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Kings and Kingship in the Writings of Bede*

I

‘Bede’s mind was full of kings; so, too, his writings.’¹ And so, too, writings on Bede; for, since J.M. Wallace-Hadrill wrote those words in his ground-breaking Ford Lectures of 1970, the quantity of scholarship on kings and kingship in Bede’s works has grown enormously. Much of that literature has been devoted to how Bede promoted a Christian ideal of kingship with scholars of recent years focusing in particular on the role of kings within Bede’s reform agenda.² Despite changes in this historiography, both Wallace-Hadrill and recent writers agree that the essential goal of kingship in Bede’s thought was ‘the furthering of religion’, ‘the maintenance and extension of Christianity’.³ The Northumbrian monk turned to his patristic sources to provide ‘a blueprint for Christian kingship’, wrote his histories ‘to reconcile the ruler’s qualities as warlord and lawgiver with the qualities of a saint’, and generally celebrated the traditional image of the strong, warlike king providing he acted in

* This article has benefitted greatly from Richard Sowerby, Zoë Sternberg, and Charles West’s comments and criticisms of early drafts, as well as from those of the editor and reviewers for the *English Historical Review*. I am grateful to the Master and Fellows of Churchill College, Cambridge, for electing me to the Research Fellowship (supported by the Isaac Newton Trust) which allowed me to undertake this work. All errors remain my own.

¹ J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent* (Oxford, 1971), p. 72.

² Reform is now the dominant paradigm for understanding Bede’s writings: A. Thacker, ‘Bede’s Ideal of Reform’, in P. Wormald, et al., eds., *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies Presented to J.M. Wallace-Hadrill* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 130–53; S. DeGregorio, ‘Bede’s *In Ezram et Neemiam* and the Reform of the Northumbrian Church’, *Speculum*, lxxix (2004), pp. 1–25.

³ Wallace-Hadrill, *Germanic Kingship*, p. 97; M.J. Ryan, “‘To mistake gold for wealth’: The Venerable Bede and the Fate of Northumbria”, in K. Cooper and C. Leyser, eds., *Making Early Medieval Societies: Conflict and Belonging in the Latin West, 300-1200* (Cambridge, 2016), p. 87.

the service of orthodox Christianity.⁴ For Bede, it has been said, ‘the king occupies a kind of priestly office’.⁵

In all these respects Bede appears as a harbinger of the medieval ideal of Christian kingship, as ‘feeling [his] way towards a new model’ of the sanctity of earthly rulership, as mirroring Alcuin in his conviction that the purpose of kingship was to support the Church.⁶ This article, however, presents Bede not as a forerunner of later developments but as an heir to older, Augustinian traditions. I argue that the Northumbrian conceived of kingship as a morally neutral thing, indeed as something ‘secular’ in the sense applied by Robert Markus to Augustine’s thinking on political institutions: these could be used as tools for either good or selfish purposes, ‘directed to the enjoyment of eternal peace by members of the heavenly City, or ... directed to the enjoyment of lesser goods, the earthly peace.’⁷ For Bede, kingship belonged to a ‘third realm’ between the sacred and the diabolic.⁸ In monarchy, as in any other secular institution, the elect and the reprobate remained mixed together, each working for their own ends; when Christians gained earthly power they could utilise it as a tool for the Church, but it could be turned against the Church just as easily.⁹ While Bede’s mind was full of kings, he did not have a developed image of a muscular Christian kingship

⁴ C. Leyser, ‘The memory of Gregory the Great and the making of Latin Europe, 600-1000’, in Cooper and Leyser, eds., *Making Early Medieval Societies*, p. 186; G. Klaniczay, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses: Dynastic Cults in Medieval Central Europe*, trans. É. Pálmai (Cambridge, 2002), p. 83; P.J.E. Kershaw, *Peaceful Kings: Peace, Power, and the Early Medieval Political Imagination* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 38, 245–6; J.E. Damon, *Soldier Saints and Holy Warriors: Warfare and Sanctity in the Literature of Early England* (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 56–7.

⁵ C. Grocock and I.N. Wood, eds., *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow* (Oxford, 2013), p. 159 n. 95.

⁶ Klaniczay, *Holy Rulers*, p. 115; L.E. von Padberg, ‘Das christliche Königtum aus der Sicht der angelsächsischen Missionsschule’, in F.-R. Erkens, ed., *Das frühmittelalterliche Königtum: Ideelle und religiöse Grundlagen* (Berlin, 2005), p. 194.

⁷ R.A. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular* (Notre Dame, IN, 2006), p. 40. See also id., *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine* (2nd edn., Cambridge, 1988).

⁸ R.A. Markus, ‘The Secular in Late Antiquity’, in É. Rebillard and C. Sotinel, eds., *Les frontières du profane dans l’antiquité tardive* (Rome, 2010), p. 354.

⁹ Ryan, ‘Fate of Northumbria’, p. 86.

working closely with the Church; kings' significance remained quite limited in his religious writings.

Traditionally scholarship on Bede and kingship was dominated by a single work; the monk's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* naturally continues to form the centre of many studies which focus on Bede's ideas concerning Anglo-Saxon kings.¹⁰ But the *Historia's* importance in the literature has directed attention towards a certain vision of kingship, not necessarily reflected in all of Bede's writings. While Wallace-Hadrill emphasised that the vast body of theological works, and especially exegesis, which survives from Bede's pen should be integrated into any complete study of the Northumbrian's conception of kingship, early approaches to the topic tended to concentrate on drawing parallels between the text of scripture itself and Bede's *Historia*.¹¹ Recent years have seen more attention paid to the exegesis and work by DeGregorio and Ryan has skilfully discussed representations of kingship within Bede's theology, while maintaining an interest in linking the political concerns underlying these writings with the contemporary Northumbrian world.¹²

This article examines Bede's views on kingship with the exegesis placed at the centre of the investigation. Bede's historical and hagiographical writings will be addressed, but his commentaries on the books of the Old and New Testament will set the agenda in what follows: particularly those on 1 Samuel/Kings, Proverbs, Ezra and Nehemiah, Luke, and the

¹⁰ S. Fanning, 'Bede, *Imperium*, and the Bretwaldas', *Speculum*, lxvi (1991), pp. 1–26; H.R. Loyn, 'Bede's Kings: A Comment on his Attitude to the Nature of Secular Kingship', *Trivium*, xxvi (1991), pp. 54–64; 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, 1995), pp. 33–83; B. Yorke, *Rex doctissimus: Bede and King Aldfrith of Northumbria* (Jarrow, 2009); S. Foot, 'Bede's Kings', forthcoming in R. Naismith and D. Woodman, eds., *Writing, Kingship, and Power in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge, 2017) - I am grateful to Prof. Foot for sharing her work before publication.

¹¹ Wallace-Hadrill, *Germanic Kingship*, pp. 76–8; J. McClure, 'Bede's Old Testament Kings', in Wormald, et al., eds., *Ideal and Reality*, pp. 76–98. For the problems with such an approach: P. Buc, *L'ambiguïté du livre: prince, pouvoir, et peuple dans les commentaires de la bible au moyen age* (Paris, 1994), pp. 27–30.

¹² DeGregorio, 'Reform of the Northumbrian Church', pp. 13–14; Ryan, 'Fate of Northumbria', pp. 82–91.

Catholic Epistles. I owe much to a tradition of non-Anglophone scholarship, which has often argued for an ambiguous portrayal of kingship in Bede's writings.¹³ An early example of that tradition, Hanna Vollrath-Reichelt's monograph (contemporary with Wallace-Hadrill's Ford Lectures), questioned the evidence of the *Historia ecclesiastica* for Bede's view of kingship by referring to his theology; Eric John argued in response that the derivative nature of Bede's scriptural commentaries rendered them useless for assessing his thought. Only in the *Historia* could one hear the original, and therefore true, voice of Bede.¹⁴ The revolution in understanding the Northumbrian's exegesis since the 1980s means that John's concerns have been addressed: Bede was an original exegete, whose work provides a thoughtful and deliberate response to the biblical text, patristic tradition, and his own circumstances in eighth-century Northumbria.¹⁵ Certainly quotation and paraphrase of earlier Christian works form a large part of his theological writings; but the skill with which he adapted, manipulated, and, on occasion, disagreed with the statements of the Church Fathers makes it likely that Bede rarely unthinkingly copied previous authors: their words became his.¹⁶

If we have learnt to hear Bede's voice a lot more in his own theological writings, we perhaps find it less in the *Historia ecclesiastica*. D.P. Kirby's research revealed the extent to which

¹³ H. Vollrath-Reichelt, *Königsgedanke und Königtum bei den Angelsachsen bis zur Mitte des 9. Jahrhunderts* (Cologne, 1971), pp. 21–9; J. Davidse, *Beda Venerabilis' Interpretatie van de Historische Werkelijkheid* (Groningen, 1976), ch. 3 – partly summarised in J. Davidse, 'The Sense of History in the Works of the Venerable Bede', *Studi Medievali*, xxiii (1982), pp. 687–93; G. Tugène, *L'idée de nation chez Bède le Vénérable* (Paris, 2001). Also now Ryan, 'Fate of Northumbria'.

¹⁴ Vollrath-Reichelt, *Königsgedanke*, pp. 21–9 (the problem of Bede's use of patristic sources: p. 24); E. John, Review of 'Hanna Vollrath-Reichelt, *Königsgedanke und Königtum bei den Angelsachsen*', *ante*, lxxxix (1974), p. 612.

¹⁵ See S. DeGregorio, ed., *Innovation and Tradition in the Writings of the Venerable Bede* (Morgantown, WV, 2006), esp. id., 'Introduction: The New Bede', pp. 1–10.

¹⁶ P. Hilliard, 'The Venerable Bede as Scholar, Gentile and Preacher', in R. Corradini, et al., eds., *Ego Trouble: Authors and their Identities in the Early Middle Ages* (Vienna, 2010), pp. 102–3; C. O'Brien, *Bede's Temple: An Image and its Interpretation* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 45–6. Also Wallace-Hadrill, *Germanic Kingship*, p. 76.

Bede's sources had shaped, and limited, his history.¹⁷ Not all these sources necessarily inspired Bede's trust, as caveats such as *fertur* show.¹⁸ We need not reject the intentionalist reading of the *Historia*, associated with Walter Goffart, but must acknowledge that Bede did not make his history up out of whole cloth.¹⁹ Most importantly, consideration of genre and audience should encourage us to reflect on how Bede's different writings present his views: work on Frankish sources has shown not only that a single culture may produce various images of kings within different types of texts, but that a single writer would tailor their vision of kingship to the readership addressed in any given work.²⁰ The *Historia ecclesiastica* differs from every other work of Bede in that we know he intended it for an audience which included the laity: it was sent to King Ceolwulf of Northumbria and intended to be heard as well as read (something rarely mentioned in Bedan prefaces).²¹ While it clearly also had a clerical audience, nonetheless Bede here reached out to the lay elite in a manner he had never done before.²²

That new audience will have had consequences for the content of Bede's message. Some excellent work on the *Historia* has focused upon this issue, addressing how Ceolwulf's

¹⁷ D.P. Kirby, 'Bede's Native Sources for the *Historia Ecclesiastica*', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, xlviii (1965–66), pp. 341–71.

¹⁸ E.g. Bede, *H[istoria] e[cclesiastica gentis Anglorum]*, II.1, II.5, III.10, III.17, IV.16,, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), pp. 132, 152, 244, 264–6, 382. R. Ray, 'Bede's *Vera Lex Historiae*', *Speculum*, lv (1980), pp. 1–21; R. Shaw, 'What Bede's Use of Caveats Reveals About his Attitude to his Sources', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, lix (2015), pp. 1–24.

¹⁹ W. Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History* (Princeton, NJ, 1988), ch. 4: mention of Bede's relationship to sources at pp. 240, 253, 304–5.

²⁰ Y. Hen, 'The Uses of the Bible and the Perceptions of Kingship in Merovingian Gaul', *Early Medieval Europe*, vii (1998), pp. 277–90; M. Garrison, 'The Franks as the New Israel: Education for an Identity from Pippin to Charlemagne', in Y. Hen and M. Innes, eds., *The Uses of the Past in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 132–4.

²¹ Bede, *HE*, preface, pp. 2, 6. A. Thacker, 'Bede and History', in S. DeGregorio, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Bede* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 183. Bede's letter to Plegwine was intended for reading aloud, although to an exclusively clerical audience: *Epistola ad Pleguinam*, 17, ed. C.W. Jones, CCSL, CXXIII (Turnhout, 1975–80), p. 626.309–15.

²² N.J. Higham, *(Re-)Reading Bede: The Ecclesiastical History in Context* (London, 2006), pp. 41–4; J.A. Westgard, 'New Manuscripts of Bede's Letter to Albinus', *Revue bénédictine*, cxx (2010), p. 214. G. Musca, *Il Venerabile Beda storico dell'Alto Medioevo* (Bari, 1973), pp. 235–42.

patronage in particular may have affected the work, leading to an emphasis on the heroic status of King Oswald, for instance, for which Bede's previous historical writings hardly prepare the reader.²³ Whether we think in Gregorian or Skinnerian terms, if Bede intended the *Historia ecclesiastica* to reach a lay audience and to influence them,²⁴ he would have had to employ a discourse designed for them, which they understood and to which they were receptive.²⁵ What Bede wrote would have been shaped by this audience's 'horizon of expectations', established in part by previous Anglo-Saxon writings.²⁶ Early eighth-century saints' lives from the Northern Insular world had championed a Christian form of warrior kingship, potentially preparing the ground for how Bede spoke about military activity.²⁷ King Ceolwulf may have been familiar with the discourse of ministerial kingship (kingship as a divine office, analogous to that of a bishop, given by God for the salvation of subjects) beginning to be utilized in public by Southumbrian kings at just this time.²⁸ In his prefatory letter to the *Historia ecclesiastica*, clearly rhetoric intended to get the king to smile upon his work, Bede inserted a line addressing Ceolwulf as a divinely-appointed ruler with a God-given duty to aid his people's salvation.²⁹ Rather than Bede's clear expression of his own view of kingship, when situated in its wider context this looks like the instrumental

²³ D.P. Kirby, 'King Ceolwulf of Northumbria and the *Historia Ecclesiastica*', *Studia Celtica*, xiv–xv (1979–80), pp. 168–73; Goffart, *Narrators*, pp. 280, 288–9; Higham, (*Re-*)*Reading Bede*, ch. 5.

²⁴ N.J. Higham, 'Bede's Agenda in Book IV of the "Ecclesiastical History of the English People": A Tricky Matter of Advising the King', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, lxiv (2013), pp. 476–93.

²⁵ Gregory the Great asserted the need to modify one's preaching for the specific audience addressed: *Regula Pastoralis*, ed. J.-P. Migne, P[atologia] L[atina], LXXVII (Paris, 1839), cols. 13–128. Quentin Skinner highlighted the importance of viewing a text as a speech-act, necessarily only comprehensible in terms of its specific discursive context: *Visions of Politics, I: Regarding Method* (Cambridge, 2002).

²⁶ For 'horizons of expectations': I.H. Garipzanov, *The Symbolic Language of Authority in the Carolingian World (c. 751–877)* (Leiden, 2008).

²⁷ Stephen of Ripon, *V[ita] W[ilfridi]*, 19, ed. B. Colgrave, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus* (Cambridge, 1927), pp. 40–42; Adomnán, *Vita S. Columbae*, I.1, ed. A.O. Anderson and M.O. Anderson, *Adomnan's Life of Columba* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 14–16.

²⁸ *Laws of Ine*, ed. F.L. Attenborough, *The Laws of the earliest English Kings* (Cambridge, 1922), p. 36.

²⁹ Bede, *HE*, preface, p. 2: 'historiam memoratam in notitiam tibi simul et eis, quibus te regendis diuina praefecit auctoritas, ob generalis curam salutis latius propalari desideras.' Ray, '*Vera Lex Historiae*', p. 11.

deployment of values familiar to the monk's audience in order to achieve a specific aim. Sensitivity to such rhetorical features in Bede's *Historia* and *Epistola ad Ecgberhtum* will help us weigh their presentation of kingship alongside the sometimes different image derived from the exegesis.

This is not to contrast the varied genres of Bede's work absolutely, for he did find a way of working some of the priorities of his theology into his historical account.³⁰ Nonetheless, the theological writings addressed a solidly clerical and monastic audience; modern scholarship has shown how the pastoral and educational needs of the institutional Church lay uppermost in Bede's mind when he wrote these works.³¹ The audience of the commentaries remained far closer to Bede himself than the wider circle intended to receive the *Historia ecclesiastica*. Clerics, monks, the occasional nun, familiar with the liturgical, scriptural, and patristic reference points which framed his worldview: these were individuals mostly living within communities and contexts like that which Bede himself inhabited. We shall see that Bede spoke rarely to them of kings and when he did so it was as likely to be in negative as positive tones; in general, this audience does not seem to have perceived the need for an active ministerial kingship to assist them in their work of spreading the true faith. Outside the cloister, Bede and his brethren happily used the discourse of Christian kingship when they demanded the formation of righteous politics and polities. But within the monastery they spoke a different language, recognising that as good Christians they would obey both faithful and unbelieving rulers, because whether kings did right or wrong the devout would

³⁰ P. Hilliard, 'Quae res quem sit habitura finem, posterior aetas videbit: Prosperity, Adversity and Bede's Hope for the Future of Northumbria', in P. Darby and F. Wallis, eds., *Bede and the Future* (Farnham, 2014), pp. 181–205.

³¹ J. McClure, 'Bede's Notes on Genesis and the Training of the Anglo-Saxon Clergy' in K. Walsh and D. Wood, eds., *The Bible in the Medieval World: Essays in Memory of Beryl Smalley* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 17–30; A. Thacker, 'Bede and the Ordering of Understanding' in DeGregorio, ed., *Innovation and Tradition*, pp. 37–63.

have their reward in heaven.³² Whether the strong arm of the king oppressed or supported Christians did not matter because kingship belonged to the *saeculum*. Although he wrote at the beginning of the century which ended with Charlemagne's coronation, Bede attests to the continuation of the Late Antique 'secular' into the early Middle Ages.

II

If for Bede 'earthly kings are ... a reflection of the heavenly king' and '[t]he king was a kind of Christ', then it makes sense to begin by investigating his view of spiritual and divine kingship.³³ Like Christians before and since, Bede spoke of God, and particularly of Christ, as a king – Jesus's kingship was biological, based upon descent from David and membership of the *stirps regia* of the Jews.³⁴ Rulers in the Bible were interpreted as symbolizing Christ: the anointed kings David and Solomon especially, but also gentile emperors like Cyrus and Augustus.³⁵ But Christ did not come to hold an earthly kingship in Jerusalem, waging war and gathering tribute;³⁶ his kingdom was not of this world. Christ's kingship did mimic earthly kingship in some particular ways: the Lord was a king in leading the elect into the kingdom of heaven in the future or (somewhat less frequently) in commanding them in their present spiritual struggle against evil. By linking the divine *rex* with the celestial *regnum*

³² Bede, *[In] ep[istolas VII] cath[olicas]*, ed. D. Hurst, C[orpus] C[hristianorum] S[eries] L[atina], CXXI (Turnhout, 1983), pp. 239.260–240.281.

³³ Wallace-Hadrill, *Germanic Kingship*, p. 97; H. Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England* (3rd edn., University Park, PA, 1991), p. 255.

³⁴ Bede, *[Expositio actuum] Apost[olorum]*, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL, CXXI (Turnhout, 1983), p. 21.196–7; *[In] Luc[ae euangelium expositio]*, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL, CXX (Turnhout, 1960), p. 34.612–17; *Hom[eliae euangelii]*, I.3, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL, CXXII (Turnhout, 1955), p. 17.100–3.

³⁵ Bede, *Luc.*, p. 45.1047–9; *[In] cant[ica canticorum]*, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL, CXIXB (Turnhout, 1983), pp. 237.270–71, 250.248–51; *[In primam partem] Sam[uhelis]*, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL, CXIX (Turnhout, 1962), p. 108.1671–2; *Hom.*, II.24, p. 365.245–6; *[In] Ezra[m et Neemiam]*, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL, CXIXA (Turnhout, 1969), pp. 241.15–18, 244.148–9.

³⁶ Bede, *Luc.*, pp. 32.530–5, 345.1982–6; *[In] Marc[us] euangelium expositio*, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL, CXX (Turnhout, 1960), p. 574.1254–60; *Ret[ractatio in actus Apostolorum]*, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL, CXXI (Turnhout, 1983), p. 116.222–5.

Bede emphasised the eschatological nature of Christ's kingship more than some patristic formulations of the same priest/king contrast.³⁷ Furthermore, Bede associated Christ's most salvifically significant actions with his priesthood: sacrificing himself to redeem humanity of its sins and subsequently interceding bodily on its behalf before the Father in heaven.³⁸

Bede celebrated Christ's eschatological kingship in particularly elaborate fashion in verse, with saints like Aidan and Æthelthryth depicted joining the angelic *comitatus* of the high-throned king in heaven's hall.³⁹ His poem celebrating the Ascension represents it as the entry of a triumphal king into his royal city – an interpretation already centuries old by Bede's time.⁴⁰ The Northumbrian repeatedly understood Isaiah 33.17 ('His eyes shall see the king in his beauty') as referring to the future life, in relation to the vision of God which the elect will enjoy in heaven or to the appearance of Christ on the Day of Judgement.⁴¹ Sitting upon a throne implied judgement to Bede and he could probably visualise this aspect of Christ's heavenly kingship very easily, familiar, as he was, with images of the Last Judgement upon the walls of St Peter's church at Wearmouth and of the enthroned Lord in the Codex Amiatinus's *majestas domini* (created in the monastery during Bede's own lifetime).⁴² These

³⁷ E.g. Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, ed. E. Dekkers and J. Fraipont, CCSL, XXXVIII–XL (3 vols., Turnhout, 1956), i. 155.8–9, iii. 2182.10–14; Isidore, *Quaestiones in Genesin*, XI.8, ed. J.-P. Migne, PL, LXXXIII (Paris, 1850), col. 240.

³⁸ Bede, *Ep.cath.*, p. 237.170–72; *Luc.*, pp. 8.157–61, 35.619–23; *Hom.*, I.3, I.5, II.10, pp. 19.206–20.216, 36.167–70, 249.117–25; *Ezra.*, p. 264.916–21.

³⁹ Bede, *Vita metrica sancti Cuthberti*, 4, ed. W. Jaager (Leipzig, 1935), p. 68.128–31; *HE*, IV.20, p. 400.

⁴⁰ Bede, *In ascensione Domini*, ed. J. Fraipoint, CCSL, CXXII (Turnhout, 1955), pp. 419–23; *Hom.*, II.15, p. 284.163–9. B.É. Ó Broin, 'Rex christus ascendens: The Christological Cult of the Ascension in Anglo-Saxon England' (Univ. of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Ph.D. dissertation, 2002), pp. 96–9. On Bede's poetry: Michael Lapidge, *Bede the Poet* (Jarrow, 1993).

⁴¹ Bede, *Cant.*, pp. 204.545–53, 229.707–8; *Hom.*, I.24, II.17, pp. 171.57–172.61, 305.171–2; *[De] temp[lo]*, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL, CXIX (Turnhout, 1969), pp. 176.1175–6, 227.1387–8.

⁴² The wall paintings (Bede, *H[istoria] a[bbatum]*, 6, ed. Grocock and Wood, *Abbots*, p. 36) no longer exist, but the *majestas domini* (Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Amiatino 1, fo. 796v) may reveal how Christ was depicted in judgement: enthroned, attended by seraphim and the four beasts of the Evangelists, but otherwise without regalia; Wallace-Hadrill, *Germanic Kingship*, p. 96. For a reproduction: Leslie Webster and Janet Backhouse, *The Making of England: Anglo-Saxon Art and Culture, AD600-900* (London, 1991), p. 124.

images produced in a monastic context are all the more significant as Bede believed that all the perfect (amongst whom he numbered ideal monks such as his own monastery's founder) would pass judgement on the Last Day, enthroned beside Christ.⁴³ The language used to describe earthly and divine kings might overlap, therefore, without implying any special relationship: all the elect, not just kings, would reign with Christ in heaven since all the Church shared in the Lord's kingship.⁴⁴ Christ had not transferred any special eschatological or salvific status to earthly rulers.⁴⁵

Christ's kingship was, of course, not purely eschatological – or rather its eschatological/peaceful aspect was linked to a this-worldly/warlike aspect because the divine king entered heaven in triumph having been victorious in his struggle against death and Satan upon the cross.⁴⁶ Bede conceived of redemption as Christ's victory, while continuing to present it as Christ's sacrifice.⁴⁷ The discourse of victory formed a long-established part of royal panegyric in the post-Roman West and Bede did use the overlapping language of *Christus victor* and the *rex victoriosissimus* to connect King Oswald with the Saviour. The famous story of Oswald setting up the *sanctae crucis vexillum* before his great victory at Heavenfield, where he fought *pro salute gentis nostrae*, cannot be an historically accurate description of the Northumbrian king's actions: knowledge of developments in the liturgical cult of the cross comparatively recent in Bede's own time

⁴³ Bede, [*Explanatio*] *Apoc[alypseos]*, ed. R. Gryson, CCSL, CXXIA (Turnhout, 2001), p. 279.29–34; [*In*] *prov[erbia Salomonis]*, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL, CXIXB (Turnhout, 1983), p. 117.219–20; *Hom.*, I.13, pp. 89.35–90.60; *Temp.*, p. 175.1148–54.

⁴⁴ Bede, *Apoc.*, pp. 551.298–553.301; *Ep.cath.*, p. 239.232; *Hom.*, I.4, pp. 28.287–29.290; *Ezra.*, p. 242.39–42; *HE*, III.12, p. 250.

⁴⁵ Cf. W.A. Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England: The Transition from Paganism to Christianity* (Manchester, 1970), p. 251: a misinterpretation of Bede, *Ret*, p. 117.257–65. Davidse, *Interpretatie*, pp. 93–4.

⁴⁶ Bede, *Apoc.*, p. 275.272–4, 393.26–7; *Cant.*, pp. 250.251–6, 330.539–44; *Hom.*, II.7, pp. 230.196–231.217.

⁴⁷ O'Brien, *Bede's Temple*, pp. 109–10.

shaped the entire account.⁴⁸ We need not assume that Bede alone created the story as we currently have it; presumably the Wilfridian community at Hexham, who dedicated themselves to commemorating Oswald's victory, had substantially adapted the story of the battle already.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, Bede was willing here to link the warrior Christ with a warrior king from Anglo-Saxon England. But a single connection between Christ's warfare and that of secular rulers in the *Historia* does not necessitate the assumption that mention of divine warfare against sin in Bede's exegesis was intended to comment on royal violence in the contemporary world.⁵⁰

After all, Christ's wars were fought against a rival of similar status to himself, for the devil too was a king. The New Testament, and consequently Bede, described the devil as holding the *imperium* of death and the devil himself as *princeps mundi* – hence the application of a range of political language to the devil and his power.⁵¹ Bede interpreted biblical kings as symbolizing Satan, just as they did Christ; he understood the devil's relationship to his followers as that of a king ruling over his subjects; he believed that Antichrist would rule as an earthly monarch at the end of time.⁵² The devil's kingdom may have been more of the world than God's heavenly realm but, clearly, Bede did not hesitate to apply the language of kingship to Satan in strikingly similar ways to how he applied it to Christ. So they could be

⁴⁸ Bede, *HE*, III.2, pp. 214–16; I. Wood, 'Constantinian Crosses in Northumbria', in C.E. Karkov, et al., eds., *The Place of the Cross in Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge, 2006), pp. 3–13; P.J. Stapleton, 'Alcuin's York Poem and Liturgical Contexts: Oswald's Adoration of the Cross', *Medium Aevum*, lxxxii (2013), pp. 190–92, 197–8.

⁴⁹ For a possible cult of the victorious cross at Bede's Jarrow: Rosemary Cramp, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture in England*, I: *Durham and Northumberland* (Oxford, 1984), p. 113. See Bede, *Luc.*, p. 404.1638–59.

⁵⁰ Cf. Ryan, 'Fate of Northumbria', pp. 89–91.

⁵¹ Hebrews 2.14; John 12.31. Bede, *Apoc.*, p. 467.3–4; *Luc.*, pp. 181.587–8, 300.167; [*In reg[um] librum XXX quaestiones*], XXX, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL, CXIX (Turnhout, 1962), p. 321.49; *Sam.*, pp. 47.1478–81, 73.204–9, 153.683–4, 161.1032–3; *Hom.*, II.3, II.7, pp. 203.100, 228.103; *Ezra.*, pp. 267.1064, 275.1379–80. The Church Fathers also saw the devil as a king: e.g. Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, XVII.16, ed. B. Dombart and A. Kalb, CCSL, XLVII–XLVIII (Turnhout, 1955), p. 581.64.

⁵² *Apost.*, pp. 45.44–5; *Luc.*, p. 233.77–9; *Cant.*, p. 323.316–20; *Sam.*, pp. 147.419–20, 252.1718; *Hom.*, II.11, p. 256.105–6; *Ezra.*, pp. 282.1645–6, 284.1739–42, 286.1810–16.

seen as rulers locked in a struggle over control of human souls: an idea Bede derived from the biblical view of sin as slavery from which humanity was liberated by Christ in redemption.⁵³ Pushing this idea further could have provided the Northumbrian with the language to delegitimize thoroughly the devil's kingship: tyranny.

Bede predominantly understood tyranny as referring, in its technical sense, to illegitimate, usurped rule: the tyrannical queen Athaliah had murdered the rightful heirs; Maximus was a man worthy to be emperor, but a tyrant because he seized power by breaking his oath; Absalom's revolt against his father constituted tyranny.⁵⁴ A few references to the devil's power as tyranny or Antichrist as tyrant suggest a vision of spiritual warfare which pitted divine king against demonic usurper.⁵⁵ Thus, Christ overthrew the devil's tyranny in saving mortal souls, in just the same way as Cuthbert liberated Farne Isle, like a victorious monarch, from the tyranny of its resident demons.⁵⁶ Bede could call the devil a tyrant because he rebelled against God.⁵⁷ But, more generally, Bede seems to have been happy to recognise the legality of Satan's rule over sinners, both those who had not yet received baptism and those who had later sinned. Perhaps the devil ruled the elect unjustly before they were liberated by the victorious Christ, but his kingship over the reprobate seems ongoing and unquestioned.⁵⁸ Interestingly, Bede's caution about using the concept of

⁵³ John 8.34; Romans 6.20. Bede, *Ep.cath.*, pp. 240.293–241.295; *Hom.*, I.14, II.3, pp. 101.202–14, 201.21–4; *Ezra.*, pp. 251.412–22, 285.1769–71, 369.1195–9.

⁵⁴ Bede, *Reg.*, XIX, p. 314.7–8; *D[e] t[emporium] r[at]ione*, 66, ed. C.W. Jones, CCSL, CXXIII (Turnhout, 1975–80), p. 512.1506–7; *Ezra.*, p. 387.1914–17. For the meaning of 'tyrant': C.A. Snyder, *An Age of Tyrants: Britain and the Britons A.D. 400–600* (Stroud, 1998), pp. 90–108. S. Fanning, 'Rex and Tyrannus in Roman Historiographical Tradition – Livy, Cicero, Josephus and Gildas', *Majestas*, vi (1998), pp. 3–18, argues that the term never had a legal meaning.

⁵⁵ Bede, *Apoc.*, p. 417.99–101; *Hom.*, I.3, p. 15.26–8; *Ezra.*, p. 245.184–7.

⁵⁶ Bede, *Vita metrica*, 15, p. 87.396–7; *Vita Sancta Cuthberti*, 17, ed. B. Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert* (Cambridge, 1940), pp. 214–16; *HE*, IV.14, p. 376.

⁵⁷ Bede, *[In] Gen[esim]*, ed. C.W. Jones, CCSL, CXVIII (Turnhout, 1967), pp. 145.133–146.138.

⁵⁸ Bede, *Ep.cath.*, p. 327.306–14; *Prov.*, p. 86.141–5; *Sam.*, p. 100.1337–58; *Ezra.*, pp. 285.1767–71, 316.1142–6.

illegitimate tyranny to deny Satan's kingship seems reflected in his own account of recent British history where tyrants remain elusive.

Only one monarch in Bede's description of Anglo-Saxon history received the title tyrant: the detested Briton Cadwallon, whose brutal war against the Northumbrians saw him act not like 'a victorious king' but 'like a savage tyrant'.⁵⁹ Bede perhaps intended the technical meaning of the word here, since Cadwallon had 'rebelled' against King Edwin, but it also seems a reflex of purest disgust at Cadwallon's violence, bubbling up in his consciousness; Gildas, who used the term in a fuzzily pejorative fashion, probably lies in the background here.⁶⁰ Isidore had already used the tyrant/king distinction to separate good from sinful rulers, but Bede did not draw on it to distinguish the monarchy of pagan or apostate monarchs from that of Christian kings.⁶¹ Take the oft-referred-to case of Osric and Eanfrith, the ill-fated kings of Northumbria whose apostasy led to their slaughter at Cadwallon's hands and whose names, Bede recounted, had been removed from the Northumbrian king-lists, their year of rule assigned to Oswald's reign.⁶² Rather than engaging in a 'textual act of suppression', writing pagan kings out of history, Bede actually wrote the kings' names, the details of their reigns, and the fact that their memory had been suppressed back *into* history.⁶³ Bede had his reasons for telling Osric and Eanfrith's story, of course: as with other apostate rulers, he intended them to be an object lesson in how God punishes back-sliders,

⁵⁹ Bede, *HE*, III.1, p. 212: 'Dein cum anno integro prouincias Nordanhymbrorum non ut rex uictor possideret, sed quasi tyrannus saeuens disperdet ac tragica caede dilaceraret ...' On occasion I silently modify Colgrave's translation.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, II.20, p. 202: 'rebellauit'; Snyder, *Age of Tyrants*, pp. 101–4; T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Bede, the Irish and the Britons', *Celtica*, xv (1983), pp. 46–7. Cf. Davidse, *Interpretatie*, p. 104.

⁶¹ E.g. Isidore, *Etymologiae sive origines*, II.XXIX.7, IX.III.4, ed. W.M. Lindsay (2 vols., Oxford, 1911).

⁶² Bede, *HE*, III.1, pp. 212–14.

⁶³ Cf. K. Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia, PA, 2008), p. 128.

warning his readers of the foolishness of abandoning Christianity.⁶⁴ But he no more denied the kingship of the *reges perfidi* than he denied that of Satan himself, suggesting a view of monarchy as morally neutral.

That Bede chose to interpret some biblical kings as Christ and some as Satan, does not itself provide any great insight into his conception of kingship. All scriptural symbolism was fluid and flexible, the link between signifier and signified recognisably arbitrary: Bede openly acknowledged that the interpretation of kings in the Bible could shift between positive and negative depending on circumstances.⁶⁵ This gives us no greater understanding of how he viewed kings in his own world than his interpretation of scriptural mountains, sometimes positive, sometimes negative, gives us about his experience of Anglo-Saxon topography. Nevertheless, the fact that Bede utilised the language of kingship to describe both God and the devil, that both were not just *symbolized by* kings but *were* in some sense kings, is significant. It makes clear that there was nothing inherently divine about kingship; monarchy did not make Bede always and everywhere think of Christ. The exegete indeed felt the diversity of meaning signified by kings in the Bible to be appropriate because it reflected the diversity of kings themselves, some of whom were elect and some reprobate: ‘whatever scripture says concerning a good king signifies Christ ... whatever concerning a wicked one, the devil ... and deservedly so, because this one is a member of the devil, that one of Christ.’⁶⁶ Kingship here belongs to the neutral zone where the elect and reprobate freely mix; even Christ shares his kingship with the damned.

⁶⁴ C. Twomey, ‘Kings as Catechumens: Royal Conversion Narratives and Easter in Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica*’, *Haskins Society Journal*, xxv (2013), pp. 5–9.

⁶⁵ Bede, *Apoc.*, p. 457.27–31; *VIII Quaestiones*, VI, ed. Michael Gorman, ‘Bede’s *VIII Quaestiones* and Carolingian Biblical Scholarship’, *Revue bénédictine*, cix (1999), pp. 68–9; *Ezra.*, p. 313.1011–33.

⁶⁶ Bede, *Sam.*, p. 73.204–9: ‘Figurate autem quae de bono rege scriptura loquitur Christum significant ... quae autem de malo diabolum ... et merito quia ille diaboli iste membrum est Christi.’

III

The first uses of Bede's exegesis to approach his understanding of kingship arose from the, not unreasonable, belief that he would have connected the rulers of Old Testament Israel with the kings of Anglo-Saxon England.⁶⁷ Of all Bede's exegesis, *On 1 Samuel* has received the most attention in this light because the work addresses the scriptural account of the origins of Israelite kingship and the transference of the crown from Saul to David. For instance, according to McClure, Bede asserted that Samuel's analysis of the relationship between the Hebrews' morality and that of their king had a general application to all peoples.⁶⁸ Bede's words, however, simply point out that, while Samuel spoke of a single king, the truth of his words could be seen in all the kings of Israel as that nation's moral, and therefore political, status declined over time.⁶⁹ An earlier comment in the same work similarly seems to promise an universal application of Samuel's warnings 'concerning one people' on the dangers of choosing a king against God's will, but Bede related the words simply 'to all mortals who throw off the Lord's sweet yoke' by subjecting themselves to the wicked king, the devil.⁷⁰ His focus was morality, not politics.

Recent work dealing with *On 1 Samuel* has directed attention to later parts of the commentary, where Bede dealt with Saul's loss of God's support and David's refusal to murder him. Did Bede's comments on these topics provide a political message related to the roughly contemporary violent death of his own king, the morally questionable Osred, at

⁶⁷ McClure, 'Old Testament Kings', p. 98.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 91; also, Ryan, 'Fate of Northumbria', p. 84.

⁶⁹ Bede, *Sam.*, pp. 98.1279–99.1296; noted by Grocock and Wood, *Abbots*, p. 137 n. 33.

⁷⁰ Bede, *Sam.*, p. 73.215–19: 'Nam quod de uno populo semel dictum specialiter sed diutius ... omnibus aequae mortalibus qui iugum domini suaue a se proiecerint est generaliter aptandum.'

some point in 716?⁷¹ I would be cautious, for nothing in the text of *On 1 Samuel* mentions Osred's murder. Bede interpreted God's transference of the kingdom from Saul to David as a figure of the transference of grace from the Jews to the gentiles, or any wicked individual's loss of the kingdom of heaven;⁷² on one occasion he did link it with the Jews' loss of their earthly kingdom once Christ had come, but without drawing a general message from this about God's role in the dynastic changes of other kingdoms.⁷³ If Bede sought to address Osred's death in his commentary, David's refusal to harm the anointed of the Lord would have provided a perfect opportunity.⁷⁴ David did not kill Saul for two reasons, Bede believed: first, he rightly honoured the kingship and anointing which he knew to represent the Lord's ever inviolable kingship and spiritual anointing (David as a good exegete looked beyond the literal to the spiritual), and secondly he provided us with moral instructions not to dare speak against those set above us, especially those distinguished with holy orders, however much they treat us unjustly.⁷⁵ The mention of holy orders is surely significant, all the more so since Bede returned to it a little later. David's declaration, 'For who shall raise his hand against the Lord's anointed and be guiltless' (1 Kings 26.9), teaches, 'according to the simple sense of its words, how much reverence ought to be devoted to the divine

⁷¹ A. Thacker, 'Bede, the Britons and the Book of Samuel', in S. Baxter, et al., eds., *Early Medieval Studies in Memory of Patrick Wormald* (Farnham, 2009), pp. 129–47; I. Wood, 'Who are the Philistines? Bede's Readings of Old Testament Peoples', in C. Gantner, et al., eds., *The Resources of the Past in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 2015), p. 179.

⁷² Bede, *Sam.*, pp. 130.2591–5, 134.2763–9; the latter passage translated at Thacker, 'Book of Samuel', p. 139.

⁷³ Bede, *Sam.*, p. 245.1409–11.

⁷⁴ While royal anointing was not yet common practice, anointing was frequently associated with kingship in Insular literature: Gildas, *De excidio Britonum*, 21, ed. M. Winterbottom, *Gildas: The Ruin of Britain and other Works* (Chichester, 1978), p. 96; *Collectio canonum Hibernensis*, XXV.1, XXV.8, ed. H. Wasserschleben, *Die irische Kanonensammlung* (Leipzig, 1885), pp. 76, 78.

⁷⁵ Bede, *Sam.*, p. 226.590–603: '... primo regnum uel unguentum quod et ipsum dominici semper uidelicet inuolabilis regni ac spiritalis unguenti nouerat praetendere figuram digno ueneratur honore, deinde etiam nos moralibus instituit disciplinis ne praepositos nobis eos maxime qui sacris ordinibus insigniti sunt quamuis nos iniuste persequentes uerbi austerioris ense foedare ... praesumamus ...'

sacraments, even when dispensed by the hand of the wicked.’ We ought to beware therefore to presume to slander bishops, priests, or deacons.⁷⁶

The coincidence (anything more sinister seems unlikely) that Bede commented upon these verses around the time Northumbria witnessed a royal assassination and change of ruling family certainly strikes us; it may have struck his monastic contemporaries. Perhaps this part of the Bible informed how they spoke about Osred’s demise (seventy years later Northumbrian bishops would use it to uphold the sanctity of the royal person⁷⁷) – but clearly not to the extent that their thoughts found expression in *On 1 Samuel*. Possibly 1 Kings presented too complicated and negative a picture of earthly kingship for Bede to draw useful conclusions.⁷⁸ If so the Book of Proverbs, whose scattered verses on rulers add up to a scriptural ‘mirror for princes’, presenting a God-centred vision of holy kingship, would have given Bede excellent material as it did later Carolingian clerics.⁷⁹ His hitherto almost unstudied commentary on Proverbs, however, practically flees from any application of scripture to this-worldly rulers.⁸⁰ Bede’s response to Proverbs 21.1 reveals much: when the text declared that the heart of the king is in the hands of God, the monk reacted with confusion, pointing out that surely the hearts of all men are in God’s hands. Bede dismissed here the possibility of any special link between the ruler and God, sinking the grandeur of ministerial kingship in the banality of divine omnipotence. His interpretation of the verse was that ‘king’ must mean ‘saint’ – a solution to which he turned elsewhere in the same

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 244.1383–245.1395: ‘Verum iuxta simplicem dicentis sensum docet quanta reuerentia sit diuinis adhibenda sacramentis quamuis per malorum manum dispensatis ... Cauendum ergo ne episcoporum presbiterorum diaconorum famam passim lacerare et attaminare praesumamus.’

⁷⁷ Alcuin, *Epistolae*, 3, ed. E. Dümmmler, MGH, *Epistolae*, IV (Berlin, 1895), p. 24.

⁷⁸ Wood, ‘Old Testament Peoples’, pp. 180–81.

⁷⁹ H.H. Anton, *Fürstenspiegel und Herrscherethos in der Karolingerzeit* (Bonn, 1968), pp. 357–8.

⁸⁰ Vollrath-Reichelt, *Königsgedanke*, pp. 22–3.

commentary to spiritualize away the earthly referents of other mentions of kings.⁸¹ The only other appearance of Proverbs 21.1 in Bede's writings celebrated the virtue of contemplation, with holy kings and holy men in general being equated.⁸² The declaration at Proverbs 16.10 that the mouth of the king shall not err in judgement he interpreted as referring to Christ, 'for who amongst temporal kings never errs in judgement?';⁸³ the warning not to use one's wealth to destroy kings he repurposed as an admonition not to corrupt men so that they will be unable to reign with the Lord.⁸⁴

If Bede held a strong sense of the ministerial view of kingship it seems bizarre that he took such care to knock away so many of the scriptural supports upon which the theory rested. The ministerial view had long existed by Bede's own lifetime, but key elements within it, which he must have known, appear nowhere in his writings. He knew the influential etymology of *rex* which linked it with *corrigere* (implying the king's duty to correct his subjects spiritually and morally), but only used it once, quoting Augustine, in reference to Christ.⁸⁵ The seventh-century *De duodecim abusivis* presented a grand image of cosmologically significant Christian kingship, but Bede only shared an interest in the most traditional of royal virtues (generosity and piety) with this text;⁸⁶ he nowhere linked the

⁸¹ Bede, *Prov.*, p. 108.1–5: 'Quare cor regis et non potius omnium hominum in manu Dei esse perhibet ... nisi forte regem sanctum quemque appellat qui uitiorum bella in se ipso uincere et uirtutum militia nouit stirpare?'; also *ibid.*, pp. 60.48–50, 91.74–6, 117.216–22. Gregory the Great treated references to kings similarly in his exegesis for a monastic audience: Anton, *Fürstenspiegel*, p. 388 n. 140.

⁸² Bede, *Apoc.*, pp. 547.258–549.266.

⁸³ Bede, *Prov.*, p. 91.48–50: 'Quis est enim regum temporalium qui numquam erret in iudicio?'; also *ibid.*, pp. 92.78, 107.171–3

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 148.21–6.

⁸⁵ Bede, *Excerpts from the Works of Saint Augustine on the Letters of the Blessed Apostle Paul*, trans. D. Hurst (Kalamazoo, MI, 1999), p. 334 – the much-needed critical edition of this work is in preparation by Nicolas De Maeyer, to whom I am grateful for confirming that Bede's Latin essentially followed that of Augustine, *Enarrationes*, i. 505.30–506.33.

⁸⁶ *Pseudo-Cyprianus De XII abusivis saeculi*, ed. S. Hellmann (Leipzig, 1909), pp. 51–3. V. Gunn, *Bede's Historiae: Genre, Rhetoric and the Construction of Anglo-Saxon Church History* (Woodbridge, 2009), pp. 163–5; J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People: A Historical Commentary* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 88, 103.

king's justice to clement weather or abundant fertility, an idea popularised by the Irish text.⁸⁷ Boniface, rather than Bede, first drew on this vision of kingship in Anglo-Saxon literature.⁸⁸ Both Isidore of Seville and the author of *De duodecim abusivis* were clear that the king's duty was to actively correct his subjects, but in *On Ezra and Nehemiah* Bede condemned the most direct means by which a Christian king could have done so: forced conversion.⁸⁹

The necessity of individual freedom in faith clearly impressed itself greatly upon Bede since he went out of his way to insert a reference to it into his account of Æthelberht of Kent's conversion, despite the documentary evidence suggesting that the Roman missionaries expected the king to coerce his subjects.⁹⁰ Bede's *Historia* provides key evidence for the role rulers played in conversion in seventh-century Anglo-Saxon England but scholars have had to read the political context into Bede's account, for he did his best to obscure it at the surface level. The practical credit for conversion goes to bishops, whom good kings acknowledged they needed; as Tugène has pointed out, Bede de-politicised the religious work of over-kings: Oswiu swayed Sigeberht of the East Saxons through friendly persuasion, a model of lay preaching on an individual level, while Oswald's role in the conversion of the West Saxons almost vanished behind that of Bishop Birinus, only revealed through the apparent coincidence that the Northumbrian king happened to visit Wessex at the relevant

⁸⁷ Wallace-Hadrill, *Germanic Kingship*, p. 76, seems to misunderstand Bede, *Sam.*, p. 99.1296–1308 (which simply comments upon 1 Kings 12.17–18). Bede ascribed the desire for earthly abundance to the outdated Law, replaced by the Gospel: *Luc.*, p. 301.198–208.

⁸⁸ M. Clayton, 'De Duodecim Abusivis, Lordship and Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England', in S. McWilliams, ed., *Saints and Scholars: New Perspectives on Anglo-Saxon Literature and Culture in Honour of Hugh Magennis* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 149.

⁸⁹ Bede, *Ezra.*, p. 312.999–1001.

⁹⁰ Bede, *HE*, I.26, I.32, pp. 76–8, 110–12. Padberg, 'Königtum', pp. 190–91 n. 3; C. Stancliffe, 'Kings and Conversion: Some Comparisons Between the Roman Mission to England and Patrick's to Ireland', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, xiv (1980), pp. 61–2. Bruno Dumézil, *Les racines chrétiennes de l'Europe: Conversion et liberté dans les royaumes barbares V^e-VIII^e siècle* (Paris, 2005), p. 160, argues that Bede accurately reflected Gregory the Great's position.

time.⁹¹ Oswiu's conversion of Mercia after killing Penda provides the most direct evidence for a ruler bringing Christianity to a people at sword point, and Bede almost instantly undercut it by celebrating the Mercian rebellion against Oswiu, after which the people 'free with their own king, rejoiced to serve Christ the true king for the eternal kingdom in heaven'.⁹² Bede's discomfort at conversion by conquest looks forward to Alcuin's opposition to the forced baptisms of Charlemagne's Saxon campaign.⁹³

The *Historia ecclesiastica* does contain explicit statements about the royal ministerial duty to save one's subjects, but all appear in letters directly addressed to kings, only one of which Bede ascribed to himself. These are the papal letters asserting the king's divinely granted role in bringing his people to salvation (most explicitly perhaps, Gregory the Great's letter to Æthelberht), Ceolfrith's letter to Nechtan of the Picts encouraging him to lead his subjects to the correct dating of Easter, and Bede's prefatory letter to King Ceolwulf, discussed already.⁹⁴ Most of these presentations of Christian kingship appear as documentary relics of the past, clearly delineated from Bede's own words in a way which patristic quotations in his exegesis rarely were.⁹⁵ Gregory's letter to Æthelberht contained statements at which Bede might have grimaced: not only encouraging Æthelberht to coerce his subjects, but also

⁹¹ Tugène, *L'idée de nation*, pp. 131–5; Bede, *HE*, III.7, III.22, pp. 232, 280–82. Edwin 'persuaded' the king of the East Angles to convert: *ibid.*, II.15, p. 188; the credit for converting the people goes to Bishop Felix: *ibid.*, II.15, p. 190. Eorcenberht, who imposed Christian practice upon the people of Kent, only received the briefest of mentions: *ibid.*, III.8, p. 236. Bede similarly downplayed Pippin II's role in Willibrord's missionary work in Frisia: Dumézil, *Les racines chrétiennes*, pp. 448–9.

⁹² Bede, *HE*, III.24, pp. 292–4 (quotation at 294): 'cum suo rege liberi, Christo uero regi pro sempiterno in caelis regno seruire gaudebant.'

⁹³ Padberg, 'Königtum', pp. 202–4, 205–7.

⁹⁴ Bede, *HE*, pref. (Bede to Ceolwulf), I.32 (Gregory to Æthelberht), II.17 (Honorius to Edwin), III.29 (Vitalian to Oswiu), V.21 (Ceolfrith to Nechtan), pp. 2, 110–12, 194, 318–22, 534, 550.

⁹⁵ The letter to Nechtan has sometimes been claimed as Bede's work but he likely just tweaked the computistical phraseology of Ceolfrith's original: Michael Lapidge, *Beda: Storia degli Inglesi* (2 vols., Rome, 2008–10), ii. 715. Bede preserved the distinctive syntax and scribal features of the papal letters, indicating his view of them as historical documents: Joanna Story, 'Bede, Willibrord and the Letters of Pope Honorius I on the Genesis of the Archbishopric of York', *ante*, cxxvii (2012), pp. 785–6.

holding up as a model Constantine, an historical figure for whom Bede seems to have felt no great admiration.⁹⁶ But Bede recognised that, in this letter, Gregory ‘was anxious to glorify the king with temporal honours, who he rejoiced had attained to the knowledge of heavenly glory’ – in other words, the pope hoped to solidify his spiritual achievements in Britain with some earthly flattery.⁹⁷ The letter constituted a piece of rhetoric and Bede understood that. He knew that arguments had to be carefully adapted to their individual audience (‘those in power are to be taught in one way, and subjects in another’) and that preachers therefore might find it useful on occasion not to contest incorrect views their listeners held, to peddle popular opinion, to simplify a message for those who as yet were children in the faith.⁹⁸ Paul preached to the Athenians using the words of pagan poets to ‘confirm his true statements from the false statements of those whom his audience could not contradict’.⁹⁹ Seen in this light the clarity of the letters to kings in Bede’s *Historia* cannot blind us to the conclusion which emerges from the overwhelming majority of his work: kings did not hold a divine office with responsibility for saving their subjects’ souls, even if it may have been useful to tell them so.¹⁰⁰

Of course, the New Testament explicitly stated that royal power comes from God (providing the essential basis for all Christian theologies of kingship) and Bede accepted Peter’s epistolary command to obey human authorities. Even here, however, he managed to nuance the blunt order to subject oneself to kings and their officers: Peter, Bede argued,

⁹⁶ C.B. Kendall, ‘Modeling Conversion: Bede’s “Anti-Constantinian” Narrative of the Conversion of King Edwin’, in C.B. Kendall, et al., eds., *Conversion to Christianity from Late Antiquity to the Modern Age: Considering the Process in Europe, Asia, and the Americas* (Minneapolis, MN, 2009), pp. 138–9.

⁹⁷ Bede, *HE*, I.32, p. 110: ‘temporalibus ... honoribus regem glorificare satagens, cui gloriae caelestis ... notitiam prouenisse gaudebat.’ See Dumézil, *Les racines chrétiennes*, pp. 157–8.

⁹⁸ Bede, *Apost.*, p. 35.60–61; *Luc.*, p. 67.1905–11; [*De*] *tab[ernaculo]*, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL, CXIXA (Turnhout, 1969), p. 26.836–7: ‘aliter praelati aliter subditi docendi sunt’; *HE*, III.5, p. 228. Ray, ‘*Vera Lex Historiae*’.

⁹⁹ Bede, *Apost.*, p. 73.84–8: ‘de falsis ipsorum quibus contradicere non poterant sua uera confirmans.’

¹⁰⁰ Vollrath-Reichelt, *Königsgedanke*, pp. 21–3, 26–7; Davidse, *Interpretatie*, pp. 92–3 (but cf. p. 107).

‘teaches the faithful servants of the eternal king to be subject even to the powers of the world lest in this the Christian faith and religion could be slandered, because through it the duties of the human condition are disturbed.’¹⁰¹ Obedience is thoroughly instrumentalised as a means of safeguarding the faith, whose maintenance necessarily trumped any obedience to temporal princes.¹⁰² Perhaps Bede’s comments here reflected the circumstances of oppressive rule under King Osred, probably still alive when Bede wrote this commentary, but the exegete clearly saw this as advice of general applicability to all Christians.¹⁰³ Bede imagined that he spoke to an audience who may have to deal with either faithful or unbelieving rulers.¹⁰⁴ When confronted with 1 Peter 2.17’s command to ‘fear God, honour the king’, Bede pushed the closely connected God and king far apart by interpreting the verse as requiring nothing more than rendering to Caesar and to God their respective dues, thereby injecting ‘secularism’ into a verse which contained none.¹⁰⁵

IV

When the devil claimed to have all the kingdoms of the world in his power, he lied; God chooses rulers and, Bede declared, we know that he has appointed many holy men as kings on occasion.¹⁰⁶ The Saviour has made not only peoples but rulers submit to himself.¹⁰⁷ With

¹⁰¹ Bede, *Ep.cath.*, p. 239.257–60: ‘Docet ergo fideles famulos uidelicet aeterni regis etiam mundi potestatibus subdi ne uel in hoc fidei et religioni christianae possit detrahi, quod per eam humanae conditionis iura turbentur.’ I depart from D. Hurst (trans.), *Bede: Commentary on the Seven Catholic Epistles* (Kalamazoo, MI, 1985), p. 90.

¹⁰² Bede, *Prov.*, p. 123.103–7.

¹⁰³ Ryan, ‘Fate of Northumbria’, pp. 83–4. Bede, *Vita metrica*, 21, p. 100.554–5, described Osred as a ‘New Josiah’; even if he here intended to flatter a new king, Bede does not seem to have removed this statement from later versions of his poem: M. Lapidge, ‘Bede’s Metrical *Vita S. Cuthberti*’, in G. Bonner, et al., eds., *St Cuthbert, His Cult and His Community until AD1200* (Woodbridge, 1989), pp. 78, 84–5.

¹⁰⁴ Bede, *Ep.cath.*, pp. 239.260–240.262. Christ’s submission to an unbelieving ruler fulfilled 1 Peter 2’s command: *Hom.*, I.6, p. 40.133–41.

¹⁰⁵ Bede, *Ep.cath.*, p. 241.303–5; also *Prov.*, p. 123.79–80. On rendering unto God and Caesar: *Luc.*, p. 357.2452–72.

¹⁰⁶ Bede, *Luc.*, p. 96.3041–4; *Ezra.*, p. 246.205–7. But cf. *Apoc.*, p. 465.19–21.

¹⁰⁷ Bede, *Prov.*, p. 98.50–54.

death approaching in 734, Bede wrote to Bishop Egberht of York, urging him to reform the Northumbrian Church, and suggesting that he enlist King Ceolwulf to assist him in the task.¹⁰⁸ It would be pointless, therefore, to deny that Bede accepted a role for Christian kings. That role very much involved submitting to the authority of bishops, as the *Historia ecclesiastica* repeatedly demonstrated; if the work aimed at teaching kings how to behave, then the frequent stories of good kings obeying bishops and bad ones suffering the devastating consequences of not doing so had an important didactic function.¹⁰⁹ Alongside this the *Historia* celebrated successful Christian kings and even acknowledged the greatest spiritual achievements as not incompatible with ruling. While Bede did not intend to place himself at the foundation of any tradition of royal sainthood in recounting the life of Oswald (whose sanctity derived from his personal piety not his royal office or his warrior's death), he did become the first Christian author to describe a king as a *miles Christi*.¹¹⁰ The monk thought he recognised a kindred spirit in this king.

Oswald was, by virtue of his sanctity, exceptional. Bede's commentaries give some idea of his expectations of a good ruler who did not reach the level of saint. A Jewish king was given the precepts of the Law at his enthronement to remind the ruler that he himself was ruled by divine laws; Bede thought that Deuteronomy taught how the just emperor ought to rule, presumably referring to a similar instruction to obey the Law.¹¹¹ *On Ezra and Nehemiah* devotes some attention to the question of how Christian kings behave and the picture presented chimes with the interests, and sometimes the self-interest, of the Northumbrian

¹⁰⁸ Bede, *Epistola ad Egberhtum*, 9, ed. Grocock and Wood, *Abbots*, p. 138.

¹⁰⁹ Bede, *HE*, I.32, II.5, III.3, III.7, III.22, pp. 112, 152–4, 220, 236, 284. Higham, 'Bede's Agenda'.

¹¹⁰ Bede, *HE*, IV.14, p. 380. Klaniczay, *Holy Rulers*, p. 83; V.A. Gunn, 'Bede and the Martyrdom of St Oswald', in D. Wood, ed., *Martyrs and Martyrologies* (Studies in Church History, 30; Oxford, 1993), pp. 57–66.

¹¹¹ Bede, *Reg.*, XIX, p. 314.6–11; *Sam.*, p. 72.199–202; Deuteronomy 17.18–19.

monk. Devout rulers end the persecutions of their heathen predecessors and legislate for the well-being, peace, and prosperity of the Church;¹¹² the material wealth of the Church could particularly benefit from the support of kings and the Persian Artaxerxes showed he had 'learned very well what the practice of divine service demands' when he exempted from tribute 'those who were always occupied in divine service'.¹¹³ Tax breaks for monks seem to have received Bede's whole-hearted approval. But rulers could also make a spiritual contribution to their people by praying to Christ to gather them into his Church and by encouraging them in the practice of religion, including confession, good works, and obeying clerics.¹¹⁴ Bede recognised that the Church had even been greatly supported by princes working against heretics and pagans, perhaps thinking about the behaviour of a king like Nechtan in his own day.¹¹⁵

Recent readings of Bede have strongly argued that the monk saw this supportive role for Christian kings as one based upon force. Ryan points to the command in the emperor Darius's letter in support of the Jews (which Bede understood as a model for Christian rulers assisting the Church) to execute anyone who disobeyed; but Bede stepped nimbly around this, emphasising in his interpretation the spiritual death God imposes on sinners, without ever addressing Christian royal violence.¹¹⁶ A widespread conviction that Bede disapproved of kings who retired to the monastic life now dominates scholarship, although some, such as

¹¹² Bede, *Ezra.*, pp. 294.258–296.354, 318.1231–43.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 318.1204–9: '... ut hi qui in diuino seruitio semper occupati erant a suo essent famulatu liberi quique nil in terra proprium possidebant sed ex decimis populi uiuebant ab his nemo tributa soluenda exigeret. Ex quibus omnibus apertissime probatur rex non solum dilexisse sed et optime didicisse quae diuinae seruitutis posceret cultus'; trans. S. DeGregorio, *Bede: On Ezra and Nehemiah* (Liverpool, 2006), p. 125. Ryan, 'Fate of Northumbria', pp. 86–7.

¹¹⁴ Bede, *Ezra.*, pp. 294.273–295.280, 312.999–1001, 314.1048–51, 316.1151–7.

¹¹⁵ Bede, *Apoc.*, p. 231.116–21; *Temp.*, p. 149.76–9, shares the expression *domini rerum* to describe rulers with *HE*, V.21, p. 534.

¹¹⁶ Bede, *Ezra.*, p. 296.323–36; Ryan, 'Fate of Northumbria', p. 89. Also Kershaw, *Peaceful Kings*, p. 246.

Higham, retain the old conviction that Bede thought highly of the practice.¹¹⁷ This perceived rejection of ‘piously pacifist’ rulers underpins the view that strong kingship was vital to Bede’s reform agenda and that he saw monarchy as a Christian duty which could not wilfully be cast aside.¹¹⁸ In part this seems to be because scholars have frequently assumed that the Church generally must have disapproved of a practice which decreased political stability or threatened its own monopoly upon the sacred. We should be cautious about overly institutional readings of clerical views on right kingship,¹¹⁹ while accepting that Bede, like other individuals in his society, had been well exposed to traditional ideas that military activity marked a good ruler.¹²⁰ Nonetheless the current near consensus perhaps downplays the positive tone of Bede’s own discussion of those kings who ‘opted out’.

He commemorated Cædwalla by providing his entire verse epitaph, established Sebbi’s sanctity with miracles, and declared that, while Cenred ‘ruled the kingdom of the Mercians most nobly’, he ‘much more nobly renounced the sceptre of the kingdom’ – an explicit statement about the righteousness of royal retirement to a monastery.¹²¹ Certainly Bede accepted that Offa’s people regretted his departure, but he framed the prince’s actions in the same language (using Matthew 19.29) as he used to celebrate his own monastic

¹¹⁷ R.M.T. Hill, ‘Holy Kings – The Bane of Seventh-Century Society’, in D. Baker, ed., *Church, Society and Politics* (Studies in Church History, 12; Oxford, 1975), pp. 39–43; S. Ridyard, ‘Monk-Kings and the Anglo-Saxon Hagiographic Tradition’, *Haskins Society Journal*, vi (1994), pp. 13–27; B. Yorke, *Nunneries and the Anglo-Saxon Royal Houses* (London, 2003), pp. 29–30. Arguing that Bede approved: Wallace-Hadrill, *Germanic Kingship*, pp. 87–91; Goffart, *Narrators*, p. 323; Higham, *(Re-)Reading Bede*, p. 100. On the phenomenon: C. Stancliffe, ‘Kings Who Opted Out’, in Wormald, et al., eds., *Ideal and Reality*, pp. 154–76; N.J. Higham, ‘The Shaved Head that Shall Not Wear the Crown’, in G.R. Owen-Crocker and B.W. Schneider, eds., *Royal Authority in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 7–16.

¹¹⁸ Kershaw, *Peaceful Kings*, p. 38. See G. Tugène, ‘Rois moines et rois pasteurs dans l’*Histoire Ecclesiastique de Bède*’, *Romanobarbarica*, viii (1984–85), pp. 111–47.

¹¹⁹ See R. Collins, ‘Julian of Toledo and the Royal Succession in late Seventh-Century Spain’, in P.H. Sawyer and I.N. Wood, eds., *Early Medieval Kingship* (Leeds, 1977), pp. 34–5.

¹²⁰ Bede, *DTR*, 66, pp. 498.1066–8, 500.1119–21.

¹²¹ Bede, *HE*, V.7, IV.11, V.19, pp. 468–72, 364–8, 516: ‘Coinred, qui regno Merciorum nobilissime ... praefuerat, nobilius multo regni scepra reliquit.’

founder's retirement from the secular world.¹²² Deciding to abandon earthly military service earned Benedict Biscop nothing but praise and it is not clear why Bede would have detested the same decision in a king; more interesting is his willingness to apply the language of martial monasticism (fighting for the kingdom of heaven) both to Edwin, who never retired, and Sigebert of East Anglia, who did.¹²³ The story in which the East Anglians drag their former king from his monastery to lead them against Penda, only to be utterly slaughtered, more likely condemned the people's foolish attempt to blur the lines between the religious and the secular than Sigebert's initial abdication.¹²⁴ After all, Bede disapproved of monks fighting or being forced to fight (a mark of heretics and tyrants).¹²⁵ His acceptance in the *Historia ecclesiastica* (because of his audience's 'horizon of expectations'?) of warrior kingship, did not come at the expense of denying the religious life's higher calling. Bede commended a king's decision to retire to a monastery, to work to save his own soul, suggesting that kingship remained part of the secular order.¹²⁶

One can shed more light on this issue of Bede's attitude to militarily active Christian rulership in the way he engaged with the tradition of praying for kings. Prayers for rulers and for the peace of the state were already ancient by the eighth century but developed in the early Middle Ages into masses for the victory of Christian princes over the heathen.¹²⁷ Bede's celebration of the victories of Christian kings over barbarians during the 'Golden Age'

¹²² Ibid., V.19, p. 516; *Hom.*, I.13, pp. 91.80–94.210.

¹²³ Bede, *HA*, 1, p. 24; *HE*, II.20, III.18, pp. 202, 268; also *ibid.*, III.24, p. 292.

¹²⁴ Bede, *HE*, III.18, p. 268; T.D. Hill, "'Non Nisi Uirgam Tantum . . . in Manu': Sigebert's Mosaic Aspirations (Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* III, 18)", *Notes & Queries*, n.s. liii (2006), pp. 391–5.

¹²⁵ Bede, *DTR*, 66, p. 512.1485–93; *HE*, I.11, pp. 38–40.

¹²⁶ Davidse, *Interpretatie*, pp. 113–15; J. Campbell, *Bede's Reges and Principes* (Jarrow, 1979), pp. 12–13.

¹²⁷ G. Tellenbach, 'Römischer und christlicher Reichsgedanke in der Liturgie des frühen Mittelalters', in *id.*, *Ausgewählte Abhandlungen und Aufsätze*, (5 vols., Stuttgart, 1988-96), ii. 343-410; M. McCormick, *Eternal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium, and the Early Medieval West* (Cambridge, 1986), chs. 7–9.

of Archbishop Theodore suggests familiarity with this tradition.¹²⁸ Nonetheless, elsewhere Bede seems to have maintained a conservative awareness that the Church's duty to pray for rulers arose under pagan monarchs and, quoting Augustine, he associated the kings for whom Christians prayed with their persecutors (though pagans received little benefit from those prayers).¹²⁹ Although in his own lifetime the Roman Church refused to name heretical emperors in the mass and other Insular authors sought to limit ecclesiastical intercession to good kings, Bede vaguely suggested clerics pray for kings for the sake of 'a quiet life' (1 Timothy 2.2): advice in line with the 747 Council of Clofesho's defensive tone when instructing clerics and religious to pray for rulers.¹³⁰ Such comments have more in common with the loyalty of the early Christians to the pagan empire than the support for warlike Christian princes which contemporary Frankish churchmen offered in their masses.

Bede knew that war and peace mattered to kings and he carefully inserted discussion of the military harm caused by 'false monasteries' into his *Epistola ad Ecgberhtum*, no doubt as an useful argument with which to bring Ceolwulf on board with his programme of reform should the king's much-trumpeted piety prove insufficient.¹³¹ The suggestion that the resources of these houses should be repurposed to support the establishment of new episcopal sees can hardly have helped Ceolwulf pay warriors, however. Genuine military threats may stand in the background here, worrying Bede, but, as in sections of the *Historia ecclesiastica* already discussed, the monk also spoke a language to which he thought a

¹²⁸ Bede, *HE*, IV.2, p. 334; Tellenbach, 'Römischer und christlicher Reichsgedanke', p. 392.

¹²⁹ Bede, *DTR*, 66, p. 505.1278–81; *Excerpts*, p. 303.

¹³⁰ Bede, *Tab.*, p. 123.1184–90; *DTR*, 66, p. 532.2011–14; *Ezra.*, p. 295.312–16. *Praefatio Gildae de Poenitentia*, 23, ed. L. Bieler, *The Irish Penitentials* (Dublin, 1963), p. 62; Canons of the Council of Clofesho, 30, ed. A.W. Haddan and W. Stubbs, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents Relating to Great Britain and Ireland* (3 vols., Oxford, 1869–73), iii. 375.

¹³¹ Bede, *Ad Ecgberhtum*, 11, pp. 142–6. J. Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford, 2005), p. 111.

secular audience would respond.¹³² Bede's concern for military matters in the letter to Ecgberht gave a greater importance to the well-being of a temporal kingdom than his religious writings tended to do: he frequently pointed out that the Jewish people wanted to maintain and expand their earthly kingdom, awaiting a carnal king as Messiah, an obsession which led to the loss of both earthly and heavenly kingdoms.¹³³ Hence, Bede's concern for the temporal kingdom of Northumbria appears situational and purposeful, a piece of rhetoric like his brief mention of ministerial kingship when writing directly to Ceolwulf and his heightened interest in military victory in the *Historia*.

The letter to Bishop Ecgberht, Bede's last surviving work, bears many similarities to *On Ezra and Nehemiah* and DeGregorio has noted that both propose a role for Christian kings in supporting the work of the Church.¹³⁴ But both also suggest the limitations of that role, or rather attest to the fact that Christian kings operate from within an institution which belongs to the *saeculum*. Bede encouraged Ecgberht to call upon Ceolwulf for help in reforming the Church because of the king's personal suitability for the work of reform. As the bishop's cousin and an especially pious individual, Ceolwulf seemed likely to prove amenable to assisting the work of the bishop.¹³⁵ Of course, Ceolwulf's usefulness derived from his royal office since Bede's plan for reform involved the mass requisitioning of the land of 'false monasteries' to finance the foundation of new episcopal sees, a process involving tearing up dozens of royal charters;¹³⁶ but his duty to help was a personal one. Bede made this precise point when he justified his radical policy: Ceolwulf, in rejecting

¹³² For the political context of Bede's letter to Ecgberht: C. Stancliffe, *Bede and the Britons* (Whithorn, 2005).

¹³³ Bede, *Luc.*, p. 266.1410–15; *Prov.*, pp. 28.220–29.224; *Sam.*, pp. 70.102–6, 72.167–71, 188.2198–203; *In Tobiam*, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL, CXIXB (Turnhout, 1983), pp. 16.58–17.64; *Marc.*, p. 626.1210–13; *Ezra.*, p. 262.831–7.

¹³⁴ DeGregorio, 'Reform', p. 14.

¹³⁵ Bede, *Ad Ecgberhtum*, 9, p. 138. Cf. Tugène, *L'idée de nation*, pp. 273–4.

¹³⁶ Grocock and Wood, *Abbots*, p. lii.

previous kings' charters, would be following 'the example in the sacred history which depicts the reigns of the kings of Judah ... and points out that only a few of them were men of faith, but many were wicked; as one followed on after the other the wicked disapproved of the actions of the good men who preceded them; while on the other hand the just kings with all their energies put right ... the wicked deeds of the iniquitous kings ... as was right.'¹³⁷ Righteous behaviour was not demanded of a king as the holder of a ministry, but as a pious individual; the royal office see-sawed between the elect and the reprobate, each seizing the opportunity to push his agenda when the time came.

On Ezra and Nehemiah also reveals the sense of instability central to how Bede represented kingship in the above passage to Ecgberht. Good Persian rulers may symbolize Christian kings, but those who hindered the Jews in rebuilding Jerusalem represent gentile princes, including persecutors of the Church. Some kings support the work of the religious but heretics also appeal to and win the assistance of secular rulers: 'How much this harms the faith became clearer than daylight during the time of the Arian treachery.'¹³⁸ Indeed, Bede provided a whole list of Catholic heroes who suffered under Arian emperors in *On Ezra and Nehemiah* and his martyrological work made him as familiar with the victims of heretical rulers, as those of pagan ones.¹³⁹ Having carefully emptied many of the most positive verses of the Book of Proverbs of any reference to earthly kingship, the monk chose to read

¹³⁷ Bede, *Ad Ecgberhtum*, 11, p. 144: '... iuxta exemplum sacrae hystoriae quae tempora regum Iuda ... describens nonnullos quidem in eis religiosos sed plures reprobos extitisse designat, uicibusque alternantibus nunc impios bonorum qui ante se fuerant facta reprobare, nunc e contra iustos impiorum qui se praecesserant gesta nociua, prout dignum erat ... omni instantia correxisse'; Grocock and Wood's translation.

¹³⁸ Bede, *Ezra.*, pp. 294.258–63, 378.1546–8; quotation at 284.1711–14: '[heretici] accusant eos ad reges cum principum quoque terrenorum opera contra ecclesiam praesidia conquirunt. Quod quantum noceat fidei tempore Arrianae perfidiae luce clarius innotuit.'; trans. DeGregorio, *On Ezra*, p. 72. Also Bede, *Apoc.*, p. 349.38–40.

¹³⁹ Bede, *Ezra.*, p. 283.1670–86; *DTR*, 66, pp. 510.1430–32, 512.1511–513.1516, 520.1697–1702; Henri Quentin, *Les martyrologues historiques du Moyen Age* (Paris, 1908), pp. 100, 104.

Proverbs 28.12 (which declares that the ruin of men comes through the wicked ruling) quite literally. For Bede, the verse called to mind the dangers of heretic and pagan princes who always assisted their accomplices in the kingdom.¹⁴⁰ While sometimes Bede spoke as if his own era was one where persecution was unknown, royal power having submitted itself to Christ, he knew that the greatest persecution lay in the future and that Antichrist would wield the power of earthly kingdoms against the Church.¹⁴¹

Kingship could bear more welcome fruit than persecution, of course, and Bede celebrated the good which an active king might bring. Three sentences, whose mirrored beginnings heighten the rhetorical effect, commemorate the *pax, utilitas, and excellentia* which marked Edwin's reign.¹⁴² The king exercised a genuinely paternal care for his people, which brought them peace and prosperity in this world through his monarchy.¹⁴³ Such good, however, clearly belonged to the earthly kingdom, not the heavenly one. The way in which these two kingdoms often appear juxtaposed in the *Historia ecclesiastica* makes clear, albeit in a complicated fashion, that they are very different realms, the temporal kingdom's relationship to the heavenly as shifting as anything in the *saeculum*: sometimes they are opposed to each other, sometimes paralleled.¹⁴⁴ Bede, thus, had a clear sense of the 'this-worldly' nature of monarchy, of politics as a field of human activity belonging to the temporal sphere. The fluidity of the signifier *rex* in exegesis mirrored the fluidity of kingship

¹⁴⁰ Bede, *Prov.*, p. 137.30–34: 'Sicut multi gloriam Deo dare incipient cum iustos in profectu uirtutum gaudere conspiciunt ita quoties reprobi regnum tenent multos suae perfidiae complices exhibent. Quod et de paganis et de hereticis et de malis catholicis recte potest accipi.'

¹⁴¹ Bede, *Apoc.*, pp. 469.27–471.37; *Sam.*, p. 250.1608–11; *Gen.*, pp. 235.1475–236.1513; *Hom.*, II.8, p. 238.186–8; *Ezra.*, p. 378.1543–53.

¹⁴² Bede, *HE*, II.16, p. 192. Kershaw, *Peaceful Kings*, pp. 31–9.

¹⁴³ Foot, 'Bede's Kings'.

¹⁴⁴ Bede, *HE*, II.5 (x2), III.1, III.6, III.7, III.12, III.14, III.22, IV.12, IV.14, pp. 148, 152, 212, 230, 232, 250, 254, 282, 368, 378. Bede knew Gregory the Great's fondness for juxtaposing the two kingdoms: *DTR*, 66, p. 522.1750–54; *HE*, I.32, p. 112.

in the real world. Although kingship was not a divine office which had to be filled by a servant of God, Bede believed that a good Christian could reign with benefit to the Church. Bede's view of monarchy was neither positive nor negative; he made moral demands of Christians who were kings, but no demands of kingship itself, for he recognised the institution as fundamentally amoral.¹⁴⁵ The vision of kingship presented here is strikingly similar to Augustine's understanding of political institutions or classical literature: it is a social space open to both the just and wicked who can use its common goods for their own diverging ends.¹⁴⁶

V

Looking at Bede's descriptions of historical Anglo-Saxon kings, Tugène declared that the monk had 'worked out ... a doctrine of Christian kingship'.¹⁴⁷ Viewing the full richness of Bede's writing, treating his exegesis as seriously as his history, while recognising its difference in genre, presents a different picture. If Bede commented on the Bible with one eye on his Northumbrian social context, then the other was firmly directed towards eternity; a Christ-centred universal history of salvation formed the main subject of his commentaries and a centuries-old tradition of interpretation framed how he approached scripture. One best understands the political thought of a work like *On 1 Samuel* by acknowledging this, rather than by turning it into a *roman à clef* about the Northumbrian elite in 716. Thinking on this scale did not encourage Bede to bestow great religious significance on earthly rulers, necessarily part of the transitory *saeculum*, where if they reflected a spiritual kingship at all it was that which both Christ and Satan shared: a morally

¹⁴⁵ See Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, p. 46.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 44–5.

¹⁴⁷ G. Tugène, 'Reflections on "Ethnic" Kingship in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*', *Romanobarbarica*, xvii (2000–2002), p. 328.

neutral monarchy. Its neutrality allowed kingship to be swayed to good Christian ends on occasion and much of Bede's writing about historical kings aimed to do just that, rather than to present the Anglo-Saxon Church's understanding of kingship, which appears to have been somewhat more cautious. Undoubtedly the picture here presented can be nuanced; work tracking the possible shifts in Bede's thought over time (testing the hypothesis that his interest in reform in later works may have influenced his attitude to secular rulers) would be particularly useful.¹⁴⁸

Bede's view of kingship hardly resulted from any one single cause; intellectual and social factors must both have fed into it. The similarities of my reading of Bede to Markus's interpretation of Augustine presumably derive from the well-recognised influence of the Bishop of Hippo upon the Northumbrian.¹⁴⁹ The monk's relationship with Augustine requires further work; Bede clearly was an informed and sophisticated reader of the North African Father, though one taking the latter's thought in distinctively 'medieval' new directions, especially in relation to the institutional Church.¹⁵⁰ At the very least we can say that Bede had read *The City of God* carefully and grasped the important lesson that no political institution represented the ideal community of God's people.¹⁵¹ His thought did not replicate Augustinian 'secularism' exactly, but was shaped by it.

¹⁴⁸ In the footnotes I cite Bede's works in roughly chronological order, but the dating of many of Bede's writings remains provisional.

¹⁴⁹ A. Thacker, *Bede and Augustine of Hippo: History and Figure in Sacred Text* (Jarrow, 2005); R.A. Markus, *Bede and the Tradition of Ecclesiastical Historiography* (Jarrow, 1975), pp. 14–15.

¹⁵⁰ O'Brien, *Bede's Temple*, pp. 144–54.

¹⁵¹ H.J. Rector, 'The Influence of St. Augustine's Philosophy of History on the Venerable Bede in the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*', (Duke Univ., PhD. dissertation, 1975); J.N. Hillgarth, 'L'influence de la *Cité du Dieu* de saint Augustin au haut Moyen Age', *Sacris Erudiri*, xxviii (1985), pp. 20–21; Hilliard, 'Bede's Hope'. Cf. Wallace-Hadrill, *Germanic Kingship*, p. 73.

The direct influence of contemporary politics upon Bede remains harder to determine than that of a long-dead Church Father. The monk famously said surprisingly little about any of the kings of his own lifetime, though his reticence may tell its own story. The lack of direct comment on kingship in Bede's exegetical writings should not be taken as evidence that its monastic readers had no interest in the doings of secular kings.¹⁵² All Anglo-Saxon religious communities were closely linked to lay elites and recent work has highlighted how Bede's Wearmouth-Jarrow had connections with kings from the moment of foundation and frequently thereafter, a possible royal estate lying within sight of Jarrow.¹⁵³ While embedded in the world of political power, such communities also perceived themselves as removed from it through the liturgy and *lectio divina*: the warrior Guthlac became a monk to escape 'the shameful ends of the ancient kings of his race'.¹⁵⁴ The monks of Wearmouth-Jarrow, like those in other Northumbrian religious houses of the late seventh and early eighth century, had reason to be grateful to the kings who donated land and approved papal privileges, and reason to be wary of those rulers who moved monasteries around at will and set aside a papal ruling as easily as accept one.¹⁵⁵ Northumbrian kings were probably no more likely than any other early medieval princes to exile bishops, grow envious of ecclesiastical wealth, or despoil consecrated virgins – and no less likely either, as Bede and his colleagues knew.¹⁵⁶ A certain caution towards royal authority, a desire to win it over with

¹⁵² Cf. Vollrath-Reichelt, *Königsgedanke*, p. 26.

¹⁵³ Grocock and Wood, *Abbots*, pp. lix–lxi.

¹⁵⁴ *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac*, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave (Cambridge, 1985), p. 82: 'cum antiquorum regum stirpis suae per transacta retro saecula miserabiles exitus flagitioso vitae termino contemplaretur ...'

¹⁵⁵ Bede, *HA*, 6, 7, 15, pp. 36, 38, 58–60; *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, 8, p. 180; *Hom.*, I.13, p. 91.113–16. Stephen, *VW*, 34, p. 70.

¹⁵⁶ Bede, *HE*, V.19, p. 522; Stephen, *VW*, 24, 45, pp. 48, 92; Boniface, *Epistolae*, 73, ed. M. Tangl, *S. Bonifatii et Lulli epistolae*, MGH, *Epistolae Selectae*, I (Berlin, 1916), p. 153.

theological blandishments while denying it any sacral quality, would not have been an illogical strategy in this situation.

At Wearmouth-Jarrow Bede belonged to a community with perspectives much wider than the simply Northumbrian. The monastery had emerged from a culture heavily influenced by Frankish ecclesiastical experience and some of the well-known dangers Frankish politics held for clerics may have shaped attitudes there, as they seem to have done in the contemporary Wilfridian communities.¹⁵⁷ Bede's knowledge of the Islamic conquests (difficult as it is to reconstruct) might have shaken his confidence in the dominance of Christianity in his world.¹⁵⁸ Markus argued that the possibility of conceiving of a religiously neutral space drained away in the early Middle Ages as society became more monolithically Christian; the arrival of Islam in Europe may have sharpened Bede's pre-existing conviction that the Church had to consider the possibility of dealing with unbelieving rulers and so allowed a trace of 'secularism' to continue after it had ended according to Markus's model.¹⁵⁹

Rome, however, probably played the most important role in shaping ideas at Bede's monastery. Regular contact with the papal centre throughout his life provided Bede with Roman perspectives on recent political events, especially as given in the *Liber Pontificalis*. Reading through this Bede would have found, as he himself recorded in his chronicle, a narrative where the papacy provided a bulwark of true religion against fickle emperors, who swung between orthodoxy and heresy in a manner not dissimilar to the alternating

¹⁵⁷ W. T. Foley, *Images of Sanctity in Eddius Stephanus' Life of Bishop Wilfrid, An Early English Saint's Life* (Lampeter, 1992), pp. 84–5; P. Fouracre, 'Wilfrid and the Continent', in N.J. Higham, ed., *Wilfrid: Abbot, Bishop, Saint; Papers from the 1300th Anniversary Conferences* (Donington, 2013), pp. 186–99.

¹⁵⁸ C.B. Kendall, 'Bede and Islam', in Darby and Wallis, eds., *Bede and the Future*, pp. 93–114.

¹⁵⁹ R.A. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge, 1990); id., *Christianity and the Secular*, ch. 4.

righteousness and injustice of the Jewish kings which Bede presented as a model for Ceolwulf in his letter to Bishop Ecgberht.¹⁶⁰ From the mid-seventh century Rome and Constantinople had clashed repeatedly over doctrinal issues such as monothelism and the first intimations of Eastern iconoclasm; Bede was aware, even in his final years, that the papacy continued to struggle against bouts of imperial heterodoxy.¹⁶¹ The *Liber Pontificalis* provided an account of these disputes with frequent references to the plots of emperors and imperial agents to murder and abduct popes or steal Church property, but also included mention of pious rulers honouring the papacy and organising Church councils.¹⁶² It presented a vision of secular rule to be considered alongside the ministerial kingship promoted by the papal letters to Anglo-Saxon kings.

All these factors (the influence of Augustine, the contemporary experience of Northumbrian kingship, a monastic culture at Wearmouth-Jarrow shaped by papal self-representation) likely had some part in forming Bede's ideas about kings and kingship. The exact processes at work here will only be fully understood once Bede's work is set alongside the evidence of other early medieval writings. For the significance of this study is not just that it changes our understanding of how one important thinker saw kingship; it also invites us to reconsider the usual narrative of early medieval political thought, where Bede's role has traditionally been as a forerunner to the Carolingian moment. It opens up new possibilities for

¹⁶⁰ S. Kaschke, 'Mediterranean Lessons for Northumbrian Monks in Bede's *Chronica Maiora*', in A. Fischer and I. Wood, eds., *Western Perspectives on the Mediterranean: Cultural Transfer in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, 400–800 AD* (London, 2014), p. 99; R. McKitterick, 'The Papacy and Byzantium in the Seventh- and early Eighth-Century Sections of the *Liber Pontificalis*', *Papers of the British School at Rome*, lxxxiv (2016), pp. 241–73.

¹⁶¹ *Liber Pontificalis*, 76.4–6, 78.3–4, 86.6–9, 88.5, 90.10, 91.16, ed. L. Duchesne (2 vols., Paris, 1888–92), i. 337–8, 343–4, 372–4, 385–6, 392, 403. In 725 Bede had access to recent updates of the *Liber Pontificalis*; he subsequently received further information from Rome: Peter Darby, 'Bede, Iconoclasm, and the Temple of Solomon', *Early Medieval Europe*, xxi (2013), pp. 390–421.

¹⁶² *Liber Pontificalis*, 81.6–15, 90.5–7, 91.5, i. 351–4, 390–91, 398–9.

considering the legacy of the Christian 'secularism' which Markus saw Augustine as espousing and which, he argued, disappeared as Late Antiquity transformed into the Middle Ages in a process of 'de-secularization'.¹⁶³ The evidence of Bede's thought should give us pause to think: the penetration of political power by the moral and religious precepts of Christianity was already well under way by 700, but was not necessarily a straightforwardly linear process. In Bede's world alternative Christian visions of politics remained possible and one cannot simply treat the venerable monk's writings as just another step in the rise towards an inevitable Christian kingship.

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¹⁶³ Markus, 'Secular in Late Antiquity', pp. 360–61.