of idol worship. Dagon's second, more complete fall, reminded Bede of his own time, when there was in England a near-total cessation of idolatrous belief and observance. But, as a stump of Dagon's statue remained in situ, Bede's figural exegesis hinted at his present concern with the faith in England, including, it seems, his belief that there were some who had turned back in order to venerate the figural Dagon (that is, English gods) over the one true God.

The Dagon passage serves to underline Bede's brilliance as an exegete. The reader encounters several motifs collected from the Old and New Testament, such as the conspicuous pairing of material from the Book of Tobit with the strong man parable from Luke's Gospel. Truly, this shows the fulfilment of what Bede perceived in the floodgates in the bowels of the earth being broken to release living waters, Scripture interpreted Scripture, with Christ the Word revealed at the centre. Bede showed greater interest in Dagon's figural than literal meaning; nonetheless, he tethered his figural interpretation to the text of 1 Samuel 5. His pastoral intent

⁷⁸ 1 Samuel 5:4-12.

⁷⁹ For Christ as the ark, see *DeTab.*, I.320-494, pp.13-17 (pp.11-16) [em.cit.].

is evident in several incorporated lessons that concern Acca's role in overseeing the continued teaching that was critical to consolidating faith. The innovative nature of Bede's interpretation cannot be stressed enough. The vivid narrative in 1 Samuel 5 had naturally attracted its earlier commentators; however, outside a few minor examples, Bede constructed his own path in order to impart an English-centric interpretation of Dagon. The following overview of select earlier commentators reveals his imaginative reading and moreover helps situate his exegesis within the wider patristic context.

The first Christian writer to comment on Dagon was seemingly Lucifer, the bishop of Cagliari, c.353-370.⁸⁰ Exiled with other pro-Nicene bishops after the Council of Milan in 345, Lucifer produced several polemics against Emperor Constantius II.⁸¹ In one of these, *De Athanasio*, Lucifer reminded Constantius how the former emperors Maxentius, Nero, and other 'persecutors', had once believed in the error that 'the power of their gods' would subdue Christ and his Church. Lucifer cited several proofs in opposition to this error, one of which was God's punishment of Dagon and Philistia.⁸² Another commentator, Quodvultdeus, d.c.450, compared the ark bringing about Dagon's fall to Christ on the cross forcing the devil 'to be prostrated and defeated'.⁸³ Elsewhere, Quodvultdeus cited the Azotians' punishment as a warning to those who sought to keep God for themselves as the Azotians had possessed the ark.⁸⁴ For Augustine, those who welcomed Christ the ark into their hearts would see their inner Dagon 'fall down'.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Dagon is mentioned in Josephus' *Antiquitates* but the Jewish writer essentially repeated the report from 1 Samuel and the Books of Maccabees, see *Antiquitates*, VI.i.1.1, XIII.iv.4.91, XIII.iv.5.103 [em.cit.].

⁸¹ For Bede and the Arian persecution of pro-Nicene bishops, see *DTR*, lxvi.1430-1435, p.510 (pp.213-214), quot. Jerome, *Chronicon*, ls.16-4, pp.234-235, ls.1-4, p.236.

⁸² Lucifer of Cagliari, *Quia absentem nemo debet iudicare nec damnare sive De Athanasio*, CCSL 8, I.xii, pp.22-23 [em.cit.].

⁸³ Quodvultdeus, *De accedentibus ad gratiam*, CCSL 60, II.vi, pp.462-463.

⁸⁴ *idem*, *Liber promissionum et praedictorum Dei*, CCSL 60, II.xxiv.32-53, pp.118-119.

⁸⁵ Augustine, *Sermo LIII*, in *Sermones in Matthaem I*, CCSL 41Aa, vii.134-137, p.94 (trans. Hill, p.69), quot John 2:24.

Isidore of Seville produced the most extensive pre-Bede treatment of Dagon, and, in this case, Bede did indeed include or rework several of the bishop's points in his own exegesis. That Israel's high priest Eli, and all his line had perished when Philistia captured the ark served Isidore an image of the replacement of the priestly Levite tribe with the priesthood of all believers in the Church.⁸⁶ Bede sustained this reading; however, he underlined what Isidore had not. Ichabod, Eli's grandson, had survived, presaging what the prophets, Paul in Romans 9-11, and Bede elsewhere had stressed: a Jewish remnant would be gathered in with the Church at the end times.⁸⁷ Bede took further inspiration from Isidore's sense that the prostrate Dagon, his rump facing upward not from reverent adoration but compelled humiliation, and the haemorrhoids of the Philistines, appropriately punished the Philistine way of life, which Isidore and Bede compared to 'dung' (Philippians 3:8).⁸⁸ Significantly, where Isidore had read Dagon's fall as the total collapse of strange gods before Christ, Bede saw instead the initial humiliation of these demons, presaging their ruin and that of all idolatry in the end times.⁸⁹ For Dagon was restored, his stump remained, and although Philistia's priests recognised God's power over Dagon, the Philistines still sent the ark away. To Bede, this stood as a figure of a nation recusing itself from Christian faith. This interpretation better represented the literal text and complemented his wider intent to relate the Dagon exegesis to contemporary English problems, including, as this thesis argues, extant idolatrous belief and observance. Lastly, we can note that two English contemporaries – Aldhelm and Tatwine (later the Archbishop of Canterbury, r.731-734) – named Dagon, but neither seemed to influence Bede's exegesis.⁹⁰ We turn now to that text, considering its

⁸⁶ 1 Samuel 4:11-22; Isidore, *In Regum I*, in *Mysticorum expositiones sacramentorum seu Quaestiones in uetus Testamentum*, PL 83, col.391-410, iii.2-3, col.395BC [hereafter, *Reges I*].

⁸⁷ Isaiah 11; Zechariah 8:1-13; *Samuhel*, I.1438-1450, p.46 (p.166) [em.cit.].

⁸⁸ Isidore, *Reges I*, iii.6, col.395D-396A [em.cit.], compare *Samuhel*, I.1552-1560, p.48 (pp.170-171) [em.cit.].

⁸⁹ Isidore, *Reges I*, iii.4, col.395C, compare *Samuhel*, I.1509-1549, pp.47-48 (pp.169-170) [em.cit.].

⁹⁰ Aldhelm, *Carmen de uirginitate*, ed. Ehwald, ls.1352-1370, pp.409-410 (trans. Rosier, pp.132-133); Tatwine, *Ars grammatica*, CCSL 133, I.1107, p.35; *HE*, V.23, pp.558-559.

content under two headings that seem best placed to extrapolate Bede's meaning in this fascinating exegesis.

Bede's Dagon: water demons and the devil

Following Jerome, Bede interpreted the meaning of Dagon as *piscis tristitiae*, 'fish of sorrow', for, in Hebrew, *dag* meant 'fish', and *'ōn*, 'sorrow'.⁹¹ Next, Bede took note of Dagon's person and name, seeing in these a reflection of the devil and other water demons and monsters from Scripture.

Dagon ... not only by his person [*persona*] but also his name [*nomen*] signifies him who is the *author of all our miseries*, existing from the very beginning, who is called by the prophet *the king of all things in the waters*, about whom the Lord recounts many things to blessed Job, under the guise of Leviathan.⁹²

For Bede, Dagon signified Satan; the *piscis tristitiae* represented the essence of the *auctor nostrarum miseriarum*, 'author of our miseries'.⁹³ Alluding to the devil's existence 'from the very beginning', Bede reminded readers of the creation account in Genesis 1:3-31. In *In Genesim*, Bede stated his belief that the angels were made at the very beginning of Genesis 1:1, whereafter, Lucifer rebelled to become Satan.⁹⁴ Bede knew the earth had not at that stage been formed and he seems then to have conceived of Satan plunging through the heavens into the waters below.⁹⁵ Thus, Bede could label the former as 'king of all things in the water', which, from Bede's wider understanding of waters and idolatrous nations, can be understood

⁹¹ Samuhel, I.1478, p.47 (p.167), cit. Jerome, *Nom.Hebraica*, ls.7, p.99; J.F. Healey, 'Dagon', *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn et al. 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 1999), pp.216-219.

⁹² Samuhel, I.1478-1482, p.47 (pp.167-168).

⁹³ Bede's comparison of the *persona* and *nomen* of Aminadab and Christ offers a similar treatment, see *Cant.Canticorum*, IV.vi.583-600, p.314 (p.194) [em.cit.].

⁹⁴ *Genesis*, I.43-61, p.4 (p.69) [em.cit.]. Here, Bede differed from Augustine, who had bound the creation of angels and light together on day one, cf. *Genesis* 1:3; Augustine, *DCD*, XI.9, pp.328-330 (pp.9-10).

⁹⁵ *Genesis* 1:6-10; *Psalm* 23(24):1-2; *Proverbs* 8:27-29; *Job* 38:8-11; *Jeremiah* 5:22; Augustine, *Enarrat.Psalms*, CCSL 40, Ps.CIII, *Sermo* iv, 7.1-6, p.1526 (pp.172-173), 9.42-47, p.1529 (p.176).

as meaning the devil ruled over demons but also idolaters.⁹⁶ Bede's line 'king of all things in the water' has been interpreted as a reference to Psalm 73(74):13b, "you crushed the heads of the dragons in the water".⁹⁷ However, the reference appears to belong to LXX Job 41:25, "he is king of all things in the waters". This can be seen when comparing the word-for-word text; moreover, it is implied by Bede's naming of Leviathan, the monster that of course formed the literal subject of Job 41:25.⁹⁸ Jerome could have provided Bede his inspiration here; the former had explored the waters as evil with reference to Job LXX 41:25 in several commentaries and Bede had earlier quoted one of these passages in *Expositio Apocalypseos*.⁹⁹

Bede showed less interest in Job's Leviathan – the Dagon passage appears to be the sole explicit mention of Leviathan in Bede's corpus – than in the *piscis inmanis*, 'monstrous fish', which in the Book of Tobit was reported to have seized Tobit in the River Tigris.¹⁰⁰ Bede recalled this scene in his Dagon exegesis, explaining how Tobit, with help from the angel Raphael, had dragged this fish onto land, where he 'guts, roasts, eats, salts and carries him [the fish's flesh] as medicine and provision for the journey.'¹⁰¹ For Bede, Tobit symbolised Christ and the *piscis inmanis* the devil,

⁹⁶ Isaiah 17:12-13; 57:20-21; Revelation 17:1, 15; *Apocalypsis*, xxi.2-3, pp.399 (p.197), cit. Tyconius, *Expositio Apocalypseos*, CCSL 107A, IV.25.9-10, p.181. For Bede, the devil, and the sea, see *Apocalypsis*, xi.30-34, p.341 (pp.164-165) [em.cit.]; *Genesis*, I.41-61, p.4 (p.69), cit. Job 38:4, 7, Isaiah 14:12-13; I.146-156, p.7 (pp.72-73), quot. Basil [trans. Eustathius], *In Hexaemeron*, in *Eustathius, ancienne version latine des neuf homélies sur l'Hexaéméron de Basile de Césarée*, ed. De Mendieta and Rudberg, II.5, ls.7-12, p.25.

⁹⁷ Hurst, *In Samuhelem*, ls.1480, p.47; DeGregorio and Love, *Bede: On Samuel*, pp.167-168, n.357.

⁹⁸ Job 40:20-28; 41.

⁹⁹ In the passage in question, Jerome had quoted both LXX Job 41:25 and Psalm 73(74):13b within the same sentence. Bede followed this format, though his word order suggests that he felt David had authored only the second of these verses, Psalm 74[73]:13: 'Hence the dragon is called the *king of all that is in the waters* (LXX Job 41:25), and *his heads*, according to David, *are crushed in the sea* (Psalm 73(74):13b)', cf. *Apocalypsis*, xxi.4-6, pp.399, 401, (p.197), cit. Jerome, *Daniel*, II.vii.450-452, p.838 (p.72) [em.cit.]. Roger Gryson included both verses in the CCSL edition, but the English translation of Faith Wallis is missing LXX Job 41:25. Cf. Jerome, *Commentariorum in Hiezechielem libri XIV*, CCSL 75, IX.618-771, especially ls.667-669, pp.404-409 (trans. Scheck, pp.334-338) [hereafter, *Hiezechiel*]; *idem, Adversus Iovinianum*, PL 23 (1845), II.4, col.289BC.

¹⁰⁰ Tobit 6:1-3.

¹⁰¹ Tobit 6:4-9; *Samuhel*, I.1482-1485, p.47 (p.168).

... the Lord our Saviour, by divine power overcomes the devil, as he is seeking the food of his flesh, snatches him out of the lairs of his traps, cuts off the limbs of iniquity,¹⁰² and tosses them, steeped in the salt of wisdom and cooked on the fire of the Holy Spirit, in among the limbs of his *body, which is the Church*.¹⁰³

In Christ's snatching of the devil out from his *latebra*, Bede evoked the *ab immemorabili* struggle between fish and fisherman.¹⁰⁴ His noun *latebra* is more often identified as a metaphorical 'lair', or better, 'hiding-place', as Bede once preached in a sermon, 'the [faithful] seek out lairs [*latabrae*] within the depths of their heart'.¹⁰⁵ Yet in the Dagon passage, *latebra* instead recalls the physical lair of underwater denizens, perhaps owing its interpretation to Vergil's Scylla, who, as Bede knew from *Aeneid*, had seized sailors from ships passing too close by her *latebra* in the Straits of Messina.¹⁰⁶ Having hauled out his prize, Christ dismembered the devil's *membra iniquitatis*, 'limbs of iniquity'.¹⁰⁷ In *In Tobiam*, Bede explained how 'the devil is the head of all the wicked and they are all his body, his members'.¹⁰⁸ Thus, in the Dagon exegesis in *In Samuhelem*, Bede saw Christ's dismemberment of the fishlike devil as the separation of mortals attached to the body of the devil, in order that he might incorporate these mortals within his own body, the Church, something Bede imagined through the seasoning and cooking of a fish.¹⁰⁹ Bede explored the exact same transition in *In Tobiam*, where he noted how 'The part of the fish that they took with them represents those who were transferred from being the devil's members to Christ's,

¹⁰² Invoking the separation of Dagon's head and hands from his statue, cf. 1 Samuel 5:4; *Samuhel*, I.1509-1516, p.47 (p.169) [em.cit.].

¹⁰³ *Samuhel*, I.1485-1490, p.47 (p.168; *emend.*), cit. Colossians 1:24; compare *Tobias*, vi.37-49, 57-87, pp.9-10 (pp.65-67) [em.cit.].

¹⁰⁴ Job 40:20. Fishing was popular in the mid Anglian phase, with larger fish and marine cetaceans considered prized catches, see Rebecca Virginia Reynolds, 'Food for the Soul: The Dynamics of Fishing and Fish Consumption in Anglo-Saxon England: c. A.D. 410-1066' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Nottingham, 2015), pp.108-109, 181-182.

¹⁰⁵ *Homelia* ii.25, ls.198-203, p.373 (p.262).

¹⁰⁶ Vergil, *Aeneid*, LCL 63, III.424-428, pp.400-401, compare Bede, *Nomina regionum atque locorum de Actibus Apostolorum*, CCSL 121, ls.245-251, p.175, quot. Pliny, *NH*, LCL 352, III.viii.86-87, pp.64-65.

¹⁰⁷ *Samuhel*, I.1485-1487, p.47 (p.168).

¹⁰⁸ *Tobias*, vi.45-46, p.9 (p.66), compare *Samuhel*, III.1391-1395, p.169 (p.371), IV.1350-1353, p.244 (pp.480-481) [em.cit.]; see also Gregory, *Moralia in Iob*, IX.xxviii.44.23-25, p.487, XIII.xxxiv.38, p.689.

¹⁰⁹ Ephesians 1:22-23.

that is, those who were converted from unbelief to faith.’¹¹⁰ In a later chapter in *In Tobiam*, Bede reiterated this theme when explaining Tobit’s betrothal to Sara, a woman under possession from the demon Asmodeus, who had slain her previous suitors. When Tobit cooked the liver of the fish, Raphael bound Asmodeus in Egypt, the land of darkness, and thus permitted Sara and Tobit three-days of contemplative prayer before their marriage. Once the marriage was consummated, Sara became freed from possession.¹¹¹ In *In Tobiam*, Bede reimagined Sara’s period of prayer as the convert reciting the baptismal liturgy, with Raphael’s binding of Asmodeus prefiguring the catechumen’s renunciation. Sara’s consummation with Tobit signified the union of convert and Christ in baptism.¹¹² Bede provided a similar if much shortened interpretation in the Dagon exegesis in *In Samuhelem*, perhaps suggesting the former was produced after *In Tobiam*.

Bede’s introduction of the parable of the strong man from Luke’s Gospel into his Dagon exegesis complemented both the 1 Samuel and Tobit texts.¹¹³ Inserting its words under 1 Samuel 5:2, as the ark was placed beside Dagon in his temple, Bede quoted,

“When a strong man keeps his court, those things are in peace which he possesses; but if a stronger man than he should come upon him and overcome him, he will take away all his weapons in which he trusted and will distribute his spoils.”¹¹⁴

Christ had taught the strong man parable when countering the Pharisees’ accusation that he cast out demons by Beelzebub, that is, the devil, for how, Christ argued, could the devil drive

¹¹⁰ *Tobias*, vi.75-77, p.10 (p.67).

¹¹¹ Tobit 3:7-23, 7:10-20, 8.

¹¹² Ephesians 5:23; *Tobias*, viii.2-10, p.11 (pp.68-69).

¹¹³ Luke 11:21-22. For Bede’s earlier consideration of this passage, see *Lucas*, IV.117-135, p.234 (p.397) [em.cit.].

¹¹⁴ *Samuhel*, I.1470-1472, p.46 (p.167), quot. Luke 11:21-22; compare Matthew 12:29; Mark 3:27, *Ezra-Neemia*, II.1135-1146, p.316 (pp.122-123) [em.cit.]; *Marcus*, I.1517-1535, p.476 [em.cit.].

out himself?¹¹⁵ A strong man could only be overcome by a stronger man. Thus, Christ, the stronger man, overcame the devil and took for himself the latter's spoils, meaning mortals.¹¹⁶ Bede had hinted at the same parable later in Book Three of *In Samuhelem* when expounding David's triumph over Goliath (1 Samuel 17:40-51) – David was, to Bede, 'strong in hand', *manu fortem* – but in the Dagon passage, Bede plainly envisioned Christ the strong man in the figure of the ark.¹¹⁷

The crucial moment where Christ proved himself as the 'stronger man' was the crucifixion, where, having descended to the dead for three days, Christ rose again and ascended into heaven. For Bede, Christ had foretold this sequence when teaching of 'the sign of Jonah', a passage that followed the strong man parable passage in Luke's Gospel.¹¹⁸ The Book of Jonah is of course famous for its *piscis grandis*, 'great fish', a beast that Bede, when recalling this Old Testament narrative in his exegesis of the 'sign of Jonah' in *In Lucam*, classified as a whale [*cetus*] from 'the depths of hell.'¹¹⁹ In that same commentary, Bede reminded its recipient, Acca, how Jonah had been 'swallowed up' for three days and nights whereafter he was 'delivered from the abyss and the jaws of death'.¹²⁰ Jonah's 'sign' thus pointed to the period that Christ spent in the abyss before rising again.¹²¹ Returning to the Dagon exegesis, Jonah's *piscis grandis* seems implied together with fishlike Dagon, Leviathan, and Tobit's

¹¹⁵ Luke 11:15. In answer to this question, Bede quoted Jerome: 'the works of the Saviour cannot be compared to the works of Beelzebub. He wishes to hold the souls of men captive; the Lord, to free them. He preaches idols; the Lord, knowledge of the one God', *Lucas*, IV.139-142, p.234 (pp.397-398; *emend.*), quot. Jerome, *Matheus*, II.479-482, p.94 (p.144).

¹¹⁶ *Lucas*, IV.126-135, p.234 (p.397).

¹¹⁷ *Samuhel*, III.1019-1036, p.161 (p.358) [em.cit.], III.2365-2370, p.192 (pp.404), cit. Jerome, *Nom.Hebraica*, ls.11, p.103.

¹¹⁸ Luke 11:16, 29-32.

¹¹⁹ Jonah 2; *Lucas*, IV.270-273, pp.237-238 (p.402), cit. Jerome, *Esaias*, III.vii.10/11.35-37, p.101 (p.167); see, too, several relevant observations made by Elizabeth A. Alexander, 'The Sailors, the Sea Monster, and the Saviour: Depicting Jonah and the *Ketos* in Anglo-Saxon England', *Meanings of Water in Early Medieval England*, ed. Carolyn Twomey and Daniel Anlezark (Turnhout, 2021), pp.127-144, pp.136-140.

¹²⁰ *Lucas*, IV.271-273, pp.237-238 (p.402), cit. Jerome, *Esaias*, III.vii.10/11.35-37, p.101 (p.167). Bede replaced the verb from Jonah 2:1, *deglutire*, with *sorbere*, 'swallow', recalling his treatment of Charybdis in *De natura rerum*, see, *DNR*, I.10-12, p.233 (p.102) [em.cit.].

¹²¹ Matthew 12:40.

piscis inmanis. Christ, Bede impressed to Acca, had triumphed over all these water monsters and their master, the devil. Indeed, Bede seemed to imagine that Christ himself became, in rising from the abyss, one such monster of the deep in order to consume death and swallow up mortals into the Church. This recalls what Bede had written in *In Tobiam*, where, as Tobit approached the river where the fish lay in wait, Bede explained, ‘the enormous fish lay hidden in the Tigris since humanity’s invisible seducer had *power over death*’.¹²² Satan had waited for Christ at the crucifixion, intending to capture his opponent, but ‘the Lord grabbed the devil and through his own dying took and vanquished the very one that had wanted to take him in death.’¹²³ Thus, as the stronger man overcame the strong man, Bede seems to have envisioned, the greater monster overcame the lesser monster. Here, Bede could have taken inspiration from 1 Peter 3:21-22, “[Christ] swallowed up death”, and 1 Corinthians 15:54, “Death is absorbed in victory”.¹²⁴ We encounter the same sense in Bede’s hymn for the Ascension, ‘For he led many in spirit back from the gates of hell, and with his own body he snatched many from the jaws of death.’¹²⁵

Bede’s Dagon: England’s conversion and Christian consolidation

Integral to Bede’s Dagon passage was his lesson that Christ and through him the Church overcame the waters and its terrors, and perhaps then Bede saw Dagon, Leviathan and their monstrous company as figures for English water demons. Increasingly, scholars have proposed connections between English paganism and water bodies in Britain; however, while episodes involving monsters and fens in *Beowulf* are intriguing, the only clear evidence from

¹²² Hebrews 2:14c.

¹²³ *Tobias*, vi.18-28, 37-38, pp.8-9 (p.65), cit. Tobit 6:3.

¹²⁴ *Epist. Catholicae*, 1Pt.iii.270-280, pp.250-251 (p.106) [em.cit.].

¹²⁵ *Lib.Hymnorum*, III.7, pp.364-365.

pre-Viking England lies in riverine burials and deposits.¹²⁶ Some scholars have seen the report that the Roman missionaries baptised in English watercourses as a conscious response to the veneration of these environments, but this is a rather fragile footing.¹²⁷ From Philip's baptism of the Ethiopian official to Paulinus wetting his feet in the River Swale near Catterick, watercourses had been the expedient choice for baptisms where no ecclesiastical infrastructure offered itself to officiants.¹²⁸ A case could be made for river baptisms that were performed near royal villas that had an attached idol place. The River Glen (Yeavinger) and, if it were used, River Deben (Rendlesham) might then have been selected for this reason, but Bede has nothing further to contribute here.¹²⁹

There remains some sense that Bede saw Christ and his Church overcoming demons associated with water in England. Consider, for instance, what Bede said about how Cedd (d.664) chose Lastingham in the Yorkshire Moors as a site for his minster.

Cedd chose himself a site for the monastery amid some steep and remote hills which seemed better fitted for the haunts of robbers and the dens of wild beasts than for human habitation; so that, as Isaiah says, *Then the habitations where once dragons lay, shall be grass with reeds and rushes*, that is, the fruit of good works shall spring up where once beasts dwelt or where men lived after the manner of beasts.¹³⁰

¹²⁶ *Beowulf*, ed. Klaeber, i.86-ii.163, pp.6-8 (trans. Liuzza, pp.58-65), viii.529-581, pp.20-22 (pp.86-89), xix.1258-1261, p.44 (pp.130-131), xix.1292-1295, p.45 (pp.132-133), xx.1345-1376, pp.47-48 (pp.134-137), xxi.1425-1441, pp.49-50 (pp.140-141), xxii.1492-xxiii.1643, pp.51-56 (pp.144-153). Cf. Della Hooke, 'Rivers, Wells and Springs in Anglo-Saxon England: Water in Sacred and Mystical Contexts', *Water and the Environment in the Anglo-Saxon World*, ed. Maren Clegg Hyer and Della Hooke (Liverpool, 2017), pp.107-135, pp.108-113; compare Julie Lund, 'At the Water's Edge', *Signals of Belief*, pp.49-66, especially pp.53-55; Kelley M. Wickham-Crowley, 'Living on the *Ecg*: The Mutable Boundaries of Land and Water in Anglo-Saxon Contexts', *A Place to Believe In*, pp.85-110, p.91f; and two chapters in *Meanings of Water in Early Medieval England*: Della Hooke, 'The Sacred Nature of Rivers, Wells, Springs, and Other Wetlands in Anglo-Saxon England', pp.33-57; and Carolyn Twomey, 'Rivers and Rituals: Baptism in the Early English Landscape', pp.59-84.

¹²⁷ *HE*, II.14, pp.188-189; II.16, pp.192-193; Twomey, 'Rivers and Rituals', pp.65-67, 76-77; compare Foot, 'Water in the spirit', pp.180-183.

¹²⁸ As the Ethiopian exclaimed to Philip on the road through Gaza to Egypt, "See, here is water, what should prevent me from being baptised?", Acts 8:36, compare *Exp.Actuum*, xiii.114-125, p.43 (pp.84-85) [em.cit.].

¹²⁹ *HE*, II.14, pp.188-189, III.22, pp.284-285.

¹³⁰ *ibid.*, III.23, pp.286-287, quot. Isaiah 35:7b, compare Gregory, *Moralia in Iob*, XXIX.xxvi.54-65, p.1470. Note, too, Bede's figure of Satan searching for wicked persons in which to rest as Leviathan seeking marshy

According to Bede, Cedd wished to ‘cleanse the site ... from the stain of former crimes by prayer and fasting’.¹³¹ By citing Mark 9:28, Christ’s lesson that some demons could be exorcised only by “prayer and fasting”, Bede implied that a notorious set of spirits had inhabited Lastingham. The site could even have been selected for its existing relationship to a local cult – the stronger man, as it were, entering the strong man’s domain. Importantly, this struggle between saint and spirits in a watery environ has no Scriptural precursor (as opposed to other Bedan miracles involving water in England), but might be seen in light of the hagiographic tradition where saints withdraw into the wilderness to confront demons.¹³² Still, Lastingham bears a less obvious relationship to that tradition than other English saints’ lives, notably Felix’s treatment of Guthlac’s mound at Crowland in the Lincolnshire fens.¹³³ As Sarah Semple has observed of Crowland’s setting, the physical environment of water in these narratives remains peculiar to an English context.¹³⁴ Cuthbert’s victory over *phantasias demonum* (against which others could not prevail) is placed in a similar setting, reportedly occurring on the island of Inner Farne located several miles off the Northumberland coast.¹³⁵ Elsewhere, in reporting Wilfrid’s conversion of the South Saxons, Bede noted the pitiful scenario where famine-stricken pagan men drowned themselves in the sea.¹³⁶ The purpose of this sacrifice could have been propitiation of spirits associated with the sea. Supporting this

lairs, “*He sleeps under the shadow, in the covert of the reed, and in moist places*”, *Lucas*, IV.151-164, pp.234-235 (p.398), cit. Luke 11:24, quot. Job 40:16.

¹³¹ *HE*, III.23, pp.286-287, compare *Marcus*, III.342-344, p.550.

¹³² See, by way of comparison, the miracles involving Aidan and Oethelwald, *HE*, III.15, pp.260-261, V.1, pp.454-457.

¹³³ Felix, *Vita Sancti Guthlaci*, ed. and trans. Colgrave, xxiv-xxviii, pp.86-95 [hereafter, *VG*], compare Athanasius of Alexander [Latin trans. Evagrius], *Vita beati Antonii abbatis*, CCSL 170, par.8-13, 51-53, pp.13-20, 56-59 [hereafter, *Vita Antonii*]. For discussion, see Audrey L. Meaney, ‘Felix’s Life of St Guthlac: Hagiography and/or Truth’, *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society* XC (for 2001), pp.29-48, pp.29-30, 33-36; *idem*, Felix’s Life of Guthlac: History or Hagiography?, *Æthelbald and Offa: Two Eighth-Century Kings of Mercia*, ed. David Hill and Margaret Worthington (Oxford, 2016), pp.75-84, pp.78-80.

¹³⁴ Sarah Semple, *Perceptions of the Prehistoric in Anglo-Saxon England: Religion, Ritual, and Rulership in the Landscape* (Oxford, 2013), pp.149-151.

¹³⁵ *VSC*, xvii, pp.214-217, compare *Vita Sancti Cuthberti auctore anonymo*, ed. and trans. Colgrave, III.i, pp.96-97.

¹³⁶ *HE*, IV.13, pp.372-375. For Bede, drowning demons, and possible English connections, see Peter Dendle, ‘Demons of the Water: Anglo-Saxon Responses to the Gerasene Demoniac’, *The Maritime World of the Anglo-Saxons*, ed. Stacy S. Klein et al. (Tempe, AZ, 2014), pp.187-207, p.195f.

proposal lies Bede's claim that Wilfrid won over the South Saxons by providing what their gods could not: rain and fish, thereby demonstrating the true God's power over strange gods and perhaps hinting at the nature of the Sussex deities.¹³⁷

On balance, Bede's evidence of English water veneration remains a poorer cousin than those belonging to a Merovingian or Pictish context.¹³⁸ Nevertheless, we can propose that Bede had English gods in mind when writing the Dagon passage, albeit not necessarily those associated with water. To explore this sense, we must first read Bede's summary of his interpretation of 1 Samuel 5.

This passage [1 Samuel 5] mystically implies that once the uncircumcised receive the covenant of faith [*fidei testamentum*], first the idols [*simulacra*] are to be abased and without delay utterly destroyed, also those who turn back after receiving the faith are to receive the punishment they justly deserve.¹³⁹

Here, Bede revealed his intent to interpret the events of 1 Samuel as a figure of a recently converted people. The Philistines became figural converts who had received the ark, a figure of Christ, but later sent it away from reluctance to cast out the fullness of their idolatrous belief and observance. Bede appears to have seen the Philistines as presenting a type for all Gentile peoples but in particular the English. We shall explore that proposition through the three ideas that Bede seemed to introduce in his summary: uncircumcised English; convert English; and reverted English.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ *HE*, IV.13, pp.372-377. See also Stephen's claim that the local inhabitants believed the sea's provision was 'their own possession', *VW*, xiii, pp.26-29.

¹³⁸ Gregory of Tours, *Historia Francorum*, II.10, ls.10-3, pp.58-59 (p.125); Fredegar, *Chronicon*, ed. Krusch, III.9, ls.6-10, p.95; Adomnán, *Vita Sancti Columbae*, ed. Anderson and Ogilvie, II.11, pp.108-111, II.27, pp.132-135.

¹³⁹ *Samuhel*, I.1455-1458, p.46 (p.167).

¹⁴⁰ For a different interpretation, see Wood, 'Who are the Philistines?', pp.172-187.

(i) Uncircumcised English

Bede's term *praeputium*, meaning 'foreskin' but understood here collectively as 'the state of not being circumcised', might seem a curious word from which to infer the English, but it simply meant all Gentiles who had not been circumcised, i.e., the Philistines, or, in the language of the New Testament, baptised. As Bede noted in his homily for the octave of Christmas,

For the one [Christ] who now cries out in a terrible but saving way through his evangelist, *Unless a man shall be reborn of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*, is the one who previously cried out through his law, *A male, the flesh of whose foreskin is uncircumcised, that soul shall vanish from his people because he has made my pact null and void*.¹⁴¹

Making his first comment after the summary, Bede indicated that by 'uncircumcised' he meant Gentile peoples in the Christian era, the figural but not the literal Philistines from the Old Testament.

The Gentiles received the word of the Gospel from Judaea ... and carried it with blessed reputation into the world's far-flung provinces [*exterarum prouincias mundi*] which, until that point seething with flames of vices [*uitiorum flamma feruentes*] were then released from the enticements of the flesh.¹⁴²

The carrying of the Gospel into 'the world's far-flung provinces' offers the first clue that Bede had the English in mind in this passage. In the Introduction, we mentioned how Bede saw England and Britain as one such 'far-flung province', and now we can extract more of the idolatrous connotation embedded within this notion.¹⁴³ It was Gregory the Great, so Bede

¹⁴¹ *Homelia* i.11, ls.48-53, p.74 (p.105), quot. John 3:5, Genesis 17:14; compare *ibid.* ii.3, ls.51-58, pp.201-202 (p.25), cit. John 3:16.

¹⁴² *Samuhel*, I.1460-1461, 1463-1465, p.46 (p.167).

¹⁴³ See 'Introduction', p.8.

claimed, who had ‘made our nation, till then enslaved to idols [*idola*], into a Church of Christ’.¹⁴⁴ Writing to Eulogius, Bishop of Alexandria, Gregory had observed of the English how they ‘live in a corner of the world, [and] still remained faithless in their worship of trees and rocks’.¹⁴⁵ Whether Bede knew these words or not, he still stressed in his exegesis in *In Samuhelem* the wickedness of the Gentiles in their ‘far-flung provinces’, where ‘the flames of vices’ prevailed, citing, too, the image from 1 John 5:19b of ‘a world seated in wickedness’.¹⁴⁶ Pre-Christian England was for Bede a place ‘seated in wickedness’, indeed, the shadows that enveloped idolatrous kingdoms is a point that he stressed in the *Historia*, which would seem to support the argument that Bede in the Dagon passage was contemplating the event of England’s conversion.¹⁴⁷

(ii) Convert English

The wickedness of pre-Christian England was the result of Satan the strong man’s imprisonment of its people, which, as Bede pointed out in the Dagon exegesis, required the liberation that could only be effected through a stronger man. Bede explained this point with reference to Dagon, and, it is suggested, other gods, including English deities.

Dagon was strong when he kept the foolish weapons of the Gentile world in his court. Stronger is the ark of faith which, having vanquished him, took away the spoils of ungodliness and has made these into the weapons and spoils of godliness.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ *HE*, II.1, pp.122-123.

¹⁴⁵ Gregory, *Registrum*, VIII.xxix.22-23, p.551 (p.524).

¹⁴⁶ *Samuhel*, I.1463-1465, 1468-1469, p.46 (p.167). Commenting of this verse in his *Epistolae Catholicae*, Bede explained how it signified non-Christians or lapsed believers, *Epist.Catholicae*, 1Io.v.306-310, p.327 (p.226).

¹⁴⁷ *HE*, II.10, pp.170-171, II.15, 190-191, III.9, pp.240-241.

¹⁴⁸ *Samuhel*, I.1473-1475, p.46 (p.167).

Were we to paraphrase this comment to invoke the coming of the Roman missionaries to England, we might write: The English gods were strong when they kept the foolish weapons of the Gentile world in their court. Stronger is Christ who, having vanquished the English gods, took away their spoils of ungodliness and has made the English into the weapons and spoils of godliness.¹⁴⁹

Julia Barrow has demonstrated Bede's incorporation of the strong man parable into his historical narrative of the victory won by the Northumbrian king Oswald over his Briton counterpart Cædwalla at the battle of Deniseburn in 634.¹⁵⁰ This triumph brought with it the consolidation of Christian rule in Northumbria, which had formerly been lost in the reign of the apostates Osric and Eanfrith, whose price for their faithlessness was to perish at the hand of the same Cædwalla, contrasting with Oswald, who, as one of Christ's stronger men, overcame his opponent.¹⁵¹ Barrow's observations relate to the wider theme in Bede's *Historia* and the Dagon passage: Christ the stronger man had seized the spoils of England, meaning its people, the *membra iniquitatis*, when he had humiliated the English gods. Oswald presents a rare secular example of these stronger men, for Bede normally related this image with reference to Christian ministers: 'Destroying through his preachers the worship of gods in whom they [the Gentiles] had trusted, ignorant of the truth, he taught that these should trust in the faith of heavenly beings who could never be destroyed.'¹⁵² In the anonymous *Vita*

¹⁴⁹ Bede's impression of Woden as powerful ancestor seems particularly relevant to the strong man parable.

¹⁵⁰ *HE*, III.1-2, pp.212-217, cit. with comment in Julia Barrow, 'Oswald and the Strong Man Armed', *The Land of the English Kin: Studies in Wessex and Anglo-Saxon England in Honour of Professor Barbara Yorke*, ed. Alexander Langlands and Ryan Lavelle (Leiden, 2020), pp.183-196, p.187ff.

¹⁵¹ *HE*, III.1, pp.212-215; Barrow, 'Oswald and the Strong Man Armed', pp.188-189.

¹⁵² *Salomonis*, II.xxi.87-93, p.110, cit. Proverbs 21:22, quot. Psalm 113(115):12b(4b) [=Ps.134(135):15b], cit. 1 Corinthians 1:24b. This passage closely resembles another commentary on Proverbs once believed to have been composed by Salonius (Bishop of Geneva, fl.c.450), but now thought to be the work of a much later author who borrowed heavily from Bede's *In prouerbia Salomonis*. Cf. ps.Salonius, *Commentarius in parabolas Salomonis*, ed. Curti, ls.771-775, 778-783, p.52 [em.cit.], and Carmel Curti's defence of the Salonius attribution in the same edition, *praef.*, pp.9-21, 24-44; Jean-Pierre Weiss, 'Essai de datation du *Commentaire sur les Proverbes* attribué abusivement à Salonius', *Sacris Erudiri* 19 (1969), pp.77-114; Valerie I.J. Flint, 'The True Author of the *Salonii Commentarii in Parabolas Salomonis et in Ecclesiasten*', *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 37 (1970), pp.174-186.

Gregorii, written in early eighth-century Northumbria, Gregory the Great is praised as the apostle to England who ‘bravely entered the house of the strong man whom Christ had bound, taking as spoils those goods, that is, ourselves [the English], who were *sometimes in darkness but now are light in the Lord*.’¹⁵³ In the *Historia*, Bede’s biography of Gregory the Great similarly celebrated the pope, echoing, too, the teaching from the Dagon exegesis as to how Christ (and through him, holy teachers) had snatched the devil and other water demons in order to release mortals in their thrall and incorporate these within the Church.

To his works of piety and justice this also belongs, that he snatched our race from the teeth of the ancient foe and made them partakers of everlasting freedom by sending us preachers. Rejoicing in their faith and commending them with worthy praise he says in his commentary on the blessed Job: ‘Lo, the mouth of Britain, which once only knew how to gnash its barbarous teeth, has long since learned to sing the praises of God with the alleluia of the Hebrews. See how the proud Ocean has become a servant, lying low now before the feet of the saints, and those barbarous motions, which earthly princes could not subdue with a sword, are now, through the fear of God, repressed with a simple word from the lips of priests; and he who, as an unbeliever, did not flinch before troops of warriors, now, as a believer, fears the words of the humble. For having received the heavenly Word and being enlightened by miracles as well, he is filled with the grace and the knowledge of God. He is restrained by the fear of God so that he dreads to do evil and with all his heart he longs to attain to everlasting grace.’¹⁵⁴

The verbal parallels and shared theme between the above extract and the Dagon passage seem pronounced. English idolatry was the metaphorical ocean that surrounded Britain, while the ‘teeth of the ancient foe’ recalls Dagon, Leviathan, and other water terrors, these one and the same as the devil and his demonic servants in England. Indeed, a little earlier in Gregory’s biography, Bede had quoted Job 29:17, “I broke the jaws of the wicked and plucked the spoil out of his teeth”, echoing the emphasis on Christ plucking captives from the jaws of death.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Anonymous, *Vita Gregorii*, ed. and trans. Colgrave, vi, pp.82-83 [em.cit.].

¹⁵⁴ Gregory, *Moralia in Iob*, XXVII.xi.68-80, p.1346, quot. in *HE*, II.1, pp.130-131; Diarmuid Scully, ““Proud Ocean has become a Servant”: A Classical Topos in the Literature of Britain’s Conquest and Conversion”, *Listen, O Isles, unto me: Studies in Medieval Word and Image in Honour of Jennifer O’Reilly*, ed. Elizabeth Mullins and Diarmuid Scully (Cork, 2011), pp.3-15.

¹⁵⁵ *HE*, II.1, pp.130-131.

Reading on in Bede's *Historia*, we encounter further parallels with the Dagon passage in the signs that helped establish England's conversion.

Historia

In these words St. Gregory also declares that St. Augustine and his companions led the English race to the knowledge of the truth, not only by preaching the Word but also by showing *caelestia signa* [heavenly signs].¹⁵⁶

In Samuhelem

As signs of miracles shone forth through the *fidei praecones* [heralds of the faith], the *idolatriae cultus* [worship of idolatry] falls in ruin, in those who have been able to be converted to Christ ... As the light of *caelestia signa* [heavenly signs] kept increasing bit by bit, and the face of idolatry was destroyed before the faithful of Christ, they confessed whatever they had thus far done or believed in that was earthly in every regard and destined to perish.¹⁵⁷

The critical role of miracles to England's conversion is well-known in Bede's *Historia*, with various signs performed, in another verbal parallel to the Dagon exegesis, by *praecones*, 'heralds'.¹⁵⁸ In Kent, Augustine and his missionaries had confirmed the truth of their preaching by 'performing many miracles'.¹⁵⁹ One such sign involved the conversion of Eadbald, Æthelberht's pagan successor, who became convinced of Christ on learning of the scourging of Archbishop Laurence and promptly banned 'all worship of idolatry [*idolatriae cultus*]' – the same expression found in the Dagon exegesis.¹⁶⁰ Here, we can mention in passing the interest that Bede's biography of Gregory in the *Historia* has to offer the wider treatment of strange gods and idolatry in *In Samuhelem*, such as the 'Christ strangles the strange gods' passage studied above.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁶ *HE*, II.1, pp.130-131.

¹⁵⁷ *Samuhel*, I.1498-1500, 1504-1507, p.47 (p.168).

¹⁵⁸ *HE*, I.22, pp.68-69; William D. McCready, *Miracles and the Venerable Bede* (Toronto, 1994), pp.112-116.

¹⁵⁹ *HE*, I.26, pp.76-77, I.31, pp.108-111, II.2, pp.134-137.

¹⁶⁰ *ibid.*, II.5-6, pp.150-155.

¹⁶¹ See 'Introduction', pp.16-21.

(iii) Reverted English

In Bede's summary, he underlined the imperative for convert societies to make irreversible ruin of their idols, and, it follows, cease all idolatrous belief and observance. He reiterated this point when indicating the need for converts to 'cut off' the 'profession of ungodliness ... the rituals of praises and sacrifices', praising the example of those who 'preferred to remain humble and submissive, as if next to the ark of God, among those who had been predecessors in the faith', i.e., faithful Christians standing in the inheritance of faithful Israelites.¹⁶²

Emphatic in Bede's summary is the necessary punishment of those who 'turn back', *retro convertere*, that is, renounce Christ and restore idol worship.¹⁶³ As Bede indicated under 1 Samuel 5:6, where God punished not only Azotus but its hinterland, idol worship embraced all examples of idolatry: God had forbidden 'capital crimes in which the devil's overt work is clearly seen, but also all the small ones'.¹⁶⁴ Considering Bede's wider treatment of idolaters, we might interpret his comment here as confirmation that he saw muttering a superstitious charm as spiritually equivalent to sacrificing at idol places, recalling his sense of idolaters as 'those who offer to idols vows, prayers, and sacrifices, which ought to have been owed to the one God'.¹⁶⁵

The Dagon passage seems to relate the theme of reversion or wilful intent to continue worshipping idols besides Christ to the spiritual landscape as Bede saw it in England. Under 1 Samuel 5:2b, Bede wrote, 'And they erected churches of Christ among the Gentiles, but the worship of idols still remained in some places.'¹⁶⁶ Churches had been erected throughout

¹⁶² *Samuhel*, I.1509-1520, pp.47-48 (p.169) [em.cit.].

¹⁶³ *ibid.*, I.1457-1458, p.46 (p.167; *emend.*), possibly reversing the sense of Psalm 43(44):19a [*Ps.Hebraicum*].

¹⁶⁴ *Samuhel*, I.1562-1567, pp.48-49 (p.171).

¹⁶⁵ See 'Introduction', p.16.

¹⁶⁶ *Samuhel*, I.1476-1478, pp.46-47 (p.167).

seventh-century England but as Bede reported idol worship had continued and was further restored in those kingdoms that reverted from Christianity to paganism. Bede's treatment of Dagon's restoration seems to hint further at the struggle of some in England who wished to preserve or restore part or all of their former idolatrous belief and observance.¹⁶⁷ Here, we can shift our consideration to eighth-century England, a place that might be construed from Bede's criticism of those who turned back from faith in the figure of the Azotians who wished the ark sent elsewhere in Philistia and then removed altogether. The suffering of Azotus symbolised to Bede the weeping of Christian converts who, while 'imbued with knowledge of the faith and even its mysteries' (that is, having been baptised), nevertheless,

...do not permit idols [*idola*] to be destroyed or vices forbidden to them, because they are looking backwards, not abandoning the foulness of their former life, and going back to the things they left 'behind' them which they ought, with the Apostle, to have forgotten and reckoned as but dung.¹⁶⁸

Later, under 1 Samuel 5:7, where the Azotians call for the ark's removal, Bede made a series of remarks that he may have thought reflected the present mood in England.

Seeing the power of Christ against their deities, the lovers of idolatry [*idolatriae dilectores*] refuse to accept his faith, lest on account of this faith alone they are forced to renounce the whole crowd of their deities. When false Christians [*falsi christiani*] see that the sins which they love are forbidden them on account of belief in Christ, they loathe that same faith as much as they can, lest by reason of this faith they be ordered for God's sake to quench the desires to which they are enslaved.¹⁶⁹

These 'false Christians' had their figure in the Azotians, being those 'who refuse to know the commands of sacred Scripture' in case they be compelled to practise its lessons (that is, cast

¹⁶⁷ *Samuhel*, I.1500-1502, p.47 (p.167).

¹⁶⁸ *ibid.*, ls.1552-1558, p.48 (p.170), cit. Philippians 3:8; compare Isidore, *Reges I*, iii.6, col.395D-396A [em.cit.]; *HE*, III.1, pp.212-213. Bede's subsequent explanation of the punishment that awaited these appears to have its inspiration in Augustine's treatment of Psalm 77(78):66, *Samuhel*, I.1558-1560, p.48 (pp.170-171), compare Augustine, *Enarrat.Psalms*, CCSL 39, Ps.LXXVII.40, pp.1093-1094 (pp.119-120) [em.cit.].

¹⁶⁹ *Samuhel*, I.1572-1578, p.49 (p.171).

off idolatrous belief and observance), and preferring to settle for the lesser punishment that Christ had prescribed for those who never knew him compared to those who had known him.¹⁷⁰ Drawing on Gregory's explanation of such individuals, Bede explained how 'there is a great distinction between simply not knowing and not wanting to know that you have learned you should know', that is, there were some who never knew Christ and others who, having learned of Christ, wished to forget him.¹⁷¹ Bede's subsequent comment under 1 Samuel 5:8, where the Philistines in Gath wish the ark to be carried about and not kept within their city, suggests further that he had in mind a contemporary convert people.

And this carrying about of the ark corresponds to the period of the present age, where every idle person wants the harsh words of the Lord to be fulfilled by someone else rather than by themselves. But also barbarian nations [*barbarae nationes*] – a fact which is distressing enough if they are those which have recently received the faith of Christ – soon weakened by indulgent laziness, reckon that this faith should be passed on to others more than it ought be practised any longer by them.¹⁷²

In order to grasp Bede's intended meaning, this comment needs to be read besides his later observation under 1 Samuel 5:11, where the Philistine lords declared their verdict, "Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it return to its own place, that it may not kill us and our people."

Many Gentile believers today say these things in their deeds, though not in their words: 'Send away this faith, and let it be returned to the children of Israel, so that we can be cut out and they who are the natural branches may be grafted into their own olive tree. For it is better for us to perish in ignorance than to be damned, along with our other sins, by failure to do our duty for a faith which we are not even able to keep.'¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ *Samuhel*, I.1578-1583, p.49 (p.171), cit. Luke 12:48.

¹⁷¹ *ibid.*, ls.1583-1585; compare Gregory, *Moralia in Iob*, XV.xlv-xlvi, pp.779-781, cit. Job 21:14-15; Luke 12:45-48; see also the saying of Ambrose, *Nemo enim nisi id quod acceperit obliuisci potest*, 'For none can forget except that which they have received', Ambrose, *Expositio Psalmi CXVIII*, CSEL 62, XVIII.xviii.1.27-28, p.405.

¹⁷² *Samuhel*, I.1588-1594, p.49 (pp.171-172).

¹⁷³ *ibid.*, I.1609-1615, p.50 (p.173), cit. Romans 11:24.

The expression *barbarae nationes* can refer to the pre-Christian English, while, of course, Bede knew as he wrote *In Samuhelem* that the faith had been carried from England to the pagan tribes in Germany.¹⁷⁴ Part of Bede's frustration might correspond to his wider criticism of English sloth (note the particular mention of 'idle persons' and 'indulgent laziness').¹⁷⁵ A more pronounced worry about faithlessness seems embedded in this and other sections of the Dagon passage.¹⁷⁶ The emphasis on those who turn back can be read as a comment on 'false Christians' in England, that is, those whom Bede felt had betrayed their Christian faith. Other passages where Bede mentioned *falsi Christiani* show that the term can embrace idolaters, and it is this interpretation that seems relevant to our present discussion.¹⁷⁷ In accusing figural Philistines of rejecting the true God, Bede seemed to be criticising certain English with turning back from Christ out of love for their former religion.¹⁷⁸ Thus, while Christ had humiliated the English gods, the faithlessness of some had seen idolatrous belief endure into the eighth century. Bede's response highlighted the need for Acca and other teachers to punish those who had turned back from Christ and snatch these souls from the devil in order to incorporate, or, more likely, reincorporate these into the Church.

Conclusion

Bede's treatment of strange gods reveals his personal faith in the power of his own God, 'the one true God', and, at the same time, his conviction that all other gods were powerless and thus worthless. In line with patristic tradition, Bede blended the teaching of Scripture that strange gods were 'demons' with the classical philosophy of euhemerism. Thus, Bede's

¹⁷⁴ DeGregorio and Love, *Bede: On Samuel*, p.172, n.376.

¹⁷⁵ *Samuhel*, I.1588-1594, p.49 (pp.171-172).

¹⁷⁶ *ibid.*, I.1588-1594, p.49 (pp.171-172).

¹⁷⁷ *Apocalypsis*, xiv.62-69, p.359 (p.175) [em.cit.]; *Samuhel*, II.2745-2754, p.133 (p.313), IV.170-190, p.216 (pp.439-440) [em.cit.]; *Marcus*, IV.1103-1107, p.623, cit. Mark 14:65.

¹⁷⁸ *Samuhel*, I.1500-1502, 1552-1558, 1572-1578, pp.47-49 (pp.168, 170-171).

strange gods were demons who masqueraded as renowned individuals such as Greek Io or English Woden in order to trick mortals into their worship. Bede agreed with the explanation that ‘Each nation made its own god’, extending this to illustrate the countless cults among the Gentiles. Outside a few exceptions, Bede preferred not to name specific gods, his rule apparently influenced both by the Old Testament and his anxieties as a cleric conscious of residual idolatry in a recently-converted society.

Certainly, Bede had more to report of English gods than was previously thought. He knew the existence of several deities, in addition, that is, to Hretha and Eostre. A parallel reading of Bede’s account of the first gods in *Chronica maior* with his genealogy of Woden in the *Historia* suggests that Bede understood that Woden was once venerated as principal god of the English and remained beloved among the nation’s kings. Bede’s endeavour in relation to England’s strange gods was to consign their names and cult to the past, as shown in his closing prayer to the *De mensibus Anglorum* chapter in *De temporum ratione*,

Good Jesu, thanks be to thee, who has turned us away from these vanities and given us [grace] to offer to thee the sacrifice of praise.¹⁷⁹

In his exegesis of the Philistine god Dagon, Bede taught how the latter and other water monsters in Scripture signified the person and nature of the devil. He explored several Scriptural themes within the Dagon exegesis; however, most of his treatment of that passage concerned his reading of the encounter between ark and Dagon as a figure for Christ’s triumph over strange gods. In this exegesis, Bede seemed to have the historical conversion and ongoing Christianisation of his people in mind. While Dagon, like his master, the devil, was a monster of the waters, Bede’s exegesis offers little support to the view that English

¹⁷⁹ *DTR*, xv.50-52, p.332 (p.54; *emend.*).

paganism venerated water and water demons. Instead, Bede explored the conversion and consolidation of faith in England, considering the uncircumcised English, the convert English, and the reverted English. Therein we find his anxieties with strange gods and in particular those demonic deities in England. For, as the stump of Dagon remained, humiliated, but extant, Bede apparently reckoned that an idolatrous remnant endured in England. More than two decades before he wrote the *Historia*, Bede seems to have been contemplating the events of the English conversion and the contemporary, ongoing consolidation of the faith that was required to restore to the Church those who had become captive to the devil. This presents one example where Bede's exegesis informs a more transparent perspective of English religion than is possible in the *Historia*, informing a more complex spiritual landscape than once thought. For the Gentile people in the Dagon passage that Bede saw as a figure of the Philistines (proposed here as the English) had indeed been converted to Christ. Nonetheless, they had chosen not to rid themselves of all idolatrous belief and observance.

Chapter Two: Idol places

For someone who had surely never seen an active pagan temple or shrine, Bede showed a remarkably keen interest in the treatment of such sites that he sometimes termed *loca idolorum*, ‘idol places’.¹ On several occasions, Bede expressed his view that idol places should face immediate and total ruin on the conversion of a pagan people. In the previous chapter, we saw this treatment in Bede’s instruction to Acca in the summary of the Dagon passage: ‘once the uncircumcised receive the covenant of faith, first the idols [*simulacra*] are to be abased and without delay utterly destroyed’.² In Chapter One, it was proposed that Bede interpreted 1 Samuel 5 as a commentary on Christ’s triumph over strange gods, including English gods; here, we will examine how Bede wrote about Scripture’s idol places with equivalent English sites in mind.

As Bede recognised from examples such as Dagon’s temple, idol places were sacred to pagans because the gods inhabited or visited them.³ According to Deuteronomy 12:2-3, Israel, on entering the Promised Land, was to eradicate idol places and, in a complementary command, prevent their restoration, or face punishment.⁴ Earlier, we encountered one prophetic echo of this legislation in Bede’s quotation of Jeremiah 10:11 in the ‘Christ strangles the strange gods’ passage.⁵ God was to dwell in Israel, its land and people, and since the true God could not co-habit with strange gods, it then followed that idolatrous

¹ *Quaest. Regum*, XXVII-XXIX, pp.317-320 (pp.131-136); *HE*, II.4, pp.148-149, II.13, pp.184-187, II.15, pp.190-191, III.30, pp.322-323; see also Judges 3:26a.

² *Samuhel*, I.1455-1458, p.46 (p.167).

³ 1 Samuel 5:2-5; H.R. Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe* (Manchester, 1988), pp.13, 35; Dowden, *European Paganism*, p.127.

⁴ “Destroy all the places [*omnia loca*] in which the nations, that you shall possess, worshipped their gods upon high mountains and hills and under every leafy tree. Overthrow their altars [*arae*], and break down their statues [*statuae*], burn their sacred groves [*luci*] with fire, and break their idols [*idola*] in pieces: destroy their names out of those places”, see also vv.29-32; Leviticus 26:30; Numbers 33:50-52.

⁵ *Samuhel*, III.789-791, p.155 (p.349). See ‘Introduction’, p.17.

infrastructure needed removing otherwise God would be blasphemed. Bede expressed the force of this latter sentiment when reproducing one Old Testament pejorative term for idol places, *offensio*, ‘scandal’, for, as he explained, ‘God is scandalized by them or because they bring scandal and ruin to their worshippers.’⁶ In this respect, we should not neglect Bede’s impression of the rites conducted at idol places – most prominent, sacrifice, of both human and animal kind – which strengthened the revulsion that he felt towards such sites.⁷

In Deuteronomy 12:11-28, Moses had passed on God’s instruction concerning the correct place of worship, “the site where the Lord shall set his name”, that is, the tabernacle and temple. Bede, too, considered idol places as part of his wider preoccupation with Christian infrastructure. Whether exploring Dagon’s statue collapsing before the ark in Azotus or the conflagration that ruined the idol place at old Goodmanham in Northumbria, Bede’s intent was one and the same, to preserve the correct place of worship which in convert societies necessitated the ruin of idol places and the prevention of their restoration. As we shall see, this impulse led Bede to oppose even the limited concessions that Gregory the Great had outlined for certain idol places in England.⁸ Indeed, throughout his writings, Bede offered no exemption to his rule for idol places, except, that is, his report of the Pantheon in Rome which having lain idle for centuries was consecrated as a church in 609.⁹ First, we shall begin with Bede’s study of idol places from Scripture, where we find much of the inspiration behind his specific programme for the treatment of pagan infrastructure.

⁶ 2 Kings 23:13; Ezekiel 5:11, 11:18; 20:7; *Quaest.Regum*, XXIX.11-12, p.319 (p.135); Foley; *Bede: On Kings*, p.135, n.4.

⁷ *Quaest.Regum*, XXVIII.12-16, p.318 (p.132), quot. Jerome, *Hieremias*, II.xlv.3.6-7, p.84 (p.54), 2 Chronicles 28:3; *DTR*, xv.49-50, p.332 (p.54).

⁸ Gregory, *Registrum*, XI.lvi.8-14, p.961 (pp.802-803), quot. in *HE*, I.30, pp.106-107.

⁹ *DTR*, lxvi.1780-1784, p.523 (p.227), compare *HE*, II.4, pp.148-149, both cit. *LP*, lxix.3-4, p.317 (p.61).

Scripture's idol places

Across his writings, Bede mentioned a number of idol places found in Scripture, such as Dagon's temple at Azotus, and other extracanonical sites, notable here: the images of Jupiter that the Seleucid king Antiochus Epihanes, d.164 BC, had erected in Jerusalem and Samaria; the iconography of the imperial cult that Caligula, d.41, tried to place in the Jerusalem temple; and sites consecrated to Serapis in Alexandria.¹⁰ However, Bede's most prominent comments involved three sites that the Book of Kings recorded were established in Jerusalem and its hinterland: Topheth; the Mount of Scandal; and the shrines to the sun within the temple complex. Bede considered each in successive responses to Nothhelm as part of *In Regum librum*.¹¹ Nothhelm is sometimes remembered for his role in copying papal letters pertaining to the Roman mission to England in the register collections at the Lateran Palace, which Bede acquired after 725 and incorporated into his *Historia*.¹² Yet Nothhelm was more than Bede's trusted logistics partner. Bede described him as 'a godly priest of the Church in London', an impression perhaps gained from meetings between the two in Northumbria and their wider, fruitful correspondence.¹³ Nothhelm sent Bede two series of questions on the Book of Kings, with Bede's responses contained in *In Regum librum* and *De octo quaestionibus*. The original questions have sadly been lost, nevertheless, we still retain the

¹⁰ *Samuhel*, I.1468-1549, pp.46-48 (pp.167-170), cit. 1 Samuel 5:2-5; Antiochus: *DTR*, lxvi.857-862, p.491 (p.190), cit. Jerome, *Chronicon*, pp.139-140, ls.22-7; Caligula: *Samuhel*, IV.1477-1486, p.247 (p.485), quot. Orosius, *Historiae*, vol. 3, VII.v.7, p.27 (p.329) (DeGregorio and Love cited Josephus here but Bede was quoting from Orosius); *DTR*, lxvi.1030-1031, p.497 (p.197), cit. Jerome, *Chronicon*, ls.17, 22-24, p.177; Serapis: *Marcus*, II.811-825, pp.509-510, cit. Rufinus, *HE*, XI.23, 27-30, pp.1025-1030, 1033-1036 (pp.466-469, 474-477).

¹¹ *Samuhel*, I.1468-1549, pp.46-48 (pp.167-170), cit. 1 Samuel 5:2-5; *Quaest.Regum*, XXVII-XXIX, pp.317-320 (pp.131-136), cit. 2 Kings 23:10-11, 13.

¹² *HE*, praef., pp.4-5; Paul Meyvaert, 'The Registrum of Gregory the Great and Bede', *RB* 80:1-2 (1970), pp.162-166; Joanna Story, 'Bede, Willibrord and the Letters of Pope Honorius I on the Genesis of the Archbishopric of York', *English Historical Review* 127:527 (2012), pp.783-818, pp.786-790; Richard Shaw, *How, When and Why Did Bede Write his Ecclesiastical History?* (Abingdon, 2022), pp.57-60.

¹³ *HE*, praef., pp.4-5; see also Bede, *Epistola ad Albinum*, ed. and trans. Joshua A. Westgard, 'New Manuscripts of Bede's Letter to Albinus', *RB* 120:2 (2010), pp.208-215, pp.214-215; William Hunt, rev. Henry Mayr-Harting, 'Nothhelm', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography in Association with The British Academy*, Volume 41, ed. H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford, 2004), pp.212-213.

Scriptural passages that inspired Nothhelm's enquiries, enabling some evaluation of Nothhelm's interests. One of these appears to have concerned the nature and treatment of idol places, suggesting that this subject formed a broader topic of conversation from Wearmouth-Jarrow to London.

Topheth

Bede examined 'Topheth', *Thofeth*, in response to Nothhelm's question about 2 Kings 23:10: "And he (King Josiah) defiled Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Ennom: that no man should consecrate there his son or his daughter through fire to Moloch."¹⁴ We can presume that Nothhelm had read 2 Kings 23 which reported King Josiah's abolishment of idolatry in Judah and his ruin of 'groves', *luci*, and 'shrines', *aedificia*, dedicated to the Baals and Ashtaroth.¹⁵ His question to Bede might have been a straightforward one, perhaps even, *Quid erat Thofeth?* Certainly, Bede began his response as if he had received such a question, for he first supplied Nothhelm with a literal explanation of Topheth (based on Jeremiah and Jerome), placing this site in its physical environment. Topheth, Bede observed, was located outside Jerusalem's east wall in the Valley of Hinnom where 'the fountains of Siloam watered 'a most lovely grove', *nemus pulcherrimum*.¹⁶ Topheth itself sat near to this grove, close to the Fuller's Pool and Akeldama field, south of Mount Zion.¹⁷

¹⁴ As Bede observed, *Thofeth* (Topheth) could also be written *Thafeth* (Tapheth). He followed the order found in Scripture: the prophetic books used *Thofeth*, while in the Book of Kings it was written *Thafeth* (I have used Topheth since it is more common in Bede's writings).

¹⁵ 2 Kings 23:4, 6-7, 12, 15-16, 19-20. Earlier in his career, Bede made a passing reference to how Josiah's reforms were prophesied long before his birth, see *Lucas*, I.228-229, p.25 (pp.122-123), cit. 1 Kings 13:2.

¹⁶ *Quaest.Regum*, XXVII.5-7, p.317 (p.131), cit. Jeremiah 7:31a, 19:6, compare Jerome, *Hieremias*, I.xxxi.1.16-18, pp.22-23 (p.14), II.xlv.2.16-18, p.83 (p.54), IV.xi.3.18-20, p.182 (p.117).

¹⁷ *Quaest.Regum*, XXVII.7-10, pp.317-318 (pp.131-132), cit. 2 Kings 18:17b; Isaiah 7:3, 36:2; compare Jerome, *Liber de situ et nominibus locorum Hebraicorum*, PL 23, col.926B [hereafter, *Loc.Hebraica*]; Bede, *De locis sanctis*, CCSL 175, v.2.13-18, p.261 (trans. Foley, p.12) [hereafter, *DLS*], quot. ps.Eucherius, *De situ Hierusolimae epistula ad Faustum presbyterum*, CCSL 175, ls.46-49, p.238.

Bede related Topheth's natural beauty to its idolatrous use, remarking that the site was selected for sacrifices since it was 'a delightful place', *locus amoenissimus*.¹⁸ He explained to Nothhelm how the rites performed at Topheth included the immolation of royal children:

In an unholy fire they would *consecrate their own children and give them as a whole-offering*, as is written of King Ahaz in the Book of Chronicles, *It was he who burned incense in the valley of Benhinnon and consecrated his sons in the fire*.¹⁹

Bede believed these terrible sacrifices were offered to Moloch, who Bede, explaining Acts 7:43a in his *Expositio Actuum*, noted was 'the idol of the Ammonites', his name meaning 'your king'.²⁰

Having attended to the literal Topheth, Bede turned his attention to its figural interpretation. Noting how the Hebrew word for 'valley of Hinnom' was 'Gehinnom', Bede connected Topheth to the New Testament place of 'Gehenna', which patristic authors from Tertullian onward had read as synonymous with hell.²¹ Warren Tormey has shown how Bede and other English commentators invoked Gehenna to incite monastic discipline, following John Cassian and Benedict of Nursia, d.543.²² Bede was still pleased to sustain the Tertullian reading of Gehenna as the place of eternal punishment, as we see in several of his

¹⁸ *Quaest.Regum*, XXVII.10-13, p.318 (p.132), cit. Jerome, *Hieremias*, II.xlv.3.4-8, p.84 (p.54), VI.xlvii.1.10-14, p.343 (p.215).

¹⁹ *Quaest.Regum*, XXVII.13-16, p.318 (p.132), cit. Jeremiah 7:31, Jerome, *Hieremias*, II.xlv.3.6-7, p.84 (p.54), and quot. 2 Chronicles 28:3. Child sacrifice was forbidden under the Mosaic Law, cf. Deuteronomy 18:10; Leviticus 18:21, 20:1-5; 2 Kings 3:26-27, 16:3; 21:6; 2 Chronicles 28:1-4, 33:6; Isaiah 30:33; Jeremiah 7:30-34, 19:1-15.

²⁰ *Exp.Actuum*, vii.95-97, p.36 (p.73), cit. Jerome, *Loc.Hebraica*, col.912B; *idem*, *Esaias*, XVI.lvii.9.24-29, p.648 (p.725), cit. Isaiah 57:9a; *idem*, *Nom.Hebraica*, ls.5, p.147.

²¹ *Quaest.Regum*, XXVII.16-17, p.318 (p.132), cit. Jerome, *Hieremias*, II.xlv.3.1-5, p.84 (p.54), VI.xlvii.1.10-11, p.343 (p.215). See also Tertullian's description, 'Gehenna ... a secret fire beneath the earth for the purpose of punishment', *Apologeticum*, CCSL 1, xlvii.54-55, pp.164-165.

²² As Alcuin remarked, *Ubi timor gehennae*, 'Where is the fear of Gehenna?', *idem*, *Epistola CCXCIV*, p.452, ls.2; Warren Tormey, 'The Transformation of Gehenna: Taking the Biblical Wasteland into the Prison House of Hell', *Incarceration and Slavery in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age: A Cultural-Historical Investigation of the Dark Side in the Pre-Modern World*, ed. Albrecht Classen (London, 2021), pp.59-88, pp.61-63.

commentaries.²³ In *In Regum librum*, Bede noted first how the everlasting punishment at Gehenna was presaged by Israel's suffering at Topheth.

From that word [Gehinnom], hell's torment is given the nickname Gehenna ... because just as those in the valley of Hinnom perished in the very place that they served idols, as the prophets attest, so too are sinners punished in eternal damnation with the very sins that they have committed.²⁴

In Jeremiah 19:1-13, Bede read the prophecy that Judah would fall at Topheth and thus be punished in the place where the idols were worshipped, which he seemed to think fulfilled when God later permitted Nebuchadnezzar and his Chaldean forces to capture and exile the kingdom.²⁵ Topheth also served as the final place of punishment for 'the devil', the instigator of strange gods and idolatry. Bede explored this eschatological treatment with close reference to Isaiah 30:31-33, where the prophet personified the devil as 'the Assyrian' (a fierce persecutor of Israel) and foretold how the Lord would strike the evil one and bring him to Topheth to face 'everlasting ruin',

For Topheth was prepared recently, prepared deep and wide by the king (God). Its food is fire and much wood: the Lord's breath is kindling it like a torrent of brimstone.²⁶

Closing his response to Nothhelm, Bede returned his fellow-priest to the literal ruin of Topheth under Josiah's reforms,

²³ *Apocalypsis*, xii.8-10, p.339 (p.163); *Lucas*, IV.1662-1665, p.272 (p.448); *Samuhel*, III.994-1013, pp.160-161 (pp.357-358) [em.cit.]; *Quid Isaias ait*, col.705CD (p.45) [em.cit.].

²⁴ Matthew 5:22, 29-30, 10:28; James 3:6; Revelation 19:20, 20:14-15; *Quaest.Regum*, XXVII.17-21, p.318 (p.132), cit. Jerome, *Hieremias*, II.xlv.3.4-8, p.84 (p.54).

²⁵ *Quaest.Regum*, XXVII.24-27, p.318 (p.132), quot. Jeremiah 19:6-7b. Here, Bede chose a bolder interpretation than he had read in Jerome's treatment of these verses. Compare Jerome, *Hieremias*, IV.xiii.2.2-8, p.184 (p.118).

²⁶ *Quaest.Regum*, XXVII.27-35, p.318 (pp.132-133), quot. Isaiah 30:31-33, and cit. Jerome, *Hieremias*, II.xlv.3.21-22, p.84 (p.54). Bede recalled the same Isaianic passage in *In Samuhelem* when relating the everlasting punishment of the devil through the figure of Goliath's fall, cf. 1 Samuel 17:49; *Samuhel*, III.994-1016, pp.160-161 (pp.357-358) [em.cit.].

So Josiah defiled Topheth, scattering either the bones of the dead there – as the following verses show him doing at other idol places [*idolorum loca*] – or every other kind of unclean thing. As a result, the place would seem more suitable for abomination than for delight to all who looked on it!²⁷

Josiah's action made the idol place at Topheth where idolatrous kings consecrated their sons to strange gods a scorched ruin, previewing the time when God would punish idolaters, the demon Moloch, and the devil – their shared, eternal torment implied in a comment Bede made in relation to Gehenna in *In proueria salomonis*: ‘the fire never says, “It is enough.”’²⁸ The monument to past evils at Topheth was something that Bede felt was replicated elsewhere in the Old Testament. Discussing Sodom and Gomorrah, Bede noted how God had reduced these and other cities in Pentapolis to ashes and covered the land in the Dead Sea as a presage to the Last Judgement to warn others against committing similar crimes.²⁹

The Mount of Scandal

Bede's twenty-ninth response to Nothhelm described the ‘high place’ known as *mons offensionis*, ‘The Mount of Scandal’, of 2 Kings 23:13-14.³⁰ Following Jerome, Bede outlined the nature of these and other *loca excelsa* from Scripture:

²⁷ 2 Kings 23:14-16, 20; *Quaest.Regum*, XXVII.36-40, p.318 (p.133), compare Jerome, *Hieremias*, II.xlvii.2.11-15, p.85 (p.55).

²⁸ *Salomonis*, III.xxx.122-126, p.144, cit. Proverbs 30:15-16.

²⁹ Genesis 14:3, 19:24-25; Bede, *DLS*, xi.1.1-6, p.271 (p.19), cit. ps.Hegesippus, *Historiae libri V*, CSEL 66, IV.xviii.8-10, p.271; *ibid.*, 4, pp.272-273 (p.20), quot. ps.Hegesippus, *Historiae*, IV.xviii.2-5, p.272, xvi.7-10, p.267; *Genesis*, I.1514-1519, p.48 (p.114), III.335-336, p.151 (p.226), III.1475-1480, p.183 (p.261), cit. Isidore, *Etymologiae*, XIII.xix.4.28, p.102 (p.279); *ibid.*, IV.1055-1066, p.223 (pp.301-302), cit. Luke 17:28-30, and Jude 7; IV.1145-1147, p.226 (p.304); *Epist.Catholicae*, 2Pt.ii.104-124, p.271 (pp.138-139), cit. 2 Peter 2:6, Augustine, *DCD*, XXI.v.26-28, viii.93-99, p.765 (p.455), p.773 (p.462), quot. Wisdom 10:6-7.

³⁰ ‘Also, the high places at Jerusalem on the right side of the Mount of Scandal, that continues until, the king defiled and broke the statues in pieces’, quot. in *Quaest.Regum*, XXIX.1-3, p.319 (p.135).

For Scripture customarily gives the name ‘high places’ [*loca excelsa*] to designated sites on wooded hills [*colles frondea*] where [Israel] either used to sacrifice to demons or offer victims also to the Lord, enticed by the beauty of such sites and unlawfully abandoning the altar in the Temple.³¹

Mount Scandal, so-called since its idol places were an *offensio*, ‘scandal’ to God, overlooked Jerusalem to the north. For Bede, the site’s proximity meant its idols, or, as Bede labelled them, ‘filth’, had ‘contaminated’ the city.³² None other than Solomon, whom Bede elsewhere labelled *rex sapientissimus*, ‘wisest of kings’, had sponsored this pagan infrastructure in order to please his foreign wives and their gods: Astarte the idol of Sidon; Chemosh the scandal of Moab; and Moloch the abomination of Ammon.³³ In a lament for David’s son, Bede mourned the king’s unrepentant heart, which, he felt, had stimulated idolatry among the wider populace.

If I am not mistaken, it is also plainly shown there (how I wish it were not!) that Solomon never fully repented of the acts of idolatry which he had committed. For had he borne fruits worthy of repentance he would have been concerned above all to remove from the holy city the idols he had built and not to leave behind, as things wisely and rightly done, those deeds that he, for all his wisdom, had wrongly done and that served as a stumbling block [*scandalum*] for the simple-minded [*stulti*].³⁴

Here, Bede revealed his acute fears for *stulti*, ‘the simple-minded’, who he felt willingly followed the wicked example of others in society (especially the elites) and ‘stumbled’ by means of their error.³⁵ On several occasions, he interpreted *stulti* as idolaters, seeing, for instance, Christ’s healing of the blind man at Bethsaida as Gentiles coming to faith (equating

³¹ *Quaest.Regum*, XXIX.4-7, p.319 (p.135) [em.cit.].

³² *ibid.*, ls.9-12, 25-29, pp.319-320 (pp.135-136).

³³ 1 Kings 11:7; 2 Kings 23:13b; quot. in *Quaest.Regum*, XXIX.14-16, 23-25 p.320 (p.136).

³⁴ *Quaest.Regum*, XXIX.16-22, p.320 (pp.135-136), compare Augustine, *Enarrat.Psalms*, CCSL 40, Ps.CXXVI.2.4-7, p.1857 (pp.83-84); *idem*, *DCD*, XVII.viii.33-40, p.571 (p.257).

³⁵ ‘Indeed, *scandalum* is a Greek word that can be translated as “stumbling block” or “falling and striking against the foot”’, *Marcus*, III.509-511, p.555, quot. Jerome, *Matheus*, II.1468-1469, p.129 (p.179).

visual blindness with spiritual ignorance).³⁶ He used *stulti* in his prose *Life of Cuthbert* when referring to Bernician converts who had reverted to idol worship.³⁷ Writing to Ecgberht, Bede condemned senior churchmen who had peddled charters to secular persons, the former were ‘ignorant’, *stulti*, their habit not Christian but of ‘the heathens’, *ethnici*.³⁸

In *De templo*, Bede’s figural interpretation of Solomon’s temple, Bede interpolated his exegesis with a case for the permissible use of Christian images to counter the increasing iconophobia that led Emperor Leo III legislate against images in 730.³⁹ There, Bede emphasised his view that such images should not be regarded as idols: ‘it is not making images of objects or animals that is forbidden. Rather what is entirely prohibited is making them for the purpose of idolatry.’⁴⁰ When preparing this passage in *De templo*, Bede was contemplating the *picturae* that Biscop had installed at Wearmouth-Jarrow.⁴¹ His argument that such images ‘make available to those who are illiterate [*litteras ignorant*] a living narrative of the story of the Lord’, adding thereafter, ‘For in Greek too a painting is called ζωγραφία, i.e. “a living writing”’, seems to suggest that one function of the Wearmouth-Jarrow images was to teach the *stulti* in its hinterland.⁴² The notion was not novel to Bede; Gregory the Great had earlier produced a similar reasoning when supporting the use of Christian images, indeed, it must be possible that Gregory had influenced Bede in this

³⁶ *Marcus*, II.1789-1796, p.534, cit. Mark 8:22-26; see also *Homelia* i.22, ls.79-89, p.158 (p.218), quot. Matthew 15:21.

³⁷ *VSC*, ix, pp.184-185.

³⁸ *Ep.Ecg.*, xvii, pp.156-157.

³⁹ *DeTemp.*, II.809-866, pp.212-213 (pp.90-92) [em.cit.]; for discussion, see Robin Cormack, ‘Art and Iconoclasm’, *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies*, ed. Elizabeth Jeffreys et al. (Oxford, 2008), pp.750-757, pp.751f; Thomas F.X. Noble, *Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians* (Philadelphia, PA, 2009), pp.112-116.

⁴⁰ *DeTemp.*, II.844-846, p.213 (p.92). See Peter Darby, ‘Bede, iconoclasm and the Temple of Solomon’, *EME* 21:4 (2013), pp.390-421.

⁴¹ *HA*, vi, pp.36-37, ix, pp.44-45; Peter Hunter Blair, *The World of Bede* (London, 1970; rpt. Cambridge, 1990), pp.172-174, 178-179.

⁴² *DeTemp.*, II.831-832, p.213 (p.91), compare *HA*, vi, pp.36-37; *Homelia* i.13, ls.182-185, p.93 (p.131).

matter.⁴³ It remains significant that Bede thought images held the potential to influence individual faith, whether statues and sacred poles for idolaters or images of the crucifixion for Christians. His observation in *In Regum librum* that idolatrous iconography represented a ‘stumbling-block’ to the *stulti* could perhaps reflect his wider fears for the faith of such persons in the ongoing consolidation of Christianity in England, which would seem closely related to his insistence that idol places be ruined in convert societies. On the other hand, Bede saw Christian images as effective tools in the teaching of *stulti*, perhaps encompassing pseudo-converts or idolaters in England.⁴⁴

Jerusalem temple complex

Bede’s twenty-eighth response to Nothhelm explored Josiah’s ruin of the iconography of the sun god in the Jerusalem temple complex as reported in 2 Kings 23:11: ‘*And at the entrance of the Lord’s temple he removed the horses that the kings of Judah had given to the sun, and a little later, and he burned the sun’s chariots with fire*’.⁴⁵ Jerusalem was to Bede ‘the Lord’s city’ and its temple signified the ‘house of God’ among his people, the ‘place where the Lord will set his Name’.⁴⁶ The erection of idol places within the temple complex thus represented a most egregious crime, one exacerbated by the dedication to the sun god, which, to add insult to injury, saw Israel worship the created order in the Creator’s temple (violating the Deuteronomic prohibitions of celestial imagery).⁴⁷ As Bede stated,

⁴³ Gregory, *Registrum*, IX.ccix.8-18, p.768 (p.674), XI.x.15-62, pp.873-875 (pp.745-746); Celia Chazelle, ‘Memory, Instruction, Worship: “Gregory’s” Influence on Early Medieval Doctrines of the Artistic Image’, *Gregory the Great: A Symposium*, ed. John C. Cavadini (Notre Dame, IN, 1995), pp.181-215, pp.197-198.

⁴⁴ Other Christian media in Northumbria might have been made with similarly didactic purposes. See, for example, Barbara Raw’s comments regarding the carvings on the Ruthwell stone cross which she estimated ‘would have provided a good basis for a programme of instruction in Christian belief’, Barbara Raw, ‘Pictures: The Books of the Unlearned?’, *The Christian Tradition in Anglo-Saxon England: Approaches to Current Scholarship and Teaching*, ed. Paul Cavill (Cambridge, 2004), pp.103-119, pp.104-105.

⁴⁵ *Quaest.Regum*, XXVIII.1-3, p.318 (p.133).

⁴⁶ Deuteronomy 12:5; *Ezra-Neemia*, I.67-68, p.242 (p.9); *DeTemp.*, I.1, p.147 (p.5).

⁴⁷ Genesis 1:14-18; Deuteronomy 4:15-20, 17:3.

This passage shows that the Jews at that time were given over to every superstition of Gentile idolaters, so much so that in order to venerate the sun, which they believed was a god (just as the Gentiles did), they added horses and chariots to [the sun's] image that they had made, and this [they did] in the courts of the Lord's temple!⁴⁸

And, a little later,

By imitating the Greeks, the Jews took pains not to appear less foolish in some respect than the most foolish of all Gentiles.⁴⁹

In his explanation to Nothhelm, Bede recalled the construction of the sun's image from 2 Kings 21 where it was reported how Manasseh restored the celestial imagery that his father Hezekiah had removed, including the 'image of the sun', *simulacrum solis*.⁵⁰ Bede pointed out to Nothhelm how the traditional Greco-Roman image ('either painted or fashioned') for the sun was a beardless boy in a horse-drawn chariot bound for heaven, but where he learned this information remains unknown.⁵¹ In turn, Bede noted how John Chrysostom (in fact, ps.Chrysostom) had suggested the Greeks venerated Helios as sun god after confusing him with Elijah (in Latin, *Helias*), the prophet who was borne into heaven on a fiery chariot drawn by fiery horses.⁵² Quoting the Christian poet Sedulius, Bede repeated this claim about *Helios* and *Helias*; moreover, he could have been thinking of Ovid's prose of the sun god and his chariot.⁵³ Once more, Bede seems to have been contemplating the *picturae* in Wearmouth-

⁴⁸ *Quaest.Regum*, XXVIII.3-7, pp.318-319 (p.133).

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, XXVIII.27-29, p.319 (p.134). For Bede's criticism of the Gentile veneration of the sun, see *DTR*, viii.30-32, 36-37, pp.300-301 (pp.32-33), cit. Isidore, *DNR*, III.4.22-23, p.185 (p.116).

⁵⁰ 2 Kings 21:3-5; *Quaest.Regum*, XXVIII.8, p.319 (p.133); compare 2 Kings 21:21-22, 23:5; Ezekiel 8:1-16.

⁵¹ *Quaest.Regum*, XXVIII.7-10, p.319 (p.133). Cicero marked Apollo out as 'beardless', but a more likely source was Macrobius, who described Jupiter's features as those of 'a golden, beardless man', Cicero, *De natura deorum*, LCL 268, I.xxx.83, pp.80-81; Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, LCL 510, I.xxiii.12, pp.300-301.

⁵² 2 Kings 2:11; *Quaest.Regum*, XXVIII.12-15, p.319 (pp.133-134), cit. ps.Chrysostom, *De ascensione Heliae*, ed. Wenk, ls.18-27, pp.101-102; Berthold Altaner, *Kleine Patristische Schriften* (Berlin, 1967), pp.416-436, p.429; see also André Wilmart, 'La collection des 38 Homélie latines de Saint Jean Chrysostome', *Journal of Theological Studies* 19:76 (1918), pp.305-327, pp.310-311; Rosalind Love, 'Bede and John Chrysostom', *Journal of Medieval Latin* 17 (2007), pp.72-86, pp.79-80.

⁵³ *Quaest.Regum*, XXVIII.15-27, p.319 (p.134), quot. Sedulius, *Paschale carmen*, ed. and trans. Springer, I.184-187, pp.12-13; compare Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II.116-400, pp.68-89.

Jarrow, shown in his suggestion that one reason the Greeks confused *Helias* with *Helios* was an image of Elijah ‘on a wall with other things’.⁵⁴ He was, I suspect, thinking of a specific image, revealing, I propose, the theme of one of the painted panel pairings concerning the intertestamental agreement which adorned the walls at St. Paul’s, Jarrow.⁵⁵ The Gospel writers Matthew, Mark, and Luke each paired Elijah with John the Baptist and Bede stressed this relationship on several occasions and I think it highly possible that in this response to Nothhelm he took inspiration from images of Elijah and John the Baptist in the church at his home minster.⁵⁶

Bede’s sketch to Nothhelm of these three sites emphasised the risk extant idol places posed to Judeo-Christian societies, his words offering an English visualisation of Judah’s idolatry.⁵⁷ Helios rose in the east, and, since the Jerusalem temple was oriented to the east, the sun’s morning rays would be greeted by his motionless steeds and chariots at the temple complex entrance.⁵⁸ As Helios rose higher, his light touched the valley of Hinnom and the grove at Topheth, warming too the western slopes of Mount Scandal and its idol places. For his ruin of these sites, Bede considered Josiah among the greatest of Judah’s kings and it seems obvious that the latter’s reign inspired Bede in relation to his own literary treatment of idol places.⁵⁹ His comment in the Dagon summary indicates that Bede emulated Josiah’s particular brand of iconophobia which ensured idol places were ruined in such a manner that prevented their simple restoration. Josiah ruined Topheth and turned its ‘abomination’ into a monument that

⁵⁴ *Quaest.Regum*, XXVIII.23-24, p.319 (p.134).

⁵⁵ *HA*, vi, pp.36-37, ix, pp.44-45.

⁵⁶ Matthew 11:11-14; Mark 9:10-12; Luke 1:16-17; *Lucas*, I.276-287, p.26 (pp.124-125) [em.cit.]; *Homelia* ii.23, ls.34-47, p.350 (pp.230-231) [em.cit.]; *DeTemp.*, I.889-896, p.169 (p.34) [em.cit.].

⁵⁷ For corrections to Bede’s geography, see Foley, *Thirty Questions*, p.131, n.3, p.132, n.1.

⁵⁸ In an earlier response to Nothhelm in *In Regum librum*, Bede had noted how as the sun rose it shone on the temple entrance, cf. XII.8-11, p.304 (p.107); cf. *Homelia* ii.1, ls.210-212, p.190 (p.9); *DeTemp.*, I.571-576, p.161 (p.23), both cit. Josephus, *Antiquitates*, VIII.iii.2.

⁵⁹ 2 Kings 21:26-23:30; *Ezra-Neemia*, I.806-809, p.261 (p.37), quot. 2 Chronicles 34:33.

warned Israel over its idolatrous past.⁶⁰ He broke Solomon's idol places on Mount Scandal and 'defiled and crushed the statues to pieces'.⁶¹ In a profoundly symbolic revenge, the king 'burned the sun's chariots with fire', completing his elimination of the pagan paraphernalia to the sun that had proved so outrageous.⁶² In doing so, Josiah invited God to resume his place in Judah, as Bede commented in *De temporum ratione*, 'After casting out the impurities of idolatry, Josiah purified Judaea and Jerusalem and restored the temple'.⁶³ Ultimately, Bede understood that Josiah's reforms came too late to prevent God's punishment of Israel.⁶⁴ His thirtieth and final response to Nothhelm in *In Regum librum* related the fall of Judah and its capital Jerusalem to the forces of the Chaldaean Nebuchadnezzar, an event which led to the exile of Judah to Babylon, as punishment, Bede believed, for Israel's idolatry, including the establishment of idol places.⁶⁵

English idol places

Anglo-Saxon England, of course, possessed its own *loca idolorum*, with several of these mentioned in Bede's *Historia*. Bede considered what he seemed to think were larger sites, describing these as *fana*, 'temples', such as old Goodmanham in Deira or the East Anglian temple (perhaps located at Rendlesham).⁶⁶ He said much less about smaller sites, *aedificia*,

⁶⁰ *Quaest.Regum*, XXVII.36-40, p.318 (p.133).

⁶¹ *ibid.*, XXIX.3, p.319 (p.135), quot. 2 Kings 23:14a.

⁶² *ibid.*, XXVIII.3, p.318 (p.133), quot. 2 Kings 23:11c. Beyond these three sites, Josiah had removed idol places across Judah and his territories in the northern kingdom of Israel, Samaria, cf. 2 Kings 23:4, 6-7, 12, 15-16, 19-20.

⁶³ *DTR*, lxvi.532-534, p.480 (p.178); see also Bede's similar praise of King Asa of Judah, *idem*, ls.429, p.476 (p.173).

⁶⁴ 2 Kings 23:26.

⁶⁵ 2 Kings 24:10-16; *Quaest.Regum*, XXX, pp.320-322 (pp.136-138). Bede knew that a similar fate had befallen the northern Israelite kingdom of Samaria, though they had been exiled to Assyria, cf. 2 Kings 17:1-23; Isaiah 10:11; *Quaest.Regum*, XXIII, p.315 (pp.126-127).

⁶⁶ *HE*, II.13, pp.184-187, II.15, pp.190-191, III.30, pp.322-323. I have reproduced Colgrave and Mynors' translation of *fanum* as 'temple', but Ian Wood's caution in this regard remains relevant: *idem*, 'Some Historical Re-identifications and the Christianization of Kent', *Christianizing Peoples and Converting Individuals*, ed. Guyda Armstrong and Ian N. Wood (Turnhout, 2000), pp.27-35, pp.27-30. For Bede's evidence and material

‘shrines’, though perhaps these were hinted at in Bede’s *posta*, ‘wooden posts’.⁶⁷ He might have thought certain idol places in England shared a similar natural environment to those in Scripture – the native preference for wooded sites perhaps recalling Topheth – but he knew of no location to rival the vast, urban complexes in Jerusalem, Ephesus, and Rome.⁶⁸ The site known as ‘Building D2’, a ‘massive and elaborate structure’ found in the substantial complex at Yeavinger, had an obvious pagan religious function and at present represents the closest example known from Northumbria (but Bede mentioned only that Yeavinger was a royal villa).⁶⁹

What Bede might have thought of England’s idol places has received little attention since Philippon, and even his fine work never compared Bede’s impression of insular and external sites, nor questioned whether the Northumbrian held separate views to the earliest witness for pagan infrastructure in England, Gregory the Great.⁷⁰ That is not to say that scholars have neglected English idol places; on the contrary, the last three decades have witnessed renewed interest in these sites.⁷¹ Several studies have explored Gregory the Great’s permission for the Roman missionaries in England to ruin idols in ‘well-constructed temples’ [*bene constructa*

culture, see John Blair, ‘Anglo-Saxon Pagan Shrines and their Prototypes’, *ASSAH* 8, ed. David Griffiths (Oxford, 1995), pp.1-28.

⁶⁷ *HE*, III.10, pp.244-245, III.12-13, pp.250-255.

⁶⁸ For a potential pagan grove in Lincolnshire, ‘at Barrow (*Ad Baruae*), that is, “At the Grove” (*Ad Nemus*)’, see Della Hooke, ‘Groves in Anglo-Saxon England’, *Landscape History* 38:1 (2017), pp.5-23, pp.8-9, cit. *HE*, IV.3, pp.336-337.

⁶⁹ *HE*, II.14, pp.188-189; Brian Hope-Taylor, *Yeavinger: An Anglo-British Centre of Early Northumbria* (London, 1977; rpt. Swindon, 2009), pp.97-102, 158-161; Douglas Mac Lean, ‘King Oswald’s Wooden Cross at Heavenfield in Context’, *The Insular Tradition*, ed. Catherine Karkov et al. (Albany, NY, 1997), pp.79-97, pp.82-92; John Blair, ‘Holy Beams: Anglo-Saxon Cult Sites and the Place-Name Element *Bēam*’, *Trees and Timber in the Anglo-Saxon World*, ed. Michael D.J. Bintley and Michael G. Shapland (Oxford, 2013; rpt. 2020), pp.186-210, pp.189-190; Michael D.J. Bintley, *Trees in the Religions of Early Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2015), pp.28-43.

⁷⁰ Philippon, *Germanisches Heidentum*, pp.183-190, especially 183-186.

⁷¹ Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism*; pp.44-66; Blair, ‘Anglo-Saxon Pagan Shrines’; Audrey L. Meaney, ‘Pagan English Sanctuaries, Place-Names and Hundred Meeting-Places’, *ASSAH* 8, pp.29-42; Hines, ‘Limits of Knowledge’, pp.384-391; Semple, ‘In the Open Air’, pp.39-41. For England and the wider European picture, see Dowden, *European Paganism*, pp.117-148.

fana] in order to reconsecrate these as churches.⁷² Evidence for this sort of transformation is scarce, especially outside Southumbria.⁷³ We might consider the order in Theodore's *Paenitentiale* that no altar be consecrated in churches where there were buried 'bodies of infidels', until the pagan dead be removed and the structure cleansed from their polluting influence.⁷⁴ Possibly, this involved a former idol place that had subsequently been consecrated as a church.

Further importance has been attached to a single sentence in Aldhelm's letter to Heahfrith:

...where once the crude pillars [*ermula cruda*] of the same foul snake [*nefanda natrix*] and the stag [*ceruulus*] were worshipped with coarse stupidity in profane temples [*fana profana*], [now] in their place dwellings for students, not to mention holy houses of prayer, are constructed...⁷⁵

Aldhelm's words are sometimes interpreted as revealing a West Saxon idol place where a snake and stag had been venerated in pre-Christian times.⁷⁶ Most recently, it has been suggested that the site was an Anglian continuation of a Romano-British cult involving horned gods, such as the Celtic deity 'Cernunnos'.⁷⁷ Notwithstanding the interest in these views, there remain serious obstacles to reading the clerical celebration of a newly-established Christian site as proof of an English idol place. We might first remember that the context of Aldhelm's letter concerned neither pagan nor Christian infrastructure but the

⁷² See p.105f of this chapter.

⁷³ Dowden, *European Paganism*, pp.147-148; and Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, pp.183-191. Blair's identification of the Cowdery's Down hall complex with the cult site of *Besingahearh* suggests one place where an overlap occurred between pagan and Christian worship in seventh-century Wessex, *idem*, *Building Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodstock, 2018), pp.126, 136.

⁷⁴ *Paenit. Theodori* II.i.4, p.312.

⁷⁵ Aldhelm, *Epistolae*, ed. Ehwald, V.3-6, p.489 (trans. Herren, pp.160-161).

⁷⁶ Bintley, *Trees in the Religions of Early Medieval England*, p.37; Blair, *Building Anglo-Saxon England*, pp.92-93; Scott Gwara, 'Introduction', CCSL 124, pp.45-46.

⁷⁷ Patrick A. Atkinson, 'Pagans and Christians in Early Medieval Wessex, c.400-800' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 2023), pp.1-2, 66-68. As Barbara Yorke observed, the site might also have belonged to British pagans living in Wessex, *idem*, *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages* (London, 1995), p.166.

migration of English students to Irish minsters, followed by Aldhelm's plainspoken response that England's schools could offer as much (and more besides) as Hibernian counterparts. Moreover, little to no evidence has been produced to connect Gewissan religion to snakes and stags. Other excerpts from Aldhelm's writings suggest he saw 'snake' (both *natrix* and *celydrus*) as a euphemism for Satan (and, on one occasion, Rome's pagan religion).⁷⁸ *Natrix* might then be purely metaphorical. The ordering of *natrix* first and then *ceruulus* might rule out an association with 'Cernunnos', whose principal image in Britain and Europe was of a stag-headed man with serpents limited to a supporting motif.⁷⁹ It is possible that these creatures represented other, lesser-known Romano-British spirits, but there remains too little evidence to read Aldhelm's words as proof of an English idol place that had previously been the site of a Romano-British cult. At best, we can suggest that Aldhelm was identifying an idol place known to him in Wessex, possibly a Romano-British site of some sort, that may or may not have possessed some religious significance to the local Gewisse (but not necessarily in Aldhelm's lifetime).

It is nevertheless significant that Aldhelm mentioned an existing idol place that had since found new life as a Christian site. We know that English builders recycled and reused Roman infrastructure and perhaps then Aldhelm was thinking of a Romano-British site.⁸⁰ If so, this example would increase the number of references to Romano-British idol places in early English literature to two – the first being Bede's mention of a probable *lararium* in the Verulamium forum in his *Passio Albani*.⁸¹ These minor references indicate how little English

⁷⁸ Aldhelm, *Epistolae*, V.2-3, p.489; *idem*, *Carmen de uirginitate*, ls.549-550, p.376 (p.115). The influence of Sedulius seems apparent here. Compare Sedulius, *Paschale carmen*, III.183-189, pp.86-89; *idem*, *Paschale opus*, ed. Huemer, III.16, ls.9-15, p.245; see also Atkinson, 'Pagans and Christians', pp.66-67.

⁷⁹ But see Atkinson, 'Pagans and Christians', pp.67-68.

⁸⁰ Most notable here the construction of Wearmouth from stonework taken from the fort of Arbeia at South Shields. Cf. Sam Turner et al., *Wearmouth and Jarrow: Northumbrian monasteries in an historic landscape*, (Hatfield, 2013), pp.89-92, 139-167. For Roman pagan infrastructure and the Anglian phase, see Dorothy Watts, *Christians and Pagans in Roman Britain* (London, 1991), pp.99-143.

⁸¹ *HE*, I.7, pp.30-31.

writers knew of Romano-British temples and, it must be said, offer even less proof that the latter were ever repurposed as idol places in the Anglian phase. True, Æthelberht permitted Augustine ‘to build or restore churches’ and it could be that certain Romano-British churches in Kent, which might themselves have been converted from Romano-British temples, later became English idol places.⁸² Gregory’s ‘well-constructed temples’ could plausibly have referred to what were originally Roman buildings.⁸³ Beyond these speculative thoughts, the limits of our present knowledge permit no firmer conclusions.

Bede remains our most reliable source for English idol places, even if he said less of these than external sites (which probably reflects his wider preference regarding the report of strange gods and idolatry in England). One reason for his care over reporting English idol places might be found in his report – or lack thereof – of the terminus for pagan infrastructure in England. Bede only told us that Eorcenberht, Æthelberht’s grandson who ruled Kent between 640-664, was ‘the first English king to order idols to be abandoned and destroyed throughout the whole kingdom’, and that the king prescribed ‘suitably heavy punishments for offenders’.⁸⁴ Eorcenberht’s presumed law code has not survived but Lisi Oliver has made the sensible suggestion that its content might have shaped later Kentish legislation, in particular, the prohibition of idol worship in the law code of Wihtred, r.c.690-725, promulgated in 695.⁸⁵ That Kent, the heartland of the Roman mission, never saw its pagan infrastructure removed in the reigns of Æthelberht and Eadbald, even with the concessions of Gregory the Great, suggests that the Old Testament-inspired ruin of idol places was less than welcome in convert

⁸² *HE*, I.26, pp.76-77. The same might be said of the British ‘holy places’ that Stephen reported Wilfrid as receiving from Ecgfrith and Ælfwine (c.661-679), *VW*, xvii, pp.36-37.

⁸³ *HE*, I.30, pp.106-107.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, III.8, pp.236-237. Wilson’s view that Eorcenberht ruined Kent’s idol places in 640 cannot be construed from Bede’s statement, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, p.29.

⁸⁵ *Wihtred* xii-xiii, Liebermann, p.13 (Oliver, ix-x, pp.156-159), cit. in. Oliver, *Beginnings of English Law*, p.166.

England. This is surely further supported in the need for Wihtred to prohibit idol worship, nearly a century after Augustine had landed at Thanet. One of Kent's neighbours, East Anglia, kept at least one prominent idol place long after the kingdom had converted. According to Bede, King Aldwulf, r.c.663-713, testified that the temple of King Rædwald, d.c.625, had survived into his lifetime and must then, as Wilson noted, have been a substantial structure, and, for Norman Scarfe, 'a source of vexation' to Suffolk's Christian teachers.⁸⁶

That idol places were restored in times of reversion suggests further that these sites survived the initial conversion and consolidation of Christianity in England. When King Sigehere, r.c.664-683, and his portion of the East Saxons reverted to idol worship, they restored 'derelict temples' [*fana derelicta*] and began once again 'to worship images' [*adorare simulacra*].⁸⁷ The Mercian king Wulfhere, r.658-675, sent Bishop Jaruman, d.669, to reconvert the idolaters, and, as a result, Sigehere and his people 'either abandoned or destroyed the temples [*fana*] and altars [*arae*] they had erected and reopened their churches'.⁸⁸ A priest in Jaruman's party supplied Bede with this report and it is conceivable then that the latter knew a little more of the nature of those sites in Essex.⁸⁹ Their restoration and continued existence after reconversion ('either abandoned or destroyed') provides further proof of the longstanding English attachment to idol places. Churches seemed to inspire less fondness. Various reports in the *Historia* indicate how Christian sites were targeted by pagan and Christian kings, perhaps offering another layer to English opposition to the removal of

⁸⁶ *HE*, II.15, pp.190-191; Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, pp.29-30; Norman Scarfe, *Suffolk in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 1986; rpt. 2007), pp.30-31; see too Richard Hoggett, *The Archaeology of the East Anglian Conversion* (Woodbridge, 2010) p.25f.

⁸⁷ *HE*, III.30, pp.322-323, cit. Exodus 34:15.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

pagan infrastructure.⁹⁰ We might also consider the situation in England besides the evidence for earlier convert societies, notably, Rome. Constantine the Great had closed a number of temples (Bede thought this an imperial edict but his source, Orosius, was mistaken); however, specific legislation against idol places had to wait until 391-392 under Theodosius I, r.379-395.⁹¹ The promulgation of similar laws in the *Theodosian Code*, 435, indicates that such legislation took time to take effect, and it could then be the case that a similar reluctance towards the removal of idol places was experienced in England.⁹²

Intriguing is the sense in Bede's exegesis that he had considered the idol places of England when espousing the need for convert societies to rid themselves of idolatry and its infrastructure. His summary in the Dagon passage reproduced verbatim the sense of Eorcenberht's laws as they were reported in the *Historia*: convert societies must immediately ruin their idol places and punish those who seek to restore them.⁹³ Several lines of exegesis later, as the ark is placed in Dagon's temple, Bede observed: 'And they erected churches of Christ among the Gentiles, though the worship of idols still continued in some places.'⁹⁴ This comment on the religious landscape seems relevant to England's situation, with churches built but certain idol places remaining. That interpretation might explain Bede's robust programme for the treatment of idol places, which was specific to the context of convert societies. Here, we must emphasise the subtle variance between Bede and the Mosaic Law: he called for the removal of idol places in convert, not pagan, societies, in contrast to the

⁹⁰ *HE*, II.14, pp.188-189, IV.12, pp.368-369, IV.26, pp.426-427.

⁹¹ *Imperatoris Theodosiani Codex xvi*, SC 497, X.10-12, pp.438-447; *DTR*, lxvi.1424-1425, p.510 (p.213), quot. Orosius, *Historiae*, vol. 3, VII.xxviii.28, p.79 (p.372).

⁹² *Imperatoris Theodosiani Codex xvi*, X.25, pp.466-469; David Hunt, 'Christianising the Roman Empire: the Evidence of the Code', *The Theodosian Code: Studies in the Imperial Law of Late Antiquity*, ed. Jill Harries and Ian Wood (London, 1993), pp.143-158, p.157.

⁹³ *Samuhel*, I.1455-1458, p.46 (p.167).

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, ls.1476-1478, pp.46-47.

Mosaic Law and certain other early Christian writers.⁹⁵ The best example of his wider approach lies in Bede's treatment in the *Historia* of the idol place at old Goodmanham in Deira, to which we now turn.

Old Goodmanham

The place where the idols [*idola*] once stood is still shown, not far from York, to the east, over the River Derwent. Today it is called Goodmanham, the place where the high priest, through the inspiration of the true God, profaned and destroyed the altars [*arae*] which he himself had consecrated.⁹⁶

According to Bede, the idol place at old Goodmanham comprised a single temple, *fanum*, with at least two altars, *arae*, enclosed to form a single complex.⁹⁷ John Blair has persuasively argued that Goodmanham, similar to other idol places in England, formed a square enclosure built over a prehistoric barrow.⁹⁸ The village of Goodmanham occupies an elevated position in the East Riding of Yorkshire and a raised earthen mound would have made the idol place even more visible; moreover, such a substructure would have withstood the conflagration that ruined the complex in the late 620s. Indeed, we might wonder whether Bede was describing a place that he had seen for himself. Goodmanham lies on the road between York (twenty miles to the east) and Beverley (ten miles to the west), making a visit to the village entirely plausible.⁹⁹ Furthermore, Bede believed that the idol place at

⁹⁵ Sulpicius Severus, *Vita Martini*, ed. and trans. Burton, xiii-xv, pp.108-113, compare Aldhelm, *Prosa de uirginitate*, iv.44-49, pp.333, 335 (p.85); Quodvultdeus, *Liber promissionum et praedictorum Dei*, III.xxxviii, pp.182-186.

⁹⁶ *HE*, II.13, pp.184-187. The elevated site lies on the north bank of the Derwent, not far from Edwin's villa, *ibid.*, II.9, pp.164-165. For a recent proposal as to its location, see Glanville R.J. Jones, 'Nuclear Settlement and its Tenorial Relationships: Some Morphological Implications', *Britons, Saxons, and Scandinavians: The Historical Geography of Glanville R.J. Jones*, ed. Paul S. Barnwell and Brian K. Roberts (Turnhout, 2011), pp.211-227, pp.223-227.

⁹⁷ Bede's report of the dialogue between Edwin and Coifi indicates his belief that Northumbria possessed other temples besides the one at old Goodmanham, *HE*, II.13, pp.184-187.

⁹⁸ Blair, 'Shrines and their Prototypes', pp.22-23; Pickles, *Anglo-Saxon Yorkshire*, pp.43-44.

⁹⁹ Morris, *Journeys from Jarrow*, pp.17-18.

Goodmanham possessed an older, pre-Christian name, or he would not have emphasised, ‘Today it is called Goodmanham’.¹⁰⁰

The ruin of old Goodmanham was integral to Bede’s wider narrative of Edwin’s conversion, and thus, in keeping with the theme of conversion in the *Historia*, the wider kingdom of Northumbria.¹⁰¹ Bede credited Edwin’s conversion to the teaching of Paulinus and it was his words that led Coifi, one-time pagan priest of Northumbria and a member of Edwin’s council, to become chief instigator and undertaker of the ruin of old Goodmanham. On listening to Paulinus, Coifi advised Edwin and the council that ‘we should promptly abandon and commit to the flames the temples and altars [*templa et altaria*] which we have held sacred without reaping any benefit.’¹⁰² When Edwin asked Coifi who should ‘profane the altars and temples of the idols, together with the enclosures with which they were surrounded’, Coifi responded:

I will, for through the wisdom the true God has given me no one can more suitably destroy those things which I once foolishly worshipped, and so set an example to all.¹⁰³

Taking Edwin’s stallion and arming himself with spear and sword, Coifi rode to old Goodmanham where he ordered his companions to set fire to the enclosure and its temple. Bede’s claim that stallions and weapons were prohibited for pagan priests emphasised at once the foolishness of the old religion and Coifi’s new-found zeal for ‘the true God’, indeed, as Chris Fern has observed, the high-priest was not so much ‘casting off vain superstitions’ as literally trampling these under royal hooves, impressing royal assent for this venture.¹⁰⁴ The

¹⁰⁰ But see Page, ‘Anglo-Saxon Paganism’, p.119, n.46.

¹⁰¹ *HE*, II.9-14, pp.162-187.

¹⁰² *ibid.*, II.13, pp.184-185.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, pp.184-187; Chris Fern, ‘Horses in Mind’, *Signals of Belief*, pp.128-157, p.145; see also Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, pp.30-31. For the potential relationship of these codes to laws governing priests in first-century Germany, see Tacitus, *Germania*, LCL 35, xl, pp.196-197.

choice of weaponry might hold further significance to English paganism. In *In Samuhelem*, Bede identified Saul's spear as emblematic of the 'power of the kingship', a comment that has little precedent in Scripture and might then derive from his knowledge of Northumbrian emblems of kingship.¹⁰⁵ Bede's report of Coifi's spear throw seems further symbolic: 'As soon as he approached the temple, without any hesitation, he profaned it by casting the spear [*lancea*] which he held into it...'.¹⁰⁶ A highly-trained warrior would struggle to embed a spear into a wooden structure while on horseback, much less a priest who had never before borne arms, and to this end Bede might instead have intended readers to conceive of this spear being thrown over the threshold of the idol place. From the Old Testament, Bede knew that the threshold, *limen*, was sacred in religious infrastructure, and here we might find a further connection between Philistia and England.¹⁰⁷ In Dagon's hands, separated from their limbs and strewn on the threshold of the Azotus temple, Bede perceived the coming to faith of the Gentiles. It was of course Coifi's spear throw that instigated the burning of old Goodmanham, and, as we have stressed on several occasions, Bede firmly believed that convert societies must prove their faith by removing their idols. As Dagon was powerless to prevent his statue falling before the ark, Edwin's god(s) at old Goodmanham proved powerless before the convert Coifi who through Christ the stronger man penetrated with a throw of the convert king's spear whatever strength was bound within the temple and its threshold, thereby inciting the ruin of idolatry that was so critical to true conversion.

¹⁰⁵ *Samuhel*, III.1263-1264, p.166 (p.366), cit. 1 Samuel 18:10c; *ibid.*, IV.1397-1399, p.245 (p.482), cit. 1 Samuel 26:11-12, 22. The spear as symbol of kingship is known from other cultures, including the legend of Romulus (transmitted by Sergius the Grammmarian, fl.c.400, and known to eighth-century authors such as Paul the Deacon), and, from a source that was more likely known to Bede, Gregory of Tours' report of the Merovingian kings Gunthram, d.592, and Childebert, d.596. Cf. Servius, *In Vergilii carmina commentarii*, ed. Thilo and Hagen, 292, ls.21-23, p.108, cit. in Paul the Deacon, *Historia Romana*, ed. Crivellucci, I.ii, ls.13-17, p.12; Gregory, *Historia Francorum*, VII.33, ls.13-15, p.353 (p.416).

¹⁰⁶ *HE*, II.13, pp.184-185.

¹⁰⁷ Exodus 12:1-7, 21-23; 1 Samuel 5:4; Ezekiel 10:4, 18, 43:7-8; Zephaniah 1:9, 2:14.

Julia Barrow has suggested that the spear in this episode formed an intentional inversion of John 19:34, the piercing of Christ's side by a Roman soldier.¹⁰⁸ The water that flowed from Christ's right side (which, as Barrow pointed out, had for Bede an Old Testament precursor in the door on the right side of Solomon's temple) symbolised the forthcoming washing of baptism.¹⁰⁹ Peter Cramer noted the theme of baptismal liturgy begins in Bede's report of the speech of Edwin's unnamed counsellor, where the hitherto slow progression of Edwin to faith found momentum in response to the preaching of Paulinus.¹¹⁰ Yet, Bede reserved the moment of Edwin's conversion for the king's proclamation that the idol places of Northumbria should now be ruined, writing, 'The king publicly accepted the gospel which Paulinus preached, renounced idolatry [*idolatria*], and confessed his faith in Christ.'¹¹¹ In Bede's sequence in the *Historia*, Edwin's words and the subsequent episode where old Goodmanham was burned are placed before the chapter where Edwin's baptism is recorded.¹¹² Thus, it could be said that Bede wished the ruin of old Goodmanham to be read as proof that Northumbria and its royal catechumen Edwin were wholly committed to renouncing the devil, his works, and pomp, and thereby made a true confession of Christ as Lord. This recalls further Bede's Dagon exegesis, where as the head and hands of Dagon lie strewn on the threshold, Bede saw the 'casting aside and banishment of the profession of idolatry and activity of demons' and, in its replacement, the blood of Christ the paschal lamb sprinkled on 'the threshold' of his followers, that is, the hearts of Christians like Edwin, now washed in the blood of Christ and protected by the power of Christ the stronger man.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ Julia Barrow, 'How Coifi Pierced Christ's Side: A Re-Examination of Bede's Ecclesiastical History, II, Chapter 13,' *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 62:4 (2011), pp.693-706, pp.703-704.

¹⁰⁹ *DeTemp.*, I.760-769, p.166 (pp.29-30), quot. 1 Kings 6:8a; quot. with comment in Barrow, 'How Coifi Pierced Christ's Side', pp.703-704.

¹¹⁰ Cramer, *Baptism and Change*, pp.193-200.

¹¹¹ *HE*, II.13, pp.184-185.

¹¹² *ibid.*, II.14, pp.186-187.

¹¹³ *Samuhel*, I.1517-1519, 1537-1545, pp.47-48 (pp.169-170) [em.cit.].

It was Coifi who ruined the idol places, which, as Bede seemed keen to stress, ‘he himself had consecrated.’¹¹⁴ Coifi’s connection with the idolatries at old Goodmanham permits us one further comparison between Northumbria’s conversion and the Dagon passage. In the figure of Dagon’s hands that were strewn on the threshold, Bede commented of ‘the work of idolatry [*opus idolatriae*], which was carried out, as it were, by both the palms, by the profession of ungodliness, and by the rituals of praises and sacrifice’, suggesting that he had in mind hands that performed idolatrous observances.¹¹⁵ Coifi represented the hands of Northumbria’s pantheon, now ‘cut off’ through his own public renunciation, ‘If the gods had any power they would have helped me more readily, seeing that I have always served them with greater zeal ... our religion is worthless’.¹¹⁶ That Alcuin later identified Paulinus as the instigator of old Goodmanham’s ruin emphasises further Bede’s intent to place Coifi at the centre of this episode and its significant ramifications to Northumbrian religion.¹¹⁷

Bede’s report of the ruin of old Goodmanham represents the sole English fulfilment of his Old Testament-inspired treatment of idol places. The site was ruined at once – ‘first the idols are to be abased and without delay utterly destroyed’ – within the exact context that Bede had stipulated his instruction – the ‘uncircumcised who receive the covenant of faith’ – that is, conversion-era Northumbria.¹¹⁸ The site remained visible as a monument to past idolatries, recalling Josiah’s choice to mark Topheth as a similar reminder for Israel. These and other connections seem to indicate a wider relationship between exegesis and history in Bede’s report of idol places in Israel and England. It seems to confirm, too, that even if Coifi had ruined Goodmanham, other sites in Northumbria remained, since Edwin had died before

¹¹⁴ *HE*, II.13, pp.186-187.

¹¹⁵ *Samuהל*, I.1509-1513, p.47 (p.169), compare Isidore, *Reges I*, iii.4, col.395C.

¹¹⁶ *HE*, II.13, pp.182-185.

¹¹⁷ Alcuin, *Versus de Patribus Regibus et Sanctis Euboricensis Ecclesiae*, ed. and trans. Godman, pp.16-21, ls.149-193.

¹¹⁸ *Samuהל*, I.1455-1458, p.46 (p.167).

Eorcenberht came to power and promulgated his laws. Thus, even with the encouragement of Pope Boniface V, Edwin seems to have chosen to preserve at least some Northumbrian idol places.¹¹⁹ This would strengthen the case that Bede's interest in the treatment of idol places was at least partly inspired by his sense that England had retained some of its pagan infrastructure, encouraging him to impress how such sites should be ruined in the model of old Goodmanham.

Gregory the Great: conversion and concession

We can now turn to the view of Gregory the Great, who between June-July 601 sent two letters to England with instruction for its idol places.¹²⁰ On June 22 601, Gregory wrote to the convert Æthelberht, urging him to attend to the eradication of paganism in Kent and its vassal lands: 'Increase your righteous zeal for their conversion; suppress the worship of idols; overthrow their temples [*fana*] and shrines [*aedificia*]'.¹²¹ On July 18 601, Gregory sent fresh word to Abbot Mellitus and his missionaries who had left Rome not long before in order to reinforce the Augustinian party in Kent,

... tell him [Augustine] what I have decided after long deliberation about the English people, namely that the idol temples [*fana idolorum*] of that race should by no means be destroyed, but only the idols [*idola*] in them. Take holy water and sprinkle it in these temples [*fana*], build altars [*altaria*] and place relics in them. For if the temples [*fana*] are well built [*bene constructa*], it is essential that they should be changed from the worship of devils [*cultus daemonum*] to the service of the true God.¹²²

¹¹⁹ *HE*, II.10, pp.168-169.

¹²⁰ Gregory, *Registrum*, XI.xxxvii, pp.929-932 (pp.782-784), quot. in *HE*, I.32, pp.112-113; *ibid.*, XI.lvi, pp.961-962 (pp.802-803), quot. in *HE*, I.30, pp.106-109. For discussion, see Russell, *Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*, pp.183-192.

¹²¹ Gregory, *Registrum*, XI.xxxvii.12-14, p.930 (p.783).

¹²² *ibid.*, XI.lvi.8-14, p.961 (pp.802-803).

The Mellitus letter also permitted the English to ‘construct huts [*tabernacula*] from the branches of trees around the churches which have been converted’, i.e., the former idol temples, with the huts to be used as shelters during Christian festivals.¹²³ Moreover, Gregory allowed the slaughter of cattle at these festivals since the English had been ‘in the habit of slaughtering much cattle as sacrifices to devils’, only now, cattle were to be slaughtered with the proviso that the Christ God should be thanked as provider.¹²⁴ These various points reveal Gregory’s knowledge of English paganism, perhaps learned via the missionaries Laurence and Peter, who, having returned to Rome in summer 601, met Gregory and thereafter travelled back to England as part of Mellitus’ party.¹²⁵

In writing to Mellitus, Gregory instructed that it was only the structure of *bene constructa fana* which should be transformed to Christian use.¹²⁶ Therefore, Gregory still required idols within English idol places to be ruined, so too *fana* of lesser build and all *aedificia*, meaning that his concession was extremely limited.¹²⁷ Gregory’s *Dialogi*, completed 593, provides a precedent in relation to the idol places at Cassino near Rome. There, Benedict (c.480-550) broke an idol and altar, cut down the sacred groves, and transformed Apollo’s temple into a chapel to St. Martin, while another chapel to John the Baptist was erected over the ruined altar.¹²⁸ For Miriam Adan Jones, Gregory’s concessions were intended to target prospective converts, but it is doubtful whether English pagans would find benefit in a religion that broke

¹²³ Gregory, *Registrum*, XI.lvi.18-22, pp.961-962 (p.803), compare *VCP*, xxxii, pp.256-259.

¹²⁴ *ibid.*, ls.16-18, 22-24.

¹²⁵ R.A. Markus, ‘Gregory the Great and a Papal Missionary Strategy’, *The Mission of the Church and the Propagation of the Faith*, ed. G.J. Cuming (Cambridge, 1970), pp.29-38, pp.32-36; Fabrizio Conti, ‘Gregorio Magno e gli Anglosassoni: Considerazioni sullo sviluppo di una strategia missionaria’, *Studi Romani* 53:3-4 (2005), pp.460-481, pp.478-480.

¹²⁶ Gregory, *Registrum*, XI.lvi.12, p.961 (p.803). Philippon noted the likelihood that these sites possessed some form of roofing, meaning they were substantial structures, *Germanisches Heidentum*, p.185.

¹²⁷ Gregory, *Registrum*, XI.lvi.10, p.961 (p.802); but see, in opposition to this view, Campbell, ‘Religion in Early England’, p.69; Miriam Adan Jones, ‘Conversion as Convergence: Gregory the Great confronting Pagan and Jewish Influences in Anglo-Saxon Christianity’, *Pagans and Christians in the Late Roman Empire: New Evidence, New Approaches (4th-8th centuries)*, ed. Marianne Sághy and Edward M. Schoolman (Budapest, 2017), pp.151-163, p.152.

¹²⁸ Gregory, *Dialogorum libri*, SC 260, II.viii.10, pp.166-169 (trans. Zimmerman, p.74).

their sacred images, much less one that further desecrated holy sites with the infrastructure of a foreign god.¹²⁹ As Flora Spiegel put it, Gregory intended his concessions for ‘newly-converted Anglo-Saxons’.¹³⁰ In particular, Gregory wished Æthelberht to prove his faith by eradicating paganism in his territories. George Demacopoulos felt otherwise, finding the letter to Æthelberht a call to faith and not the ruin of paganism, but this overlooks that these were complementary instructions, something that Augustine and Bede observed in the faith-inspired iconoclasm of Hezekiah and Josiah.¹³¹ The view that Gregory’s instruction for English idol places was more lenient than his treatment of paganism in Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica, seems to neglect the distinct context between these societies.¹³² The Mediterranean idolaters were no new converts but instead Christians who had reverted to paganism and thus required a stern correction that might have been considered inappropriate for the English convert coming to terms with Christianity.

From Rome, Gregory shared with Mellitus his vision of the English convert as the pilgrim who ‘rises by steps and degrees and not by leaps’ and he obviously felt the concession over idol places would encourage the English to sustain their new faith.¹³³ The same letter reveals that Gregory had ruminated over at least two Old Testament passages in Leviticus 17:1-9 and 23:34-44.¹³⁴ Leviticus 17:1-9 implied that God had permitted Israel to retain the sacrificial

¹²⁹ Jones, ‘Conversion as Convergence’, pp.151-152f.

¹³⁰ Flora Spiegel, ‘The *tabernacula* of Gregory the Great and the conversion of Anglo-Saxon England’, *ASE* 36 (2007), pp.1-13, p.1. Russell, too, stressed that these seem to have been ‘an initial accommodation’, *Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*, p.209.

¹³¹ Demacopoulos also stressed instances where Gregory censured those who ruined ‘non-Christian shrines’, but these were Jewish, not pagan sites. Robert Markus, whom Demacopoulos criticised, had earlier pointed out the differences between the Gregorian treatment of Jews and Christians, George E. Demacopoulos, ‘Gregory the Great and the Pagan Shrines of Kent’, *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1:2 (2008), pp.353-369; *idem*, *Gregory the Great: Ascetic, Pastor, and First Man of Rome* (Notre Dame, IN, 2015), pp.144-146; compare R.A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and his World* (Cambridge, 1997), pp.76-82; see also Augustine, *Epistula CLXXXV*, in *S. Aureli Augustini Epistulae, Pars IV*, CSEL 57, 19.18-2, pp.17-18 (trans. Teske, p.190).

¹³² Jones, ‘Conversion as Convergence’, p.150.

¹³³ Gregory, *Registrum*, XI.lvi.25-28, p.962 (p.803).

¹³⁴ *ibid.*, ls.28-34. See also Bruno Judic, ‘Le corbeau et la sauterelle. L’application des instructions de Grégoire le Grand pour la transformation des temples païens en églises : études de cas’, *Impies et païens entre Antiquité et Moyen Age*, ed. Lionel Mary and Michel Sot (Nanterre, 2002), pp.97-125, pp.98-103.

rite in Egyptian pagan religion, commanding the people to: stop conducting their own sacrifices (vv.3-4); take victims to the priest (vv.5-6); make no further sacrifices “to devils, with whom they [Israel] have committed fornication” (v.7). Gregory seems to have seen this passage as offering precedent for English idol places becoming churches; nonetheless, his was not a universal interpretation. Theodoret of Cyrus, c.393-c.460, stressed that the animals to be sacrificed were held sacred in Egypt, thus, their offering insulted Egyptian paganism and reinforced its separation with Israelite religion.¹³⁵ Augustine, in a passage critical to the Christian concept of sacrifice, had warned against the literal reading of sacrifice in the Old Testament, observing: ‘Visible sacrifice is a sacrament, that is a sacred sign, of an invisible sacrifice’, contending that God wished not for burnt offerings but ‘the contrite heart’.¹³⁶ Bede seemed to hold to the Theodoret-Augustine view rather than Gregory’s, as suggested in his own teachings concerning the bread offerings of Leviticus 2:4 and the figural sacrifice of Christ and the Christian.¹³⁷

The commands in Leviticus 23:34-44 instituted the feast of tabernacles wherein the Israelites were ordered to construct small tabernacles or huts and reside in these for a week in order to commemorate the Hebrews’ liberation from Egypt. Gregory seemed to think that English pagans made similar huts for their own festivals, indeed, Spiegel has made a compelling case that similar structures were built at Yeavinger.¹³⁸ Gregory’s suggestion that these huts be constructed within the perimeter of the transformed idol places might mean that the ‘well-built temples’ that Gregory had in mind were located in or near to woodland, presenting, as

¹³⁵ Theodoret of Cyrus, *Quaestiones in Leuiticum*, ed. and. trans. Petruccione and Hill, vol. 2, I.i, pp.2-5.

¹³⁶ Augustine seems to have based part of this thought on Theodoret’s material, but improved on the latter’s teaching by referring readers to relevant verses from Scripture, cf. Psalm 50(51):18-19(16-17); Psalm 49(50):12-14; Micah 6:6-8; Matthew 9:13; 12:7, quot. in *DCD*, X.5-7, pp.276-280 (pp.309-312; *emend.*) [em.cit.].

¹³⁷ *Exp.Actuum*, vii.90-91, p.36 (p.73), quot. Jerome, *In Amos*, II.v.847-848, p.296 (p.361); *Homelia* ii.19, ls.155-223, pp.322-324 (pp.193-196); *Ezra-Neemia*, III.1733-1760, pp.382-383 (pp.214-215) [em.cit.]; compare Jerome, *Hieremias*, II.xlv.4, p.84 (p.54).

¹³⁸ Spiegel, ‘Gregory and the conversion of England’, pp.6-9, cit. Hope-Taylor, *Yeavinger*, pp.100-102, 278.

Philipppson pointed out, a link with first-century Germany.¹³⁹ In contrast, Miriam Adan Jones found Gregory's proposals less a concession than a reflection of his belief that the spiritual ascent began with 'a "Jewish" kind of faith', with God recognised as 'Lawgiver' but not 'beloved Saviour'.¹⁴⁰ Jones may have overstated her interpretation of what she expressed as an 'importation' of a Jewish custom into the English conversion process. The Mellitus letter had proposed but one Jewish element due to its specific relationship with the insular use of wood for idol places; moreover, there exists little sense that Gregory found Jewishness the appropriate starting point for the English spiritual ascent.¹⁴¹

Few scholars have considered Bede's impression of Gregory's instruction, but it seems significant that the Northumbrian felt it more critical than the apostle to England for pagan converts to make a clear separation with the past. Converts must renounce idolatrous belief and observance, to borrow Gregory's pilgrim image, both to begin their spiritual ascent and ensure its progress without obstruction from the past. Bede could even have felt the Gregorian concession over 'well-constructed *fana*' had made reversion more straightforward – the transformed idol place was easier to restore than a ruined site – that is, if this concession were implemented on a scale large enough for Bede to judge its long-term consequence. Certainly, Bede's opposition to Gregory's concession over 'well-constructed *fana*' seems evident in his treatment of English idol places and in particular the site at old Goodmanham – a complex which might be presumed to have met the Gregorian criteria for transformation. His opposition could even be implied in his non-chronological arrangement of Gregory's letters to Æthelberht and Mellitus. In the *Historia*, Bede placed the Mellitus letter with its

¹³⁹ Philipppson, *Germanisches Heidentum*, p.183, cit. Tacitus, *Germania*, xxxix-xl, pp.194-197.

¹⁴⁰ Jones, 'Conversion as Convergence', pp.151-153, 158, 162-163.

¹⁴¹ As Jones pointed out, Gregory himself opposed reading too much into the literal sense of Scripture, *ibid.*, pp.152-153.

concessions before the earlier letter to Æthelberht, meaning he left readers with his own ideal programme – the overthrow of all temples and shrines in convert societies.¹⁴²

The Pantheon

Bede's treatment of what he called *templum Romae, quod Pantheon uocabatur ab antiquis*, 'the temple at Rome anciently known as the Pantheon', is highly significant since it represents the sole idol place that he reported was converted into a church.¹⁴³ Bede mentioned the Pantheon in *De temporum ratione* and *Historia*, commenting in the former how, in 610,

[Emperor Phocas] ... responding to a request of Pope Boniface, ordered that a church should be constructed in the former temple called the Pantheon, with the stains of idolatry removed, and dedicated to the blessed and ever virgin Mary and all the martyrs; so that where once the worship, not of all the gods but rather of all the demons had taken place, there should thenceforth be a memorial to all the saints.¹⁴⁴

This was not the first such transformation of a religious building in Rome. In the *Liber Pontificalis* (known to Bede), it is recorded how Pope Felix VI (r.526-530) converted the *lararium* within the *Templum Sacrae Urbis* into a church for Sts. Cosmas and Damian.¹⁴⁵ The Pantheon's transformation remained, nevertheless, a seismic change in the site that Hadrian

¹⁴² Bede inserted other letters of Gregory's outside their chronological order (compare *HE*, I.27, pp.78-103, with I.31, pp.108-111), but none of these presented a revised papal opinion.

¹⁴³ *HE*, II.4, pp.148-149.

¹⁴⁴ *DTR*, lxvi.1780-1784, p.523 (p.227), compare *HE*, II.4, pp.148-149, both cit. *LP*, lxi.3-4, p.317 (p.61); *HE*, II.4, pp.148-149. As Conor O'Brien noted, Bede embellished the report from the *Liber Pontificalis* with 'a triumphalist contrast between the old (pagan) and new (Christian) religions', 'Wilfrid's Restoration of the Church at York and the Permanence of Sacred Buildings in Post-Conversion Northumbria', *Architectural Representation in Medieval and Textual and Material Culture*, ed. Hannah M. Bailey et al. (Leeds, 2023), pp.41-56, pp.47-48. For the transmission of Bede's report of the Pantheon's conversion in later medieval chronicles, see Tilmann Buddensieg, 'Criticism and Praise of the Pantheon in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance', *Classical Influences on European Culture A.D. 500-1500: Proceedings of an International Conference Held at Kings College, Cambridge, April 1969*, ed. R.R. Bolgar (Cambridge, 1971), pp.259-267, pp.259-260.

¹⁴⁵ *LP*, lvi.3-4, p.279 (p.49), cit. in R.P.C. Hanson, 'The Transformation of Pagan Temples into Churches in the Early Christian Centuries', *Journal of Semitic Studies* 23:2 (1978), pp.257-267, p.264.

had first dedicated to the gods nearly five centuries beforehand.¹⁴⁶ While Bede restated Jerome's erroneous identification of Domitian as the builder, no such confusion prevailed over the site's purpose: 'it was to be the dwelling-place of all the gods.'¹⁴⁷ His comment in the *Historia* as to how, when the site was transformed, 'abominations', *spurcitia*, of 'many devils', *daemonia multa*, were 'expelled' and 'driven out' recalls some of his language from the Dagon exegesis and Cuthbert's exorcism of the 'evil spirits' on Farne.¹⁴⁸

Bede's sources informed him of Pantheon's impressive structure. He reported, for instance, that the site had survived a lightning strike in 113 (though he ignored Orosius' claim that this was punishment for Trajan's persecution of Christians).¹⁴⁹ A visual report from Nothhelm might easily have supplemented Bede's written sources. The former could have visited the Pantheon as it sat only a few kilometres northwest of the archives at the Lateran Palace. Elsewhere, Bede praised as 'marvellous' the standards of 'Roman workmanship', and he must have realised that the Pantheon had been well-constructed from robust materials.¹⁵⁰ Its scale could have led Bede to write in favour of its transformation but perhaps a more likely reason was his impression of the spiritual landscape in early seventh-century Rome. Roughly three centuries of Christian consolidation had taken place between Constantine's conversion from 'persecutor to Christian' and the Pantheon's renovation, meaning, Rome could securely turn an idol place into a Christian place of worship without fear of reversion.¹⁵¹ This interpretation seems in keeping with Bede's wider interest in the treatment of idol places in

¹⁴⁶ Hugo Brandenburg [trans. Andreas Kropp], *Ancient Churches of Rome from the Fourth to the Seventh Century: The Dawn of Christian Architecture in the West* (Turnhout, 2005), pp.233-234; Erik Thunø, 'The Pantheon in the Middle Ages', *The Pantheon: From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Tod A. Marder and Mark Wilson Jones (Cambridge, 2015; rpt. 2018), pp.231-254, p.232ff.

¹⁴⁷ *DTR*, lxvi.1114-1116, p.499 (p.201), cit. Jerome, *Chronicon*, ls.1-8, p.191.

¹⁴⁸ *HE*, II.4, pp.148-149, compare *Samuhel*, I.1509-1514, 1517-1519, pp.47-48 (p.169); *VSC*, xvii, pp.214-217.

¹⁴⁹ *DTR*, lxvi.1114-1115, p.499 (p.201), cit. Jerome, *Chronicon*, ls.26, p.195; compare Orosius, *Historiae*, vol. 3, VII.xii.1-5, pp.43-44 (pp.342-343).

¹⁵⁰ *VSC*, xvii, pp.242-245; Andrew Wallace, *The Presence of Rome in Medieval and Early Modern Britain: Texts, Artefacts and Beliefs* (Cambridge, 2020), pp.28-41.

¹⁵¹ *DTR*, lxvi.1398, p.509 (p.212), ls.1780-1784, p.523 (p.227) [em.cit.].

convert societies, most especially his own, and perhaps best explains why Bede thought it had been a sound choice to convert the old temple in celebration of the martyrs who had perished under Rome's former pagan emperors.

Conclusion

Bede's treatment of *loca idolorum* reveals his adaptation of the Mosaic Law to suit the particular contexts of early medieval Christian societies, most especially, England. He resolutely believed that convert societies must remove their former idol places at once, prevent their return, and punish those who sought to restore their cult. The strength of this emotion was based on his reading of how Israelite idol places such as Topheth, Mount Scandal, and the iconography to the sun god in Jerusalem had led to Israel's exile, and, in relation to England, how the choice to either transform idol places or simply leave them in situ had enabled reversion to idolatry. In this respect, we might consider Bede's responses to Nothhelm concerning Topheth, Mount Scandal, and the Jerusalem temple as a stimulus to contemporary English treatments of pagan infrastructure, impressing the threat of idol places and the need to remove these from Christian lands.

Plainly, Bede sought to influence others in England, most notably, Acca and Nothhelm, perhaps also Ceolwulf, in relation to the correct treatment of idol places. His sustained interest in the correct treatment of pagan infrastructure should not be consigned to a curiosity for the past, but can instead be read as one of several immediate fears that Bede held towards England's relationship with idolatrous belief and observance. His report of the English conversion signalled that several kingdoms had not removed their idol places and that certain sites remained in situ as a threat to the continued work needed to consolidate Christ's rule

over each member of the *gens Anglorum*. Indeed, Nothhelm's shared interest in this subject could indicate that Eorcenberht's legislation, similar to the laws of Theodosius I, had not been carried out and that fresh impetus was needed to recapture the Josiah-like reforms of Æthelberht's grandson. The wider influence of Eorcenberht's law code on Bede should not be overlooked here, certainly, it seems Bede had this Kentish legislation in mind when preparing several exegetical passages. Similarly, Bede's rejection of Gregory the Great's concession concerning 'well-constructed *fana*' seems to strengthen the case that he saw idol places as an enduring obstacle to the consolidation of faith in England. Notwithstanding Bede's opposition, we would be unwise to see Bede as a critic of Gregory. Both men wished the English to progress in Christian faith and it seems best to see each as a product of their own time. In conversion-era England, Gregory believed that his concessions would help the English cling to their new faith. Bede, in contrast, saw first-hand what appear to have been issues with residual idolatrous belief and observance which seems to have strengthened his conviction that England's pagan past must be consigned to the flames that had enveloped old Goodmanham and prefigured Gehenna. Bede himself was open to concessions from the letter of the Old Testament law – shown in his belief that only idol places in convert societies, not pagan societies, should be ruined – and this nuance should be remembered when taking his own stance on Gregory and English idol places into consideration.

Bede's exemption of the Pantheon can be explained by virtue of his recognition that the Roman people had long since converted to Christianity. Its case nowhere encourages a wider permission on Bede's part, indeed, while he had opportunities to praise other transformed sites, he never chose to do so. Instead, his impulse throughout his writings was to promote a programme for the immediate and total ruin of idol places in convert societies. As he stressed when concluding his condemnation of Caligula's blasphemous intent to transform the

Jerusalem temple into an idol place, 'There is indeed no end of speaking about these things concerning the degeneration of religion ... until they are utterly destroyed.'¹⁵²

¹⁵² *Samuhel*, IV.1484-1486, p.247 (p.485).

Chapter Three: Idol makers

Bede's thought about those who made idols owed much to Psalm 134(135):15-18 and its parallel in Psalm 113(115):12-16(4-8). As we saw in the Introduction, Bede in his passage 'Christ strangles the strange gods' taught his reader how the Psalmist David had exposed the fallacies of the idol and its maker,

Idola gentium argentum et aurum opera manuum hominum
 The idols of the Gentiles are silver and gold, the works of men's hands
os habent et non loquentur oculos habent et non videbunt
 They have mouths and speak not, they have eyes and see not
ures habent et non audient sed nec spiritus in ore eorum
 They have ears and hear not, nor is there breath in their mouth
similes illis fiant qui faciunt ea omnis qui confidit in eis.
 Let them that make them become like them, every one that trusts in them.¹

David's verdict was then perfectly sensible to Bede.² Idol makers who made and worshipped what was precious but insensible matter became themselves insensible, for how, Bede plainly reckoned, could mortal hands make something divine? Error begot error. Indeed, Bede on occasion repeated one Old Testament expression for idol makers, "fashioners of errors", *fabricatores errorum*, which he extended to encompass, figuratively speaking, wicked teachers and the spiritually blind.³

¹ Psalm 134(135):15-18 [*Ps. Hebraicum*]; part. quot. in *Samuhel*, III.787-788, p.155 (pp.348-349). Bede quoted up to and including the first part of verse sixteen, but his addition of *et cetera* indicated his wish for readers to take note of the following verses too. In Hurst's edition, so too DeGregorio and Love's translation, the reference is to Psalm 113(115):12-13(4-5). However, the noun *idola* reveals Bede's employment of the *Psalterium Hebraicum* – the *Gallicanum* (Vulgate) and *Romanum* read *simulacra* – and, when comparing in the *Hebraicum* Psalms 113:12-13a with 134:15-16a, we find that *opus* (113:12b) becomes *opera* (134:15b). As Bede had written *opera*, he must then have been quoting Psalm 134:15-16a from the *Psalterium Hebraicum*. See 'Introduction', p.17, n.83.

² Psalm 134(135):18a; *Lucas*, I.2310-2312, p.78 (p.191), quot. Gregory, *Homiliae in Euangelia*, CCSL 141, XX.ix.170-172, p.160 (trans. Hurst, p.41) [hereafter, *Hom. Euangelia*]; compare 2 Kings 19:18; 2 Chronicles 32:19b; Wisdom 13:10; Isaiah 37:19; Baruch 6:50-51.

³ Isaiah 45:16b; *Samuhel*, II.249-250, p.74 (p.213), II.1088-1096, p.94 (p.250) [em.cit.], compare Jerome, *Esaias*, XIII.xlv.14/17.40-41, p.512 (p.593).

In his writings, Bede stressed the contrast between idol makers and the made idol with the Christian Creator God and Creationism. Thus, in his homily for the Chair of St. Peter, Bede took inspiration from his text, Matthew 16:13-16, and its record of Peter's statement to Jesus, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God", commenting thereafter,

He called him the living God to distinguish him from the false gods [*dei falsi*] which the gentile world, deluded by various errors, had established for themselves out of dead men [*homines mortui*], or, by a greater madness, had created from insensible matter [*materia insensibilis*] (gods) whom they could adore. Concerning them it is chanted in the psalm, *The images of the Gentiles are silver and gold, the works of men's hands. They have mouths and speak not*, and so forth.⁴

As we have already seen, Bede translated the Scriptural treatment of idol makers into an English context. This is plain from the two passages in Bede's *Historia* where it might be possible to identify idol makers in seventh-century England, even if Bede wrote only the second of these. The first belonged to Pope Boniface V, who in 625 wrote to the pagan Edwin and robustly criticised the king's irrational belief in idols with close reference to several Old Testament passages.⁵ How, Boniface probed, could Edwin believe in idols 'made from corruptible material by the hands of your own servants and subject', manufactured 'by means of human craft ... with the inanimate likeness of human form.'⁶ Edwin's idols, Boniface continued, 'cannot walk unless you move them, but are like a stone fixed in one place.'⁷ Boniface's letter claimed that Edwin's idols were free-standing – lending support to the view of some scholars that the substantial posts that once stood at Edwin's palace at Yeavinger had

⁴ *Homelia* i.20, p.142, ll.48-52 (p.198; *emen.*), quot. Psalm 113(115):12-13a(4-5a); compare Jerome, *Matheus*, III.40-43, p.140 (pp.190-191); Augustine, *Sermo* XXIV, 2, pp.326-327 (pp.72-73) [em.cit.].

⁵ Peter Hunter Blair, 'The letters of Pope Boniface V and the mission of Paulinus to Northumbria', *England before the Conquest: Studies in Primary Sources presented to Dorothy Whitelock*, ed. Peter Clemoes and Kathleen Hughes (Cambridge, 1971; rpt. 2010), pp.5-13, p.8f; O'Reilly, 'Islands and idols at the ends of the earth', pp.43-44.

⁶ Boniface continued, 'The great guilt of those who cling to the pernicious superstitions of idolatrous worship is seen in the damnable form of their gods', *HE*, II.10, pp.168-171.

⁷ *HE*, II.10, pp.170-171.

some religious function – and, intriguingly, bore ‘the likeness of the human form’ – perhaps recalling Bede’s criticism of ‘dead men’ in his homily on the Chair of St. Peter. Boniface’s simile need not indicate that Northumbria had stone idols; indeed, ‘corruptible material’ could refer to the wood that formed the construction materials at old Goodmanham.

Bede’s contribution to what little is known of English idol makers may indicate that wood, stone, and metal were the idol materials of preference in England. Observing how Oswiu, King of Northumbria between 642-670, had reproached the East Saxon king Sigeberht for his worship of idols, Bede reported,

[Oswiu] used to urge Sigeberht ... to realise that objects created by the hands of men⁸ could not be gods. Neither wood nor stone were materials from which gods could be created,⁹ the remnants of which were either burned in the fire, made into vessels for men’s use, or else cast out as refuse, trodden underfoot, and reduced to dust.¹⁰

Bede also had Oswiu impress to Sigeberht the Christian teaching that God was ‘omnipotent, eternal, Creator of heaven and earth and of mankind’, and, impressing this point to his East Saxon counterpart, stated, ‘We must believe that His eternal abode is in heaven, not in base and perishable metal [*uile et caducum metallum*].’¹¹ Bede’s expression *uile et caducum metallum* has no known source to explain it and seems to suggest a metal overlay within which an idol might be seen as ‘housed’, or, for Bede (and in turn, Oswiu), ‘trapped’, serving a further contrast between God in heaven and the idol confined in base material.

⁸ Psalm 113(115):12b(4b), 134(135):15b.

⁹ Colgrave and Mynors (*HE*, p.282, n.1) suggested that Bede was inspired by Isaiah 44:9-19, but the prophet spoke only of wood and metal, not stone. This reference should also include the twentieth verse in Isaiah 44.

¹⁰ *HE*, III.22, pp.280-283, cit. Isaiah 44:9-20; compare Jerome, *Esaias*, XII.xliv.6/20.45-116, pp.497-500 (pp.579-581). Bede’s verb *creare* appears intended to invoke Genesis 1:1, *In principio creauit Deus...*, and I have therefore translated *creandi* as ‘created’ instead of Colgrave and Mynors’ ‘made’.

¹¹ *HE*, III.22, pp.282-283.

Bede's account of Oswiu's words seems to have been based on either Psalm 113 or 134 and Boniface's letter to Edwin, suggesting that he himself knew little of English idol makers. However, he could have something more to contribute here. His examination of named idol makers from Scripture represents one part of his wider concern with strange gods and idolatry and he might have supposed a connection between these, the English idol maker, and other craftsmen in England who specialised in the materials of the idol maker. The transition from pagan to Christian in England was slower for certain craftsmen, who, while ceasing to create or maintain English idols and idol places, continued to memorialise pagan themes in various media.¹² Bede expressed a particular concern with fine metalworkers, and, albeit to lesser extent, the product of their craft. Indeed, it seems that Bede's issue with English fine metalworking would in turn influence his rather critical exegetical treatment of even God-ordained fine metalworkers from Scripture.

Metalworking in Scripture and the idol maker

Tubal-Cain

It was in Genesis, the book of so many beginnings, where Bede learned the origins of metalwork and other craftsmanship, including, it seems, idol making. In Genesis chapter four, Bede read of the first children – Adam and Eve's sons Cain and Abel – as well as the first murder when Cain, overcome with envy, slew his younger brother.¹³ The Lord marked the fratricide Cain with the curse that his posterity would later perish – later fulfilled in the flood

¹² For example, see the various studies under the heading 'Pagan into Christian' in Leslie Webster and Janet Backhouse, ed., *The Making of England: Anglo-Saxon Art and Culture AD 600-900* (London, 1991), pp.15-37; Hawkes, 'Symbolic Lives', pp.311-344.

¹³ Genesis 4:1-8.

in the time of Noah.¹⁴ However, before the flood, Lamech, the sixth generation from Cain, bore three sons between his wives Adah and Zilla, who in Genesis 4:20-22b were each credited with the invention of a craft or trade. Adah bore Jabal (“father of those who dwell in tents and of herdsmen”) and Jubal (“father of those that play the harp and pipe”), while Zillah bore “Tubal-Cain, who was a smith in every work of iron and brass [*qui fuit malleator in cuncta opera ferri et aeris*].”¹⁵ Bede’s comments in his exegesis of this passage in Book One of *In Genesim* reveal his conviction that Tubal-Cain was the first metalworker.¹⁶ In contrast, Elizabeth Coatsworth and Michael Pinder have argued that Bede found credible the report in the Book of Enoch as to how the fallen angel Azazel imparted the wisdom of metalworking to mortals.¹⁷ However, Bede rejected this work as apocryphal and never mentioned Azazel in his writings.¹⁸

Patristic writers held one of two interpretations concerning Tubal-Cain. For some, the crafts or trades of Jabal, Jubal, and perhaps most of all, Tubal-Cain, revealed how God provided for mortal need amid the harsh post-Eden climate. Thus, John Chrysostom, c.347-407, observed, ‘See how stage by stage the things necessary for the well-being of the human race were provided for’.¹⁹ The Christian poet Victorius, fl.425-455, echoed this sense in *Alethia*, a paraphrase of Genesis 1-4, hailing metallurgy as proof of ‘the help of God’.²⁰ Against this view, Augustine considered the inventions of Tubal-Cain and his siblings as tainted through their association with Cain, influenced, it seems, from criticisms of the latter in the New

¹⁴ Genesis 4:9-12, 7:17-24. The passing of Cain’s line served Bede a figure for the destruction of all evildoers in the end times, *Genesis*, II.499-508, pp.86-87 (p.155).

¹⁵ Genesis 4:20-22b, quot. in *Genesis*, II.519-524, p.87 (p.156).

¹⁶ The four books of Bede’s commentary *In Genesim* were completed in several stages, with Kendall proposing c.717-718 for Book One, c.720 for Book Two, and c.722-725 for Books Three to Four, ‘Introduction’ to *Bede: On Genesis*, pp.45-53.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Coatsworth and Michael Pinder, *The Art of the Anglo-Saxon Goldsmith: Fine Metalwork in Anglo-Saxon England: its Practice and Practitioners* (Woodbridge, 2002), pp.196-203, especially 200, cit. Enoch 6-7.

¹⁸ *Epist. Catholicae*, Iud.219-228, p.340 (pp.249-250), cit. Jerome, *De Viris Illustribus*, iv.1, pp.80-81 (p.11).

¹⁹ John Chrysostom, *Sermo XX*, in *Sermones in Genesim*, PG 53, ii, col.168 (trans. Hill, p.38).

²⁰ Victorius, *Alethia*, CCSL 128, II.111-162, pp.151-153 (trans. Kuhnmuensch, pp.334-339).

Testament.²¹ In Book Fifteen of *De ciuitate Dei*, ‘On the two branches of the human race’, Augustine stressed how Cain and his offspring, both literal and figural, inhabited the ‘earthly city’, while blessed Abel, his brother Seth, and the rest of the righteous inhabited the ‘City of God’.²²

In his own interpretation of Tubal-Cain in *In Genesim*, Bede elected to follow the Augustinian path, resulting in a sharp criticism of Lamech’s sons, or, as Bede labelled them, the ‘children of the curse’: ‘All these things which the sons of Lamech are said to have invented and done pertain to the refinement, embellishment and charms of this life.’²³ Bede’s ensuing exegesis reserved especial condemnation for Tubal-Cain and his craft of metalworking, beginning with his comment,

Anyone who truly contemplates all the works that are made with skill from *brass and iron* clearly learns that if the human race kept the natural law correctly, even after being driven from the joys of paradise by the sin of the transgression, it would not have had need for any of these things at all.²⁴

These comments indicate that Bede conceived of Tubal-Cain as a fine metalworker and weapons-maker – something he implied later on in this passage.²⁵ It is obvious that Bede felt both skills entirely superfluous within the natural law of God. He did admit that certain Israelites had been instructed in ‘*every work of brass and iron*, as well as of silver and gold’, but then immediately underscored the exceptional nature of their example – God had bestowed skills on these fine metalworkers in order to facilitate the construction and

²¹ 1 John 3:12; Jude 1:11a.

²² Augustine, *DCD*, XV.1.15-61, pp.453-454 (pp.139-140), XV.17, pp.479-480 (pp.164-165); compare John Cassian, *Collationes*, VIII.xxi.2-9, pp.28-31 (pp.305-307).

²³ *Genesis*, II.524-526, 537, pp.87-88 (p.156).

²⁴ *ibid.*, II.532-536, pp.87-88 (p.156), cit. Genesis 4:22b.

²⁵ Josephus had earlier described Tubal-Cain as both a warrior and metalworker, perhaps influencing Bede’s interpretation here. See *Antiquitates*, I.ii.2.64; John Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition: Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the First Sibling Rivalry* (Leiden, 2011), pp.144-145.

decoration of the tabernacle.²⁶ Against weapons-makers, Bede invoked one of Isaiah's Messianic prophecies,

And the Prophet, preaching the joys of the Lord's Incarnation, foretold that the injurious works of iron would be destroyed and turned to better uses, saying, *and they shall turn their swords into ploughshares and their spears into sickles; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they be exercised any more to war.*²⁷

Bede's opposition to fine metalworking is emphasised in his remark as to how 'the wicked', i.e., Tubal-Cain and the rest of Cain's line, had perished in the flood when, among other vices, 'they began to work hard at craftsmen's skills'.²⁸ Therefore, he stressed, readers should take heed of this lesson for their own lives, with Bede now pointing to the forthcoming return of Christ – 'we must be resourceful in taking care lest the last day find us entangled beyond measure in things of this kind.'²⁹ Earlier in his exegetical career, Bede had provided a similar caution in *Expositio Apocalypseos* when examining the report of Babylon's final ruin from Revelation 18:21-23. According to John, Babylon's ruin would precipitate the collapse of craftsmanship, including metalwork, leading Bede to comment, 'All these things, he (John) says, which pertain to the ease of enjoyment of human life, are taken from the wicked.'³⁰ Bede's wording seems to presage his later comment about the inventions of the sons of Lamech in *In Genesim*, which were nothing other than refinements, embellishment, and

²⁶ *Genesis*, II.551-553, p.88 (p.157) [em.cit.].

²⁷ *ibid.*, ls.553-558, quot. Isaiah 2:4bc. In *In Lucam*, Bede tied the peace of Augustus' reign to the birth of Christ, "the prince of peace", *Lucas*, I.1022-1041, p.45 (p.149), quot. Isaiah 2:2, 4-5, cit. Isaiah 9:6, and Orosius, *Historiae*, vol. 2, VI.xx.4-8, pp.227-229 (pp.309-310), VI.xxii.9, pp.236-237 (p.316); compare *DTR*, lxvi.971-978, p.495 (p.195) [em.cit.]; *Homelia* i.6, ls.1-44, pp.37-38 (pp.52-54) [em.cit.].

²⁸ *Genesis*, II.558-562, p.88 (p.157). Here, it is interesting to note that Bede never repeated the teaching of John Cassian, who had claimed that Ham, Noah's second son (Genesis 5:31b), had engraved 'superstitions and sacrilegious and profane arts ... on plates of various kinds of metal which could not be ruined by water exposure, and on very hard stone', thereby preserving these 'wicked arts' when all else was destroyed in the flood, *Collationes*, VIII.xxi.7, p.30 (p.307).

²⁹ *Genesis*, II.562-569, p.88 (p.157), quot. Matthew 24:38-39.

³⁰ *Apocalypsis*, xxxiii.22-23, p.487 (p.242), cit. Tyconius, *Expositio Apocalypseos*, VI.38.8-9, p.213; compare *Genesis*, II.524-526, p.87 (p.156).

charms.³¹ Thus, in *In Genesim*, Bede traced the wicked origins of the superfluous craft of fine metalwork, while, in *Expositio Apocalypseos*, he celebrated its future end.

Here, we must understand that Bede's criticism of metalwork in *In Genesim* concerned only fine metalwork and weapon-making, not, seemingly, mundane metalwork. He noted in what seems a positive light how 'good servants of God ... as the human race degenerated from the purity of its first manner of life ... worked hard at things of this kind for the sake of fellowship in social life.'³² One such smith was none other than Jesus Christ. Interpreting Matthew and Mark's *faber* as 'metalworker', not 'carpenter', Bede thus found the exemplar 'servant of God' who plied this trade.³³ In relation to mundane metalwork, Bede would then have nodded approvingly at the interpretation of John Chrysostom and Victorius. He knew, of course, what has since become clear to students of Anglo-Saxon England – metalwork was an essential part of early medieval English society. The complaint of Ælfric's ploughman, *Nimum laboro*, 'I work too much', would have been still-more melancholic were it not for the iron plough breaking hard earth to provide English farmers greater yield for lesser toil.³⁴ Bede's metaphor of the traveller who must use stables or monies on long journeys, borrowed from Augustine, illustrates his view that Christians should practise metalwork on nothing more than an *ad hoc* basis.³⁵ The 'wicked', *reprobi*, in contrast, 'delighted in such things as if they were their highest good'.³⁶

³¹ *Genesis*, II.524-526, p.87 (p.156).

³² *ibid.*, II.539-540, p.88 (p.156).

³³ Read Matthew 13:55a, and Mark 6:3a, both cit. with comment in *Lucas*, II.193-214, pp.104-105 (pp.227-228) [em.cit.] [=Marcus, II.530-547, p.502]. Compare Isidore, *Regula monachorum*, PL 83, v.2, col.873B. Cit. with comment in Kendall and Wallis, 'Introduction' to *Bede: Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, pp.1-92, pp.32-34.

³⁴ *Genesis* 3:17-19; Ælfric, *Colloquy*, ed. Garmonsway, II.23, p.20.

³⁵ *Genesis*, II.542-545, p.88 (pp.156-157), cit. Augustine, *Enarrat.Psalms*, CCSL 38, Ps.XXXIV.6.40-43, p.304 (trans. Boulding, p.49); compare Augustine, *Sermo* CLXXVII, CCSL 41Bb, 2.58-64, p.569 (trans. Hill, p.280).

³⁶ *Genesis*, II.541-542, p.88 (p.156).

In the case of fine metalwork, Bede's exegesis of Tubal-Cain offered one outlier to his criticism of this skill – those individuals among 'the people of God' (Israel) whom God had instructed to fashion articles for the tabernacle.³⁷ In their brief assessment of Bede and metalwork, Coatsworth and Pinder isolated this passage from its surrounding text and naturally then saw it as proof of Bede's support for fine metalwork.³⁸ However, Bede's point here rather seems to confirm his particular aversion to fine metalwork, beyond what he saw as the exceptional need for Israelite metalworkers to fashion the articles required for the tabernacle. It is curious that Bede made no mention here of other instances of righteous metalwork, such as the bronze snake that Moses had fashioned to heal the sick Hebrews (perhaps since it was later worshipped as an idol), or the bronze articles that the Gentile Hiram of Tyre made for the interior of the Jerusalem temple.³⁹ The tabernacle may be the most conspicuous exception as it represents the sole occasion where God had ordained Israelite fine metalworkers, namely, Bezalel and his assistant Oholiab. According to Exodus, God filled Bezalel with the Holy Spirit – a rare outpouring in the Old Testament where select individuals received this gift to perform a particular task.⁴⁰ Bezalel received a list of the precious articles that he alone was to fashion, such as the propitiatory cover for the ark made of pure gold.⁴¹ Bede surely knew of this blessed example of a fine metalworker; however, he never identified Bezalel or Oholiab (in contrast to several earlier commentators).⁴² Neither

³⁷ *Genesis*, II.551-553, p.88 (p.157), cit. *Genesis* 4:22b.

³⁸ Coatsworth and Pinder, *Anglo-Saxon Goldsmith*, p.200.

³⁹ Numbers 21:8-9; 2 Kings 18:4; John 3:14; *Homelia* ii.18, ls.167-211, pp.315-316 (pp.184-185) [em.cit.]; 1 Kings 5:1-12; *DeTemp.*, I.61-79, pp.148-149 (p.7) [em.cit.].

⁴⁰ "And I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom and understanding, and knowledge in all manner of work. To devise whatsoever may be fashioned of gold, and silver, and bronze, of marble, of precious stones, and variety of wood", Exodus 31:3-5; Howard Watkin-Jones, *The Holy Spirit in the Mediaeval Church* (London, 1922), pp.28-30; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Holy Spirit – In Biblical Teaching, through the Centuries, and Today* (Cambridge, 2013), pp.3, 9.

⁴¹ Exodus 35:30-c.39; 2 Chronicles 1:5.

⁴² Compare Gregory of Nazianzus [trans. Rufinus], *Orationes*, IV.xiii.13-18, p.157; Ambrose, *De Noe*, CSEL 32/1, iii, ls.2-6, p.417 (trans. Dunkle, p.33) [em.cit.]; Jerome, *Esaias*, II.iii.3.68-72, pp.45-46 (p.112), cit. Isaiah 3:3c, Exodus 31:1-11.

smith is included in *In Genesim* or his commentary on the tabernacle, *De tabernaculo*.⁴³ One reason for this omission could have been Bede's wider issue with fine metalworking, which we shall now relate to his reception of named idol makers in Scripture.

Aaron and Demetrius

It is rather surprising to recall that the first idol maker identified in Scripture was none other than Aaron, brother to Moses and high priest of Israel. While Moses met with God on Mount Sinai and received the Decalogue, Aaron at the foot of the mountain had fashioned the idol of the golden calf in response to the idolatrous request of the Hebrews.⁴⁴ The creation and subsequent worship of this calf broke the first commandment, "You shall not have strange gods before me"; indeed, in his anger at this event, Moses threw down the stone tablets containing the Decalogue on the mountainside.⁴⁵ Bede recalled these events on several occasions, noting, too, the return of bovine worship to Israel when Jeroboam erected golden calves at idol places in Samaria.⁴⁶

The New Testament had its own idol maker in Demetrius, who in Acts 19:24-27 is identified as a silversmith in Ephesus. He and another Greek metalworker, Alexander the coppersmith, are presented in Scripture as persecutors of the Church.⁴⁷ Bede examined the character of

⁴³ Bede's *De tabernaculo* ends at Exodus 30:31 and therefore prior to Bezalel's introduction (Exodus 31:2). Still, the works that Bezalel was ordered to fashion feature prominently in the commentary, making his omission from Bede's text rather intriguing.

⁴⁴ Exodus 32:1-6. Aaron was the first high priest of Israel, a privilege that was passed down through the subsequent generations of the Levite tribe, see Deuteronomy 18:1-8; *Samuhel*, I.814-815, 818-822, p.31 (p.141) [em.cit.].

⁴⁵ Exodus 20:3, 32:15-19.

⁴⁶ 1 Kings 12:25-33; *Exp. Actuum*, vii.85-92, p.36 (p.73), cit. Acts 7:42, Exodus 32:1-5, quot. Jerome, *In Amos*, II.v.841-849, pp.296-297 (p.361); *Samuhel*, IV.1862-1863, p.256 (p.498) [em.cit.]; *Ezra-Neemia*, I.338-346, p.249 (pp.19-20) [em.cit.].

⁴⁷ For Alexander, cf. 2 Timothy 4:14; Bede, *Collectio ex opusculis sancti Augustini in epistulas Pauli apostoli*, CCSL 121B, cdxxxv (trans. Hurst, pp.323-325), cit. Augustine, *De sermone Domini in monte*, CCSL 35, I.xxi.71-74.1732-1739, 1744-1757, 1773-1777, 1791-1819, pp.79-84 (trans. Campbell, pp.63-65).

Demetrius in his *Expositio Actuum*, where, following the literal text of Acts, he noted how Demetrius was one of several craftsmen whose business relied on the cult of Diana that was centred on her temple in Ephesus.⁴⁸ Demetrius fashioned “silver houses” [*argenteae aedes*] and made a handsome profit from these wares.⁴⁹ Responding to the teaching of Paul and Silas, “They are not gods which are made by hands”, Demetrius incited his fellow craftsmen, warning that their trade would be much-reduced should the Ephesians take to Paul’s message.⁵⁰ The idol maker then roused the wider population, invoking the honour of Diana, she “whom all Asia and the world worships”.⁵¹ Enraged, the Ephesians seized Paul’s companions and rushed them into the theatre while chanting “Great is Diana of the Ephesians”.⁵² The intercession of the local clerk, who, insisting on law and order claimed that Diana remained in high honour, saved Paul’s companions from their fate, whereafter the apostle travelled on into Macedonia.⁵³

Bede’s treatment of Demetrius similarly presented him as a persecutor of the faith, noting through Jerome how the silversmith’s name meant ‘persecuting greatly’.⁵⁴ He condemned Demetrius in clever remarks that exploited the bullion of the latter’s trade, his words recalling David’s condemnation of the blindness of idol makers from Psalms 113(115):16(8) and 134(135):18.

⁴⁸ Bede knew a little of Diana from Vergil and Ovid, while Solinus would have supplied him with knowledge of the immense fame of the Temple of Diana in the ancient world, cf. Vergil, *Aeneid*, LCL 64, VII.761-769, pp.54-57, XI.532-663, 836-867, pp.272-283, 294-297; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, LCL 42, II.417-465, pp.88-93; VIII.267-395, pp.424-435; Pliny, *NH*, LCL 419, XXXVI.xxi.95-97, pp.74-77; Solinus, *Collectanea rerum memorabilium*, xl.2-8, pp.166-167; see also Isidore, *Etymologiae*, VIII.xi.56-58, p.335 (p.187);

⁴⁹ Acts 19:24. Bede described these as *templa Dianae*, which Martin translated as ‘shrines’. However, since Bede used *templum* to refer to the Jerusalem temple, *templa Dianae* might be better understood as ‘temples’, *Exp.Actuum*, xix.85, p.79 (p.156).

⁵⁰ Acts 19:25-27a.

⁵¹ Acts 19:27b-28.

⁵² Acts 19:29-34.

⁵³ Acts 19:35-20:1.

⁵⁴ *Exp.Actuum*, xix.83-84, p.79 (p.156), cit. Jerome, *Nom.Hebraica*, ls.16-17, p.145.

Hence it is appropriate that the temples of Diana which he (Demetrius) made were constructed of no other metal than silver, for in the Scriptures eloquence is customarily indicated by silver,⁵⁵ just as true knowledge is indicated by gold,⁵⁶ and the craftiness of the Gentiles customarily constructed its religion not out of any consideration of meaning, but out of the empty brilliance of discourse.⁵⁷

For Bede, the emptiness of Demetrius' belief, or, as we saw him express more broadly of pagan religion in Chapter One, its worthlessness, was plain from the silversmith's fear that the power of Diana might be lessened through Paul's message. Quoting Arator, Bede noted how fitting it was that Demetrius and the other Ephesian craftsmen had met to contrive their opposition to Paul in the marketplace – 'a shameful place embraces the work of a disgraceful assembly' – which seems intended as a further criticism of Diana. Her true worth, Bede thought, was contained in the marketplace, serving a contrast with his treatment of how Christ drove out those whom Bede named 'fraudulent traders', *negotiatores iniusti*, from the temple in Jerusalem.⁵⁸ Of Demetrius and the Ephesians, Bede poured scorn on what he perceived as 'the extraordinary stupidity on the part of the Gentiles not to be ashamed to worship those whom they acknowledged can be constructed or destroyed by man'.⁵⁹ Indeed, the whole sequence of events in Ephesus convinced Bede that Demetrius, far from triumphing over Paul, had instead confirmed the simple truth in Paul's teaching that "idols are not gods".⁶⁰ In the *Historia*, Bede echoed this message in the speech of Oswiu to

⁵⁵ Psalm 11(12):7(6).

⁵⁶ This comment could have been inspired from a description found in a Hiberno-Latin commentary on Revelation (though Bede's knowledge of this work remains contested). Citing Revelation 21:18b where the new Jerusalem is seen to be of 'pure gold', the anonymous author of this commentary stated, 'By gold is meant the sense of the Scriptures', *Commemoratorium de Apocalypsi Iohannis Apostoli*, CCSL 107, XXI.18, p.226 (see Gryson's introduction for provenance, pp.179-182; and, for Bede's knowledge of this work, Gryson, CCSL 121A, pp.154-157).

⁵⁷ *Exp.Actuum*, xix.83-88, p.79 (pp.156-157), cit. Arator, *Historia Apostolica*, CCSL 130, II.723-752, pp.360-362 (trans. Hillier, pp.201-203).

⁵⁸ *Exp.Actuum*, xix.101-104, p.80 (p.157), quot. Arator, *Historia Apostolica*, II.714-716, p.359 (p.201). Here, I have followed Martin in reading *Lasciuos tractare foro* instead of Laistner's *Lasciuo tractare foro*, see Martin, *Bede: On Acts*, p.158, n.2. For Bede's sermon on Christ and the traders from John 2:15-17, see *Homelia* ii.1, pp.184-192 (pp.1-12), especially ls.30-43, cit. Augustine, *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus CXXIV*, CCSL 36, X.4.14-25, p.102 (trans. Hill, p.200), and ls.54-59, cit. Matthew 21:12-13, Mark 11:15-18, Luke 19:45-46.

⁵⁹ *Exp.Actuum*, xix.92-94, p.79 (p.157).

⁶⁰ Acts 19:26b, cit. in *Exp.Actuum*, xix.92, p.79 (p.157); compare *Quaest.Regum*, XXIV.5-6, p.316 (pp.127-128); *Salomonis*, II.xxi.87-89, p.110 [em.cit.].

Sigeberht – ‘objects made by the hands of men could not be gods’ – and it is towards English idol makers and similar craftsmen that our attention now turns.⁶¹

Metalworking in England and the idol maker

According to Bede, when Augustine and company met Æthelberht at Thanet the missionaries ‘bore as their standard a silver cross and the image of our Lord and Saviour painted on a panel.’⁶² This cross served a visualisation of Augustine’s message – as Paul had informed the Corinthians, “We preach Christ crucified.”⁶³ In Paul’s subsequent teaching, that this message was “foolishness to the Gentiles”, we perhaps find something close to Æthelberht’s initial response to this new teaching.⁶⁴ Crucifixion, resurrection, and life everlasting might have seemed “foolishness”; nevertheless, whatever scepticism Æthelberht and others in England held at first, they later came to confess Christ as “the wisdom of God”.⁶⁵ In turn, the old religion would become foolish, and in relation to idol makers and idols, it seems safe to presume that their craft ceased as the consolidation of Christianity in England took hold in the seventh and eighth centuries.

We have already noted that Bede said little of English idol makers, but that he provided some report of other craftsmen in England who, working within the same medium and sometimes producing idolatrous objects, might then be considered as similar to idol makers. Bede supposed that idol makers in England were craftsmen of wood, stone, and metal, and he had

⁶¹ *HE*, III.22, pp.280-281.

⁶² *ibid.*, I.25, pp.74-75.

⁶³ 1 Corinthians 1:23a.

⁶⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:23c.

⁶⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:24. For Bede’s remarks over the Gentile hesitation to believe in the resurrection (possibly resulting from his knowledge of the challenges encountered by English teachers), see *Lucas*, III.1772-1776, p.211 (p.367), VI.2259-2295, pp.419-420 (pp.641-642) [em.cit.].

something to relate of each craft in his historical writings. Wood held a special significance in England, as Bede showed when reporting how, Owine, a carpenter who oversaw Princess Æthelthryth's household in East Anglia, left the secular life to enter the minister at Lastingham.⁶⁶ Bede's statement that Owine took just his 'axe and adze' offers more than a colourful emphasis of Owine's resolve to forego materialism, it indicates his skill at woodwork and the status that carpenters could hold in elite secular and ecclesiastical circles in England.⁶⁷ English masons were similarly prized. Bede must have interacted with those individuals who lived at Wearmouth-Jarrow and shaped stone in the form of stone crosses (perhaps those found at Ruthwell and Bewcastle) or were loaned to King Nechtan in Pictland in order to construct 'a church of stone after the Roman fashion'.⁶⁸ Bede's most insightful comments concern English metalworkers, but before examining his report we must situate our discussion with a brief overview of metalwork in England.

English metalworking in the seventh and eighth centuries involved ferrous and non-ferrous metals including gold, silver, and, more commonly, brass alloy.⁶⁹ Iron ore was excavated at various sites in Britain, but precious metals had to be recycled from Roman and British supplies, though this might have been supplemented by small-scale importation of ore from the continent.⁷⁰ Gold was treasured over all metals but good silverwork retained its value.⁷¹ Ironwork remained vital, both for mundane and specialist use, with smiths forging new

⁶⁶ *HE*, IV.3, pp.338-339; Kevin Leahy, *Anglo-Saxon Crafts* (Stroud, 2003), pp.15-40.

⁶⁷ *HE*, IV.3, pp.338-339.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, V.21, pp.532-533; compare *HA*, v, pp.32-33.

⁶⁹ Leahy, *Anglo-Saxon Crafts*, pp.111-166.

⁷⁰ Gale R. Owen-Crocker, 'Gold in the Ground or Just Rust in the Dust: Measuring Wealth by Metalwork in Anglo-Saxon Graves', *De Re Metallica: The Uses of Metal in the Middle Ages*, ed. Robert Bork (Aldershot, 2005), pp.15-30, p.16.

⁷¹ Although, as Bede pointed out in *De orthographia*, the mixing of gold and silver with other metals resulted in alloys of lesser value, *De orthographia*, CCSL 123A, ls.599-601, p.31 [em.cit.]; see also C.R. Dodwell, *Anglo-Saxon Art: A New Perspective* (Manchester, 1982), pp.24-30; Dominic Janes, *God and Gold in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 1998), p.19; Justine Bayley, 'Precious metal working in Anglo-Saxon England', *Outils et ateliers d'orfèvres des temps anciens*, ed. Christiane Eluère (Saint-Germain-en-Laye, 1993), pp.137-140.

objects or repairing older items.⁷² Fine metalworking occasionally incorporated precious stones and Bede reported how these were found throughout Britain, though certain stones required importing.⁷³ The value placed on metalworkers in society is suggested in the provisions made for these but not other craftsmen in English legislation, which could explain the resentment that non-metalworking craftsmen showed towards the blacksmith in Ælfric's *Colloquy*.⁷⁴ In Æthelberht's law code, the wergild was prescribed for those who murdered 'the king's own smith'.⁷⁵ Ine's law code permitted thegns who relocated their household to take their smith with them.⁷⁶

Bede's writings reveal his familiarity with the sights and sounds of metalwork. In *Historia Abbatum*, he recalled fondly how Eosterwine, Biscop's cousin and abbot of Wearmouth between 682-686, was often seen helping the brothers with physically-demanding tasks, including 'shaping iron with a hammer'.⁷⁷ Iron was the hardest metal known to Bede, his verb here, *domare*, literally meaning 'to tame', evokes the scene of the brothers rotating in turns the constant hammering and heating needed to make iron malleable.⁷⁸ Bede could have been contemplating the same scene in *In prouerbia salomonis* when noting how reprobates, who he sometimes labelled as 'hard-hearted', would at the end times be 'endlessly beaten with a hammer in the furnace of hell [*gehenna*]'.⁷⁹ In *In Lucam*, Bede included a brief explanation of casting processes, seemingly resulting from his personal observation of fine

⁷² David A. Hinton, 'Weland's Work: Metals and Metalsmiths', *The Material Culture of Daily Living in the Anglo-Saxon World*, ed. Maren Clegg Hyer and Gale R. Owen-Crocker (Exeter, 2011), pp.185-200, pp.186, 190ff.

⁷³ *HE*, I.1, pp.14-15; compare Gildas' illustration of Britain as 'chosen bride arrayed in a variety of jewellery', *De excidio Britanniae*, iii.3, pp.16-17, 90; see also Marian Campbell, 'Gold, Silver and Precious Stones', *English Medieval Industries*, ed. John Blair and Nigel Ramsay (London, 1991; rpt. 2001), pp.107-166, pp.114-117.

⁷⁴ Ælfric, *Colloquy*, ls.217-237, pp.39-41.

⁷⁵ *Æthelberht* vii, Liebermann, p.3 (Oliver, xiii, pp.64-65).

⁷⁶ *Ine* lxiii, Liebermann, p.118 (trans. Whitelock, *EHD*, p.407).

⁷⁷ *HA*, viii, pp.40-43.

⁷⁸ Compare Jerome, *Hiezechiel*, I.1227, p.43 (p.49).

⁷⁹ *Salomonis*, II.xi.142-145, p.102, cit. Proverbs 19:29b.

metalwork in Northumbria where various casting techniques were used to produce objects such as cruciform brooches.⁸⁰ He omitted the mention of Bezalel and Oholiab in *De tabernaculo*, but his mention in that same commentary of the technique where constant fine hammering was needed to form sheets of gold indicates that he had in mind English processes of fine metalwork.⁸¹ As this last example shows, many of these passages involve a figurative lesson. For in the constant fine hammering that lengthened gold sheets, Bede imagined the Christian saying unto God, ‘With a metalsmith’s pummelling you have stretched me out, and by pounding me you have afforded me greater progress’, thereby showing the imprint that English industry left on his exegesis.⁸² Notwithstanding this and other figural interpretations, Bede still reserved criticism for the love of precious metals, perhaps most obvious his praise of Abraham for choosing to excavate wells for his cattle to drink instead of mines through which to extract ore.⁸³

James Campbell observed Bede’s lack of enthusiasm – relative to that of his English contemporaries – for metalwork, but perhaps it would be better to see Bede as a cleric anxious at the influence of fine metalwork in England.⁸⁴ It is now well-known that Christian craftsmen in Bede’s England continued to work pagan image into their products, though certain findings, such as the resemblance between Jarrow’s sculptures and Germanic-style metalwork require further investigation before confirmation can be made of their iconographical origin.⁸⁵ Less elliptical, though still enigmatic in its final meaning, is the

⁸⁰ *Lucas*, VI.13-23, p.363 (p.569), quot. 1 Kings 7:45b-46. An earlier passage from the same commentary noted the processes involved in making statues, but, on that occasion, Bede borrowed explanation from Augustine, *Lucas*, IV.678-686, p.248 (p.415), quot. Augustine, *Enchiridion ad Laurentium de Fide et Spe et Caritate*, CCSL 46, xxxiii.66-74, p.97; see also Toby F. Martin, *The Cruciform Brooch and Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge, 2015), pp.144-148.

⁸¹ *DeTab.*, I.1208-1215, pp.35-36 (p.38).

⁸² *ibid.*, ls.1224-1225 (p.39).

⁸³ *Lucas*, I.1391-1395, p.54 (p.161) [em.cit.].

⁸⁴ James Campbell, ‘Elements in the Background to the Life of St Cuthbert and his Early Cult’, rpt. in his *The Anglo-Saxon State* (London, 2000), pp.85-106, p.88.

⁸⁵ Cramp, *Wearmouth and Jarrow*, vol. 2, p.173; Turner et al., *Wearmouth and Jarrow*, pp.166-167.

object known as the Franks Casket. Although its material is whalebone, not metal, this box nonetheless benefits our discussion since its iconographic scheme combines Scriptural, classical, and patristic motifs with English tales – including one legend concerning the smith-god known elsewhere in northern Europe as Weland.⁸⁶ Made in Northumbria, c.700-750, possibly at Ripon or another minster, the Franks Casket reveals the progress of Christian consolidation, but perhaps too, resistance to the sort of monotheistic faith that Bede wished to see confirmed among his countrymen.⁸⁷ The Casket indicates that at least some English craftsmen in Bede's world continued to work with pagan motifs, which increases the likelihood that he himself knew of this trend, one that we can imagine he would surely have opposed from his wider rejection of pagan memorialisation. In the previous chapter, we mentioned in passing the power of visualisation, and in this chapter we will advance that theme by examining Bede's reception of fine metalworkers and fine metalworking objects in England. For Jane Hawkes, English fine metalwork in this period became increasingly reliant on the imported influences of Scripture and the Mediterranean; however, as Hawkes noted, there remained a certain degree of interplay between Christian and pagan culture in England.⁸⁸ Bede's anxieties involving English veneration of fine metalworkers and perhaps too fine metalworking objects could reveal the continuation of pre-Christian ideals and styles into the eighth century.

⁸⁶ Leslie Webster, 'The Iconographic Programme of the Franks Casket', *Northumbria's Golden Age*, ed. Jane Hawkes and Susan Mills (Thrupp, 1999) pp.227-246; Thomas Klein, 'The Non-Coherence of the Franks Casket: Reading Text, Image, and Design on an Early Anglo-Saxon Artifact', *Viator* 45:2 (2014), pp.17-54.

⁸⁷ T.D. Kendrick, *Anglo-Saxon Art to A.D. 900* (London, 1938), pp.121-125; Ian N. Wood, 'Ripon, Francia and the Franks Casket in the Early Middle Ages', *Northern History* 26:1 (1990), pp.1-19, p.9f; Rollason, *Northumbria, 500-1100*, pp.166-168; Richard Abels, 'What Has Weland to Do with Christ? The Franks Casket and the Acculturation of Christianity in Early Anglo-Saxon England', *Speculum* 84:3 (2009), pp.549-581, pp.565-581.

⁸⁸ Hawkes, 'Symbolic Lives', pp.312f, 317-334.

‘A brother I once knew’ – a monk-smith in Bernicia

In a uniquely personal chapter in the *Historia*, Bede introduced his reader to an unnamed monk-smith: ‘I myself once knew a brother, and would that I had not known him, whose name I could mention if it were any use.’⁸⁹ This monk-smith, Bede related, was a member of a minster in Bernicia, though Bede’s report made it abundantly clear that he thought this individual was ill-suited to monasticism. The man was ‘addicted to drunkenness and other pleasures of a loose life’, and preferred ‘to remain in his workshop [*officina*] day and night’ rather than ‘go to the church with his brothers to sing psalms and pray and listen to the word of life.’⁹⁰ He was, Bede added, ‘a man of dark mind and dark deed’, whose sins returned to punish him in later life. Illness befell the monk-smith, and, worse still, visions of hell wherein he saw ‘Satan ... Caiaphas and the others who slew the Lord’ burning in hell, with a place beside these reserved for him.⁹¹ Death ensued, and his former brothers buried the man ‘in the furthest corner of the monastery’ with none in the minster venturing ‘to say masses or sing psalms or even pray for him.’⁹²

First, we can observe Bede’s regard for the talent of this monk-smith – he was, Bede told us, *ars fabrilis singularis*, ‘an exceptionally skilled craftsman.’⁹³ We can envision a fine metalworker specialising in non-ferrous metals and or precious stones – certainly, this was no ordinary smith, nor a weapons-maker. His membership of a minster implies the monk-smith fashioned and decorated artefacts for ecclesiastical use. Surviving artefacts from late seventh- to mid-eighth-century Bernicia could suggest that the monk-smith worked on covers for

⁸⁹ *HE*, V.14, pp.502-503.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*

⁹¹ *ibid.*, pp.502-505.

⁹² *ibid.*, pp.504-505.

⁹³ *ibid.*, pp.502-503.

prized books, shrines, or chalices. Stephen reported how, at Ripon, ‘jewellers’ [*gemmarii*] inlaid the gold cover that was made for Wilfrid’s gospel book with precious stones.⁹⁴ A fine metalworker was responsible for the delicate hammering needed to create the gilded gold leaf visible on the cover for *Codex Amiatinus*, so too, the gold cross that Ceolfrith took with him when leaving Wearmouth.⁹⁵ In the late tenth century, Aldred of Chester-le-Street credited a skilled metalworker named Billfrith with having fashioned the binding of the Lindisfarne Gospels, which was produced in a similar period to Ceolfrith’s pandect.⁹⁶ The same craftsman was mentioned in the ninth-century Durham *Liber Vitae*, and, much later, in Symeon of Durham’s twelfth-century history, where Billfrith was described as a ‘skilled goldsmith’ commissioned by Bishop Æthilwald.⁹⁷

Material evidence for specialist fine-metalworking English workshops is comparatively late, leading some scholars to propose the fine metalworkers in this period were often itinerant workers.⁹⁸ Bede’s report leaves little doubt that his monk-smith lived and worked at a Bernician minster where he accessed a workshop [*officina*] suitable for his craft.⁹⁹ The minster must have been a rich foundation in order to retain a fine metalworker, with finds at Hartlepool, Hexham, Jarrow, and Lindisfarne suggesting the presence of a skilled metalworker, though one or more of these might have taken on an itinerant smith or loaned

⁹⁴ *VW*, xvii, pp.36-37.

⁹⁵ *HA*, xvii, pp.64-65; *Vita Ceolfridi*, xxvi, pp.104-107; Richard Gameson, *Codex Amiatinus: Making and Meaning*, JL (2017), pp.47-48.

⁹⁶ *Codex Lindisfarnensis*, London, British Library, MS Cotton Nero D. iv, fol.259r; see for text and translation, E.G. Stanley, ‘The Lindisfarne Gospels: Aldred’s Gloss’, *The Lindisfarne Gospels: New Perspectives* (Leiden, 2017), ed. Richard Gameson, pp.206-217, pp.206-207.

⁹⁷ BL Cotton MS Domitian A.viii, f.18r; Symeon of Durham, *Historiae Ecclesiae Dunhelmensis*, ed. Arnold, II.12, pp.67-68; both cit. with comment in Michelle P. Browne, *The Lindisfarne Gospels: Society, Spirituality and the Scribe* (London, 2003), pp.104-110.

⁹⁸ The liminal location of the smith’s grave at Tattershall Thorpe (Lincolnshire), dated c.660-670, is often cited in support of this position, but this seems to overlook the isolated burial of Bede’s monk-smith. See David A. Hinton, *A Smith in Lindsey: The Anglo-Saxon Grave at Tattershall Thorpe, Lincolnshire* (London, 2000), pp.100, 111-115.

⁹⁹ *HE*, V.14, pp.502-503. The noun *officina* is rarely encountered in early English literature – Bede apparently borrowed it from Isidore’s encyclopaedic description of craftsmen in *Etymologiae*, XVI.xvi.3.5, p.211 (p.328), XIX.xvii.16.22, p.319 (p.381).

one from another foundation. Bede's personal experience, 'I myself once knew...', presumes a close proximity to the monk-smith, and strengthens the case for all of the sites above. From Bede's use of *frater*, 'brother', some extrapolate an individual at Jarrow, but Bede had *fratres* outside of Wearmouth-Jarrow, and, in Helmwald's case, Britain, too.¹⁰⁰ The site at Wearmouth remains to be excavated, but work at Jarrow, Bede's home minster, revealed the presence of several buildings that were built farthest from the heart of the minster, St. Paul's Church, at the foot of the south-facing slope, adjacent to the River Don. In Rosemary Cramp's opinion, these were craftsmen's workshops, including a metalworker.¹⁰¹ The riverine location provided access to water for cooling and transportation of raw materials, but perhaps the planners of Jarrow also intended to make clear the separation between the spiritual and material life at the minster. In turn, this could mean that Bede's remarks about the temporal nature of metalwork in the Tubal-Cain exegesis were at least partly informed by his physical environment at Jarrow. Were the monk-smith mentioned in the *Historia* indeed a member at Jarrow, it is tempting to imagine a scene where, as the brothers processed into St. Paul's, a lone figure hammered, out of sight but not out of mind, below the church at the foot of the slope. This contrast between spiritual heights of worship and the base preoccupation of metalworking is one that Bede stressed in his treatment of Tubal-Cain (and similar images such as the construction of Jerusalem and Babylon) and it must then remain possible that the chapter about this monk-smith was inspired by an individual at Jarrow whom Bede felt was faithless for preferring matters of metal over faith.

¹⁰⁰ Duncan W. Wright, 'Crafters of Kingship: Smiths, Elite Power, and Gender in Early Medieval Europe', *Medieval Archaeology* 63:2 (2019), pp.271-297, p.288. Writing to Helmwald, Bede expressed as 'vast' the 'distances of land and sea that lie between us', suggesting the latter was based in Ireland or the continent, *Epistola ad Helmuwaldum*, CCSL 123C, p.629 (trans. Wallis, p.416).

¹⁰¹ Cramp, *Wearmouth and Jarrow*, vol. 1, pp.230-241, vol. 2, pp.479-480. See, by way of comparison, the similar segregation of metalworkers in the ninth-century plan of the minster at St. Gall, Walter Horn and Ernest Born, *The Plan of St Gall: A Study of the Architecture and Economy of, and Life in a Paradigmatic Carolingian Monastery*, 3 vols. (London, 1979), vol. 2, pp.189-198.

Against this interpretation, we should remember Bede's praise of the observance of the rule at Wearmouth-Jarrow. The Benedictine Rule required craftsmen 'to practise their crafts with all humility, provided the abbot give permission', and, in cases where this was ignored, craftsmen could be removed from the community.¹⁰² The monk-smith in Bernicia surely fits this criterion, encapsulating the criticism that Bede made in the Tubal-Cain exegesis when criticising those who practised their skill 'as if it were the highest good'.¹⁰³ Bede expressed a similar point in *In Samuhelem*,

And any brother, even one steadfast in catholic unity, when he has learnt any skill whatsoever for the common benefit of the Church and of those among whom he lives, pollutes that skill with the contagion of pride, vainglory, greed, and any other vice, wretchedly runs himself through with his own sword, because by that which he ought to have been defended from the enemy, he has instead helped the enemy.¹⁰⁴

It seems hard to envisage Ceolfrith or his successor, Hwætberht, known as 'Eusebius' for his holiness, condoning such behaviour from a member of their minster.¹⁰⁵ It might be more credible to place this monk-smith in a separate minster, perhaps an episcopal foundation, an interpretation which might benefit from a supporting clue in Bede's letter to Ecgberht. There, Bede restated the same accusation with which he had charged the monk-smith – 'drunkenness and other pleasures of a loose life' – but in this case, Bede was condemning the immoral company kept by certain Northumbrian bishops.¹⁰⁶ The wider cultural relationship between elite households in secular and ecclesiastical society could mean that fine metalworkers found esteem from certain bishops, and perhaps one such bishop had tolerated the lifestyle of Bede's monk-smith for the value of his skill.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² *Regula Sancti Benedicti*, ed. and trans. Fry, lvii.1-3, pp.264-265 [hereafter, *RSB*].

¹⁰³ *Genesis*, II.541-542, p.88 (p.156).

¹⁰⁴ *Samuhel*, IV.2424-2429, p.269 (p.518).

¹⁰⁵ *HA*, xviii, xx, pp.66-71; Conor O'Brien, 'Hwaetberht, Sigfrith and the reforming of Wearmouth and Jarrow', *EME* 25:3 (2017), pp.301-319, pp.311-316.

¹⁰⁶ *Ep.Ecg.*, iv, pp.128-129.

¹⁰⁷ Campbell, 'Cuthbert and his Early Cult', pp.96-97f.

Among the most striking features of Bede's chapter about the monk-smith was his severe condemnation of this man. Few passages in Bede's work compare with this particular tirade; however, one example seems relevant here. Earlier in his career, Bede had written to Plegwin, a cleric in Bishop Wilfrid's circle at Hexham, in order to criticise 'lewd rustics' who had slandered Bede as a heretic before Wilfrid.¹⁰⁸ In both cases, Bede cast his opponents as living in 'shadows', recalling Paul's criticism of *opera tenebrarum*, "works of darkness".¹⁰⁹ Bede reiterated the darkness of the monk-smith when contrasting him with the protomartyr Stephen, who, as he died, saw the heavens open and light-filled glory of God and Christ, with Bede exclaiming in the *Historia*, 'Oh, how far asunder has God divided light from darkness!'¹¹⁰ This is naturally further emphasised in Bede's placing of the monk-smith in hell between Satan, Caiaphas, and the others who had crucified Christ, so too, his robust insistence that the man received neither proper burial nor prayers for his damned soul.¹¹¹ What Bede intended as a spur to penance for others in Northumbria reveals much of his own negative opinion towards fine metalworkers in England. The peculiar strength of Bede's emotion could suggest that there was more at play here than a frustrated cleric's belief that fine metalwork had interrupted the monastic rhythm, particularly when we see this emotion reproduced in Bede's exegesis. The criticism that Bede made of fine metalwork in *In Genesim* can then be traced back his personal experience, including, but probably not limited to, the monk-smith in Bernicia.

Some scholars have ventured to see certain English metalworkers as 'spiritual figureheads', and, in the case of Bede's monk-smith, this seems tangible in his characterisation as a man of

¹⁰⁸ Bede, *Epistola ad Pleguinam*, CCSL 123C, ls.5-7, 309-325, p.617, 626 (trans. Wallis, pp.405, 415) [em.cit.].

¹⁰⁹ Romans 13:12-13; *Epistola ad Pleguinam*, ls.43-46, p.618 (p.406); *HE*, V.14, pp.504-505; compare Lucas, IV.1870-1877, pp.277-278 (p.455), quot. Romans 13:13, Ambrosiaster, *Commentaria in epistolam ad Romanos*, PL 17, xiii, col.166A; *Epist. Catholicae*, 2Pt.ii.197-204, pp.273-274 (p.142).

¹¹⁰ Acts 7:55-59; Genesis 1:4b.

¹¹¹ *HE*, V.14, pp.504-505.

shadows.¹¹² The craft of metalwork wherein raw materials became transformed into finished artefact could of course elicit fascination and, on occasion, fear. Much of this surely resulted from the necessary isolation of smiths in order to reduce fire hazards, perhaps, too, chemical and noise pollution, with metalworkers such as those found at Jarrow required to practise their craft on the edge of their communities. Nonetheless, there remains something to be said of the isolated, sinister smith. This figure is embodied in the god-smith known as ‘Weland’, a supernatural craftsman of German extraction who appears to have been esteemed in Anglo-Saxon England.¹¹³

Weland

Our knowledge of the ‘early English Weland’ is limited to a single carving on the left-hand side of the front panel of the Franks Casket.¹¹⁴ Weland is depicted opposite a scene showing the adoration of the Magi (Matthew 2:1-12). This Scriptural scene possessed a runic inscription, *mægi*, whereas the Weland scene needed no such notation, suggesting it was better known than the Gospel event. In the Weland scene, the smith-god, complete with beard and smithing tools, clasps with his left hand a set of tongs holding a human head, while with his right hand he proffers a cup to a woman with outstretched arms. A second female observes this interaction, and, to her right, a male figure catches several fowl around the throat. The scene is one episode of the wider German legend of Weland, surviving in the Old

¹¹² Leahy, *Anglo-Saxon Crafts*, pp.167-173; David A. Hinton, ‘Anglo-Saxon Smiths and Myths’, *Textual and Material Culture in Anglo-Saxon England: Thomas Northcote Toller and the Toller Memorial Lectures*, ed. Donald Scragg (Cambridge, 2003), pp.261-282, pp.270-273; Paul Frodsham, “‘The stronghold of its own native past’: Some thoughts on the past in the past at Yeavinger”, *Yeavinger: People, Power and Place*, ed. Paul Frodsham and Colm O’Brien (Stroud, 2005), pp.13-64, pp.29-31; Warren Tormey, ‘Magical (and Malign) Metalworkers: Understanding Representations of Early and High Medieval Blacksmiths’, *Magic and Magicians in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Time: The Occult in Pre-Modern Sciences, Medicine, Literature, Religion, and Astrology*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin, 2017), pp.109-148, p.125ff.

¹¹³ Wright, ‘Crafters of Kingship’, p.271f.

¹¹⁴ Philip Webster Souers, ‘The Wayland Scene on the Franks Casket,’ *Speculum* 18:1 (1943), pp.104-111.

Norse poem *Völundarkviða* from the *Poetic Edda* and the Old English poem *Deor* from the *Exeter Book*.¹¹⁵ Weland's legend varies within each tradition but the Northumbrian version can be reasonably reconstructed by reading these external sources with the scene on the Franks Casket. By order of King Niðhad, who wished to steal the smith's treasure-hoard, Weland was captured, lamed, and imprisoned. Seeking revenge, Weland murdered the king's sons and fashioned drinking vessels from their skulls. With one of these vessels, he poisoned Niðhad's daughter, Böðvildr, whom Weland subsequently raped before escaping on wings crafted from the feathers of the captured fowl.

Outside of the Franks Casket, English references to Weland, whether material or literary, typically belong to a later period and thus cannot be easily separated from the Germanic or Scandinavian Weland. The Old English poems *Beowulf* and *Waldere* emphasise Weland's skill as weapons-maker in a characterisation that could recall Bede's perception of Tubal-Cain as weapons-maker.¹¹⁶ The impression of Weland is visible in England's landscape, with the god-smith depicted on tenth-century crosses including two examples from Leeds.¹¹⁷ An English charter from 955 marked out a boundary extending past *Wlandes smiððe*, 'Wayland's Smithy', a secluded site shared with a megalithic tombs in the Berkshire Downs which could be related to Bede's earlier sense of the isolated monk-smith in Bernicia.¹¹⁸ Intriguingly, it has been suggested that the mention of Weland in the Old English version of Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, believed to have been written by King Alfred, 849-899, had its

¹¹⁵ *Völundarkviða*, in *The Poetic Edda: Volume II, Mythological Poems*, ed. and trans. Dronke, pp.243-254; *Deor*, in *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*, ed. Muir, p.281, vv.1-13.

¹¹⁶ *Beowulf*, vi.452-455, p.17 (pp.80-81); *Waldere*, ed. Hill, l.2-5, p.39; Victoria Thompson, *Dying and Death in Later Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge, 2004; rpt. 2012), p.164f. Like *Beowulf*, *Waldere* belongs to a much earlier period than its extant manuscripts, but whether this reached as far back as Bede remains unknown.

¹¹⁷ Richard N. Bailey, *Viking Age Sculpture in Northern England* (London, 1980), pp.104-105.

¹¹⁸ London, British Library, MS Cotton Claudius B. VI, ff.40v-41r, cit. in P.H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters* (London, 1968), no. 564, p.204, cit. with comment in Hinton, 'Smiths and Myths', p.268.

inspiration in Bede's figural interpretation of fine metalworkers and other smiths as Christian teachers.

The Old English Boethius replaced the Roman general Fabricius with Weland, 'the famous and wise goldsmith', who 'can never lose his skill nor easily have it taken from him'.¹¹⁹

James Bradley argued that the Christian Anglo-Saxon Weland must be understood for his 'reputation for craftsmanship in metal', and that Alfred, taking inspiration from Bede, encouraged Weland to be seen as 'a Christian symbol of wisdom and hope' since the god-smith had overcome the suffering of captivity to win his liberation.¹²⁰ His interpretation relied on Bede's exegesis of Nebuchadnezzar's capture and exile of "every artificer and smith" in Israel (2 Kings 24:12-14), contained in the thirtieth and final response to Nothhelm in *In Regum librum*, and suggested that Nebuchadnezzar (whom Bede saw as a figure of the devil) could translate as Niðhad, and Israel's smiths (for Bede a figure of Christian teacher) as Weland.¹²¹ In support of Bradley, Victor Millet viewed Bede's smiths and Alfred's Weland as compelling proof that in Christian England Weland came to represent 'the wise man who serves God with his craftsmanship and fights against the city of the devil'.¹²² Indeed, Victoria Thompson reckoned Weland might even have been a figure of Christ.¹²³ While a case for Christian teachers employing Weland could be made, particularly in respect of lay congregations in less-Christianised parts of England, it seems contrary to Bede's wider treatment of fine metalworkers and strange gods, particularly those in an English context, to

¹¹⁹ 'The B Text', in *The Old English Boethius: An Edition of the Old English Versions of Boethius's De Consolatione Philosophiae*, ed. and trans. Godden and Irvine, vol. 1, xix.16-21, p.283, vol. 2, pp.1-96, p.30.

¹²⁰ James Bradley, 'Sorcerer or Symbol? – Weland the Smith in Anglo-Saxon Sculpture and Verse', *Pacific Coast Philology* 25:1/2 (1990), pp.39-48, pp.41f, 47.

¹²¹ *Quaest.Regum*, XXX, especially ls.32-36, 53-57, 67-61, pp.320-322 (pp.136-138), cit. in James Bradley, 'Sorcerer or Symbol?', pp.45-47.

¹²² Victor Millet, 'Der Schmied und der Erlöser: Zur Deutung Wielands im altenglischen Boethius und auf dem Runenkästchen von Auzon', *Mythos-Sage-Erzählung: Gedenkschrift für Alfred Ebenbauer*, ed. Johannes Keller and Florian Kragl (Göttingen, 2009), pp.311-330, pp.318-321.

¹²³ Thompson, *Dying and Death*, p.166.

think that he would find Weland as comparable to Christ. Moreover, the noble image of Weland in later English literature should not be imprinted in the smith-god's representation on the Franks Casket, which seems more in keeping with the powerful, threatening smith from *Völundarkviða*.¹²⁴ Bede's particular aversion to fine metalworkers in an English context could nevertheless betray his sense of the looming figure of Weland, supernatural craftsmanship, and the worrying incorporation of these notions into Christian thought in England.

Æthelthryth's monilia

Bede rarely mentioned metal artefacts and so his criticism of the jewellery worn by the East Anglian princess Æthelthryth, later the founding abbess of the double monastery at Ely, warrants some investigating.¹²⁵ His report took the form of Æthelthryth's own testimony, alleging a painful tumour beneath her jaw, which led to her death in 679, was punishment for a proclivity to wear an abundance of jewellery in her youth,

I know well enough that I deserve to bear the weight of this affliction in my neck, for I remember that when I was a young girl I used to wear an unnecessary weight of necklaces; I believe that God in His goodness would have me endure this pain in my neck in order that I may thus be absolved from the guilt of my needless vanity. So, instead of gold and pearls [*aura et margarita*], a fiery red tumour now stands out upon my neck.¹²⁶

The precise form of Æthelthryth's *monilia* can be extrapolated from Bede's text and finds in high-status burials. Decorated metalwork is more commonly found in female than male graves and relevant finds indicate the *monilia* were either cloisonné brooches pinned at the

¹²⁴ *Völundarkviða*, 25, p.250, see also Dronke's notes at pp.267-268.

¹²⁵ *HE*, IV.19, pp.390-397.

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, pp.396-397; compare Ælfric, *Saint Æthelthryth*, in *Old English Lives of Saints Volume 11: Ælfric*, ed. and trans. Clayton and Mullins, pp.194-203, ls.58-60, pp.198-199.

shoulder or neck or gold and garnet bullae.¹²⁷ Bede's placement of the tumour in Æthelthryth's neck and weight of her ornaments seems suggestive of bullae, indeed, the redness of the tumour could further support this suggestion, for Gale Owen-Crocker has observed the trope in English literature wherein gold is visualised as the colour red, such as the *readan golde* in *Daniel* (ls.59).¹²⁸ Bede was less interested in the style of these pieces than the substance of their 'needless vanity', and it seems his report, similar to what he said of the monk-smith, was intended as a warning to other English virgins.¹²⁹ Later in the *Historia*, Bede sternly recalled how the double monastery at Coldingham had burnt down when its female members began weaving 'elaborate garments', accusing these of 'imperilling their virginity' and inviting the company of 'strange men'.¹³⁰ Such examples impress Bede's wish for propriety in religious females, in which he took a certain inspiration from Jerome's letters to Marcella which extolled the model of the virgin Asella who, similar to Æthelthryth, swapped precious ornaments for the plain habit of the religious life.¹³¹

In an intriguing passage in *In Samuhelem*, Bede read together the purification laws for lepers and pagan female captives, with his comments seemingly relevant to his later report of Æthelthryth in the *Historia*. He envisioned these females as lepers, their disease, paganism, and stressed how both foreign captive and leprous Israelite were required to shave themselves before being readmitted to society.¹³² Bede likened this purification rite to how Christians reject their own *leuitas superflua*, 'excessive vanity', perhaps prefiguring his criticism of

¹²⁷ Owen-Crocker, 'Gold in the Ground', p.17; *idem*, *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England*, rev. edn. (Woodbridge, 2004; rpt. 2010), p.138f.

¹²⁸ Owen-Crocker, 'Measuring Wealth by Metalwork', p.20.

¹²⁹ Stephen J. Harris, *Bede and Aethelthryth: An Introduction to Christian Latin Poetics* (Morgantown, WV, 2016), p.255f.

¹³⁰ *HE*, IV.25, pp.420-427. See Sarah Foot, *Veiled Women. Volume 1: The Disappearance of Nuns from Anglo-Saxon England* (Aldershot, 2000; rpt. Abingdon, 2017), pp.55-56.

¹³¹ Jerome, *Epistulae* XXIV, CSEL 54, pp.214-217, CXXVII, CSEL 56, pp.145-156.

¹³² *Samuhel*, I.250-255, p.17 (p.116), cit. Leviticus 14:8; Deuteronomy 21:11-13; compare Origen [trans. Rufinus], *In Leuiticum homiliae*, ed. Baehrens, VII.vi.7-8.14-23, pp.390-391 (trans. Barkley, p.150); see also *Lucas*, VI.152-159, pp.366-367 (p.574) [em.cit.].

Æthelthryth's *leuitas superuacua* and suggesting that he saw the East Anglian princess as symbolic of pagan female captives.¹³³ We encounter a similar sort of criticism in Bede's exegesis of 1 Peter 3:3-4 in *Epistolae Catholicae*, where, citing Paul's first letter to Timothy and Cyprian's *De habitu virginum*, Bede equated female adornment with promiscuity.¹³⁴ Yet, in *In Cantica Canticorum*, Bede seemed willing to envision virgins wearing some jewellery, perhaps as a mark of their purity.¹³⁵ He remarked in the same commentary how such pieces resulted from 'the craftsmen's art', perhaps showing some tolerance on Bede's part towards the role of fine metalworkers in producing *monilia*.¹³⁶

Overall, it seems improbable that Bede saw a particular relationship between female adornment and idolatry in England. His interest in Æthelthryth and association of adornment with pagan female captives is intriguing but cannot be linked to a particular anxiety with pagan dress in England.

Conclusion

Bede considered idol makers as irrational for their production of idols from precious but insensible materials. He found compelling the treatment of idol makers in Psalms 134 and 113, combining these with similar passages from Isaiah and Acts in order to impress the maxim that whatever was made by mortal hands could not be worshipped as god. The conclusions that have so far been formed in other chapters in this thesis have often stressed

¹³³ *Samuhel*, I.253-254, p.17 (p.116); compare *HE*, IV.19, pp.396-397.

¹³⁴ *Epist.Catholicae*, 1Pt.iii.9-17, p.243 (p.95), cit. 1 Timothy 2:9, quot. Cyprian of Carthage, *De habitu uirginum*, CCSL 3F, viii.159-164, p.296 (trans. Keenan, pp.38-39).

¹³⁵ *Cant.Canticorum*, I.i.500-503, p.203 (p.54), cit. Song of Songs 1:9-10, Isidore, *Etymologiae*, XIX.xxxi.14.24-25, pp.340-341 (p.391).

¹³⁶ Although Bede's comments here may well have been figural, *Cant.Canticorum*, I.i.513-522, p.203 (p.54) [em.cit.].

the influence of Scripture over Bede's treatment of themes relating to strange gods and idolatry in an English context. This is certainly true of Bede's report of English idol makers, which was limited to his record of Oswiu's persuasion of Sigeberht concerning the East Saxon idol makers, which Bede himself probably constructed based on his knowledge of Scripture and its related influence in the letter of Boniface V to Edwin. However, when considering Bede's wider treatment of metalworkers, in particular, fine metalworkers, we find a reversal of the normal pattern in our conclusions thus far. For Bede's particular complaint with fine metalworkers and their craft was based less on his reading of Scripture than his personal experience of fine metalworking in Northumbria, in particular, his acute dislike of a monk-smith in a Bernician minster. This could have led him to omit the names of those God-ordained fine metalworkers, Bezalel and Oholiab; certainly, it coloured his treatment of Tubal-Cain and particularly the latter's metalworking craft which Bede reserved especial criticism for in his commentary *In Genesim*.

Bede's reception of the monk-smith in Bernicia could possibly betray his wider fear of the continued veneration of fine metalwork and its practitioners in Northumbria (and perhaps elsewhere in England). His report that the monk-smith was offered no funerary masses or prayers presents the clear impression that Bede believed this individual was damned for his refusal to partake in monastic life, a choice that Bede tied to the man's preference to remain sequestered in his workshop with his tools and precious metals. This image sits comfortably within the wider tradition of isolated smiths in England, including those of supernatural origin. It is entirely possible that Bede knew of Weland and that his protest at fine metalworking was in part inspired from the latter's popularity in eighth-century Northumbria, even in ecclesiastical centres where Bede would think that Christ the true *faber* should have no rival. His consistent redaction of pagan knowledge surely means that Bede would have

opposed the memorialisation of Weland in objects such as the Franks Casket. It may be plausible that Bede saw a minor and short-lived role for Weland and other pagan figures from English tales in the teaching that targeted congregations with limited knowledge of Christianity. Bede's criticism of the *monilia* that Æthelthryth had worn in her youth might represent an extension of his unease with English fine metalworking; certainly, this seems pronounced in Bede's loud silence concerning metal ornaments in his world.

Chapter Four: Pagan thought

In Bede's exegesis of Paul's protracted voyage to Rome in *Expositio Actuum*, we find evidence of two interests shared between England and classical antiquity.¹ Conscious of English maritime culture, Bede pointed out several Greek nautical practices that might intrigue readers, even pausing at one point in order to contrast Phoenician with English anchoring techniques.² A second interest is revealed in a substantial excursus that began with Bede's straightforward correction of a scribal error in his Latin text for Acts 28:11b, "we sailed in an Alexandrian ship ... whose insignia was fortified camps [*insigne castrorum*]". With help from Isidore, Bede explained how *insigne castrorum* should have read *insigne Castorum*, in line with the Greek text, *παρασήμῳ Διοσκούροις. Διοσκούροις*, 'Dioskourois', were the Greco-Roman gods Castor and Pollux (literally, 'sons of Zeus'); thus, Bede observed, Paul's Alexandrian ship had borne on its stern an icon to Castor and Pollux.³ Having satisfied the correction of this corrupted text, Bede proceeded to explore several Greco-Roman *fabulae* or 'tales' of the Dioscuri, including the notorious conception of the twins and their sister, Helen.⁴

For *fabulae* tell that Jupiter, transformed into a swan, ravished Leda, the wife of Theseus, and from that Helen was born. Hence it is said as a *melodious bird he sought the embraces of Leda*. Again, he defiled the same woman, who was changed into a star and begot the twins

¹ Acts 27:1-28:14.

² *Exp. Actuum*, xxvii.10-28, pp.93-94 (pp.187-188), cit. Acts 27:15-17, Josephus [trans. and abbrev. ps.Hegesippus], *Bellum Iudaicum*, CSEL 66/11, II.ix.5-7, p.153, Isidore, *Etymologiae*, XIII.xviii.6.3-5, p.102 (p.279), in turn cit. Sallust, *Bellum Iugurthinum*, LCL 116, lxxviii.3, pp.298-299, and *Etymologiae*, XIX.i.18, p.303 (p.373); *ibid.*, xxvii.36-40, 52-54, pp.94-95 (pp.188-189), cit. Acts 27:28-32, 40, Isidore, *Etymologiae*, XIX.iii.3.13-15, p.307 (p.375)

³ *Exp. Actuum.*, xxviii.25-31, pp.96-97 (p.194), cit. Isidore, *Etymologiae*, XV.i.40.11-12, p.154 (p.303).

⁴ *ibid.*, ls.31-38, cit. Isidore, *Etymologiae*, XV.i.40.9-11, p.154 (p.303), and Pliny, *NH*, LCL 330, II.xxxvii.101, pp.244-245. Elsewhere, Bede related how Castor and Pollux held the sign for Gemini (May), 'the twins', *DNR*, xvii.6-7, pp.208-209 (p.84), cit. *De causis quibus nomina acceperunt duodecim signa*, CCSL 123C, ls.18-20, p.665.

Castor and Pollux.⁵

For a man who wished to be remembered for his fidelity to Scripture, it says something important about Bede that he knew and at times liberally recited these and other classical tales that having sprung up in Ancient Greece and Rome were later transmitted to Anglo-Saxon England by Christians, possibly from the sixth century and increasingly from the seventh century onward.⁶ Tales of Leda's offspring formed only one part of a wider body of writings that Bede called 'secular literature', *litterae saeculares*, or, when making reference to the religion of their *auctores*, 'books of the pagans', *libri gentilium*.⁷ The curriculum at Wearmouth-Jarrow introduced Bede to the liberal arts of the *trivium* – grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic – and, in turn, *auctores pagani*, such as Aelius Donatus, fl.315-380, and Mallius Theodorus, fl.376-409.⁸ Grammar, as Martin Irvine has noted, proved indispensable to Bede's *lectio* and *enarratio* of Scripture.⁹ Theories of rhetoric were increasingly employed in service of the written word, indeed, Bede's 'impersonation' technique in *In Samuhelem* bears a certain resemblance to the classical devices of *sermocinatio* and *prosopopoeia* and might then have its origins in the teachings of Cicero or the latter's student, Quintilian.¹⁰ Naturally, Bede

⁵ *Exp. Actuum*, xxviii.38-42, p.97 (pp.194-195), quot. *Vita Antonii*, par.75, ls.10-11, p.82, cit. ps.Clement of Rome [Latin trans. Rufinus], *Recognitiones*, ed. Rehm, X.xxii.6.2-4, p.342. *Recognitiones* is not cited in the Latin or English edition of *Expositio Actuum* but shares verbal parallels with Bede's text and explains his mistaken identification of Athenian Theseus as Leda's husband (when it should have been Spartan Tyndareus).

⁶ Bede told us that Gregory had sent manuscripts to England with Mellitus and that Benedict had returned to Northumbria with books 'of every sort' from his trips. He never clarified whether secular volumes were part of these collections, but perhaps these are identifiable in Biscop's providing 'all such things as were necessary for the worship and ministry of the Church', *HE*, I.29, pp.104-105; compare *HA*, vi, pp.34-35, ix, pp.44-45. For a recent review of Bede's 'persona of orthodoxy', see Paul Hilliard, 'The Venerable Bede as scholar, gentile, and preacher', *Ego Trouble: Authors and their Identities in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Richard Corradini et al. (Vienna, 2010), pp.101-109, p.103f.

⁷ Leclercq, *Love of Learning*, pp.112-119, 124-143; Hunter Blair, *World of Bede*, pp.282-295; Foot, *Monastic Life*, pp.228-230.

⁸ M.L.W. Laistner, 'Bede as a Classical and a Patristic Scholar', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 16 (1933), pp.69-94, p.71ff.

⁹ Irvine, 'Bede the grammarian', p.26ff.

¹⁰ Bede's impersonations, such as his mimicking Christ in 'Christ strangles the strange gods', seem to fulfil many of Quintilian's criteria for the orator seeking to attempt this style of discourse. See Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, LCL 124, I.viii.3, pp.200-201, LCL 125, III.viii.49-54, pp.138-143, LCL 126, VI.i.25-27, pp.30-31, LCL 127, IX.ii.29-37, pp.50-55, LCL 494, XI.i.39-41, pp.28-31. See also DeGregorio and Love, 'Introduction', pp.33-38; and, for rhetoric in Anglo-Saxon England, Gabriele Knappe, *Traditionen der klassischen Rhetorik im angelsächsischen England* (Heidelberg, 1996), pp.147-156.

still found rhetorical training beneficial to speech, especially the Gospel peroration. Bede knew his classical poets, too, inserting into his works verses from Vergil (or as Bede named him, *Maro*) and Ovid with a fluency that indicates he had committed at least these two poets to memory.¹¹ In Pliny the Elder, Roman statesman and natural historian, c.23-79, Bede encountered an esteemed teacher on the natural world. Pliny's *Naturalis historia* became a staple to Bede's understanding of several subjects, including that of portents, and thus mean that portents form a natural complement to our exploration of secular literature and *fabulae*.¹²

Bede sensed a certain tension that he, as a Christian, would consume the works of those he labelled "fashioners of errors", equivalent to idol makers.¹³ From c.710 onward, Bede revealed an enhanced concern with the influence of pagan thought in England. Neil Wright has shown how Bede, in *De arte metrica*, distinguished Christian poets from their classical counterparts – the former were *moderni*, the latter *posteriores* and *prisci poetae*.¹⁴ In the same work, Bede replaced classical lines with Scriptural verses.¹⁵ The motivation behind this transformation seems pronounced in several commentaries, none more so than *In Samuhelem*. There, Bede complained that certain English clerics were taking an excessive interest in secular literature, criticising these for preferring its eloquence to sacred writings. Yet, in that same exegesis, Bede explored the merits of secular literature, namely, its benefit to the preacher's tongue and the teaching that countered pagan error. In the same post-710 period,

¹¹ Neil Wright, 'Bede and Vergil', *Romanobarbarica* 6 (1981-1982), pp.361-379.

¹² Bede was probably acquainted with at least Books II-VI of Pliny's *Naturalis historia*, with a copy of these volumes written in Anglo-Saxon set miniscule surviving from early to middle eighth-century Northumbria. Mary Garrison has suggested that Biscop could have brought the Wearmouth-Jarrow copy back from his fourth trip to Rome. See Leiden, Bibliotheek der Rijksuniversiteit, Voss. Lat. F.4, ff.4-33; Lapidge, *ASL*, pp.130, 222-223; Mary Garrison, 'An Insular Copy of Pliny's *Naturalis historia* (Leiden VLF 4 fols 4-33)', *Writing in Context: Insular Manuscript Culture 500-1200*, ed. Erik Kwakkel (Leiden, 2013), pp.67-125, pp.68f, 96-97.

¹³ See 'Chapter Three: Idol makers', p.115, n.3.

¹⁴ Wright, 'Bede and Vergil', pp.371-378,

¹⁵ For Bede, the authors of Scripture had employed schemes and tropes long before 'teachers of secular eloquence', i.e., classical writers, see *DST*, I, pp.168-169; Kendall, 'Introduction' to *Libri II De Arte Metrica et De Schematibus et Tropis*, pp.15-35, p.22; Irvine, 'Bede the grammarian', p.32f.

Bede seemed to reconsider his employment of Greco-Roman *fabulae*, with fewer, and shorter references to these found in his mature works. Moreover, he introduced a novel concern with *fabulae* of English origin, condemning their popularity in secular and ecclesiastical contexts. While Bede appeared reluctant to provide specifics of characters or plots in English tales (in keeping with his wider treatment of English paganism), he seemed to think Christian teachers might profitably include mild references to such tales in order to supplant pagan heroes with Christ and his renowned followers.

Secular literature

The compelling exegesis in Book Two of Bede's *In Samuhelem* where Bede considered the influence and use of secular literature in early eighth-century England was based on the record in 1 Samuel 13:15-14:30 of a series of skirmishes between Philistia and Israel on their shared border, brilliantly reimagined in Bede's exegesis as the conflict between secular and sacred literature.¹⁶ His lesson was neither an encomium of secular literature nor an indictment of such learning (as some have stated), but instead taught the merits of pagan thought for a select few in England.¹⁷ Two clear themes emerge: (i) the problem of secular literature; and (ii) the merits of secular literature (notwithstanding its sweet sting).

¹⁶ *Samuhel*, II.1750-2236, pp.110-121 (pp.275-295).

¹⁷ Pierre Riché [trans. John J. Contreni], *Education and Culture in the Barbarian West: Sixth Through Eighth Centuries* (Columbia, SC, 1976), p.389; Wormald, 'Bede, *Beowulf*', p.43; compare Scott DeGregorio, 'Literary Contexts: Cædmon's Hymn as a Center of Bede's World', *Cædmon's Hymn and Material Culture in the World of Bede*, ed. Allen J. Frantzen and John Hines (Morgantown, WV, 2007), pp.51-79, pp.66-68.

The problem of secular literature

In a striking introduction to his exegesis, Bede complained how certain ‘scholars’, *scholi*, and ‘teachers’, *doctores*, referred to later but implied here, had preferred secular to sacred literature. According to 1 Samuel 13:19-21, in an earlier occupation of Israel, the Philistines had seized Israel’s metalworkers, thus forcing Israel to employ Philistine metalworkers in order to mend iron tools and weapons. But Israel and Philistia had remained enemies and therefore the Philistine metalworkers blunted Israel’s weapons. When three Philistine companies then marched into Israel, the people of God had “neither sword nor spear” at hand with which to repel the invader.¹⁸ Interpreting these events, Bede saw Israelite weapons as English teaching, which, he felt, had become blunted since its practitioners had sharpened their lessons on the whetstone of secular literature (Philistia’s smiths) instead of Scripture (Israel’s smiths).¹⁹ Thus, at 1 Samuel 13:20, where Israel brought tools and weapons to Philistine metalworkers, Bede commented,

Today too some descend, having abandoned the height of God’s word, which they ought to have ascended to hear, and they listen to secular tales [*fabulae saeculares*] and devilish doctrines [*doctrinae daemoniorum*], and by reading pagan dialecticians [*dialectici*], rhetoricians [*rethores*], and poets [*poetae*] in order to exercise their earthly ability, it is as if they go unarmed to the smiths of the Philistines to sharpen tools for use in the woods or fields, that is, deprived of spiritual knowledge.²⁰

Here, Bede echoed a concern that had reverberated throughout the Christian Church and now reached eighth-century Northumbria: the potential of pagan thought to entice Christians from Scripture. Significantly, Bede considered this problem from an English-centric perspective,

¹⁸ Except for Saul and his son, Jonathan, see 1 Samuel 13:17-22.

¹⁹ *Samuhel*, II.1844-1859, 1869-1877, 1880-1884, 1968-1970, 2121-2124, 2135-2139, pp.112-113, 115, 119 (pp.278-280, 283, 287-288) [em.cit.]. For Bede’s wider metaphor of smiths and its Scriptural inspiration, see Psalm 149:6; Jeremiah 48:10; 2 Corinthians 10:5; Ephesians 6:10-18; Hebrews 4:12; *Quaest.Regum*, XXX, pp.320-322 (pp.136-138) [em.cit.]; *Cant.Canticorum*, II.iii.317-326, pp.238-239 (pp.98-99) [em.cit.].

²⁰ *Samuhel*, II.1853-1859, p.112 (p.279; *emend.*).

with little influence from external voices. He had not read Tertullian's famous denunciation, 'What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? The Academy with the Church?', neither was he familiar with Origen's counter-claim that the Hebrews' plundering of Egypt in order to fashion the tabernacle presented a precedent for Christians to exploit secular literature in order to enrich the Church.²¹ Augustine had reproduced Origen's position in *De doctrina christiana*, but while Bede possessed extracts of this text in the florilegium of Eugippius (c.455-535), the latter had not quoted Augustine's teaching concerning secular literature.²² Examining the harlot in Proverbs 7, Bede interpreted her luxurious bed covers, woven from "painted tapestry, brought from Egypt", as 'symbolic of flowery eloquence, or of dialectic reasoning, derived from heathen origins'.²³ Here, we find nothing more than a passing resemblance to Origen and Augustine, though Bede still imparted an important lesson for English readers. Citing Revelation 2:21-22 in the same exegesis, Bede emphasised how the Great Harlot foretold in the end times would be cast down with her lovers, his message to readers, beware the fleeting flatteries of secular literature.²⁴

Indeed, the English flavour in Bede's treatment of secular literature is so pronounced in his exegesis of 1 Samuel 13:15-14:30 that one cannot help but sense that he was responding to trends in Northumbria, specifically, correcting those who either overindulged in secular literature or wanted its learning forbidden. His statement, 'Today too, some descend', can thus be read as referring to English teachers. This is supported in Bede's mention of known English sins, in particular, the complaint with 'our laziness', *torpor*, or 'our sloth', *desidia*,

²¹ Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum*, CCSL 1, vii.32-33, p.193; compare Origen, *Epistula ad Gregorium*, SC 148, ii, pp.188-191 (trans. Trigg, p.211), cit. Exodus 11:2, 12:35.

²² Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, ed. and trans. Green, II.xl.60-61, pp.124-127 [hereafter, *DDC*]; Paul-Irénée Fransen, 'D'Eugippius à Bède le Vénérable: à propos de leur florilèges augustiniens', *RB* 97:3-4 (1987), pp.187-194, p.192. For other views in late antiquity, see Robert A. Kaster, *Guardians of Language: The Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity* (London, 1988), pp.70-95.

²³ *Salomonis*, I.vii.73-75, p.58, cit. Proverbs 7:16b.

²⁴ *ibid.*, ls.61-73; compare Proverbs 7:27.

both consonant with Bede's wider preoccupation concerning this sin in England.²⁵ Bede introduced sloth besides the persecution of 'evil spirits' at 1 Samuel 13:23, where, in the literal text, the Philistines had captured the region of Michmash (since Israel was without weaponry) and then penetrated further into Israel.²⁶ Following Jerome, Bede interpreted Michmash as 'humility', commenting thereafter,

And we, by slothfulness in reading or asking questions of our spiritual teachers, as it were by the lack of care for making weapons or asking Israelite smiths to make them, give an opportunity to our enemies [evil spirits] so that once they have crushed humility, which Michmash under siege signifies, they can apply the weapons of godlessness to other virtues, the borders of the Holy Land, so to speak.²⁷

Here, Philistines represent 'evil spirits', these accused of stripping humility from English teachers.²⁸ *Humilitas*, Bede explained, enabled the Christian to 'distinguish good from bad', therefore, teachers bereft of this virtue were vulnerable to the temptation of choosing secular over sacred literature (as well as indulging in further sins).²⁹

In raising the problem of English overindulgence in secular literature, Bede offered rare insight as to how pagan thought influenced the listeners of scholars and teachers, identified as 'pupils', *discipuli/discipulae*, apparently those in ecclesiastical schools, and 'simple members of the Church', *membra simplicia ecclesiae*, taken here to imply lay congregations.³⁰ Both

²⁵ *Samuhel*, II.1865, 1870, pp.112-113 (p.279).

²⁶ 1 Samuel 13:5, 16, 23.

²⁷ *Samuhel*, II.1452-1453, 1771, 1869-1875, 1939, pp.103, 110, 113-114 (pp.264, 276, 279-280, 282), cit. Jerome, *Nom.Hebraica*, ls.6, p.104; see also, *Quaest.Regum*, XXX.15-50, pp.320-321 (pp.136-138).

²⁸ When introducing his exegesis of 1 Samuel 13:15-14:24, Bede stated, 'In this passage, as the zeal for the Scriptures grows rare due to the cunning of unclean spirits...'. He employed numerous terms when referring to these spirits throughout the passage, compare *spiritus immundi/maligni/nequissimi*; *temptatores improbi*; *potestates adversariae*; and *daemones*, see *Samuhel*, II.1752-1753, 1773, 1794-1795, 1807-1808, 1848-1849, 1863, 1918, 1924-1925, 1928, 2159, pp.110-112, 114, 116, 119 (p.275-277, 279, 281, 284, 290).

²⁹ For the importance of humility, see *Samuhel*, II.1825-1841 pp.111-112 (p.278), cit. Proverbs 4:18; III.356-369, p.145 (pp.332-333), cit. Jerome, *Nom.Hebraica*, ls.25, p.105, ls.19, p.67.

³⁰ For Bede's pupils, see *Samuhel*, II.1881-1882, 1945, pp.113-114 (p.280, 282); and for laity, *ibid.*, ls.1994-2007, p.116 (pp.283-284), cit. 1 Samuel 14:14, quot. Proverbs 14:4.

listeners seem indicated in Bede's expression of 'woods and fields', the figural places where scholars and teachers cultivated learning.³¹ In Scripture and, in turn, patristic writings, this sort of landscape often signified the once-uncultivated hearts of the Gentiles coming to faith, reimagined in Bede's exegesis as the environment where English scholars and teachers wielded ineffectual tools and tended a harvest of pagan thought.³² Later, at 1 Samuel 14:28-29, Bede warned of cultivating interest in Plato, who, besides Cicero, is one of two pagan authors whom Bede named in this exegesis, and here we can briefly elaborate Bede's worries over Platonism in England.³³

Bede possessed no text of Plato and was then reliant on others for his limited knowledge of the Athenian thinker.³⁴ English minsters were not hotbeds of Hellenist philosophy, nevertheless, certain lessons were valued in both the Academy and Wearmouth-Jarrow. Asceticism, the renouncing of the world and its pleasures, was one such shared interest, being central to the Platonic and monastic experience.³⁵ For Bede, ascetic performance had the potential to become a spiritual idol in the minster. He criticised the singular pursuit of asceticism on several occasions, including in his homily for the feast of Benedict Biscop, who had earlier introduced ascetism to Wearmouth-Jarrow having experienced its benefits at Lérins.³⁶ Bede began his sermon by criticising those who 'follow Plato, Diogenes, and certain other philosophers in trampling underfoot the riches of this life ... for the empty praise of mortal men', and stressed the folly that was 'taking on additional hardships in the present

³¹ *Samuhel*, II.1857-1858, p.112 (p.279).

³² Psalm 95(96):12-13; Augustine, *Enarrat.Psalms*, CCSL 38, Ps.XCV.13, p.1351 (p.434) [em.cit.]; Gregory, *Hom.Euangelia*, XXXVI.8, p.339 (pp.319-320), quot. Psalm 95(96):12-13.

³³ *Samuhel*, II.2218, p.121 (p.294).

³⁴ From Jerome, Bede learned that Plato believed in the mind's rule over the soul, *Marcus*, II.1329-1331, p.522, quot. Jerome, *Matheus*, II.1524-1527, pp.131-132 (p.181), cit. Matthew 15:18-19.

³⁵ For Conor O'Brien, Bede essentially saw philosophers as 'the monks of the pagans', *Bede's Temple*, pp.133, 140.

³⁶ *HA*, ii, pp.26-27.

without hope of future rest and peace.³⁷ Closing his address, Bede urged those present to flee pleasures of ‘the soul and body’ and choose instead to ‘follow in the footsteps’ of Benedict.³⁸ Other, similar lessons in Bede’s writings suggest that he saw philosophers as ‘the patriarchs of heretics’; apparently, he found little to no value whatsoever in their teachings.³⁹

The merits of secular literature (notwithstanding its sweet sting)

Returning to *In Samuhelem*, we find Bede exploring the merits of secular literature for ‘noble teachers’, *magistri nobiles*, between 1 Samuel 14:1-30, interspersing his remarks with several prominent cautions. Bede’s noble teachers were identified as ruminators, that is, those renowned for ‘long meditation on Scripture’, or, the virtuous, those marked by ‘the grace of their virtues’.⁴⁰ Both sorts had ‘trained their senses for the discernment of good and evil’, and were therefore permitted to read ‘the books of heretics or pagan peoples’, or hear ‘the cunning of the dialecticians’.⁴¹ Jonathan, Saul’s son, represented one such noble teacher, his armour-bearer envisioned as a pupil.⁴² In contrast, Saul and his soldiers were initially seen as lesser teachers, that is, ‘those who are not yet accomplished in virtues’.⁴³ That Saul, Jonathan, and their men camped together beneath a pomegranate tree on the hill of Gibeah presented a lesson to Bede as to how all teachers must, like the seeds contained in the red flesh of the

³⁷ *Homelia* i.13, ls.7-13, p.88 (p.125); compare *Ezra-Neemia*, I.966-975, p.265 (pp.43-44), cit. 1 John 2:1.

³⁸ *Homelia* i.13, ls.199-203, p.94 (p.132).

³⁹ *Samuhel*, IV.2345-2347, p.267 (p.515), quot. Jerome, *Epistula* CXXXIII, CSEL 56, ii.1, p.243, in turn quot. Tertullian, *De anima*, CCSL 2, iii.1.2-4, p.785; compare *Lucas*, III.928-931, pp.189-190 (p.338) [=Marcus, II.320-323, p.497]; *Ezra-Neemia*, II.1589-1593, p.327 (p.139), III.2083-2088, p.391 (p.225).

⁴⁰ *Samuhel*, II.2044-2050, p.117 (p.285). Bede delighted in the image of scholars and teachers as ruminators, often recalling these in the figure of cloven-hoofed animals that chew the cud (according to the Mosaic Law, the diet of such creatures meant they were ritually pure). Early Christian writers such as Clement of Alexandria had extolled this image, but Bede picked it up through Ambrose, among others. Cf. Leviticus 11:3-8; Deuteronomy 14:4-8; Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, SC 158, III.xi.76.1-2, pp.148-149 (trans. Wood, p.257); Ambrose, *De Patriarchis*, CSEL 32/2, XI.lvi.14-7, pp.157-158 (trans. McHugh, p.273) [em.cit]; *Cant. Canticorum*, V.vii.591-608, pp.331-332 (p.215), cit. Song of Songs 7:9; *DeTab.*, III.1335-1344, p.127 (p.148), cit. Exodus 30:2; *HE*, IV.24, pp.414-419.

⁴¹ *Samuhel*, II.2044-2050, p.117 (p.285).

⁴² *ibid.*, II.18880-18884, p.113 (p.280), cit. Jerome, *Nom.Hebraica*, ls.1-2, p.100.

⁴³ *ibid.*, ls.1898-1900.

pomegranate fruit, be numbered in the reddened cross of Christ.⁴⁴ At 1 Samuel 14:1, Jonathan and his armour-bearer set out to infiltrate a Philistine camp (in order to procure weapons for Israel), but Saul and his soldiers remained at Gibeah. Bede reimagined this scene as noble teachers making forays into secular literature in order to learn pagan thought, and thereafter, like a Philistine blade in an Israelite hand, bring this knowledge to bear against pagan error.⁴⁵

Bede explored the spiritual opposition faced by noble teachers through the challenging terrain that Jonathan climbed to reach the Philistine camp (making particular reference to Josephus), it further serving to emphasise how none except the fittest of ‘Christ’s perfect athletes’ should read secular literature.⁴⁶ At Samuel 14:14-24a, where the Philistines, in blind panic as a result of Jonathan’s successful infiltration, started turning on one another, Bede highlighted the contradictions within secular literature.⁴⁷ The swift choice of Saul to reinforce Jonathan, which led to the rout of the embattled Philistines, was seen as a model for ‘the leaders of the Church’ who, on seeing an opportune moment to counter spiritual opponents, should call forth the ‘heavenly-warband’, that is, Christian teachers to preach.⁴⁸

Bede’s main teaching in this wider passage falls between 1 Samuel 14:24b-30. As the Philistines fled, Saul laid an oath of fasting on the pursuing Israelites, but Jonathan, oblivious to his father’s command, consumed a mouthful of honey.⁴⁹ Bede took particular interest in

⁴⁴ 1 Samuel 13:15-16, 14:2; *Samuhel*, II.1772-1781, p.110 (p.276), quot. Galatians 6:14, ls.1903-1908, p.113 (pp.280-281); compare Apponius, *In Canticum Canticorum expositionem*, CCSL 19, VIII.1123-1127, p.214

⁴⁵ *Samuhel*, II.1886-1920, pp.113-114 (pp.280-281), cit. Jerome, *Nom.Hebraica*, ls.13, p.121, ls.7, p.104.

⁴⁶ While, in Jonathan’s armour-bearer, who crawled behind his master, Bede saw pupils eager to learn from noble teachers, *Samuhel*, II.1917, 1924-1991, pp.114-115 (pp.281-283) [em.cit.], quot. Josephus, *Antiquitates*, VI.6.2. See A.H. Merrills, *History and Geography in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2005), pp.229-309, especially pp.245ff.

⁴⁷ *Samuhel*, II.2101-2106, p.118 (p.287), see also, ls.2075-2079, pp.117-118 (p.286); compare *Genesis*, III.700-702, pp.161-162 (p.238).

⁴⁸ 1 Samuel 14:16-23; *Samuhel*, II.2066-2085, pp.117-118 (p.286), cit. 1 Peter 2:9. That noble teachers led the spiritual soldiery into battle recalls Anglo-Saxon military obligation and tactics, cf. *HE*, III.18, pp.268-269; Guy Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West, 450-900* (London, 2003), pp.194, 198-199.

⁴⁹ 1 Samuel 14:24b-27.

this honey, perceiving it as the sweetness of secular literature, which, while sometimes poisonous, was beneficial when responsibly consumed by noble teachers as a supplement to the much broader study of Scripture. Guiding his reader, Bede introduced the section between 1 Samuel 14:24b-30 by explaining,

This passage instructs teachers of the truth to refrain from seeking the sweetness of secular eloquence [*dulcedo saecularis eloquentiae*], just as they would from other worldly pleasures...⁵⁰

In Saul's oath of fasting, Bede interpreted the Christian need to exercise 'self-control', *continentia*, extolling this virtue in the model of 'the outstanding teacher', *magister egregius*, that is, Paul.⁵¹ In styling Paul in this manner, Bede emulated what Jerome had said of the apostle when writing to the infant Pactula.⁵² That same letter exhorted Pactula's guardians to teach the child *continentia* and to nourish her with Scripture (and not too much secular literature, characterised as poisonous honey).⁵³ The similarities with Bede's exegesis suggests that he had examined these and other letters when preparing his own lesson on secular literature for English readers. Indeed, as Jerome had warned of the perils of lust in Pactula's case, Bede chastened his own audience to keep themselves celibate over pagan thought. The 'sweetness of secular eloquence', he wrote, flowing from 'the arrogant and uncultivated grove of the philosophers', should be treated as the kiss of the harlot from Proverbs 5:3, her lips "a dripping honeycomb."⁵⁴ In a comparable treatment, Bede's *In Lucam* compared the pods – the fodder of pigs eaten by the prodigal son – as 'worldly doctrines resounding with

⁵⁰ *Samuhel*, II.2145-2148, p.119 (p.288).

⁵¹ *ibid.*, II.2153-2160, p.119 (pp.289-290) [em.cit.], quot. 1 Corinthians 9:27.

⁵² Jerome, *Epistula CXXVIII*, CSEL 56, iii.6, p.159, compare Gregory, *Homiliae in Hiezechihelam prophetam*, CCSL 142, i.7, ls.48-64, p.84 (trans. Tomkinson, pp.114-115) [em.cit.].

⁵³ Jerome, *Epistula CXXVIII*, CSEL 56, i-iv, pp.156-161; pp.466-479, compare *Epistula CVII*, CSEL 55, iii-xiii, pp.292-305.

⁵⁴ *Samuhel*, II.2161-2164, pp.119-120 (p.290), compare *Salomonis*, I.v.9-12, p.48.

sterile sweetness’, within which ‘praises of *fabulae* of idols burst out to the gods of the nations in various words and songs ... delighting only the demons’.⁵⁵

Returning to *In Samuhelem*, we see how Bede intended his emphasis of secular eloquence as sweetness to prepare readers for 1 Samuel 14:27. In the literal text, Jonathan had consumed wild honey when, pursuing the Philistines on horseback, he thrust his rod into a honeycomb and brought it to his mouth. Bede imagined Jonathan riding on horseback as noble teachers exercising their knowledge of pagan thought ‘to rule those beneath him’ (the horse as listener), while, Jonathan’s rod symbolised the same teacher’s desire to ‘conduct himself without stumbling’ (when speaking to listeners).⁵⁶ On tasting the honey, Jonathan’s tired countenance was enlightened, thus signalling to Bede how the teacher who read pagan thought was ‘illuminated as it were by the honey-sweet arrangement of words’.⁵⁷ Bede’s ensuing criticism of ‘noble teachers’ who ‘studied the books of the gentiles [*libri gentilium*] with more eager delight than is fitting’, introduced one such teacher whom God had castigated with ‘a hail of blows’ since he was ‘not a Christian but a Ciceronian.’⁵⁸ Bede and presumably Acca, too, knew this was none other than Jerome, who had recorded his own stripes as a caution to others.⁵⁹ The corrective to such lust, Bede explained, was the self-control that enabled teachers to close, as it were, the book of secular literature and return to contemplating Scripture, so that these might say together with David, “The wicked have told me fables [*fabulationes*]: but not as your law, O Lord. All your statutes are truth.”⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Luke 15:13-16; *Lucas*, IV.2334-2337, p.289 (pp.469-470; *emend.*), quot. Augustine, *Quaestiones euangeliorum*, II.xxxiii.29-32, p.74 (p.394); compare Caesarius, *Sermo* CLXIII, 1, p.669 (FOTC 47, pp.385-386).

⁵⁶ *Samuhel*, II.2184-2192, p.120 (pp.291-292).

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, ls.2190-2191, compare *Homelia* i.1, ls.110-112, p.4 (p.4).

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, ls.2173-2179.

⁵⁹ Jerome, *Epistula* XXII, CSEL 54, xxix.6-30, pp.188-191; DeGregorio and Love, *Bede: On Samuel*, p.291, n.511. Allegedly, Caesarius had experienced a similar scourge, see *Vita Caesarii Arelatensis*, SC 536, I.9, pp.16-161 (trans. Klingshirn, pp.13-14).

⁶⁰ *Samuhel*, II.2172192-2196, p.120 (p.292), quot. Psalm 118(119):85-86a. [*Ps.Romanum*].

From 1 Samuel 14:28-30, Bede outlined two merits of secular literature for noble teachers: oratorical improvement and countering pagan error. However, he inserted in this same material a prominent caution, which, since it relates closely to what we have considered thus far, will be explored first. Concluding his exegesis of 1 Samuel 14:28-29a, Bede warned,

But one must be much more careful when plucking a rose among sharp thorns than a lily amidst soft leaves; it is much safer to seek out salutary guidance in apostolic pages than in Platonic ones. For even the bees themselves which make honey of this kind hold out with their mouth sweet words which soothe, but in their hinder parts they keep poisonous deeds which wound.⁶¹

Here, Bede presented a rich blend of Scriptural, classical, patristic, and English imagery. The rose blossoming among thorns is proverbial, often referring to virgins, as in Jerome and Aldhelm's application.⁶² However, Bede saw the rose flower as symbolic of the occasional merit in secular literature, its blossoms surrounded by barbs. By contrast, lilies and their soft leaves were the *flores scripturae divinae*, resulting in the simple lesson: gather Pauline lilies instead of Platonic roses.⁶³ Bede might additionally have had in mind the healing properties that lilies were supposed to have contained for burns. He noted elsewhere how figural lilies soothed 'the flames of vices', a sense that might be extrapolated from this exegesis where Christian readers inflamed by secular roses found their passion cooled by Scripture's lilies.⁶⁴

Bede's comparison of pagan authors to bees suggests some fluency with certain classical ideals of these insects. From Vergil's fourth *Georgic*, Bede would learn how Jupiter had

⁶¹ *Samuhel*, II.2216-2221, p.121 (pp.293-294), compare *ibid.*, III.471-474 p.148 (p.337).

⁶² Jerome, *Epistula XXII*, CSEL 54, xx.1, p.170, quot. in Aldhelm, *Prosa de uirginitate*, CCSL 124A, viii.18-21, p.93 (trans. Lapidge, p.65).

⁶³ *Samuhel*, II.2216-2217, p.121 (pp.293-294), compare *Cant.Canticorum*, III.iv.306-310, p.252 (p.115), cit. Song of Songs 4:5-6, Apponius, *Canticum Canticorum*, VI.31, pp.150-151; *DeTemp.*, II.1568-1575, pp.231-232 (p.115), cit. 1 Kings 7:49c; compare Aldhelm's expression, 'plucking crimson flowers of modesty from the meadow of holy books', *Prosa de uirginitate*, xix.37-38, p.225 (p.76).

⁶⁴ *Cant.Canticorum*, II.ii.644-651, pp.227-228 (p.85) [em.cit.].

bestowed bees with special qualities since these had secretly nourished him when as a child he was kept hidden from Saturn's filicide.⁶⁵ Indeed, Maro had opened that volume with a praise of bees, 'Heaven's gift, the honey of the skies', later extolling their 'qualities': order and industry; sexual purity; and obedience to rulers.⁶⁶ Vergil's bees were also 'souls of the poets', collecting their food from the gardens of the Muses, an idea that Plato had earlier traced to Socrates.⁶⁷ It was such notions that seemingly inspired Bede to interpret pagan writers as bees, that, besides their sweetness, carried a nasty sting.⁶⁸ Bede's exploitation of this classical ideal, one that criticised Plato, Cicero, Vergil and others, was itself surrounded by verses from Scripture's lilies and thus fulfilled his later lesson that noble teachers limit themselves to select observations from secular literature which should only be collected in order to criticise the error of pagan thought.⁶⁹

(i) Oratorical improvement

At 1 Samuel 14:29a, where Jonathan criticised the fast that his father had imposed on Israel, Bede began his argument for the permissible reading of secular literature. He explained, 'He (Jonathan) says "troubled" because Saul totally forbade it. If he had partly forbidden it and partly allowed it, the matter would seem to have been done more conveniently'.⁷⁰ Here, Bede envisioned Saul as a figure for those in the Church who wished secular literature forbidden.

⁶⁵ Vergil, *Georgicon*, LCL 63, IV.149-205, pp.228-233.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, IV.1-2, pp.218-219, ls.153-218, pp.228-235, compare Pliny, *NH*, LCL 353, XI.iv.11-xxiii.70, pp.438-475.

⁶⁷ Plato, *Ion*, LCL 164, 533E-534D, pp.420-423; Vergil, *Georgicon*, IV.219-227, pp.234-235; T.J. Haarhoff, 'The Bees of Vergil', *Greece and Rome* 7:2 (1960), pp.155-170.

⁶⁸ Apiculture is well-documented in Anglo-Saxon England, meaning it remains possible that Bede's lesson was partly inspired from an unfortunate encounter with a bee in the surrounds of Wearmouth-Jarrow. See Debby Banham and Rosamond Faith, *Anglo-Saxon Farms and Farming* (Oxford, 2014; rpt. 2020), pp.104-105.

⁶⁹ Once, Bede compared the work of the Fathers to 'the labour of the wisest bees [*apes prudentissimae*]', but, unlike other Christian commentators, he never pursued further the classical veneration of bees. See *Salomonis*, III.xxv.121-125, p.128, cit. Proverbs 25:16; compare Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, iii.13-17, p.7, ls.13-17; Caesarius, *Sermo* CCVII, 4, p.831 (FOTC 66, p.86); Aldhelm, *Prosa de uirginitate*, iv-vi, pp.47-75 (pp.61-63).

⁷⁰ *Samuhel*, II.2200-2202, p.120 (p.292).

Addressing these opponents, Bede pointed out how Moses and Daniel had permitted themselves an education ‘in the wisdom or writing of the Egyptians or the Chaldeans, whose superstitions as well as their pleasures they nevertheless used to abhor’.⁷¹ Paul, too, now identified as ‘the teacher of the Gentiles’, had ‘interspersed some verses from the poets of the Gentiles in his own writings or sayings.’⁷² A few lines later, Bede rewrote Jonathan’s words from 1 Samuel 14:29b, impersonating a Christian teacher in whose speech Bede established his own claim that Ciceronian rhetoric improved preaching, as Bede imagined it, a mouthful of Cicero bettering the teacher’s tongue.

Jonathan

“You have seen yourselves that my eyes are enlightened, because I tasted a little of this honey. How much more if the people had eaten of the prey of their enemies, which they found: would not there have been a greater slaughter among the Philistines?”⁷³

Christian teacher

‘You see’, he says, ‘that I have become more efficacious and sharper and quicker in delivering what is fitting in as much as I have tasted a little of the flower of a Tullian reading.’⁷⁴

Bede could not have foreseen how his reference to Cicero, *Tulliana lectio*, based, it seems, on an expression that he had encountered in Aquila Romanus’s *De figuris*, would prove so contentious in modern literature.⁷⁵ Reading this and other passages in Bede, Roger Ray became convinced that the library at Wearmouth-Jarrow possessed a volume by the Roman

⁷¹ *Samuhel*, II.2212-2215, p.121 (p.293), cit. Acts 7:22; Daniel 1:3-6, 17-20; compare Jerome, *Daniel*, I.i.81-91, pp.780-781 (pp.21-22).

⁷² *Samuhel*, II.2215-2216, p.121 (p.293); DeGregorio and Love, *Bede: On Samuel*, pp.293-294, n.520. Here, we encounter a contrast with Augustine, who had firstly called on patristic examples and then Moses and Paul (but not Daniel), see Augustine, *DDC*, II.xl.61, pp.126-127.

⁷³ 1 Samuel 14:29b-30.

⁷⁴ *Samuhel*, II.2227-2230, p.121 (p.294; *emend.*). Bede probably intended these lines to be understood in light of his figure where Jonathan’s use of his rod as a prop became the teacher employing pagan thought (specifically rhetoric), ‘to conduct himself [that is, to speak] without stumbling’, *ibid.*, ls.2188, p.120 (p.291).

⁷⁵ Aquila Romanus, *De figuris*, ed. Elice, ls.9-10, p.25, compare *VG, prol.*, pp.60-63.

rhetorician and statesman.⁷⁶ Gabriele Knappe, in her broad study of classical rhetoric in Anglo-Saxon England, opposed Ray, and it is her findings that have since informed the dominant position in the literature.⁷⁷ Yet, neither Ray nor Knappe recognised that Bede's essential point concerning rhetoric here was that rhetorical theories bettered the preaching of noble teachers. Moreover, Knappe's claim that Bede saw little relationship between Scripture and rhetoric, and thus eschewed rhetorical theories, cannot be inferred from this passage in *In Samuhelem*.⁷⁸ George Brown similarly rejected Bede's knowledge of Cicero on the basis that Bede's Christianity was 'a religion of the book', meaning that the Northumbrian found no need for rhetoric.⁷⁹ Bede would have us remember that he believed in a 'living word' that 'endured forever' in 'the Word made flesh', and that Christians should teach of this Word, in both spoken and written form.⁸⁰

Knappe rightly pointed out that 'Bede does not recommend a full study of ancient rhetoric at any point' and that rhetoric is conspicuously absent from his textbooks on: computus (*De temporum ratione*); grammar (*De orthographia*); grammar and meter (*De arte metrica*); and figures of speech (*De schematibus et tropis*).⁸¹ The lack of classical rhetoric in *De schematibus et tropis* might seem especially significant; however, this omission can be attributed to Bede's choice to write solely 'concerning the figures and modes of speech with

⁷⁶ Ray, 'Bede's *Vera Lex Historiae*', pp.7-10; *idem*, 'Bede and Cicero', *ASE* 16 (1987), pp.1-15, pp.8-15; *idem*, *Bede, Rhetoric, and the Creation of Christian Latin Culture*, JL (1997), especially pp.1-7.

⁷⁷ Knappe, *Traditionen der klassischen Rhetorik*, pp.147-156; *idem*, 'Classical rhetoric in Anglo-Saxon England', *ASE* 27 (1998), pp.5-29, p.14; George Hardin Brown, 'Ciceronianism in Bede and Alcuin', *Intertexts: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Culture Presented to Paul E. Szarmach*, ed. Virginia Blanton and Helene Scheck, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies Volume 334 (Tempe, AZ, 2008), pp.319-329, pp.319-325; Vicky Gunn, *Bede's Historiae: Genre, Rhetoric, and the Construction of Anglo-Saxon Church History* (Woodbridge, 2009), pp.13-17; Love, 'Library of the Venerable Bede', p.617.

⁷⁸ Knappe's view that Bede had in mind here 'a time long since past' also seems to overlook the contemporary flavour to Bede's exegesis, 'Today, some too descend...', so, too, the emphasis in this passage on pastoral care for eighth-century clerics, *Traditionen der klassischen Rhetorik*, pp.148, 156.

⁷⁹ Brown, 'Ciceronianism', p.322.

⁸⁰ Hebrews 4:12a; 1 Peter 1:23-25; John 1:1-4; *Epist. Catholicae*, 1Pt.i.256-259, p.232 (p.79). For the relationship between grammar and rhetoric in 'the extensively oral culture of monastic life', see Irvine, 'Bede the grammarian', pp.26-27.

⁸¹ Knappe, *Traditionen der klassischen Rhetorik*, p.151.

which the holy Scriptures are adorned.’⁸² Rhetoric that Bede believed to have originated within classical circles would then be excluded from a handbook on Scriptural speech. The best witness to Bede’s knowledge of classical rhetoric remains the passage from *In Samuhelem* – Bede’s recommendation of ‘Tullian flowers’ to his reader offering compelling evidence that he himself had read Ciceronian rhetoric.⁸³ His caveat that only a taste of such knowledge was beneficial and only so in the case of the noblest teachers would seem to preclude a need for comprehensive studies in rhetoric; simultaneously, it conforms to Bede’s wider sense that pagan thought should not be consumed in each classroom. It seems then entirely plausible that Bede opted not to share certain branches of pagan thought in his *Didascalia*, instead reserving these for a select few.

(ii) Countering pagan error

Bede explored his second, and, in the confines of this wider passage, final merit, in the ensuing material under 1 Samuel 14:29b-30, with which he concluded his lesson on secular literature.

Moreover, if the Christian people were to learn about the sects and teachings of the pagans, would they not deride them and at the same time refute their errors much more confidently and certainly? And would they not rejoice much more devoutly over their own sound faith and give thanks for this to the *Father of Lights*?⁸⁴ For one should not think that Moses or Daniel wished to study secular literature for any other reason than that, having become acquainted with it, they could destroy it and refute it better.⁸⁵

⁸² *HE*, V.24, pp.570-571.

⁸³ Here, we can lend our support to Ray’s argument that Bede had read a Ciceronian text or some substantial extract transmitted through an intermediary (although whether this was *De inuentione*, known first-hand or through Marius Victorinus’ fourth-century commentary, cannot be ascertained at present). See Ray, *Bede, Rhetoric*, p.1ff.

⁸⁴ James 1:17.

⁸⁵ *Samuhel*, II.2230-2236, p.121 (pp.294-295), cit. Jerome, *Daniel*, I.84-85, p.780 (p.21).

Learning pagan thought thus improved the teaching that countered pagan error, strengthening, at the same time, faith in the true God. In support of his claim, Bede returned to the authorities of Moses and Daniel, whom he had earlier mentioned besides Paul when first stating that noble teachers should be permitted to read secular literature. In a later chapter, we will explore the importance that Bede placed on Paul's sermon to the Athenians in the setting of the Areopagus.⁸⁶ Here, we can note Bede's sense that the teacher of pagans who cited pagan thought would penetrate better the soul of their listener, indeed, it was precisely this point that led Bede to think of local Gentile converts as superior teachers since these were best-placed to exploit indigenous beliefs.⁸⁷

For Bede, the excessive interest of certain English scholars and teachers in secular literature was idolatrous since it replaced Christian with pagan thought. When preparing the *In Samuhelem* exegesis, Bede may have had specific individuals in mind, one of them, perhaps, the deceased Aldhelm. The Abbot of Malmesbury (c.675-705) and first Bishop of Sherborne (705-709/710) has been christened England's 'latterday Athena', having, as it were, 'leapt up' in the seventh century with a prodigious capacity for classical lore.⁸⁸ Aldhelm's pupils praised their teacher's 'Roman eloquence'; certainly, classicisms overflow from his works, whether Homeric titles for God (for instance, *regnator Olympi*, 'lord of Olympus') or love of Vergilian verse over Davidic Psalms.⁸⁹ Aldhelm himself stressed that *litterae saeculares* should only be studied in order to comprehend Scripture, nevertheless, his example appears

⁸⁶ See 'Chapter Six: Contemporary idolaters', pp.222-224.

⁸⁷ Cf. Acts 17:16-34; *Exp.Actuum*, xxvii.29-98, pp.71-74 (pp.142-145) [em.cit.]. See also 'Introduction', p.24, n.120.

⁸⁸ Michael Lapidge and James Rosier, 'Introduction' to *Aldhelm: The Poetic Works*, pp.1-4, p.1.

⁸⁹ Aldhelm, *Epistolae*, VI.ls.9-11, p.494 (p.164), IX.8-10, p.498 (p.167); *idem*, *Aenigmata*, lxxix.5, pp.494-495; *idem*, *Prosa de uirginitate*, ii.6, p.33 (p.59); G.T. Dempsey, *Aldhelm of Malmsebury and the Ending of Late Antiquity* (Turnhout, 2015), pp.217-218.

to personify Bede's complaint with certain scholars in this passage, which might partly explain the latter's rather muted reception of the Southumbrian bishop.⁹⁰

Besides Aldhelm, we might implicate the very recipient of Bede's passage, Acca. According to Bede, Acca established 'a very large and most noble library' at Hexham, and, while Bede never mentioned its secular shelves (similar to his report of the libraries at Wearmouth-Jarrow), we still find some evidence to suggest that Acca took pleasure in pagan thought.⁹¹

Acca's sole surviving work – a letter to Bede which the bishop insisted the former preserve in the preface to *In Lucam* – incorporated four verses from Scripture, but preceding these were 'the words of the comic playwright, *Nothing is said that has not been said before*'.⁹² Acca had not read first-hand this line from Terence (fl.195-159 BC), learning it instead through Jerome's *Commentarius in Ecclesiasten*.⁹³ Still, the example suggests Acca's fondness for pagan prose, with Terence preferred over the surely more obvious saying of Solomon, "Nothing under the sun is new" (Ecclesiastes 1:9). This exact Scriptural verse had served Jerome's heading to the passage in *Commentarius in Ecclesiasten* where Acca would read the Terentian line, presenting a stark contrast to Bede's replacement of pagan with sacred verse.

Several other points could further suggest that Bede was thinking especially of Acca when preparing his exegesis in *In Samuhelem*. Much of his passage concerned 'noble teachers' and, in the *Historia*, Acca represents one of just two bishops, and the only English-born bishop, to

⁹⁰ Aldhelm, *Epistolae*, VIII.8-15, p.500 (p.168); *HE*, V.18, pp.514-515; Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, pp.214-219.

⁹¹ *HE*, V.20, pp.530-531. Aelred of Rievaulx (1110-1167) reported that Acca's library was destroyed as a result of the Danish invasions in the ninth century, *De sanctis ecclesie Haugustaldensis et eorum miraculis*, CCCM 3, xiv.1-8, pp.93-94 (trans. Freeland, p.87).

⁹² Acca, *Epistola ad Bedam*, CCSL 120, ls.19-20, p.5 (trans. Kendall and Wallis, p.96), quot. Terence, *Eunuchus*, LCL 22, *prol.*, ls.41, pp.318-319. Acca's patronage of art and music might be seen as complementing an appreciation for secular literature, cf. *HE*, V.20, pp.530-531; Cook, 'Andreas and Acca', pp.308-316; Lapidge, *ASL*, pp.42, 47-48.

⁹³ Jerome, *Commentarius in Ecclesiasten*, CCSL 72, I.230-232, p.257 (trans. Goodrich and Miller, p.40).

receive the title *nobilis*.⁹⁴ Indeed, Acca's employment of Terence when compelling Bede to begin working on *In Lucam* recalls what we earlier read about noble teachers 'using the arguments or opinions of the pagans ... to rule those set under him'.⁹⁵ Writing to Bede, Acca had repeated the Ovidian title for the sun *Auctor lucis*, 'Author of light' when referring to God.⁹⁶ Replying to Acca, Bede employed the same title twice, introduced by his comment, 'to speak in the words of your Holiness'.⁹⁷ Since only one much-changed version of this title occurs throughout Bede's wider writings, it might be proposed that Bede felt uncomfortable styling God in this pagan Roman manner.⁹⁸ Intriguingly, Bede placed a certain stress on the title *Pater luminum*, 'Father of Lights' (James 1:17), in the *In Samuhelem* passage, possibly intending for Acca to favour the words of Christ's step-brother over those of an idolatrous poet.⁹⁹ Furthermore, Bede's encouragement for noble teachers to exercise *continentia* when reading secular literature could be seen as a comment relevant to Acca, for, when later writing to Ecgberht, Bede singled out this virtue for its scarcity in Northumbria's episcopal households.¹⁰⁰ By that stage, Acca had been chased from his see and remained an exile until his death in 739/740. Indeed, it was once thought that Acca had written the classically-infused Old English poem *Andreas* as a reflection of his own odyssey in exile.¹⁰¹ Although this is now believed improbable, Acca does seem to have taken pleasure in secular literature, so much so that Bede apparently felt the need to correct his superior over what he perceived as a perilous excess.

⁹⁴ *HE*, V.20, pp.530-531, compare II.7, pp.156-157 (Mellitus).

⁹⁵ *Samuhel*, II.2186-2189, p.120 (p.291).

⁹⁶ Acca, *Epistola ad Bedam*, ls.62, p.6 (p.97), compare Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, LCL 42, IV.257-258, pp.196-197; Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, LCL 510, I.xv.14, pp.180-181

⁹⁷ *Lucas, prol.*, ls.115-122, p.7 (p.100).

⁹⁸ *DTR*, xxx.47-57, p.374 (p.87).

⁹⁹ *Samuhel*, II.2233, p.121 (p.295).

¹⁰⁰ *Ep.Ecg.*, iv, pp.128-129.

¹⁰¹ Cook, 'Andreas and Acca'.

From the idolatry of teachers, we turn to the idolatry of the laity. That Bede encouraged noble teachers to consume pagan thought in order to better reach those who believed its errors surely means that he felt a need existed for this sort of preaching in England. Christian preaching was in itself a preventative to idolatry; however, Bede's intent here seems more related to the teaching that countered extant idolatrous belief and observance, implying his knowledge of idolatrous belief in eighth-century Northumbria. The issue was serious enough for Bede to raise it with Acca; indeed, the pressing need for Acca and other noble teachers to counter idolatrous thought seems pronounced in Bede's striking exhortation, "Accursed is the one who keeps back his sword from bloodshed".¹⁰² This of course echoes Bede's interpretation of spiritual weapons forged in Scripture and sharpened a little on the whetstone of pagan thought. The passage in *In Samuhelem* offers little clarity in relation to Bede's specific fears with paganism in England; however, in the ensuing material and elsewhere in his writings, we encounter several such examples, one of which represents our next concern: *fabulae*.

Fabulae

According to the Brepols Database, the nouns *fabulae* or *fabulationes*, both meaning 'tales', altogether occur over forty times in Bede's writings. Most of these cases involve classical tales, such as Castor and Pollux; however, Bede's repertoire showed a wider familiarity with several 'Jewish *fabulae*' (ordinarily dismissed as extracanonical hearsay), and English tales.¹⁰³ Bede identified only one set of tales from England but seemed to know others

¹⁰² *Samuhel*, II.2121-2124, p.119 (pp.287-288), quot. Jeremiah 48:10b.

¹⁰³ Titus 1:13; *Lucas*, IV.286-291, p.238 (p.480), cit. Luke 11:31, V.2495-2499, 2500-2501, p.358 (p.562), cit. Luke 20:27-33 [= *Marcus*, III.1834-1838, 1840-1841, pp.588-589, cit. Mark 12:18-23], quot. Jerome, *Matheus*, III.1813-1818, 1820-1821, p.205 (p.254); *DTR*, lxvi.639-646, pp.483-484 (p.181), quot. Jerome, *Daniel*, II.v.36-37, p.821 (p.56).

besides. True to his wider treatment of English paganism, he kept these anonymous. Indeed, Bede held a notable apprehension over the popularity of English *fabulae* among clerical and lay audiences in his day. First, we must explain his interest in classical tales, which will help make sense of his anxieties towards English equivalents.

Dozens of classical tales surface in Bede's writings, apparently included for one of three reasons: to explain something relating to his literal text; as colour for figural embellishment; or simply out of sheer pleasure.¹⁰⁴ Reading of giants in Genesis 6:4, Bede recalled similar monsters from *fabulae poetarum*.¹⁰⁵ Kendall cited Isidore's influence here, but, since *poetae* was original to Bede, he was perhaps thinking of classical giants such as those mentioned in Ovid's creation myth.¹⁰⁶ In Bede's *De tabernaculo*, Aesop's fable about the crow and peacock was read with the altar of incense from the tabernacle as a figure of hypocrites.¹⁰⁷ Bronze horns adorned this altar, recalling to Bede the faithful who, like 'clean animals', possessed 'fixed and unmoveable devotion from the inner root of the mind.'¹⁰⁸ Hypocrites wore imitation horns, impersonating the faithful like the jealous crow bedecked with peacock feathers. Elsewhere, a startling criticism in Bede's letter to Ecgberht compared the 'avarice and greed of (spiritual) idolatry' that seemed to him so manifest in Northumbria's bishops with Cerberus, 'whom *fabulae* name as the three-headed dog of the lower worlds.'¹⁰⁹ In Greco-Roman mythology, Cerberus guarded the entrance to the underworld – primarily to prevent the dead from leaving – and Bede quite brilliantly exploited this depiction to

¹⁰⁴ The point that Bede took pleasure in reading secular literature has previously been overlooked, cf. Gerald Bonner, 'Bede and medieval civilization', *ASE* 2 (1973), pp.71-90, p.79; Irvine, 'Bede the grammarian', pp.39-40.

¹⁰⁵ *Genesis*, II.983-986, p.100 (p.170).

¹⁰⁶ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, LCL 42, I.151-162, pp.12-13

Isidore, *Etymologiae*, XI.iii.13, p.28 (p.244), cit. in Kendall, *On Genesis*, p.170, n.170.

¹⁰⁷ *DeTab.*, III.1344-1350, p.127 (p.148). As Holder (*On the Tabernacle*, p.148, n.5) noted, Bede's source for this version of Aesop's fable remains unknown.

¹⁰⁸ Exodus 30:2-3.

¹⁰⁹ *Ep.Ecg.*, xvii, pp.156-161.

emphasise how bishops who loved the world would be prevented from escaping Christ's judgement in the end times.¹¹⁰ Mixing Cerberus with Scripture, Bede warned Ecgberht to beware the monster's 'rabid teeth', *rabidi dentes*, while quoting 1 John 2:15, "Dearly beloved, do not love the world, nor those things that are of the world."¹¹¹ In this case, Grocock and Wood thought that Bede had consulted Vergil, but his text is closer to Ovid, whose Cerberus had a venomous mouth with *rabidi dentes*.¹¹² As we saw with Leda's husband, Bede sometimes mistook the meaning of a Greco-Roman tale. He ridiculed the stories told of peoples living in the Antipodes, oblivious to the fact that the Romans had considered these from a philosophical or satirical perspective.¹¹³ Sometimes, the distance between early medieval England and Mediterranean antiquity was vast.

Bede's concern with secular literature after 710 might be seen in his increasingly cautious citation of Greco-Roman *fabulae*. While classical tales still occur in his writings from this period (see the four examples just mentioned), they became less prominent and never identified deities – no longer would Euripides' Helen and Pindar's Dioscuri interrupt a Scriptural lesson. In roughly the same period, Bede began to express a novel concern with English tales. As Hector Chadwick observed, it was not until the late eighth century that insular writers began to share firm particulars of English pagan poems and tales.¹¹⁴ However, to conclude from this that Bede possessed little knowledge of English pagan tales risks inventing a modern tale – for, in examining Bede's *fabulae*, we find compelling evidence that Bede was in fact well-versed in the trends of vernacular tales of his day.

¹¹⁰ As Vergil described him, 'the warder of Hell', *Aeneid*, LCL 64, VIII.296-297, pp.80-81.

¹¹¹ *Ep.Ecg.*, xvii, pp.160-161, compare *Homelia* i.20, ls.135-154, p.145 (p.201) [em.cit.].

¹¹² Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, LCL 42, IV.500-501, pp.212-213, VII.408-419, pp.370-373, compare Vergil, *Georgicon*, IV.481-484, 3, pp.230-231; *idem*, *Aeneid*, LCL 63, VI.417-425, pp.560-563; see also Isidore, *Etymologiae*, XI.iii.33, p.31 (p.245).

¹¹³ *DTR*, xxxiv.67-73, p.390 (p.99), compare Augustine, *DCD*, XVI.ix, pp.510-511 (p.197).

¹¹⁴ H.M. Chadwick, *The Heroic Age* (Cambridge, 1912; rpt. 1967), p.41f; see also Hunter Blair, *World of Bede*, p.290f.

We can start with Bede's report in the *Historia* of the freeing of Imma, a Northumbrian prisoner in Mercia, c.679, which represents the sole set of English tales that can be clearly identified in his writings.¹¹⁵ When Imma's chains kept opening, the *gesith* holding Imma captive asked whether he knew 'loosing spells, such as are described in *fabulae*.'¹¹⁶ Bede had Imma respond in a manner that resembles his own belief that converts renounce their former paganism – the man 'knew nothing about such arts', and instead credited his emancipation to the masses said by Imma's brother, Tunna.¹¹⁷ Miracles in Bede's writings often follow Scriptural or patristic models, and, while this is true of Imma's loosing, the peculiarly English reference to 'tales of loosing spells' could suggest that he knew a similar miracle from English pagan thought – similar, perhaps, to the captive-freeing *Indisi* named in the first of the German incantations known as the 'Merseburg Charms'.¹¹⁸ As Seth Lerer has proposed, Bede's inclusion of Imma in the *Historia* could show his intent to teach the power of Christian supplication over pagan superstition.¹¹⁹ Were this so, it would provide further evidence of Bede fulfilling his own teaching that noble teachers studied pagan thought in order to counter its error; though, in this case, the pagan thought was not classical but English.

The clearest evidence of Bede's knowledge of English tales lies outside his *Historia*. Half a dozen or so complaints, scattered across Bede's homilies and exegesis, appear to reveal his impression that clerics and laymen alike were sharing English tales, which, it seems, had become more popular than Scripture. Richard Fletcher warned that, in some of these cases,

¹¹⁵ *HE*, IV.22, pp.400-405.

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*, pp.402-405. See R.I. Page, *An Introduction to English Runes*, 2nd edn. (Woodbridge, 1999), pp.110-111.

¹¹⁷ Chiara Benati, 'Insprinc haptbandun, inuar uigandun: Magical (?) Remedies to Escape from Imprisonment in the Germanic Tradition', *Incarceration and Slavery in the Middle Ages*, pp.89-108, pp.89-93, 101-102.

¹¹⁸ Acts 16:23-26; Gregory, *Dialogi*, SC 265, IV.lvii-lix, pp.184-199 (pp.266-272); Seth Lerer, *Literacy and Power in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (London, 1991), pp.35-37; Richard A. Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity* (New York, 1997; rpt. Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1999), pp.248-251.

¹¹⁹ Lerer, *Literacy and Power*, pp.37-42.

Bede might have been complaining of non-pagan *fabulae*, such as ‘idle talk’, a second translation of *fabulae*.¹²⁰ Yet, Bede often mentioned *fabulae* (as in ‘tales’) in passages where he named other ecclesiastical sins, be it ‘idle talk’, ‘gossip’, or ‘slander’, meaning we can, with care, read these passages as sharing his anxieties over tales. Several of Bede’s homilies plead with *mei fratres*, that is, the brothers at Wearmouth-Jarrow, to spurn ‘superfluous’, *supervacuae*, and ‘idle’, *uacantes*, ‘tales’.¹²¹ Citing Mary’s example on hearing the revelation of Gabriel that she would bear the infant-Christ, “And his mother kept all these words, bearing them in her heart”, Bede charged those present to meditate on Scripture,

... let us take care to rebuke ourselves and our neighbours concerning our pointless tales, and chatter filled with the wicked sweetness of slander, and to enkindle [instead] the frequent offering of divine praises.¹²²

A sermon for Lent was even more chastening. Recalling Christ’s clearing of the temple traders, Bede pondered how the Lord would receive the tales and other sins at Wearmouth-Jarrow.¹²³ Lent was the season of reflection, reading, and probably fasting too, and Bede’s lesson indicates his sense that some in his minster had spoiled this period with tales, seemingly confirming the truth of Paul’s words in relation to some in England (quoted in another Bedan homily): “And they will turn their ears from the truth, and will be turned towards false tales.”¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Fletcher, *Barbarian Conversion*, p.249; see *RSB*, vi.8, pp.190-191; xliii.1-9, pp.242-245.

¹²¹ *Homelia* i.19, ls.158-177, pp.138-139 (p.193) [em.cit], ii.1, ls.43-64, pp.185-186 (p.3) [em.cit.], ii.6, ls.102-128, p.223 (pp.55-56) [em.cit.].

¹²² *Homelia* i.19, ls.163-170, p.139 (p.193), compare Caesarius, *Sermo* I, 10, p.7 (FOTC 31, pp.10-11).

¹²³ *Homelia* ii.1, ls.43-64, pp.185-186 (pp.2-3), cit. Matthew 21:12-13.

¹²⁴ *ibid.*, ii.6, ls.102-105, p.223 (p.55), quot. 2 Timothy 4:4, compare Caesarius, *Sermo* CXCVIII, 3, p.800 (FOTC 66, p.50); see also *RSB*, xlviii.14-16, p.250-251; *Marcus*, I.1189-1894, p.485, cit. Mark 4:23, 2 Timothy 4:2-4; Foot, *Monastic Life*, p.235f.

In *In Genesim*, Bede saw Ishmael's persecution of his half-brother Isaac as a figure for 'the one who in a charming manner seeks to turn him (a brother) aside from the rectitude of his purity by games or *ineptis colloquiis* [foolish talk]'.¹²⁵ Quoting Psalm 118(119):85-86, "The wicked have told me *fabulationes*: but not so as your law, Lord. All your statutes are truth. The wicked have persecuted me. Help me", Bede then immediately observed how David had endured the 'tellers of fables [*narratores fabularum*] as though they were persecutors', but had overcome these by prayer.¹²⁶ Thus, tale tellers persecuted the faithful by intruding on the proper order of monastic life with pagan tales. Bede condemned these individuals and those ensnared by their speech in his exegesis of Luke 7:11-12, the funeral cortege of the son of the Nain widow. Luke reported how the citizens of Nain watched as the man was borne out of its gates, which Bede turned into a criticism of those who in public reject the spiritual life to indulge in corporeal pleasure, 'Whoever willingly opens his ear to idle tales [*fabulae otiosae*] and lewd songs [*obscena carmina*] or slanders [*detractiones*], makes this gate of the soul the gate of his death'.¹²⁷

These complaints seem related to Bede's criticism of English tales and accompanying sins in his historical writings. Cuthbert, Bede told us, believed that a pestilence had returned to Lindisfarne since its members took pleasure in 'feasting, rejoicing, and tales'.¹²⁸ In the case of Coldingham, Bede reported how Adomnán, in his vision of its sins, cited the telling of *fabulationes* as one reason for the later destruction of the minster.¹²⁹ Tales were also popular among certain bishops and their households, for, when writing to Egberht, Bede condemned

¹²⁵ Genesis 21:9-10; *Genesis*, IV.1607-1610, p.238 (p.318).

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, ls.1610-1616, compare *Anonymi Glosa Psalmorum ex traditione seniorum*, ed. Boese, *Psalmus* 118, versus 84-85, pp.114-115.

Samuhel, II.2186-2196, p.120 (pp.291-292), quot. Psalm 118(119):85-86;

¹²⁷ *Lucas*, II.2283-2285, p.158 (p.297).

¹²⁸ *VSC*, xxvii, pp.244-249, compare Caesarius, *Sermo* LV, 4, pp.242-243 (FOTC 31, pp.273-274), LVa, 3, pp.246-247 (pp.277-278); see also Foot, *Monastic Life*, pp.236-241.

¹²⁹ *HE*, IV.25, pp.420-427.

the sinful companions beloved of Northumbrian bishops who were ‘steeped in mockery and pranks, tales, feasting together, drunkenness and other wanton pursuits’.¹³⁰ The occasion for this excess was the *convivium*, the episcopal banqueting table, which had earlier been criticised as a setting for *otiosae fabulae* in a proscription of the Council of Toledo, c.589.¹³¹ As Patrick Wormald and James Campbell noted, such examples highlight the cultural similarities between secular and ecclesiastical elites in England.¹³² Bede indicated on one occasion how congregations, not clerics, had forsaken God for love of tales and other ‘Gentile errors’, and his wider treatment of *fabulae* in secular and spiritual environments is suggestive of a fascination throughout English society with songs and tales from its pagan past.¹³³

In an earlier section of this chapter, we learned how the secular literature of Rome had provided one sweet temptation to English scholars and teachers – ‘Today too, some descend, having abandoned the height of God’s word...’.¹³⁴ Here, it might be countered that Bede’s complaint of tales in ecclesiastical centres was not concerned with ‘loosing spells’ and English heroes, but classical equivalents in Aeneas and Dido. Yet, it can be shown that Bede’s frustration was not so much with classical tales but those of English origin. Only a select few in England had the required skill to read the elegiac or hexameter verse of Ovid or Vergil, and classical tales were not then widely known, especially in lay congregations.¹³⁵ By contrast,

¹³⁰ *Ep.Ecg.*, iv, pp.128-129 (in the previous chapter, Bede urged Ecgberht to ‘keep himself from storytelling, gossip, and other plagues of an unbridled tongue’, iii, pp.126-127).

¹³¹ *Concilium Toletanum III*, in *Concilios Visigóticos e Hispano-Romanos*, ed. with Sp. trans. Vives, vii, p.21, compare *Lucas*, II.2283, p.158 (p.297).

¹³² *HE*, III.10, pp.244-245; Wormald, ‘Bede, *Beowulf*’, p.51f; Campbell, ‘Cuthbert and his Early Cult’, pp.96-100; Foot, *Monastic Life*, p.236f.

¹³³ *Quaest.Regem*, XVI.17-20, p.309 (p.116); *HE*, IV.24, pp.414-417; John McNamara, ‘Bede’s Role in Circulating Legend in the *Historia Ecclesiastica*’, *ASSAH* 7, ed. William Filmer-Sankey and David Griffiths (Oxford, 1994), pp.61-69, p.62f; John Blair, *Bede and the Culture of the Laity*, JL (2010), pp.2-3.

¹³⁴ See this chapter, pp.149-153.

¹³⁵ It is true that certain Christian writings could present similar challenges to English students (for instance, the works of Origen and Augustine); however, by and large, the latter genre was more accessible than the works of the ancient poets.

the oral culture of England meant that native tales could be widely shared. Moreover, it would seem strange for Bede to recite even brief extracts from Greco-Roman tales were these considered a threat to English faith, particularly in works where he criticised tale-tellers. It is inconceivable that Bede would risk censuring Northumbria's bishops for their love of Greco-Roman tales and then, a few paragraphs later, introduce monstrous Cerberus! A certain interplay between Greco-Roman and English tales might be envisaged (as others have explored), particularly when it came to reaching those congregations where pagan thought had retained some significance among the local population.¹³⁶

We might now take seriously Bede's complaint with *fabulae* as evidence in England of the wider popularity of vernacular tales in the seventh and eighth century. It can at the least be concluded that Bede knew more of these tales than he told us, to borrow the words of Bishop Daniel, 'their tales [*fabulae*] are well-known to us'.¹³⁷ Indeed, in one of Bede's own tales – Cædmon the cowherd turned Christian poet – we might envision Bede's ideal that vernacular poetry swop frivolous tales told at the ecclesiastical and lay repast for spiritually-edifying songs.¹³⁸ Certainly, Bede distinguished Cædmon from other English poets. The latter had not learned 'the art of poetry from men nor through a man' but 'freely by the grace of God. Hence he could never compose any foolish or trivial poem but only those which were concerned with devotion'.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ J.R.R. Tolkien, "'Beowulf" and the Critics (A)', *Beowulf and the Critics*, ed. Michael D.C. Drout, 2nd edn. (Tempe, AZ, 2011), pp.67-112, p.95f; Hunter Blair, *World of Bede*, p.282f; Alistair Campbell, 'The use in Beowulf of earlier heroic verse', *England before the Conquest*, pp.283-292. See also 'Chapter Three: Idol makers', pp.139-140.

¹³⁷ Tangl 23, ls.19, p.40 (p.27)

¹³⁸ *HE*, IV.24, pp.414-421.

¹³⁹ *ibid.*, pp.414-419; DeGregorio, 'Literary Contexts: Cædmon's Hymn', pp.64-65.

Portents

One aspect of Bede's thinking that was significantly influenced by pagan thought was his understanding of 'portents', *prodigia*, sometimes termed 'signs', *signa*.¹⁴⁰ For Bede, portents were a means to prognosticate certain events as part of the ongoing witness of God, as A. Di Pilla articulated, 'reality and Revelation, nature and Scripture, inform one another'.¹⁴¹ In interpreting the various astrological and meteorological phenomena that constituted such portents, Bede turned most of all to the teaching of Pliny the Elder. Anyone familiar with Bede's works on natural history and time will instantly recognise his fondness for this Roman naturalist and his *Naturalis historia*, c.77.¹⁴² Writing in *De temporum ratione*, Bede praised Pliny as 'that most astute researcher into natural history', his *magnum opus*, 'that most delightful book'.¹⁴³ Indeed, as Elisa Tinelli has shown, Bede regarded Pliny's observations on the natural world as equal to Ambrose's *Hexaemeron* or Basil's *Expositio in Genesim*, and, more trustworthy than Isidore's *De natura rerum*.¹⁴⁴

Of course, Bede had to contend with Pliny the pagan, who credited the event of portents to the Roman pantheon. Bede considered Plinian thought as less sweet or treacherous than Platonic philosophy or Ciceronian rhetoric; nonetheless, he occasionally presented an exaggerated reminder of Pliny's religion. This is shown, rather comically, in Bede's chapter from *De temporum ratione* concerning the eclipse of the sun and moon. Having quoted Pliny throughout this chapter, Bede remarked near its close,

¹⁴⁰ *DNR*, xxvii.6-7, p.223 (p.94); Peter Darby, *Bede and the End of Time* (Farnham, 2012), p.97-104.

¹⁴¹ Alessandra Di Pilla, 'Cosmologia e uso delle fonti nel *De natura rerum* di Beda', *Romanobarbarica* 11 (1991), pp.129-147, p.147; Faith Wallis, 'Si Naturam Quæras: Reframing Bede's Science', *Innovation and Tradition in the Writings of the Venerable Bede*, ed. Scott DeGregorio (Morgantown, WV, 2006), pp.65-99.

¹⁴² Wallis, 'Bede and Science', *Cambridge Companion to Bede*, pp.113-126, p.115f.

¹⁴³ *DTR*, xxvii.2-3, p.362 (p.78), xxxiv.73-74, p.390 (p.99).

¹⁴⁴ Elisa Tinelli, 'La *Naturalis Historia* di Plinio nel *De natura rerum* di Beda il Venerabile', *La Naturalis Historia di Plinio nella tradizione medievale e umanistica*, ed. Vanna Maraglino (Bari, 2012), pp.77-104, pp.98-103.

But lest we seem to take up a whole chapter with the statements of even such a great pagan [as Pliny], let us also ask the doctors of the Church what they think of this.¹⁴⁵

Bede proceeded to raise Jerome's counter to the polemic of Porphyry and Celsus who had ridiculed Christian belief in the eclipse at Christ's Passion.¹⁴⁶ Bede no doubt enjoyed Jerome's rational explanation that since Christ had been crucified over Passover, which, in line with the Mosaic Law, took place at the time of the full moon, then the shadow of the Passion could not be confused with a solar eclipse since solar eclipses only occur with the new moon.¹⁴⁷ However, Bede must have realised that Jerome was employing the same Greek cosmology that he himself had learned from Pliny, and which, a few lines earlier in *De temporum ratione*, he had restated for English readers, namely, the cycles of eclipses as discovered by Hipparchus.¹⁴⁸ Bede's effort at concealment reveals the wider trust that he and other Christian writers conferred on pagan observations of portents. It shows, too, the opposition that Bede seemed to expect for his employment of Pliny, echoing the argumentative discourse in parts of his treatment of secular literature in *In Samuhelem*.

Portents were of course found in Scripture's pages, particularly in relation to the end times; however, the writers of the canonical books offered no explanation as to how these should be interpreted. Thus, Bede turned to Pliny's observations in order to make sense of these phenomena. His choice to read portents (and construct his readings from pagan science) was not a universal one. Indeed, Bede must have known that none other than Augustine held reservations over the interpretation of portents that occurred outside the pages of Scripture. Augustine recognised the existence of these, but warned that non-Scriptural portents might

¹⁴⁵ *DTR*, xxvii.27-29, p.363 (p.79).

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*, ls.29-36, quot. Jerome, *Matheus*, IV.1751-1756, p.273 (p.318); see Matthew 27:45; Scheck, *Jerome: On Matthew*, p.318, n.356.

¹⁴⁷ Leviticus 23:5-6; Matthew 26:17.

¹⁴⁸ *DTR*, xxvii.20-21, p.363 (p.79), quot. Pliny, *NH*, LCL 330, II.x.56-57, pp.204-207.

represent the machinations of evil spirits.¹⁴⁹ Scripture, Augustine contended, must provide the principal means to interpret life, and so portents ‘should demonstrate, show, portend, predict that God will do what he has declared he will do’.¹⁵⁰ As Valerie Flint has noted, Bede shared Augustine’s concern with what in Scripture are termed ‘lying signs and portents’; nonetheless, he still provided explanations for how to interpret certain portents.¹⁵¹ Bede perhaps realised that, whatever Augustine’s reservations, portentous phenomena continued to occur in Britain and were observed with some degree of superstition. The very sight of comets over Northumbrian skies in 729 elicited widespread panic and such examples seem to have convinced Bede of the need for the English Church to explain these and other portents from a Christian perspective.¹⁵²

Bede’s portents occurred throughout the ‘heaven of earth’, *caelum inferius*, a place that he believed was found beneath the ‘heaven of heavens’, *caeli caelorum*, which, since it was invisible to mortals, had no purpose for portents.¹⁵³ Astrological portents, such as comets, stars, and eclipses, took place in ‘the upper air’, *aether*, while meteorological portents, including storms both weather-related and pestilential, were restricted to ‘the lower air’ or simply ‘heaven’, *caelum*.¹⁵⁴ Our ensuing discussion of Bede’s portents follows this division.

Astrological portents: comets, stars, and eclipses

Quoting Pliny, Bede explained the portent of comets,

¹⁴⁹ Augustine, *DCD*, XXI.viii.21-128, pp.771-774 (pp.460-463).

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*, ls.117-128.

¹⁵¹ 2 Thessalonians 2:9; Revelation 13:13; Valerie I.J. Flint, ‘The Transmission of Astrology in the Early Middle Ages’, *Viator* 21 (1990), pp.1-27, pp.3-4.

¹⁵² *HE*, V.23, pp.556-557, V.24, pp.566-567.

¹⁵³ *DNR*, v-vii, pp.196-198 (pp.76-77) [em.cit.].

¹⁵⁴ *ibid.*, xxv, pp.216-217 (pp.89-90) [em.cit.]; Ahern, *Bede and the Cosmos*, pp.36-38.

*Comets are stars with flames like hair. They are born suddenly, portending a change of royal power or plague or wars or winds or heat.*¹⁵⁵

The rest of Bede's chapter on comets essentially forms a compendium of Plinian observations.¹⁵⁶ He omitted whatever seemed idolatrous to him, ignoring, for instance, Pliny's report of that comet named *sidus Iulium*, 'the star of Julius', which, shining over Rome, was considered confirmation that Caesar's soul had been received by the 'immortal gods', and as bestowing a 'health-giving influence' for Augustus' new empire.¹⁵⁷ This report could have influenced Bede's comment in *Expositio Apocalypseos* as to how the Romans believed their rulers were 'translated into heaven amongst the other gods'.¹⁵⁸ Of course, Bede knew that Christians recognised a similar portent in the Bethlehem star, which portended the king to be born in Bethlehem.¹⁵⁹ Responding to Nothhelm in *De octo quaestionibus*, Bede praised the wise men for their observation of this portent, noting how these 'astrologers', *astrologi*, had studied Balaam's prophecy from Numbers 24:17 and were thus well-prepared for interpreting this phenomenon.¹⁶⁰ Here, Bede impressed his view that Christian astrologers should where possible interpret the skies through Scripture, in keeping with his wider criticism of pagan *mathematici* who, among several errors, tried to predict the fate of infants through the zodiac.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁵ *DNR*, xxiv.2-4, p.216 (p.89), quot. Pliny, *NH*, LCL 330, II.xxii.89, pp.230-235, Isidore, *Etymologiae*, III.lxxi.17, pp.160-161 (p.105), and *idem*, *De natura rerum*, ed. w/ Fr. trans. Fontaine, xxvi.13, p.273 (trans. Kendall and Wallis, p.154).

¹⁵⁶ *DNR*, xxiv.4-10, p.216 (p.89), quot. Pliny, *NH*, LCL 330, II.xxii-xxiii.90-91, pp.232-235.

¹⁵⁷ Pliny, *NH*, LCL 330, II.xxiii.93-94, pp.236-237.

¹⁵⁸ *Apocalypsis*, xxi.14-17, p.401 (p.198).

¹⁵⁹ Matthew 2:1-2.

¹⁶⁰ Bede, *De octo quaestionibus*, ed. Knibbs, II, pp.174-176 (trans. Holder, pp.149-151). For Bede's authorship, see Michael Gorman, 'Bede's *VIII Quaestiones* and Carolingian Biblical Scholarship', *RB* 109:1-2 (1999), pp.32-74, pp.43-47; see also *Exp.Actuum*, ii.121-123, p.19 (p.32), quot. Acts 2:17b, 19a [=Joel 2:28b, 30a].

¹⁶¹ *DTR*, iii.34-42, pp.277-278 (pp.15-16). For Bede's patristic influences here, see Flint, 'Transmission of Astrology', pp.3-5.

Bede seemed to think that a prominent comet seen over England for three months in 678 had marked a change in sacred power.¹⁶² Bede's source, the *Liber Pontificalis*, had instead recorded its occurrence in August 676 when Donus was bishop-elect, one month earlier than observations from Japan, China, and the Middle East.¹⁶³ Bede invited readers to connect this comet with the dispute between King Ecgrith and Bishop Wilfrid, which saw the latter removed from his see.¹⁶⁴ Two comets in 729 were considered heralds of several significant events, presaging Saracen raids in Gaul and the deaths of notable figures, including King Osric (r.718-729).¹⁶⁵ Bede noted how their occurrence struck 'great terror into all beholders ... portending dire disaster to both east and west alike', only serving to highlight his impression of the popular superstition that surrounded such phenomena in England.

Bede seemed more cautious in relation to portents associated with the sun and moon, perhaps resulting from his knowledge of the symbiosis of England's pagan calendar and these celestial lights.¹⁶⁶ His primary fear appeared to rest with the event of eclipses, including one notable solar example which had occurred on May 3rd in 664, which Bede, writing in 725, claimed was 'still remembered in our days'.¹⁶⁷ This eclipse took place sometime before or after the Synod of Whitby, which has implications for Bede's report of this epochal moment in the English Church where Irish influence was rejected for closer communion with

¹⁶² *HE*, IV.12, pp.370-371. Bede's comment in *De natura rerum* that such phenomena lasted no more than eighty days further impresses the significance of the 678 comet, *DNR*, xxiv.7-8, p.216 (p.89), quot. Pliny, *NH*, LCL 330, II.xxii.90, pp.232-235.

¹⁶³ *LP*, lxxx.3, p.348 (pp.71-72); D. Justin Schove, in collaboration with Alan Fletcher, *Chronology of Eclipses and Comets, AD 1-1000* (Woodbridge, 1984), p.293.

¹⁶⁴ *HE*, IV.12, pp.370-371; N.J. Higham, 'Theodore's Peace', *Land of The English Kin*, pp.197-213, pp.207-210.

¹⁶⁵ *HE*, V.23, pp.556-559; Schove, *Eclipses and Comets*, p.294.

¹⁶⁶ *DTR*, xv.1-7, 13-18, 27-30 pp.329-332 (pp.53-54) [em.cit.]; Meaney, 'Bede and Anglo-Saxon Paganism', pp.3-5.

¹⁶⁷ We now know that this eclipse actually took place two days earlier on May 1st. Cf. *DTL*, xxii.74-75, p.611 (pp.130-131); *DTR*, lxvi.1870-1871, p.527 (p.230); *HE*, III.27, pp.310-311, V.24, pp.562-565; Schove, *Eclipses and Comets*, pp.128-131; Jennifer Moreton, 'Doubts about the Calendar: Bede and the Eclipse of 664', *Isis* 89:1 (1998), pp.50-65. For Bede's rebuke of those who predicted weather by the moon, see *DTR*, xxv, pp.357-359 (pp.74-76) [em.cit.].

Rome.¹⁶⁸ Bede's sequence of events between May-July in *HE* III.27 is somewhat at odds with the record in his authoritative chronology at the end of that work; however, in each case, it can be construed that the eclipse and the plague that accompanied its event must have preceded the synod.¹⁶⁹ Joining together the events of that summer, Sarah Foot has persuasively argued that King Oswiu's observation of several concurrent phenomena, including the eclipse, plague, and an occurrence of the aurora borealis (recorded in the *Annals of Ulster*), convinced the king to pledge Northumbria to the Roman tradition.¹⁷⁰ Bede's reticence over placing the events of that summer in their correct order thus indicates his intent to preserve the Synod of Whitby as a triumph of orthodox truth, rather than a superstitious response to portents.

Meteorological portents: plagues and storms

It seems to have been overlooked that Bede's chapter concerning 'plagues', *pestilentia*, in *De natura rerum* represents his longest original explanation in that work.¹⁷¹ Bede contemplated this portent at length, teaching, in said chapter, that it resulted either as a result of sin or droughts and rains and was spread through inhalation or contaminated foods.¹⁷² Here, Bede probably took inspiration from plagues in Scripture, which, as his wider treatment of pestilence shows, convinced him that plague could represent a portent of divine judgement.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁸ *HE*, III.27, pp.310-313.

¹⁶⁹ *ibid.*, IV.1, pp.328-329, (i) eclipse (1 May); (ii) plague; (iii) synod; (iv) Colman and his Irish departure (v); Deusdedit's and Eorcenberht's deaths (14 July); V.24, pp.564-565, (i) eclipse; (ii) Eorcenberht's death; (iii) Irish departure; (iv) plague; (v) Chad and Wilfrid consecrated; see Daniel McCarthy and Aidan Breen, 'Astronomical Observations in the Irish Annals and their Motivation', *Peritia* 11 (1997), pp.1-43, pp.24-28.

¹⁷⁰ Sarah Foot, 'Plenty, Portents and Plague: Ecclesiastical Readings of the Natural World in Early Medieval Europe', *God's Bounty? The Churches and the Natural World*, ed. Peter Clarke and Tony Claydon (Woodbridge, 2010), pp.15-41, pp.27-29, cit. *Annals of Ulster*, s.a. 664, ed. Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, pp.134-135.

¹⁷¹ *DNR*, xxxvii, p.223 (p.94) [em.cit.].

¹⁷² *ibid.*, ls.2-6, cit. Isidore, *DNR*, xxxix.1, p.303 (p.167), and *idem*, *Etymologiae*, IV.vi.17, pp.168-169 (p.110).

¹⁷³ Exodus 11:4-6; Numbers 21:4b-9; *HE*, I.14, pp.48-49. As John Maddicott observed, sometimes plagues were considered natural events, *idem*, 'Plague in Seventh-Century England', *Plague and the End of Antiquity: The Pandemic of 541-750*, ed. Lester K. Little (Cambridge, 2006), pp.171-214, pp.181-182.

Indeed, when commenting on a ‘pestilence’, *lues*, that occurred in Italy in the reign of Marcus Aurelius (r.161-180), seen as punishment for the latter’s persecution of Christians, Bede embellished his sources to describe plague as ‘the avenger of evil deeds [*uindex scelerum*]’.¹⁷⁴

Bede connected several plagues with reversion, most notable, an outbreak of the bubonic plague between 664-c.666, which returned in 684-c.687.¹⁷⁵ Its event prompted Sigehere and his portion of the East Saxons, ‘commoners and nobles alike’, to ‘restore the derelict temples [*fana*] and to worship images [*simulacra*], as if they could protect themselves by such means from the plague.’¹⁷⁶ The same plague led to reversion in other parts of England, as Bede reported in the case of rural communities around Melrose,

For many of them profaned the faith they held by wicked deeds, and some of them also at the time of the plague, forgetting the sacred mystery of the faith into which they had been initiated, took to the delusive cures of idolatry [*erratica idolatriae medicamina*], as though by incantations or amulets [*incantationes uel alligaturae*]¹⁷⁷ or any other mysteries of devilish art [*demoniacae artis archana*], they could ward off a blow sent by God the Creator.¹⁷⁸

Despite Bede’s criticism of these East Saxon and Bernician apostates, he shared their belief that plague was an instrument of divine judgement and that its cure necessitated the immediate implementation of religious reforms.

¹⁷⁴ *DTR*, lxvi.1158-1159, p.500 (p.202), cit. Jerome, *Chronicon*, ls.13, p.205, and Orosius, *Historiae*, vol. 3, VII.xv.5, p.48 (p.347). In *Contra Symmachum*, Prudentius bestowed the title *uindex scelerum* on the *Augusti*, and it is plausible that Bede (who knew this work) reversed Prudentius’ sense in order to criticise Marcus Aurelius. See Prudentius, *Contra Orationem Symmachi*, LCL 398, II.435, pp.40-41; Lapidge, *ASL*, p.224.

¹⁷⁵ Maddicott, ‘Plague in Seventh-Century England’, pp.175-178.

¹⁷⁶ *HE*, III.30, pp.322-323.

¹⁷⁷ *Alligaturae*, ‘bindings’ (replaced with *phylacteria* in the *Historia*), suggests the wrapping or placing of cords as a ward or cure. Compare Isaiah 1:6; *HE*, IV.27, pp.432-433.

¹⁷⁸ *VSC*, ix, pp.184-187. As Blair noted, Bede’s later proposal that laymen make a habit of crossing themselves might have been purposed to replace pagan superstition, *Ep.Ecg.*, xv, pp.152-153, cit. in Blair, *Bede and the Culture of the Laity*, pp.9-11.

Christian Rohr has noted how Bede ignored most of Pliny's observations on thunder, suggesting, in turn, that Bede trusted more to English readings of this phenomenon.¹⁷⁹ This might be traced to the circle of Chad and perhaps also Cuthberht. Trumberht reported to Bede how Chad had prayed for God's mercy on seeing signs of judgement in the heavens, seemingly inspired by Psalm 17(18):14-15.¹⁸⁰ Bede reproduced this sense when explaining the portent of severe weather in *In Ezram-Neemiam*, considering storms 'open signs' of God's judgement.¹⁸¹ Cuthbert, who, like Chad, experienced an intimate connection with the natural world, was claimed to have predicted the deaths of King Ecgfrith and his thegns at the battle of Nechtansmere (685) through the sudden change in weather.¹⁸² Portents of storms, in particular, winter storms, seem to have engendered superstition in England, as seen in Bede's emphasis on the 'wintry tempest', *hiemis tempestas*, that served his backdrop to the speech of Edwin's ealdorman.¹⁸³ In response to Paulinus's preaching, the ealdorman articulated his understanding of the precarious position of mortal life. The king sat safe and warm in his hall, 'while outside the wintry storms of rain and snow are raging'. A sparrow flew into one end of the hall and back out the other into the tempest, with the ealdorman explaining,

So this life of man appears but for a moment; what follows or indeed what went before, we know not at all. If this *new teaching* brings us more certain information, it seems right that we should accept it.¹⁸⁴

That Bede intended this as a criticism of the emptiness of pagan thought in relation to creation and in particular the afterlife is obvious. As he noted in *In Tobiam*, the 'teachers of

¹⁷⁹ Christian Rohr, 'Von Plinius zu Isidor und Beda Venerabilis: Zur Übernahme antiken Wissens über Witterungsphänomene im Mittelalter', *Exzerpieren - Kompilieren - Tradieren: Transformationen des Wissens zwischen Spätantike und Frühmittelalter*, ed. Stephan Dusil et al. (Berlin, 2017), pp.49-67, pp.60-62.

¹⁸⁰ *HE*, IV.3, pp.342-345; see also M.L.W. Laistner, 'The Western Church and Astrology During the Early Middle Ages', *Harvard Theological Review* 34:4 (1941), pp.251-275, p.270.

¹⁸¹ *Ezra-Neemia*, II.1785-1803, p.332 (pp.145-146), cit. Ezra 10:9.

¹⁸² *VSC*, xxvii, pp.242-249.

¹⁸³ *HE*, II.13, pp.182-185.

¹⁸⁴ *ibid.*, cit. Mark 1:27, and Acts 17:19, compare *Marcus*, I.431-438, p.448.

the Gentiles knew so much about life in this world ... but had nothing to say about life eternal.¹⁸⁵ In the *Vita Gregorii*, Edwin is shown to trust in the augury of birds, and Bede's sparrows might then be relevant to this belief. His choice of the sparrow might also have resulted from his impression of these birds as 'the tiniest of creatures' that were nevertheless 'not forgotten by God'. In this regard, Bede's lesson would impress the value of Northumbria's people, as Christ had taught, "you are of more value than many sparrows."¹⁸⁶

Of further interest is Bede's emphasis on wintry tempests in the ealdorman's speech, shown by his fourfold repetition of *hiemis* or a close variant.¹⁸⁷ In Job 24:19, hell is described as a place of intolerable cold and heat, "They will pass from snow waters to excessive heat".¹⁸⁸ Yet, Gehenna is more widely characterised as a fiery place which the Lord superheated with his bellows, encapsulated, in Italian not English style, in those 'images of the visions of the apocalypse of the blessed John' found on the north wall of St. Peter's at Wearmouth.¹⁸⁹ Bede's interest in hell's wintry tempests could suggest he believed these conditions were superior to Gehenna's flames at exploiting native superstitions about the afterlife, thereby encouraging fretful minds to turn to the refuge of heaven as promised in Scripture.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁵ *Tobias*, iii.3-5, p.6 (p.61).

¹⁸⁶ Luke 12:6-7; *Lucas*, IV.650-654, 691-695, pp.247-248 (pp.415-416). See Fred C. Robinson, 'Possible biblical resonances in Bede's presentation of the conversion of the English', *Text and Language in Medieval English Prose: A Festschrift for Tadao Kubouchi*, ed. Akio Oizumi et al. (Frankfurt, 2005), pp.207-213.

¹⁸⁷ *HE*, II.13, pp.182-185.

¹⁸⁸ *Apocalypsis*, xii.8-10, p.339 (p.163); *Lucas*, IV.1662-1665, p.272 (p.448). Bede mentioned these mixed conditions elsewhere, cf. *Versus de die iudicii*, ed. and trans. Lapidge, ls.93-99, pp.168-171, ls.131, 133, pp.174-17; *HE*, V.12, pp.488-491; compare Felix, *VG*, xxxi, pp.104-105. See also Sarah Foot, 'Anglo-Saxon "Purgatory"', *The Church, The Afterlife and the Fate of the Soul*, ed. Peter Clarke and Tony Claydon (Woodbridge, 2009), pp.87-96, pp.87-92.

¹⁸⁹ The traditional orientation of hell to the north (influenced by notions such as the devil being borne on the north wind) might have led Biscop to place the images of the apocalypse on the building's north wall. Cf. Revelation 14:10b-11; 21:8; Job 37:9-10; *HA*, vi, pp.36-37; *HE*, III.19, pp.272-275.

¹⁹⁰ Similar conditions are found in English poetry – *Andreas* (ls.1253-1268), *Wanderer* (ls.101-105), and the *Seafarer* (ls.14-33) – and in the event known as *fimbulvetr*, 'mighty winter', from the Scandinavian eschaton. See Hines, 'Limits of Knowledge', pp.383-384; P.S. Langeslag, *Seasons in the Literatures of the Medieval North* (Cambridge, 2015), pp.73-76.

Conclusion

Clearly, pagan thought shaped Bede the teacher and scholar. He was conscious of (and oftentimes anxious about) the problematic influence of secular literature, *fabulae*, and portents throughout the social fabric of Anglo-Saxon England. Nonetheless, he demonstrated a willingness to exploit such elements of pagan thought that seemed useful to building the Church. In doing so, Bede eschewed the poles of idolatrous overindulgence and puritanical proscription to pursue a balanced position – one that he believed had a precedent in the examples of Moses, Daniel, and Paul. Bede thus fulfilled his own teaching to Acca, modelling the figural Jonathan who penetrated the camps of pagan thought in order to procure spiritual weaponry as a means to counter pagan error and strengthen Christian faith in Northumbria and beyond.

The posthumous title *nobilis magister* bestowed on Bede in ninth-century Germany was then well-chosen.¹⁹¹ Certainly, he saw himself as a ‘noble teacher’, one fit enough to handle Ciceronian rhetoric, English tales, and Plinian portents. In the early part of his exegetical career, Bede might have been beguiled by the sweetness of pagan thought (classical, more so than English, which he found easier to refuse). In Jonathan’s illicit mouthful of honey, Bede could then have experienced a personal lesson. That he made fewer references to Greco-Roman tales in his mature career certainly suggests he reevaluated his own use of secular literature at some point in time, in order to better reflect (from his perspective) the high standards expected of Christ’s perfect athletes.

¹⁹¹ Rabanus Maurus, *Commentaria in libros IV Regum*, PL 109, *praef.*, col.9C [hereafter, *Commentarius Regum*].

Bede was familiar with aspects of English pagan thought and should not then be seen as isolated from that tradition.¹⁹² The narrative of Imma might have had its origins in an English tale, but Bede knew more legends besides those ‘loosing spells’ referred to by the Mercian *gesith*. His regular criticism of tale-tellers who regaled their listeners with English, not classical tales, indicates that early eighth-century Northumbria was a place where pagan thought was shared and, it seems, loved, whether at the ecclesiastical or lay repast. Our study of portents further shows Bede’s knowledge of pagan thought, with both classical and English readings of phenomena evident in his writings. His pragmatic approach led him to accept certain pagan signs, reworking these to suit Christian doctrine. We have had little opportunity to speak of Bede the poet thus far, but in closing this chapter we may recall his short verse from the opening of *De natura rerum*, which seems in keeping with the theme of this chapter.

You who study
the stars above,
Fix your mind’s gaze, I pray,
on the Light of the everlasting day.¹⁹³

¹⁹² Page, ‘Anglo-Saxon Paganism’, pp.101-102.

¹⁹³ *DNR*, ls.5-7, p.189 (p.71).

Chapter Five: Idolatrous kings

‘Who is the temporal king who never errs in judgement?’¹ Had Bede ever written a political theory, he might well have started with this line from *In proueria salomonis*. Inspired from Proverbs 16:10b, “his (a king’s mouth) shall not err in judgement”, Bede’s words implied that all rulers, save Christ, the king whom Bede believed was prophesied in this verse, fell short of his standard for kingship.² For Bede, Christ was ‘King of Kings’ and ‘Lord of Lords’.³ According to Cuthbert, one of Bede’s students and later the abbot at Wearmouth-Jarrow, Bede spent his last days singing antiphons, naming in particular the Magnificat for the Ascension, ‘O King of Glory, Lord of Might’, and, in his final moments, shared with those assembled, ‘The time of my departure is at hand, and my soul longs to see Christ my King in all His beauty.’⁴

This chapter focuses less on Bede’s much-studied Christian kings, but rather on Bede’s idolatrous kings, who occupied an important place in his wider thought about strange gods and idolatry. Still, it is beneficial to start with Bede’s Christian kings whom he envisioned as holders of a *ministerium*, meaning that they were spiritual rulers.⁵ Some instead see Bede’s kings as part of the *saeculum*, and, while there is much of value in this position, it seems to exaggerate the realities of temporal kingship and its primarily wicked office-bearers which

¹ *Salomonis*, II.xvi.50, p.91, cit. Proverbs 16:10b.

² “...in him [Christ] there is no sin”, 1 John 3:5b, quot. in *Epist. Catholicae*, IIo.iii.115-118, p.303 (p.188).

³ Revelation 19:16, compare Deuteronomy 10:17. See *Apocalypsis*, xxxiv.59-61, p.499 (p.249); *Abacuc*, II.210-211, p.388 (p.73), cit. Habakkuk 3:4; *Lib.Hymnorum*, XIII.11-35, pp.432-439. For Christ and Bede’s temporal kings, see Conor O’Brien, ‘Kings and Kingship in the Writings of Bede’, *English Historical Review* 132:559 (2018), pp.1473-1498, pp.1478-1483.

⁴ Cuthbert, *Epistola De Obitu Bedae*, in *Historia Ecclesiastica*, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors, pp.580-587, pp.582-585, cit. Isaiah 33:17; 2 Timothy 4:6.

⁵ Sarah Foot, ‘Bede’s Kings’, *Writing, Kingship and Power in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Rory Naismith and David A. Woodman (Cambridge, 2018), pp.25-51, pp.40-46, compare George Tugène, ‘Rois moines et rois pasteurs dans l’*Histoire Ecclesiastique de Bède*’, *Romanobarbarica* 8 (1984-1985), pp.111-147.

has then become conflated with Bede's ideal.⁶ Bede knew of only a remarkably small number of kings who were fit to be holders of the *ministerium*, thus, in turn, he rarely spoke of this ideal. Consider, for example, Bede's remark to Ecgberht as to how in Israel's lists of kings, 'from David and Solomon up to Zedekiah', there reigned few 'men of faith', with the rest 'wicked'.⁷ The contrast is starker still when, reading Bede's *Chronica* together with Scripture, we find that he could have counted only seven righteous kings in Israel.⁸ Indeed, even these rulers erred, as Bede pointed out in the cases of David, Hezekiah, and Josiah, nor should we overlook that they more often than not produced idolatrous heirs (as Bede too surely noticed).⁹

Bede's metric for whether a king was righteous or wicked is found in perhaps his most significant statement on the subject of kingship, 'He who sees himself as exalted to rule over the people must remember that he himself is to be ruled and subject to divine laws'.¹⁰ Rulers must observe the law, which, since it was personified in Christ, meant that Bede's kings were

⁶ H.R. Loyn, 'Bede's Kings: A Comment on the Attitude of Bede to the Nature of Secular Kingship', *Trivium* 26 (1991), pp.54-64; O'Brien, 'Kings and Kingship'. For discussion of the secular and spiritual, see Robert A. Markus, 'The Secular in Late Antiquity', *Les frontières du profane dans l'Antiquité tardive*, ed. Éric Rebillard and Claire Sotinel (Rome, 2010), pp.353-361.

⁷ *Ep.Ecg.*, xi, pp.144-145.

⁸ David, 1 Kings 15:5, compare *DTR*, lxvi.397, p.475 (p.172) [em.cit.]; Asa, 1 Kings 15:11-14, compare *DTR*, lxvi.424, 429-430, p.476 (p.173) [em.cit.]; Jehoshaphat, 1 Kings 22:1-43, part. quot. in *DTR*, lxvi.443, p.477 (p.174); Uzziah, 2 Kings 15:1-3, compare *DTR*, lxvi.481, p.478 (p.175) [em.cit.]; Jotham, 2 Kings 15:32-34, compare *DTR*, lxvi.496, p.479 (p.176) [em.cit.]; Hezekiah, 2 Kings 18:1-7a, compare *DTR*, lxvi.513, p.479 (p.177) [em.cit.]; Josiah, 2 Kings 22:1-2, compare *DTR*, lxvi.532, p.480 (p.178) [em.cit.]. The final section of the eighth-century commentary known as *In Prouerbia Salomonis allegoricae interpretationis fragmenta* considers whether Solomon had truly worshipped idols and if he had repented of his idolatrous example. Concluding that the king had repented 'in his private conscience', the author then named Solomon besides his father David and Josiah as Israel's *optimi reges*, 'best kings'. Once thought to have been composed by Bede, scholars now reckon the *Fragmenta in Prouerbia Salomonis* comprises extracts taken from Bede and other sources. Solomon's elevation to 'best king' probably reveals a non-Bedan extract, since Bede held that the king had not repented (and he moreover required public repentance in cases of well-known idolaters, as shown when he criticised Solomon for not removing his idol places). Cf. ps.Bede, *In Prouerbia Salomonis allegoricae interpretationis fragmenta*, PL 91, col.1065A-1066C, especially col.1066C; 'Chapter Two: Idol places', p.88, and pp.193-194 of this chapter.

⁹ *Genesis*, IV.1294-1297, p.230 (p.308) [em.cit.]. Of interest is Bede's explanation that the proverb, "the just shall leave behind blessed children" (Proverbs 20:7) should not be taken literally, since 'the reprobate Ahaz left behind him a blessed son, Hezekiah', *Salomonis*, II.xx.8-11, p.103, cit. 2 Kings 16:2-4, 18:1-3.

¹⁰ *Quaest.Regum*, XIX.10-11, p.314 (p.123).

exalted to rule and be subject to Christ. Thus, Bede could expect that King Ceolwulf would facilitate reforms in Northumbria, since he held a kingly *ministerium*, beneath the watchful gaze of the episcopate who oversaw the Church.¹¹ Kings who observed Christ in faith would meet the short verdict that signalled righteous kings in Israel, as Bede noted in the case of one of these, ‘Jehoshaphat did what was right before the Lord.’¹² Wicked kings, much like wicked clerics, besmirched themselves, not their spiritual office.

Bede’s idolatrous kings, of course, rejected the law and in turn the Lawgiver. Indeed, the origins of kingship in Israel were rooted in an idolatrous request, which Bede enshrined when commenting that the evening of the fourth age corresponded to Israel’s election of a king in imitation of the idol worshipping nations.¹³ From Bede’s study of kingship in Israel, England, and other societies, he knew that rulers were, by virtue of their power, susceptible to idolatry, and believed that idolatrous kings were a ruin unto themselves and their kingdom.¹⁴

Throughout his life, Bede himself remained subject to English kings, an experience that shaped his sense that the fortunes of a kingdom ebbed and flowed with the spiritual inclination of its ruling power.¹⁵ In England, Christian influence had recast much of the Germanic mould of kingship but traces of traditional or ‘ethnic kingship’ can still be encountered in Bede’s writings.¹⁶ For instance, the perception of kings as spiritual figureheads might be seen in Bede’s report that the English tended to follow their rulers when

¹¹ *Ep.Ecg.*, ix-x, pp.138-143; see Lutz E. von Padberg, ‘Das christliche Königtum aus der Sicht der angelsächsischen Missionsschule’, *Das frühmittelalterliche Königtum: Ideelle und religiöse Grundlagen*, ed. Franz-Reiner Erkens (Berlin, 2005), pp.190-213, pp.192-194.

¹² *DTR*, lxvi.443, p.477 (p.174), compare 2 Kings 14:3a.

¹³ *Genesis*, I.1134-1143, p.37 (p.102), cit. Genesis 1:9-13, compare *DTR*, x.24-28, p.311 (p.40).

¹⁴ Judith McClure, ‘Bede’s Old Testament Kings’, *Ideal and Reality*, pp.76-98.

¹⁵ *Samuhel*, II.1279-1284, p.99 (pp.257-258), cit. 1 Samuel 12:1-25; *HE*, IV.26, pp.428-429, cit. Vergil, *Aeneid*, LCL 63, II.162-170, pp.326-327. See Christopher Grocock, ‘Separation Anxiety: Bede and Threats to Wearmouth and Jarrow’, *Bede and the Future*, pp.67-92, pp.82-92.

¹⁶ Following Georges Tugène’s interpretation, I understand ‘ethnic kingship’ to mean pre-Christian kingship; *idem*, ‘Reflections on “ethnic” kingship in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*’, *Romanobarbarica* 17 (2000-2002), pp.309-331, especially p.317, n.18.

converting and especially so when reverting to paganism.¹⁷ Similarly, Bede's comparison between Saul and Æthelfrith could reveal a native sense that kings need be experts in warfare.¹⁸ Other impressions have been explored in the literature; instead, our attention turns to Bede's metric for rulers as it applied to idolatrous kings, now examined through three closely related themes.¹⁹ 'Kings and the law' focuses on the importance that Bede placed on the regulations for kingship found in Deuteronomy 17. Discussion of 'foreign consorts' and 'spiritual minsters', both inspired from Deuteronomy 17, reveal what Bede seemed to think two prominent idolatrous influences for rulers. A reconsideration of what Bede said about the East Anglian king Rædwald completes the chapter.

Kings and the law

According to Solomon, 'wisest of kings', the "fear of the Lord was the beginning of wisdom", but "an unwise king will be the ruin of his people."²⁰ Bede's writings reflect this view – kings, he felt, must, as Solomon had said elsewhere, "Fear God, and keep his commandments".²¹ J. M. Wallace-Hadrill felt that Bede found fewer conclusions for kingship than individual examples of kings in Scripture, but Bede cited on at least two occasions the legislation for kings in Deuteronomy 17:14-20 which we shall refer to as 'the dictates of

¹⁷ For sacral kingship, see Chaney, *Cult of Kingship*, p.7ff; Stancliffe, 'Kings and Conversion', pp.70-74; Cusack, *Conversion among the Germanic Peoples*, pp.18-20, 91f, 97-105, 108f, 179; and Kathrin McCann, *Anglo-Saxon Kingship and Political Power, Rex gratia Dei* (Cardiff, 2018), pp.35-38 and relevant notes on pp.44-4.

¹⁸ *HE*, I.34, pp.116-117; J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, 'War and Peace in the Earlier Middle Ages', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 25 (1975), pp.157-174, p.168; Alban Gautier, 'Tueur de moines et père d'un saint: Æthelfrith de Northumbrie', *Histoires des Bretagnes 5. En marge*, ed. Hélène Bouget and Magali Coumert (Brest, 2015), pp.133-146, pp.144-145. For a possible connection between Æthelfrith as 'wolf' and English pagan impressions of this predator, see Aleksander Pluskowski, *Wolves and the Wilderness in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2006), pp.154ff, 196-198; Williams, 'Confronting the Bestial', pp.178-180.

¹⁹ See, for example, Tugène's exploration of kingly origins and local rulers in the *Historia: idem*, 'Reflections on "ethnic" kingship in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*', pp.310-324.

²⁰ Proverbs 9:10a; Ecclesiasticus 10:3a, quot. in *Samuhel*, II.206-209, p.73 (p.212).

²¹ Ecclesiastes 12:13b, quot. in *Epist. Catholicae*, 1Pt.ii.157-159, p.237 (p.86).

Deuteronomy'.²² The passage instructed kings to write out the law and contemplate its precepts in order to learn how to fear God and keep his words and ceremonies.²³ Kings were prohibited from: returning to Egypt, meaning, to keep themselves and Israel from idolatrous worship; possessing multiple consorts or excessive wealth; and becoming proud.²⁴ Kings who adhered to these laws would reign “for a long time” through their heirs.²⁵ As Bede explained, this legislation ‘set out what a moderate and just ruler should be like’, with such kings perceived to be ‘limbs of Christ’.²⁶ Bede presented an original study of this legislation, with little patristic precedent available to him other than Augustine’s brief remarks.²⁷

Bede’s two explicit mentions of the Deuteronomy dictates for kings were contained in his exegesis of 1 Samuel 8, which records Israel’s idolatrous request to Samuel for a king to rule them. Bede criticised the Israelites who wished for a ‘wicked ruler’, *rector improbus*, describing these as ‘limbs of the devil’ (in contrast to the righteous ‘limbs of Christ’).²⁸ He took particular interest in Samuel’s response to Israel’s request, where the prophet warned how “the rights of the requested king” would include forced conscription, tithes, and taking their sons and daughters for royal pleasures.²⁹ Israel ignored Samuel and chose to replace him with Saul, who later became, in Bede’s words, ‘a reprobate king’, *rex reprobus*, since he

²² ‘But here, through the law of the kingdom laid which has been spoken, written down, and laid up before the Lord for the sake of memory, is revealed what the good ruler [*rector bonus*] should be like ... in keeping with the dictates of Deuteronomy [*deuteronomii iussa*]; *Samuhel*, II.985-988, p.91 (p.244), compare *ibid.*, II.199-202, p.72 (pp.211-212); *Quaest.Regum*, XIX, pp.313-314 (p.123), cit. 2 Kings 11:12a, quot. 2 Chronicles 23:11a; and see J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent: The Ford Lectures delivered in the University of Oxford in Hilary Term 1970* (Oxford, 1971), p.47.

²³ Deuteronomy 17:18-19.

²⁴ Deuteronomy 17:15-17, 20ab.

²⁵ Deuteronomy 17:17b, 20b, compare *HE*, V.21, pp.550-551

²⁶ *Samuhel*, II.199-209, pp.72-73 (p.212); II.985-988, p.91 (p.244).

²⁷ Augustine, *Quaestionum in Heptateuchum libri VII*, CCSL 33, V.xxvi-xxvii, p.291 (trans. Lienhard and Doyle, pp.331-332) [em.cit.].

²⁸ *Samuhel*, II.202, 206-208, pp.72-73 (p.212) [em.cit.].

²⁹ 1 Samuel 8:10-18; *Samuhel*, II.199-320, pp.72-75 (pp.211-216) [em.cit.].

neglected the Deuteronomy dictates concerning rulers and Samuel's complementary instruction.³⁰

The significance of Scripture's royal legislation to Bede seems further evident in his nineteenth response to Nothhelm in *In Regum librum*.³¹ Here, Bede remarked upon the coronation of Joash, the only survivor of the purge carried out against Ahaziah's heirs by Joash's grandmother, Athaliah, the sole queen to rule Israel.³² As scholars have shown, Bede took seriously the New Testament teaching that Christians should honour their rulers.³³ Nonetheless, he celebrated the coup that Jehoiada, Israel's high-priest, had orchestrated against Athaliah, since it overthrew 'the tyrannical and impious queen' and returned the throne to 'the rightful king's son'.³⁴ Observing the order of Joash's coronation as it was recorded in 2 Chronicles 23:11, Bede praised Jehoiada for firstly bestowing on the new king 'the law', *testimonium*, and then the 'crown', *diadema*, the sequence impressing a vital lesson for Bede's kings: 'he who sees himself as exalted to rule over the people might remember that he himself is to be ruled and subject to divine laws.'³⁵ This might be taken as a third reference to the dictates of Deuteronomy, certainly, it emphasises Bede's sense of the critical need for kings to observe the law of God. Yet, Bede knew that Joash later rejected God for idols. For this and other crimes, Bede thought it appropriate that Matthew had excluded Joash, together with his father Azariah and son Amaziah, from his genealogy of Christ.³⁶

³⁰ *Samuhel*, II.993, p.91 (p.244); *Ezra-Neemia*, II.1015, p.313 (p.118).

³¹ *Quaest.Regum*, XIX, pp.313-314 (p.123), cit. 2 Kings 11:12a, quot. 2 Chronicles 23:11a.

³² 2 Kings 11:1-3; *DTR*, lxvi.456-461, p.477 (p.174).

³³ Romans 13:12; 1 Peter 2:13-17; *Epist.Catholicae*, 1Pt.ii.249-275, pp.239-240 (pp.90-91), quot. Romans 13:1-3, and cit. Augustine, *Sermo CCCII*, in *Augustini: Sermones Selecti Duodeuiginti*, ed. Lambot, xii.19-23, p.106 (trans. Hill, p.306); Martin J. Ryan, "'To mistake gold for wealth": the Venerable Bede and the fate of Northumbria', *Making Early Medieval Societies: Conflict and Belonging in the Latin West, 300-1200*, ed. Kate Cooper and Conrad Leyser (Cambridge, 2016), pp.80-103, pp.83-84.

³⁴ 1 Kings 11:4-16; *Quaest.Regum*, XIX.6-8, p.314 (p.123).

³⁵ 'By these latter (the laws) the king is taught what to do and how to live', *Quaest.Regum*, XIX.3-6, p.314 (p.123), compare *ibid.*, XVIII, pp.311-313 (pp.118-122).

³⁶ *DTR*, lxvi.452-455, pp.477-478 (pp.174-175), cit. Matthew 1:8, and ls.462-466, cit. 2 Chronicles 24:17-25.

Bede also measured Christian kings, including English rulers, against the dictates of Deuteronomy. Prefiguring these was the Persian king Artaxerxes, who for believing the Law to be the wisdom of God became a ‘model for later Christian kings’.³⁷ In England, Bede knew two sorts of idolatrous kings. First, those rulers who had not lived to see Augustine’s mission and were thus oblivious to the Gospel. Then came those kings who had heard the Gospel but either chosen to remain pagan – like Penda of Mercia, ‘idolaters and (wilfully) ignorant of the name of Christ’ – or, having converted to Christ, reverted to paganism, as was the case with Rædwald, Osric and Eanfrith, etc.³⁸ Here, we can note that while Bede considered all idolatrous kings as *reges reprobi*, he remained convinced that God had reserved harsher punishment for those apostate kings who, like Emperor Julian (r.361-363), had betrayed Christ after confessing him as Lord.³⁹

Bede’s treatment of idolatrous kings in his *Historia* sometimes recalls passages from his exegesis. The choices of Osric and Eanfrith on their succession contrasts with the restoration of the law to Israel at Joash’s coronation. It was, Bede stated, ‘a great and wholesome prudence’ that Joash received the law, whereas, of Osric and Eanfrith’s coming to power, he wrote,

...no sooner had these two kings gained the insignia of their earthly kingdom than they abjured and betrayed the mysteries of the heavenly kingdom to which they had been admitted and reverted to the filth of their former idolatry...⁴⁰

In *In Cantica Canticorum*, Bede read Song of Songs 8:6a, “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm”, as speaking of the emblem of kingship which God had removed

³⁷ *Ezra-Neemia*, II.1216-1239, p.318 (pp.125-126), quot. Psalm 36(37):30-31.

³⁸ *HE*, II.20, pp.202-203.

³⁹ *DTR*, lxvi.1444-1445, p.510 (p.214), cit. Jerome, *Chronicon*, ls.11-12, p.242.

⁴⁰ *Quaest.Regum*, XIX.6-10, p.314 (p.123), compare *HE*, III.1 pp.212-213 (*emend.*).

from the apostate king. He later reproduced some of this exegesis when describing the East Saxon reversion under Sigehere.

Cantica Canticorum

(As if) rejecting and casting off the one who turned to apostasy after having come to faith [*qui post fidem ad apostasiam conuersus est et abiciens*], he (God) says: *If Jeconiah son of King Jehoiakim of Judah were the ring on my right hand, from there I would tear him off.*⁴¹

Historia

(The East Saxons) deserted the sacraments of the Christian faith and turned to apostasy [*relictis Christianae fidei sacramentis, ad apostasiam conuersus est*].⁴²

For rejecting law and Lawgiver, idolatrous kings lost their place in both the temporal and eternal kingdom. Concerning Osric and Eanfrith, Bede noted how their apostasy led these co-rulers to become ‘polluted and destroyed’.⁴³ Yet the faithless king would also bring suffering on the wider kingdom.⁴⁴ In Kent, Eadbald’s reversion caused ‘severe setback’ to the Christian faith, with Kentish converts reverting to idol worship, or, as Bede put it, ‘to return to their own vomit.’⁴⁵ Under Sæberht’s sons, the reversion in Essex resulted in a ‘more violent tempest of troubles’, with the kingdom remaining in error for nigh on half a century.⁴⁶ The terrible situation in reversion-era Northumbria saw Bede support the choice of English computists to reassign the period of Osric and Eanfrith’s reign to their righteous successor, Oswald, presumably inspired by Matthew’s selective genealogy of Christ.⁴⁷

⁴¹ *Cant. Canticorum*, V.viii.281-284, p.345 (p.232), quot. Jeremiah 22:24.

⁴² *HE*, III.30, pp.322-323 (*emend.*).

⁴³ *ibid.*, III.1 pp.212-215.

⁴⁴ Compare Gildas, *De excidio Britanniae*, xxvii-xxxvi, pp.29-36, 99-105.

⁴⁵ *HE*, II.5, pp.150-151, cit. Proverbs 26:11 (not, as Colgrave and Mynors cited, 2 Peter 2:22).

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, pp.152-155.

⁴⁷ Bede nevertheless included Osric and Eanfrith in his *Historia*, possibly, as Catherine Cubitt has proposed, to provide ‘examples of divine punishment’. Certainly, their case encapsulates Bede’s wider sense that apostate rulers would meet an unhappy end. Cf. *HE*, III.1, pp.212-215, III.9, pp.240-241, compare *DTR*, lxvi.452-455, p.477 (p.174), cit. Matthew 1:1-17; *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, sub anno 634 (MS. E), ed. Irvine, p.25; Catherine Cubitt, ‘Narrating providential history: Bede’s account of the conversion of King Edwin of Northumbria in his *Historia ecclesiastica*’, *EME* 33:1 (2025), pp.26-49, p.35.

Foreign consorts

Bede took a particular interest in the idolatrous example of foreign consorts, that is, women from Gentile nations who married Israelite kings in the Old Testament and its later equivalent in pagan women who married Christian kings. The Deuteronomy dictates prohibited kings from taking multiple wives, while explicit prohibition of pagan consorts was made in the Mosaic Law.⁴⁸ Still, the issue of ‘mixed marriages’, *conubia mixta*, remains well-attested in the Old Testament and in England. Apparently referring to both contexts, Bede, in *In Ezram-Neemiam*, identified beautiful women and advantageous marriage alliances as particular temptations for Judeo-Christian men to wed ‘forbidden wives’, *uxores illicitae*.⁴⁹ He could trace the issue of mixed marriage to Genesis 6:1-2, at a time when the “sons of God” – who Bede interpreted as ‘sons of Seth’, not angels – had coupled themselves with the beautiful descendants of Cain. Citing John Cassian’s exegesis of this passage, Bede explained,

Finally, in the Mosaic Law it is carefully and zealously enjoined upon the children of Israel that they not mix in marriage with foreigners, *lest*, it says, *his daughter turn away your son, and they follow their gods*.⁵⁰

Foreign consorts had turned the hearts of many Israelite kings, but Bede understood that none were so beguiled as Solomon. According to Scripture, Solomon kept seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, indeed, his heir, Rehoboam, who seceded the northern tribes to Jeroboam, had been born from one such illicit union with an Ammonite princess.⁵¹ In

⁴⁸ Genesis 6:4-5, 24:1-4; Exodus 34:16; Deuteronomy 7:3-4; Numbers 25; 31; Joshua 23:12; Judges 3:5-7; Ezra 9:12.

⁴⁹ ‘Forbidden’ being synonymous with ‘foreign’ since the wives were non-Israelites. Cf. *Ezra-Neemia*, II.1530-1639, pp.326-327 (pp.136-139) [em.cit.], II.1924-1954, pp.335-336 (pp.150-151) [em.cit.].

⁵⁰ Kendall, citing Jones, noted that Bede in this passage was quoting Deuteronomy 7:3-4 *antiqua versione* – his source can now be traced to Cassian, cf. *Genesis*, II.957-960, p.99 (p.169), cit. John Cassian, *Collationes*, VIII.xxi.9, p.31 (p.307), in turn quot. Deuteronomy 7:4; see also Kendall, *On Genesis*, p.169, n.166, cit. Charles W. Jones, ‘Some Introductory Remarks on Bede’s Commentary on Genesis’, *Sacris Erudiri* 19 (1969-1970), pp.115-198, p.130, n.43.

⁵¹ 1 Kings 11:1-13, 43.

Chapter Two, we noted how Bede named Solomon as ‘wisest among kings’ and, among other allusions to the king’s wisdom, he praised Christ the “Wisdom of God”⁵² through the figure of Solomon in the liturgical refrain from Psalm 71(72):2(1-2).⁵³ When writing to Nothhelm, Bede had lamented Solomon’s lack of ‘fruits of repentance’, which seems a reference to Matthew 3:8, part of an extended Gospel passage where John the Baptist had warned how the tree without fruit would be cast into the fire.⁵⁴ Preaching of this same text, Bede invoked Christ as the true *rex sapiens*, his surrounding words suggesting that he saw Solomon as one barren tree who would face the eternal fires.⁵⁵ A similar lesson is encountered in Bede’s *In Cantica Canticorum*, where he explored Solomon’s loss of his eternal insignia with reference to the latter’s own warnings about the love of queens and concubines.⁵⁶ Following patristic tradition, in particular Apponius, Bede interpreted Solomon’s Song of Songs as a figure of the covenant between Christ the Bridegroom and the Church as his Bride. In spurning the Bridegroom, Solomon committed spiritual fornication, which Bede reckoned a form of idolatry since it placed the love of foreign women (and thus their gods) over and above faithful adherence to the law of the true God.⁵⁷ It is often true that in Bede’s writings there emerge only two sorts of kings, pagan and Christian, nevertheless, as the example of Solomon shows, Bede could paint his rulers in more than black and white.⁵⁸

⁵² 1 Corinthians 1:24.

⁵³ Though he was a reprobate, Solomon’s writings retained their value, and for his wisdom Bede saw the king as a figure of Christ, see *Samuhel*, II.204-206, p.73 (p.212), quot. Psalm 71(72):2a(1), ls.1009-1011, p.92 (p.245). See ‘Chapter Two: Idol places’, p.88.

⁵⁴ *Quaest.Regum*, XIX.16-22, p.320 (p.135).

⁵⁵ *Homelia* ii.25, ls.50-68, 88-96, pp.369-370 (pp.257-258). Bede made use of another agrarian metaphor when writing of Solomon’s own words in Proverbs 20:26 LXX, “A wise king winnows the wicked and rolls over them the wheel of evil”, *Salomonis*, II.xx.173-177, p.107 [em.cit.].

⁵⁶ *Cant. Canticorum*, IV.vi.339-364, p.308 (p.186), cit. Song of Songs 6:7(8).

⁵⁷ Exodus 34:15-16; Leviticus 17:7a; 20:5-6; Numbers 25:1; Deuteronomy 31:16; 1 Chronicles 5:25; 2 Chronicles 21:11-13; Jeremiah 3; Isaiah 23:17; Ezekiel 16; Psalm 72(73):27; Proverbs 20:26; Hosea 4; Amos 7:17; 1 Corinthians 5; 6:9, 18; 10:7-8; Colossians 3:5; Ephesians 5:5; Galatians 5:19-23; Hebrews 12:16; 13:4; Revelation 2:14, 20; 18:13-19; 21:8.

⁵⁸ Barbara Yorke, ‘The Adaptation of the Anglo-Saxon Royal Courts to Christianity’, *The Cross Goes North: Processes of Conversion in Northern Europe, AD 300-1300*, ed. Martin Carver (Woodbridge, 2003), pp.243-257, pp.244-245; see also *Samuhel*, II.993-1111, pp.91-92 (pp.244-245).

Solomon's idolatrous example was repeated in later Israelite kings, most wickedly, Ahab, whose illicit marriage to the Phoenician princess Jezebel led to Baalism spreading throughout Samaria.⁵⁹ Bede knew the child from that marriage was none other than Athaliah, providing him a further example of how foreign consorts would bear wicked offspring.⁶⁰ The wickedness of these consorts was personified in the Great Harlot of Revelation 17, she who was beloved among 'the kings of the earth', but was later stripped and burnt, likened in Bede's *Expositio Apocalypseos* to a ruined city.⁶¹

Foreign consorts were but one problem in the complex of cultural marital traditions that faced Christian teachers in England, indeed, surpassing its incidence were the wider challenges of kindred and non-royal mixed marriages.⁶² Stephanie Hollis has shown how these issues find expression as early as Gregory the Great's *Libellus Responsionum* and continue to be raised in later ecclesiastical literature in the canons of the Council of Hertford and Theodore's *Penitential*, to which we can add Wihtrud's law code and the anonymous *Vita Gregorii*.⁶³ Augustine had questioned Gregory over kindred and mixed marriages (both were possible within a single union), and, in response, the pope quoted the prohibition of Leviticus 18:7, instructing Augustine to encourage separation in the case of kindred marriages that had been formed before baptism and withhold the sacrament from married kin whose union had been made after their baptism.⁶⁴ Bede might have felt this teaching had set a troublesome

⁵⁹ *Marcus*, II.738-741, pp.507-508, quot. Jerome, *Matheus*, II.1125-1127, p.117 (p.167), cit. 1 Kings 17:1, 18:16-45, 21:18-24; *DTR*, lxvi.434-435, p.477 (p.173), cit. 1 Kings 16:29-17:1.

⁶⁰ *DTR*, lxvi.448-449, p.477 (p.174), cit. 2 Kings 8:18.

⁶¹ Revelation 17; 18:3; *Apocalypsis*, xxxi.90-92, p.475 (p.236); compare 2 Kings 9:30-37, 11:13-16.

⁶² Bede believed incest an abomination and noted how, in the case of Lot and his daughters, their illicit union 'begot pagan peoples (Moab and Ammon) ... estranged from the faith of their father', cf. Genesis 19:30-38; *Genesis*, IV.1252-1324, pp.229-231 (pp.307-309) [em.cit]; *HE*, II.5, pp.150-151; Máirín MacCarron, 'Royal Marriage and Conversion in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum*', *Journal of Theological Studies* 68:2 (2017), pp.650-670, pp.655-656.

⁶³ *HE*, I.27, pp.84-87, IV.5, pp.352-353; *Paenit. Theodori* II.xii.18-19, 32, pp.328, 330, cit. with comment in Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon Women and the Church: Sharing a Common Fate* (Woodbridge, 1992), pp.20-21ff, 46-51, 55-65; see also *Wihtrud* iii-vi, Liebermann, p.12 (Oliver, iii-v, pp.154-155); Anonymous, *Vita Gregorii*, xv, pp.96-97.

⁶⁴ *HE*, I.27, pp.84-87; Hollis, *Women and the Church*, pp.20-21.

precedent – similar to his response towards Gregory’s later permission for ‘well-constructed *fana*’ to be reconsecrated as churches – by enabling kindred marriage to become embedded within the nascent English Church.

Indeed, Bede’s criticism of Eadbald as ‘faithless’ for marrying his own step-mother surely indicates his rejection of Gregory’s concession, since Eadbald had not been baptised when the union took place.⁶⁵ When commenting of Eadbald’s example in the *Historia*, Bede quoted not Gregory but Paul, specifically, the apostle’s admonition to the Corinthians (who had also taken their father’s wives in marriage) over their own fornication and its emphasis that the Corinthian’s repute for sordid behaviour rivalled even the debauched pagans.⁶⁶ Bede’s report further suggested that Eadbald’s example had encouraged similar marriages in Kent, where the people renounced ‘the laws of faith [*fides*] and chastity [*castimonia*]’. Here, Bede’s wording reveals his impression that Eadbald’s refusal to practise ‘chastity’ in marriage was an indicator of his lack of ‘faith’ in Christ, which, in turn, meant the reversion in Kent had been effected through an idolatrous marriage. Bede reiterated this in reporting that Eadbald’s conversion to Christianity only took place once he had ceased ‘his idolatrous worship’ and set aside ‘his unlawful wife’ – the two, in Bede’s mind, were essentially one.⁶⁷ Other episodes involving mixed marriages in the *Historia* include the murder of Sigeberht I, King of East Anglia, who was slain at the home of a *gesith*, a man involved in an *inlicitum coniugium*, ‘illicit marriage’.⁶⁸ Bede’s allegation that this *gesith* and another thegn were provoked to Sigeberht’s killing, since he forgave his enemies too readily, appears to suggest the murder had a religious motivation.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ *HE*, II.5, pp.150-151.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, cit. 1 Corinthians 5:1, compare *Paenit. Theodori* I.ii.16-17, pp.291-292.

⁶⁷ *HE*, II.6, pp.154-155.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, III.22, pp.284-285.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, compare Matthew 5:43-45; Luke 6:27-29.

As Bede explained in his *In Genesim* and *De temporum ratione*, the ‘purification of the people [Israel] from foreign wives’ was a central motif within Ezra-Nehemiah, and, when later writing a dedicated commentary on these books, Bede touched on issues relevant to our discussion.⁷⁰ His expansive treatment of the issue of foreign wives in *In Ezram-Neemiam* carries little sense that men and women in eighth-century England were engaging in mixed marriages; nevertheless, he voiced other concerns with idolatrous belief and observance that we shall return to in Chapter Six.⁷¹ Here, we can note Bede’s lament that Israel, having overcome exile and various obstacles to the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s temple and walls, were laid low from lust for ‘pagan women’.⁷² Bede placed the burden of this sin on the first returnees from exile and their leaders Zerubbabel and Jeshua, not on Ezra and his returnees, since the latter’s excellent teaching would not have permitted Israel’s evil to take root.⁷³ Bede insisted that both the foreign women and their idolatrous offspring had been removed from Jerusalem, lest these children came to ‘follow the perfidy of their mothers rather than the faith of their fathers’.⁷⁴

There were in Bede’s writings other pagan women whom he considered righteous. Zipporah, the Midian-born wife of Moses, is implied in Bede’s commentary of 1 Samuel 15:6, where Saul showed kindness to Zipporah’s Kenite descendants. ‘You will find many among the pagans who are mild, humble, kind, and patient’, Bede wrote, highlighting the example of Cornelius the pagan commitment to alms and prayer.⁷⁵ In Rahab, a prostitute from the

⁷⁰ Ezra 9-10; Nehemiah 9:2; 10:28-30; 13:3, 23-30; Malachi 2:11-12; *Genesis, praef.*, ls.41-42, p.2 (p.67); *DTR*, lxvi.717-718, p.486 (p.185).

⁷¹ *Ezra-Neemia*, II.1530-2026, p.136-153 (pp.326-338), III.1300-1314, pp.371-372 (p.200), III.1930-1935, p.387 (p.220), III.2069-2088, p.391 (p.225).

⁷² *ibid.*, II.1934-1949, p.336 (pp.150-151).

⁷³ *ibid.*, ls.1539-1547, p.326 (pp.137-138).

⁷⁴ *Ezra-Neemia*, II.1988-1990, 1997-2009, pp.337-338 (p.152).

⁷⁵ Exodus 2:11-22, 3:1, 4:24-26; Numbers 12:1-9; *Samuhel*, II.2515-2524, p.128 (pp.304-305), cit. Judges 4:11, and Acts 10:1-2. Compare Origen [trans. Rufinus], *Commentarium in Cantica Cantorum*, in *Origenes Werke*, 8, ed. Baehrens, II, ls.4-22, pp.115-18 (trans. Lawson, pp.93-98).

Canaanite city of Jericho, Bede perceived ‘an iniquitous woman, a foreign woman’, but a woman who was ‘made righteous by works’ for aiding Joshua’s capture of Jericho.⁷⁶ The virtuous example of Zipporah and Rahab notwithstanding, Bede’s writings indicate his wider distrust of pagan females. Further to this, as Dorsey Armstrong showed, there is little sense that Bede saw mixed marriages between pagan kings and Christian spouses as beneficial to conversion.⁷⁷ Christian queens hold an important place in Bede’s *Historia*, but neither Bertha, the Christian Frankish princess who married the pagan Æthelberht, nor Æthelburh, who wedded the pagan Edwin, effected conversion in their husbands, a transformation that Bede preserved as the province of Christian teachers.⁷⁸

Spiritual ministers

According to Deuteronomy 17:18-19, kings should copy out the Mosaic Law for themselves from the volume kept by the priestly Levite tribe. From this and other examples, Bede knew the influential role of priests or spiritual ministers, whether Levite, Christian, or pagan, in shaping the faith of kings and kingdoms. Idolatrous rulers received counsel from those whom Bede labelled ‘ministers of Satan’, *ministri Satanae*.⁷⁹ Bede knew several pagan practitioners from the Old Testament, perhaps most prominent Baalam from Numbers 22-24, who Bede in *Epistolae Catholicae* turned into a figure for those who provide ‘bad counsel’.⁸⁰ In *In Samuhelem*, Bede stated that the ‘magicians [*magi*] and soothsayers [*arioli*]’ that were found in Israel mystically represented ‘all the oracles [*uates*] and idolaters [*idolatrae*] of the

⁷⁶ Joshua 2:1-21; *Epist. Catholicae*, Iac.ii.287-299, p.201 (pp.33-34), cit. James 2:25.

⁷⁷ Dorsey Armstrong, ‘Holy Queens as Agents of Christianization in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*: A Reconsideration’, *Medieval Encounters* 4:3 (1998), pp.228-241.

⁷⁸ *HE*, I.25, pp.72-75; II.9, pp.162-163; for a contrasting viewpoint, see MacCarron, ‘Royal Marriage and Conversion’, pp.650-670.

⁷⁹ Bede seems to have learned this expression from Primasius, *Commentarius in Apocalypsin*, IV.xvi.199-200, p.233, compare *Apocalypsis*, xxviii.23, p.455 (p.226); *Epist. Catholicae*, IIo.ii.273, p.296 (p.177).

⁸⁰ *Epist. Catholicae*, Iud.124-125, 136-137, p.338 (p.246), cit. Jude 11b.

Gentiles'.⁸¹ Citing Jerome, Bede explained how *magi* or *malefici* practised 'blood and animal sacrifices and often have contact with corpses'; while, *arioli* or *incantatores* 'perform their craft with words'.⁸² Similar practitioners can be inferred from Bede's criticism in *Expositio Apocalypseos* of 'wicked teachers', *mali doctores*, whom he imagined as harrying the Church as a rider spurring their horse into an enemy battleline.⁸³ Together, these ministers represented the builders of Babylon, who cursed the true God and sought to poison the faith of his followers.⁸⁴

James Campbell found only two references to pagan priests in early English literature: Bede's Coifi, the Northumbrian *pontifex primus*; and Stephen's South Saxon *princeps sacerdotum idolatriae*.⁸⁵ We might add the London-based 'idolatrous high priests', *pontifices idolatriae*, who, so Bede reported, the East Saxons chose to serve over Mellitus, even though their king, Eadbald, had since converted to Christianity.⁸⁶ Bede might have known other examples of pagan practitioners in England, at the least, he seemed familiar with some of the regulations that governed these individuals.⁸⁷ Campbell suggested that the English calendar in chapter fifteen of Bede's *De temporum ratione* was probably regulated by priests.⁸⁸ He also noted the transition in English law, where, as the Christian faith strengthened the punishment for severe crimes was handed over to the king, could suggest that in pre-conversion England the priests had handled such punishments, as Tacitus had reported in the case of the Germanic tribes.⁸⁹

⁸¹ 1 Samuel 28:3b (compare Deuteronomy 18:9-12); *Samuhel*, IV.1789-1793, p.254 (p.495) [em.cit.].

⁸² *ibid.*, cit. Jerome, *Daniel*, I.ii.158-163, p.784 (p.24), cit. Daniel 1:2; while Bede's line *qui uulgo malefici* is identical to Isidore's explanation of *magi*, see *Etymologiae*, VIII.ix.9.16, p.324 (p.182); compare *Cant. Canticorum*, V.viii.328-333, p.346 (p.234) [em.cit.].

⁸³ *Apocalypsis*, xiii.58-60, p.351 (p.170), cit. Revelation 9:7.

⁸⁴ *Genesis*, III.666-709, pp.161-162 (pp.237-238) [em.cit.]; O'Brien, *Bede's Temple*, p.140.

⁸⁵ Campbell, 'Religion in Early England', p.68; cf. *HE*, II.13, pp.182-183, compare *VW*, xiii, pp.28-29. See Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, pp.175-176.

⁸⁶ *HE*, II.6, pp.154-155.

⁸⁷ See 'Chapter Two: Idol places', p.101.

⁸⁸ Campbell, 'Religion in Early England', p.68.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, pp.68-69, cit. Tacitus, *Germania*, vii, pp.140-141.

Interactions between idolatrous kings and Levite or Christian ministers could become violent.⁹⁰ Joash had observed the law throughout Jehoiada's lifetime, but on the high priest's passing, the king turned to the worship of idols.⁹¹ Zechariah, a prophet and son of Jehoiada, rebuked the king for his errors, whereafter Joash had him 'stoned between the Temple and the altar.'⁹² Christ later recalled Zechariah's example alongside the first martyr, Abel, and Bede in his interpretation of this passage explained that Abel was a figure for the martyred laity and Zechariah a figure for the martyred priesthood.⁹³

As other scholars have explored, Bede recognised that there had been no priestly martyrs in England.⁹⁴ Several of the Roman missionaries experienced persecution, but, for various reasons, these never led to martyrdom. Mellitus withheld the sacrament from the sons of Sæberht, since this was reserved for those who had been 'cleansed in the same font of salvation as your father'. 'We will not enter the font' came the reply and Mellitus was later expelled from the East Saxon kingdom.⁹⁵ In Kent, Eadbald's succession saw Justus, Bishop of Rochester, and Archbishop Laurence, prepared to quit the mission for the refuge of Rome, 'rather than remain fruitlessly among these barbarians who had rebelled against the faith.'⁹⁶ While Mellitus and Justus travelled to Gaul, Laurence was scourged in a vision from Peter, leading the archbishop to remain at his post. Indeed, when Laurence revealed his wounds to Eadbald, the latter was convinced to divorce his father's wife and renounce his gods in order

⁹⁰ 1 Kings 18:13; 2 Kings 21:16; Luke 13:34a.

⁹¹ 2 Kings 12:2; 2 Chronicles 24:17-18

⁹² 2 Chronicles 24:20-22; *DTL*, xx.13-14, p.605 (p.123); *DTR*, lxvi.462-466, pp.477-478 (pp.174-175); *Ezra-Neemia*, III.1101-1103, p.366 (p.193); see also *DTL*, ii.8-9, p.605 (p.122), cit. 1 Kings 16:7.

⁹³ Genesis 4:8; Luke 11:51; *Lucas*, IV.572-580, p.245 (p.412); *Homelia* i.3, ll.196-200, p.19 (p.26).

⁹⁴ Acts 7, compare *Ex.Actuum*, vii, pp.33-39 (pp.69-76) [em.cit.]. See Eusebius [trans. Rufinus], *HE*, IV.xv-xvii, pp.334-363 (pp.157-169), V.i, pp.402-427 (pp.185-198), VIII.iv, x, pp.744-747, 758-765 (pp.325, 332-334); see also *Homelia* ii.21, pp.335-341 (pp.211-219) [em.cit.]; Alan Thacker, 'In Search of Saints: The English Church and the Cult of Roman Apostles and Martyrs in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries', *Early Medieval Rome and the Christian West: Essays in Honour of Donald A. Bullough*, ed. Julia M.H. Smith (Leiden, 2000), pp.247-277; Sarah Foot, 'Why were there no martyrs in the early English Church?', *H.M. Chadwick Memorial Lectures 31* (Cambridge, 2020), pp.1-38.

⁹⁵ *HE*, II.5, pp.152-153.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

to confess Christ.⁹⁷ This report casts something of a critical light on the flight of Mellitus and Justus, or the later event of Paulinus fleeing Northumbria.⁹⁸ Even before arriving in England, Augustine and company had been nervous, with Bede reporting how, on leaving the island-minster at Lérins in the spring of 596, the missionaries became ‘paralysed with terror’ at the impending prospect of preaching Christ to ‘a barbarous, fierce, and unbelieving nation whose language they did not even understand.’⁹⁹ On that occasion, Augustine had returned to Rome to plead with Gregory, who, plainly irritated, ordered the missionaries onward to England.¹⁰⁰

Select passages in Bede’s exegesis might suggest his sense of regret at the lack of priestly martyrs in England. Consider, for instance, Bede’s exegesis of 1 Samuel 22:16-23 and its study of Doeg the Edomite’s massacre of Ahimelech and the other priests of Nob (as commanded by Saul).¹⁰¹ Ahimelech could have chosen fight or flight, but Bede praised his choice of the former, ‘for truth’s sake’.¹⁰² He observed that other individuals with ‘less courage’ opted to flee from persecution, ‘knowing that *the high hills are a refuge for harts*, but *the rock for hedgehogs and hares*’, adding, in postscript, ‘we can see in past events such a discrepancy of merits and morals’.¹⁰³ Earlier, when summarising his interpretation of this passage, Bede noted the relevance of Doeg’s persecution to the martyrdoms from the first centuries of the Church to the future time of Antichrist, perhaps then, these verses recalled to him the fearful flight of those once tasked with England’s conversion.¹⁰⁴ Doeg the Edomite,

⁹⁷ Recalling Isaiah 53:5, “But he was wounded for our iniquities, he was bruised for our sins: the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and by his bruises we are healed”; compare *HE*, II.6, pp.154-155.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*, II.20, pp.204-205.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, I.23, pp.68-69.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, pp.68-71.

¹⁰¹ *Samuhel*, III.3047-3129, pp.208-210 (pp.427-430) [em.cit.].

¹⁰² *ibid.*, ls.3047-3049, p.208 (pp.427-428) [em.cit.].

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, ls.3049-3055, p.208 (p.428), quot. Psalm 103(104):18. Cf. Cassiodorus, *Exp.Psalmorem*, CIII.18, pp.933-934 (vol. 3, pp.40-41) [em.cit.]. In contrast, Bede was more tolerant when preaching on the theme of the flight to Egypt of Joseph and Mary with the infant Jesus, *Homelia* i.10, ls.57-66, pp.69-70 (pp.98-99), quot. Matthew 10:23.

¹⁰⁴ *Samuhel*, III.2908-2914, p.205 (p.423) [em.cit.].

his name meaning ‘moved’ or ‘shaken’, his race ‘bloodthirsty’ (Isaiah 63:1), might then have served Bede a figure for the sons of Sæberht, Penda, and other idolatrous kings who persecuted Christ’s ministers in England.¹⁰⁵

Rædwald

Simon Keynes once reckoned the sum of what we know about Rædwald, King of East Anglia, could be imparted ‘on the back of the proverbial postage stamp.’¹⁰⁶ But perhaps more can be said of Rædwald, ‘the son of Tytil, whose father was Wuffa, from whom the kings of the East Angles are called Wuffingas.’¹⁰⁷ Doubtless, we shall learn something from the excavations at Rendlesham, Suffolk; indeed, it is even possible that ‘Structure 3760’ represents the famous temple of Rædwald alluded to in Bede’s *Historia*.¹⁰⁸ Of course, it is thanks to Bede that we know the name Rædwald, his sons Regenhere and Eorpwold, the existence of the East Anglian *fanum*, and much besides.¹⁰⁹ Here we will reconsider Bede’s Rædwald through his treatment in the *Historia*, supported by several exegetical passages, under the following headings: Rædwald the short-lived subject of Christ; Rædwald’s queen, a foreign consort; Rædwald’s ministers, the ‘perverse teachers’, *doctores peruersi*.

Four episodes in the *Historia* involve Rædwald. First, Bede listed Rædwald among the seven Anglo-Saxon kings that he regarded as overlords of the lands south of the River Humber.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ *Samuhel*, III.2602-2603, 2967-2968, pp.198, 206 (p.412, 425), cit. Jerome, *Nom.Hebraica*, ls.12, p.103, *idem*, *Epistula* LIII, CSEL 54, viii.9, p.458; compare *HE*, IV.26, pp.426-429.

¹⁰⁶ Simon Keynes, ‘Rædwald the Bretwalda’, *Voyage to the Other World: The Legacy of Sutton Hoo*, ed. Calvin B. Kendall and Peter S. Wells (Minneapolis, MN, 1992), pp.103-123, p.103.

¹⁰⁷ *HE*, II.15, pp.190-191.

¹⁰⁸ Scull et al., ‘Excavations at Rendlesham’, p.220.

¹⁰⁹ Brief mention of Rædwald is made in the anonymous *Vita Gregorii*, but Bede’s report is the only full account, see *Vita Gregorii*, xvi, pp.98-101.

¹¹⁰ *HE*, II.5, pp.148-149; Keynes, ‘Rædwald the Bretwalda’, pp.104-109; Patrick Wormald, ‘Bede, the *Bretwaldas* and the Origins of the *Gens Anglorum*’, *Ideal and Reality*, pp.99-129, p.101ff.

In Bede's report of Sigeberht's succession to the East Anglian throne, he explained how Sigeberht, step-son of Rædwald, had lived as an exile in Gaul (where he received his baptism) 'while fleeing from the enmity of Rædwald.'¹¹¹ Elsewhere, Bede discussed Rædwald in his long narrative of Edwin's conversion in Book Two. At II.12, we learn of Rædwald's mixed treatment of Edwin when he had lived in exile at the East Anglian court. Weakened through bribes and threats from the Northumbrian Æthelfrith, Rædwald reneged on his promise to protect Edwin, but the East Anglian queen persuaded her husband to keep his word. A rapid march northward saw Rædwald outmanoeuvre Æthelfrith, resulting in Edwin succeeding the former as king of Northumbria. Later, the convert Edwin acted as sponsor at the baptism of Eorpwold, Rædwald's son and successor, prompting Bede to recall Rædwald's own baptism.

Indeed, his [Eorpwold's] father Rædwald had long before been initiated into the mysteries of the Christian faith in Kent, but in vain; for on his return home, he was seduced by his wife and by certain perverse teachers and corrupted from the sincerity of his faith, so that his last state was worse than his first. After the manner of the ancient Samaritans, he seemed to be serving both Christ and the gods whom he had previously served; in the same temple he had one altar for the Christian sacrifice and another small altar on which to offer victims to devils.¹¹²

Rædwald, one-time subject of Christ

At the precise moment that Rædwald was baptised, he became subject to the rule of Christ. Of course, that he received his baptism in Kent seems to have reinforced Rædwald's status (at least at that time) as a subject of a temporal king, Æthelberht, who we can presume acted as Rædwald's sponsor. Gregory's letter to Æthelberht in 601 had called on the king to win neighbouring kingdoms for Christ – Rædwald's baptism and that of Æthelberht's nephew,

¹¹¹ *HE*, III.18, pp.266-269.

¹¹² *ibid.*, II.15, pp.188-191.

Sæberht, king of the East Saxons, implies that Æthelberht made some effort to fulfil the papal command.¹¹³ We learn little of Rædwald's time in Kent, but it is possible to extrapolate from Bede's report that the former received some catechetical instruction. Rædwald was an idolater to Bede, no doubt, but the king's reversion seemed less severe than that of other rulers in England. He was, Bede told us, 'perverted from the sincerity of his faith', contrasting the emphasis that Bede laid on 'sincerity and truth' when writing of the purpose of baptism in *De temporum ratione*.¹¹⁴ The Christian altar in Rædwald's temple demonstrates some effort to worship Christ, perhaps reflecting a teaching learned as a catechumen, such as the lesson that Bede later claimed was 'said to all catechumens': "Nobody comes to the Father except through me".¹¹⁵ These words might have motivated the two-altar scheme, though, equally, the temple might have been thus arranged to ensure the traditional East Anglian gods would not be expected to share offerings with a newcomer.¹¹⁶ What Rædwald saw as a viable solution, Bede plainly felt was a scandal to rival the equine shrines in the Jerusalem temple complex, with the king's commitment to Christ seeming as short-lived as his baptismal report in the *Historia*.

'In the manner of the ancient Samaritans', Bede wrote, Rædwald had worshipped Christ and the East Anglian pantheon. Were Rædwald presented with this comparison, he might justifiably have enquired 'Who were the Samaritans?' For Bede, the Samaritans were five pagan tribes whom the Assyrians resettled in Samaria when its indigenous population, the ten tribes that constituted the northern Israelite kingdom, were themselves resettled east of the

¹¹³ Gregory, *Registrum*, XI.xxxvii.10-11, 25-27, 56-60, pp.930-932 (pp.783-784); *HE*, I.32, pp.112-115; II.3, pp.142-143; Hoggett, *East Anglian Conversion*, pp.28-29, 164; but see, for an alternative view, Keynes, 'Rædwald the Bretwalda', pp.107-108.

¹¹⁴ 'And because in baptism we seek to pass over from Satan's power to the portion allotted to the saints ... it is necessary to cling to sincerity and truth', *DTR*, lxiii.57-59, p.455 (p.151); compare *HE*, II.15, pp.190-191.

¹¹⁵ John 14:6b; *Homelia* ii.18, ls.164-167, p.315 (pp.183-184).

¹¹⁶ Lutz E. von Padberg, *Mission und Christianisierung: Formen und Folgen bei Anglesachsen und Franken im 7. und 8. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 1995), pp.253-254.

Euphrates in Medea.¹¹⁷ Once in Samaria, the five tribes worshipped their native gods, but because the land remained the possession of the Israelite God, the people, now known as ‘Samaritans’, suffered from a plague of lions.¹¹⁸ In response, the Assyrians returned a captive Israelite priest to Samaria. He instructed the tribes in the Mosaic Law, but the people never renounced their native gods.¹¹⁹ Thus, Bede made what to him was a perfectly sensible comparison between Samaritans and Rædwald – the king who received the Lawgiver, Christ, but refused to forsake his traditional gods.

In recent times, Bede’s identification of Rædwald with the Samaritans has been challenged, or, in one study, reimagined to incorporate New Testament treatments of Samaritanism, wherein Rædwald becomes a ‘Good Samaritan’ (Luke 10:25-37) for his service to Edwin.¹²⁰ Christ’s positive treatment of Samaritans provided Bede a figure for the forthcoming faith of the Gentiles, but this seems incompatible with the insincere example of Rædwald.¹²¹ Indeed, the Good Samaritan seems an especially poor example when we recall Bede’s report that Rædwald had been prepared to betray Edwin and had, far more seriously, betrayed Christ.¹²² Nor can we place the queen in this parable. Her motivation was less the selfless ‘love of thy neighbour’ that Bede saw in the Good Samaritan than the concern for her husband’s reputation.¹²³

¹¹⁷ 2 Kings 17:1-24; *Ezra-Neemia*, I.801-803, 827-831, pp.261-262 (pp.37-38).

¹¹⁸ 2 Kings 17:25-28; *Quaest.Regum*, XXIII.1-12, p.315 (p.126) [em.cit.].

¹¹⁹ 2 Kings 17:26-41; *Lucas*, I.947-955, p.43 (p.146), cit. Luke 1:75; *Ezra-Neemia*, III.672-673, p.356 (p.179).

¹²⁰ Sam Newton, *The Reckoning of King Rædwald: The Story of the King Linked to the Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial* (Colchester, 2003), p.15; Joseph Grossi, *Angles on a Kingdom: East Anglian Identities from Bede to Ælfric* (London, 2021), p.56.

¹²¹ Luke 17:11-19, compare Leviticus 14:2-32; John 4:4-42.

¹²² *Ezra-Neemia*, II.704-707, p.305 (p.106); Sally Shockro, ‘Blessed Betrayal: The Opportunity of Treachery in Anglo-Latin Ecclesiastical Texts’, *Treason: Medieval and Early Modern Adultery, Betrayal, and Shame*, ed. Larissa Tracy (Leiden, 2019), pp.170-198, pp.172-175.

¹²³ *HE*, II.12, pp.180-181.

Bede offered no further clarification over Rædwald as a figure for the Samaritans, but certain passages of his *In Ezram-Neemiam*, written in the same period as his *Historia*, seem to resemble the criticism of Rædwald as Samaritan.¹²⁴ In the narrative of Ezra-Nehemiah, the Samaritans oppose Israel's efforts to rebuild Jerusalem.¹²⁵ For Bede, 'the hostile crowd of Samaritans' were the vices that opposed the sanctification of Christians.¹²⁶ These Christians, Bede noted, cannot, having earlier 'renounced the devil and confessed the true and living God', receive once more the cleansing of baptism, but must instead perform 'long labour of penance, copious streams of tears, and the unremitting toil of continence.'¹²⁷ One reoccurring condemnation of Samaritans in Bede's *In Ezram-Neemiam* is that they signify those who promoted erroneous interpretations of Christ. On occasion, this involved heretics and pagans, who for Bede held similar errors, and it is possible that, in the case of Rædwald's confused belief, Bede recalled the heretical and idolatrous Samaritans. At Ezra 4:2, where the Samaritans offered to help Israel rebuild the temple since they claimed both peoples worshipped one and the same God, Bede quoted Paul's warning to the Corinthians in comments that seem appropriate to his criticism of Rædwald's syncretism,

You have made sacrifices but unclean ones because you have not renounced idols. *For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? And what harmony is there between Christ and Belial?*¹²⁸

In *In Lucam*, Bede explored the Gospel equivalent to Paul's Christ and Belial in Luke 11:15-20 where the Pharisees claimed that Christ cast out demons by Beelzebub. Quoting Jerome's treatment of the parallel passage in Matthew 12:24-28, Bede wrote,

¹²⁴ Scott DeGregorio, 'Bede's *In Ezram et Neemiam* and the Reform of the Northumbrian Church', *Speculum* 79:1 (2004), pp.1-25.

¹²⁵ Ezra 4; Nehemiah 4:1-8.

¹²⁶ *Ezra-Neemia*, II.704-707, p.305 (p.106).

¹²⁷ *ibid.*, II.694-704, p.305 (pp.105-106).

¹²⁸ *ibid.*, I.1633-1636, p.282 (p.69), quot. 2 Corinthians 6:14-15.

The works of the Saviour cannot be compared with the works of Beelzebub. He desires to hold the souls of men captive; the Lord, to free them. He preaches idols; the Lord, knowledge of the one God. He drags people to vices; the other calls them back to virtues. How then, can there be concord between them, since their works are opposed?¹²⁹

Here, Bede stressed the theological separation between Christ and strange gods. His ensuing exegesis in *In Lucam* covered the strongman parable, with Bede observing how where ‘Christ cleansed the contaminated, Satan hastened to contaminate the cleansed’.¹³⁰ For, having explained the strongman parable, Christ taught his listeners how wicked spirits will repossess their former host should that individual neglect the faith, concluding, “And the last state of that man becomes worse than the first”.¹³¹ Bede reproduced these exact words when speaking of Rædwald in the *Historia*, showing his reader that while Christ had rescued Rædwald from the strongman, the king had lost Christ’s protection since he began once more to worship the East Anglian pantheon, and was then returned into Satan’s captivity.¹³² Earlier in this chapter, we noted how idolatrous kings proved the ruin of both themselves and their kingdom and it is obvious that Bede wished us to connect Rædwald’s faithlessness with the suffering of East Anglia. In *In Samuhelem*, Bede cited Peter’s reprise of Christ’s words at Luke 11:26b, “their last state becomes worse than the first”, when explaining that Israel was to suffer for choosing a king to rule over them like the Gentile nations.¹³³ Similarly, in the *Historia*, Bede characterised East Anglia as a place of ‘long-lasting evil and unhappiness’.¹³⁴ Rædwald’s successor, the convert Eorpwold, was murdered, with Bede accusing the ‘heathen Ricberht’ of the regicide.¹³⁵ Ricberht then ruled until 630 or 631, whereafter Sigiberht (d.635), step-

¹²⁹ *Lucas*, IV.139-144, p.234 (pp.397-398), quot. Jerome, *Matheus*, II.479-484, p.94 (p.144), cit. Matthew 12:24-30.

¹³⁰ *ibid.*, ls.148-149.

¹³¹ Luke 11:24-26.

¹³² *HE*, II.15, pp.190-191, cit. Luke 11:26b; cf. 2 Peter 2:9-22.

¹³³ As Bede noted, Israel was ‘set to have times worse than those before’, see 1 Samuel 12:25; 2 Peter 2:20b; *Samuhel*, II.1289-1308, p.99 (pp.258-259) [em.cit.].

¹³⁴ *HE*, II.15, pp.190-191.

¹³⁵ *ibid.*; David P. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*, rev. edn. (London, 2000), p.66.

brother to Eorpwold but not of Rædwald's line, was recalled from his exile in Gaul.¹³⁶ It was through the Christian Sigebert and his Burgundian bishop, Felix (d.c.648), that East Anglia left behind its idolatrous past and the kingdom finally became a place of 'everlasting felicity.'¹³⁷ Of Rædwald himself, we may be sure that Bede felt he too, like the wicked monk-smith, would have reserved a place beside the Lord's betrayers, Satan and Caiaphas.¹³⁸ Moreover, he might have pondered the relevance of Peter's words at 2 Peter 2:21, included in the passage in *In Lucam* just studied, "For it had been better for him not to have known the way of truth, than after knowing it to turn back."¹³⁹

East Anglia's queen – a foreign consort

Clare Stancliffe has commented on the fact that kings held the centre stage in Anglo-Saxon England.¹⁴⁰ However, in the case of Rædwald, Bede's *dramatis personae* would have been much poorer without the East Anglian queen, who, since no record existed of her baptism, can be considered a 'foreign consort'.¹⁴¹ Bede claimed that it was the East Anglian queen, together with certain 'perverse teachers', who 'seduced', *seducere*, the king into worshipping both the new and old gods.¹⁴² Here, Bede's language recalls God's warning about pagan women from Deuteronomy 7:4, "she will seduce [*seducere*] thy son from following me". The East Anglian queen and these teachers might be construed in Bede's criticism of the Persian king, Artaxerxes, and the Samaritans, who prevented the works in Jerusalem as the former who opposed the building of Rædwald's spiritual temple.¹⁴³ Bede's remark at Ezra 4:16 could

¹³⁶ *HE*, III.18, pp.266-269; Barbara Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1990; rpt. Abingdon, 2013), pp.67-68.

¹³⁷ *HE*, II.15, pp.190-191.

¹³⁸ Compare 'Chapter Three: Idol makers', p.132.

¹³⁹ *Lucas*, IV.184-185, p.235 (p.399).

¹⁴⁰ Clare Stancliffe, 'Kings who Opted Out', *Ideal and Reality*, pp.154-176, p.154.

¹⁴¹ Hollis, *Women and the Church*, pp.232-234.

¹⁴² *HE*, II.15, pp.190-191.

¹⁴³ *Ezra-Neemia*, I.1806-1818 p.286 (p.76) [em.cit.], III.664-683, pp.355-356 (p.179) [em.cit.].

further reveal his impression of the desire among the East Anglian elite to restore Rædwald to their native religion,

For in fact, even those who do not understand the true faith realize that light and darkness, wickedness and righteousness, Christ and Belial, cannot be master of the one and the same mind.¹⁴⁴

Earlier, we noted Bede's awareness of the Gentile fear that Christian monotheism would replace their own culture.¹⁴⁵ In this respect, it is possible that a similar emotion influenced the queen and Rædwald's other councillors in their successful persuasion of Rædwald to continue worshipping the East Anglian pantheon.

It has been said that Bede's report of Rædwald 'is couched in the knowledge and understanding of his own Christian Church'.¹⁴⁶ While this is true, it still seems that Bede employed his knowledge of English paganism to criticise the importance that pagans attached to 'honour', *fides*.¹⁴⁷ According to Bede, when the queen persuaded Rædwald to renew his promise of protection to Edwin she had warned him,

...that it was in no way fitting for so great a king to sell his best friend for gold when he was in such trouble, still less to sacrifice his own honour, which is more precious than any ornament, for the love of money.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ *Ezra-Neemia*, I.1816-1818, p.286 (p.76), cit. 2 Corinthians 6:14-15.

¹⁴⁵ See 'Chapter One: Strange gods', p.49.

¹⁴⁶ Tim Pestell, 'Paganism in Early-Anglo-Saxon East Anglia', *Art, Faith and Place in East Anglia: From Prehistory to the Present*, ed. T.A. Heslop et al. (Woodbridge, 2012), pp.66-87, p.69.

¹⁴⁷ *HE*, III.13, pp.254-255; Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship*, pp.54-55; Scarfe, *Suffolk in the Middle Ages*, p.32; Anton Scharer, 'The Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Kings in the 7th and 8th Century', *Changing Perspectives on England and the Continent in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. *idem* (Farnham, 2014), I, pp.1-17, p.8.

¹⁴⁸ *HE*, II.12, pp.180-181, compare Gregory of Nyssa [trans. Dionysius Exiguus], *De opificio hominis*, PL 67, iv, col.352C.

Here, we can draw a comparison with Stephen's report of the similar promise referred to in the conversation between the Lombard king, Perctarit, d.688, and Wilfrid. Having warned Wilfrid that the bishop's enemies in Britain had made overtures for his head, Perctarit recalled his own experience as an exile in the court of 'a certain pagan king of the Huns, who entered into a covenant with me before the idol that was his god, to the effect that he would never betray me nor hand me over to my enemies.'¹⁴⁹ Perctarit had remembered this promise when his covenant with Wilfrid was put to the test in words that seem relevant to Bede's criticism of the lack of honour in Rædwald.

'For,' said he, 'doubtless the gods would cut off my life if I were to commit this crime and break the pledge made before them.' How much more shall I, who know the true God, refuse to give my soul over to destruction for the wealth of the whole world!¹⁵⁰

Thus, Bede's emphasis on honour, as spoken through the queen, seems intended to mock Rædwald as a king without honour. Indeed, the later episode involving the queen appears to reveal her self-contradiction – having bid the king to keep his promise to Edwin, she then pressured him to break the public vows that he had made to Christ as part of his baptism.¹⁵¹ In revealing the fickle nature of pagan honour, Bede heaped further scorn on East Anglian religion, the followers of which extolled honour but possessed none themselves.¹⁵² Moreover, Bede placed a certain significance on the queen's role in ensuring Edwin's survival. Her intervention inadvertently facilitated the latter's conversion and his subsequent support of Eorpwold's baptism, which eventually saw the overthrow of the East Anglian pantheon. In this light, the East Anglian queen becomes a figure of dramatic irony. For none of the

¹⁴⁹ *VW*, xxviii, pp.54-57.

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*, pp.56-57.

¹⁵¹ But see, for an opposing view, Grossi, *East Anglian Identities*, p.47, cit. Alan Thacker, 'Bede and the Ordering of Understanding', *Innovation and Tradition*, pp.37-63, pp.55-56.

¹⁵² Bede's claim that Coifi, though he 'devoted himself more earnestly to the worship of our gods', watched others receive greater *dignitas*, 'honour', seems relevant here, *HE*, II.13, pp.182-183.

characters (least of all the queen) realise their actions will lead to the conversion of Northumbria and, over time, East Anglia, with Bede reserving this insight for readers of the *Historia*. His narrative thus ensured the fulfilment of God's promise to Edwin, which the self-serving East Anglian royals could not overturn. The queen as involuntary tool to Christian conversion recalls the earlier example of Æthelfrith, who had driven Edwin into exile. Georges Tugène, noting Bede's comparison of Æthelfrith to King Saul, suggested that Bede wished readers to recall the example of the Apostle Paul, who, before the Damascene Road incident, had been known as Saul.¹⁵³ Saul had devoured his Christian prey in the morning, distributing it in the evening, and Æthelfrith had slain Christians earlier in his rule and spent some of his latter reign persecuting Edwin, in the process, scattering the seed which returned to take root in Northumbria.¹⁵⁴

Rædwald's *doctores peruersi*

Bede's mention of the *doctores peruersi*, 'perverse teachers', who ministered to Rædwald and influenced his reversion, must surely refer to idolatrous priests.¹⁵⁵ He used the expression *doctores peruersi* on two other occasions: once in *In Samuhelem*, connected with the 'army of impiety', that is, Jews, heretics, and pagans.¹⁵⁶ The other instance, located in *Epistolae Catholicae*, likened such teachers to the churning waves, which, rising higher in the sea, receive their foaming crown which Bede interpreted as pagan pride, fêted but flimsy.¹⁵⁷ In each case, Bede seems to have taken inspiration from Jerome's use of the expression, which

¹⁵³ *HE*, I.34, pp.116-117, cit. Genesis 49:27.

¹⁵⁴ Georges Tugène, 'L'histoire "ecclésiastique" du peuple anglais: Réflexions sur le particularisme et l'universalisme chez Bède', *Recherches augustiniennes et patristiques* 17 (1982), pp.129-172, pp.162-164f.

¹⁵⁵ *HE*, II.15, pp.190-191.

¹⁵⁶ *Samuhel*, IV.1323-1327, p.243 (p.480); *Epist. Catholicae*, Iud.124-125, 136-137, p.338 (p.246), cit. Jude 11b.

¹⁵⁷ *Epist. Catholicae*, Iud.168-175, p.339 (pp.247-248), cit. Jude 13.

most often signified idolatrous teachers.¹⁵⁸ Thus, we can interpret Rædwald's perverse teachers as East Anglian equivalents to those pagan practitioners in Essex, Northumbria, and Sussex, thereby establishing further the existence of a pagan priesthood (of sorts) in pre-Christian England.

Bede might also have had Christian or at least Christianised teachers in mind.¹⁵⁹ He identified no Christian teacher in East Anglia until Bishop Felix arrived in the kingdom in c.630.

However, it seems sensible to propose that Rædwald had returned to East Anglia with a Christian teacher, or later received one at a more opportune time. Æthelberht seems to have responded to Gregory the Great's exhortation to convert his client kingdoms. On the conversion of the East Saxon king, Sæberht, Æthelberht, who was Sæberht's uncle and overlord of his kingdom, had built a church in London, St. Paul's, to function as Mellitus' see.¹⁶⁰ Paulinus, too, was permitted to travel northward to Northumbria with his daughter Æthelburh.¹⁶¹ When listing the responsibilities of Paulinus, Bede noted first how Paulinus was charged with preventing his Christian companions from succumbing to the 'pollution of pagan society', and perhaps this exact fate befell a Christian teacher who had returned with Rædwald to East Anglia?¹⁶² It would seem curious for Æthelberht to make no provision for Christian teaching in East Anglia, for, at the least, Rædwald would have required a priest to celebrate the sacrament over the East Anglian Christian altar.¹⁶³ Von Padberg suggested that Rædwald himself conducted the sacrament, as *rex et sacerdos*, but, even were this the case,

¹⁵⁸ Jerome, *Commentarii in epistulas Pauli apostoli ad Titum et ad Philemonem*, CCSL 77C, I.694-695, p.31 (trans. Scheck, p.307) [hereafter, *Ad Titum*].

¹⁵⁹ In a letter to the Neapolitan Church, Gregory the Great had labelled their former bishop, Demetrius, as a 'perverse teacher', perhaps offering a precedent to the situation in East Anglia, *Registrum*, II.iii.5-13, p.91 (p.195).

¹⁶⁰ *HE*, II.3, pp.142-143

¹⁶¹ *ibid.*, II.9, pp.162-163.

¹⁶² *ibid.*

¹⁶³ Von Padberg, *Mission und Christianisierung*, p.253, n.103.

the king must have first learned the office from a Christian priest.¹⁶⁴ It would seem extreme to implicate one of the Roman missionaries who had set out from Rome with Augustine or Mellitus or the Frankish missionaries who, at Gregory's request, had joined the Roman party.¹⁶⁵ Roughly a century later, Boniface complained how certain deceased 'sacrilegious priests', *sacrilegi presbyteri*, in northern Gaul had, among other idolatrous observances, 'sacrificed bulls and goats to gods of the pagans [*dii paganorum*]'.¹⁶⁶ Boniface's *sacrilegi presbyteri* seem to present a clear case of religious syncretism, much more so than those *falsi presbyteri* whom Frankish councils placed as opponents of Christ but whose principal crime might have been support for the waning Merovingian powers.¹⁶⁷ Maybe there existed similar 'sacrilegious priests' in Rædwald's East Anglia (or elsewhere in conversion-era England), but the limits of the available evidence permit no firmer conclusions at present.

The burial assemblage of Mound 1 at Sutton-Hoo could support the presence of a Christian or Christianised teacher in early seventh-century East Anglia. Two baptismal spoons from Byzantium were placed in the chamber, each bearing a Greek inscription, SAULOS and PAULOS, recalling how Paul put off the old man for the new man in Christ.¹⁶⁸ The inscriptions may suggest the spoons were a baptismal gift, and, if so, this would strengthen the case that this was Rædwald's resting place since none of his sons received baptism in his lifetime. The placement of the spoons implies an individual with not inconsiderable knowledge of Christian traditions of baptism had been present when the ship was prepared for burial. Of course, the spoons might also have been placed with little regard to their

¹⁶⁴ Von Padberg, *Mission und Christianisierung*, p.254.

¹⁶⁵ Gregory, *Registrum*, VI.li.7-16, p.424 (p.438).

¹⁶⁶ Tangl 80, ls.26-3, pp.174-175 (p.122), compare Tangl 28, ls.5-7, p.51 (p.36).

¹⁶⁷ *Concilium in Austrasia habitum q.d. Germanicum A.742*, ed. Werminghoff, i.5-7, p.3 [hereafter, *Concilium Germanicum*]; *Concilium Suessionense A.744*, ed. Werminghoff, ii, p.34; Michael E. Moore, *A Sacred Kingdom: Bishops and the Rise of Frankish Kingship, 300-850* (Washington, DC, 2011), pp.222-225.

¹⁶⁸ Ephesians 4:22-24; Bruce-Mitford, *The Sutton-Hoo Ship Burial*, pp.707-709.

meaning. It is perhaps too tempting to wonder, were this indeed Rædwald's burial site, whether the king had requested his attendants to inter the spoons in order to ensure he was fit to meet both the old and new gods, mirroring the intent behind his two-altar layout in the temple.

Conclusion

Bede's idolatrous kings were holders of a spiritual office, but, as he knew from the dictates of Deuteronomy and the past example of rulers from Saul to the sons of Sæberht, the faithlessness of such rulers led to their removal from the temporal and eternal kingdom. Old Testament kings were measured by their observance to the law and, likewise, Christian kings to the Lawgiver. Bede placed particular importance on the king's choice of consorts and ministers, who, perhaps more than all others, might incline the religious persuasion of their liege. He condemned the influence of foreign consorts, and, more broadly, pagan marriage customs in England. Yet, Bede provided little sense that such crimes were common in his day, even if the matter was raised in other ecclesiastical literature. Just as Satan cast his darts at the Church, wicked ministers opposed Christ's teachers. Bede reported the presence of several such individuals from conversion-era England, suggesting he possessed reasonable information as to the role of idolatrous practitioners in the seventh century. His silence over whether similar ministers were known in eighth-century England is a strong indicator that whatever pagan priesthood had existed in the past had since vanished or was at least restricted to rural parts where there remained a need for teachers to consolidate the Christian faith.

Bede's Rædwald stands out among his English kings, prominent within the landscape of the *Historia*. The king's inclusion was much more than a prop to Edwin's conversion. Instead, his character and the other East Anglian *dramatis personae* seem to touch on a motif so central to Bede's *Historia* – the contrast between pagan and Christian ideals (in this case, relating to kingship) and the varied promises held in each respective religion. Rædwald the short-lived subject of Christ was a contradiction in honour, his promises to Edwin and Christ, meaningless. The East Anglian queen, a foreign consort, exposed further the inconsistencies behind the perception of honour in English kingship. Bede positioned her as persecutor of Christian faith, but made her culpable for the later conversion of East Anglia under Eorpwold. Thus, the Rædwald episodes present an example of dramatic irony in early English literature. Bede saw Rædwald's 'perverse teachers' as one and the same as the ministers of Satan, though, whether these were once ministers of Christ, remains unclear. Foreign consort and perverse teachers combined to seduce Rædwald into renouncing his renouncement of East Anglia's pantheon, meaning this king's 'last state was worse than his first'.

It might seem overly critical to consider Rædwald a failure of the Gregorian mission. However, as we will see in the next chapter, the presumably limited catechesis that was offered to Rædwald prefigured Bede's personal sense of the need to reform the instruction of converts or pseudo-Christians who retained idolatrous belief in eighth-century England. Perhaps, in Rædwald's temple, we glimpse Bede's frustration with the Gregorian concession over 'well-built *fana*', for, of course, Rædwald would have found it harder to implement a two-altar solution had his temple been 'immediately and thoroughly destroyed.' Nor should we overlook the relevance of Rædwald and other idolatrous English kings for Ceolwulf, who would be reminded in Bede's narrative that kings who neglected to observe Christ and serve his Church would forfeit the insignia of the temporal and eternal kingdom. While our study of

Rædwald has suggested that there were no formal examples of pagan kings, queens, or organised priesthood in eighth-century England, Bede's treatment of the East Anglian king offers some confirmation of the longstanding issue with instructing converts that was carried over into his lifetime. This will be explored in our subsequent and final chapter: Bede's contemporary idolaters.

Chapter Six: Contemporary idolaters

One late medieval legend of how Bede came to receive his title *Venerabilis* saw Bede tricked into entering an empty valley. Finding nothing to teach except the stones, Bede preached regardless, and, as he concluded his homily, ‘the stones cried out in loud voice, *Amen, Venerabilis Pater*.’¹ The legend is less fanciful than it first seems – whoever created it at least knew Bede’s favoured expression when closing his addresses was *per omnia saecula saeculorum* (possibly following Gregory the Great’s example).² These represent the words of the presiding minister to newly-baptised Christians and perhaps then Bede hoped those contemplating his message would remember baptismal promises made to the everlasting God.³ We should note, too, Bede’s interest in the preaching of Christian teachers to ‘stones’, *lapides*, that is, idolaters, who in at least two passages of exegesis he described as possessing hard hearts.⁴ The legend creator surely took inspiration from Christ’s rebuke of the Pharisees at Luke 19:36-40, occurring just after Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem on a colt. Urging Jesus to silence his disciples, who now proclaimed Christ as King, the Pharisees were told in response, “I say to you, that if these shall hold their peace, the stones will cry out [*lapides clamabunt*]!”⁵ Commenting of this same Scriptural passage in his *In Lucam*, Bede read the ‘stones’ as ‘Gentiles’, ‘once without faith and hard of heart’, but now, from the Incarnation,

¹ *Nova Legenda Anglie*, ed. Horstman, vol. 1, p.111, ls.10-23, cit. in David Rollason, ‘The Cult of Bede’, *Cambridge Companion to Bede*, pp.193-200, p.195.

² A remarkable forty-two of Bede’s circulated homilies end with this expression.

³ Michel Andrieu, *Les Ordines Romani du Haut Moyen Age*, 5 vols. (Louvain, 1931-1956), vol. 2, pp.417-447, pp.437, 440.

⁴ *Lucas*, I.2307-2319, pp.77-78 (pp.191-192), quot. Gregory, *Hom.Euangelia*, XX.ix.167-179, p.160 (p.41) [em.cit.]; *Lucas*, V.2013-2020, p.346 (p.545), quot. Romans 11:25-26. As one eighth-century Irish commentator who cited the second of these passages noted, Gentiles could also be seen as stones since they worshipped this same matter, cf. Anonymus, *Commentarius in Lucam*, CCSL 108C, xix.73-74, p.94 [em.cit.]. For ‘stony hearts’ in other early English Christian writings, see Sarah Foot, “‘Approaching the stony and barren hearts of the pagans’: The place of catechesis in the Anglo-Saxon missions’, *Rooted and Grounded: Faith Formation and the Christian Tradition*, ed. Steven Croft (Norwich, 2019), pp.86-103, p.86f.

⁵ Compare Isaiah 40:4a, “Every valley shall exalt”.

their ‘stony heart’, *lapideum cor*, had been replaced with one that enabled them to ‘believe, praise, and know their God and Creator.’⁶

Bede’s writings indicate his knowledge that there remained ‘stones’ in his day, both internal and external to England. From 678, the converted English turned converters when a storm deposited Wilfrid in *Frisia Citerior*, inaugurating, in turn, the English missions to the German tribes. Bede identified these as ‘Frisians, Rugians, Danes, Huns, Old Saxons, and *Boruhtware* [*Bructeri*]’, in addition to ‘many other nations in the same land’, describing them as pagans who possessed no prior knowledge of Christ.⁷ He, like Aldhelm before him, believed these tribes estranged kinsmen of the English – separated by the North Sea, and, more profoundly, competing faiths.⁸ While English missionaries evangelised the northern part of the European continent, to the south west, the Visigoths in Iberia were overrun by the pagan tribe that Bede called ‘Saracens’, *Sarraceni*, but who were in fact Arab Muslims in coalition with, among others, the Berbers. By the time that Bede began Book Three of *In Samuhelem*, c.715, word had reached him that the Saracens had seized Iberia and much of Septimania, and now penetrated into northern France to the terror of its Christian population. His wider writings reveal a profound concern at this new threat; nonetheless, he expressed more than once his hope that this people would come to faith in the true God. Together, German and Saracen idolaters must cast out their idols, fulfilling the prophecies in the Old Testament and partaking in the apostolic proclamation that was first voiced in Jerusalem, “Christ is Lord”.⁹

⁶ Lucas, V.2013-2020, p.346 (p.545), quot. Romans 11:25-26; compare Ezekiel 11:19, 36:26; Luke 3:8; Augustine, *Sermo CXXI*, in *Augustin d’Hippone: Sermons Pour la Pâque*, SC 116, iii, pp.226-229 (trans. Hill, p.235); ps.Jerome, *Expositio quatuor euangeliorum*, PL 30, col.576A.

⁷ *HE*, V.9, pp.476-477.

⁸ *ibid.*, compare Aldhelm, *Epistola ad Acircium*, ed. Ehwald, cxlii, ls.5, p.202 (trans. Herren, p.45). See James T. Palmer, ‘Beyond Frankish Authority? Frisia and Saxony between the Anglo-Saxons and Carolingians’, *Anglo-Saxon England and the Continent*, ed. Hans Sauer et al. (Tempe, AZ, 2011), pp.139-162, pp.139f, 152-153; John-Henry Clay, *In the Shadow of Death: Saint Boniface and the Conversion of Hessa, 721-54* (Turnhout, 2010), pp.269-270.

⁹ Acts 2:36, compare 10:36b.

His inspiration was Christ's Commission, summarised in Bede's *Expositio Actuum*, 'the fame of the Gospel must spread ... to the bounds of Judaea, and from there on to the neighbouring people of Samaria, and finally through the farthest borders of the world.'¹⁰

Bede wrote less about the English missions to Germany or the need to evangelise the Saracens than he did about his concerns with the Christian faith in eighth-century England. The English, residents of one remote corner of the world, had received Christ, but Bede's writings indicate his sense that some of his compatriots had since become lapsed in their faith. We have already noted Bede's concern with scholars and teachers who overindulged in secular literature or others in English society who enjoyed pagan tales. More worrisome to Bede were those individuals in England who he claimed had forsaken the renunciation made as part of their baptismal vows in order to return to idolatrous belief and observance. In response to these extant English idolaters, Bede called for reforms in English pastoral care, in particular, improved standards of catechesis and increased numbers of teachers. Thus, the common cure for all Bede's idolaters, whatever their tribe, was the preaching that effected conversion and prevented reversion.

Sowers of words – preaching to pagans

For Bede, preaching was the primary means of Christian conversion and prevention of reversion.¹¹ Thirteen instances of the verb to preach, *praedicare*, occur in his narration of the English missions in the *Historia*, while he frequently called for an increase in the number and standard of Christian teachers in England.¹² Here, Bede followed the order of Scripture and

¹⁰ Acts 1:8, quot. with comment in *Exp.Actuum*, i.75-81, p.8 (p.12); compare Romans 10:14-15.

¹¹ Ian N. Wood, 'What is a Mission?', *Converting the Isles I*, pp.135-156, pp.135-136f.

¹² *HE*, V.9-11, 19, pp.478-481, 484-487, 522-523.

those later teachers who had echoed Christ's first proclamation, "Repent, and believe the gospel."¹³ The significance of preaching to Bede is shown further in the fact that he lies only second to Thomas Aquinas in the Brepols' Latin Writers Database for sentences including the expression *praedicare gentibus*. Like Aquinas, Bede was certain that good preaching involved making the Gospel proclamation accessible to listeners. In the thesis Introduction, we noted how Bede conceived of the entire body of Scripture as the immense depths of the sea which were released in Christ.¹⁴ He explored an extension to this theme in his commentary *In Abacuc*, written to 'a dearly beloved sister in Christ', perhaps sometime after c.716.¹⁵ Reading Habakkuk 3:10, "Sprinkling waters on its ways, the deep gave forth its voice from the full extent of its envisioning", Bede explained how this verse was fulfilled by 'holy teachers' who possessed the depths of truth in their hearts but sprinkled this on listeners, that is, these 'outwardly exercise the ministry of the word for their hearers, revealing gradually and partially, according to the capacity of the weak, the insights, both many and rich, that they themselves inwardly possess.'¹⁶

In extolling accessible teaching, Bede took inspiration from the earliest Christian preachers. When Peter spoke before the Jews in Jerusalem, he called Christ "Jesus of Nazareth" (Matthew 2:23) since, Bede explained, it situated Christ in Messianic literature that was familiar to Jewish listeners.¹⁷ Thus, preachers to Jews were characterised as 'reapers', *messores*, since these collected souls who had been nourished in the Old Testament; while, in

¹³ Mark 1:14-15. See *Marcus*, I.348-354, p.446, cit. Augustine, *Sermo CCCLIIa*, ed. Dolbeau, ls.30-37, p.314 [em.cit.].

¹⁴ See 'Introduction', p.10, n.47 and n.48.

¹⁵ *Abacuc*, ls.1-2, p.381 (p.65); Brown and Biggs, *Fascicles*, vol. 2, pp.68-69.

¹⁶ *Abacuc*, ls.412-416, pp.395-396 (p.81).

¹⁷ Acts 2:22-24; *Exp.Actuum*, ii.152-163, p.20 (pp.33-34), quot. Psalm 15(16):10b; see also Acts 3:13, cf. *Retract.Actus*, iii.13-20, p.119 [em.cit.]. Bede's lesson relied on Jerome's explanation that the 'flower' from Isaiah 11:1, "a rod will come forth out of the root of Jesse, a flower will rise from his root", could be read as the Hebrew *nezer*, 'bud', thereby permitting the Messianic interpretation that Christ resulted from David's line. See Jerome, *Esaias*, IV.xi.1/3.6-26, p.147 [em.cit.]; *Homelia* i.6, ls.90-102, p.39 (p.55), cit. Jerome, *Nom.Hebraica*, ls.24, 27, p.137.

contrast, preachers to Gentiles were ‘irrigators’, *rigatores*, watering a seedbed ‘uncultivated by the preaching of the prophets.’¹⁸ In *Expositio Actuum*, Bede highlighted two sermons from Acts – Peter to the centurion Cornelius (10:33-43) and Paul to the Athenians (17:22-31) – that modelled how Christ should be taught to Gentiles.¹⁹ For Bede, Cornelius stood as a figure for all Gentiles who possessed an existing, humble belief but were in need of Christian instruction, that is, the office of catechesis, which Peter had conducted when teaching Cornelius and his household the creed.²⁰ Bede extolled this model elsewhere in his writings, perhaps thinking it relevant of those in England who, having learned something of Christ, required better instruction in order to live as true Christians. On the other hand, preachers to German or Saracen idolaters would find no better example than Paul’s sermon to the Athenians. Fleeing Jewish persecution in Thessalonica, Paul travelled southward to Athens, where, “Seeing the whole city given to idolatry”, he began to debate with its citizens in the marketplace.²¹ Listening to Paul were certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, who remarked, “What is it, that this ‘word sower’ would say?”²² Bede knew enough Greek in c.709 to translate *σπερμολόγος* as *seminiuerbius*, ‘word sower’, but perhaps missed the pejorative sense intended against Paul, ‘babbler’.²³ In Athens, other hearers invited Paul to explain this “new teaching” at the Areopagus, a place that Bede through Augustine knew as ‘the meeting-place of Mars [Greek Ares].’²⁴

¹⁸ *Samuhel*, II.1383-1389, p.101 (p.262) [em.cit.], compare *Exp.Actuum*, viii.56-57, p.41 (p.81).

¹⁹ *Exp.Actuum*, ii.163-166, p.20 (p.34), compare *Cant.Canticorum*, II.iii.4-32, pp.230-231 (pp.88-89) [em.cit.]. Citing the example of Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory the Great had similarly emphasised the need for preaching that was tailored to listeners, cf. Gregory, *Regula pastoralis*, SC 382, III, *prol.*, pp.258-261 [em.cit.].

²⁰ *Exp.Actuum*, x.152-159, pp.53-54 (p.102).

²¹ Acts 17:13-34.

²² Acts 17:18a.

²³ *Exp.Actuum*, xvii.26-27, p.71 (p.142), cit. Acts 17:18b, Luke 8:11b. Bede’s later study of this passage shows that he came to realise the pejorative sense here, *Retract.Actus*, xvii.11-14, pp.152-153, quot. Augustine, *Sermo* CL, in ‘Le sermon 150 de saint Augustin’, ed. Elfassi, i, p.39 (trans. Hill, p.30).

²⁴ Acts 17:19-21; Bede, *Nomina regionum de actibus apostolorum*, CCSL 121, II.49-50, p.168, cit. Augustine, *DCD*, XVIII.xi.1-21, pp.600-601 (pp.288-289).

On the Areopagus, Paul ‘the word sower’ preached Christ with cultural references to Athenian material culture – the idol to “THE UNKNOWN GOD” – and Greek poetry – Epimenides (c.600-c.500 BC), and Aratus (c.315-c.240 BC).²⁵ Paul’s message won several converts, among them, the Epicurean philosopher Dionysius the Areopagite, whom Bede thought later became the Bishop of Corinth.²⁶ Here, we see how Paul influenced Bede’s second merit for noble teachers who employ secular literature (the countering of pagan error).²⁷ Bede himself observed that Paul’s sermon warranted ‘careful examination’, and in *Expositio Actuum* he listed its ‘series of points’ for his reader.²⁸ These he supplemented with several reflections, partly his own, but mostly taken from Ambrose’s reflections on the same passage as found in the Bishop of Milan’s *Expositio Lucam*.²⁹

Paul’s first point: The ‘one God’ is originator and sustainer of all. He made mortals as his offspring (vv.24a, 28).³⁰

Bede’s reflection: Christians should love God because of his Creation and kindred relationship.³¹

Paul’s second point: No reason exists for idols,³² since:

- i. The ‘Creator’ and ‘Lord’ cannot be enclosed in ‘temples of stone [*templa saxea*]’ (v.24).³³

²⁵ ‘He [Paul] is rightly called a *sower of words* ... for the seed was the word of God’, *Exp.Actuum*, xvii.26-27, p.71 (p.142), cit. Acts 17:18b, Luke 8:11b; see also Acts 17:23, 28. Bede knew the verse that Paul had quoted from Aratus’ *Phaenomena* (‘For we are also his offspring’), perhaps through Jerome’s *Ad Titum*, cf. *Exp.Actuum*, xvii.86-88, p.73 (pp.144-145), possibly cit. Jerome, *Ad Titum*, I.651-657, pp.29-30 (pp.304-305), in turn quot. Aratus, *Phaenomena*, LCL 129, ls.5, pp.206-207.

²⁶ Acts 17:34; *Exp.Actuum*, xvii.93-97, pp.73-74 (p.145).

²⁷ See ‘Chapter Four: Pagan thought’, pp.161-162.

²⁸ *Exp.Actuum*, xvii.37-38, p.72 (p.142).

²⁹ *ibid.*, ls.37-59 (pp.142-143) [hereafter, until n.41, *EA*]; cf. Ambrose, *Exp.Lucam*, CCSL 14, VI.1120-1176, pp.211-213, especially ls.1123-1137, 1139-1159 (trans. Ní Riain, pp.188-190) [hereafter, until n.41, *EL*].

³⁰ *EA*, ls.38-40 [= *EL*, ls.1123-1125].

³¹ *EA*, ls.40-42 [= *EL*, ls.1125-1127].

³² *EA*, ls.42-43 [= *EL*, ls.1127-1128].

³³ *EA*, ls.43-44. Bede’s ‘stone temples’ were not copied from Ambrose, who had written instead about idols made from ‘gold, silver, or wood’. Cf. *EL*, ls.1128-1129, ls.1146-1147.

- ii. The ‘Bestower of all blessings’ has no need of ‘the blood of victims [*sanguis uictimarum*]’, i.e., sacrifice (v.25).³⁴
- iii. The ‘Creator and Ruler of all men’ cannot be created by mortals (v.25).³⁵
- iv. God made mortals in his image (i.e. created with the capacity for reason); therefore he should not be valued as metal (v.29).³⁶

Paul’s third point: Repentance serves the remedy for pagan error (v.30).³⁷

Bede’s reflection: Had Paul begun by opposing idol worship, his Gentile listeners would have rejected him.³⁸

Paul’s fourth point: Salvation comes through Christ alone.³⁹

Bede’s reflection: Pagans find it easier to believe first in Christ the man, so Paul applied the term *uir*, ‘man’, rather than *deus*, ‘God’, of Christ (v.31), thereafter revealing by his miracles performed in the flesh that Christ was more than a man.⁴⁰ Again, Paul taught that Christ conquered death in the flesh, showing that he was more than a man, he was God.⁴¹

In Paul’s preaching, Bede found a pertinent example for English teachers.⁴² The expert in the Old Testament had cited Greek poets instead of ‘Moses or Isaiah’, thus, ‘from the falsehoods of those to whom they (the Athenians) could not object, he confirmed his own truths.’⁴³ Bede continued, ‘Surely it is the mark of great knowledge to give fellow servants their fare at the proper time, and to account for the particular individuals who are one’s listeners’.⁴⁴

³⁴ *EA*, ls.44-45. Bede borrowed this title from Cassiodorus, *Exp.Psalmodum*, XXX.20.384, p.270 (vol. 1, p.300). Since Paul nowhere mentioned sacrificial victims in Acts 17, merely that God required ‘no service from men’s hands’, Bede’s comment here might refer to English pagan rites. See ‘Chapter One: Strange gods’, p.53, and this chapter, pp.238-240.

³⁵ *EA*, ls.45-46, cit. Psalm 113(115):12(4)/134(135):15; compare *EL*, ls.1144-1147.

³⁶ *EA*, ls.47-48.

³⁷ *EA*, ls.48-49 [= *EL*, ls.1148].

³⁸ *EA*, ls.49-50 [= *EL*, ls.1139-1141].

³⁹ *EA*, ls.50-52 [= *EL*, ls.1129-1131].

⁴⁰ *EA*, ls.52-54 [= *EL*, ls.1148-1150, 1131-1132]. Anna Luiselli Fadda has noted how the vernacular terms for the Christian God, in particular, *hlaford*, *frea*, *dryhten*, and *theoden*, often express specific characteristics. Here, *theoden*, ‘lord of the *theod*, chief of the same descent or tribal communities’, seems relevant to Bede’s encouragement that preachers to pagans emphasise ‘Christ “the man”’, *idem*, ‘The Vernacular and Propagation of the Faith in Anglo-Saxon Missionary Activity’, *Missions and Missionaries*, ed. Pieter N. Holtrop and Hugh McLeod, (Woodbridge, 2000), pp.1-15, pp.12-14.

⁴¹ *EA*, ls.54-57 [= *EL*, ls.1148-1150, 1132-1135].

⁴² In c.723-724, Bishop Daniel produced his own strategy for pagan conversion in response to a request from the West Saxon missionary Boniface, see Tangl 23, ls.5-10, pp.39-41 (pp.26-28). His steps resemble some of Bede’s comments about Paul’s sermon in Athens; however, there remain several notable differences. For instance, Daniel’s point that Boniface should present the materialist argument that Christians were, in essence, better off than their heathen counterparts (ls.3-12, p.40), has little precedent in Bede (but see Coifi’s indignant protest against Northumbria’s pantheon, *HE*, II.13, pp.182-183). For discussion of strategies of pagan conversion, see Wood, *Missionary Life*, p.256f.

⁴³ *Exp.Actuum*, xvii.84-88, p.73 (pp.144-145).

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, xvii.88-89, p.73 (p.145). Martin cited Proverbs 31:15 here, but the reference must surely be to Matthew 24:45-46.

Elsewhere, we have seen Bede's reluctance to endorse the Gregorian concessions over certain idolatrous observances in English converts. Commenting on Paul's sermon, Bede pointed out that repentance was the sole means of conversion, meaning, a turning from idolatrous observance towards Christ. This is complemented, not contradicted, in Bede's remark, made subsequent to Paul's emphasis on 'Christ the man': 'What matter is the order of belief? Perfection is not sought from the start, but from beginnings one comes to perfection.'⁴⁵ The order of faith mattered less than its existence, but Bede still felt that converts who retained part of their idolatrous belief could not be considered true Christians. We shall now explore how, in the case of the German and Saracen idolater, Bede recognised the need for preachers to supplant traditional beliefs with the Gospel.

Germans

In 678, Bishop Wilfrid became the first English 'sower' in Germany. Driven from his York see by King Ecgfrith, Wilfrid embarked for a port in northern France, and on to Rome where he might plead his case before Pope Agatho. However, a west wind blew him off-course to Frisia, where Wilfrid preached Christ to the pagan King Aldgisl and his people, an event that Stephen in *Vita Wilfridi*, c.712-714, Bede, and other writers hailed as inaugurating the English missions to the continent.⁴⁶ Bede named the wind that bore Wilfrid to Frisia as Favonius (the Roman god for the west cardinal wind), thus, from Bede's study of winds and seasons, we can propose that Wilfrid departed England soon after 8th February 678, a time

⁴⁵ As Bede noted a few lines earlier, 'faith grows little by little', *Exp. Actuum*, xvii.57-59, 55-56, p.72 (p.143), quot. Ambrose, *Exp. Lucam*, VI.1156-1159, 1134 pp.211-212 (p.188-1899).

⁴⁶ *HE*, V.19, pp.522-523; James T. Palmer, 'Wilfrid and the Frisians', *Wilfrid: Abbot, Bishop, Saint. Papers from the 1300th Anniversary Conferences*, ed. N.J. Higham (Donington, 2013), pp.231-242.

when, as Bede's source Pliny had explained, 'spring opens the sea to voyagers.'⁴⁷ When discussing the English calendar, Bede revealed how the English preferred to sail over July and August, both called '*Litha*, meaning "gentle" or "navigable"'.⁴⁸ However, Wilfrid's trip was no pleasure cruise. The perils he faced in England (which Stephen claimed had followed him to Europe) suggest that the bishop had indeed left England as soon as the winds permitted.⁴⁹ In Frisia, Bede claimed that Wilfrid converted 'thousands' of Frisians, though, unlike Stephen, never included King Aldgisl among their number.⁵⁰ Walter Goffart suggested Bede sought to undermine Stephen and, in turn, Wilfrid, but Palmer thinks otherwise.⁵¹ Perhaps a position somewhere in-between is most sensible. While Bede had less love for Wilfrid than other bishops, he would not have criticised the exile here, who, from his perspective, had laid an evangelistic path for other Englishmen to follow.

Bede made no criticism either of Wilfrid's choice to leave Frisia and his converts for Strasbourg, but he recognised the loss of this newest flock. For the next English evangelist to land in Frisia was Wihthberht, an exile in Ireland, who came to Frisia in c.680 where Bede reported that he met resistance from the pagan King Radbod (d.719), presumably Aldgisl's successor.⁵² Like Gregory the Great, Bede saw teachers as guard dogs who watched over their master's household (the Church).⁵³ Similar to when Paulinus left Northumbria, Bede probably concluded that without Wilfrid's presence, the Frisians reverted to paganism.

⁴⁷ *DNR*, xxvii.13-14, p.218 (p.91), cit. Isidore, *DNR*, xxxvii.4.19-21, p.297 (pp.163-164); *DTR*, xxxv.43, p.393 (p.101), cit. Pliny, *NH*, II.xlvii.122, LCL 330, pp.262-263. See also *Marcus*, IV.256-261, p.601, quot. Jerome, *Matheus*, IV.574-580, p.231 (p.277).

⁴⁸ *DTR*, xv.43-47, p.331 (p.54).

⁴⁹ *VW*, xxiv-xxv, xxvii, pp.48-55.

⁵⁰ *HE*, V.19, pp.522-523, compare *VW*, xxvii-xxviii, pp.52-55; John Hines, 'Religion and Conversion Amongst the Frisians', *Frisians of the Early Middle Ages*, ed. John Hines and Nelleke IJssennagger-van der Pluijm (Woodbridge, 2021), pp.311-337, pp.319-321.

⁵¹ Walter Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550-800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Guildford, 1988; rpt. Notre Dame, IN, 2005), pp.317-318, 320; Palmer, 'Wilfrid and the Frisians', pp.233-234, 236.

⁵² *HE*, V.9, pp.478-481.

⁵³ *Tobias*, vi.5-8, p.8 (p.64), cit. Tobit 6:1; xi.1-20, p.15 (pp.73-74), cit. Tobit 11:9. Compare Gregory, *Moralia in Iob*, XX.vi.11-46, pp.1014-1015 [em.cit.]; *idem*, *Hom.Euangelia*, XL.i.35-45, p.395 (p.372).

Wihthberht returned to Ireland after two fruitless years, but others in the Hiberno-Anglo tradition of *peregrinatio* continued to set out for Germany.⁵⁴ One of these, Egbert, a priest at Rath Melsigí in Carlow, wished ‘to deliver from Satan those [who] still practise pagan rites [*pagani ritus*] and bring them to Christ’; however, Bede reported that Egbert was instead sent to Iona in order to reform Irish errors.⁵⁵ Bede seems to have thought Egbert maintained responsibility for sending English exiles in Ireland to Germany, including Willibrord, a onetime pupil of Wilfrid at Ripon, who in 690 sailed to Frisia with eleven companions.⁵⁶

Bede saw Willibrord as having completed Wilfrid’s *opus euangelicum*, but said less of his personal evangelism than his organisation of the mission.⁵⁷ He seems to have known more about the wider missions than he told us, perhaps from those contacts whom he reported had crossed the North Sea between Frisia and Northumbria in his lifetime.⁵⁸ Bede might well have been reluctant to share the serious setbacks that Willibrord faced until after 719. From Willibrord’s biographer, Alcuin, we learn that Willibrord received support from Pippin II of Herstal (d.714), who had recently captured *Frisia Citerior* from Radbod, but that his evangelism suffered severe setbacks when Radbod regained his territories, that is, until 719, when Charles Martel (d.741), Pippin’s heir, consolidated Frankish overlordship over *Frisia Citerior* and other lands to the east.⁵⁹ Wood christened the period after 719 as ‘the highpoint of Willibrord’s missionary activity’, at a time when Boniface, the West Saxon missionary who later became known as ‘the Apostle to the Frisians’ (but whom Bede never mentioned)

⁵⁴ *HE*, V.9, pp.478-481.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, pp.474-477.

⁵⁶ For the intriguing proposal that it was Wilfrid, not Egbert, who influenced Willibrord, see Claudia Benigni, ‘La missione anglo-sassone in Frisia del 690: elementi di novità in una storia di incontri’, *Bullettino dell’Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo* 118 (2016), pp.1-48, pp.32-34.

⁵⁷ *DTR*, lxvi.1941-1945, p.529 (p.233); *HE*, V.19, pp.522-523; compare *VW*, xxvi, pp.52-53.

⁵⁸ *VSC*, xlv, pp.296-299.

⁵⁹ Alcuin, *Vita Willibrordi archiepiscopi Traiectensis*, ed. Levison, v-xiii, pp.119-127 [hereafter, *Vita Willibrordi*].

returned to reinforce the mission.⁶⁰ Bede simply reported that Willibrord ‘in a short time converted many from idolatry to faith in Christ’, preferring to focus on how, with Pippin’s patronage, Willibrord established churches and monasteries, won protections for preachers and rewards for converts, and personally selected bishops from among his original eleven companions.⁶¹ Bede’s sense that kings and bishops should work together in the *ministerium* seems explicit here, perhaps encouraging his later pressure of Ecgberht to implement reforms in Northumbria with support from King Ceolwulf.

Bede’s report of the Hewald’s martyrdom offers the most extensive interaction between English evangelist and German pagan in the *Historia*. These priests in Irish exile, known as Black Hewald and White Hewald, had accompanied Willibrord to Frisia but later undertook a separate mission to the Old Saxons in the 690s.⁶² The Old Saxons, however, became fearful that the Hewalds would turn their leader ‘from their gods and bring him to a new faith ... and so gradually the whole land would be compelled to change its old religion for a new one.’⁶³ The Hewalds were murdered, an event commemorated on October 3rd in Bede’s *Martyrologium*, which, similar to the report in the *Historia*, connected the martyrdom as occurring in response to the preaching of the Hewalds.⁶⁴ Black Hewald could have preached what turned out to be the fatal message, since Bede considered him ‘more learned in Scripture’. This might be further implied in his report that, while White Hewald was ‘slain quickly’, Black Hewald ‘was put to lingering torture ... torn limb from limb in horrible fashion’.⁶⁵ As Bede reported of Alban and other martyrs, the Hewald’s deaths precipitated

⁶⁰ Ian N. Wood, ‘Franks and Frisians’, *Frisians of the Early Middle Ages*, pp.203-222, pp.213-214.

⁶¹ *HE*, V.10, pp.480-481.

⁶² *ibid.*, pp.480-485.

⁶³ *ibid.*, pp.482-483.

⁶⁴ Bede, *Martyrologium*, ed. Quentin, pp.105-106 (trans. Lifshitz, p.192), compare *HE*, V.10, pp.482-483. See Alan Thacker, ‘Bede and His Martyrology’, *Listen, O Isles*, pp.126-141, pp.129-130.

⁶⁵ *HE*, V.10, pp.480-483.

signs that led to an increase in converts in the place of persecution and neighbouring lands.⁶⁶

Still, Bede observed the continued Old Saxon resistance to other English evangelists.

Swithberht, another of Willibrord's original companions, found initial success when he took some of the brothers to evangelise the *Bructeri* tribe, but an Old Saxon invasion scattered converts and converters alike with Swithberht retreating westward where he would found the monastery at Kaiserwerth.⁶⁷

To conclude, we might reconsider Bede's English 'sowers' through Christ's parable of the cast seed.⁶⁸ In his exegesis of this parable in *In Lucam* and *In Marcum*, Bede explained Christ's words as a figure for evangelism, and the motif enables a reasonable evaluation of what Bede might have seen as the success or failure of each evangelist.⁶⁹ The seed cast on the wayside, where feet trample and birds gorge, signified the devil's opposition to the Gospel, recalling Wihthberht's struggles in Frisia and the Hewalds' martyrdom in Old Saxony.⁷⁰ Here, we might wonder whether the Scriptural knowledge of these evangelists was married with words that were sensitive to their pagan German listener. Certainly, the suspicion of the Old Saxons could suggest that the Hewalds had been too hasty in their condemnation of idol worship.⁷¹ The seed falling on stony ground sprung up rapidly but, possessing too little soil, withered in the elements – this, Bede noted, a symbol of those with 'a hard and ungovernable heart, and one penetrated by no ploughshare of the truth faith, "a rock"'.⁷² Wilfrid converted

⁶⁶ *HE*, I.7, pp.28-35, V.10, pp.482-485, compare *Exp.Actuum*, viii.1-3, p.39 (p.79) [em.cit.].

⁶⁷ *HE*, V.11, pp.484-487.

⁶⁸ "He that sows, sows the word", Mark 4:14, compare Luke 8:11b, "The seed is the word of God"; see *Lucas*, III.323-450, pp.174-177 (pp.318-322) [em.cit.].

⁶⁹ For similar examples in the *Historia*, see *HE*, IV.13, pp.372-375, IV.16, pp.382-383.

⁷⁰ Matthew 13:19; Luke 8:5, 12; *Lucas*, III.325-333, 382-386, pp.174-175 (pp.318, 320); compare Mark 4:4, 15; *Marcus*, I.1704-1716, pp.480-481; *HE*, V.9, pp.478-481.

⁷¹ When Boniface began his mission to Germany, Gregory II exhorted him to '...pour into their untaught minds the preaching of both Old and New Testament in the spirit of virtue and love and sobriety and with reasoning suited to their understanding', Tangl 12, ls.2-4, p.18 (p.11).

⁷² Matthew 13:20-21; Luke 8:6, 13; *Lucas*, III.335-336, 386-390 pp.174-175 (pp.318, 320); *Marcus*, I.1735-1747, 1780-1784, pp.481-482, cit. Mark 4:5-6, 16-17.

his ‘thousands’ in Frisia and Swithberht ‘many’ among the *Bructeri* but neither mission bore lasting fruit, the harvest lost to reversion and pagan counter-conversion.⁷³ The missions to Germany provide no obvious parallel to the seed that became choked among thorns; however, we will return to this image later for its relevance to the faith in Bede’s England.⁷⁴ In the seed that fell on good soil, which Bede saw as symbolising the seed which faithfully ‘bears its seed to harvest-time’, we can imagine Willibrord sowing the word in Frisia, as Bede celebrated of this sower in his *Chronica maiora*, ‘even now ... he achieves in that place innumerable daily losses for the devil and gains for the Christian faith.’⁷⁵

Saracens

Bede’s Saracens have been written about elsewhere, but his hope that this idolatrous tribe would be converted to Christ has apparently been overlooked.⁷⁶ For Bede, the Saracens were descended from Ishmael, the son of Abraham through his wife Sarah’s Egyptian handmaid, Hagar, of whom the angel prophesied: “He shall be a wild man: his hand will be against all men, and all men’s hands against him”.⁷⁷ When Sarah later bore Isaac, she insisted that Abraham, “Cast out the bondwoman and her son”.⁷⁸ Hagar and Ishmael were sent out into the wilderness; however, God fulfilled his earlier promise to Hagar and made Ishmael into “a great nation”.⁷⁹ Following Jerome, Bede understood Ishmael’s descendants were the

⁷³ *HE*, V.11, pp.484-487.

⁷⁴ Luke 8:7, 14. See ‘Coda: after Bede’, p.254ff.

⁷⁵ Matthew 13:23; Mark 4:8, 20; Luke 8:8a, 15; cf. *Lucas*, III.354-356, 422-425 [=*Marcus*, I.1828-1832, pp.483-484], pp.174-176 (pp.319, 321); *DTR*, lxvi.1943-1945, p.529 (p.233); *HE*, V.11, pp.486-487.

⁷⁶ J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede’s Europe*, JL (1962), pp.4-7; R.W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA, 1962), pp.16-18; John V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (Chichester, 2002), pp.72-78; Katharine Scarfe Beckett, *Anglo-Saxon Perceptions of the Islamic World* (Cambridge, 2003), pp.123-138; John V. Tolan, “‘A wild man, whose hand will be against all’: Saracens and Ishmaelites in Latin Ethnographical Traditions, from Jerome to Bede”, *Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World: The West, Byzantium and the Islamic World, 300-1100*, ed. Walter Pohl et al. (London, 2012), pp.513-530; Calvin B. Kendall ‘Bede and Islam’, *Bede and the Future*, pp.93-114.

⁷⁷ Genesis 16:1-12.

⁷⁸ Genesis 21:1-10.

⁷⁹ Genesis 21:14-21.

Saracens, a fierce, warlike tribe who had once lived in the desert of Pharan and who falsified their lineage by calling themselves *Sarraceni*, ‘of Sarah’, that is, descended from Abraham and Sarah.⁸⁰

As Kendall has explained, Bede knew little of the religion that most Saracens practised = Islam.⁸¹ Instead, Bede restated Jerome’s identification of this tribe as worshippers of Lucifer and Venus, the morning and evening star.⁸² John Tolan has shown that Bede, when writing of idolatrous Saracens in *Expositio Actuum*, changed Jerome’s present tense verbs into the past.⁸³ Tolan observed further that Bede in *De locis sanctis* revised the ‘church for infidels’, *ecclesia incredulorum*, that Arculf reported the Saracens had constructed in Damascus into *basilica*.⁸⁴ From these examples, Tolan concluded that Bede thought at least some Saracens had been converted to Christianity, probably from his reading of Jerome’s *Vita Hilarionis*.⁸⁵ However, both *Expositio Actuum*, c.709, and *De locis sanctis*, pre-703, were written before the Saracens conquered Iberia in 711-712, and Bede’s final mention of the Saracens indicates his impression that the Saracens involved in this conquest were *perfidii*, ‘faithless’, presumably in their case meaning apostate Christians or unconverted pagans.⁸⁶

Bede indicated his knowledge of the Saracen threat to Europe in several works, providing, for instance, reports of their military campaigns in his *Chronica maiora*.⁸⁷ In *In Genesis*, he

⁸⁰ Jerome, *Hiezechiel*, VIII.76-80, p.335 (p.280); Isidore, *Etymologiae*, IX.ii.6-7, 57 pp.346, 351 (pp.192, 195).

⁸¹ Kendall, ‘Bede and Islam’, pp.94-95.

⁸² *Exp.Actuum*, vii.100-101, p.36 (p.73), cit. Jerome, *In Amos*, II.v.835-836, p.296 (p.360), and *idem*, *Vita Hilarionis*, SC 508, xvi.1-2, pp.256-259 (trans. White, p.102). Bede saw Lucifer as morning star and Venus as morning and evening star (Vesper), see *DTL*, iii.6-7, p.586 (p.108), cit. Isidore, *DNR* ii.10-11, p.181 (p.115), and Isidore, *Etymologiae*, V.xxxi.5, p.203 (p.127) [em.cit.]; *DTR*, viii.52-53, pp.301-302 (p.34)

⁸³ Tolan, ‘Saracens and Ishmaelites’, pp.521-522.

⁸⁴ Bede, *DLS*, xvii.5-6, p.277 (p.23), cit. Adomnán, *De locis sanctis*, CCSL 175, xviii.2, p.220; Tolan, ‘Saracens and Ishmaelites’, pp.525-526.

⁸⁵ Jerome, *Vita Hilarionis*, xvi, pp.256-259 (pp.102-103); Tolan, ‘Saracens and Ishmaelites’, pp.522-521, pp.525-526.

⁸⁶ *HE*, V.23, pp.556-557.

⁸⁷ *DTR*, lxvi.1880-1881, p.527 (p.231), cit. *LP*, lxxix.3, p.346 (p.71); *ibid.*, lxvi.1930-1933, p.529 (p.232), cit. *LP*, lxxxiv.3, p.366 (p.78); *ibid.*, lxvi.2052-2066, pp.534-535 (pp.236-237).

noted that the Saracens controlled ‘the whole breadth of Africa ... the greatest part of Asia and parts of Europe’, stating how this tribe was ‘hateful and hostile to all.’⁸⁸ We mentioned previously Bede’s record in the *Historia* of two comets appearing in 729, which he seems to have identified with Saracen raids into northern France, ‘At this time a terrible plague of Saracens ravaged Gaul with cruel bloodshed and not long afterwards they received the due reward of their perfidy in the same kingdoms.’⁸⁹ His report that ‘one comet was the forerunner of the day and the other of the night’ would place these phenomena in the skies at the same time as Lucifer and Vesper (Venus), hinting that Bede felt that eighth-century Saracens were indeed idol worshippers.⁹⁰

A passage in Bede’s *In Samuhelem* could even imply that he received news of the Saracen incursion before 716, that is, shortly after the Umayyad caliphate captured Iberia.⁹¹ Reading 1 Samuel 25:1b, “And David rose and went down into the wilderness of Pharan”, Bede saw the Christian Church in the first centuries AD putting aside Jewish teachings in order to incorporate the Gentiles, the latter understood here as Pharan’s deserts.⁹² Thereafter, Bede explored Paul’s quotation of Sarah from Genesis 21:10 (“Cast out this bondwoman, and her son”) in his letter to the Galatians. Equating Hagar and Ishmael with Jewish observance, Paul

⁸⁸ *Genesis*, IV.246-254, p.201 (p.279), cit. Genesis 16:12, and Jerome, *Hebraicae quaestiones in libro Geneseos*, 16/12.17-20, p.21 (p.49); Roger Collins, *The Arab Conquest of Spain, 710-797* (Oxford, 1989; rpt. 1994), p.28f.

⁸⁹ *HE*, V.23, pp.556-557. Roger Collins suggested the ‘cruel bloodshed’ referred to the Muslim sack of Autun (Burgundy) in August 725. The Saracen’s ‘reward’ points to a prominent loss – once thought to have been Charles Martel’s triumph over a Muslim force near to Tours and Poitiers in 732 but now reckoned to be the earlier defeat to Eudes, Duke of Aquitaine, at Toulouse in 721, whereafter Muslim incursions into Gaul lost their momentum. Cf. Collins, *Arab Conquest*, pp.88-91; Scarfe Beckett, *Anglo-Saxon Perceptions*, pp.33-34; Ian Meadows, ‘The Arabs in Occitania’, *Aramco World* 44:2 (1993), pp.24-29. See also ‘Chapter Four: Pagan thought’, p.177.

⁹⁰ *HE*, V.23, pp.556-557.

⁹¹ *Samuhel*, IV.810-830, p.231 (p.462) [em.cit.].

⁹² Bede sustained the theme of Jewish-Gentile relations in the early Church throughout his exegesis of 1 Samuel 25:1b-19, see *Samuhel*, IV.796-815, 834-839, 931-971, 985-1062, pp.230-232, 234-237 (pp.461-463, 466-471) [em.cit.].

had urged the Galatian Church to remove Jewish observance from their worship, thus equating the latter with Hagar and Ishmael, summarised in Augustine,

Therefore, the Apostle says that we are the children of the promise according to Isaac, and thus Isaac suffered persecution from Ishmael, just as those who had begun to live spiritually suffered persecution from the carnal Jews, but in vain, since according to the Scriptures the handmaid is cast out and her son cannot be heir with the son of the free woman.⁹³

Bede reproduced Paul's sense in his exegesis of 1 Samuel 25. Furthermore, within this broader lesson, Bede included a brief but important set of remarks about the Saracens. First, he reminded readers how Pharan represented the fierce Gentiles since it had been home to Ishmael, 'from whom the Saracens took their origin.'⁹⁴ Next, Bede considered the plight of Christians who were facing persecution. His comments could have concerned the pressure for the Galatians to observe the Old Testament ceremonies; however, it seems more likely that Bede meant these as a contemporary comment on the Saracen persecution of Christians in Europe.

The son of the free woman, i.e., the people renewed by spiritual grace [Christians], trembling at his troublesome proximity [the Saracens], complains, saying: *Woe is me, that my sojourning is prolonged, I have dwelt with the inhabitants of Cedar*,⁹⁵ and so on up to the end of the psalm, words which describe in particular the Saracens, and in general all the Church's adversaries.⁹⁶

Here, Bede understood 'inhabitants of Cedar' as Saracens. Cedar was the name of Ishmael's second son and, as Bede knew from Jerome, a Saracen region.⁹⁷ Thus, 'the people renewed by spiritual grace tremble at the proximity of the inhabitants of Cedar', can be interpreted as meaning 'the Church trembles at the proximity of the Saracens'. Continuing his lesson, Bede

⁹³ Galatians 1:6-5:13a; Augustine, *Epistolae ad Galatas expositio*, ed. and trans. Plumer, xl.24, pp.196-199.

⁹⁴ *Samuhel*, IV.815-821, p.231 (p.462), cit. Genesis 21:21a.

⁹⁵ Psalm 119(120):5.

⁹⁶ *Samuhel*, IV.821-826, p.231 (p.462).

⁹⁷ Genesis 25:12-13; Song of Songs 1:4(5); *Cant. Canticorum*, I.v.214-215, p.195 (p.44).

stressed how '[these] words describe in particular the Saracens', indicating that he was indeed contemplating the contemporary presence of Saracens in Iberia and Septimania.⁹⁸ In *In Cantica Canticorum*, completed in a similar period to *In Samuhelem*, Bede repeated the notion of Saracens in Cedar, remarking further, 'Today, the Saracens are hated by everyone'.⁹⁹ The treatment of Saracens in both commentaries suggests that reports of the Saracens in Spain and Gaul were circulating Europe and had reached Bede at Wearmouth-Jarrow sometime between 712-716.¹⁰⁰

Given Bede's anxieties over the Saracen threat, it might seem curious to consider his hopes for this same people. However, we must not forget that Bede read Scripture as both an historical and prophetic book, nor neglect the interplay between these two senses in relation to Ishmael and the Saracens. Where Scripture proclaimed the coming to faith of all nations, Bede saw the inclusion of the Saracens, who, as with all peoples, must then receive Christ through the preaching of his ministers. Once more, Bede found some inspiration in Jerome, in this case, the latter's exegesis of Isaiah 42:11 and 60:6-7.¹⁰¹ As Jerome explained, these prophecies of Isaiah foretold the coming to faith of the inhabitants of Cedar, the Saracens. Bede reproduced this sense when exploring Christ coming to the Saracens in the figure of David descending into Pharan at 1 Samuel 25:1b,

But so that Christ could call to liberty also some of the sons of the bondwoman, i.e. of the people who serve this world, and make them sons of promise, like Isaac, having been put to flight by the Jews, he went down into the desert of Pharan, that is the grace of his love poured into the humbled hearts of the Gentiles.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ *Samuhel*, IV.824-826, p.231 (p.462).

⁹⁹ *Cant. Canticorum*, I.v.214-220, p.195 (p.44) [em.cit.].

¹⁰⁰ For communication between Britain and the Arab world, cf. Scarfe Beckett, *Anglo-Saxon Perceptions*, pp.44-68.

¹⁰¹ Jerome, *Esaias*, XII.xlii.10/17.59-66, p.484 (p.564), XVII.lx.6/7.12-71, pp.697-698 (pp.74-776) [em.cit.].

¹⁰² *Samuhel*, IV.826-830, p.231 (p.462), cit. Galatians 4:28.

That Bede in this passage seems to have had in mind Christian word sowers taking the Gospel to the Saracens might be shown in his similar teaching in relation to the Midianites – a neighbouring people of the Saracens. In his commentary *In Abacuc*, examining Habakkuk 3:7, “The tents of Midian will be stricken”, Bede explained, ‘Let the Midianites also be awestruck at the intimation that the interior peoples [*plebes mediterraneae*] too are to be saved’.¹⁰³ The Midianites lived among the Saracens in Pharan and were also descended from Abraham (through his second wife, Keturah).¹⁰⁴ Thus, when Bede wrote that the ‘*plebes mediterraneae* are to be saved’, he meant the interior peoples of Africa, including the Saracens, would come to faith.

Kendall felt the prospect of Saracen conversion ‘troubled Bede’, but perhaps that interpretation relies on precisely the same over-literalist reading of Isaac and Ishmael that saw the Galatian Church so encumbered with Jewish observances.¹⁰⁵ The Gentile Galatians became spiritual heirs to Abraham and Bede knew this same salvation was as open to the Ishmaelite Saracens as it had been for the warlike, idolatrous tribes who had migrated to Britain and later became the English people. In his treatment of the Saracens, we encounter hatred of their idolatrous belief and persecution of Frankish Christians, but, moreover, a hope that the true inheritance of Abraham the father of faith would be bestowed on those who had once been cast out. In this sense, Bede wished that the Saracen, together with the Midianite, Galatian, English and German, would receive the affirmation, “You are all one in Christ Jesus.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ *Abacuc*, ll.306-324, p.392 (pp.77-78) [em.cit.]. Connolly translated *plebes mediterraneae* as ‘Mediterranean peoples’, but Bede must have meant ‘interior peoples’.

¹⁰⁴ Genesis 25:1-2.

¹⁰⁵ Kendall, ‘Introduction’ to *Bede: On Genesis*, pp.26-27; *idem*, ‘Bede and Islam’, pp.103-104.

¹⁰⁶ Galatians 3:28b; Connolly, *Bede: On Habakkuk*, p.77, n.84.

English

In the *Historia*, Bede located the last English pagans in the South Saxon and Isle of Wight kingdoms. Between 680-686, the West Saxon prince and later king, Cædwalla, himself still a pagan, conquered the South Saxons, a nation that Wilfrid had partly liberated from ‘the bonds of *paganis cultibus* [pagan worship]’, and later, crossing the Solent, Wight, which Bede told us was ‘until then entirely given up to *idolatriae* [idolatry].’¹⁰⁷ This makes Arwald, King of Wight, Bede’s last-named English pagan. Arwald’s two brothers, who escaped to the mainland but were there betrayed, baptised, and executed, represent Bede’s last-identifiable English pagans.¹⁰⁸

Bede’s report of the aftermath to the conversion of Sussex and Wight preserves some of the problems that seem evident in the wider conversion and Christianisation of England. Both territories struggled to retain a local bishop, which, in turn, implied fewer teachers and poorer standards among clergy in these parts.¹⁰⁹ Bishop Daniel, who provided Bede with information about Sussex and Wight, seems to have received oversight of these territories for much of his episcopate.¹¹⁰ Daniel’s wider correspondence with Boniface suggests the two men encountered shared challenges in their respective dioceses; indeed, the content of these letters hint at Daniel’s first-hand knowledge of idolaters in his enlarged province.¹¹¹ The presence of

¹⁰⁷ Bede’s report of the Irish monk Dícuill who with several brothers had earlier ministered fruitlessly in Sussex (‘none of the natives cared to follow their way of life or listen to their preaching’) suggests a longstanding resistance to Christianity in this part of England, *HE*, IV.13, pp.370-377, IV.15-16, pp.380-383.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, IV.16, pp.382-385.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, V.18, pp.514-517; Barbara Yorke, ‘The Jutes of Hampshire and Wight and the origins of Wessex’, *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, ed. Stephen Bassett (London, 1989), pp.84-96, p.89ff; *idem*, ‘Anglo-Saxon Gentes and Regna’, *Regna and Gentes: The Relationship between Late Antique and Early Medieval Peoples and Kingdoms in the Transformation of the Roman World*, ed. Hans-Werner Goetz et al. (Leiden, 2003), pp.381-407, pp.390-391.

¹¹⁰ *HE*, *praef.*, pp.4-5.

¹¹¹ Tangl 23, ls.5-10, pp.39-41 (pp.26-28), Tangl 63-64, pp.128-136 (pp.92-99); but see Patzold’s view that Daniel was merely a ‘mission theorist’, Steffen Patzold, ‘Wahrnehmen und Wissen Christen und „Heiden” an den Grenzen des Frankenreichs im 8. und 9. Jahrhundert’, *Das Mittelalter* 8:2 (2003), pp.83-106, pp.84, 87, compare von Padberg, *Religiöse Konfrontationen*, pp.322-327.

idolaters in eighth-century England finds support in Bede's exegesis. For, in several commentaries, Bede revealed his belief that certain English Christians had forsaken the renunciation made at their baptism and since returned to idolatrous belief and observance.¹¹² Here, we will explore two passages, one each from *In Samuhelem* and *In Regum librum*, before addressing the possible location of these idolaters in Bede's England.

Philistine livestock and bloody catechumens

In a vivid exegesis in Book Two of *In Samuhelem*, Bede raised the issue of English teachers who had failed to fully rid their catechumens of pagan belief. As a result, the baptism of these catechumens was imperfect, meaning pseudo-converts were now being incorporated into the English Church. In response, Bede urged Acca to rebuke the errant teachers responsible for this failure and ensure reinstruction for affected pseudo-converts. Earlier, we considered the first part of this exegesis when examining Bede's concern with pagan thought.¹¹³ Bede had indicated the complete lesson at 1 Samuel 14:24, explaining to readers, 'This passage instructs teachers of the truth to refrain from secular eloquence (1 Samuel 14:24-30) ... and also to sacrifice on the rock of faith those whom they are instructing, of every corruption of their former life (1 Samuel 14:31-35).'¹¹⁴ Turning to vv.31-34, we read how Israel's soldiers cut down the Philistines who fled back across the border to Philistia. The victorious Israelites fell on the Philistine baggage train, slaughtering some of the livestock for food (1 Samuel 14:31-32). But, in their fatigued state, the soldiers neglected to drain the blood of the butchered animals and consequently consumed unclean food in contravention of the Mosaic

¹¹² *Quaest.Regum*, XVI, pp.309-310 (p.116); *Samuhel*, II.1470-1520, pp.103-104 (p.265-267), ls.2254-2294, pp.122-123 (pp.295-297), IV.2010-2048, pp.259-260 (pp.503-504).

¹¹³ See 'Chapter Four: Pagan thought', p.155ff.

¹¹⁴ *Samuhel*, II.2145-2149, p.119 (pp.288-289).

Law.¹¹⁵ On hearing this news, Saul reprimanded the soldiers and ordered them to correctly butcher the remaining animals before his sight (1 Samuel 14:33-34).

In Bede's interpretation of these events, he read Israelite soldiers as English teachers and the slain Philistines and captured livestock as the converts of English teachers. But, as Bede observed, the catechumenate of these converts failed to drain their pagan life force, something he blamed on their negligent instructors.

And falling upon the spoils, they took sheep, and oxen, and calves, and slaughtered them on the ground, and the people ate them with the blood. This refers to lazy teachers [*magistri inertes*] who, just as we see today, wearied by the time-consuming task of frequent catechising slaughter through their teaching some of those whom they have by their preaching rescued from demonic errors [*errores daemonum*], indeed, from pagan rituals [*gentiles ritus*]; in this they tried to imitate him to whom it was said when living things of every species were shown to him from heaven: Slaughter and eat.¹¹⁶ But these teachers slaughter on the ground and eat with the blood, as it were, those whom they do not draw away from earthly senses and the allurements of flesh and blood, being less perfect either in their teaching or their own living and hasten to incorporate them among the members of the Church when they are still accustomed to vices and not well grounded in performing virtues, contrary to the example of the first pastor of the Church who, placed in the upper room, that is, at the highest citadel of living and teaching, was ordered to kill and eat offerings purified by God.¹¹⁷

Bede's striking pairing of blood and converts here resulted from his reading 1 Samuel 14:32 with Acts 10:9-16. In the New Testament passage, Peter experienced a vision where a sheet bearing all manner of birds and beasts descended from heaven – its purpose, to show Peter that the Gentiles were now considered 'clean' and had no need of Jewish observances but required only baptism to be incorporated within the Church.¹¹⁸ A voice exhorted Peter, "Arise, kill, and eat [*Surge, occide, et manduca*]"; and, while pondering its meaning, Peter

¹¹⁵ Genesis 9:4; Deuteronomy 12:15-16, 23; Leviticus 19:26; Acts 15:20; Hebrews 9:22.

¹¹⁶ Compare Acts 10:13b.

¹¹⁷ *Samuhel*, II.2248-2267, p.122 (pp.295-296) [em.cit.].

¹¹⁸ Returning to this passage in his *Retractatio in Actus*, Bede noted that the Latin term *occide* should be interpreted as Greek θύσον, which 'does not mean "killing" in general, but is specific to that "killing" by which victims are sacrificed', *Retract. Actus*, x.19-33, pp.140-141 [em.cit.].

received news that Cornelius, the Roman centurion, wished to hear his preaching.¹¹⁹ The Holy Spirit confirmed to Peter that this was in fulfilment of his vision, and, when Peter later preached to Cornelius, both he and his household received the Spirit and were baptised into the Church.¹²⁰ In his earlier exegesis of this passage in *Expositio Actuum*, Bede had provided a more explicit translation to Acts 10:13b, ‘Kill in the Gentiles what they had once been, and make [the Gentiles] as you are [Christian].’¹²¹ Similar interpretations occur elsewhere, such as in *In Genesim*, where, when Noah received God’s permission to eat “all manner of fish and animals” at the cessation of the flood, Bede saw prophesied ‘all manner of nations’ that would later be consumed into the Church.¹²² In both *In Lucam* and *In Marcum*, Bede recalled Acts 10:13b when imagining the grain that the disciples had collected and rubbed in their palms (in order to separate the edible part from the chaff) as teachers stripping converts from their wickedness in order to pass into the body of Christ – the second of these Gospel commentaries also impressing ‘holy teachers’ to make candid inspection of their catechumens.¹²³ Comparable lessons occur in other Bedan commentaries, but the clearest concern with pseudo-converts as idolaters remains the passage from *In Samuhelem*.¹²⁴

To borrow from Bede’s imagery, ‘bloody converts’ were now being incorporated into the English Church, which, in itself, provides some evidence of extant idolaters in eighth-century England. Bede’s remark that English teachers sought to ‘rescue’ their listeners from ‘demonic

¹¹⁹ In the *In Samuhelem* passage, Bede replaced *occide*, ‘kill’, with *macta*, ‘slaughter’ – the same verb used to describe the slaughter of the livestock at 1 Samuel 14:32 and the *Vetus Latina* Acts, though he reverted to *occide* in a later section of *In Samuhelem*. Cf. *Samuhel*, II.2259-2260, p.122 (p.296), IV.1687-1688, p.252 (p.492); DeGregorio and Love, *Bede: On Samuel*, p.296, n.530.

¹²⁰ Acts 10:1-8, 17-48.

¹²¹ *Exp. Actuum*, x.54-70, pp.50-51 (pp.97-98); compare *Cant. Canticorum*, II.iv.89-93, pp.245-246 (p.107) [em.cit.]; *Marcus*, I.141-146, p.440 [em.cit.].

¹²² Genesis 9:1-4; cf. *Genesis*, II.2114-2125, 2133-2138, p.132 (pp.204-205), quot. Matthew 28:19 and Acts 10:13b.

¹²³ *Lucas*, II.1081-1103 pp.127-128 (pp.256-257) [em.cit.]; *Marcus*, I.974-1007, p.462 [em.cit.]; compare Mark 2:23; Luke 6:1.

¹²⁴ See, for instance, Bede’s interpretation of the temple lavers for washing victims, 1 Kings 7:38-39; 2 Chronicles 4:6; *DeTemp.*, II.869-900, pp.213-214 (pp.92-93) [em.cit.].

errors, indeed, from pagan rituals', referring readers back to the soldiers' slaughter of the captured livestock, might suggest that Bede was thinking of a specific rite, possibly animal sacrifice. Were this true, then Bede cannot have been thinking of a relevant example from Israel or Philistia encountered in 1 Samuel, where no such idolatrous sacrifice took place. Instead, we can recall Bede's wider notes about sacrifice. Defining idolaters, Bede claimed that these offer 'vows, prayers, and *sacrificia*' to 'idols', and, when commenting on Peter's sermon in the Areopagus, Bede had stressed that God had no need of *uictimae*.¹²⁵ The chapter concerning *De mensibus Anglorum* in *De temporum ratione* is of obvious relevance.¹²⁶ There, Bede observed how 'feasts' were held to honour Eostre over *Eosturmonath* (April), since celebrated as Easter.¹²⁷ Easter and Pentecost were the traditional periods for baptism, and perhaps Bede, in his exegesis of bloody converts in *In Samuhelem*, had in mind some ritualistic slaughter of animals that occurred in connection with Easter, or, Pentecost, in either *Eosturmonath* or *Thrimilchi* (May).¹²⁸ The period preceding Easter might seem the stronger candidate, for Bede's exegesis of bloody converts concerned the time when Saul had imposed a fast on Israel and thereafter lifted it, recalling the Christian fast that ended at Easter.¹²⁹ The Lenten fast coincided with the catechumenate, perhaps then, in the Israelite soldiers exhausted from hunger and pursuit of Philistines, Bede reflected on English teachers worn out through similar privation and the pressing need to instruct candidates for baptism.¹³⁰ A particular worry with idolatrous sacrifice might explain Bede's rejection of Gregory's concession that English converts be permitted to slaughter animals over Christian festival

¹²⁵ See 'Introduction', p.16, and this chapter, p.223, n.34.

¹²⁶ *DTR*, xv.34-36, 47-50, pp.331-332 (p.54).

¹²⁷ Bede's report of 'feasts' ties in with Gregory's claim that the English 'were in the habit of sacrificing much cattle on feast days', *DTR*, xv.38, p.331 (p.54), compare Gregory, *Registrum*, XI.lvi.16-17, p.961-962 (p.803). Sizeable deposits of oxen and other animal skulls uncovered at English cult sites seem confirmation of this custom, cf. Owen, *Rites and Religions*, pp.45-49; Scull et al., 'Excavations at Rendlesham', pp.220-221.

¹²⁸ For Bede's report of baptisms occurring in these periods, see *HE*, I.20, p.62-63, II.9, pp.166-167; but see certain exceptions in Foot, 'Water in the spirit', p.188f.

¹²⁹ 1 Samuel 14:24.

¹³⁰ *Homelia* ii.16, ls.133-159, 289-297, pp.294, 298 (pp.154-155, 159) [em.cit.].

periods. If Bede, on reading this letter in 725, had learned that English pseudo-converts were slaughtering animals in idolatrous fashion over these festivals, he would then hold a natural opposition to Gregory's concession. Or, approaching this from a different angle, if animal slaughter at Christian festivals had lost all trace of idolatrous observance, then what motive could Bede have had to reject Gregory's concession, and how then should we explain his exegesis of 1 Samuel 14:31-32? Here, we can note the evidence from legal and penitential literature that sacrifice represented an ongoing issue for the English Church. Eorcenberht had enacted legislation requiring that the Lent fast be observed (with offenders facing severe punishment).¹³¹ His law suggests there existed considerable local opposition to the loss of traditional ceremonies, including sacrifices that overlapped with the new Christian calendar. A number of provisions from Wihtred's law code appear of further interest. Two concern 'offerings to devils', comparable to Theodore's prescription of penance for those who 'sacrifice to demons'.¹³² Two additional provisions, which immediately follow the prohibitions of sacrifice, punished those who consume meat in fasting periods.¹³³ It shares an obvious relationship with Eorcenberht's legislation, perhaps, too, the foods offered to idols mentioned in Theodore's *Penitential*.¹³⁴ When read together with Bede's treatment of bloody converts in *In Samuhelem*, these examples might suggest that some form of sacrifice was still observed in England in the seventh and eighth centuries.

English teachers come in for stern criticism from Bede. Inspired by Saul's rebuke of his soldiers and insistence that the remaining livestock be butchered in his sight, Bede urged 'all

¹³¹ *HE*, III.8, pp.236-237.

¹³² *Wihtred* xii-xiii, Liebermann, p.13 (Oliver, ix-x, pp.156-159), compare *Paenit.Theodori* I.xv.1, p.310. See Meaney, 'Legal and Penitential Penalties', pp.128-129.

¹³³ *Wihtred* xiv-xv, Liebermann, p.13 (Oliver, xi, pp.158-159).

¹³⁴ *HE*, III.8, pp.236-237, compare *Paenit.Theodori* I.xv.5, p.311. A parallel situation might be found in conversion-era Germany, where death was prescribed for 'those who, scorning the holy Lenten fast from contempt of Christianity, eat meat', *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae*, ed. Boretius, iv, p.68.

perfect rulers’, *rectores perfecti*, to reprimand ‘lazy teachers’, *magistri inertes*, ‘negligent teachers’, *doctores neglegentes*, and ‘by their catholic authority, order that the rule of heavenly life be set forth openly’.¹³⁵ These words appear directed to Acca, whom Bede addressed further in his next remarks,

...enjoin upon those lazy teachers whom ordinary ignorance has hitherto afflicted, that, having led all those whom they have undertaken to teach to that standard of life which the negligent teachers themselves learned from the fathers, they should, by catechising them upon the soundest model of catholic perfection, kill in them the ancient conversation of their fathers,¹³⁶ and they should, by baptising them, incorporate them in the members of the Church; and the negligent teachers should no longer sin against the Lord in binding those who are ignorant of the faith and heavenly life into the unity of his body, that is, Christ’s Church.¹³⁷

The reprise of Bede’s concern with bloody converts and the specific recommendations made to Acca emphasise Bede’s preoccupation with the standard of pastoral care in eighth-century England.¹³⁸ His particular frustration with ineffectual catechesis seems tied to a longstanding issue with the faith of Christian converts in England. Sarah Foot, in her exploration of catechesis in conversion-era England, has noted the severe strain placed on teachers in that period.¹³⁹ How, to take one example from Foot’s chapter, could Augustine and his companions have catechised what Gregory claimed was over ten thousand Kentish converts?¹⁴⁰ The report of Edwin’s baptism in the anonymous *Vita Gregorii* indicates that some converts were baptised first and catechised later, which could be relevant to Bede’s impression that pseudo-Christians were being incorporated into the eighth-century English

¹³⁵ *Samuhel*, II.2281-2286, p.122 (p.297).

¹³⁶ 1 Peter 1:8b; compare Bede, *PA*, ii.17-26, p.388; *Retract.Actus*, x.27-33, pp.140-141.

¹³⁷ *Samuhel*, II.2286-2294, pp.122-123 (p.297; *emend.*).

¹³⁸ For other examples of Bede’s recommendations to Acca, see Hilliard, ‘Acca of Hexham’, pp.452-455f.

¹³⁹ Foot, ‘Water in the spirit’, pp.186-187.

¹⁴⁰ Gregory, *Registrum*, VIII.xxix.20-34, p.551 (p.524).

Church.¹⁴¹ The poor standard of English catechesis is suggested in the episode involving Herebald in the *Historia*. Herebald, a member of the *familia* of John of Beverley, sustained serious injuries while out horseracing. John, thwarted in his efforts to heal Herebald, realised his companion had been improperly catechised and blamed the priest responsible for Herebald's instruction – 'a man so slow-witted' that he neither knew 'the office of catechesis or baptism'.¹⁴² John reinstructed Herebald, and, blowing on his face, healed his companion's injuries.¹⁴³ Commenting of this event, Richard Morris observed that it was John who had ordained this incompetent priest, indicating that even good bishops could err over the selection and ordination of clergy.¹⁴⁴ Morris noted too that since Herebald was insensible to bad catechesis, then we might presume other, less-privileged English were, to paraphrase Bede's comment in *In Samuhelem*, even more 'ignorant of their improper binding into Christ's Church.'¹⁴⁵

Bede's wish for Acca to reinstruct Northumbrian catechumens and correct Northumbrian teachers was later echoed in his letter to Ecgberht. There, Bede pressed Ecgberht to read Acts and see for himself how Paul, Barnabas, and their companions had 'preached the word and sowed it everywhere', urging the York prelate to do likewise.¹⁴⁶ Ecgberht should ordain more teachers, and, recalling Bede's earlier counsel to Acca, reinstruct his clergy and ensure these learned the Apostle's Creed and Lord's Prayer in Old English.¹⁴⁷ Both the Creed and Prayer

¹⁴¹ Anonymous, *Vita Gregorii*, xv, pp.96-99. I am grateful to Dr. Sian Mosford-Foster for drawing my attention to this example which she will discuss in her forthcoming edition of *Vita Gregorii* for the Oxford Medieval Texts series.

¹⁴² *HE*, V.6, pp.464-469.

¹⁴³ *ibid.*; see Foot, 'Water in the spirit', p.176.

¹⁴⁴ Richard Morris, 'Baptismal Places: 600-800', *People and Places in Northern Europe 500-1600: Essays in Honour of Peter Hayes Sawyer*, ed. Ian Wood and Niels Lund (Woodbridge, 1991; rpt. 1996), pp.15-24, p.16. Bede dedicated several chapters to John's life (noting in particular his performance of miracles) in the *Historia*, cf. *HE*, V.2-5, pp.456-465.

¹⁴⁵ *Samuhel*, II.2292-2294, p.123 (p.297); Morris, 'Baptismal Places: 600-800', pp.15-16.

¹⁴⁶ *Ep.Ecg.*, iv, pp.128-131.

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.*, v, pp.130-133.

were elemental to catechesis, therefore, we might see Bede's letter to Ecgberht as sustaining his earlier concern with pseudo-converts whose retention of their pagan lifeforce had contaminated the Northumbrian Church.

Hiel of Bethel as errant clergy and apostate laity

A concern similar to English bloody converts can be found in Bede's sixteenth response to Nothhelm in *In Regum librum*, written in roughly the same period as his *In Samuhelem* passage. Nothhelm's question concerned 1 Kings 16:34, "In his [King Ahaz'] days, Hiel of Bethel built Jericho, *he laid its foundations in Abiram, his firstborn; and he set up its gates in Segub, his youngest son.*"¹⁴⁸ Here, the text that seems to have prompted Nothhelm to seek Bede's clarification has been highlighted: how, Nothhelm reasonably wondered, could Hiel have constructed foundations and gates in his sons? Certainly, Bede began his response as if answering that question – Hiel had indeed rebuilt Jericho, as the ablative indicated, 'in' or 'on' Abiram and Segub, because both sons had died in Jericho's reconstruction. As Bede explained, this fulfilled Joshua's curse that whoever restored Jericho would lose their first and lastborn.¹⁴⁹ In the Old Testament, Jericho was the first Canaanite settlement that Joshua had conquered after the Hebrews crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land.¹⁵⁰ God commanded that Jericho be left ruined, as the ninth-century bishop Isho'dad of Merv noted, it was to be 'a sign and memory of the power of God and the victory of the people of Israel.'¹⁵¹ Bede presented a similar explanation to Nothhelm, but seems to have focussed his comments on issues that were perhaps common to Northumbria and London.

¹⁴⁸ *Quaest.Regum*, XVI, pp.309-310 (p.116); *DTR*, lxvi.432, p.476 (p.173).

¹⁴⁹ *Quaest.Regum*, XVI.1-12, p.309 (p.116), quot. Joshua 6:26.

¹⁵⁰ Joshua 5:13-6:25; Bede, *DLS*, ix, pp.267-269 (pp.16-18); *idem*, *De mansionibus filiorum*, PL 94, col.701A (trans. Holder, pp.32-33).

¹⁵¹ Joshua 6:26; Isho'dad of Merv, *Liber Sessionum*, ed. and trans. van den Eynde, *I Rois*, xvi.34, p.116 (p.138).

Hiel of Bethel restores Jericho's walls ... whenever they who have renounced the devil's pomp return to it by wanton living, or prefer erroneous dogmas [*errorum dogmata*] or Gentile tales [*gentilium fabulae*] to the Church's truth in which they were initiated. They are like the one who left Bethel to rebuild Jericho's ruins. Such a one, who has been cursed before the Lord's face, rightly loses both his firstborn in the foundation of a wicked city and his youngest in setting up its gates, because he forsakes not only the foundations of faith, from which he should have begun erecting good buildings, but also the gates of good works, by which he should have been perfected. I have explained these things allegorically, so that you [Nothhelm] might recall the truth of the apostle's statement: *all things happened to them in a figure; and they are written for us*.¹⁵²

Here, Bede combined the Old Testament background of Jericho with Jerome's interpretation that Hiel meant 'living for God', Bethel 'house of God', and Jericho, 'moon', that is, 'place of shadows'.¹⁵³ Jericho thus became a place that God's servants entered when forsaking his commands, which, in Bede's response to Nothhelm, signified those who returned to idolatrous belief and observance.¹⁵⁴ In Hiel, Bede perceived those in 'the religious habit', *habitus religionis*, an expression that Bede identified elsewhere as men and women in holy orders, i.e., bishops, priests, and those under a monastic rule.¹⁵⁵ Bede charged these errant clerics with resuming the same 'crimes', *scelera*, that had been forgiven at baptism. On its own, this criticism could signal several crimes, but, given the parallels between this material and the exegesis from *In Samuhelem*, we might wonder whether Bede was thinking of clerics who overindulged in secular literature and/or failed to instruct their listeners, perhaps in particular their catechumens, in 'the Church's truth'.

In Bethel, 'house of God', Bede plainly perceived a figure of the laity. These, Bede felt, had returned to some form of idolatry and might then be considered apostates. Closer inspection of his comments indicates that Bede's language had its inspiration in the baptismal liturgy.

¹⁵² *Quaest.Regum*, XVI.12-27, pp.309-310 (p.116; *emend.*) [em.cit.].

¹⁵³ *ibid.*, ls.12-13, cit. Jerome, *Nom.Hebraica*, p.113, ls.8, p.62, ls.18; *Lucas*, V.1424-1425, p.331 (p.526), quot. Gregory, *Hom.Euangelia*, II.ii.21, p.13 (p.95), in turn cit. Jerome, *Nom.Hebraica*, ls.9, p.137.

¹⁵⁴ *Lucas*, III.2214-2215, p.222, (pp.381-382), cit. Augustine, *Quaestiones euangelium*, II.xix.4-6, p.62 (p.388).

¹⁵⁵ *Quaest.Regum*, XVI.15, p.309 (p.116). For select examples of 'religious habit', cf. *Ezra-Neemia*, III.829, p.360 (p.184); *HE*, III.26, pp.310-311; IV.11, pp.366-367.

For these laity had been ‘initiated’, *imbuti*, into the faith and had ‘renounced the devil’s pomp’, but had since chosen to ‘forsake the foundations of faith’. Bede employed a shortened form of the renunciation rite here and swapped the traditional verb *abrenuntiare*, ‘renouncing’, for *anathematizare*, ‘cursing’, in order to imitate Joshua’s ‘cursing’ of Jericho.¹⁵⁶ His claim that these laypersons had returned to ‘wanton living’ and preferred ‘erroneous dogmas or Gentile tales to the Church’s truth’ constitutes compelling evidence for idolatry.¹⁵⁷ ‘Wanton living’ recalls the prodigal son from Christ’s parable, who, Luke stated, spent his inheritance “living wantonly”, *uiuendo luxoriose*.¹⁵⁸ Writing of this parable in *In Lucam*, Bede named the prodigal son as a figure for those ‘who abandoned God for the sake of worshipping idols.’¹⁵⁹ At first, this seemed to refer to all Gentiles (contrasting with Israel who, in the figure of the prodigal son’s elder brother, had remained faithful to God). However, Bede’s subsequent comments in *In Lucam* seem concerned with issues of faith in England, suggesting that this passage, written between c.712-714, might be placed besides those already studied from *In Regum librum* and *In Samuhelem*, c.713-715. In *In Regum librum*, Bede’s identification of ‘erroneous doctrines’ might have been based on the same expression in Jerome’s writings, where it was used to criticise those who led Christians into false belief, both heretical and idolatrous.¹⁶⁰ More straightforward is the matter of ‘Gentile tales’, which recalls our earlier investigation of the popularity of English *fabulae*.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁶ *Iosue anathematizat Hiericho*, Joshua 6:26a; *Quaest.Regum*, XVI.14, 17, p.309 (p.116); Trent Foley, ‘Thirty Questions on the Book of Kings’, p.116, n.3.

¹⁵⁷ *Quaest.Regum*, XVI.17-20, p.309 (p.116).

¹⁵⁸ Luke 15:11-32, especially v.13. Compare *DeTab.*, III.1121-1209, pp.122-124 (pp.141-144) [em.cit.].

¹⁵⁹ *Lucas*, IV.2285-2295, pp.287-288 (p.468); compare ps.Jerome, *Expositio euangeliorum*, col.574CD, quot. in Kendall and Wallis, *Bede: On Luke*, p.468, n.380.

¹⁶⁰ Jerome, *Commentariorum in Osee prophetam*, CCSL 76, I.ii.185-193, p.22 (trans. Marks and Scheck, p.163), [em.cit.]; *idem*, *Hiezechiel*, V.882-892, pp.212-213 (p.188); compare Gregory, *Moralia in Iob*, XX.xxiii, p.1040 [em.cit.].

¹⁶¹ See ‘Chapter Four: Pagan thought’, pp.165-172.

One final indication that Bede had English matters in mind when writing to Nothhelm might be found in his concluding quotation of 1 Corinthians 10:11, ‘I have explained these things allegorically so that you might recall the truth of the Apostle’s statement: *all things happened to them in a figure; and they are written for us.*’¹⁶² In the Introduction, we noted how Bede seemed to insert this verse and others like it when writing of issues pertinent to England’s context, in this case, sharing his concern with errant clergy and apostate laity to Nothhelm.¹⁶³ We should not overlook, too, the evidence that when Rabanus Maurus (780-856) later quoted Bede’s response to Nothhelm in two of his own commentaries, he refrained from following the moralising application of this last sentence, perhaps finding it less relevant to his own context.¹⁶⁴

Fields and villages? Locating England’s idolaters

Bede offered little help to readers interested in locating his eighth-century English idolaters. However, that he shared his concern with Acca at Hexham and Nothhelm in London could suggest a widespread problem, particularly when we remember that Northumbria and Essex were two of the first English kingdoms to convert. Focussing on Northumbria, we can look to Acca’s vast diocese and its mountainous regions in west and north-west Bernicia.¹⁶⁵ Decades earlier, these regions had seen Cuthbert restore those who had ‘profaned the faith by wicked deeds’ and others who, ‘at the time of plague, forgetting the sacred mystery of the faith into which they had been initiated, took to the delusive cures of idolatry, as though by incantations or amulets or any other mysteries of devilish art, they could ward off a blow sent by God the

¹⁶² *Quaest. Regum*, XVI.25-27, p.310 (p.116).

¹⁶³ See ‘Introduction’, p.4, n.15.

¹⁶⁴ Rabanus Maurus, *Commentaria in librum Iosue*, PL 108, I.viii, col.1024D-1025B; *idem*, *Commentarius Regum*, III.xiv, col.205BD.

¹⁶⁵ David Hill, *An Atlas of Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1981), pp.6, 30.

Creator.’¹⁶⁶ How much the situation in this part of Bernicia or in similarly rural parts of Northumbria had improved must be wondered at, for when Bede later wrote to Ecgberht he expressly raised the plight of inhabitants of ‘villages and hamlets’ in ‘out of the way, hilly places and thick woodland’ that English bishops and teachers had neglected to visit and who, as a result, could not distinguish between ‘good and bad conduct.’¹⁶⁷

Isolated communities in rural Northumbria could be implied in an exegetical passage in Bede’s *In Cantica Canticorum*, which took as its inspiration Song of Songs 7:11, “Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the field, let us linger in the villages.” Bede’s initial interpretation reproduced the prophetic sense of wild or rural terrain, that is, woods, fields, valleys, and villages, as the Gentile peoples longing to receive Christ.¹⁶⁸ It was here that Bede explained, ‘For who does not know that in Greek the name “pagans” is taken from [those who live in] villages, since they are a long way away from the abode of the heavenly city, or even far from the knowledge of it?’¹⁶⁹ Turning his attention to ‘the Church of our time’, Bede impersonated the Church of his day as it addressed God,

You order me to cultivate the field in which you have sown good seed (that is, you command me to preach the gospel you have given to the whole world), but since apart from you I can do nothing,¹⁷⁰ I beseech you to go out into the field with me (that is, to be my co-worker and helper in all the places where you want me to preach the word).¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁶ Bede claimed that other teachers were fearful of visiting these remote congregations, cf. *VCP*, ix, pp.184-187; *HE*, IV.27, pp.432-435.

¹⁶⁷ *Ep.Ecg.*, vii, pp.134-137; see also Thacker, ‘Bede’s Ideal of Reform’, p.133; and DeGregorio’s discussion of parallels between teachers in the Ecgberht letter and Bede’s *In Ezra et Neemiam*, Scott DeGregorio, ‘Bede’s “*In Ezra et Neemiam*” and the Reform of the Northumbrian Church,’ *Speculum* 79:1 (2004), pp.1-25, pp.18-20. See also ‘Introduction’, p.32.

¹⁶⁸ *Cant.Canticorum*, V.vii.631-666, pp.332-333 (pp.216-217) [em.cit.]; compare *Abacuc*, II.224-238, p.389 (p.74), cit. Habakkuk 3:5.

¹⁶⁹ *Cant.Canticorum*, V.vii.641-643, p.332 (p.217).

¹⁷⁰ John 15:5c.

¹⁷¹ *Cant.Canticorum*, V.vii.652-657, p.333 (p.217).

Thereafter, Bede quoted Christ's warning to the disciples, "One will be taken, and the other left", explaining to readers how fruit-bearing teachers will be redeemed whereas barren teachers will be rejected.¹⁷² Bede then instructed English teachers, returning these to the sense of Song of Songs 7:11.

Let us linger in the villages. Let us engage in teaching the hearts of outsiders also. Let us not only visit them in passing, but let us linger in them for a while, until we change them from being residences for pagans [*pagani*], and homes for outsiders and foreigners, into our own possessions.¹⁷³

Foreign peoples would seem implied in Bede's supplication, 'I pray ... let us work to establish churches for God throughout the world', perhaps suggesting he was thinking of German and Saracen idolaters.¹⁷⁴ But it remains possible that Bede had in mind isolated communities in Northumbria and England, where, he felt, there lived those who were more idolater than Christian and thus required sowers of words to reinstruct and restore these to the Church.¹⁷⁵ We need not restrict Bede's English idolaters to rustic flocks, for, as we have already seen, Bede appeared to locate figural 'fields and villages' in more illustrious settings. Dynasties who maintained a connection with demonic ancestors, or tolerated the presence of idol places in their territories. Elite centres, both secular and spiritual, where fine metalworkers who recalled Weland more so than Bezalel were perhaps venerated. Each could have represented a field or village within Bede's wider impression of idolatry in England's spiritual landscape.

¹⁷² *Cant. Canticorum*, V.vii.657-662, p.333 (p.217), quot. Luke 17:35b.

¹⁷³ *ibid.*, ls.662-666, compare Gregory, *Hom. Euangelia*, XXXVI.8, p.339 (pp.319-320), quot. Psalm 95(96):12-13.

¹⁷⁴ *Cant. Canticorum*, V.vii.674-677, p.333 (p.218), cit. Song of Songs 7:12a.

¹⁷⁵ A similar sense might be construed from Bede's exegesis of Simon of Cyrene, who we earlier noted had borne the cross for Christ. Cyrene, Bede explained, was a rural place, thus Simon signified the Gentiles 'forsaking their pagan rituals, obediently embrace the steps of the Lord's passion', *Lucas*, VI.1443-1455, p.399 (pp.615-616) [em.cit.]; see also 'Introduction', p.15.

Conclusion

Bede's concern with contemporary German, Saracen, and, in particular, English idolaters appears to have shaped much more of his writings than once thought. We should then reconsider what we know about the times of Bede, in particular, the enduring presence of those in English society whom Bede believed less Christian than idolater. His solution to this problem, both in Europe and England, rested on those sowers of words who converted pagans or reinstructed pseudo-converts, thereby incorporating idolaters into Christ's Church. In Germany and Saracen-occupied Iberia and Septimania, Bede saw a need for evangelists to fulfil Christ's commission and preach the Gospel in a culturally-sensitive manner to these idolatrous tribes, and, in addition, be prepared to face whatever persecution might result from this worthiest of endeavours.

England's idolaters required a sterner hand, since these were now blaspheming Christ from inside the Church. Certainly, Bede indicated the presence of pseudo-Christians in Northumbria and perhaps too in Essex who had not fully renounced (or had simply returned to) their idolatrous belief. Sacrifice may have represented one localised observance that continued in parts of eighth-century Northumbria, perhaps occurring in the same period as major Christian festivals. Its event could form one legacy of the Roman mission and the endeavour to consolidate Christian faith by offering concessions to new converts. Bede's frustration with Gentile tales indicates once more the widespread popularity of non-Christian narratives in his time. More serious to Bede were those Christians who now believed in certain Gentile doctrines. His complaint with errant clerics seems reflective of a much wider problem with the standard of pastoral care in Northumbria and England.

Since Bede's letter to Egberht in 734 echoed several of the complaints that he shared with Acca and Nothhelm, we can propose that Bede held a sustained interest in idolaters in England from at least c.712 onward. In this respect, we might reconsider the timeline behind what scholars often call Bede's 'reform agenda'. In the literature, this period is often considered to have begun in c.720; however, the material explored in this chapter suggests that we should now trace its origins to at least as far back as 712.¹⁷⁶ Bede appears to have communicated an ongoing concern with contemporary English idolaters in several commentaries written between 712-717, specifically *In Lucam*, *In Cantica Canticorum*, *In Regum librum*, and *In Samuhelem*. In these works, Bede established himself as a mature exegete who read with increasing confidence the issues that he saw in Northumbria, England, and Europe through the pages of Scripture, in particular the Old Testament. His pastoral instruction to Acca and Egberht, and, to some extent Nothhelm, too, reveals his wider intent to inform those who were responsible for encouraging and correcting the laity in England. Thus, Bede provided the means for England's words sowers to transform stony-hearted idolaters, at home and abroad.

¹⁷⁶ Scott DeGregorio, "'Nostrorum socordiam temporum': The Reforming Impulse of Bede's Later Exegesis", *EME* 11 (2002), pp.107-122; *idem*, 'Reform of the Northumbrian Church', pp.1-25; *idem*, 'Visions of Reform', p.219f.

Coda: after Bede

One of the central arguments of this thesis has been that scholars have overlooked Bede's fears about strange gods and idolatry in his own time. However, Bede's immediate successors recognised that his interest in this subject amounted to more than mere historical enquiry, for, they too experienced something of the threat of strange gods and idolatry in their own day. We know this because senior members of the English Church and other, continental visitors to Britain went on to promulgate legislative and penitential literature which refers to idolatrous observance and pagan practitioners, arguably showing the continued presence of idolaters in the insular world. This literature from the mid- and late-eighth century may be read in support of the various passages in Bede's writings that indicate his concern with English laity who had not received proper baptism and were then still considered non-Christian, and others who had foregone the baptism of tears either to maintain or return to part or all of their former idolatrous belief and observance, thus falling under his category of idolaters. Its content shared Bede's intent to correct and encourage the English Church, so too his belief that pastoral and structural reforms were needed to overhaul an institution that had in places failed to tend the seed of faith. Most relevant here was the legislation agreed at the Council of *Clofesho* of 747, the prescriptions from the *Dialogue* and *Penitential* attributed to Archbishop Ecgberht and circulated between 735-766, and the report of the legatine mission to England, known as the *Legatine Capitulary*, 786.

Bede's treatment of strange gods and idolatry also proved influential in Europe, where there remained a pressing need to convert pagan peoples hitherto without firm knowledge of the Gospel. On the continent, Bede's writings were read by the English missionaries Boniface and Lul and local successors such as Rabanus Maurus, all of whom shared Bede's will to

fulfil Christ's commission to teach, baptise, and teach. This coda will first examine where the English and then continental Church echoed Bede's concern with strange gods and idolatry. It will then suggest how scholars might now, as a result of the arguments presented in this thesis, reconsider Bede as a watchman of the English Church who, learning of extant idolatrous belief and observance, raised this threat with his ecclesiastical readership in order that these might further consolidate and preserve England's faith in the true God.

English horizons

In 747, Cuthbert (Archbishop of Canterbury, 740-760), convened a council at a place called *Clofesho*.¹ Representatives from each Southumbrian diocese met and promulgated thirty canons, including several that address themes that we have identified in Bede's writings.² It is now well-established that a number of the *Clofesho* 747 canons, including some of particular interest to this section, contain close verbal parallels with Frankish legislation passed at *Concilium Germanicum* of c.742.³ In 747, probably sometime before the council took place, Boniface had written to Cuthbert with recommended reforms and enclosed a summary of relevant German legislation.⁴ Boniface's letter has led some scholars to see the *Clofesho* canons which concern pagan error as largely irrelevant to England's situation; however, as Catherine Cubitt has shown, Cuthbert was no 'mute dog', and he and the other bishops surely selected only that which was thought necessary for the English Church.⁵

¹ Sarah Foot, 'Clofesho, Councils of', in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. Andrew Louth, 4th edn., 2 vols. (Oxford, 2022), vol. 1, p.429.

² Catherine Cubitt, *Anglo-Saxon Church Councils c.650-c.850* (London, 1995), pp.99-152 [hereafter, *Councils*].

³ Cubitt, *Councils*, pp.102-110.

⁴ Tangl 78, pp.161-170 (pp.114-119); Cubitt, *Councils*, pp.102-110, especially 102-105.

⁵ Tangl 78, ls.29-3, pp.163-164 (p.115), compare *Clofesho* iii, pp.363-364; Catherine Cubitt, 'Anglo-Saxon church councils c.650-c850' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Cambridge University, 1990), pp.179-188; *idem*, *Councils*, pp.110, 118ff; but see Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, p.168.

Aside from Boniface, Cuthbert might also have been inspired by the earlier example of Archbishop Theodore.⁶ At the Council of Hertford, 672/673, Theodore had ordered an annual council meet at *Clofesho* on 1 August.⁷ Verbal parallels between Theodore's *Penitential* and the canons of *Clofesho* 747 suggest the former's continued influence over the Southumbrian Church and its latest prelate in Cuthbert.⁸ In convening the council, Cuthbert may then have wished to capture the reforms of both Theodore and Boniface. Daniel and Nothhelm, who both held some interest in matters of idolatry, might also have influenced the council. Nothhelm was Cuthbert's predecessor, while Bishop Hunfrith, an attendee at *Clofesho* 747, had succeeded Daniel at Winchester.⁹ It is possible that Cuthbert and Hunfrith may have inherited something of the extant issues related to idolatry in their provinces, providing further motivation for the canons concerning idolatry from *Clofesho* 747.

Ecgberht's *Dialogue* consists of sixteen *interrogationes* and *responsiones* which offer instruction for clergy and laity, with two of these raising a concern with idolatrous clerics.¹⁰ The *Dialogue*, so too the *Penitential*, extracted material from several earlier sources, among them: ecclesiastical councils; papal letters; and fifth-century Gallic sermons, most prominent, those of Caesarius of Arles.¹¹ As Allen Frantzen has shown, the *Penitential*, a rather more complex text, also contains some material of later, continental origin, notably the chapters permitting the commutation of penance.¹² Nonetheless, Frantzen, so too, Audrey Meaney and,

⁶ Simon Keynes, *The Councils of Clofesho* (Leicester, 1994), pp.4-5.

⁷ *HE*, IV.5, pp.352-353.

⁸ Cubitt, *Councils*, p.119.

⁹ *Clofesho*, p.362.

¹⁰ Martin J. Ryan, 'Archbishop Ecgberht and his *Dialogus*', *Leaders of the Anglo-Saxon Church: From Bede to Stigand*, ed. Alexander R. Rumble (Woodbridge, 2012), pp.41-60, pp.46-49; Kristen Carella, 'Northumbrian Law before the Vikings: A Preliminary Assessment of the Evidence', *Languages of the Law in Early Medieval England: Essays in Memory of Lisi Oliver*, ed. Stefan Jurasinski and Andrew Rabin (Leuven, 2019), pp.45-57, pp.48-50.

¹¹ Ryan, 'Ecgberht and his *Dialogus*', pp.50-53.

¹² Allen J. Frantzen, *The Literature of Penance in Anglo-Saxon England* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1983), pp.69-75.

most recently, Rob Meens, have shown the core of this text to be genuine.¹³ Ecgberht's *Penitential* is sometimes listed besides several penitential handbooks credited to Bede; however, all but one of these are reckoned spurious.¹⁴

The *Legatine Capitulary* represents the report of the papal legates, Bishop George of Ostia, and his assistant, Abbot Wigbod, whom Pope Hadrian I had sent to Britain with a third legate in 786 in order to uproot 'tares that had spoiled the harvest, sown with the best seed which the blessed Gregory had planted through the mouth of Augustine'.¹⁵ Promulgated at York in the presence of King Ælfwald (d.788), Archbishop Eanbald (d.796), and his five suffragan bishops, the *Capitulary* comprised twenty chapters and several of these indicate that idolatry was among the tares found in Northumbria.¹⁶ From Northumbria, the legates journeyed south to Mercia where a second council, overseen by King Offa (r.757-796) and Archbishop Jaenberht (r.765-792) and attended by other representatives from the Southumbrian Church, confirmed the same chapters, showing that the *Capitulary* responded to prevailing issues on both sides of the Humber.¹⁷ Catherine Cubitt and in particular Kristen Carella have proposed that Alcuin helped to word significant sections of the report, though Donald Bullough felt the latter's influence more moderate.¹⁸ Despite Alcuin's influence, Carella reiterated how the *Capitulary* remained 'a Northumbrian law code in its own right.'¹⁹ This seems evident in the

¹³ Meaney, 'Idolators and Ecclesiasts', pp.107-111; Rob Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe, 600-1200* (Cambridge, 2014), pp.96-100.

¹⁴ Allen J. Frantzen, 'The Penitentials Attributed to Bede', *Speculum* 58:3 (1983), pp.573-597; Meaney, 'Idolators and Ecclesiasts', p.108; Meens, *Penance in Medieval Europe*, pp.99-100.

¹⁵ *Capit. Legatorum*, ls.12-15, p.20 (p.892); compare Matthew 13:24:30. See also 'Chapter Six: Contemporary idolators', pp.228-229.

¹⁶ Meaney, 'Idolators and Ecclesiasts', pp.113-116; Carella, 'Northumbrian Law before the Vikings', pp.50-52.

¹⁷ *Capit. Legatorum*, ls.11-18, pp.28-29 (pp.895-897).

¹⁸ Cubitt, *Councils*, pp.164-166; Bryan [now Kristen] Carella, 'Alcuin and the Legatine Capitulary of 786: The Evidence of Scriptural Citations', *Journal of Medieval Latin* 22 (2012), pp.221-256; *idem*, 'The Historical and Literary Context of the *Legatine Capitulary* of 786 in England and Abroad', *Law, Literature, and Social Regulation in Early Medieval England*, ed. Anya Adair and Andrew Rabin (Woodbridge, 2023) pp.137-150, pp.143-150; Donald A. Bullough, *Alcuin: Achievement and Reputation. Being Part of the Ford Lectures Delivered in Oxford in Hilary Term 1980* (Leiden, 2004), pp.346-356.

¹⁹ Carella, 'Context of the *Legatine Capitulary*', p.137.

preface to the report, in which George stated that he and Wigbod had learned first-hand of the spiritual issues in Northumbria while awaiting an audience with King Ælfwald who at that time was in the far north of the kingdom.²⁰

Idoltrous observance and pagan practitioners

The *Clofesho* 747 canons, Ecgberht's *Dialogue* and *Penitential*, and *Legatine Capitulary* all suggest the presence of pagan observance and practitioners in England. The third *Clofesho* canon required bishops to make annual visit of the parishes in their diocese in order to 'prohibit, besides other sins, pagan observances [*paganae observationes*]', which the legates listed beside idoltrous practitioners: 'diviners', *divini*; 'sorceresses', *sortilege*; 'auguries', *auguria*; 'auspices', *auspicia*; 'amulets', *fylacteria*; and 'incantations', *incantationes*.²¹ These 'pagan errors', *errata gentilium*, signified 'all the pollution of the ungodly [*omnes spurcitiae impiorum*]'.²² For John Blair, this list need not be construed as 'pagan worship'.²³ The similarities between the third canon at *Clofesho* and the fifth canon from the *Concilium Germanicum* of c.742, except, that is, for the prohibition of sacrifice which is only found in the German canon, convinced Blair that no such sacrifices (which for him constituted substantive evidence of idolatry) occurred in England.²⁴ Perhaps this overlooks the expression from the third *Clofesho* canon concerning *paganae observationes*, which could have encompassed sacrifice; indeed, a canon from the *Concilium Turonense* 567 had used the same expression when prohibiting idol worship.²⁵ The *Clofesho* canon was also not an exact

²⁰ *Capit. Legatorum* iii, ls.34-33, pp.20-21.

²¹ *Clofesho* iii, pp.363-364.

²² *ibid.*, p.364.

²³ Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, p.168.

²⁴ *Concilium Germanicum*, v, pp.3-4, cit. in Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, p.168, n.142; compare Cubitt, *Councils*, pp.103-104.

²⁵ *Concilium Turonense* 567, in *Concilia Galliae A. 511 - A. 695*, CCSL 148A, xxiii, pp.191-192.

replica of the fifth German canon, expressing an original concern with those ‘who seldom hear the word of God’ and containing the novel expression, ‘Gentile errors’, *errata gentilium*.²⁶

The third chapter of the *Legatine Capitulary* reproduced the requirement in *Clofesho* iii that bishops make annual visitations to each parish, stating, in addition, that the Northumbrian Church should hold two councils each year.²⁷ Where *Clofesho* 747 and its German forerunner were concerned with idolatrous observance, Bishop George, by contrast, ordered Northumbria’s bishops to confront idolatrous practitioners.²⁸ By preaching and confirming, bishops would separate the faithful from ‘the incestuous’, *incaestuosus*; ‘augurs’, *augures*; ‘soothsayers’, *aruspices*; ‘enchanters’, *incantatores*; ‘diviners’, *divini*; ‘wizards’, *uenefici*; and ‘soothsayers’, *sortilegi*.²⁹ The intent to isolate idolatrous practitioners recalls Bede’s figural interpretation of the separation of Dagon’s head from its statue, which shattered the hold of Satan and his ministers over their congregations and thus enabled Christ’s teachers to incorporate, or, reincorporate, these into the Church.³⁰ Of course, the vocabulary of these idolatrous observances and practitioners was not English (nor for that matter, German or Frankish), originating instead in Roman classical literature.³¹ Bishop George reported that in Mercia the Capitulary chapters were read aloud in both Latin and the vernacular, but the latter version has long since been lost, if indeed, it was ever written down.³² Bede, too, employed the language of Rome when considering English idolatry, and while such terms seem less-

²⁶ *Clofesho* iii, pp.363-364; compare *Exp.Actuum*, xiv.27-28, p.65 (p.126); *VSC*, ix, pp.186-187.

²⁷ Reprising the tares motif from the preface, George noted how biannual councils would enable the bishops to ‘cut off the thorns’ in Northumbria, *Capit.Legatorum* iii, ls.27-33, p.21.

²⁸ *Capit.Legatorum* iii, ls.33-34, p.21.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ See ‘Chapter One: Strange gods’, p.63f.

³¹ Karen Jolly, ‘Medieval Magic: Definitions, Beliefs, Practices’, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Volume 3: The Middle Ages*, ed. Karen Jolly et al. (London, 2002), pp.1-71, pp.6-8, 14-20.

³² *Capit.Legatorum*, ls.14-16, p.28.

than satisfactory, it is clear that Bede, Cuthbert, Ecgberht, and George were responding to local issues in England, albeit in an alien tongue.

The *Clofesho* canon and *Legatine Capitulary* requirement for bishops to visit each parish in their dioceses would, if fulfilled, have brought bishops into more regular contact with rural congregations. Earlier, Bede had articulated his fears to Acca for ‘the woods and fields’ and to Ecgberht for those ‘hamlets and villages in remote, hilly places and thick woodland’ who never saw a bishop or indeed priests, and this concern seems to find expression in the *Clofesho* and *Capitulary* requirement.³³ Other evidence of Northumbrian provenance further suggests a problem with idolatry among certain rural congregations. In a letter to Æthelheard (Archbishop of Canterbury, 792-805), dated c.793, Alcuin expressed his horror at ‘assemblies in mountains where the people are deceived, leaving the churches and worshipping not with prayers but with drunkenness’, and reminded Æthelheard of Christ’s words from Matthew 24:26a: “[Beware] if any one tells you that the things which are of Christ are in the wilderness.”³⁴ A second letter of Alcuin’s from this period, addressed to an unnamed English archbishop, condemned new sects which ‘neither please God nor conform to Christian religion’, making especial criticism of amulets.³⁵ For Meaney, these letters provided evidence of ‘a genuine heathen cult’ in late eighth-century England, while, in contrast, Blair considered them to show little more than a concern with eccentric Christian teachers.³⁶ Alcuin is clear that these assemblies were comprised of those who had forsaken churches and Christian observance, and it seems reasonable then to consider these as non-Christian, and, if we apply Bede’s standard, idolatrous.

³³ See ‘Chapter Six: Contemporary idolaters’, pp.246-248.

³⁴ Alcuin, *Epistola* CCXC, ls.17-25, p.448.

³⁵ *idem*, *Epistola* CCXCI, ls.17-30, p.449, cit. Augustine, *DDC*, II.xxiii, pp.96-101.

³⁶ Meaney, ‘Idolaters and Ecclesiasts’, pp.116-117; Blair, *Church in Anglo-Saxon Society*, pp.177-179.

The opening to the nineteenth chapter in the *Legatine Capitulary* called for whatever remained of ‘the rite of the pagans’, *ritus paganorum*, to be ‘plucked out, scorned, and abandoned.’³⁷ Marking the human body in a pagan fashion was criticised as a corruption of God’s creation, with the legates rejecting that such marks could bring salvation (perhaps revealing the beliefs behind this practice).³⁸ Other observances to be censured were: pagan clothing; the casting of lots ‘after the manner of the pagans’; and two practices involving horses – the mutilation of the animal in order to deafen it, and the consumption of horsemeat (echoing a proscription from Theodore’s *Penitential*).³⁹ The fifteenth chapter prohibited ‘unlawful and incestuous marriage’ with ‘handmaids of God or other illicit persons [*illicitae personae*], as well as with relatives, wives of relatives, or foreigners [*alienigenae*].’⁴⁰

The first chapter in Ecgberht’s *Penitential* stipulated penance between four and twelve years for ‘capital crimes’, highlighting that the worst such crime was ‘serving idols’.⁴¹ A few lines later we find *idolatria* embedded in a list of crimes that seem based on 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:10 – the second Scriptural reference indicates spiritual idolatry, but the first plainly concerned physical idol worship.⁴² The fourth chapter in Ecgberht’s *Penitential* reproduced Theodore’s proscription of one year penance for those who made minor sacrifice to demons and ten years for major sacrifices.⁴³ Further parallels between these handbooks include the concern with women who: ‘perform divinations or diabolical incantations’; ‘ruin others by evil art, that is, by a cup or some device’; ‘place their daughters on the roof or inside an oven to cure fever’.⁴⁴ Other idolatrous observances listed in Ecgberht’s *Penitential*

³⁷ *Capit.Legatorum* xix, ls.40-42, p.26.

³⁸ *ibid.*, ls.42-4, pp.26-27, quot. Prudentius, *Dittochaeon*, LCL 398, i.3, pp.346-347.

³⁹ *Capit.Legatorum* xix, ls.5-7, 9-12, p.27, compare *Paenit.Theodori* II.xi.4, p.325.

⁴⁰ *Capit.Legatorum* xv, p.25, compare *HE*, I.27, pp.82-87. See ‘Chapter Five: Idolatrous kings’, pp.193-198.

⁴¹ *Paenit.Ecgberhti*, i, p.233, compare *Paenit.Theodori* I.xv.1, p.310.

⁴² *Paenit.Ecgberhti*, i, p.233.

⁴³ *Paenit.Ecgberhti* iv.12, p.235, compare *Paenit.Theodori* I.xv.1, p.310.

⁴⁴ *Paenit.Ecgberhti* vii.6-8, viii.2, p.239, compare *Paenit.Theodori* I.xv.4a, p.311, I.iv.7c, p.295 (here, the protagonists were men), and I.xv.2, p.310.

suggest a continued superstition in England towards portents; though, as Audrey Meaney has shown in her thorough study of these English legislative and penitential literature, much of the concerns with portents share close parallels with earlier Frankish text and should then be treated with caution.⁴⁵ However, we can note that the penance proscribed for ‘senders of storms’, has less precedent and could then be original, particularly in light of Bede’s interest in portents of storm.⁴⁶

Here, we can note the implication from Ecgberht’s *Dialogue* that even clerics were not immune from idolatry. The fifteenth *interrogatio* concerned those ‘crimes’ which prevented ordination, its *responsio* identified the first two of these as follows:

For these crimes it is not permissible to ordain anyone, indeed, some who have been elevated are to be deposed: (i) worshipping idols, of course [*idola adorare*]; (ii) those who make themselves captive to the devil through soothsayers [*aruspices*] and diviners [*divini*] and enchanters [*incantatores*].⁴⁷

Ecgberht’s response seems to involve a more serious issue than scholars and teachers overindulging in secular literature; however, perhaps a parallel might be found with Bede’s complaint of errant clergy when writing to Nothhelm.⁴⁸ The *Dialogue* indicates a clear need in England to prevent the ordination of those who had worshipped idols or consulted idolatrous practitioners, and, depose current clerics known to have erred in this regard. The strength of this latter sentiment is reinforced in the conclusion to this *responsio*, which stated that those who had committed such crimes should not be readmitted to the Church except through ‘public penance ... since it is foreign to the Church to minister the sacred mysteries

⁴⁵ *Paenit.Ecgberhti* viii.3-4, pp.239-240. Cf. Caesarius, *Sermo* XIII, 5, pp.67-68 (FOTC 31, pp.78-79), CXCI, 2, p.784 (FOTC 66, p.32); Meaney, ‘Idolators and Ecclesiasts’, pp.103-116, especially p.109.

⁴⁶ *Paenit.Ecgberhti* iv.14, p.235. Compare ‘Chapter Four: Pagan thought’, p.180.

⁴⁷ *Dial.Ecgberhti* xv, p.410, compare Eusebius ‘Gallicanus’, *Homelia* XLV, in *Collectio homiliarum*, CCSL 101A, 3.28-39, pp.535-536, cit. in Ryan, ‘Ecgberht and his *Dialogus*’, p.52.

⁴⁸ See ‘Chapter Six: Contemporary idolaters’, pp.243-244.

to penitents who had long been vessels of vice.⁴⁹ Theodore had earlier stated that public penance was not practised in England, but Bede could offer some support to Ecgberht's teaching that severe errors necessitated conspicuous compunction.⁵⁰ We noted one such passage in *In Samuhelem* where Bede imagined how formerly errant clerics, having been corrected by their bishop, now brought catechumens before the sight of their superiors in order to 'bleed' these of pagan error in the proper manner.⁵¹ Elsewhere, in *In Lucam*, Bede considered the case of those who merited penance 'after public disgrace', inserting, in the same passage, a short confession of his creation.⁵² The eighth chapter in Ecgberht's *Penitential* seems to complement the issue of errant clerics raised in the *Dialogue*, requiring excommunication in the case of clerics (and laymen) who: 'observe auguries or lots which are falsely attributed "to the saints"'; 'prognosticate through writings' (possibly Scripture); or 'make vows to a tree or anything else except a church'.⁵³

The twelfth *Clofesho* canon ordered priests 'not to chatter in the church in the manner of the 'secular poets', *saecularium poetarum*, lest by a tragic sound they corrupt or confuse the composition of the sacred words'.⁵⁴ Ecgberht's *Dialogue* and *Penitential* and the *Legatine Capitulary* remained silent on this matter, but Alcuin raised it when rebuking in 797 one 'Speratus', perhaps *Unuuona*, 'Unwona', Bishop of Leicester (r.785-800), for permitting the telling of tales at the episcopal *conuiuium*. His letter named an English pagan hero, *Hinieldus*,

⁴⁹ *Dial.Ecgberhti* xv, p.410, compare *EcgEpist.*, iii, pp.126-129.

⁵⁰ *Paenit.Theodori* I.xiii.4, p.306.

⁵¹ See 'Chapter Six: Contemporary idolaters', p.240f.

⁵² *Lucas*, V.1186-1192, p.325 (pp.517-518).

⁵³ *Paenit.Ecgberhti* viii.1, p.239. Meaney has indicated several parallels here with material from earlier Frankish councils and penitentials; nonetheless, she notes that parts of Ecgberht's chapters seem original to England, 'Idolaters and Ecclesiasts', p.110.

⁵⁴ *Clofesho* xii, p.366.

a Latinisation of the Old English ‘Ingeld’,⁵⁵ whom Alcuin believed to have supplanted Christ at the bishop’s table.

Let God's words be read at the episcopal dining-table... What has Hiniel to do with Christ? The house is narrow and has no room for both. The Heavenly King does not wish to have communion with pagan and forgotten kings listed name by name: for the eternal King reigns in Heaven, while the forgotten pagan king wails in Hell.⁵⁶

Historians of Anglo-Saxon England rightly cherish this rarest mention of a pagan hero in pre-Viking English literature, but Bede had voiced a similar frustration with the popularity of English tales some eighty years prior, even if, in keeping with his preference not to memorialise such individuals, he left us no known names of pagan heroes. As Bullough noted, Ingeld is the only English pagan hero to be mentioned in Alcuin’s letters. That he was well-known seems obvious and it follows that Alcuin knew other such heroes besides, but, like Bede, chose to omit these from his writings.⁵⁷ His letter to Unwona touched on the wider problem of songs, tales, and drinking at episcopal tables, echoing Bede’s earlier complaint of this trend.⁵⁸ Moreover, where Bede had warned Ecgberht by pointing towards Christ’s judgement; Alcuin, too, expressed similar sentiments to Unwona, ‘Whatever is done here is judged there.’⁵⁹ In her consideration of the Hinielodus passage in its epistolary and wider political context, Mary Garrison cautions narrow readings of ‘a rant solely directed against heroic literature’ and proposes that Alcuin was more interested in the problematic relationship

⁵⁵ A Heathobard prince named in *Beowulf*, xxix-xxx.2063-2066, p.70 (pp.176-177), and *Widsith*, ed. and trans. Chambers, ls.45-49, p.205. For Ingeld’s lay, see Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, ed. and trans. Friis-Jensen, VI, pp.392-447.

⁵⁶ Alcuin, *Epistola CXXIV*, ls.21-26, p.183; trans. Donald A. Bullough, ‘What has Ingeld to do with Lindisfarne?’, *ASE* 22 (1993), pp.93-125, text on pp.122-125, quotation from p.124.

⁵⁷ Bullough, ‘Ingeld and Lindisfarne’, p.93; Wormald, ‘Bede, *Beowulf*’, pp.41-42f.

⁵⁸ Alcuin, *Epistola CXXIV*, ls.6-20, p.183; Richard North, *The Origins of Beowulf: From Vergil to Wiglaf* (Oxford, 2006), pp.133-135.

⁵⁹ Alcuin, *Epistola CXXIV*, ls.12, p.182.

between Unwona and his sovereign, King Offa, than songs extolling a pagan hero.⁶⁰

Garrison's contribution is a helpful one and her point might profitably be extended to Bede's concern with native *fabulae*. Like Alcuin, Bede saw the telling of tales as involving more issues than the broadcast of non-Christian, and in some cases, idolatrous, themes. As we noted in Chapter Four, there were other, complex matters at play here, not least the worrying rapport between senior clerics and secular elites. This broader outlook in no way lessens the importance of Bede and Alcuin's mention of *fabulae*; rather, it places that specific fear in its proper context. From Bede to Alcuin, one complaint of English clerics lay with the popularity of vernacular pagan tales in ecclesiastical centres, indicating, in turn, how these sorts of stories were engrained in the social fabric of England in the seventh and eighth centuries.

Idolatry and reform

The pastoral reforms promoted in the various canons and chapters of *Clofesho* 747, the *Capitulary*, and Ecgberht's *Dialogue* and *Penitential* echo some of Bede's earlier comments regarding the cure for idolatry. As I have argued, one reason why Bede became so frustrated with the sloth of English bishops, priests, and deacons was its consequence to the consolidation of Christianity in parts of England where he intimated that Christ was lesser known and elements of idolatrous belief and observance still prevailed. This in part spurred Bede's pointed remarks to Acca in *In Samuhelem* and its later, more concerted treatment in the letter to Ecgberht. Three of our prescriptive and penitential texts – the *Clofesho* canons, *Capitulary* chapters, and Ecgberht's *Dialogue* – provided pastoral instruction to bishops and clerics. Bishops must become more visible to each parish within their diocese and be stricter

⁶⁰ Mary Garrison, 'Quid Hiniildus cum Christo?', *Latin Learning and English Lore: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature for Michael Lapidge, Volume 1*, ed. Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe and Andy Orchard (London, 2005), pp.237-259, pp.238-252.

in the selection and instruction of ordinands. Ordained ministers who exhibited idolatrous tendencies were to be deposed and some of their offices repeated. Here, in particular, the *Legatine Capitulary* stands out for its emphasis on preaching, with the compilers choosing to mix correction with encouragement.⁶¹ Its third chapter, concerning the requirement that bishops make annual visitation to each parish, highlighted ‘fear’ and ‘secular friendship’ as particular obstacles in the Northumbrian Church.⁶² Bishop George exhorted the bishops with reference to several Scriptural verses, intending to instil courage in the episcopate and remind these of their spiritual obligation.⁶³ “Preach the word”, Paul had told the Ephesian overseer Timothy, echoing the prophetic cries of Isaiah, “Go up on a high mountain, you who evangelise Zion”, and Jeremiah, “Gird up your loins and arise, and go speak to them!”⁶⁴ Bishops must stand as the ‘watchful shepherd’, *pastor pervigil*, who protects ‘the flock of Christ’, otherwise, as the Lord had warned Ezekiel when calling the prophet, “I will require their blood at your hand”.⁶⁵ George concluded this chapter with upholding the exemplar of “the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep”, inspiring Northumbria’s bishops to strive in their labour, in order that they too might one day hear, “Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of the Lord.”⁶⁶

Ecgberht’s *Dialogue* indicated the need for better standards of Christian instruction in order to counter paganism. The fifth *interrogatio* and *responsio* in Ecgberht’s *Dialogue* investigated the divine offices performed by the *presbyter corruptus* or those offices which such priests had later corrupted.⁶⁷ Its *responsio* indicates these individuals were to be excommunicated

⁶¹ Carella, ‘Context of the *Legatine Capitulary*’, pp.147-149

⁶² *Capit.Legatorum* iii, ls.44-5, pp.21-22.

⁶³ Cubitt has noted the influence of Isidore’s teaching throughout this chapter, tracing this to Alcuin. See Isidore, *Sententiae*, CCSL 111, III.xlv, pp.288-290 (trans. Knoebel, pp.194-195), cit. in Cubitt, *Councils*, p.181.

⁶⁴ *Capit.Legatorum* iii, ls.36-44, p.21, quot. 2 Timothy 4:1-2, Isaiah 40:9a, and Jeremiah 1:17.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, ls.5-10, p.22, quot. Ezekiel 3:18-19 [amended wording], and John 10:11.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, ls.10-13, p.22, quot. Matthew 25:21ac; compare *HE*, II.18, pp.196-199.

⁶⁷ *Dial.Ecgberhti* v, pp.405-406.

and claimed that bishops who failed to correct such abuses became ‘partakers of the damned’. Concerning the baptismal office, this ‘should not be repeated’.⁶⁸ In England, the *Discipulus Umbrensius* who compiled Theodore’s *Penitential* edited what appears to have been Theodore’s stance that individuals who received a non-Trinitarian baptism, i.e. the celebrant performed no Trinitarian invocation, should be rebaptised.⁶⁹ Instead, the *Discipulus* stressed Theodore’s compliance with Nicaea, contending that baptism should not be revisited even when performed in a less-than-orthodox manner. Bede, too, espoused the same teaching in relation to one member of the Trinity standing for all in the baptismal liturgy.⁷⁰ Later, Pope Zacharias contradicted this revision in one of several letters to Boniface which concern rebaptism, the pope stating how Theodore had ordered that whoever received baptism without the Trinitarian invocation should be rebaptised.⁷¹ Egberht’s *Dialogue* reiterated the *Discipulus*’ redaction, stressing that baptism should not be repeated, though, citing a letter from Pope Anastasius II, 496-498, to Emperor Anastasius, the *Dialogue* acknowledged that other *ministeria* might need reperforming.⁷² The *Dialogue* never indicated which offices but catechesis might seem implied for its natural relationship to baptism. Earlier, Bede had offered essentially the same counsel to Acca when raising the matter of ineffective priests and bloody catechumens in Book Three of *In Samuhelem* – baptism should not be repeated but pseudo-converts should be reinstructed in catechesis, if necessary, by the bishop himself.

Poor standards of catechesis and other basic responsibilities of practitioners of pastoral care seems evident from the tenth and eleventh *Clofesho* canons. The first of these impressed the

⁶⁸ *Dial.Egberhti* v, p.406, compare Augustine, *De baptismo*, CSEL 51, III.xi.16, pp.206-207.

⁶⁹ *Paenit.Theodori* I.v.6, p.296.

⁷⁰ *Exp.Actuum*, x.189-207, p.55 (pp.103-104), cit. Acts 10:48, quot. Ambrose, *De spiritu sancto*, I.iii.43-45.55-56, 63-74, pp.32-33 (pp.50-51) [embed. quot.]; see also Foot, ‘Water in the spirit’, p.175.

⁷¹ Tangl 80, ls.13-12, pp.173-175 (pp.121-122), compare Tangl 26, ls.18-26, p.46 (pp.32-33), quot. Ephesians 4:5; Tangl 68, ls.3-23, p.141 (pp.100-101).

⁷² *Dial.Egberhti* v, p.406, cit. Anastasius II, *Epistola papae Anastasii Urbis Romae ad imperatorem Anastasium*, PL 84, col.810D.

requirement for priests to learn in Latin the Lord's Prayer, Apostle's Creed, and liturgy for mass and baptism, echoing Bede's counsel to Ecgberht.⁷³ Cubitt has suggested this canon might have been enforced by 'periodic examination of priests by their bishops', and, were this the case, it would recall Bede's pressuring of Acca to personally oversee improvements to the performance of priests involved in catechesis.⁷⁴ Canon eleven called for a uniform approach to 'baptism, teaching, and judging' (possibly the correction of Christians in the 'baptism of tears' stage).⁷⁵ Its order that priests instruct catechumens (specifically children and their sponsors) in the renunciation rite and ensure these converts were rid of their former belief echoes Bede's sustained interest in this rite as part of the ongoing effort to deter Christians from lapsing into idolatry.⁷⁶

The need to raise standards of pastoral care is further shown in the seventh *Clofesho* canon, which stipulated that 'bishops, abbots, and abbesses' should create cultures of Scriptural learning in their dioceses and minsters.⁷⁷ Its emphasis on oblates 'being compelled and trained in schools to love the sacred' could reflect Bede's earlier fears that pupils in ecclesiastical schools had tasted too much Vergilian sweetness from scholars overly enamoured with secular literature.⁷⁸ On this matter, Alcuin offers some parallel to Bede, for he too recognised the benefit that an education in classical literature provided the Christian teacher, it was, as Eva Sanford summarised some time ago, 'a means to an end ... [but not] the main interest'.⁷⁹ Writing to certain monks in Ireland, perhaps English exiles, Alcuin

⁷³ *Clofesho* x, p.366, compare *Ep.Ecg.*, v, pp.130-133.

⁷⁴ Catherine Cubitt, 'Pastoral care and conciliar canons: the provisions of the 747 council of *Clofesho*', *Pastoral Care Before the Parish*, pp.193-211, p.196. See 'Chapter Six: Contemporary idolaters, pp.240-241.

⁷⁵ *Clofesho* xi, p.366.

⁷⁶ *ibid.* See 'Introduction', pp.27-29.

⁷⁷ *Clofesho* vii, pp.364-365.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

⁷⁹ Eva Matthews Sanford, 'Alcuin and the Classics', *The Classical Journal* 20:9 (1925), pp.526-533, p.533; Bullough, *Alcuin: Achievement and Reputation*, pp.277-286; Gernot Wieland, 'Alcuin's Ambiguous Attitude Towards the Classics', *The Journal of Medieval Latin* 2 (1992), pp.84-95.

stressed that ‘the knowledge of secular literature ought not to be despised, but grammar, and other disciplines of philosophical logic, must be provided as a foundation to children, so that these can ascend through fixed steps of wisdom to the highest summit of evangelical perfection’.⁸⁰ Elsewhere, Alcuin cited the authority of Paul who ‘brought forth certain testimonies from pagan books [*pagani libri*] ... following his example, nearly all the holy teachers incorporated the books of the Gentile philosophers or poets into their works.’⁸¹ This could have been inspired from Bede’s *Expositio Actuum* and *In Samuhelem*, where Bede stressed how Paul’s example vindicated the study of ‘secular wisdom’ by noble teachers.⁸² Alcuin’s biographer claimed how he ‘read in his youth the books of the ancient philosophers and the romances of Vergil’, but later refrained from their study.⁸³ We learn too how Alcuin scolded one Sigulf who tried in vain to keep secret his reading of Vergilian verse (and that Alcuin prohibited others from accessing similar literature).⁸⁴ Still, Alcuin styled himself ‘Flaccus’ after the first-century Roman (and pagan) poet, and, while Wieland correctly points out this concerned a limited pool of correspondents, Bede might well have felt even this somewhat inappropriate.⁸⁵

Bede’s anxieties towards and indeed response to strange gods and idolatry seems reflected in several of the chapters within the above ecclesiastical and penitential literature. That the latter sometimes reproduced Bede’s report of and response to specific issues indicates his remarkable sense of the threats facing England’s spiritual landscape. Nonetheless, it must be noted that some of Bede’s concerns find little to no reflection in this literature. Idol places

⁸⁰ Alcuin, *Epistola* CCLXXX, ls.27-31, p.437.

⁸¹ *idem*, *Epistola* CCIII, ls.15-18, p.337.

⁸² See ‘Chapter Four: Pagan thought’, pp.159, 162.

⁸³ *Vita Alcuini*, ed. Arndt, xvi, p.193.

⁸⁴ *ibid.* As Alcuin commended another former student, ‘May the four Gospels, not the twelve *Aeneides* fill your heart, and their chariot drive you to the palaces of the heavenly kingdom’, *Epistola* XIII, ls.20-22, p.39.

⁸⁵ Wieland, ‘Alcuin’s Ambiguous Attitude’, p.88.

were not, it would seem, a matter for discussion in the *Clofesho* canons or the chapters of the other texts; indeed, the English religious infrastructure that was ruined in the eighth century was Christian, not pagan, as Alcuin reported in the sack of Lindisfarne.⁸⁶ Of course, the lack of interest in idol places could conversely represent a triumph of Bede, who encouraged clerics from Hexham to London to transform what idol places might have remained into insular Topheths. Fine metalwork continued to endear itself to the English, becoming increasingly entrenched within the English Church, with little evidence to suggest that others shared Bede's issue with this craft.⁸⁷ The sole connection to the monk-smith whom Bede castigated lies in the fourteenth *Clofesho* canon and its complaint towards mixed attendance at Sunday worship (not all who could attend chose to do so).⁸⁸ Maybe this recalls a little of Bede's personal objection to the monk-smith who preferred his workshop to the communal place of worship.⁸⁹

The *Clofesho* canons, Ecgberht's *Dialogue* and *Penitential*, and the *Legatine Capitulary* all suggest the continued presence of pagan belief and observance in England. The various references that have been examined here constitute evidence that strange gods and idolatry remained a threat to the English Church after Bede. Previously, we considered how Bede interpreted the Dagon exegesis to explore Christ's conquering of strange gods (including, it was argued, English gods), which had enabled Christ's strong men, namely, the Roman missionaries and their insular successors, to redeem the Gentile English and bring these into

⁸⁶ Alcuin, *Epistola* XX, ls.5-8, p.57; XXII, ls.30, p.59. Exhorting the Northumbrian King Æthelred, r.774-779, 790-796, in the face of the new northmen threat, Alcuin cited 2 Kings 18:17-19:35 where the Lord broke Rabshakeh's siege of Jerusalem. Bede had considered this same Scriptural event some eight decades earlier; thus, he might be credited with influencing Alcuin's response to the northmen raids in Northumbria. Cf. Alcuin, *Epistola* XVI, ls.16-17, p.44, compare 'Chapter One: Strange gods', pp.43-44.

⁸⁷ Compare, for instance, Æthelwulf's praise of the monk-smith Cwicwine for his piety and immense skill (suggestive of a fine metalworker), Æthelwulf, *De Abbatibus*, ed. and trans. Campbell, x, pp.24-27.

⁸⁸ *Clofesho* xiv, p.367.

⁸⁹ See 'Chapter Three: Idol makers', p.132ff.

the Church.⁹⁰ That same passage saw Bede emphasise the need for convert societies to rid themselves of their former religion, and, between thirty and seventy years later, the legislative and penitential literature that has been studied in this section shows that this process remained incomplete. Idolatrous belief and observance represented some of the tares that were found in the places where Paulinus, Aidan, Cuthbert and more besides had furrowed hearts to receive the Gospel message. For Archbishops Cuthbert and Egberht, Bishop George and Abbot Wigbod, the problem of English idolatry necessitated reforms that were intended to eradicate this evil and restore idolaters to the English Church. As a result, we can then see Bede as a bridge for English considerations of and responses to strange gods and idolatry between the seventh and eighth centuries.

European horizons

After his death, Bede's thinking about strange gods and idolatry was exported to the continent through his writings. These were copied and sent from England, in particular Northumbria, to German ecclesiastical foundations, among them, Mainz, the first German archbishopric, occupied by Boniface, and then by his protégé Lul when Boniface was martyred in 754; Würzburg, established as a see by Boniface in 742 with the English bishop Burghard as its first incumbent; and, most important, Fulda, the minster founded by Boniface in 744.⁹¹ Of Bede, Boniface repeated a variant of the appellation 'torch of the Church' on several occasions, including a letter to Egberht in 746/747 where Boniface requested 'works of the lector Bede whom, as we learn, divine grace has endowed with spiritual intelligence and

⁹⁰ See 'Chapter One: Strange gods, p.71f.

⁹¹ Wilhelm Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century: The Ford Lectures delivered in the University of Oxford in the Hilary Term, 1943* (Oxford, 1946; rpt. 1966), p.140; Rosamond McKitterick, 'Exchanges between the British Isles and the Continent, c.450-c.900', *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, Volume 1, c.400-1100, ed. Richard Gameson (Cambridge, 2012), pp.313-337, pp.318, 320-327, 331-336.

permitted to shine forth in your country, so that we too may profit by the light of that torch which the Lord has granted unto you.’⁹² The significance of this styling is revealed in Boniface’s wider correspondence. Having returned to Germany from England in 716, Boniface wrote to his friend, Abbess Eadburga, who oversaw a busy scriptorium at either Thanet or Wimborne from where several Scriptural books were produced for the continental missions. In his salutary remarks, Boniface thanked Eadburga ‘because she has consoled (Boniface) with spiritual light by the gift of sacred books an exile in Germany who has to enlighten the dark corners of the Germanic peoples.’⁹³ Later, Boniface requested that Eadburga pray for him as he confronted those who had reverted to paganism, sketching out her intercession as follows,

[Pray that the Lord might] keep us safe from harm with his sheltering right hand as we go among the dens of such wolves; that where the lovely feet of those who bear the torch of Gospel peace [tread], there may not be the dark and wandering footsteps of apostates, but that when our loins are girded the Father all-merciful may put blazing torches in our hands to enlighten the hearts of the Gentiles to the vision of the Gospel of the glory of Christ.⁹⁴

As Boniface traversed dark corners on the continent as a “light unto the Gentiles”, he bore in his hand one torch in Bede, who, in turn, might be seen as casting something of his own light on the continent.⁹⁵ Later, this motif was reproduced in the thought of the Florentine Dante Alighiere, 1265-1321. In his vision of the court of heaven in *Paradiso*, Dante named Bede as one of the souls whose radiance was such that the poet could discern their form within the sun.⁹⁶ Indeed, Bede became a ‘burning sun’, fixed in celestial contemplation, with Dante

⁹² Tangl 75, ls.8-12, p.158 (p.111), Tangl 76, ls.11-15, p.159 (p.112).

⁹³ Tangl 30, ls.9-13, p.54 (pp.38-39).

⁹⁴ Tangl 65, ls.18-24, p.137 (p.100).

⁹⁵ Isaiah 49:6b, read with Acts 13:47.

⁹⁶ Dante, *Paradiso*, vol. 3 of *The Divine Comedy*, ed. and trans. Durling, Canto X, ls.130-131, pp.212-213.

likening he and the other souls to noble ladies listening for new notes amid the movement of a dance.⁹⁷

English missions on the continent

Between them, Boniface and Lull requested at least fourteen Bedan works.⁹⁸ Ten of these were named, but Boniface's earliest recorded requests to Ecgberht and Hwætberht pluralised the noun 'works'. From this, we may infer that he requested at least two works in each letter, their titles perhaps passed via word of mouth through the courier. The ten named works reveal that the missionaries saw greater value in Bede's overtly spiritual works – his *Epigrammata* (now lost) a singular departure – specifically, six commentaries, the prose and metrical lives of Cuthbert, and the homilies. The Northumbrian *scriptoria* that handled these requests worked hard to fulfil them and even created a new script – Insular Minuscule – in part to accelerate the process, though, it remains possible that some orders were not fulfilled.⁹⁹ A response from Abbot Cuthbert to Lull was accompanied with just one of the three works that the archbishop had requested and at another time Cuthbert explained that a severe winter had slowed production. On the whole, however, manuscript and textual evidence from the major ecclesiastical foundations established by English missionaries in Germany indicates that many requests for Bede's works were fulfilled.

The extent to which Boniface and Lull or even earlier missionaries such as Willibrord used Bede's writings as part of their evangelism still remains the realm of speculation. Bede's

⁹⁷ Dante, *Paradiso*, Canto X, ls.76-81, pp.210-211, compare Bede's comment: 'For the word "dancing" signifies not the twirling of a body bent with an actor's motions, but the devotion of a diligent heart and the religious agility of the limbs', *Lucas*, II.2502-2504, p.164 (p.304).

⁹⁸ Dorothy Whitelock, *After Bede*, JL (1960), pp.6-8.

⁹⁹ M.B. Parkes, *The Scriptorium of Wearmouth-Jarrow*, JL (1982), p.15f.

Expositio Actuum might have been one of the earliest of his works to reach the continent, perhaps even within his lifetime. A work on the canonical Book of Acts would seem of obvious significance to evangelists and Bede's work was markedly more accessible in its prose and size than other available commentaries on this Scriptural book. Two out of the three surviving inventories from English foundations (Würzburg and Fulda) list a work entitled '*Actus apostolorum*', and, while Elias Lowe presumed these represented the canonical Acts, he perhaps overlooked two important evidences: most works in these inventories were non-canonical; with a number of these abbreviated (i.e., in the Würzburg inventory, '*historia anglorum*' represents Bede's *Historia*).¹⁰⁰ The item '*Actus apostolorum*' could then represent an abbreviation of Bede's *Expositio Actuum*, which, the wider manuscript evidence shows, became a popular text both in England and on the continent. Were Bede's Acts ever in the hands of Boniface, Lul, or, even earlier, the Northumbrian Willibrord, it would have offered these and their fellow-teachers several practical lessons, not least Bede's version of Ambrose's counsel for teaching pagans which Bede had adapted to make it more suitable to convert followers of northern European religious persuasion as opposed to its original Italian audience.¹⁰¹

The regular incidence of strange gods, idols, and idolatry in Bede's *In Samuhelem* could have made this another work of interest to English missionaries in Germany. Indeed, we know that Lul requested this commentary from Æthelberht at York, and, while the manuscript transmission suggests that *In Samuhelem* was not well-known in Carolingian centres, the work was certainly studied in English centres in Germany.¹⁰² Bede's remarks about the

¹⁰⁰ Elias A. Lowe, 'An Eighth-Century List of Books in a Bodleian MS. from Würzburg and Its Probable Relation to the Laudian Acts', *Speculum* 3:1 (1928), pp.3-15.

¹⁰¹ See 'Chapter Six: Contemporary idolaters', pp.222-223.

¹⁰² M.L.W. Laistner and H.H. King, *A Hand-List of Bede Manuscripts* (London, 1943), pp.65-66; George Hardin Brown, 'Bede's Neglected Commentary on Samuel', *Innovation and Tradition*, pp.121-142, pp.123-124.

correct treatment of idol places and the need to produce robust converts seem but two lessons that could have found value in Germany. Of idol places, it is notable that the surviving narratives that concern the treatment of such sites show how the missionaries shared Bede's view that pagan temples and shrines should be ruined, not, as in the Gregorian approach, consecrated into churches. Alcuin reported how Willibrord, while in Fositeland (named after the local god, Fosite) violated the sacred well and cooked cattle that were under the protection of the temples and sanctuaries; later, Willibrord broke the idol of a god in Walichrum, much to the consternation of its keeper.¹⁰³ When between 719-722 Boniface ministered beside Willibrord in *Frisia Citerior*, he 'destroyed temples [*fana*] and sanctuaries [*delubra*] and built churches and oratories'.¹⁰⁴ These temples and sanctuaries dated to Radbod's capture of *Frisia Citerior* from Pippin, when the former burned its churches and restored its 'temples [*fana*] and sanctuaries [*delubra*]', perhaps suggesting that Willibrord had failed to have these sites eradicated.¹⁰⁵ Around 722-723, Boniface cut down the tree known as *robor Iobis*, perhaps 'Jupiter's oak', which stood in Hessa, its miraculous felling led those who moments before had cursed Boniface as he hewed with his axe to instead come to faith in Christ.¹⁰⁶ Other missionaries, such as Liudger, c.744-809, the Frisian convert who became a pupil of Alcuin at York, were also recorded as ruining idol places across the northern seaboard.¹⁰⁷ In 773, an English abbot named Eanwulf sent a letter to Charlemagne (before Alcuin entered the latter's service) in which he quoted Gregory the Great's counsel to Æthelberht, recorded in Bede's *Historia*, including the now well-rehearsed line: 'overthrow their temples and shrines'.¹⁰⁸ Charlemagne had earlier fulfilled this Deuteronomic command

¹⁰³ Alcuin, *Vita Willibrordi*, x-xi, pp.124-126, xiv, pp.127-128.

¹⁰⁴ Willibald, *Vita Bonifatii*, ed. Levison, ls.4-10, p.24 [hereafter, *VB*].

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, ls.17-20, p.16.

¹⁰⁶ Boniface's subsequent decision to construct an oratory dedicated to St. Peter from the timber of the oak could be seen to balance the approach of Bede and Gregory, *ibid.*, ls.19-2, pp.30-32.

¹⁰⁷ Altfred, *Vita S. Liudgeri*, ed. Pertz, I.ix, pp.410-411.

¹⁰⁸ Tangl 120, ls.17, p.256, cit. Deuteronomy 12:2-3.

when in 772 he cut down the sacred tree of the Old Saxons, the so-called *Irmisul* in Heresburg; indeed, in relation to this event, Dorothy Whitelock has suggested that it was the news of Irmisul and the conquering of the Old Saxons that inspired Eanwulf to write his letter to Charlemagne.¹⁰⁹ As Whitelock observed, Eanwulf's letters reveal 'the continued interest in the continental missions by the Northumbrians', and, I would add, the enthusiasm of clerics from both northern and southern England to ruin idol places.¹¹⁰

Willibrord, Boniface, and others thus observed the same Old Testament legislation that Bede had earlier espoused, indeed, Hans-Werner Goetz has proposed that the events across Fositeland, Hessia, and Heresburg were essentially identical to the ruin of old Goodmanham.¹¹¹ Yet, the parallel seems imperfect. Bede taught that idol places should be ruined only once the local population had converted, whereas Fositeland, Hessia, and Heresburg were pagan societies.¹¹² Bede would have thought it better for the missionaries to preach first and measure whatever treatment of idol places that might follow thereafter on the response of the local population to this teaching. In this respect, it is interesting to note Bede's wider contrast to Alcuin and certain other hagiographers. Steffen Patzold has shown how Christian writers with little to no first-hand experience of pagans often painted the latter in a feral, brutish light, but Bede's treatment seems closer to experienced evangelists, such as Liudger, Rimbert, and Boniface.¹¹³ This could suggest Bede held more experience of

¹⁰⁹ *Annales Regni Francorum*, ed. Kurze, 772, pp.33-34; Rudolf and Meginhard, *De miraculis sancti Alexandri*, ed. Pertz, ls.15-18, p.676; Whitelock, *EHD*, pp.887-888.

¹¹⁰ Whitelock, *EHD*, pp.887-888.

¹¹¹ Hans-Werner Goetz, 'Christians and pagans in the period of missionary activities: similar conceptions in a religious confrontation', *The Creation of Medieval Northern Europe: Christianisation, Social Transformations, and Historiography: Essays in Honour of Sverre Bagge*, ed. Leidulf Melve and Sigbjørn Olsen Sønnesyn (Oslo, 2012), pp.29-43, pp.30-31.

¹¹² See 'Chapter Two: Idol places', p.99.

¹¹³ Patzold, 'Wahrnehmung und Wissen', pp.87-100.

idolaters than once thought (in keeping with our earlier findings). Equally, it might indicate his impression of Christ's radical teachings concerning the need to reach non-Christians.¹¹⁴

Carolingian ideals: conversion and conquest

Others in continental Europe, such as Alcuin and his Mainz-born student, Rabanus Maurus, cited Bede's treatment of strange gods and idolatry in their efforts to influence Carolingian rulers to convert and Christianise the idolatrous peoples in their own and neighbouring territories. Both men shared Bede's view of the importance of rulers and bishops working together to eliminate pagan belief and observance, which, in their time, saw the Christian conquest of pagan lands in order to incorporate these into the Church. One notable instance where Alcuin might have cited Bede while espousing this Carolingian ideal can be located in the *Admonitio generalis*, a document of legislative reforms issued by Charlemagne at Aachen in 789.¹¹⁵ The prologue to the canons extolled the exemplar of Josiah, 'In the Books of Kings we read how the holy Josiah strove to recall the kingdom which God had given him to the worship of the true God by visitation, correction, and admonition'.¹¹⁶ Wallace-Hadrill suspected that Charlemagne himself was responsible for this Old Testament reference, but Bullough identified the hand of Alcuin, both here and in other Scriptural allusions scattered throughout the *Admonitio*.¹¹⁷ Theodulf of Orléans need not have prompted Alcuin's interest in Josiah, as Bullough suggested, based on Theodulf's later mention of Josiah in his *Carmina*.¹¹⁸ Alcuin, perhaps Theodulf also, could have received inspiration from reading Bede's *In*

¹¹⁴ John 3:16-17.

¹¹⁵ Rosamond McKitterick, *The Frankish Church and the Carolingian Reforms, 789-895* (London, 1977), p.1ff.

¹¹⁶ *Admonitio generalis*, ed. Mordek et al., ls.30-32, pp.182-183.

¹¹⁷ Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship*, p.107; Bullough, *Alcuin: Achievement and Reputation*, pp.379-384; see also Wilfried Hartmann, 'Alcuin und die Gesetzgebung Karls des Grossen', in *Alcuin von York und die geistige Grundlegung Europas : Akten der Tagung vom 30. September bis zum 2. Oktober 2004 in der Stiftsbibliothek*, ed. Ernst Tresp and Karl Schmuki (St. Gallen, 2010), pp.33-48, pp.35-36.

¹¹⁸ Theodulf of Orléans, *Carmina* XXVIII, ed. Dümmler, ls.77-82, p.495; see Bullough, *Alcuin: Achievement and Reputation*, p.380.

Regum librum and its substantial treatment of Josiah's receipt of the Mosaic Law which stirred the king together with the priesthood to reform Israelite religion, with *In Regum librum* stressing the action to be taken concerning idols and idol places.¹¹⁹ Plainly, the expectation was that Charlemagne would follow Josiah's example and 'correct errors, cut away what is superfluous, and establish what is right'.¹²⁰

Charlemagne's twenty-two articles, which follow the conciliar canons issued by Pope Hadrian (772-795), included the order to destroy 'trees, rocks, and springs' which had become idol places.¹²¹ Other texts associated with Charlemagne, most notable, the capitulary known as *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae*, c.792, further indicate the need to legislate against paganism in a period where conversion and conquest were increasingly entwined.¹²² Boniface had earlier raised concerns over residual and in places resurgent paganism within the Frankish Church, but much more important to Charlemagne were those pagan lands to the east which the king had invaded, most notable for Einhard, the emperor's biographer, the wars with the pagan Saxons, 772-804, and Avars, 788-830.¹²³ These idolaters, internal and external to Charlemagne's empire, may be implied in the intent to 'cut away what is abominable'. In the language of the *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae*, 'to cut away' meant 'to kill', for its eighth chapter ordered the execution of Saxons who 'scorned to receive baptism and wished to remain pagan'.¹²⁴ The shift to a more tolerant approach in the later Avar conquest was the result of pressure from Charlemagne's spiritual counsellors, including Alcuin, who, like Bede before him, believed coercion antithetical to the Gospel. Urging

¹¹⁹ Though Alcuin went further than Bede when interpreting Charlemagne as a second David, a connection that Bede reserved for the relationship between David and Christ. See Alcuin, *Epistola XLI*, pp.84-85, especially ls.14-17; *Epistola CLXXI*, ls.5-31, p.283.

¹²⁰ *Admonitio generalis, prol.*, ls.28-29, p.182.

¹²¹ *ibid.*, lxiv, pp.216-217.

¹²² *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae*, pp.68-70; Palmer, 'Paganism in the Carolingian world', p.414.

¹²³ Einhard, *Vita Karoli Magni*, ed. Holder-Egger, xiii, ls.22-25, p.15.

¹²⁴ *Admonitio generalis, prol.*, ls.28-29, p.182; *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae*, viii, p.69, see also vi, ix-x, xxi, pp.68-69; compare Einhard, *Vita Karoli Magni*, ls.31-7, pp.9-10.

Bishop Arno, later Archbishop of Salzburg (d.821), to practise persuasion over coercion in relation to conversion and carefully catechise pagan converts, Alcuin might have had in mind some of Bede's teachings.¹²⁵ The letter outlined Alcuin's belief that the baptism of the Saxons was often lost for this people 'never had in their hearts the foundation of faith', recalling, in particular, Bede's concern for a substantive catechumenate leading to baptism.¹²⁶

For Rabanus Maurus, Bede provided a useful resource for strange gods and idolatry. For instance, Rabanus quoted Bede's definition of idolaters from *In Lucam* and of pagans from *In Marcum* in his *Expositio in Matthaem*.¹²⁷ Rabanus had presented this work to Archbishop Haistulf (d.826) in 820, intending it as a resource for teachers seeking short lessons on the Gospel text.¹²⁸ One such teacher was Rabanus' student at Fulda, Otfrid of Weissenburg (c.800-c.875), who reproduced the same Bedan definition when creating his own gloss on Matthew's text.¹²⁹ Rabanus' chief interest in Bede lay in the latter's Old Testament commentaries. He reproduced the treatment of Dagon from *In Samuhelem* in his own *Commentaria in libros IV Regum*, completed c.834.¹³⁰ Developing the image of Dagon as 'devil' and 'fish of sorrow', Rabanus saw Satan as 'devouring the fishermen (that is, Christian teachers) in the sea of this world.'¹³¹ Much of Rabanus' employment of Bede reflected his own views over the relationship between kings and the Church. Rabanus impressed his vision of kings as *rectores* who should learn the history of Israelite kingship in

¹²⁵ Alcuin, *Epistola* CXIII, ls.8-4, pp.164-166 [em.cit.], see also *Epistola* CX, ls.4-14, pp.158-159 [em.cit.]; Ruth Mazo Karras, 'Pagan survivals and syncretism in the conversion of Saxony', *The Catholic Historical Review* 72:4 (1986), pp.553-572, p.554f; Jennifer R. Davis, *Charlemagne's Practice of Empire* (Cambridge, 2015), p.413f.

¹²⁶ Alcuin, *Epistola* CXIII, ls.25-26, p.164.

¹²⁷ Rabanus Maurus, *Expositio in Matthaem*, CCCM 174-174A, I.4/10.69-70, p.105, quot. *Lucas*, I.3061-3062, p.97 (p.216); *ibid.*, VIII.27/32.93-99, pp.743-744, quot. *Marcus*, IV.1329-1335, p.629.

¹²⁸ *ibid.*, *praef.*, ls.7-61, pp.1-3.

¹²⁹ Otfrid of Weissenburg, *Glossae in Matthaem*, CCCM 200, iv.10.107-109, p.79, xxvii.32.223-224, p.353.

¹³⁰ Rabanus Maurus, *Commentarius Regum*, I.v, col.28AC.

¹³¹ *ibid.*, col.28A.

order to remain faithful to their own spiritual office.¹³² For Louis the Pious (r.813-840), Rabanus reproduced Bede's teaching that kings were 'exalted and subject to rule'; however, perhaps as a result of his own close ties with Louis and other Carolingian rulers, he was less-inclined to point out as Bede had the wicked beginnings of Israel's royalty or the rejected Samuel's prophecy against kingship.¹³³

Caroline Chevalier-Royet has shown how Rabanus found in Bede's eighth response to Nothhelm from *In Regum librum* a justification for the Carolingian treatment of captured pagan peoples.¹³⁴ Bede had interpreted 2 Samuel 8:2, "And he (David) defeated Moab and measured them with a line", as an exaggerated report of David's triumph over the pagan Moabites: 'Scripture wanted to emphasise the immense abasement of a captured and oppressed nation; hence it says that they were levelled to the ground.'¹³⁵ His explanation to Nothhelm that 2 Samuel 8:2 should be understood as emphasising David's power in that the king *could* have killed his Moabite captives seems somewhat removed from the literal text where David arranged the Moabites into two lines, "one to be put to death and one to keep alive".¹³⁶ Yet it conforms with Bede's wider opposition to harming captured peoples, whatever their religion, and his related conviction that non-believers should be convinced, not coerced, into converting to Christianity. After reproducing part of Bede's teaching, Rabanus interpreted the nations that David subjugated in 2 Samuel 8 as the Gentiles over whom Christ would rule, his comments justifying how these and other peoples were compelled into

¹³² Mayke de Jong, 'The empire as *ecclesia*: Hrabanus Maurus and biblical *historia* for rulers', *The Use of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Yitzhak Hen and Matthew Innes (Cambridge, 2000), pp.191-226, pp.194-201, 204-226.

¹³³ Rabanus Maurus, *Commentarius Regum*, IV.xi, col.240D-241A, quot. *Quaest.Regum*, XIX, pp.313-314 (p.123); Rabanus, *Commentarius Regum*, I.viii, col.36AC, compare *Samuhel*, II.150-331, pp.71-76 (pp.210-217). See also 'Chapter Five: Idolatrous kings', p.186f.

¹³⁴ Caroline Chevalier-Royet, *Les Livres des Rois dans l'empire carolingien: Exégèse et actualité* (Paris, 2021), pp.375-378, especially pp.377-378.

¹³⁵ *Quaest.Regum*, VIII, p.302 (pp.103-104) [em.cit.].

¹³⁶ *ibid.*, ls.23-30 [em.cit.].

servitude and tribute.¹³⁷ Thus, for Rabanus, Christian rulers (the figural David) could subjugate pagan lands (the figural Moab). In this respect, Bede became a tool to the ongoing Carolingian efforts to legitimise past and present campaigns against pagan peoples. It is worth reiterating that Bede would have been less than pleased to learn how his interpretation of certain Scriptural passages was employed in service of a coercive version of the Christian faith that was far removed from the Gospel teachings so central to his own understanding of conversion and faith.

Conclusion: Bede the spiritual watchman

Bishop George had called on English bishops to be as ‘watchful shepherds’, *pastores pervigiles*, citing, too, the memorable words in Ezekiel where God called the prophet to be a “watchman to the house of Israel”.¹³⁸ Bede knew this motif from his own reading of the Old Testament, where the spiritual watchman [*speculator*] or watchtower [*specula*] scanned the horizon for threats, reporting these to Israel.¹³⁹ The motif is of particular relevance to the presentation of Bede in this thesis since in Scripture the watchman or watchtower was mostly employed in the case of prophets such as Ezekiel or Jeremiah who called on Israel to reject their idolatrous belief and observance and return to the worship of the one true God. For Jerome, the ecclesiastical watchman was the ‘bishop or priest’ who ‘reading the Scriptures, recognises and foresees what the future may be. He tells this to the people and corrects the

¹³⁷ Rabanus Maurus, *Commentarius Regum*, I.viii, col.93D-95A; *idem*, *Commentaria in libros II Paralipomenon*, PL 109, II.xviii, col.367D-370C.

¹³⁸ Ezekiel 3, especially vv.17-21.

¹³⁹ Isaiah 52:8, 62:6; Jeremiah 31:6, 51:12; Ezekiel 33; Nehemiah 4:9; Habakkuk 2:1; *Samuhel*, I.84-86, p.13 (p.109), I1813-1817, p.54 (p.181), I.2093-2097, p.61 (pp.191-192), I.2155-2159, p.63 (p.194), I.2289-2306, p.66 (pp.199-200); *Cant. Canticorum*, VI.540-554, p.373, quot. Gregory, *Homiliae in Hiezechielem*, i.11, 7.133-148 (see also ls.123-133), p.172 (p.217). Bede sometimes interpreted *turris*, ‘tower’, in a similarly spiritual sense. See *Cant. Canticorum*, IV.vii.306-311, p.323 (p.205), cit. Song of Songs 7:4; V.viii.548-553, p.352 (p.241), cit. Song of Songs 8:10.

transgressors.’¹⁴⁰ Bede the monk-priest can thus be considered as a watchman or watchtower of England, who, looking outward, saw strange gods and idolatry as a threat to the Church and warned of this evil in his writings.

The spiritual watchman must possess keen sight, learned through prolonged contemplation, indeed, his watch completed, he must hasten back to contemplation in order to watch over his own heart.¹⁴¹ Christ said, “Blessed are the watchful”, thus, those who were called to the night watches must be marked out as a tower rises over its encompassing wall.¹⁴² Watchmen were beneficial insofar as a people listened to their call. Jeremiah’s call for repentance from idols was ignored in Judah and as a result Nebuchadnezzar captured and exiled its king and people (but let the prophet walk free).¹⁴³ As David wrote, in words that Bede included in his *Abbreviated Psalter*, “Unless the Lord guards the city, he who guards it watches in vain.”¹⁴⁴

As one such spiritual watchman, Bede scanned the horizon of England’s spiritual landscape and it is in that observation that we locate his concern with strange gods and idolatry, that is, his fears over the threat of idolatrous belief and observance in England and Europe. The thesis has shown how Bede noted what other watchtowers had reported about paganism in their own context – in particular those from Scripture – and it was in this sense that Bede observed and then responded to what he perceived as the threat of paganism within the ongoing conversion and consolidation of Christian faith in Northumbria and the other English kingdoms. Bede the spiritual watchman reminded his readers of the threat of strange gods and idolatry within the histories of the people of God, up to and including the conversion of the

¹⁴⁰ Jerome, *Hiezechiel*, X.1088-1092, pp.468-469 (p.384).

¹⁴¹ Bede explored the active and contemplative life with reference to watchfulness in his homily for the feast of St. John the Evangelist, cf. *Homelia* i.9, ls.145-209, pp.64-65 (pp.90-93) [em.cit.].

¹⁴² Luke 12:37-40; 2 Peter 3:13-14; compare *Epist. Catholicae*, 2Pt.iii.161-166, pp.280-281 (p.152) [em.cit.].

¹⁴³ Jeremiah 34-39.

¹⁴⁴ Psalm 126(127):1, compare Bede, *Collectio Psalterii Bedae*, ed. and trans. Brown, p.29 (p.81).

English. His sense that strange gods were memorialised in England caused him to stress the Old Testament teaching that these gods were not gods but devils who were worthless in comparison to Christ. Bede sustained much of the Old Testament legislation in relation to idol places, calling for the immediate and total destruction of pagan infrastructure in convert societies. He warned over the particular threats that he perceived within the English spiritual landscape, perhaps including the status of fine metalworkers.

The influence of pagan thought represented a prominent worry for Bede. His frustration with the influence of secular literature and tales indicates the infiltration of idolatry into the heartlands of Christianity in England – its minsters and other ecclesiastical centres – while his careful teaching of portents suggests further a live issue with superstition. In response, he warned English scholars and teachers as to their conduct, whereas noble teachers were exhorted to worst pagan error by its own weapons. Bede was cautious in his treatment of kings, but made it clear in his report of Israelite rulers and their English equivalents in the *Historia Ecclesiastica* that the rule of a king was spiritual and must then include efforts to eliminate paganism in all its expressions throughout a kingdom. Bede the spiritual watchman warned that failing to heed the lessons of Scripture such as the collapse of Samaria and Judah as a consequence of their idolatry would see individual kings and kingdoms suffer a similar fate since God would not protect those who received the faith only to wish it passed on to others. Bede spoke of the need to convert pagan peoples in Europe, echoing Christ's words in relation to the German and Saracen peoples. While Christ had strangled the strange gods of England, Bede nonetheless felt there existed some in his society who had foregone the baptism of tears and now returned to the idolatrous belief and practice that had once been confessed as the work and pomp of the devil. These pseudo-Christians were by Bede's own

standards ‘idolaters’, requiring correction and reinstruction in order to be reincorporated within Christ’s Church.

Bede was never promoted to high office, though, in at least one respect, this must be seen as a boon to the modern study of his life within the context of Anglo-Saxon England. His remarkable output has no rival in the known compositions of Acca, Ecgberht, Boniface, or Alcuin. It was and still is through these works that Bede exercises his power, for in his writings he showed a remarkable grasp of the times in which he lived and an extraordinary capacity to comment of these in words that he intended to educate his readership. In Bede’s words, we come as close as we ever shall to the person and thought of this spiritual watchman of the Northumbrian and wider English Church, which, for Bede, meant a watchman of the English people. It is hoped that one of these fears, the threat of strange gods and idolatry, might now find better representation in future studies of Anglo-Saxon England and the Venerable Bede.

The initial plans behind this thesis now seem far removed from its present and final version. An interest in Bede’s thought about images and its relationship to idols which I had explored for my masters degree led me to propose a theme that explored ideas from Bede’s interpretation of the Genesis proclamation, “And God created man in his own image”, to Christian images known to Bede, most famous, the painted *tabulae* adorning the churches at Wearmouth-Jarrow.¹⁴⁵ The third chapter in the present thesis still maintains some of these notions but is much more interested in the Exodus prohibition, “You shall not make a graven thing”, than the Genesis *imago dei*, etc.¹⁴⁶ Now, the idol is studied for its own importance

¹⁴⁵ Genesis 1:27.

¹⁴⁶ Exodus 20:4-5a; Deuteronomy 5:8-9a.

with supporting themes considered thereafter, a marked change from those initial plans where this order was reversed. The original schema encountered several problems, not least the challenge of shaping its loose themes into a coherent structure.

Over time, the realisation came to me that Bede's interest as to whether an image constituted an idol seemed to form one part of his broader interest with idols and idolatry. I owe much of this understanding to Bede's *In Samuhelem*, which, together with certain other of his exegetical works, convinced me that Bede considered matters of paganism much more than scholars had previously appreciated. It became clear that Bede held an interest in historical expressions of paganism, in particular, the Gentile nations in the Old Testament and their relationship to Israel, so too, the insular religion which the English had rejected in order to profess Christ as the true God. Still, the thesis endeavoured to keep within the lines demarcated in scholarship, that Bede was a man interested most in ecclesiastical matter and that, should he have had an interest in paganism, it must then be limited to an historical expression or one external to his English context.

At last I realised that Bede's exegetical treatment of strange gods and idolatry seemed to contemplate matters in England, and thus could with careful study be read as offering comment to his immediate concerns. This revealed a number of passages where Bede showed an interest in a past instance of paganism but had at the forefront of his mind a preoccupation with idolatrous belief and practice in England. In such examples, Bede seemed to rise in stature, resembling a teacher in the mould of Demetrius the Areopagite or Cyprian of Carthage, a Christian commentator commentating on the local beliefs of his own people. Much like the Fathers so beloved to him, Bede saw the Church as opposing the congregation

of the devil, revealing that his thinking of strange gods and idolatry was intertwined with his hopes for the Church.

I have argued that Bede's concern can be shown in at least six overlapping themes: strange gods; idol places; idol makers; pagan thought; idolatrous kings; and contemporary idolaters. In relation to strange gods, I have argued that Bede reproduced the Scriptural interpretation in which pagan deities were seen as demons masquerading as divinities to mortals. He incorporated classical euhemerism within this interpretation, perhaps for its relevance to the English pantheon. Bede knew more about these English 'vanities' than once thought, but kept faith (for the most part) with the Mosaic legislation that these gods should not be memorialised. Bede was interested in the treatment of idol places in Scripture and Christian contexts, indeed, this was known as far as southern England, from where Nothhelm sent Bede several questions over Josiah's treatment of pagan infrastructure. Once again, Bede sustained what Scripture had said about these sites and, in notable contrast to the Gregorian approach, instructed Acca that convert societies should remove all idol places at once and forever. He knew of Edwin's former idol place at Goodmanham and, in his narrative of its destruction, fulfilled the instruction that he himself had earlier shared with Acca, though his wider report of insular idol places suggested that many sites remained in situ long after conversion. Bede's criticism of idol makers in Scripture might have shaped his treatment of similar craftsmen in an English context. His personal aversion to fine metalworkers was to some extent based on his experience of a wicked monk-smith known to him from a Bernician minster, which seemingly influenced his consideration of fine metalworkers celebrated in Scripture. It is possible that Bede's concern rose from his knowledge of the reverence that skilled smiths commanded in England, though there remains no evidence that he knew the Northumbrian reception of the god-smith, English Weland.

Bede revealed his knowledge of England's spiritual landscape in his treatment of pagan thought. He recognised the problems and merits of secular literature, teaching how only select individuals should be permitted to read the genre since it improved their oratory and countering of pagan error. Bede indicated that pagan tales and portents remained an issue in English society, and, while he sought to exploit part of these in order to impress Christian truths, he more commonly condemned these superstitions. I have argued that Bede's concern with idolatrous kings was most concentrated in historical examples from Scripture and England. He believed that the Mosaic Law outlined what was expected of Judeo-Christian kings but knew that most Israelite kings and more than a few English rulers had failed to meet its standard. The influence of foreign consorts and wicked ministers represented to Bede an especial threat to kings and Bede's exploration of these in his report of the conversion and reversion of King Rædwald provides a notable example where he combined history with Scripture to warn his reader of idolatrous behaviour. There were on the continent idolatrous kings like Rædwald, the Frisian Radbod, among others, and Bede praised the example of those English missionaries who travelled overseas to preach Christ to these rulers and their people. In the Saracens, Bede saw a pagan people new to the European continent, thinking these worshippers of the morning and evening star. He was distressed at the Saracen's treatment of Christians in Iberia and Septimania; however, he hoped that this tribe would learn faith in Christ and thereby receive the spiritual inheritance promised to their forefather, as Paul had taught, "And if you be Christ's, then you are the seed of Abraham, heirs according to the promise."¹⁴⁷ The English too had become heirs to the promise of Abraham; nevertheless, the thesis has suggested that Bede believed certain communities in Northumbria and elsewhere in England had retained some of their idolatrous belief and observance. He seemed to locate these idolaters in predominantly rural parts where bishops and priests

¹⁴⁷ Galatians 3:29.

neglected to tread as a result of their own sloth but also fear of the local populace, although elite circles were not immune to idolatry. In this regard, Bede revealed his sense that the full conversion of the English remained incomplete, for, while Northumbria and England possessed Christian kings and spiritual ministers, there remained a need to correct extant idolatry and prevent its further spread. He shared his firm belief with Acca and Ecgberht that the Northumbrian Church must be reformed in order to counter the increase in faithlessness and restore those whom he considered idolaters to full communion with Christ, thereby consolidating the latter's faith in England. Together, these themes reveal the concern of Bede the spiritual watchman with strange gods and idolatry and his sense of its threat whether internal or external to Anglo-Saxon England.

Appendix

Bede's vocabulary for strange gods and idolatry

Gods and idols

Deus, dei, 'god'; see *DMLBS*, vol. 1, '*deus*', i, p.836. Paired with *alieni*, 'strange' (as in foreign); *falsa*, 'false'.

Lar, lares, 'tutelary gods', 'gods of home'; see *DMLBS*, vol. 2, '*lar*', i, p.1899.

Numen, numina, 'pagan divinity'; see *DMLBS*, vol. 2, '*numen*', p.2304.

Spiritus, 'spirit'; not listed in *DMLBS* (compare vol. 3, '*spiritus*', pp.3513-3514). Paired with *immundi*, 'wicked'; *maligini*, 'bad'.

Idolum, idola, 'idol' (meaning both 'gods' and 'images' of gods); see *DMLBS*, vol. 2, '*idolum*', iii-iv, p.1497.

Imago, imagines, 'image worshipped as god'; see *DMLBS*, vol. 2, '*imago*', v, p.1518.

Simulacrum, simulacra, 'image worshiped as god'; see *DMLBS*, vol. 3, '*simulacrum*', iv, p.3443.

Statua, statuae, 'statue', 'image'; see *DMLBS*, vol. 3, '*statua*', p.3537.

Abominatio, abominaciones, 'abomination' as in 'idol', often when found in Judeo-Christian sacred places; not listed in *DMLBS* (compare vol. 1, '*abominatio*', pp.8-9).

Vanitas, uanitates, 'vanity' as in 'god'; not listed in *DMLBS* (compare vol. 3, '*vanitas*', pp.3942-3943).

Idolatry

Idolatria (idololatria), idolatriae (idololatriae), 'idolatry', 'worship of idols'; see *DMLBS*, vol. 2, '*idololatria*', p.1497.

Cultus, 'worship'; see *DMLBS*, vol. 1, '*cultus*', iii, p.703.

Idolothytum, idolothyta, ‘food or other sacrifice offered to idols’; see *DMLBS*, vol. 2, ‘*idolothytum*’, p.1497.

Apostasia, apostasiae, ‘apostasy’; see *DMLBS*, vol. 1, ‘*apostata*’, p.132.

Gentiles, pagans, and idolaters

Gens, gentiles, ‘Gentile’; see *DMLBS*, vol. 1, ‘*gens*’, iv, p.1338.

Paganus, pagani, ‘pagan’; see *DMLBS*, vol. 2, ‘*paganus*’, ii, p.2435.

Idolatra (idololatra), idolatrae (idololatrae), ‘idolater’; see *DMLBS*, vol. 2, ‘*idololatra*’, p.1497.

Ethnicus, ethnici, ‘heathen’; see *DMLBS*, vol. 1, ‘*ethnicus*’, i, p.1038.

Rusticus, rustici, ‘country dweller’; see *DMLBS*, vol. 3, ‘*rusticus*’, ii, p.3230.

Apostata, apostatae, ‘apostate’; see *DMLBS*, vol. 1, ‘*apostata*’, p.132.

Reprobus, reprobri, ‘reprobate’; see *DMLBS*, vol. 3, ‘*reprobus*’, ii, pp.3132.

Idol places

Fanum, fana, ‘larger idol place’ or ‘temple’; see *DMLBS*, vol. 1, ‘*fanum*’, p.1149.

Aedificium, aedificia, ‘smaller idol place’ or ‘shrine’; not listed in *DMLBS* (compare vol. 1, ‘*aedificium*’, p.53).

Delubrum, delubri, ‘temple’ or ‘shrine’; see *DMLBS*, vol. 1, ‘*delubrum*’, p.792.

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