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Lessons from Lesser Kings: Irony and Kingship in Books IV and V of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*

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Lessons from Lesser Kings: Irony and Kingship in Books IV and V of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*

Abstract

Bede, the early eighth-century monastic author, discusses many kings as well as bishops in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. In this *History*, Bede assumed his earlier delineation of Christian kingship in his commentary *On Ezra and Nehemiah*: that a Christian king ought to protect and promote the church and be deferential with the clergy as he cooperates with them to regulate the Christian people. However, Bede's claim in Books IV and V of his *History* that the age of Bishop Theodore was "the happiest time for the English people" because, in part, they benefitted from "the most powerful Christian kings," is startling, since the kings discussed do not measure up to Bede's claim. After clarifying Christian kingship according to Bede and then examining Bede's discussion of each king in Books IV and V, this article's author draws on the scholarship of N.J. Higham, Claire Stancliffe, and Walter Goffart to offer irony as the key for understanding Bede's claim. Thus, Bede was being ruefully ironic about the age of Theodore: if only this happiest of ages had enjoyed the benefit of powerful Christian kingship! The best that Bede would say about the "most powerful kings" of the age was that they retired from their kingship.

About the Author

Robert Winn earned his Ph.D. in the Early Christian Studies program at the Catholic University of America, and his degree focused on two examination areas: late antique history and Greek and Latin patristics. His research interests include religious and intellectual history in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Prior to joining Northwestern's faculty, he was a visiting professor at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska. Dr. Winn is the author of *Eusebius of Emesa: Church and Theology in the Mid-Fourth Century*, which was published by The Catholic University of America Press in 2011. His published articles have appeared in the *Journal of Early Christian Studies* and *Vigiliae Christianae*, and he has presented papers at the International Conference on Patristic Studies at Oxford University. His most recent conference papers, both read at the International Congress on Medieval Studies (2011 and 2012), were entitled "Lessons from Lesser Kings: Books IV and V of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*" and "On Avarice: Eusebius of Emesa and John Chrysostom."

Winn recently published *Christianity in the Roman Empire: Key Figures, Beliefs and Practices of the Early Church (A.D. 100-300)*. The book studies early Christian who lived in the Roman Empire before Constantine and is written for a general audience.

Lessons from Lesser Kings:

Irony and Kingship in Books IV and V of Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*

by Robert Winn, Ph.D.

A few paragraphs into Book IV of the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Bede (673-735) makes the startling claim that he had now arrived chronologically at the happiest time for the English people since they had come to the island of Britannia.¹ The first piece of evidence he presents for this claim is that the English people now benefited from “the most powerful Christian kings” who were a terror to all the barbarian nations.² The ecclesiastical context for this period of political flourishing was the ascendancy of Theodore of Tarsus as bishop of Canterbury. Theodore had ushered in a golden age of learning and religious devotion, and as Bede states, a time of vigorous Christian rulers. His claim is startling not only because he had already set the bar very high for good kingship by narrating the activities of Edwin in Book II and Oswald and Oswui in Book III, but also because even a cursory reading of his account of the age of Theodore in Book IV suggests that these “most powerful Christian kings” do not measure up to Bede’s claim.

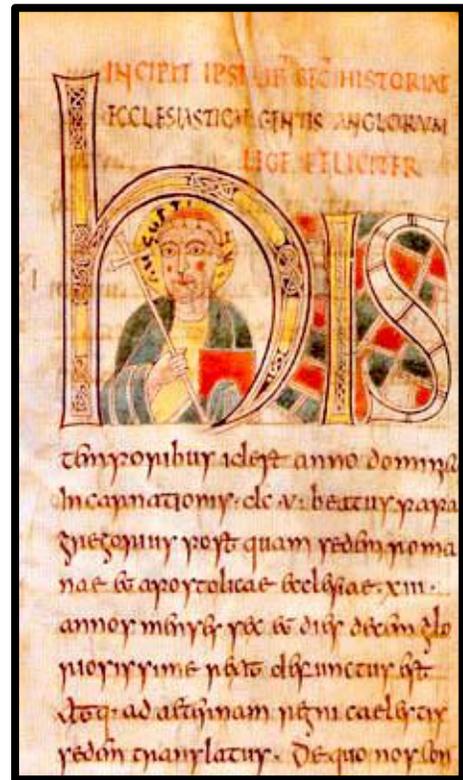
¹ Text: Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, eds. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969, 1991). Cited in the notes as follows: *HE* book#.chapter# (Colgrave and Mynors page number). In the body of the article, all subsequent references to the text will be *Ecclesiastical History*. All English translations are my own or follow Colgrave and Mynors’ translation in their edition. *Britannia*: Bede uses the Roman provincial name for the island.

² *HE* IV.2 (334): *fortissimos Christianosque habentes reges cunctis barbaris nationibus essent terrori*.

In large part, the scope of this essay revolves around two inter-connected questions: Why did Bede characterize the kings of the age of Theodore as he did, and what did Bede hope his audience would learn from his narrative about these kings? The idea that Bede had a pedagogical goal for his history, that he was providing “lessons,” is hardly a revolutionary claim.³ In fact, he makes this clear at the outset of his history.

Addressing Ceolwulf, the king of Northumbria (729-737), Bede explains in the preface to his history that his goal is to provide examples of good and evil so that his audience, the king and his court, will pursue good actions and avoid evil when they learn of these items that are “worthy of remembering.”⁴ This approach probably seemed especially poignant to Bede as Ceolwulf’s reign, interrupted by a coup with the king residing in a monastery for a time, was

fraught with instability. Given these political realities, it is worth considering what his royal audience was supposed to find “worthy of remembering” about these kings in Book IV. After all,



The opening of Bede’s Book II in a manuscript of the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, National Library of Russia.. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

³ Both Walter Goffart and James Cambell, for example, use the term “lessons” in their accounts of the *HE* in order to underscore this pedagogical agenda. N. J. Higham views Bede’s agenda as primarily pedagogical, and he quotes with approval Cambell’s characterization of Bede’s history [Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 313; Cambell, “Bede I,” in *Essays in Anglo Saxon History* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1986), 25; N. J. Higham, *Re-reading Bede: The Ecclesiastical History in Context* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2006), 81, 97].

⁴ *HE* Praefatio (6): *memoratu digna*.

as James Cambell observed in his 1979 Jarrow Lecture, “Bede dedicated his history to a king, and it is in a degree a mirror for princes.”⁵

In order to address the two questions noted above and make sense of Bede’s discussion of the kings of the age of Theodore, we will begin with Bede’s treatment of Christian kingship in his *On Ezra and Nehemiah*. From there, we will turn to the *Ecclesiastical History* to observe what Bede had already established about Christian kingship in the previous sections of the history. Having done these two things, we will be in a good position to evaluate carefully the discrepancy between Bede’s glowing introduction to royal authority during the age of Theodore and his narration of the activities of the kings in Books IV and V.

Bede’s *On Ezra and Nehemiah*

Bede wrote his commentary on Ezra and Nehemiah in the late 720s, only a few years before he began work on his *Ecclesiastical History*.⁶ The works of his final decade are often understood as expressions of Bede’s desire for reform in the church and society of Northumbria, a desire that is particularly apparent in the letter he wrote to Bishop Ecgberht of York only months before his death.⁷ In this letter, he urges the bishop to “strive zealously to recall to the right way of life” all under his jurisdiction, while also reminding the bishop that the king of

⁵ James Cambell, “Bede’s *Reges and Principes*,” in *Bede and his World*, Volume II (Aldershot, Great Britain: Variorum, 1994), 3.

⁶ Text: Bede, *In Ezram et Neemiam*, ed. David Hurst, CCSL 119A (Tournout, 1969). Cited in the notes as follows: *In Ezr.* book#.line# (edition page number). All English translations of the text follow Scott DeGregorio’s translation in DeGregorio, *Bede: On Ezra and Nehemiah* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2006). For the dating of *In Ezram et Neemiam* see Scott DeGregorio, “Bede’s *In Ezram et Neemiam* and the Reform of the Northumbrian Church,” *Speculum* 79 (2004), 21-23; and Scott DeGregorio, “Introduction: Audience and Date,” in *Bede: On Ezra and Nehemiah*, xxxvi – xlii.

⁷ On Bede’s reform agenda see Alan Thacker, “Bede’s Ideal of Reform” in Patrick Wormald, ed., *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 130-153; Scott DeGregorio, “‘Nostrorum socordiam temporum’: The Reforming Impulse of Bede’s Later Exegesis,” *Early Medieval Europe* 11 (2002), 107-122; and DeGregorio, “Bede’s *In Ezram et Neemiam* and the Reform of the Northumbrian Church.”

Northumbria, Ceolwulf, will actively assist the bishop in this pursuit.⁸ Without doubt, he is particularly interested in reforms to the clergy and monasteries, but the scope of his desire for reform extends to royal authority and society in general. Thus, in *On Ezra and Nehemiah*, Bede uses the time-honored method of spiritual or allegorical interpretation to argue that Ezra’s description of the activities of several Persian kings speaks directly to the importance of kingship in his own day.

Much of the discussion of kingship comes in Book II where Bede is commenting on Ezra 6 and 7. Because Bede is building an interpretive arc across Ezra and Nehemiah, a summary of what he has already established in Book I will be useful. By the end of Book I, Bede had reached Ezra 4, and in Bede’s hands chapter 4 becomes an extended allegory on the tension between the church (the Jews returning from Babylon who want to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple) and heretics (those who are opposed to the Jews and their rebuilding project). “Heretics assail the church whenever the opportunity is favorable,” he claims and goes on to explain how they use any means—persuasive teaching, violence, or political maneuvering—to subvert the church: they hinder “devout practice,” “good action,” right faith, and actions worthy of faith.⁹ Thus, by the end of Book I, he has established that the Church will face heresy, and the picture he gives in his commentary is a Church under siege overtly or subtly through the machinations of heretics. To make matters worse, sometimes these heretics operate with the full support of pagan kings, and sometimes pagan kings simply attack the Church on their own. Thus, according to Ezra, some

⁸ Bede, “Letter to Egbert,” in *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 348.

⁹ Bede, *In Ezr.* I.1703-1705, 1709, 1711 (283-284): *In promptu est autem allegoricus sensus: quia ecclesiam haeretici, prout temporis opportunitas arriserit.... ab operibus piae professionis.... ab intentione ipsa bonae actionis* [English: *Bede: On Ezra and Nehemiah*, 72].

Persian kings opposed the Jews, and these kings are allegories for pagan kings influenced by the Adversary who attempts to infiltrate the hearts and minds of the faithful with the help of the heretics. Such kings are not interested in the flourishing of the Church; rather, they want to prevent the growth of “true faith and devout deeds of righteousness.”¹⁰

By the beginning of the second book of his commentary, therefore, Bede has depicted a beleaguered Church surrounded by religious opponents and political powers. As he moves to his commentary on Ezra 5, however, things become more hopeful. While some secular rulers are enemies of God’s people, others, such as the Persian governor Tattenai, are admirers who take a great interest in them. Even better, some secular rulers, such as the Persian king Darius who encouraged the Jews to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, move from admiration to actively assisting and protecting God’s people. The activities of both Tattenai and Darius, are allegories of something that Bede claims happens in his own world: political rulers outside the church who marvel at the teachings of the church, “then are eager to hear and to learn the meaning of this religion, and at last, when they have discerned that this religion originated from the God of heaven and earth who alone is the true God, believing in its sacraments, rejoice to take part and to supports its edifice.”¹¹

Now that he has broached the possibility that kings outside the church could take a positive stance towards the church and, even more, join the church, he shifts the allegory of

¹⁰ Bede, *In Ezr.* I.1813 (261): *per fidem utique rectam, et opera religiosa iustorum* [English: *On Ezra and Nehemiah*, 76].

¹¹ Bede, *In Ezr.* II.191-195 (292): *deinde rationem eiusdem religionis audire ac discere student; atque ad ultimum agnito, quod haec a Deo coeli et terrae, qui est solus Deus verus, originem sumpserit, et ipsi eius sacramentis credentes communicare, eiusque aedificium iuvare laetantur* [English: *On Ezra and Nehemiah*, 85; DeGregorio points out that Bede probably has in mind the conversion of the Anglo-Saxon kings to Christianity which he would document in his *Ecclesiastical History* within a few years].

Ezra’s discussion of Darius from kings outside the church who assist it to Christian kings who devote themselves to promoting the faith. Darius represents “the dutiful devotion of those kings, who, recognizing the will of God, endeavor not only not to resist the Christian faith but to assist it with their decrees.”¹² Kings like Darius desire for themselves and their subjects to live in the Christian faith and, to that end, are eager to provide whatever is necessary for the ministry of the church. Rather than sacrificial animals or other material offerings, in Bede’s day such kings offer spiritual gifts, good works, and a consecrated people. This spiritual understanding of Ezra’s reference to Darius providing for “burnt offerings” at the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem simply indicates for Bede that Christian kings present to the true Church an offering made up of a people who have been “gathered from everywhere into one and the same faith.”¹³ In short, Christian kings do all in their power to ensure “the establishment of the Church” and “desire that it should always enjoy restful calm and peace.”¹⁴

All of this serves as a preliminary to his full discussion of Christian kingship that comes in his commentary on the letter of Artaxerxes in Ezra 7. Artaxerxes, like Darius before him, is a “figure of Christian kings” and his letter reveals the “character of Christian kings,” and Bede states that he intends to carefully document the extent to which this letter reveals through a spiritual reading the nature of Christian kingship.¹⁵ Two interrelated themes emerge from Bede’s

¹² Bede, *In Ezr.* II.263-265 (294): *piam illorum regum devotionem, qui agnita voluntate christianae fidei, non solum non resistere, sed et suis eandem adjuvare curabant* [English: *On Ezra and Nehemiah*, 88].

¹³ Bede, *In Ezr.* II.302-304 (295): *undique in unam eandemque fidem veritatis Christo consecrandi aggregantur* [English: *On Ezra and Nehemiah*, 90].

¹⁴ Bede, *In Ezr.* II.351-354 (296): *pro statu eiusdem ecclesiae publica edicta proponunt placidam semper habere quietem cupiunt, ac pacem* [English: *On Ezra and Nehemiah*, 91].

¹⁵ Bede, *In Ezr.* II.981-982, 994-995 (312): *christianorum regum figuram ... et quantum personae christianorum regum conveniat* [English: *On Ezra and Nehemiah*, 117-18].

comments on Christian royal authority: the extent to which Christian kings should regulate the faith and the importance of Christian kings cooperating with the ministers of the church.

First, although Christian kings should never compel outsiders to join the church, they should compel Christians to abide by the dictates of their religion. By definition, Christian kings should rule over a kingdom of Christian people who are committed to good works and to the duty of devotion; in fact, Christian kings should compel their Christian subjects to confess their faith and produce good works, love and mercy. To that end, kings should use their authority to require obedience to the ministers of the church.¹⁶ This assumes, of course, that a Christian king will have a good relationship with these same ministers of the church. Rather than commandeering for themselves the privilege of divine service, they provide the means for the church to accomplish all things necessary for true religion.¹⁷ Further, a Christian king must decree that those “always occupied in divine service might be freed from servitude to him” and that “they must not be forced by anyone to pay tribute.”¹⁸ For Bede, Ezra the priest, who is given broad powers in Artaxerxes’ letter, represents the Christian clergy in relationship with a Christian king who has taken steps to benefit the church. In short, Ezra 7 reveals the “devotion Christian kings in later days would have and what they would do with respect to the true faith.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Bede, *In Ezr.* II.1151-1162 (316). [English: *On Ezra and Nehemiah*, 123].

¹⁷ Bede, *In Ezr.* II.1075-1091 (315). [English: *On Ezra and Nehemiah*, 120-121].

¹⁸ Bede, *In Ezr.* II.1204-1207 (318): *ut hi qui in divino servitio semper occupati erant, a suo essent famulatu liberi; quique nil in terra proprium possidebant, sed ex decimis populi vivebant, ab his nemo tributa solvenda exigeret* [English: *On Ezra and Nehemiah*, 125].

¹⁹ Bede, *In Ezr.* II.1231-1235 (318): *Haec ergo Artaxerxes scribens Ezrae, et amorem quem erga cultum religionis habebat litteris comprehendens, patenter expressit, quid futuris temporibus Christiani reges devotionis habituri, quid erga fidem veritatis essent acturi* [English: Bede, *On Ezra and Nehemiah*, 126].

Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* I-III

Thus, prior to writing the *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede had already expressed in writing his understanding of Christian kingship: a Christian king ought to protect and promote the church and be deferential with the clergy as he cooperates with them to regulate the Christian people. It is impossible to know which Anglo-Saxon kings Bede had in mind when he wrote his *On Ezra and Nehemiah*, but his first three books of the *Ecclesiastical History* suggest that he had not changed his mind at all on his ideals of Christian kingship when he came to write his history. The kings he chooses to highlight in his history embody his ideals.

In Book I, Bede narrates the arrival of Augustine whom Pope Gregory the Great had sent from Rome to Britannia as a missionary. His account centers on the interactions between Augustine and Ethelbert (r. 589-616), the king of Kent in southeastern Britannia, who was at first wary of the newly arrived missionaries. Eventually won over by the way of life, the teaching, and the miracles of Augustine and his fellow Christians, as a convert Ethelbert granted much assistance to the leaders of his new religion. Bede is careful to point out that while Ethelbert was pleased that many of his subjects were now joining him in baptism and conversion, he was also careful never to compel anyone to join the Church.²⁰ Ethelbert's son, Eadbald, initially refused to follow his father's religion upon inheriting his kingdom. Lawrence, the bishop of Canterbury in Kent, was at the point of fleeing the kingdom when a vision convinced him to stay. Impressed by the power of the vision Lawrence revealed to him, Eadbald “banned all idolatrous worship, gave up his unlawful wife, accepted the Christian faith, and was baptized; and thereafter he promoted

²⁰ *HE* I.26 (78).

and furthered the interests of the Church to the best of his ability.”²¹ Both Ethelbert and Eadbald personify Bede’s ideal as he communicated it in the commentary: a Christian king who protects the church while cooperating with the ministers of the church. This pattern of a Christian king cooperating with a bishop for the advancement of the faith appears frequently over the next two books.

Given the language Bede uses for him and the time Bede spends on his narrative, Edwin (r. 616-633), the king of Northumbria who ruled widely over Britannia, was an important model of Christian kingship for Bede. Not surprisingly, Bede’s account stresses the presence of a faithful bishop, Paulinus of York, who like Augustine with Ethelbert is instrumental in Edwin’s conversion. Edwin first appears in Bede’s narrative as a noble pagan, like Ethelbert, who is civil in his treatment of Christians. His conversion is the result of several factors: the influence of his Christian wife Ethelburh, a princess from the royal house of Kent; the piety of bishop Paulinus and his prayers for the safe delivery of his newborn daughter; a military victory over the West Saxons who had attempted to assassinate him; and, finally, Paulinus fulfilling a vision Edwin had in his youth.²² In the end, Bede states, Paulinus was able to turn “the king’s proud mind to the humility of the way of salvation.”²³ Edwin and his nobles were baptized, and Bede makes a point of noting that the king began to devote material resources to build churches while Paulinus “preached the word of God by his [Edwin’s] consent and favor” to convert the people of Northumbria.²⁴ Edwin even convinced the king of the East Angles to the south of Northumbria to

²¹ *HE* II.6 (155): *atque anathematizato omni idolatriae cultu, abdicato conubio non legitimo, suscepit fidem Christi, et baptizatus ecclesiae rebus, quantum valuit, in omnibus consulere ac favere curavit.*

²² *HE* II.9, 12 (162-67, 176-183).

²³ *HE* II.12 (176-77): *sublimitatem animi regalis ad humilitatem viae salutaris.*

²⁴ *HE* II.14 (186-87): *verbum Dei adnuente ac favente ipso in ea provincia praedicabat.*

convert to Christianity. This short lived king, Eorpwold, was replaced by his fervently Christian brother Sigebeht. Like Edwin in Northumbria, Sigebeht desired to see his whole kingdom convert to Christianity, and, like Edwin, he had a bishop to assist him in this endeavor. Felix, the bishop, “freed the whole of this kingdom from long-lasting evil and unhappiness, brought it to the faith and to the works of righteousness and bestowed on it the gift of everlasting felicity.”²⁵ The cascading positive affect that Edwin had on Britannia was such that a great peace settled over the land, due in on small part to the unusual care Edwin took to ensure that his subjects profited from his reign.²⁶

Edwin did not end his reign in peace, and Book III opens with the chaos resulting from the death of Edwin at the hands of Penda, the pagan king of Mercia, and Caedwalla, the Christian king of the Britons. Not only did the two defeat him in battle, but they initiated a “very great slaughter of the Church and people of Northumbria.”²⁷ Bede places the blame for this slaughter overwhelmingly at the feet of Caedwalla, whom he identifies as a “barbarian who was even more cruel than the pagan.”²⁸ This king, although ostensibly a Christian, Bede remarks, was nevertheless “such a barbarian in heart and character that he did not spare women or the youth of innocent children. With bestial savagery he put to death all through torture.”²⁹ Church and state were thrown into chaos as a result of this invasion.

²⁵ *HE* II.15 (190-91): *Siquidem totam illam provinciam, iuxta sui nominis sacramentum, a longa iniquitate atque infelicitate libertatem ad fidem et opera iustitiae ad perpetuae felicitates dona perduxit.* Bede is being playful with the name of the bishop Felix by claiming he rescued them from infelicity and brought them to felicity.

²⁶ *HE* II.16 (192-93).

²⁷ *HE* II.20 (202-203): *Quo tempore maxima est facta strages in ecclesia vel genter Nordanhymbrorum*

²⁸ *HE* II.20 (202-203): *alter quia barbarus erat pagano saevior.*

²⁹ *HE* II.20 (202-205): *adeo tamen erat animo ac moribus barbarus, ut ne sexui quidem muliebri vel innocuae parvulorum parceret aetati, quin universos atrocitate ferina morti per tormenta contraderet.*

Oswald, who was a nephew of Edwin, becomes in Bede’s hands the antithesis of Caedwalla. The former is “a man beloved by God” who, led by his faith in Christ, was able to defeat Caedwalla and establish himself as king of Northumbria.³⁰ No sooner was he in power than Oswald was anxious to restore the Christian faith to his kingdom. Oswald had been in exile among the Irish during the reign of Edwin and had received Christian baptism there. Consequently, he sought a bishop from among those who had instructed him, and Aiden, a bishop “of outstanding gentleness, devotion and moderation,” arrived to cooperate with the king to build up “the church of Christ in his kingdom.”³¹ Not only did Oswald provide material assistance, in this case granting him the island of Lindisfarne as a monastic center, but Oswald would also translate Aiden’s sermons for his people. Thus, under Oswald, Bede reports, there was an influx of monks and teachers who Christianized and educated Oswald’s kingdom while new churches and monasteries were built. Further, he suggests a causal relationship between Oswald’s faithful attention to the teaching of Aiden about the heavenly kingdom and Oswald’s extensive power throughout the island and over all “the people and kingdoms of Britain.”³² Perhaps most significantly for Bede and his original audience, Oswald was able to bring peace and unity to the two competing kingdoms of Northumbria: Deira and Bernicia.

To emphasize his point about Oswald, he takes an aside in the midst of his narration about Oswald’s successes to recount the failures of Cenwealh, the king of the West Saxons. Despite his father’s embrace of Christianity through the influence of Oswald, Cenwealh rejected his father’s faith soon after inheriting his throne. Because he rejected the heavenly kingdom,

³⁰ *HE* III.1 (214-215): *id est Odualdi viri Deo dilecti*

³¹ *HE* III.3 (218-221): *summae mansuetudinis et pietatis ac moderaminis ... ecclesiam Christi in regno suo.*

³² *HE* III.6 (230-231): *omnes nationes et provincias Britanniae*

Bede explains, he soon “lost the authority over his earthly kingdom.”³³ Upon coming to his senses in exile and accepting Christian teaching and baptism, he acquired his kingdom once again. Not surprisingly, his stormy relationship with two bishops in succession, culminating in an episcopal vacancy for his kingdom, resulted in Cenwealh experiencing defeat after defeat. According to Bede, the king deduced his problem: “A kingdom which was without a bishop was, at the same time, justly deprived of divine protection.”³⁴ In order to redress this, Cenwealh immediately sought a bishop for his kingdom whom he and his people received “honorably” and who, with the support of political authorities, acted as bishop of the West Saxons for many years.³⁵

This aside on Cenwealh in the midst of his narration of Oswald’s kingship certainly is not diversionary; it serves to reinforce what Bede had been describing about the Northumbrian king. Although the latter understood in the end the relationship he needed to maintain with the church in his kingdom, it is his failures that Bede underscores in order to highlight what was never lacking in Oswald until his untimely death in battle. Oswald was, after all, “a most Christian king.”³⁶

Ethelbert and Eadbald, Edwin and Sigebeht, and Oswald and the belated Cenwealh all reflect Bede’s understanding of Christian kingship. All cooperate with clergy in order to allow the church and a Christian people to flourish. While such flourishing does not guarantee unending peace, as the deaths of both Edwin and Oswald testify, Bede does suggest that proper

³³ *HE* III.7 (232-33): *non multo post etiam regni terrestri potentiam predidit.*

³⁴ *HE* III.7 (236-37): *etiam tunc destituta pontifice provincia recte pariter divino fuerit destituta praesidio.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*: *honorifice*

³⁶ *HE* III.9 (240-41): *Christianissimus rex*

devotion to the heavenly kingdom leads to political power in an earthly kingdom. Devotion to the heavenly kingdom, however, does not mean abandoning martial virtues in favor of a meek temperament. After all, Bede commends Oswald for his use of military force against Caedwalla. The defeats of both Edwin and Oswald may have been unavoidable due to the forces arrayed against them—they did not originate with any failure in their royal authority—but Bede hints in his depictions of two succeeding kings that the Christian virtues of a king should be tempered by their vocation.

Thus, Oswine, an heir of Edwin who succeeded Oswald as a king of Northumbria with Oswui, the brother of Oswald, was “a man of great piety and religion” and was so humble that Aiden foretold he would not long survive as a king.³⁷ Oswui, unable to endure his colleague’s popularity and prosperity, raised an army against him. Oswine became convinced that he could not defeat Oswui, so he fled and, when Oswui caught up with him, was “fouly murdered.”³⁸ Similarly, Sigeberht of the East Angles was so devoted to “the kingdom of heaven that at the last he resigned his royal office” in favor of a relative named Ecgric. Sigeberht entered a monastery. When faced with an invasion a few years later, Ecgric and his nobles desperately tried to convince Sigeberht to leave the monastery to lead the army people. Sigeberht did leave the monastery under duress, but went to the battle only armed with his monk’s staff. His death, the death of Ecgric, and the slaughter of the East Anglians was the hardly surprising consequence. While Christian conversion and cooperation with clergy seem to be his baseline for evaluating

³⁷ *HE* III.14 (256-257): *virum eximiae pietatis et religionis*

³⁸ *Ibid.*: *detestanda omnibus morte interfecit*

Christian kings, Bede also was convinced that this should be a muscular Christian commitment.

In the words of one contemporary scholar, “Bede believes that kings should be scary.”³⁹

It is not difficult to isolate the point Bede is making about Christian kings in these books of the *Ecclesiastical History*; it is the same point he made in his commentary on Ezra. Kingdoms with Christian kings, kings whom Bede identifies as *humilis, religiosus, Christianissimus, bonus, Deo dilectus*, who attend carefully to bishops and provide the support they need, enjoy political power and military dominance while presiding over a kingdom that flourishes in education and religion.

The Kings of *Ecclesiastical History* IV

We now come back to Bede’s statement at the beginning of Book IV about the vigorous Christian kings of the age of Theodore of Tarsus. Prior to this statement, in the opening of the book, Bede summarizes the situation in the late 7th century in the aftermath of the Synod of Whitby, the council that attempted to bring the Irish Christians in line with Roman traditions regarding the celebration of Easter and monastic practice. There was an eclipse, which Bede appears to understand as an omen, there was plague, the Synod of Whitby did not bring full unity as some leading Irish clergy depart, and the bishop of Canterbury and king of Kent die on the same day. It is in this ominous context that Bede introduces the Aiden and Paulinus of Book IV: Theodore of Tarsus, bishop of Canterbury and architect of this golden age, a time happier than

³⁹ N. J. Higham, *Re-reading Bede: The Ecclesiastical History in Context* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2006), 156. Note that Higham considers Bede’s treatment of Sigeberht of the East Angles more a failure of Ecgric and his people for violating the former king’s monastic vows than a failure of Christian kingship. He prefers the example of another king named Sigeberht, this one of the East Saxons, whose murder Bede depicts (III.22) as evidence of Christian virtue to the point of gullibility [*Re-reading Bede*, 155].

any since the arrival of the Angles. After noting that Theodore quickly visited all the kingdoms of the English and was well received everywhere, Bede continues:

Never had there been such happy times since the English first came to Britannia. For having the most powerful Christian kings, they were a terror to the all the barbarian nations and the desires of all men were set on the joys of the heavenly kingdom of which they had only lately heard; while all who wished for instruction in sacred studies had teachers ready to hand.⁴⁰

While the “the streams of salutary learning” and religious reform Theodore brought are primarily the focus in these opening sections, his reference to effective royal authority is in keeping with his understanding of a flourishing Christian society.⁴¹

In light of what he narrated in the previous books, it would be reasonable for his audience, encountering this introduction to Book IV, to expect more of the same. Thus, Book IV would depict kings cooperating with Theodore to encourage learning and religion while providing strong military and political protection. In fact, given his language in the passage above, his audience might reasonably assume that the flourishing under Theodore and these most powerful Christian kings would surpass even the almost legendary peace and prosperity of the rule of Edwin he had described in Book II.

If in general the passage seems to refer back to the positive exemplars of kingship of Books II and III, there are very specific and surprising linguistic echoes in this passage that go

⁴⁰ *HE IV.2 (334-35): Neque umquam prorsus, ex quo Britanniam petierunt Angli, feliciora fuere tempora, dum et fortissimos Christianosque habentes reges cunctis barbaris nationibus essent terrori, et omnium vota ad nuper audita caelestis regni gaudia penderent, et quicumque lectionibus sacris cuperunt erudiri, haberent in promptu magistros qui docerent.*

⁴¹ “salutary learning”: *HE IV.2 (332-33): scientiae salutaris flumina.*

back further to Book I. “Most powerful” (*fortissimos*) is not a description that Bede ever uses for the noteworthy Christian kings of Book II and III. In fact, there is only one Anglo-Saxon king in the entire history whom Bede specifically referred to as *fortissimus*: Aethelfrith, the pagan king of Northumbria in the early seventh century. Appearing first in the last chapter of Book I and then again in Book II, Aethelfrith, whom Bede twice described as a “most powerful king” (*rex fortissimus*), won major victories over both the Britons and the Irish of Dalriada.⁴² Further, Bede claims he wrought more destruction on the Britons than any other English king and, though pagan, was God’s instrument of punishment on the Britons, a “treacherous nation,” for their rejection of and hostility toward Augustine of Canterbury’s Christian mission.⁴³

It is not only Bede’s description of the kings of Book IV as *fortissimos* that links these kings to his narration in Book I. Bede’s comment that these most powerful Christian kings of Book IV were a terror to the barbarian nations (*barbaris nationibus essent terrori*) echoes Bede’s account of the arrival of the Saxons, Angles, and Jutes whom the Britons had summoned to protect them from the Irish and Picts. They became a terror to the Britons themselves (*ipsis indigenis essent terrori*), as much as an opponent to the Irish and Picts, and, just as in the case of Aethelfrith, Bede comments that these newly arrived groups were inflicting “the just vengeance of God on the nation for its crimes.”⁴⁴

Finally, it is also worth recalling that, although Bede does use *barbarus* as a synonym for pagan, there is also a consistent use of *barbarus* to mean an agent of brutal savagery. He makes this distinction clear in his account of Caedwalla, a British Christian, and the pagan Mercian king

⁴² *HE* I.34 (116) and *HE* II.2 (140).

⁴³ *HE* I.34 (116): *gens perfida*

⁴⁴ *HE* I.16 (52): *iustas de sceleribus populi Dei ultiones expetiit*.

Penda. According to Bede, these two kings inflicted a merciless and cruel slaughter on the people and the church of Northumbria that ended the reign of Edwin. Few were spared torture and death. In this context, Bede refers to Caedwalla as a “barbarian in heart and character” rather than Penda, presumably in order to signal that his putative Christianity only made his savagery more offensive.⁴⁵

Context from the *Ecclesiastical History*, therefore, would seem to suggest that what Bede was signaling with his phrase “most powerful Christian kings” was overwhelming military power, the kind of power the newly arrived Angles had wielded against those rightly receiving God’s judgment. Thus, Bede seems to set the stage for an age of a truly remarkable and learned bishop who engendered a religious renewal cooperating with truly remarkable kings.

This is not what Bede delivers in Book IV. Who are these “most powerful Christian kings” of the age of Theodore? It is worth noting that Bede has very little to say about kings at all in the first third of Book IV, and the first king who has any significant narrative attached to him is Sebbi of the East Saxons. *Fortissimus* is not quite the adjective for him, and Bede certainly provides no evidence of him contesting barbarian nations to protect his Christian population or as an instrument of God’s justice. Instead, Bede describes a king who over the course of his thirty-year reign was constantly seeking to give up his throne and enter a monastery. According to Bede, it was the consistent refusal of his wife to agree to this plan that kept him in his position. Popular opinion, Bede reported, was that, given his devotion to God and piety, he would have been better off a bishop than a king. After thirty years his wife finally

⁴⁵ *HE* II.20 (202): *erat animo ac moribus barbarus*

agreed, and Sebbi abandoned his throne and entered a monastery. In the end, Bede identified him as “a soldier of the heavenly kingdom,” perhaps indicating that he agreed with the popular opinion.⁴⁶

In the very next chapter Bede’s readers encounter a king who could be seen as living up to the *fortissimus* qualifier. In a brief narration, Bede describes how Aethelred of Mercia, “leading a malignant army, laid waste to Kent and defiled churches and monasteries without respect of religion or divine fear.”⁴⁷ Furthermore, the pervasive devastation overwhelmed the city of Rochester and displaced the saintly Putta, the city’s bishop.⁴⁸ This is hardly the ideal Bede had in mind for vigorous Christian kingship.

At this point in Book IV, then, Bede has discussed two kings, and neither king measures up to what he had promised. His picture of Sebbi suggests someone who never should have been king. Aethelred, on the other hand, was certainly “most powerful” but was a military terror not to barbarians but to churches and monasteries.

Bede’s account of Aethelwealh of the South Saxons that follows immediately in the next chapter is on the surface more promising. Here we have a recently baptized king who cooperates with a bishop, Wilfrid, in order to bring his people to the faith. The king provides for the bishop materially; he gives Wilfrid land in order to support his work and for a monastery. Finally,

⁴⁶ *HE* IV.11 (364): *miles regni caelestis*.

⁴⁷ *HE* IV.12 (368-69):

⁴⁸ What is unsaid in this passage about Aethelred is an astonishing bit of suspension; namely, Aethelred would eventually abandon his position as king to become a monk and then an abbot. Bede reports on this only indirectly and much later in his history (*HE* V.19 and V.24) when chronicling events long after the age of Theodore had ended. This should not distract us from what Bede says about this king: this is the Aethelred he wanted his audience to encounter in Book IV.

Wilfrid not only brings them spiritual salvation but also rescues them from drought and famine.⁴⁹ This is a picture that audiences of the previous books of the *Ecclesiastical History* would recognize: a kingdom flourishing as the king and bishop cooperate. What is lacking is a show of powerful military strength against barbaric enemies. In what follows Bede exposed an Aethelwealh who conspicuously lacks this quality of *fortissimus*. The young and very vigorous Caedwalla of the West Saxons, neither a king nor a Christian at this point, attacks Aethelwealh’s kingdom. Caedwalla kills the king and slaughters the inhabitants; after years of chaos during which Caedwalla became a king in his own right, those who were left in Aethelwealh’s former kingdom were reduced to “very burdensome servitude.”⁵⁰ Bede makes a point of noting that, because of these events, the South Saxons had no bishop of their own.

As a king, Caedwalla himself receives mixed treatment in Bede’s narration of the age of Theodore. He does indeed seem to meet the requirements for a *fortissimus rex* who had great ability at devastating populations. He was a terror both to the Christian population of the South Saxons and to the pagan population of the Isle of Wight. However, Bede is careful to point out that, when engaged in his vigorous military adventures, Caedwalla had not yet sworn allegiance to Christ, though he is open to a future religious commitment when violently depopulating the Isle of Wight.⁵¹ Further, his careful language in this chapter when discussing the paganism of the Isle of Wight does not hint at any barbarism on the island; he does not call the population a “barbaric nation” in order to signal that this population was one of those that he claimed the kings of the age of Theodore defeated. Recall that Bede prefers the destruction of shrines and the

⁴⁹ *HE* IV.13 (372-374).

⁵⁰ *HE* IV.15 (380-381): *provincia graviore servitio subacta*.

⁵¹ *HE* IV.16.

conversion of people; this is what he praises about Edwin in Book II. If anywhere, the barbarism here is found in Caedwalla’s devastation of the South Saxons and the Isle of Wight and, Bede points out, the suffering of the Isle’s inhabitants that continued under his short rule. In fact, Bede includes in Book V Caedwalla’s grave inscription in Rome, in which the former king is described as laying aside his “barbarous rage.”⁵² Thus, it is the king himself who exhibits barbarism rather than fighting to defeat it.

It is perhaps not surprising that, given the reality of Caedwalla’s reign, Bede chose to celebrate his decision to abandon kingship and seek baptism in Rome. He mentions this twice in his narration of the age of Theodore and the second account, in Book V, is quite detailed. It is this decision to fully embrace Christianity, abandon his kingship, and leave the island all together that earns his praise. Bede has no praise for his military adventures.⁵³

The final king Bede discusses in the age of Theodore is Ecgrith of Northumbria. His is the most consistent royal presence in the book, though only as a name for the first two thirds of this section of the history.⁵⁴ Towards the end of Book IV, however, Ecgrith emerges. First, Ecgrith is introduced as the husband of Aethelthryth, and based on how Bede treats the couple, this wording is appropriate. She was the more important of the two. Less than appreciative of his wife’s commitment to chastity, Ecgrith, according to Bede, was working hard to convince her otherwise. The words Bede puts in her mouth as she attempted to persuade the king to allow her

⁵² *HE* V.7 (470): *barbaricam rabiem*.

⁵³ The first mention occurs at *HE* IV.12 and the second at *HE* V.7.

⁵⁴ Bede mentions him at *HE* IV.5 as the heir of Oswui and also mentions here that in his third regnal year Theodore presided over the synod of Hertford. At *HE* IV.12, he mentions the king’s quarrel with Bishop Wilfrid.

to pursue a monastic vocation do not put the king in the best light: she wanted “to serve Christ, the only true king.”⁵⁵

After extensively praising Aethelthryth and including his own poem celebrating her life and sanctity, Bede returns to Ecgrith. The Northumbrian king and Aethelred of Mercia, mentioned previously, fought a devastating war against each other, and it was only the intervention of Theodore of Canterbury that restored the peace.⁵⁶ Bede has already depicted Aethelred as a Christian king quite willing to deploy his military force against Christians, and now Ecgrith is implicated in this as well. The one bright aspect of the narrative is Theodore’s capacity as an arbitrator, and if there is anything positive Bede wanted his audience to perceive about either king it was that they were willing to submit to Theodore’s arbitration and maintain a lasting peace between the two kingdoms.

His final account of Ecgrith, however, is particularly damning and suggests that the king had learned nothing from his warmongering with Aethelred. Ecgrith sent an army to Ireland and “wretchedly laid waste to a harmless people always most friendly to the English.”⁵⁷ Reminiscent of Aethelred’s devastation of Kent, which Bede had described earlier in Book IV, Ecgrith’s army destroyed both churches and monasteries during the campaign. By itself, this provides further evidence that Ecgrith abused his military prowess, his *fortissimus*, but Bede suggests there was a deeper problem. A revered holy man, Egbert, had warned Ecgrith not to attack the Irish. He refused to listen, and consequently, when Ecgrith determined to make war against the Picts in the following year, he and his army “suffered the penalty of their guilt at the avenging

⁵⁵ HE IV.19 (392): *tantum vero regi Christo servire*

⁵⁶ HE IV.20

⁵⁷ HE IV.26 (426): *vastavit misere gentem innoxiam et nationi Anglorum semper amicissimam.*

hand of God.” As before, he was warned by a revered ecclesiastical figure, Bishop Cuthbert of Lindisfarne, but Ecgrith refused to listen, and the Picts killed him and destroyed most of his army.

Thus, in both ventures Ecgrith was not only abusing his military power, but he was also acting against the advice of clergy. He ignored both Egbert and Cuthbert and not only brought ruin on himself but also on the English in general. Summing up Ecgrith’s reign, Bede somberly declares, “From this time the hopes and strength of the English kingdom began to ebb and fall away.”⁵⁸ While he does end his discussion of Ecgrith by mentioning in passing that his successor was able to restore order over a smaller Northumbrian kingdom, nevertheless this final narration of an English king in the age of Theodore is bleak. As if to underscore the embarrassment of kingship in the age of Theodore, he wraps up Book IV with an extended discussion of Cuthbert, the bishop to whom Ecgrith should have listened. In fact, prior to noting the death of Theodore at the beginning of Book V, he says nothing more about kings except to celebrate Caedwalla of the South Saxons (mentioned above) abandoning his position as king to die in Rome.⁵⁹

The Irony of the Age of Theodore

The summary of the kings of the age of Theodore above makes clear the problem laid out at the outset of this article. At the beginning of Book IV, Bede promises an account of powerful Christian kings who are a terror to barbarians, those who are enemies of the church and Christian people, and who, ostensibly, cooperate with Theodore to promote the church and protect the

⁵⁸ *HE* IV.29 (428-29): *Ex quo tempore spes coepit et virtus regni Anglorum ‘fluere ac retro sublapsa referri.’*

⁵⁹ Death of Theodore: *HE* V.8. Caedwalla in Rome: *HE* V.7.

Christian people. No king of the age of Theodore that Bede discusses, however, comes even close to living up to this ideal. Three scholars of Bede – N. J. Higham, Claire Stancliffe, and Walter Goffart – have spoken helpfully to this problem and illuminate a way forward on discerning Bede’s agenda for framing his discussion of the age of Theodore as he did.

N. J. Higham’s treatment of the kings of the age of Theodore gives priority to Bede’s preface to the *Ecclesiastical History*. With his eye on the royal court of Northumbria, Bede presents here and throughout the history case studies of successful or failed kingship.⁶⁰ The kings of the age of Theodore, therefore, are essentially lessons in failed kingship. There can be no doubt that several of these kings are flawed in Bede’s estimation, and Higham is certainly correct to observe that Bede particularly intends Ecgfrith of Northumbria as a warning for the court of Ceolwulf.⁶¹ At the same time, Higham also argues that Bede can affirm and celebrate the decision of Caedwalla to abandon his kingship for pilgrimage to Rome while having this same king serve as a gentle critique of Ceolwulf’s rise to power.⁶² Finally, if this section of the history is to be understood as a series of lessons for the court of Northumbria, then it is hard not to be sympathetic to the notion that Ceolwulf took to heart the example of kings who retired from kingship for pilgrimage to Rome or the monastic life.⁶³ There is no doubt that he learned that lesson.

If we use Higham as our guide, then, we conclude that Bede’s agenda for his discussion of the kings of the age of Theodore is twofold: (1) provide examples of flawed kingship for

⁶⁰ N. J. Higham, *(Re-)reading Bede: The Ecclesiastical History in Context* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 69-82.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 69-71, 158-167.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 207.

Ceolwulf’s court and (2) celebrate the choice of some kings who abandon the earthly authority for the kingdom of heaven. Were it not for how Bede frames his discussion of the age of Theodore, this reading of Book IV makes perfect sense. The problem, of course, is that it is difficult to reconcile this reading with the fact that the ‘framing’ does exist. In short, these two lessons are not the lessons he adumbrates at the beginning of Book IV. In fact, he seems to promise models of good kingship rather than failed kingship.

Clare Stancliffe has isolated a running tension in Bede’s history on the notion of kingship. On the one hand, Bede supports strongly a late antique, Roman imperial theology that sees Christian rulers as good and necessary.⁶⁴ In fact, as this paper has shown, it is hard to miss his affirmation of this idea in both his *Ecclesiastical History* and his commentary on Ezra and Nehemiah. Stancliffe argues further, however, that it is possible to detect Bede’s approval for an ideal of public service in general. Cuthbert, the saintly monk Bede praises in his history and in his earlier *Life of Cuthbert*, resists the desire of his contemporaries to leave his monastery and become a bishop, but in the end accepts this vocation. Bede’s narrative suggests that he approved of this decision to leave the monastery and take on a leadership role in society.⁶⁵ On the other hand, Bede has words of praise for kings who abandon their royal authority for pilgrimage or a monastic vocation. He affirms, in other words, an Irish spiritual discipline that knows no theology of kingship of the Roman kind and singularly promotes the virtue of ascetic renunciation of the earthly kingdom, even peregrinating out of an earthly kingdom, for the

⁶⁴ Clare Stancliffe, “Kings Who Opted Out,” in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society*, ed. Patrick Wormald (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 172-175.

⁶⁵ *HE* IV.28. Stancliffe, “Kings Who Opted Out,” 176.

kingdom of heaven.⁶⁶ Stancliffe does not attempt to resolve this tension of Bede’s dual affirmations; she concludes with the observation that Bede presents a problem in his history.⁶⁷

While she does not discuss directly Bede’s glowing description of the kings of the age of Theodore, Stancliffe’s model suggests that the introduction to Book IV is a strong statement of this Roman theology of kingship. It envisions a positive role for kings in a societal renewal initiated by a bishop. What he delivers, however, are accounts of some kings who “opted out” of their duty as kings. Thus, we could conclude that what we see in Book IV is an example of Bede adhering to both of his commitments: Roman political theology and the Irish asceticism. Finding little to praise about the kings of the age of Theodore that would fit the Roman model, Bede praised what he could, the piety of some who pursued a religious vocation.

There are clearly merits to Stancliffe’s argument, but there is yet another vantage point that could account for Bede’s discussion of the age of Theodore. Walter Goffart has argued that one of the literary techniques Bede deploys throughout his history is irony. In Goffart’s reading, Bede presented a history of Northumbrian Christianity in which he diminished the role of Wilfrid of York (633-710), whose biography by Stephon of Ripon was already circulating when Bede composed his history, in favor of other ecclesiastical figures such as Theodore of Canterbury.⁶⁸ Thus, assuming that his audience knows well Stephens hagiographical account of the saintly

⁶⁶ Stancliffe, “Kings Who Opted Out,” 161-170.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁶⁸ Walter Goffart, “Bede and the Ghost of Bishop Wilfrid,” in *Narrators of Barbarian History* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 235-328.

Wilfrid’s trials and triumphs, Bede presents alternate accounts of historical events that ironically position Wilfrid in a less positive light or remove him completely from the scene.⁶⁹

Accepting the full validity of Goffart’s thesis on Bede’s agenda is not required to recognize the value in his observation that Bede does engage in irony in his history, and Goffart is not the only scholar who has noticed this about Bede’s history.⁷⁰ Perhaps the key to reconciling Bede’s laudatory introduction of the kings of the age of Theodore with the reality he presents is irony. Thus, Bede is deploying a rueful irony in his narration of the age of Theodore – an irony that he pitched for his attentive readers who shared both his appreciation for what Theodore accomplished as bishop as well as his recognition of the importance of competent Christian kingship. Thus, when faced with the royal material he had to work with for the age of Theodore, he chose to develop an artificial ironic juxtaposition of what could have been–his description in the introduction to Book IV–and what was–the narration of the kings of Theodore’s age. Bede’s brief description of the kings of the age of Theodore–Christian, most powerful, a terror to the barbarians–embedded as it is in a description of religious and cultural flourishing under Theodore, was an invitation to his careful readers to imagine the kinds of kings worthy of partnering with Theodore. Bede even signals what they should imagine by recalling what he had already discussed in his history: kings whose military prowess resembled those who brought God’s vengeance on the Britons and whose Christian faith could now provide protection

⁶⁹ See for example Goffart’s treatment of Bede’s discussion of Wilfrid’s interactions with Caedwalla of Wessex [Goffart, 318-320]. Stephen portrays Wilfrid’s active and salutary involvement with a king headed toward conversion, while Bede’s version of Caedwalla, discussed above, presents him as a brutal conqueror. The irony is most poignant for those who know Stephen’s version of the story.

⁷⁰ Roger Ray has argued persuasively that in the introduction to the *HE*, Bede ironically used the language of Isidore of Seville to explain his own understanding of history while implicitly rejecting the Spanish bishop’s understanding of history. See Ray, “Bede’s *Vera Lex Historiae*,” *Speculum* 55, no. 1 (1980): 17.

against the forces of barbarism that could threaten it. The theory that Bede is deploying irony assumes that he and the audience to whom he is pitching this really believed that, with respect to religious culture, Theodore did in fact introduce a most felicitous time. This seems a reasonable assumption. Thus, Bede was inviting this audience to join him in observing the rueful irony of the age of Theodore: if only this happiest of ages had enjoyed the benefit of powerful Christian kingship which, sadly, was woefully absent.

The attractiveness of this approach is that it allows the astute observations of Higham about the lessons present in Book IV to stand. Bede really was continuing to offer good and bad examples of kingship to the court of Northumbria, and he certainly wanted Ceolwulf to learn well from the mistakes of Ecgfrith. Further, the observations of Stancliffe usefully speak to this reading of Bede’s treatment of kingship in the age of Theodore as well. The introductory passage does express a real commitment to the vocation of strong Christian kingship, and by praising the kings who opt out, Bede was expressing real admiration for their piety. At the same time, this allowed him to only further heighten the irony. The best that he can say, or the best that he will say, about the “most powerful kings” of the age of Theodore is that they retire from their kingship.

As he was wrapping up his history, Bede commented on the political situation of his present day. The king to whom Bede dedicated his history, Ceolwulf, had become king of Northumbria in 729, and his reign up to Bede’s writing had been “filled with so many and such serious commotions and setbacks that it is as yet impossible to know what to say about them or

to guess what the outcome will be.”⁷¹ If he was writing this, as seems likely, toward the end of 731, then Bede’s cryptic reference to commotions and setbacks probably refers to Ceolwulf being forcibly removed from his position, entering a monastery, and then returning to his throne. It is worth recalling that a few years later, in 737, Ceolwulf would permanently retire from his kingship for a monastic life. Dying in 735, Bede could not have known this was coming when he wrote the lines above, but he may have been aware that Ceolwulf did not find the monastic life unattractive. Thus, he pitched his ironic discussion of the kings of the age of Theodore at a king who was pulled in two different directions: towards royal authority or towards monasticism. Bede may have wanted Ceowulf to decide on one of these two paths, and the genius of the history is that he presents models of both. Given his praise for kings like Edwin and Oswald, and given his ironic comments at the beginning of Book IV, it would seem that Bede would have preferred that Ceolwulf become a truly powerful king who would protect the church and Christian people, the kind of king that had been lacking in the age of Theodore. If he is unwilling or unable to take this path, then he should take the second path, retiring from his royal position for a monastic vocation.⁷² Bede certainly finds this praiseworthy, and, at the very least, it would prevent Ceowulf from becoming a failed king like Ecgrith.

⁷¹ *HE* V.23 (558-59).

⁷² As J. M. Wallace-Hadrill noted, “it can hardly be accidental” that Bede “lays some stress on royal pilgrimage to Rome.” For Wallace-Hadrill, Bede’s agenda in his history is to promote a literal kingdom of heaven, rather than the uncertainty of political regimes, and pilgrim-kings could show the way [Wallace-Hadrill, “Gregory of Tours and Bede: Their Views on the Personal Quality of Kings,” *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 2 (1968): 43].