'The people whom he foreknew': the English as a chosen people in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*

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Abstract
This article investigates the representation of the Anglo-Saxons as a 'chosen people' in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*. Although Bede rarely makes the connection between the *gens Anglorum* and the people of Israel explicit, I argue that he was continuing and reinventing a tradition in Christian historiography, which represented individual Christian nations after patterns established by Old Testament authors. I argue that appreciating the centrality of this biblical motif is crucial for our understanding of *Historia ecclesiastica* and consequently for our understanding of how national identity developed in Anglo-Saxon England.

In the introduction to a recent edition of the Venerable Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* ("Ecclesiastical History of the English People"), Rowan Williams wrote that the English are portrayed by Bede as a "chosen people," called by God to punish the heretical and faithless Britons, the original inhabitants of Britain, by casting them out of the land, which "replayed" the scriptural history of Israel inheriting the promised land from the Canaanites.[1] They are heathen invaders—in Bede's own words "a barbarous, fierce and unbelieving nation"—who are used as the agent of divine providence, then brought into the light of Christianity by faithful missionaries.[2] In turn, they not only help reform the practices of their wayward neighbours, but also spread the gospel further afield by sending missionaries back to Europe. This is a compelling reading of Bede's *magnum opus*, one that has been advanced a number of times by historians in recent decades, however, a complete analysis of the text to see exactly how Bede weaves this Old Testament-inspired narrative in both broad patterns and specific details has yet to be achieved. [3] Nor has anyone

[1] R. Williams and B. Ward, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People: An Introduction and Selection* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 5.

[2] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.23 (B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors [eds], *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Oxford Medieval Texts [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969], 68–69): "barbaram feram incredulamque gentem."

[3] P. Wormald, "The Venerable Bede and the Church of the English," in S. Baxter [ed.], *The Times of Bede, 625–865* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006], 216, in

reconciled Bede's special vision of the English with the broader ecclesiastical concerns of the text—the desire for unity from diversity and the hope for the salvation of all nations.

In this paper, I consider what it meant for Bede to represent the *gens Anglorum* (English people) as a chosen or covenant people, arguing that the idea of the chosen people is fundamental to *Historia ecclesiastica*. It is the biblical motif that informs and defines Bede's entire history, and it comes with a clear note of warning. Bede suggests that the status of the English as a chosen people is conditional on the English staying faithful to God. He uses the example the Britons' fall from grace into heresy to illustrate the penalty of breaking this (unwritten) covenant. Bede situates the chosen people in its very own promised land, an idealised Brittania overflowing with God's gifts. The English initially arrive in Britain as an agent of divine retribution against the Britons, whom Bede represents as a fallen nation and a failed chosen people. The English are represented as the Britons' successors, a 'foreknown' people. Their kings are represented as guardians of a covenant, responsible for protecting the people, not only from military threats but also from apostasy and spiritual decay. The church is tasked with nurturing the people, through the ministry of the clergy and through advising the kings. Bede looks at all these aspects—land, people, kingship, and church—through the lens of the Old Testament. Our understanding

particular, identified the distinct covenantal pattern within *Historia ecclesiastica*. He argues that, for Bede, "the *Gens Anglorum* is a people with a Covenant, like Israel ... its future depends on keeping its side of a bargain with ... God" Yet neither Wormald nor anybody else has undertaken a complete study of how exactly Bede represents the English as a chosen people under a divine covenant. In Wormald's writings on the subject he uses this idea as a stepping-stone towards a broader discussion of nationhood in relation to later Anglo-Saxon constructions of identity (e.g., P. Wormald, "Bede, the *Bretwaldas* and the Origins of the *Gens Anglorum*," in P. Wormald [ed.], *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies Presented to J.M. Wallace-Hadrill* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1983], 100–129; and P. Wormald, "*Engla Lond*: The Making of an Allegiance," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 7 [1994], 1–24). This leaves Wormald legitimately open to the criticism put forward by G. Molyneaux, "The Old English Bede: English Ideology or Christian Instruction?" *English Historical Review* 125 (2009), 1289–1323, at 1302, that it is "far from clear that [Wormald's interpretation] is an obvious way" to read Bede's work. This criticism recently has been reinforced in a second article: G. Molyneaux, "Did the English Really Think They Were God's Elect in the Anglo-Saxon Period?", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 65 (2014), 721–737.

of *Historia ecclesiastica* is illuminated by reading it with Bede's understanding of the Old Testament in mind.

The Venerable Bede (672/3–735) was the outstanding figure in the history of early medieval Britain. In his own day, he was arguably Europe's leading intellectual, a teacher, exegete, historian, and chronologist whose works were widely copied and respected throughout Christendom. Bede's influence is all the more remarkable considering that he lived his entire life in a remote corner of the north of England, which had begun the process of converting to Christianity some forty-five years before his own birth.[4] Although the majority of Bede's work consists of scriptural exegesis, his greatest legacy is his work as a historian in compiling *Historia ecclesiastica*, a narrative in five books of the arrival in Britain of the "Angles, Saxons, and Jutes," their conversion to Christianity by both Roman and Irish missionaries, and the flourishing of a mature Christian culture, complete with saints, scholars, and missionaries. It is a work of rare ambition, not merely an annalistic collection of genealogies and battles, but a sustained, organised work written in elegant, literary prose.

I am approaching *Historia ecclesiastica* as a cultural document. By closely reading such a source, we can shine a light on how Bede understood his world and hoped to shape others' understanding. This approach demands that we appreciate not only Bede's purpose in writing *Historia ecclesiastica* but also the overall rationale behind his life as a scholar. The traditional view of Bede has been to see him as a meticulous bookworm, a compiler and simplifier of the church fathers, rather than an innovator.[5] Roger Ray, among others, has challenged this conception, arguing that Bede "saw himself as a creator of Christian Latin culture," someone who was conscious of his own importance.[6] He certainly respected the *auctoritas*

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[4] G.H. Brown, *A Companion to Bede* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2009), 1. This process of conversion began with King Edwin's conversion in 627 but was not secured until the reign of Oswald (633/4–641).

[5] C. Jenkins, "Bede as Exegete and Theologian," in A. Hamilton Thompson (ed.), *Bede, His Life, Times and Writings* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), 152–200, at 167.

[6] R. Ray, "Who Did Bede Think He Was?", in S. DeGregorio (ed.), *Innovation and Tradition in the Writings of the Venerable Bede* (Morgantown, W.Va.: West Virginia University Press, 2006), 11–35, at 11. See also R. Ray, "Bede, the Exegete as Historian," in G. Bonner (ed.), *Famulus Christi* (London: SPCK, 1976), 125–140. This earlier essay was important in opening Bede's exegetical writings to a wider audience of historians and was one of the first articles to stress the importance of developing an intertextual approach to Bede.

of Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory, but his claim to be merely "following the footsteps of the Fathers" is an instance of rhetorical modesty that was actually intended to establish Bede as the fathers' successor.[7] There has been an increased tendency to view *Historia ecclesiastica* as part of Bede's broader œuvre of exegetical and other writing.[8] In light of this movement, we may ascribe a lot more imagination and ambition to Bede's work in *Historia ecclesiastica* than we would if we held to the traditional picture of a modest, unoriginal Bede. *Historia ecclesiastica* is a subtle work; Bede weaves his history around a complex and multi-faceted structure. He did not, however, fabricate his sources to fit this structure. His reputation for honesty is well-earned. Accordingly there are times when the course of *Historia ecclesiastica*'s narrative confounds our attempts to enforce a neat structure and other times when there is more than one way of conceptualising a passage. Just as Bede often crossed the generic boundaries of history, theology, science, and literature, the historian who seeks to understand Bede must move across disciplines. *Historia ecclesiastica* is a literary work and in order to appreciate the grandeur of its design one must occasionally engage in what some might call literary speculation. It also came from the pen of one of its era's greatest theologians, thereby demanding a theologically-informed reading. By engaging in this kind of literary-theological analysis, the 'covenantal' pattern of *Historia ecclesiastica* becomes clear.

Land and People

Bede's representation of the English as a chosen people is clear from the very beginning of *Historia ecclesiastica*. Bede begins his history by establishing Brittania as an echo of the promised land of Canaan, and its original inhabitants, the Britons, as unworthy keepers of that land.[9] Following the sixth-century British author Gildas, he represents the

[7] In contrast, P. Meyvaert, "Bede the Scholar," in Bonner, *Famulus Christi*, 40–69, at 42, interpreted this statement as a simple expression of self-deprecating modesty.

[8] This movement has been described by P. Darby, *Bede and the End of Time* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), 9–13. See also S. DeGregorio, "The New Bede," in DeGregorio, *Innovation and Tradition*, 1–10; J. McClure, "Bede's Old Testament Kings," in Wormald, *Ideal and Reality*, 76–98; and A. Thacker, "Bede, The Britons and the Book of Samuel," in S. Baxter (ed.), *Early Medieval Studies in Memory of Patrick Wormald* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 129–148.

[9] Although the Latin name for Britain is more typically spelt 'Britannia,' both Plummer and Colgrave/Mynors consistently use the spelling 'Brittania' in their editions.

Britons as a chosen people gone astray, having fallen into heresy, lethargy and vice. He departs from Gildas by picturing the English not as a mindless barbarian horde, but as the successors to the British. *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.22 is the critical turning point in Bede's narrative, the moment that marks the *gens Anglorum* as a people 'foreknown' by God. This status as a chosen people is conditional on an unwritten covenant being maintained, with the Britons' failure being held as an example of the price for abandoning this 'covenant'. It may seem strange that Bede begins his history of the Germanic English people with twenty-two chapters about the Britons, the native Celtic people of Britain. He shows little to no interest in where the English came from, except to say that some were Saxons, some Angles, and some Jutes.[10] It may be that he simply did not know or care about their continental past, shrouded as it was in the mists of pre-Christian legend. In any case, these opening chapters are more than mere "introduction to Bede's main subject," as Charles Plummer thought.[11] Nor are they merely an opportunity for Bede to regurgitate what he has learnt from Orosius, Gildas, and Pliny. Rather, they form the crucial foundation for the coming narrative, situating the *gens Anglorum* in their British context.

Bede's description of natural wonders establishes Britain as a type of the 'promised land' of Canaan. *Historia ecclesiastica* opens with an idealised chorographic portrait of this land. After situating the island in relation to Europe, he describes how "rich" (*opima*) it is in crops, trees, pastures, birds, fish, sea mammals, and shellfish; pearls of "every colour" (*omnis ... coloris*) can be found in Britain, as well as whelks, from which an almost magical scarlet dye is produced, which "neither fades through heat of the sun nor exposure to rain."[12] The land also has hot springs, as well as an abundance of various metals and jet. He goes on to describe the origins of the three 'native' nations of Brittania: the Britons, Picts, and Irish. The Britons are the original inhabitants of the land; the Picts arrived later and occupied the northern part of the land, before some of the Irish came and dispossessed

[10] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.15 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 50–51).

[11] Paraphrased by J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People: A Historical Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 6.

[12] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.1 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 14–15): "nullo umquam solis ardore, nulla ualet pluuiarum iniuria pallescere."

the Picts in what is now the west of Scotland.[13] This is Britain, as it were, in the state of nature, an *imitatio* of the Genesis creation scene.[14] It is equally reminiscent of how God described the promised land of Canaan when he appeared to Moses in the Burning Bush: "a land good and spacious … which flows with milk and honey."[15] *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.1 is an expansion of this divine description: Britain is a land that abounds with good things, a gift from God to the people he chooses to dwell in it. Bede is happy to let these images—Britain as both Eden and Canaan—rest without tension in his readers' minds, because his rhetorical point is clear either way. Brittania is a land worth inhabiting, a pleasant and prosperous place for a favoured people. The British were the first people in Brittania to be converted to Christ, which happened under Roman rule, and the first eight chapters of book one establish the golden age of the faith in Britain, with St Alban being held up as an *exemplum* of the time when "Britain also attained to the great glory of bearing faithful witness to God."[16] Thus, in the early chapters of *Historia ecclesiastica* Bede represents Brittania as an expression of divine blessing to the people God favours.

In his commentary on Genesis, Bede sees the promised land of Canaan as an anagogic signifier of the future kingdom of heaven, as well as

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[13] Ibid. (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 16–19).

[14] C.B. Kendall, "Imitation and the Venerable Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*," in M. King and W. Stevens (eds), *Saints, Scholars and Heroes: Studies in Medieval Culture in Honor of Charles W. Jones*, vol. 1, (Collegeville, Minn.: Hill Monastic Manuscript Library, 1979), 161–190.

[15] Exod 3:8: "terram bonam et spatiosam … quae fluit lacte et melle." This theme has not received the same attention as the Edenic *imitatio*, however, the 'promised land' allusion is made explicitly by Wormald, "Engla Lond," 14. This has been challenged by Molyneaux, "Old English Bede," 1300. McClure, however, has also noted how Bede's concern for geography mirrors the Book of Joshua's detailed account of the geography of Canaan (McClure, "Bede's Old Testament Kings," 94–95). The recent discussion in J. O'Reilly, "Islands and Idols at the Ends of the Earth: Exegesis and Conversion in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*," in S. Lebecq, M. Perrin, and O. Szerwiniak (eds), *Bède le Vénérable: Entre tradition et posterité* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: CEGES, 2005), 119–145, of the geography of *Historia ecclesiastica* focusses more on the idea of Britain as the 'edge of the world' in a missiological context. This is a fair reading; however, it neglects Bede's interest in the natural bounty of Britain, which is not necessarily connected with the 'ends of the earth' trope.

[16] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.6 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 28–29): "Denique etiam Brittaniam tum plurima confessionis Deo deuotae gloria sublimauit."

a historical gift to the descendants of Abraham.[17] Likewise, he describes Eden as a *typus* of both the church and the future paradise, even as he asserts that it "must nevertheless be understood in its proper literal sense" as a garden that existed at the beginning.[18] He also clearly sees the covenant with Abraham as something that is both a precursor to the new covenant (initiated by Christ's death and resurrection), and something that is conditional—the Jews lost their place in the land, and their place in the covenant, because they rejected Christ.[19] It is evident that Bede understands 'place' as something that has meaning beyond geography; not only is it a divine blessing to be given good land in which to dwell, but it is also a sign of a nation's relationship with God. From his Old Testament reading, Bede understood the importance of locating the history of the chosen people within the 'promised land', and he is accordingly careful to give this land a suitably detailed and positive description.

Although Bede stands near the beginning of a certain tradition in British literature that considers the geography of the island of Britain in almost mystical terms of blessedness, he was not quite the first writer to conceive of Britain in this way. The British historian and cleric Gildas, writing two hundred years before Bede during a lull in the wars between the Britons and the pagan English invaders, opened his work *De excidio et conquestu Britannniae* ("On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain") with a similar *descriptio* of the island, comparing it to "a chosen bride (*electa sponsa*) arrayed in a variety of jewellery."[20] By using the word *electa* to

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[17] Bede, *In Genesim* 3 (12:10) (Corpus Christianorum Series Latina [= CCL], vol. 118A, 174): "... quod ita terra Chanaan in possessionem sit promissa Abrae ac semini eius, ut haec magis hereditatem patriae celestis significet ..." ("Abram and his offspring were promised possession of the land of Canaan, so as better to signify the inheritance of the kingdom of heaven.") English trans. in C.B. Kendall (trans.), *Bede: On Genesis*, Translated Texts for Historians, vol. 48 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008). For the significance of anagogical ('upward' or spiritual) reading within medieval exegesis, see B. Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Age*s (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), 28.

[18] Bede, *In Genesim* 1 (2:8) (CCL 118A.46): "ad proprietatem tamen litterae intelligendum esse locum scilicet amoenissimum," quoting Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram* 12.28.56 (Nuovo Bibliotheca Agostiniana, vol. 9/2, 708).

[19] Bede, *In Genesim* 4 (17:4) (CCL 118A.203).

[20] Gildas, *De excidio* 3.4. (M. Winterbottom [ed. and trans.], *Gildas: The Ruin of Britain and Other Works*, History from the Sources, Arthurian Period Sources, vol. 7 [Chichester: Phillimore, 1978], 90): "electa ueluti sponsa monilibus diuersis ornate."

describe Brittania, Gildas makes the 'specialness' of the island even more explicit than Bede does, in a turn of phrase redolent of Song of Songs—those who possess it are deeply privileged, just as the Israelites were privileged to rule over Canaan. Gildas then excoriates his own people, the Britons, for being "ungratefully rebelling, stiff-necked and haughty, now against God, now against its own countrymen."[21] Even though God "increased his pity [*misericordia*]" for his sinful people by blessing them with saints and martyrs (hence the inclusion in both Gildas and Bede of the martyrdom narratives of St Alban and others), the Britons continue to "deny fear to God."[22] Therefore, according to Gildas, the Saxons were sent to "purge" (*purgare*) the Britons for their wickedness.[23] Gildas makes his Old Testament references explicit—Isaiah's words against the "lawless sons [who have] abandoned God" are applied directly to the author's countrymen, while the Saxons are compared to the Assyrians who "desecrated [God's] holy temple."[24] Gildas is often referred to as the British Jeremiah, a prophet crying out against the iniquities of his own people.[25] For Gildas, the Britons failed to maintain their covenantal relationship with their creator, so the blessing of the 'promised land' is threatened with destruction.

For general readings in Gildas, see M. Lapidge and D.N. Dumville (eds), *Gildas: New Approaches* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1984).

[21] Gildas, *De excidio* 4.1 (Winterbottom, *Gildas*, 90): "Haec erecta ceruice et mente, ex quo inhabitata est, nunc deo, interdum ciuibus."

[22] Gildas, *De excidio* 10.1 (Winterbottom, Gildas, 92): "Magnificauit igitur misericordiam suam nobiscum deus..."; and 4.1 (Winterbottom, *Gildas*, 90): "negotium quam deo timorem". Cf. K. George, *Gildas' De Excidio Britonum and the Early British Church* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2009), 55. Bede's account of St Alban's martyrdom is at *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.7 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 28–35).

[23] Gildas, *De excidio* 22.1 (Winterbottom, *Gildas*, 96).

[24] Gildas, *De excidio* 21.5 (Winterbottom, *Gildas*, 96): "filii ... sine lege, dereliquistis deum," quoting Isa 1:4; and 24.2 (Winterbottom, *Gildas*, 98): "coinquinarunt templum sanctum tuum," quoting Ps 79:1.

[25] Gildas, *De excidio* 1.4 (Winterbottom, *Gildas*, 87), himself acknowledges Jeremiah as an inspiration in his preface, writing that "[legebam] ... querelas sanctorum prophetarum uoces et *maxime Hieremiae*," emphasis mine]—"I read how ... the voice of the holy prophets rose in complaint, *especially Jeremiah's*."). Cf. M.E. Jones, *The End of Roman Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 52. See also S.J. Joyce, "Gildas and His Prophecy for Britain," *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association* 9 (2013), 39–59.

Bede takes up Gildas' criticism wholeheartedly. For Bede, the Britons were nothing less than rebels against God:

> They cast off Christ's easy yoke and thrust their necks under the burden of drunkenness, hatred, quarrelling, strife, and envy ... [They] could not be awakened from the spiritual death which their sins had brought upon them."[26]

This judgement sets the stage for the arrival of the Saxons as retribution for the Britons' waywardness, "ordained by the will of God so that evil might fall upon those miscreants."[27] Although he does not shy away from the violence that occurred during the invasion, he needs to accommodate this violence with providence.[28] Interestingly, this particular line is not taken directly from *De excidio*. Gildas is consistent in portraying the Saxons as a horde of "impious easterners" (*orientali sacrilegorum*), who are "hated by God and man" (*deo hominibusque invisi*), chosen by God only as an instrument of wrath, not as a worthy people in themselves.[29] In contrast, even at this early stage, Bede hints at a greater future for the English, which he reinforces by digressing briefly from the narrative to give the "Saxons, Angles, and Jutes" a fitting introduction, carefully dividing them into different tribes and naming Hengist and Horsa as their first leaders.[30]

The turning point of book one comes at chapter twenty-two. In this short chapter, Bede decisively casts off the Britons, who completely abandoned "all restraints of truth and justice."[31] They had been given a respite from the English invasion when they put their army into the hands of St Germanus, a Gallic bishop, but they quickly fell back into civil war

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[26] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.14 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 48–49): "ebrietati animositati litigio contentioni inuidiae ceterisque huiusmodi facinoribus sua colla, abiecto leui iugo Christi ... qui supererant, a morte animae, qua peccando sternebantur, revocari [non] poterant."

[27] Ibid.: "Quod Domini nutu dispositum esse constat, ut ueniret contra inprobos malum."

[28] N.J. Higham, *Re-Reading Bede: The Ecclesiastical History in Context* (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), 149.

[29] Gildas, *De excidio* 24.1 (Winterbottom, *Gildas*, 97); and 23.1 (Winterbottom, *Gildas*, 97).

[30] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.15 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 50–51).

[31] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.22 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 68–69): "... ita cuncta uertatis ac iustitiae moderamina concussa ac subuersa sunt ...

and depredation.[32] There is a distinct, though unstated, parallel between the Britons and the Israelites here. Throughout the Books of Kings, Israel and Judah are repeatedly pulled from the brink of destruction because they turn from idolatry and follow the instructions of the prophets, but continually fall back into waywardness and are ultimately given over to the Assyrians and Babylonians.[33] It can be difficult to disentangle Bede's scriptural allusions. There are few one-to-one correspondences; the Britons are analogous both to the Canaanites, as the original inhabitants of the promised land, and to the Israelites, as a nation that fails in its covenantal requirements. Similarly the English resemble the Assyrians and Babylonians to some extent, as the scourge of the fallen Britons. As we have seen, this is certainly how Gildas represented them in *De excidio*, and Bede repeats the analogy at *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.15. At 1.22, however, Bede ceases relying on Gildas as a source and it is here that the English begin themselves to be given the characteristics of a chosen people.[34]

For Bede, the most serious failing of the Britons was that "they never preached the faith" to the Anglo-Saxons.[35] He writes that this is nevertheless a manifestation of divine providence:

> God in his goodness did not reject the people [the English] whom He foreknew, but He had appointed much worthier heralds of the truth to bring this people to the faith.[36]

The key words here are *praescire* and *gens*. The English are both a unique 'people' and one 'foreknown' to salvation.[37] They are not merely agents of

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[32] Ibid., 1.17–21 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 55–67).

[33] For example, the Assyrians are miraculously defeated through the intervention of the prophet Isaiah (2 Kgs 18–19); and Judah is ultimately enslaved by Nebuchadnezzar at 2 Kgs 25.

[34] Wallace-Hadrill, *Historical Commentary*, 30. A. Murray, "Bede and the Unchosen Race," in H. Price and J. Watts (eds), *Power and Identity in the Middle Ages: Essays in Memory of Rees Davies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 52–67, at 59, has argued that if for Bede, "the English … were God's chosen … it follows that the Britons … were unchosen."

[35] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.22 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 68–69): "numquam … uerbum fidei praedicando committerent."

[36] Ibid.: "Sed non tamen diuina pietas plebem suam, quam praesciuit, deseruit; quin multo digniores genti memoratae praecones ueritatis, per quos crederet, destinauit."

[37] Bede is echoing the language of Rom 8:29, which states that "quos praesciuit et praedestinauit" ("those whom he foreknew he also predestined").

divine wrath; they are earmarked for God's kingdom. This is to be accomplished by "worthy heralds," firstly by St Augustine and his fellow continental missionaries, and later by St Aidan and other monks from Ireland. George Molyneaux argues that the fact that "the English were agents of divine vengeance … need not make them divinely favoured," writing off the reference to being 'foreknown' as "exceptional rather than typical."[38] This seems to ignore the overall pattern of *Historia ecclesiastica*.[39] Even if Bede does not return overtly to the theme of foreknowledge, the idea of the English as a chosen people is repeatedly alluded to and woven into the broader narrative. This brief chapter sets up not only the rest of book one, but also all of book two and most of book three, in which the history of the conversion is Bede's primary focus.

The typological association between particular Christian nations and the original chosen people was not unprecedented. Bede follows to some extent in the footsteps both of Gildas and of the fifth-century author Salvian, whose *De gubernatione Dei* presented the Roman empire as another chosen people gone astray.[40] Both Gildas and Salvian strongly identify their subjects—the Britons and the Romans respectively—with the *populus Israhel*, the biblical Hebrews.[41] Although there is no evidence that Bede read Salvian, he was certainly influenced by Gildas, as we have

[38] Molyneaux, "Old English Bede," 1302.

[39] Alcuin, *Versus de Patribus* (P. Godman [ed.], *The Bishops, Kings and Saints of York*, [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982], 10–11): "Hoc pietate Dei uisum quod … intraretque suas populas felicior urbes, qui seruaturus Domini praecepta fuisset … et reges ex se iam coepit habere potentes gens uentura Dei." ("In his goodness God determined … that a more fortunate people should enter [Britain's] cities, a people destined to follow the Lord's commands … God's destined race began to produce from its own ranks powerful kings."). He certainly read *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.22 as indicating a special or elect status for the *gens Anglorum*, as he expanded on the passage in his poem on the history of York.

[40] Salvian, *De gubernatione Dei* (K. Halm [ed.], *Salviani Presbyteri Massiliensis libri qui supersunt*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi [=MGHAA], Bd 1/1 [Berlin: Weidmann, 1877]). For general context on Salvian see R. Nürnberg, *Askese als sozialer Impuls: Monastich-asketisch Spiritualität als Wurzel und Triebfeder sozialer Ideen und Aktivitäten der Kirche in Südgallien im 5. Jahrhundert*, Studien zur Alten Kirchengeschichte, Bd 2 (Bonn: Borengässer, 1988). See also W. Goffart, *Narrators of Barbarian History, A.D. 550–800* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 169–170 for the connection between Salvian and Gildas.

[41] A.P. Scheil, *The Footsteps of Israel: Understanding Jews in Anglo-Saxon England* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 143–147.

already seen.[42] Yet there is a significant difference between Bede and his predecessors in how this 'chosen people' discourse is applied. Both Gildas and Salvian were writing in contexts of decline and fall. Salvian was wrestling with the same subject—the apparent abandonment of Rome by God—that moved Augustine and Orosius.[43] Gildas was writing in a former Roman province, which was being overrun by both internal strife and a pagan horde. Consequently, Salvian and Gildas both represent their respective nations as having gone astray, much more like the wayward, idol-worshipping Israelites who suffered God's judgement than the triumphant people of David and Solomon who received his blessing. Bede, on the other hand, wrote the beginning rather than the end of his nation's history. *Historia ecclesiastica* ends in "favourable times of peace and prosperity," a perceived golden age rather than *De excidio*'s stark image of a land laid waste and ruled by tyrants.[44] This perspective is unique in early medieval historiography. The other great 'barbarian' history prior to Bede, Gregory of Tours' *Libri historiarum*, lacked this sense of providence as an organising principle.[45] Gregory presents not only a 'darker' vision of his own society—that is, one in which violence and corruption are commonplace—but also one in which there is little sense of time moving forward towards a divine purpose. Bede, in contrast, is the providential historian *par excellence*: his is the story of a 'foreknown' nation.

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[42] Salvian is absent from the list of works cited by Bede at M. Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 191–228.

[43] In *De civitate Dei* Augustine developed a more nuanced theodicy in the wake of the Sack of Rome in 410, arguing that historical misfortunes are not necessarily a sign of divine wrath or neglect and framing history in terms of the spiritual conflict between the love of God and the love of self.

[44] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.23 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 560–561): "Qua adridente pace ac serenitate temporum." Cf. Gildas, *De excidio* 25–26 (Winterbottom, *Gildas*, 98–99).

[45] Goffart, *Narrators of Barbarian History*, 204. Gregory of Tours, *Libri historiarum X* (B. Kursch and W. Levison [eds], *Gregorii Turonensis Opera*, Teil 1: *Libri historiarum X*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum, Bd 1/1, 2nd edn [Hannover: Hahn, 1951]). This work has traditionally been known as the *Historia Francorum* (*History of the Franks*) but M. Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours: History and Society in the Sixth Century*, trans. C. Carroll (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001 [Eng. edn]), 106, has reemphasised the importance of Gregory's title, *Ten Books of History*. Gregory's work was known to Bede (Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Library*, 212).

For Bede, the English are a nation with a promising future. The example of the Britons' fall from grace offers a sharp note of warning: a nation can only expect to receive God's blessing if it upholds the faith. This warning is implied rather than stated. It is present in the counter-example offered by Gildas. It is also hinted at in the summation at the end of book five, when Bede writes that "many of the Northumbrian race ... have laid aside their weapons and taken the tonsure ... what the result will be, a later generation will discover."[46] On the one hand, one would think this was a positive development; that Bede would be gratified to see his countrymen beating their swords into ploughshares and taking up the contemplative life. On the other hand, there is clearly a note of uncertainty here. Bertram Colgrave suggests that there is an allusion to the problem of corrupt pseudo-monasteries founded by laymen, which Bede more explicitly criticises in his *Letter to Egbert*.[47] In this letter, Bede quotes Isaiah to warn his countrymen to "loose the bands of forced [i.e. false] covenants."[48] This is not only an unusually direct allusion to the parallels between the English and the Israelites; it is also a strong warning that "were the English to follow the Britons down the same sinful path, they would surely meet the

[46] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.23 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 560–561): "plures in gente Nordanhymbrorum ... se suosque liberos depositis armis satagunt magis, accepta tonsure ... Quae res quem sit habitura finem, posterior aetas uidebit."

[47] Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 560, n.1. This suggestion, generally accepted, was challenged by R.A. Markus, "Bede and the Tradition of Ecclesiastical Historiography," in M. Lapidge (ed.), *Bede and his World*, vol. 1 (Aldershot: Variorum, 1994), 385–403, at 399, who tentatively suggested that Bede was rather referring to the final judgement and the inability of the historian to speak about future events. Wallace-Hadrill, *Historical Commentary*, 200, remarks that in any case, here Bede has 'reached the barrier of silence,' beyond which he neither can nor ought to continue.

[48] Bede, *Epistola ad Ecgbertum episcopum* (C. Plummer [ed.], *Baedae Opera Historica* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896], 414): "dissolue obligationes uiolentarum commutationum." Eng. trans. in D. Whitelock (trans.), *English Historical Documents, c. 500–1042* (Oxford: Routledge, 1955), 735–745. Plummer and Whitelock both note that Bede uses neither the Vulgate nor the Old Latin of this verse (Isa 58:6); Bede seems to have derived this reading from Ambrose, *De Elia,* 10.545 (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, vol. 32/2, 431).

same fate."[49] Just as the Israelites' failure to uphold their promise to serve God as a 'kingdom of priests' was punished by exile, so was the Britons' heresy punished by invasion.[50] So too would the English be punished if they strayed. Their status as a chosen people is therefore conditional on upholding their covenantal responsibility.

Chosen Kings

In Anglo-Saxon England, the life of the people was inextricably bound to the life of its kings. If Bede understood the *gens Anglorum* as a covenant people, then its kings were the guardians of this covenant. Whether the people prosper or perish is dependent on good kingship. This applies not only to politics and warfare, but also to the spiritual life of the English; the chosen people can be driven to apostasy or led into salvation by the actions of its kings. Bede's representation of kings is drawn, like his representation of land and nationhood, from the Old Testament. Judith McClure writes that Bede "could have been in no doubt [through his reading of scripture] that the history of the chosen people, in both spiritual and political terms, depended, under God, on the influence, ability and military strength of its kings."[51] He would have been equally aware that martial prowess is never the chief quality of God's anointed. Throughout Kings and Chronicles, the leaders of Israel and Judah are judged first and foremost by whether or not they followed God's law and led their people in keeping the covenant. Thus, an exemplary king such as Hezekiah is described as follows:

> And he did that which was good before the Lord, according to all that David, his father, had done. He destroyed the high places [symbols of idolatry] … He trusted in the Lord … so that after him there was none like him among all the kings of Judah … And he stuck to the Lord and departed not from his steps, but kept his commandments, which the Lord commanded Moses. Wherefore the Lord also was with him.[52]

Bede's criteria for judging the true greatness of a king are fundamentally the same as those of the author of Kings: good kingship requires the ability not only to "do well for his people" (something no less crucial for Germanic

[49] Wormald, "Engla Lond," 14. Wormald suggests that this 'warning' was particularly resonant in the ninth and tenth centuries, after the 'punishment' inflicted by the Viking invasions.

[50] Exod 19:6.

[51] McClure, "Bede's Old Testament Kings," 87.

[52] 2 Kgs 18:3–7.

kings before the conversion) but also to shepherd the people towards the proper worship of God.[53]

Bede's kings did not each fit into a single pattern of idealised kingly behaviour. *Historia ecclesiastica* rather "presents a gallery of exemplary kings," highlighting particular virtues and vices.[54] Oswald of Northumbria, more than any other king in *Historia ecclesiastica*, seems to fulfil all the requirements of Bedan Old Testament kingship, "the one figure ... who is presented unambiguously as a saint, while also being a successful king."[55] His strength and competence as a war-leader is shown by his leading "an army small in numbers but strengthened by their faith in Christ" against the "abominable" (*infandus*) leader of the Britons, Cædwalla.[56] Oswald's kingdom is secured by arms, however, it is his work in securing his kingdom for Christ for which he is best remembered. Bede records that Oswald, having restored Northumbria after a period of political division and spiritual apostasy, "was anxious that the whole race under his rule should be filled with the grace of the Christian faith" and sent for Bishop Aidan from Ireland to preach and teach the people.[57] He was also, according to Bede,

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[53] H. Myers, *Medieval Kingship* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1982), 3–4. Many aspects of Bede's representation of kingship were surely relatable to pre-Christian modes of kingship (such as the ideal of generosity expressed through gift-giving), however at the same time there was clearly a measure of tension between the old ideal of the mead-hall strongman and the Christian ideal expressed by Bede, as can be seen in the story of King Sigeberht of Essex, who was killed by his own kinsmen because they were exasperated by the king's insistence on forgiving his enemies (*Historia ecclesiastica* 3.22). See also P. Hunter Blair, *Northumbria in the Age of Bede* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1976), 36–61 on the tension between pagan and Christian ideals of kingship in the Northumbrian context.

[54] H. Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1991), 255.

[55] C. Stancliffe, "Oswald, Most Holy and Most Victorious King of the Northumbrians," in C. Stancliffe and E. Cambridge (eds), *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint* (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1995), 33–83, at 41.

[56] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, 3.1 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 214–215): "cum paruo exercitu, sed fide Christo munito". Bede records the battle site as Denisesburn, however the battle, fought in 633/634, has come to be known as the Battle of Heavenfield, after the nearby village recorded at 3.2.

[57] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.3 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 218–219): "Osuald ... desiderans totam cui praeesse coepit gentem fidei Christianae gratia inbui."

personally "humble, kind, and generous to the poor and to strangers."[58] His martial prowess was therefore matched by his zeal for the faith and tempered by his personal piety.[59] Bede's Oswald fits perfectly the pattern for good kingship laid down by the Old Testament, combatting idolatry, establishing the worship of God and personally maintaining a high standard of morality.

At the other end of the spectrum of kingship, Bede records with some disgust the reigns of those kings who abandoned the Christian faith. On more than one occasion Bede uses language of uncleanness to describe these kings, such as Eanfrith and Osric, Oswald's predecessors in Northumbria, who "reverted to the filth of their former idolatry," or Eadbald of Kent who led his people in "[returning] to their own vomit."[60] These kings are clearly represented as unmitigated disasters for their people, leading them away from their covenantal relationship with God, analogous in Old Testament terms to kings like Ahab who "did evil in the sight of the Lord above all that were before him."[61] There is a strong sense, then, that Bede is seeking to pattern his representation of the kings of the *gens Anglorum* after the kings of Israel and Judah. These kings are nothing less than guardians of the covenant between God and his people.

Chosen People and Universal Church

Bede sees individual nations as being chosen to fulfil particular ends, within localised contexts, establishing the *gens Anglorum* as the inheritors of the 'promised land' of Britain from the wayward Britons and representing the kings of this people as the guardians of this covenant. Bede, however, was first and foremost an ecclesiastical historian. His first interest was the history of the church, its saints, missionaries, miracles, and controversies. He was deeply concerned with orthodoxy and catholicity, themes woven

[58] Ibid., 3.6 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 230–231): "pauperibus et peregrinis semper humilis benignus et largus fuit."

[59] It must be reiterated that this is Bede's idealised portrait of Oswald, and we are entirely limited to Bede's word. Stancliffe, "Oswald, Most Holy and Victorious King," 75, remarks simply that "Oswald may have been a rougher diamond than one could ever guess from Bede's polished account."

[60] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.1 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 212–213): "se priscis idolatriae sordibus polluendum perdendumque restituit"); and 2.5 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 150–151): "ad priorem uomitum reuertendi."

[61] 2 Kgs 16:30.

into the fabric of *Historia ecclesiastica*. The church and its mission inform the framework of the chosen people. This raises two questions. Firstly, how does the church fit into the life of the nation? Secondly, how can an individual, 'chosen' nation fit into the theoretical 'universal church?' For Bede, the English are elected to inherit the land of Britain, bring their Celtic neighbours into line with Roman orthodoxy, and eventually spread the gospel to their cousins on the continent. Their mission, as it were, is that of the church.

What role does the church have within Bede's 'chosen people' framework? We must return once more to Bede's reading of the Old Testament. Bede saw little distinction between the Christian church and the 'church' of the Old Testament (the priesthood and congregation of Hebrews). At the beginning of his commentary on Song of Songs, Bede acknowledges the difference between the *ecclesia* of the new covenant and the *synagogue* of the old, but writes that "these two portions of the righteous are sharers in one and the same faith and love of Christ."[62] Although the *synagogue* naturally did not have the "greater spiritual knowledge" (i.e. the gospel) given to the *ecclesia*, it (or 'she' in Bede's exposition) nevertheless "earnestly desired" (*magnopere ... cupiebat*) and longed for the coming of Christ.[63] Bede was therefore comfortable in applying the words of Song of Songs, which he believed originally represented the words between Christ (the groom) and his *synagogue* of Israel (the bride), to the contemporary church.[64] It is reasonable to suggest,

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[62] Bede, *In Cantica Canticorum*, praef. (CCL 119B.190): "haec portio iustorum una eademque est Christi fide ac dilectione consors." English trans. in A. Holder (trans.), *Bede: On the Song of Songs and Selected Writings* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2011).

[63] Ibid.: "ampliorem spiritalis scientiae."

[64] Bede inherited this understanding from Origen, perhaps via the work of Apponius, as suggested by A. Holder, "The Patristic Sources of Bede's Commentary on the Song of Songs," in MF. Wiles and E.J. Yarnold (eds), *Studia Patristica*, vol. 34, papers presented at the 13th International Conference on Patristic Studies, Oxford, 1999 (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 370–375. Origen's *In Canticum Canticorum* firmly established the typological reading of Song of Songs in late antique and early medieval exegesis. See J. Chênevert, *L'Eglise dans le commentaire d'Origène sur le Cantique des Cantiques* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1969); and J.C. King, *Origen on the Song of Songs as the Spirit of Scripture: The Bridegroom's Perfect Marriage-Song*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Here is an example of how the depth of Bede's exegetical knowledge informed not only his own exegesis but also his broader intellectual (and historical) programme.

then, that Bede's representation of the church of the English was undoubtedly strongly influenced by the depiction of the 'church' in the Old Testament.[65]

What, then, was the place of the *synagogue* in the Old Testament? Of course, it was the role of the priesthood to offer sacrifices in the temple, a ritual that was (in Christian belief) superseded by the atonement of Christ, as symbolised by the sacrament of communion.[66] The primary responsibility of the Christian priesthood was simply to continue administering the sacraments and proclaiming the gospel, just as Hebrew priesthood was responsible for offering sacrifices and upholding the law. There is a clear sense in the Old Testament that any failure on the part of the priesthood could be disastrous, not only for the priests themselves but also for the entire people.[67] Malachi implicitly connects the failure of the priests who offer "polluted bread" with that of the entire nation of Judah, for having "profaned the holiness of the Lord … [and] married the daughter of a strange god."[68] Hosea expresses this more succinctly: "like people, like priest."[69] In *Historia ecclesiastica* it is primarily the Britons, both clergy and people, whom Bede regards as being guilty of this kind of outright profanity. When the British clergy refuse to assent to Augustine's exhortations that they refrain from their heterodox practices, Bede suggests that they are subsequently punished by Æthelfrith's pagan army slaying 1,200 clergymen at the Battle of Caerlegion (Chester).[70] Bede once again holds the example of the Britons up as a cautionary tale to his own people, and his fellow clergy, of the dangers of failing to uphold the covenantal relationship.

The role of the clergy in ensuring the status of the English as a chosen people extends beyond maintaining orthodox practices. Membership in the body of the church begins with conversion: this is the first work of the

[65] S. Foot, "Bede's Church," Jarrow Lecture 2012, 7. My thanks to Professor Foot for providing a copy of this lecture via email.

[66] The major laws regarding the Hebrew priesthood are found in Lev 1–9. The New Testament understanding of Christ as perfect priest is expressed at Heb 5–7.

[67] E.g. Lev 10, where the sons of Aaron are struck down for offering 'strange fire' before the Lord.

[68] Mal 1:7 and 2:11.

[69] Hos 4:9.

[70] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 2.2 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 134–143).

church in England. This is no less true of nations that it is of individuals, at least as far as Bede was concerned. For medieval theologians, conversion encompassed two phases: external signifiers (baptism, changes to rituals and practices) and an inward change.[71] Bede presents a view of the conversion of nations that mirrors this model. Each Anglo-Saxon people has a moment of conversion, signified by a king receiving baptism. When Edwin and his chief men are baptised, it signifies the Northumbrians' 'official' entry into the kingdom of God, further signified by the former pagan high priest Coifi's act of profaning the altars and idols of the old gods.[72] However, the nation does not transform into a perfectly Christianised state overnight. Even apart from those periods of outright apostasy, which hit a number of English kingdoms in the seventh century (for example, Kent under Eadbald, Essex under Sæberht's sons, and Northumbria under Osric and Eanfrith), the work of both converting the ordinary people in the fields and of reforming pagan and syncretic practices would be a long and difficult battle.[73]

Bede is clearly aware that the process of conversion does not end with the king's baptism. The Christian faith must be spread to the wider population. This can be seen, for example, in his description of the exemplary Bishop Aidan:

> He used to travel everywhere ... not on horseback but on foot ... in order that ... whenever he saw people whether rich or poor, he might at once approach them and, if they were unbelievers, invite them to accept the mystery of the faith; or if they were believers, that he might strengthen them in the faith ...[74]

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[71] L. Milis, "La Conversion en Profondeur: Un Processus sans Fin," *Revue du Nord* 68 (1986), 487–498; and W. von Egmond, "Converting Monks: Missionary Activity in Early Medieval Frisia and Saxony," in G. Armstrong and I. Wood (eds), *Christianizing Peoples and Converting Individuals*, International Medieval Research, vol. 7 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 37–46, at 38–40.

[72] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 2:13–14 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 182–189).

[73] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 2.5 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 148–155); and 3.1 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 212–215).

[74] Ibid., 3.5 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 226–227): "Discurrere per cuncta ... non equorum dorso sed pedum incessu uectus ... solebat; quatinus, ubicumque aliquos uel diuites uel pauperes incedens aspexisset, confestim ad hos

Proselytisation is naturally one of the key duties of the church. It is inevitably difficult to measure how successful the church was in penetrating all levels of society. Dunne notes that, although by 700 the English had been quite successfully integrated into the *oecumene* of the orthodox Christian world, it is important to take into account the potential differences between the 'view from Rome' and the view on the ground.[75] In the *Letter to Egbert*, apart from the issue of corrupt monasteries noted above, Bede expresses his worry at the lack of pastoral care in parts of Northumbria where "there is never seen for many years at a time a bishop to exhibit any ministry" implying that the church did not always match up to the standard set by Bishop Aidan.[76] The mere fact that Bede sees this deficiency of the ministry in remote areas as a critical issue implies that he at least saw evangelism and discipleship as an unfinished or continual work.

Although conversion is regarded by Bede as an ongoing process, for the purposes of the narrative of *Historia ecclesiastica* each nation is 'converted' when its king is baptised; the clergy then takes on the role of advising the king, attempting to ensure that he does not neglect his newfound duty to the church and to Christian morality. The king bears the responsibility for guiding the nation, as we have seen, but it is the role of the church to minister to the king. This can be seen when King Ecgfrith ignores the urging of the monk Egbert and invades Ireland, then again disregards the advice of Bishop Cuthbert to wage war on the Picts. The clergy in this instance do everything they can to prevent their temporal ruler from leading the people to disaster, but to no avail, as the king's army is annihilated at Nechtansmere, after which "the hopes and strength of the English kingdom began to ebb and fall away."[77] On the one hand, this reinforces the idea that it is the king who bears the responsibility for

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diuertens uel ad fidei suscipiendae sacramentum, si infideles essent, inuitarent uel, si fideles, in ipsa eos fide confortaret ..."

[75] M. Dunne, *The Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons c. 597–c. 700: Discourses of Life, Death and Afterlife* (London: Continuum, 2009), 187.

[76] Bede, *Epistola ad Ecgbertum episcopum* (Plummer, *Baedae Opera Historica*, 410): "ubi nunquam multis transeuntibus annis sit uisus antistes, qui ibidem aliquid ministerii aut gratiae caelestis exhibuerit."

[77] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 4.26 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 428–429): "Ex quo tempore spes coepit et uirtus regni Anglorum fluere ac retro sublapsa referri."

leading the people either to glory or ruin. On the other hand, Bede clearly suggests that a good king must be well advised and prepared to accept the exhortations and rebuke of the church. The representation of these clergymen who exert influence at the top level of society may be influenced by the Old Testament prophets, in particular the likes of Samuel and Nathan who advise, mentor, rebuke and, in the case of Samuel and Saul, even curse the kings of Israel.[78] The Old Testament kings ignore the words of the prophets at their own peril, and to the endangerment of the entire nation, just as Ecgfrith's failure to heed the warnings of Egbert and Cuthbert leads both to his own death and the waning of Northumbrian power.

It is a fundamental doctrine of Christianity that the church is universal. That is, the church is nothing more or less than the entire body of Christian believers across the world. This idea of the universality of the church is expressed in the Nicene Creed's reference to "one holy catholic and apostolic church." Cyprian had previously defended the doctrine of the universal church in *De unitate ecclesiae* (*c.* 250).[79] Bede was particularly alive to this doctrine, as evidenced by his concern for catholicity. For instance, in *De templo Salominis*, Bede reads the story of Solomon building of the Temple (2 Kings 6–8) as an allegory for the gathering of the universal church. Mayr-Harting argues that *De templo* and *Historia ecclesiastica* "form a kind of diptych," with the former describing the building of the universal church and the latter "the building of the church amongst the *gens Anglorum*."[80] Sarah Foot in turn recognised that this is a theme that "pervades" many of Bede's other exegetical writings.[81] This church is fundamentally classless and raceless, in which "though there are Jews and barbarian peoples and Scythians, freemen and slaves, nobles and non-nobles, all are brothers in Christ."[82] Given Bede's strong belief in the

[78] E.g. 1 Sam 14 (God rejects Saul); and 2 Sam 12 (Nathan rebukes David).

[79] Cyprian, *De unitate ecclesiae* (CCL 3A.249–268).

[80] H. Mayr-Harting, "Bede, the Rule of St Benedict, and Social Class," in Lapidge, *Bede and his World*, 405–434, at 419.

[81] Foot, "Bede's Church," 6–7.

[82] Bede, *De templo* 1 (CCL 119A.185): "cum sint Iudaei et gentes barbari et Scythae liberi et serui nobiles et ignobiles cuncti se in Christo esse fratres ...". Eng. trans. quoted at Mayr-Harting, "Bede, the Rule of St Benedict and Social Class," 419–20. Bede paraphrases Col 3:11 and Gal 3:28 here. Mayr-Harting is careful to stress that

critical importance of one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, what place is there for individual 'chosen' nations within this framework?

Bede's commitment to the cause of the Roman church can be seen in his famous account of the Synod of Whitby, the great council of 664, where the question of authority in the Northumbrian church was finally settled in Rome's favour. He opens his account of the synod by saying that "those who came from Kent or Gaul declared that the Irish observance of Easter Sunday was contrary to the custom of the universal church."[83] The Irish clergy at that time celebrated Easter on a different date and according to a different cycle from that which had been sanctioned by the Roman church.[84] Although he greatly appreciated the work of the Irish church—Columba and Aidan are both given highly favourable treatment in *Historia ecclesiastica*, and even Colman, the spokesman for the anti-Roman party at the Synod of Whitby, is treated sympathetically—he is nevertheless opposed to any departure from Roman practice.[85] He even describes Aidan, who is otherwise consistently represented as nothing less than a saint, as having a zeal for God "not entirely according to knowledge" because of his observance of the Irish Easter.[86] Recent historiography has shied away from seeing the Synod as a conflict between 'Celtic Christianity' and Rome, rather emphasising the general spirit of cordiality and fellowship between clerics of Irish training and those who looked to the continent.[87] Nevertheless the controversy that came to a head at Whitby stirred up what Henry Mayr-Harting described as a "momentous" issue: "what did the unity of Christians mean if they could not even agree about the date on which their main festival should be celebrated?"[88] For Bede, the triumph of

this does not make Bede a "modern social egalitarian," as he "accepted without demur the property relations of aristocratic society."

[83] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.25 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 294–295): "confirmantibus eis qu de Cantia uel de Gallis aduenerant, quod Scotti dominicum paschae diem contra universalis ecclesiae morem celebrarent." See Wallace-Hadrill, *Historical Commentary*, 124–125.

[84] Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 103–104.

[85] Colman is described as having "innate prudence" at Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 4.26 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 426–431).

[86] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.3 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 218–219): "uirum habentemque zelum Dei, quamuis non plene secundum scientiam."

[87] Wormald, "The Church of the English," 207; and Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 105.

[88] Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 104.

the Roman party at Whitby was a defining moment for the burgeoning English church, and indeed for the nation as a whole.[89] By affirming catholicity and uniformity of religion, the English demonstrated their maturity as a Christian people.

Even though the vindication of the Roman Easter at Whitby signalled for Bede the triumph of the universal church over local variant forms of the faith, paradoxically the role of the English in the synod demonstrates what Julianna Grigg has called "the final hurrah of the virtue of Northumbrian Christian practice."[90] This is the moment when the *gens Anglorum* prove they have not fallen into the same spiritual lethargy which Bede attributes to the British. Bede castigated the Britons for failing to preach the faith to the Anglo-Saxons; at Whitby the Northumbrian church and king prove themselves capable of upholding the faith in a veritable theological battleground. Subsequently, in the last incident of note in *Historia ecclesiastica*, the monks of Iona finally accept the Roman dating of Easter, thanks to the preaching of another Northumbrian monk, the same Egbert who warned Ecgfrith against attacking the Irish. Bede writes of this event that:

> It is clear that this event happened by a wonderful dispensation of divine mercy, since that race had willingly and ungrudgingly taken pains to communicate its own knowledge and understanding of God to the English nation; *and now, through the English nation, they are brought to a more perfect way of life in matters wherein they were lacking*. On the other hand the Britons, who would not proclaim to the English the knowledge of the Christian faith which they had, still persist in their errors and stumble in their ways ...[91]

This is a crucial passage for understanding how Bede understands the role of individual nations under the universal church. For Bede, all

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[89] Foot, "Bede's Church," 14–15.

[90] J. Grigg, "Paschal Dating in Pictland: Abbot Ceolfrid's Letter to King Nechtan," *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association* 2 (2006), 85–101, at 101.

[91] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.22 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 554–555, emphasis mine): "Quod mira diuinae constat factum dispensatione pietatis, ut quoniam gens illa nouerat scientiam diuinae cognitionis libenter ac sine inuidia populis Anglorum communicare curauit, *ipsa quoque postmodum per gentem Anglorum in eis quae minus habuerat ad perfectam uiuendi normam perueniret*. Sicut econtra Brettones, qui nolebant Anglis eam quam habebant fidei Christianae notitiam pandere ... ipsi adhuc inueterati et claudicantes a semitis suis ..."

Christian *gentes* are 'chosen peoples,' each chosen for different purposes and to different ends, as part of an unfolding providential framework.[92] We have already seen how Bede represents the British as a failed nation; their punishment was to be overthrown and outshone by the invading English, and as Bede elucidates here, they continue (at the time of *Historia ecclesiastica*'s completion) to dwell apart from the true church. The Irish, on the other hand, were chosen as one of the "worthier heralds" who would bring the gospel to the English, and as a result were forgiven for their heterodox ideas about Easter and the tonsure.[93] Bede portrays the English themselves as the people chosen to return the peoples of Britain to the fold, agents of change and unification. Having accomplished this, Bede records one further great work accomplished by the English for the sake of the universal church the conversion of their own cousins, the "very many peoples in Germany from whom the Angles and Saxons ... derive their origin."[94] With these missionary efforts, the English further demonstrated

[92] O'Reilly, "Islands and Idols," 128, argued that this suggests that "the *Angli* are not themselves the new chosen people ... rather, they are the latest addition to the people of God ... which in the Old Testament was prefigured by the chosen people of one particular race and land." This idea is taken up by Molyneaux, "God's Elect," 377, who argues that "extant texts ... [present the English] as one of many Christian peoples ... declaring all Christians to be God's chosen." I would argue, however, that whether or not Bede saw the English as *the only* chosen people is beside the point; he represents them as *a* chosen people, allowing his successors (from Alcuin to Milton) to make of that what they will.

[93] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.22 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 68–69).

[94] Ibid., 5.9 (Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 476–477): "Quarum in Germania plurimas nouerat esse nationes, a quibus Angli uel Saxones, qui nunc Brittaniam incolunt ..." Bede lists Frisians, Rugians, Danes, 'Huns' (perhaps meaning the Avars), Old Saxons, and the *Boruhtware* or Bructeri. The impetus for this mission came from Egbert, but it was carried out primarily by Willibrord, who went to Frisia with twelve companions and was consecrated as archbishop of the Frisians in 696 (5.10–11 [Colgrave/Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, 480–487]). The mission was largely successful, and Anglo-Saxon missions to Germany continued long after Bede's death, most notably through the efforts of Boniface, who was active as a missionary as far east as Hesse. For background and assessment of Boniface see Willibald, *Vita Bonifatii* (W. Levison [ed.], *Vitae Sancti Bonfatii archiepiscopi Moguntini*, Monumenta Germanica Historica, Scriptores rerum Germanicarum, Bd 57 [Hanover: Hahn, 1905]); W. Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946); *Sankt Bonifatius: Gedenkgabe zum*

their completeness as a Christian nation; having received Christianity thanks to the efforts of Roman and Irish missionaries, the English themselves returned as missionaries to their homelands.

In 1 Peter 2:9–10, the author writes that the church is "a chosen generation, a kingly priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people … who in times past were not a people, but are now the people of God (*populus Dei*)". The author took the idea of the chosen people from the Old Testament and applied it to the church; the nation of Israel had been superseded by the *ecclesia* of the new covenant. Bede was more alive than most to this doctrine, as can be seen from his own reading of scriptures in works like *De templo*. However, 1 Peter's words resonate equally to Bede's representation of the English people in *Historia ecclesiastica*. For Bede, the English were chosen or 'foreknown'; they were led by holy kings and powerful priests; they were given the mission of spreading orthodoxy to Britain and the gospel to Germany; and they were 'purchased' by God through the work of Gregory, Augustine, Aidan, and others. Before conversion, they were a disparate collection of "Angles, Saxons and Jutes," but Bede saw them as one people, the *gens Anglorum*.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that Bede's representation of the *gens Anglorum* as a chosen people, patterned after the biblical Israelites, is not incidental or illusory but a conscious literary and didactic decision on Bede's part. Recent scholarship has acknowledged that Bede was a far more complex and original author than had previously been recognised. In light of this movement, I argue that the more theologically-informed our reading of *Historia ecclesiastica* is, the deeper we appreciate Bede's identification of the English with Israel. *Historia ecclesiastica* stands at the beginning of English historiography, indeed at the very beginning of English national identity and self-representation. Bede provides the English with their foundation narrative, the story of how a disparate collection of tribesmen and mercenaries began to develop into a Christian nation. At this defining juncture, Bede chooses to model the history of the *gens Anglorum* on the

zwölfhundertsten Todestag (Fulda: Verlag Parzeller, 1954); and T. Reuter (ed.), *The Greatest Englishman: Essays on St. Boniface and the Church at Crediton* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1980).

Old Testament, moulding the English as a chosen people, a nation with a unique destiny guided by providence and bound by a covenant.