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The Meaning of Apostasy in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*

When conducting historical research, no detail is too small. It is crucial to pay close attention to the words authors use and to understand the reasons they use them. This is certainly the case when attempting to understand the meaning of apostasy in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People.* St. Bede, also known as The Venerable Bede, was a 7th century monk who spent most of his life at a monastery in Jarrow, Northumbria located in Northern England. Throughout his life, he wrote more than 40 books, many of which dealt with the coming of Christianity to Anglo Saxon England. One work in particular details the conversion of several Anglo Saxon Kings and their kingdoms.

The *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* is a detailed account of Christianity's earliest history in England. However, rather than focus on the rapid spread and many triumphs of Christianity among the Anglo Saxons, the aim of this paper is to investigate the instances in which Christianity failed to keep hold and Kings decided to abandon their new faith and return to paganism. When describing these kings, Bede sometimes employs the use of the word apostasy. Many scholars who write about these kings express varying opinions when it comes to deciding which of them were apostates and which of them were not. This raised several questions: what did the word apostasy mean to a 7th century monk writing in Anglo Saxon England? Which of these kings truly were apostates, and what was Bede's purpose in including these stories of failed conversions in his account?

To answer these questions we will develop a definition of apostasy by consulting several primary sources. Some of these sources include; the Old and New Testaments, Christian laws of the fifth century, teachings of the early Church leaders, the writings of Gildas, and finally, Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.

Apostasy in the Old Testament and New Testament

According to the Old Testament, the sin of apostasy is a sin of abandonment, abandonment of God and his laws by choosing to forsake God and serve other gods in His place, *"*namely the gods of other people which are around you.*"* [1] The Old Testament is full of examples of the nation of Israel being led into apostasy on account of an unrighteous king. A few of these kings include King Ahab who abandoned the faith of Israel and became a worshiper of the pagan god Baal.[2] Ahaziah, King Ahab's son also left the faith of his ancestors and became a worshiper of Baal.[3] Similarly, King Jehoram of Judah "forsook the Lord, the God of his fathers," and instituted Baal worship. [4] King Ahaz abandoned the God of the Israelites and worshipped pagan idols and even sacrificed his own son in an offering to pagan gods.[5] A final example of apostasy from the Old Testament involves King Manasseh and his son Amon.

Manasseh built altars to Baal and Asherah but later entreated God in prayer and repented of his apostasy. The scriptures say that God forgave Manasseh and that after his repentance he rid the kingdom of pagan worship. Under Manasseh's son Amon, however, paganism was reinstated and the Israelites once again fell into apostasy.[6]

Apostasy continued into the New Testament but was understood by Christians within a slightly different framework. The abandonment of God became an abandonment of God in the person of his son Jesus Christ and with the addition of Jesus, also came the practice of baptism.[7]

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[1] Deuteronomy 13: 6-10.
[2] 1 Kings 16:30-33.
[3] *Ibid.* 22:51-53.
[4] 2 Chronicles 21:6, 10.
[5] *Ibid.* 28: 1-4.
[6] *Ibid.* 33:1-24.
[7] John 1: 29-33.

Baptism signified the Christians' conversion and from that point on, baptism was necessary in order for apostasy to take place.

Many New Testament authors simply quoted verses from the Old Testament when writing about apostasy. For instance, St. Peter quotes the Old Testament book of Numbers when writing about false teachers and the danger of apostasy. He retells the Old Testament story of Balaam and the pagan King Balak who led the Israelites into apostasy by enticing them to commit adultery and make sacrifices to idols.[8] In this case, Peter was warning Christians that the same could be done to them if the listened to false teachers.

In the following passages, Peter again draws from the Old Testament to expound upon the danger of apostasy. He states that a person who has escaped the corruption of the world by knowing the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ can still become entangled in it once again and that if they do, they are like "a dog who has returned to its vomit or a sow that has been washed and returns to the mud."[9] In reference to apostates, Peter says that that those who turned their backs on the sacred command were worse off in the end than they were in the beginning before they had the knowledge of Christ. He said it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness at all than to have known it and then abandoned it. [10] Then again in the book of Hebrews, a story of the Old Testament is used to teach the danger of apostasy. The story of the Israelites who were led out of Egypt by Moses and into the desert is referenced in order to teach Christians that even those whom God saves can rebel against him and apostatize.[11]

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[8] 2 Peter 2:15-16.
[9] *Ibid.* 2:16- 22.
[10] *Ibid.*
[11] Hebrews 3:12-19.

Roman Law Concerning Apostasy

The Theodosain Code created in the late fifth century, clearly defined apostasy in Christian terms for the first time. The law specifically addressed apostasy as a crime and prescribed punishment to those found guilty. What is important to point out is that the law made distinctions between apostasy and simply falling away from the faith or going astray. An apostate was defined as someone who betrayed the holy faith and profaned their baptism. By the definition of the law, profaning holy baptism was going over to another religion. Christians who were guilty of this crime were utterly disgraced. They were disqualified from providing testimony in any court and were forbidden from receiving inheritance of any kind and from any person.[12] Informed be the teachings of the New Testament, the Theodosian Code stipulated that the apostate person was in no way able to return to their former status because they had polluted the faith which they had vowed to God and betrayed the divine mystery of baptism.

The part of the law that disqualified the apostate from providing testimony in court, came with an explanation. It maintained that Christians who had become pagans or Jews could not be trusted to provide truthful testimony because they had disdained the dignity of the Christian faith and name and were thus polluted by criminal acts.[13] To those who were guilty of the lesser offense of simply slipping away from the faith or going astray, they were offered grace and had the possibility of doing penitence. As we will see, this law provided the definition of apostasy that was then used by Christians from the fifth century and onward.

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[12] Theodosian Code (438 AD), excerpted, Fordham University Medieval Sourcebook, http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/theodcodeXVI.html (Accessed 20 Oct. 2012), Title 7. 1.
[13] *Ibid.*

Apostasy in Gildas

The next source to consult when attempting to understand what apostasy meant to Bede, are the writing of Gildas. Gildas was a British monk who like Bede, wrote an ecclesiastical account of his nation's history and titled it *The Destruction and Conquest of Britain.* In *The Destruction of Britain*, there is a section entirely devoted to the five British kings whom Gildas described as tyrannical and guilty of committing heinous crimes against God and their people. The accounts of these kings provided a good place to search for instances of apostasy.[14]

The five kings Gildas admonished were individually denounced for various infractions. The first of these kings was Constantine of Damnonia. To him, Gildas attributed many crimes. He was said to have committed sacrilege in the form of disguising as an abbot and killing two royal youths and their teacher among holy altars. He also had his wife put away and regularly committed adultery.[15] Gildas admonished the second King on his list or a long list of crimes that included, fornication, adultery, and war mongering.[16] The third king, Vortipore was compared to the Old Testament King Mannasah. Gildas used that analogy to point out the fact that he was the son of good Christian king but had himself failed to live a godly life. Vortipore had his wife put away, committed adultery with the wives of other men, had men unjustly killed, and is even accused of violating his own daughter.[17] Cuneglasus, the fourth king, Gildas called a contemner

[14] Gildas, *The Destruction and Conquest of Britain* (504-570 AD), translated, Fordham University Medieval Sourcebook, http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/gildas-full.asp (accessed 13 Oct. 20120, c. 1.
[15] Gildas, c. 28- 29.
[16] *Ibid*., c. 30.
[17] *Ibid*., c. 31.

of God who like the others, had his wife put away but then took for himself her sister who had taken vows of chastity.[18]

The fifth king Gildas rebukes is Maglocune. Gildas called him "the last mentioned in writing but the first in mischief, exceeding many in power but also in malice, more liberal than others in giving yet more licentious in sinning, strong in arms but even stronger in ensuring his own soul's destruction."[19] Gildas tells us that when he was a young man that he killed his uncle and later joined a monastery to seek solace and escape the violent crime he had committed.[20] However, Maglocune's attempt to live the life of a monk was short lived. He ended up leaving and resuming a life of wickedness. Gildas reported that upon his departure from the monastery, Maglocune murdered his wife and nephew and then married his nephew's wife.[21]

Kenneth Hylson-Smith points out that Gildas had not reproached these British kings with heathenism but with lukewarm Christianity.[22] If these kings had been pagans, Gildas would have had no ground from which to judge their actions. What is interesting is that however wicked or unrighteous Gildas deemed these kings and their behavior, he did not call any of them apostates. It certainly a term he was familiar with and even used in the prologue to his work. He used the word the word to express how grieved he was to be writing such a terrible account of his own people and he expected that Christians who read his account would be saddened to hear the sins of their kings and that "foolish apostates" would be convicted and full of sorrow when they read

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[18] *Ibid.,* c. 32.
[19] *Ibid.,* c. 33.
[20] *Ibid.,* c. 34.
[21] Ibid., c. 35
[22] Kenneth Hylson-Smith, *Christianity in England from Roman Times to the Reformation: Volume I* (London: SCM Press, 1999), 147.

it.[23] Just as the law in the Theodosian Code had stipulated a century before Gildas wrote *The Destruction of Britain,* the kings in his account were simply lousy Christians. Since they had not reverted to their previous religions, they were not apostates.

Apostasy in Pope Gregory's *Pastoral Care*

Another collection of sources that became necessary to consult before assessing the kings of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History,* were the writings of Pope Gregory. He was the first to send missionaries to the Anglo-Saxons which toward the end of the sixth century. Pope Gregory was also responsible for teaching and advising the bishops and monks who were sent to convert the Anglo-Saxons. In his *Pastoral Care*, which Bede made mention of in the *Ecclesiastical History*, Pope Gregory devoted a chapter to admonishing apostates. He instructed that apostates were to be admonished because they were unprofitable sowers of strife who walked with a perverse mouth.[24] The bishops and monks who were sent on missions were responsible for establishing churches and instructing the newly converted Christians in the ways of the faith.[25]

It is not unreasonable to assume that if Pope Gregory found the issue of apostasy important enough to include in his *Pastoral Care*, it would have been one of the teachings that the Christian missionaries imparted upon the Anglo-Saxons. They would have informed the Anlog-Saxons of apostasy in order to impress upon them the weight and seriousness of their conversion. Luckily for the Christian missionaries, this would not have been a foreign concept to

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[23] Gildas, c. 1.
[24] St. Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Care*, trans. Henry Davis (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1950) 168-171.
[25] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People,* trans. Leo Sherley-Price (London: Penguin Books, 1955) Book I. 23.

the Anglo-Saxons. They were descended from Germanic peoples who held loyalty of oath taking in the utmost regard. Sixth century Anglo- Saxons had retained many of the social and political characteristics of their Germanic ancestors.

The most important feature of the social organization of the Germanic people was the family or kin and man's kin were expected to swear oaths to support him. Naturally, breaking an oath of loyalty was a serious offense. Rebecca Fraser commented that loyalty and the sacredness of oath- taking formed the bedrock of Anglo-Saxon society.[26] The Christians who were responsible for converting the Anglo-Saxons were aware of the importance of oath taking and they no doubt used that to their advantage when teaching them the danger of apostasy. However, as we will see, the warning of apostasy was not enough to prevent some of the Anglo-Saxon kings from becoming apostates themselves.

Apostasy in Bede

The convoluted assessments and inaccurate interpretations of the apostate kings in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* I found while conducting research warranted the scrupulous examination of each. The kings I chose to examine were Eadbald son of Ethelbert, the three sons of king Sabert, Redwald of East Anglia, Osric and Eanfrith of Deria, and King Sighere of the East Saxons. My task was to discover whether or not Bede had a specific understanding of apostasy and which of these kings from his account, if any, were apostates.

In his book, *The Earliest English Kings*, D. P Kirby provides a perfect example of how scholars have often misunderstood the meaning of apostasy in Bede. He discusses Eadbald the

[26] Rebecca Fraser, *The Story of Britain: From the Romans to the Present* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., 2006) 35.

son of Ethelbert and states that Bede himself called him an apostate. To add to the confusion, Kirby, in the next sentence claims that Ethelbert's widow, who married Eadbald after Ethelbert died, must have been a pagan or "at least a lapsed Christian," perhaps inferring that a "lapsed Christian" was the same as an apostate Christian but no definition was provided in either case.[27]

However, in the *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede does not call Eadbald an apostate and makes no remarks concerning his wife's beliefs. Bede calls Eadbald perfidious and states that after his father died, "Eadbald refused to embrace the faith of Christ."[28] Furthermore, there is no evidence that Eadbald was ever baptized while his father was alive. That being the case, Eadbald's actions of reinstating paganism upon his father's death was not apostasy since Eadbald was not yet a Christian. Eadbald did not receive baptism until much later and Bede tells us that at the point of Eadbald's conversion, "he abjured the worship of idols, renounced his unlawful marriage, was baptized, and promoted the affairs of the church."[29]

Anglo-Saxon scholar N. J. Higham attempts to dispute the fact that Eadbald was not baptized during his father's reign and suggests that the text reports that Eadbald had not wished to "receive" baptism, not that he "refused."[30] However, the quote in question does not say anything about baptism, it only affirms that after his father's death, Eadbald "refused to accept the faith of Christ.'" The point Higham is trying to make by arguing that Eadbald had received baptism before reinstating idolatry is that Ethelbert probably forced his son to receive baptism for the purposes of political gains and that the act of royal baptism was not seen as significant by

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[27] D. P. Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings* (London: Routledge, 2000) 29.
[28] Bede, II. 5.
[29] *Ibid*., II. 6.
[30] N. J. Higham, *The Convert Kings: Power and Religious Affiliation in Early Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997) 133.

the Anglo-Saxon kings who were among the first to receive it. He suggests that they only did it in order to reinforce their overkingship and suit their political agendas.[31] This argument simply does not stand in light of Bede's account. Not only is Eadbald never said to have been baptized under his Ethelbert's reign; we also know that Ethelbert did not force anyone to receive baptism because he had learned from his instructors that the service of Christ was to be voluntary, not compulsory.[32]

Sabert's Sons

The next kings whom are often inappropriately referred to as apostates are the three sons of Sabert. King Sabert of the East Saxons had converted to Christianity around the time Ethelbert of Kent had and like Ethelbert, Sabert must not have required anyone to accept the Christian faith because Bede tells us that when Sabert died, he left three pagan sons to inherit his throne.[33] We do, however, have evidence that Sabert might have issued a decree or some type of legislation that forbid his people to serve idols because when his sons took rule of the kingdom after his death, they "granted free liberty to the people under their government to serve idols."[34] Bede also wrote in his account that while their father was alive, Sabert's sons had seemed to abandon pagan rites, making their actions even more despicable in Bede's eyes. As soon as Sabert died, they spared no time restoring paganism to their kingdom and among their subjects.

The part of this story that shines a light on the meaning of apostasy in Bede's account takes place when Sabert's sons went to the church to demand the bishop to give them the white

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[31] *Ibid.,* 134.
[32] Bede, I.26.
[33] *Ibid.,* II. 5.
[34] *Ibid.*

bread that their father had received, referring of course to the holy Eucharist. In response to their demand, the bishop refused and explained that unless they agreed to convert and be baptized he could not and would not give them the sacraments. Following his response, the sons became angry and expelled the bishop from the kingdom. I would suggest that these young kings had no interest in becoming Christians and refused to be baptized because they knew that conversion and baptism was an absolute and binding commitment or oath. Perhaps they thought they could bypass the danger of apostasy by simply refusing to be baptized and instead just reap the benefits of the Christian faith as they saw it in the form of the Eucharist. The translations of the lines in which Sabert's sons demand the bishop to give then the Eucharist but refuse to be baptized as follows;

> "Why do you not give us also that white bread, which you used to give to our father Saba (for so they were wont to call him), and which you still continue to give to the people in the church?" To whom he answered, "If you will be washed in that font of salvation, in which your father was washed, you may also partake of the holy Bread of which he partook; but if you despise the laver of life, you can in no wise receive the Bread of life." They replied, "We will not enter into that font, because we know that we do not stand in need of it, and yet we will be refreshed by that bread."[35]

The case of these Sabert's sons is not a case of apostasy. They were never Christians because they refused to convert and as Bede puts it, "they did not continue long unpunished in their heathenish worship. Marching out to battle, they were slain with their army." [36]

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[35] *ibid.*
[36] *ibid.*

Redwald

The case of King Redwald provides another opportunity to understand the meaning of apostasy in Bede because his actions could easily be misinterpreted as apostasy if not given the proper amount of scrutiny. When consulting the original Latin, I found that Bede does not use "apostasy" when describing the famous King Redwald, yet both William Chaney and Ian Wood call Redwald an apostate in their own assessments of the East Anglian King. Chaney offers a perfect example of the confusion that can result when a proper understanding of apostasy is lacking. Chaney wrote that Redwald was an apostate on account of his attempt to serve both Christ and the old gods.[37]

In his essay, Ian Wood not only calls Redwald an apostate but also claims that Bede ascribes Redwald's apostasy to his wife. Both claims we will see are incorrect. The first point to be made is that Bede did not use the word apostasy when describing Redwald or his actions. Why then did Bede not consider Redwald an apostate? The answer lies in Redwalds' actions upon returning home to his kingdom after converting and receiving baptism in Kent. When he returned home, Redwald's wife and "certain perverse teachers" convinced him to "turn his back on the sincerity of the faith" and keep altars to both Christ and the gods of his old religion.[38] This to Bede that was not true apostasy because he did not completely abandon the Christian faith.

Just as the law in the Theodosian Code acknowledges, Redwald had simply gone astray from the true way of the Christian faith and Bede must have recognized this. In spite of his sinful acts, Bede could not accuse Redwald of committing apostasy. He called him ignoble in his

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[37] William A. Chaney, "Paganism to Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England." In *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (July 1960) 208.
[38] Bede, II.15.

actions and pointed out that as a result of his turning back from the sincerity of the faith, Redwald's latter state was worse than his former.[39]

Osric and Eanfrith

The next case concerns the two successors of King Edwin named Osric and Eanfrith. They represent one of only two instances in which Bede used the word apostasy. Osric was the son of Edwin's uncle who had received the faith and was baptized by the Bishop Paulinus. Eanfrith had received the faith and was baptized while living in exile among the Scots. Then when King Edwin was killed, the two kings returned home, "Renounced and lost the faith of the heavenly kingdom and defiled themselves up to be defiled by the abominations of their former idols."[40] Bede went on to say that the year in which Orsic and Eanfrith took power was considered unhappy and hateful to all good men on account of their apostasy. Not only were the years of their reign considered hateful, it was decided that that the memory of Osric and Eanfrith the apostate kings should be abolished and erased from the royal list of kings. The few shorts years Osric and Eanfrith reigned were attributed to their successor Oswald whom Bede called a man beloved by God. [41]

Sighere and his nation

The final instance in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* that involve apostasy is that of King Sighere and the East Saxons who, forsook the Christian faith while their kingdom was experiencing a plague. In this account, Bede did indeed use the word apostasy to describe

[39] Bede, II.15.
[40] Bede, III. 1.
[41] *Ibid.*

Sighere and his people. It is the second of only two times Bede used the word. Bede recorded that Sighere and his people were fond of life and afraid to die so they cast Christianity aside and began rebuilding the pagan temples and altars in an attempt to protect their mortality.[42]

The one difference between Orsic and Eanfrith and Sighere and his people is that Sighere and the East Saxons repented of their sin and were brought back to the faith by Bishop Jaruman. A neighboring king called Wulfhere had heard of the East Saxon's apostasy and sent his bishop to "correct that error and restore them to the faith." Jaruman was successful and with his help, Sighere and his people destroyed the pagan temples and altars they had built. Bede adds that they "once again confessed the name of Christ which they had opposed, being more desirous to die in Him with the faith of the resurrection, than to live in the filth of apostasy among their idols." [43] Thus it can be noted that Sighere was not stricken from the line of kings as Osric and Eanfrith had been because unlike them, he returned to the faith and repented of his apostasy.

Conclusion

In this paper, it has been demonstrated that Bede is very intentional in his use of the word apostasy. Some of the kings he labels apostates, and some he does not. It can also be proven that Bede relied upon the teaching of the Christian Tradition to inform his understanding of apostasy. It is remarkable is that at a time when Christianity was spreading so far beyond the confines of the Roman Empire, teaching as specific as the ones on apostasy were understood by Christians who lived as far away as Britain and not only did they know what apostasy was, they knew what

[42] Bede, II. 30.
[43] *Ibid.*

it was not. The shared a very specific appreciation of apostasy and it is evident in their historical accounts.

According to Bede, in order to be considered an apostate, you had to first be a baptized and confirmed Christian. Next, you had to have abandoned the Christian faith and participated in another. Christians who simply fell away from the faith, lived unrighteous lives, or made bad decisions due to ignorance were not considered apostates.

By offering his readers with several stories of kings, some of whom were good Christian kings, and some of whom were not, Bede elevated the kings who remained Christians and admonished those who did not. Thus making examples out of these kings and turning them into lessons that could be taught to future generations of Christians.

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