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Royal Marriage and Conversion in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum*

Máirín MacCarron

Abstract

The prevailing view in modern scholarship is that Bede reduced the role of women in his narrative of Anglo-Saxon conversion, in contrast to Gregory of Tours with whom Bede is unfavourably compared. In Gregory's account of the conversion of Clovis, king of the Franks, he allowed an overt role for the king's wife, Clotild, whereas in Bede's presentation of mixed marriages between Christian queens and pagan kings his queens did not actively convert their husbands. This essay presents a counter thesis arguing that the importance of Christian queens can be detected in Bede's *Historia* when attention is paid to scriptural imagery and exegetical allusions in his text. Bede's *Historia* is the only early source that refers to Christian queens at pagan courts and his presentation indicates that these women fulfilled scriptural precepts such as 1 Cor. 7:14, 'the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the believing wife'. This theological dimension reveals the unique role played by Christian queens in the conversion of their husbands and the significance of royal marriages in the acceptance of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England.

Our knowledge and understanding of the range and scope of medieval women's lives has dramatically expanded in the last thirty or so years, with a marked increase in the number of studies devoted to women alongside more general developments in gender history. Analyses of women in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* have drawn a wide variety of conclusions: from glowing accounts suggesting conversion-era Anglo-Saxon England was something of an idyll

for women, to pejorative assessments arguing that Bede sought to undermine and diminish the activities of women throughout the book.¹ Such vastly different interpretations of the same evidence indicate the complexity of Bede's work and the dangers of superficial readings of the text. Contemporary developments in Bedan studies over the last thirty years have increasingly demonstrated the depth of his historical writings, and argued that various themes and images in his *Historia* are illuminated when read alongside his exegetical works.² This approach can inform and transform our understanding of Bede's aims and intentions throughout the book, even in his accounts of actual events that are internally consistent and realistic depictions of seventh-century Anglo-Saxon society.

This methodology is particularly fruitful when analysing Bede's descriptions of royal marriages between Christians and pagans, of which there are several in the HE, concerning

CCSL = Corpus Christianorum series latina; HE = *Historia Ecclesiastica*; PL = *Patrologia Latina*.

I am indebted to the scholarship and guidance of my doctoral supervisor, Jennifer O'Reilly, who generously shared her knowledge and insights with me over many years: this essay is in her memory. I would also like to thank Peter Darby, Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, Mark Stansbury, Joanna Story for reviewing draft versions of this essay and suggesting ways to improve it. Any remaining errors are my own.

¹ For positive appraisals, see: J. Nicholson, 'Feminae Gloriosae: women in the age of Bede,' in D. Baker (ed.), *Medieval Women* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), pp. 15-29; J. Luecke, 'The unique experience of Anglo-Saxon Nuns,' in L.T. Shanks and J.A. Nichols (eds), *Medieval Religious Women, II, Peaceweavers* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987), pp. 55-65; N. Bauer, 'Abbess Hilda of Whitby: All Britain was lit by her splendour,' in M. Schmitt and L. Kulzer (eds), *Medieval Women Monastics: Wisdom's Wellsprings* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), pp. 13-31. For a more critical assessment, see: S. Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon women and the Church: sharing a common fate* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1992); D. Pelteret, 'Bede's Women,' in C.M. Rousseau and J.T. Rosenthal (eds), *Women, marriage and family in Medieval Christendom: essays in memory of Michael M. Sheehan* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1998), pp. 19-46; C.A. Lees and G.R. Overing *Double Agents: Women and Clerical Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); S. Klein, *Ruling women: queenship and gender in Anglo-Saxon literature* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), pp. 17-52.

² See, for example: R. Ray, 'Bede, the exegete, as historian,' in G. Bonner (ed.), *Famulus Christi: essays in commemoration of the thirteenth centenary of the birth of the Venerable Bede* (London: S.P.C.K., 1976), pp. 125-140; A.T. Thacker, 'Bede's ideal of reform,' in P. Wormald, D. Bullough, and R. Collins (eds), *Ideal and reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon society: studies presented to J.M. Wallace-Hadrill* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), pp. 130-53; H.M. Mayr-Harting, 'Bede's Patristic Thinking as an Historian,' in A. Scharer and G. Scheibelreiter (eds), *Historiographie im frühen Mittelalter* (Vienna: Oldenbourg, 1994), pp. 367-74; J. O'Reilly, 'Introduction' to Bede: on the Temple, tr. S. Connolly (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995), pp. xvii-lv; idem., 'Islands and idols at the ends of the earth: exegesis and conversion in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*,' in S. Lebecq, M. Perrin and O. Szerwiniack (eds), *Bède le Vénérable entre tradition et postérité* (Lille: CEGES, 2005), pp. 119-45.

the royal houses of Kent, East Anglia, Northumbria, Mercia, and the South Saxons.³ These marriages are in keeping with what we know of Anglo-Saxon political alliances in this period: royal brides were often offered as peaceweavers to ensure good relations between kingdoms, and their interests and independence were protected by a retinue from their home kingdom – in alliances between Christian queens and pagan kings the queen’s entourage frequently included a priest or bishop.⁴ Christian queens do not play an overt role in the subsequent conversion of their husbands in Bede’s narrative, which has led to the standard view that Anglo-Saxon conversion was the sole preserve of kings and bishops and the reactionary argument that Bede suppressed the role of women.⁵ However, analysis of the scriptural imagery and exegetical allusions within these narratives drives the following argument that Christian queens in mixed marriages played an important role in Bede’s account of Anglo-Saxon conversion.

1. Royal marriages in Bede’s *Historia*

³ *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum*, ed. and tr. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969): HE 1.25-26 (Kent); 2.15 (East Angles); 2.9 and 3.14, 24-25 (Northumbria); 3.21 (Mercia); 4.13 (Hwicce). These will be discussed below.

⁴ Bede explicitly referred to this practice when discussing the kingdoms of Kent (HE 1.25-26) and Northumbria (HE 2.9). See: J. T. Rosenthal, ‘Marriage and the blood feud in “heroic” Europe,’ *The British Journal of Sociology* 17 (1966), pp. 133-44; R. Hill, ‘Marriage in seventh-century England,’ in M.H. King and W.M. Stevens (eds), *Saints, scholars and heroes: studies in medieval culture in honour of Charles W. Jones* (Collegeville, MN: University of Minnesota, 1979), pp. 67-75; J.A. Brundage, *Law, sex, and Christian society in medieval Europe* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 128-35; Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon women and the Church*, pp. 224 and 234-8; J. Chance, *Woman as Hero in Old English Literature* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 1986).

⁵ The traditional accounts of Anglo-Saxon conversion, quite appropriately, focus on the activities of missionaries in Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and their relationship with kings: e.g. H.M. Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 3rd edition, 1991); J. Campbell, ‘The First Christian Kings,’ in J. Campbell (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons* (London: Penguin 1991), pp. 45-69; B. Yorke, ‘The Reception of Christianity at the Anglo-Saxon royal courts,’ in R. Gameson (ed), *St Augustine and the Conversion of England* (Stroud: Sutton 1999), pp. 152-73. For emphasis on the supposed insignificance of Anglo-Saxon queens in Bede’s narrative, see: Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon women*, passim; D. Armstrong, ‘Holy Queens as agents of christianization in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*: a reconsideration,’ *Medieval Encounters* 4 (1998), pp. 228-41; Pelteret, ‘Bede’s Women,’ pp. 40-1; Klein, *Ruling women*, pp. 17-52.

The royal marriages between pagan kings and Christian queens in Bede's *Historia* are: Æthelberht of Kent and the Frankish princess, Bertha (HE 1.25–26);⁶ Edwin of Northumbria and Æthelberht's daughter, Æthelburg (HE 2.9); Peada of Mercia and Ealhflæd, the daughter of King Oswiu of Northumbria (HE 3.21); and Æthelwealh of the South Saxons and Eafe from the kingdom of the Hwicce (HE 4.13). The marriage of Oswiu of Northumbria and Eanflæd of Kent (daughter of Edwin and Æthelburh) could also be added to this list, as Bede suggests that Eanflæd brought her husband to a deeper understanding of Christianity through encouraging him to atone for the murder of his sub-king, Oswine, by founding the monastery of Gilling, and her support for the Roman Easter which was a factor in calling the Synod of Whitby (HE 3.14, 24 and 25).

These five queens may be of varying importance in Bede's narrative but it is significant that they all are named in the book, because they are rarely referred to in other Anglo-Saxon sources. Queens Bertha and Æthelburg both received papal letters, but neither appears in any surviving source from Anglo-Saxon England prior to Bede: the letter from Gregory I (r. AD 590–604) to Bertha is not in the HE,⁷ but Æthelburg's letter from Boniface V (r. AD 619–625) is reproduced in HE 2.11. The late-seventh century anonymous *Life of Gregory the Great* from the monastery of Whitby included an account of Edwin's conversion, but did not mention Æthelburg or the marriage alliance between Kent and Northumbria which brought the missionary bishop, Paulinus to the kingdom.⁸ Ealhflæd of Mercia is absent

⁶ On links between Kent and Francia and the possible influence of the Frankish Church on the conversion of Kent, see: I. N. Wood, 'Augustine and Gaul,' in Gameson (ed), *St Augustine and the Conversion of England*, pp. 68-82.

⁷ Gregory to Bertha, *Registrum Epistularum*, 11.35, ed. D. Norberg, CCSL 140A (Turnhout: Brepols 1982), pp. 923-924. Bede's possible reasons for not including this letter will be considered below.

⁸ For Edwin's conversion, see: *The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great*, by an anonymous monk at Whitby, 15-17, ed. B. Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 96-100. The omission of Æthelburg is surprising, as the *Life* was written during the abbacy of Ælfflæd, Æthelburg's grand-daughter, and the writer may also have known her mother, Eanflæd (Æthelburg's daughter) who retired to the monastery after Oswiu's death. On the creation of this text, see: A.T. Thacker, 'Memorialising Gregory the Great: the origin and

from all other sources. Eafe of the South Saxons is named in the *Life of Wilfrid*, in the context of Wilfrid's evangelising achievements in that kingdom, but Wilfrid's hagiographer, Stephen, states that Wilfrid baptised the king and queen, in direct contradiction of Bede's account.⁹ Eanflæd is the exception, as she is granted an important role at the beginning of Wilfrid's career in the *Life of Wilfrid*.¹⁰ However, this source pays little attention to her marriage, ignoring her influence on Oswiu and her role in the Easter controversy.¹¹

Questions about the role of women in Anglo-Saxon conversion arise, however, because no Christian queen played a direct role in her husband's acceptance of Christianity, and there is no Anglo-Saxon equivalent of Clotild, the Christian wife of the Frankish king, Clovis (c. AD 466–511), who assertively extolled the merits of Christianity and succeeded in bringing her husband to the baptismal font.¹² Although Bede elected not to directly imitate Gregory of Tours' account of Clovis, which has become the archetypal conversion story of a barbarian king, his queens did play a role in the conversion of their husbands.¹³ Bede was immersed in scriptural traditions and his patristic inheritance is readily apparent in his scriptural commentaries, which he placed first in his list of writings at the end of the *Historia ecclesiastica* (5.24). The library at Wearmouth-Jarrow has to some extent been reconstructed

transmission of a papal cult in the seventh and early eighth centuries,' *Early Medieval Europe* 7 (1998), pp. 59-84.

⁹ *Vita Wilfridi*, 41, ed. B. Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927 and 1985), pp. 82-3.

¹⁰ *Vita Wilfridi*, 2 and 3, pp. 6-9. Hollis suggests that the *Vita Wilfridi* reveals the power and influence wielded by Anglo-Saxon queens, whereas Bede reduced the importance of women in Anglo-Saxon society: *Anglo-Saxon women*, pp. 151-76 and *passim*.

¹¹ See *Vita Wilfridi*, 47, pp. 98-99, for Stephen's view that Wilfrid alone saved the Northumbrian Church. Cf. *HE* 3.25.

¹² Gregory of Tours, *Historia libri X*, 2.28-31, ed. W. Arndt, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum* 1.1 (Hannover: Hahn, 1884), pp. 31-450 at 89-93. Armstrong argues that 'there is no such thing' as conversion by marriage in the *HE*: 'Holy Queens', *passim* and quotation on p. 241. Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon women*, and Klein, *Ruling Women*, pp. 17-52, come to different conclusions for the absence, as they see it, of queen-convertors.

¹³ There are many differences between the histories of Bede and Gregory of Tours, see: J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, 'Gregory of Tours and Bede: their views on the personal qualities of kings,' in J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Medieval History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), pp. 96-114; W. Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (AD 550-800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 112-328. On Bede's positive portrayal of women compared to Gregory of Tours, see J.A. McNamara, 'Review of Stephanie Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon women and the church*,' *American Historical Review* 99 (1994), p. 214.

from Bede's writings and his familiarity with the major Church Fathers can be demonstrated.¹⁴ Reading Bede's *Historia* in the light of this inheritance transforms our understanding of his presentation of royal marriages and conversion in the book.¹⁵

2. Mixed marriages in Scripture and Patristic exegesis

The four royal marriages between pagan kings and Christian queens in the HE appear to have the active support of the Church authorities and lead to the conversion of the king followed by widespread evangelisation of his kingdom. However, mixed marriages between pagans and Christians were something of a conundrum for the Church, because scripture openly condemns marriages between the chosen people of God and unbelievers. The Old Testament presents several examples of the dangers in marrying unbelievers, and taking foreign wives is usually an indication that the chosen people have fallen away from the purity of their faith. Ezra criticised the Israelites for allowing mixed marriages (Ezra 10:10–11); Nehemiah testified that marrying strange women was a transgression against God and even King Solomon was brought to this sin (Neh. 13:26-7; 1 Kings 11:8); and Tobit urged men to marry within their own tribe (Tobit 4:12).¹⁶

¹⁴ M.L.W. Laistner, 'The Library of the Venerable Bede,' in A.H. Thompson (ed.), *Bede: His Life, Times and Writings* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), pp. 237-66; idem, 'Bede as a Classical and a Patristic Scholar,' *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 4th series, 16 (1933), pp. 69-94; M. Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); R. Love, 'The Library of the Venerable Bede,' in R. Gameson (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*. Volume 1: c.400–1100 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 606-23; C. O'Brien, *Bede's Temple: an image and its interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 24-5.

¹⁵ See note 2. Cf. also J. Barrow, who described HE 2.13 as 'a sustained piece of literary inversion and biblical exegesis': 'How Coifi pierced Christ's side: a re-examination of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, II, chapter 13,' *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 62 (2011), pp. 693-706, quotation on p. 706.

¹⁶ These Old Testament books were very familiar to Bede, as he wrote commentaries on each: In *Ezra* et *Neemiam*, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL 119A (Turnhout: Brepols, 1969), pp. 235-392; In *Tobiam*, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL 119B (Turnhout: Brepols, 1983), pp. 1-19.

These admonitions were not forgotten in the New Testament. Paul warned the community at Corinth: ‘Bear not the yoke with unbelievers. For what participation hath justice with injustice? Or what fellowship hath light with darkness? Or what concord hath Christ with Belial? Or what part hath the faithful with the unbeliever?’ (2 Cor. 6:14-15)¹⁷ However, when discussing Christ’s prohibition of divorce, he noted that a spouse converting to Christianity was not sufficient grounds to dissolve a marriage (1 Cor. 7:12-13). If the unbelieving partner opted to leave, the Christian member was not at fault, but, when possible, Paul urged them to stay married: ‘For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the believing wife: and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the believing husband. Otherwise your children should be unclean: but now they are holy’ (1 Cor. 7:14).¹⁸ Peter similarly allowed for marriages between unbelievers and Christians, specifically suggesting that Christian wives could bring their husbands to Christianity (1 Pet. 3:1). This evidence indicates that leaders in the primitive Church recognised mixed unions could lead to conversion.

The early Church Fathers believed in the unity of the Old and New Testaments and attempted to resolve this scriptural ambiguity, but did not succeed in developing a definitive response to the question of mixed marriages. Tertullian, in the early third century, argued that Paul intended 1 Corinthians 7:14 to be used for specific circumstances and did not give all Christians the right to marry unbelievers.¹⁹ Cyprian (d. AD 258) warned that Christians should not marry unbelievers, as these marriages could corrupt them.²⁰ The official recognition of Christianity in the early fourth century perhaps changed the nature of the debate. Jerome (c. AD 347–420) recognised the potential of these unions and told his

¹⁷ [N]olite iugum ducere cum infidelibus quae enim participatio iustitiae cum iniquitate aut quae societas luci ad tenebras, quae autem conventio Christi ad Belial aut quae pars fidei cum infidele.

¹⁸ [S]anctificatus est enim vir infidelis in muliere fidei et sanctificata est mulier infidelis per virum fidelem alioquin filii vestri immundi essent nunc autem sancti sunt.

¹⁹ Tertullian, *Ad uxorem*, 2.2, ed. A. Krayman, CCSL 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1954), pp. 373-94 at 384-7; cf. *Ad uxorem*, 2.7, pp. 391-2.

²⁰ Cyprian, *Adversus Iudaeos*, 3.62, PL 4.767-8.

correspondent, Laeta, that her family were a living example of the Pauline precept: she was the Christian child of a mixed marriage, and had consecrated her daughter to Christ; he also hoped that Laeta's father, Albinus, might be brought to Christianity by his believing family.²¹ However, Ambrose of Milan (c. AD 337–397) warned that mixed marriages lacked peace and harmony.²² Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430) observed that mixed marriages were not forbidden in the Gospels or epistles,²³ and argued that the faithful were not contaminated by marriage to unbelievers, rather their holiness benefitted their spouse as Paul asserted.²⁴ He also suggested that 1 Corinthians 7:14 indicates such marriages did lead to conversions in the Church's first generation.²⁵

As Christianity extended into the post-Roman world diplomatic marriages between Christians and non-Christians were increasingly recognised as a legitimate method of spreading the faith. Gregory the Great and Boniface V both recognised the potential of these unions, as they wrote to the royal couples in Kent and Northumbria to encourage the kings to accept Christianity and to urge their Christian queens to convert their husbands.²⁶ Despite the success of mixed marriages across Christendom, concerns about their propriety persisted however. The Quinisext Council, also called the Council in Trullo, held in Constantinople in AD 692, prohibited these unions and decreed that anyone who transgressed should be cut off from the Church. The only permitted exception was a marriage that had taken place before

²¹ Jerome, Ep. 107.1, ed. J. Labourt (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1949-63), 5, pp. 144-145.

²² Ambrose, *Expositio evangelii Lucae*, 8.3, ed. C. Schenkl, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 32 (Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1902), p. 393. See: P. L. Reynolds, *Marriage in the Western Church: the Christianization of marriage during the patristic and early medieval periods* (Boston and Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 367-8.

²³ Augustine, *De conjugii adulterinis*, 1.25(31), PL 40.468-9.

²⁴ Augustine, *De bono conjugali*, 11.13, PL 40.382; see also Augustine, *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae*, 35.79, PL 32.1344.

²⁵ Augustine, *De sermone Domini in monte*, 16.45, ed. A. Mutzenbecher, *CCSL* 35 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1967), p. 51. See also: Augustine, *De peccatorum meritis et remissione, et de baptismo paruulorum*, 3.21, PL 44.198-199; *De Bono Conjugali*, 11.13, PL 40.382; *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae*, 35.79, PL 32.1344.

²⁶ Gregory to Æthelberht, HE 1.32; Gregory to Bertha, *Registrum Epistularum*, 11.35; Boniface to Edwin, HE 2.10; Boniface to Æthelburg, HE 2.11. See: J. L. Nelson, 'Queens as convertors of kings in the earlier Middle Ages,' in C. La Rocca (ed.), *Agire da donna: modelli e pratiche di rappresentazione (secoli VI-X)* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 95-107.

one of the members converted, closely following the Pauline precept.²⁷ Although this Council was problematic for many in the Western Church – Bede referred to it as a heretical synod in the *Chronica Maiora*²⁸ – anxieties about these marriages remained. The Penitential of Theodore (dated to early eighth-century Anglo-Saxon England) noted that if one spouse in a pagan couple was baptised and the other refused to convert they could get divorced.²⁹ Despite much discussion from the days of the early Church, it is clear that tension between the scriptural concerns about mixed marriages and the recognition that these could lead to conversion persisted until Bede’s time, and such concerns underlie the presentation of mixed marriages in the HE.

3. Dangers of mixed marriages

The threat posed by marriage to an unbeliever is most explicitly expressed in Bede’s famous account of Æthelburg’s marriage to Edwin in HE 2.9. According to Bede, Edwin sought an alliance with Kent through a diplomatic marriage but Kent at first rejected his overtures because, as a Christian, Æthelburg would be contaminated by marriage to a non-believer. Edwin offered assurances that Æthelburg could practice her religion unimpeded and suggested he might consider converting to Christianity, bringing the negotiations to a successful conclusion. Due to the seemingly swift resolution of the matter, the concerns

²⁷ Concilium Constantinopolitanum A. 691/2 in Trullo Habitum, Canon 72, ed. H. Ohme, *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum, Series Secunda*, 2.4 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013), p. 51; tr. R. H. Percival, *Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers*, 14 (Grand Rapids, MI: Hendrickson Publishers, repr. 1991), p. 397.

²⁸ *De temporum ratione*, 66, s.a. 4649 ed. C. W. Jones, CCSL 123B (Turnhout: Brepols, 1977), p. 529. On this Council, see É. Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood: liturgical images and the Old English poems of the Dream of the Rood tradition* (London: British Library, 2005), p. 247.

²⁹ J. T. McNeill and H. M. Gamer (eds and trs), *Medieval handbooks of penance: a translation of the principal libri poenitentiales and selections from related documents* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938), pp. 182-215 at 210. See: T. M. Charles-Edwards, ‘The Penitential of Theodore and the *Iudicia Theodori*,’ in M. Lapidge (ed.), *Archbishop Theodore: commemorative studies on his life and influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 141-74.

expressed by Kent have received little serious attention in scholarship. However, this short anecdote adroitly distils Christian concerns about the dangers of mixed marriages. The Christian understanding of marriage arises from Jesus' prohibition of divorce in Matthew 19:4-6 which, in turn, evoked the creation of Eve from Adam's side in Genesis 2:24: 'Have ye not read that he who made man from the beginning made them male and female: And he said: For this cause shall a man leave father and mother and shall cleave to his wife: and they two shall be in one flesh. Therefore now they are not two, but one flesh'.³⁰

The belief in complete union through marriage was also expressed in the First letter to the Corinthians (c. 6) and the letter to the Ephesians (c. 5). For this reason, Paul warned Christians to be cautious in their unions, writing: 'Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them the members of an harlot? God forbid! Or know you not that he who is joined to a harlot is made one body? For they shall be, saith he, two in one flesh' (1 Cor. 6:15-16).³¹

Christians are also described as temples of the Holy Spirit and dwelling places of the Lord, and earlier in the same letter Paul had written: 'Know you not that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? But if any man violate the temple of God, him shall God destroy. For the temple of God is holy, which you are' (1 Cor. 3:16-17).³²

The twin concepts outlined here – that Christians become one with their spouse in marriage and every Christian is a member of Christ and a temple of the Lord – underlie the threat faced by Christians in mixed marriages: they are at risk of defilement by their spouse's

³⁰ [N]on legistis quia qui fecit ab initio masculum et feminam fecit eos, et dixit propter hoc dimittet homo patrem et matrem et adheret uxori suae et erunt duo in carne una, itaque iam non sunt duo sed una caro. Cf. Mark 10:6-9. On early Christian views of marriage see: W. Rordorf, 'Marriage in the New Testament and in the early Church,' *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 20 (1969), pp. 193-210.

³¹ [N]escitis quoniam corpora vestra membra Christi sunt tollens ergo membra Christi faciam membra meretricis absit, an nescitis quoniam qui adheret meretrici unum corpus efficitur erunt enim inquit duo in carne una.

³² [N]escitis quia templum Dei estis et Spiritus Dei habitat in vobis si quis autem templum Dei violaverit disperdet illum Deus templum enim Dei sanctum est quod estis vos. See also John 14:23; 1 Cor. 6:19 and 2 Cor. 6:15-16. On the importance of the temple image in patristic exegesis, see O'Reilly, 'Introduction', pp. xxiii-xxviii.

unbelief and potential idolatry. Paul had warned the Corinthians to avoid fornicators and idolaters (1 Cor. 5:9-11 and 6:9), and Augustine linked these behaviours in his commentary on the ‘Sermon on the Mount’, arguing that unbelief is fornication.³³ John Cassian similarly linked the prohibition against adultery in the Law (Exod. 20:14) with spiritual fornications such as idolatry.³⁴ Cyprian had earlier used similar arguments to assert that Christians should not marry gentiles.³⁵ And Tertullian had claimed that Christians who married unbelievers were guilty of fornication and should be excluded from all contact with the Christian community.³⁶

This patristic tradition presented the theological opposition to mixed marriages, and Bede’s exegesis reveals his familiarity with these teachings. In his collection of excerpts from Augustine on the Pauline epistles, for example, he included Augustine’s teaching on the association of idolatry and unbelief with unchastity.³⁷ In Bede’s commentary on Ezra and Nehemiah, he warned his readers that the people of God were polluted through their unions with non-believers.³⁸ And he regarded these matters as of sufficient historical importance to record them in his *Chronica maiora*: ‘and among other deeds of zeal, he [Ezra] chastised the sons of exile because of their foreign wives.’³⁹ He was exercised by the dangers of idolatry and unbelief, and asserted – following the Pauline epistles – that Christians and un-believers have nothing in common.⁴⁰ He also frequently commented on the scriptural precept that

³³ Augustine, *De sermone Domini in monte*, 16.44-6 and 49-52. See also Augustine, *De conjugii adulterinis*, 1.17(19)–18(20), PL 40.462-463.

³⁴ Cassian, *Conlatione* 14.11 (referring to Jer. 3:6; Is. 47:13; Hos. 4:12), ed. E. Pichery, *Source Chrétienne* 54 (Paris: Cerf., 1958), pp. 197-8. See C. Stewart, *Cassian the monk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 94.

³⁵ Cyprian, *Adversus Judaeos*, 3.62 (referring to 1 Cor. 6:15-17 and 2 Cor. 6:14), PL 4.767-768.

³⁶ Tertullian, *Ad uxorem*, 2.3 and 8, CCSL 1.387-388 and 392-394.

³⁷ See: Bede, *Collectio Bedae presbyteri ex opusculis sancti Augustini in epistulas Pauli apostoli*, 172. tr. D. Hurst (Kalamazoo MI: Cistercian Publications, 1999), p. 134.

³⁸ Bede, *In Ezram et Neemiam*, 2 (on Ezra 9:1-2), and 3 (on Neh. 13:23-25 and 30-31), pp. 326-7 and 391-2.

³⁹ ... et inter alia strenuae gesta castigavit filios transmirationis ab uxoribus alienigenis: *De temporum ratione*, 66, s.a. 3529, p. 486, tr. F. Wallis (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), p. 185.

⁴⁰ See: *In Tobiam*, 1.22-3, p. 4; *In Ezram et Neemiam*, 1 and 3, pp. 282, 286 and 388.

individual Christians are temples of the Lord, devoted much attention to the image of the temple in his exegesis,⁴¹ and abhorred the presence of idols within the temple, whether the literal building in Jerusalem or the figurative Christian soul.⁴² These concerns underlie Bede's presentation of marriage in the HE, which demonstrates both the threat and benefit from marriages between Christians and non-Christians. The complex nature of mixed marriages is most clearly outlined in book two.

4. Royal marriage in HE 2

Book two of the *Historia ecclesiastica* concerns the consolidation of the Church in Kent in the early seventh century and extension of the Roman mission to Northumbria. Bede related the setback experienced by the missionaries in Kent following the death of King Æthelberht in AD 616, and the recovery under Archbishop Laurence who re-converted Æthelberht's successor and son, Eadbald (HE 2.5–6). The narrative turned to Northumbria and Edwin's reign in chapter nine, focussing on his marriage to Æthelburh in AD 625 (HE 2.9); conversion to Christianity, AD 627 (HE 2.9–14); spread of Christianity to the kingdoms of East Anglia and Lindsey (HE 2.15–16), and Edwin's death in battle and his family's flight back to Kent in AD 633 (HE 2.20). Bede referred to three royal marriages in this book: Eadbald of Kent and his unnamed step-mother (HE 2.5-6); Edwin of Northumbria and Æthelburg of Kent (HE 2.9-20); and Rædwald of East Anglia and his unnamed wife (HE

⁴¹ On Christians as temples in Bede's exegesis, see: *Homiliarum evangelii libri II*, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL 122 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1965), (Homelia 1.9, 1.23, 2.1, 2.24, 2.25); *De templo*, 1.1, p. 147; *In Ezram et Neemiam*, 1 and 2, pp. 241 and 305; *De tabernaculo*, 2, p. 43; *De schematibus et tropis*, ed. C.B. Kendall, CCSL 123A (Turnhout: Brepols, 1975), p. 147. See: O'Reilly, 'Introduction'; and idem, 'Islands and idols', pp. 128-9; and O'Brien, *Bede's Temple*, pp. 156-79. Bede wrote commentaries on Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem; its predecessor, the tabernacle that was carried to the Promised Land by the Israelites; and the rebuilding of the Temple, after the Babylonian Captivity: *De templo*, *De tabernaculo*, and *In Ezram et Neemiam*.

⁴² Bede described the profanation of the Temple by the Syrian king, Antiochus, in the *Chronica Maiora: De temporum ratione*, 66, s.a. 3809, p. 491. See also: *In Ezram et Neemiam*, 3, p. 388.

2.15). Edwin and Rædwald were in mixed marriages, while Eadbald's union was improper because he married his step-mother. Eadbald was presented as both an un-believer and an apostate Christian, whose early years in power significantly undermined the Roman mission.⁴³ His marriage to his step-mother was in keeping with his state of apostasy, and, in a clear reference to 1 Corinthians 5:1, Bede described him as polluted with such fornication that would not have been named amongst the gentiles. When Eadbald subsequently accepted Christianity, Bede noted that he banned all idolatrous worship and gave up his unlawful wife (HE 2.6), again associating idolatry with unchastity.

Soon after Eadbald's conversion and the re-establishment of the Church in Kent, Bede moved attention to Northumbria and the reign of Edwin (d. AD 633), where he, uniquely, focussed attention on the king's marriage. In a well-known passage, Bede explained that the Northumbrian people came to Christianity because Edwin became related to the kings of Kent through marriage. As we have seen, Edwin offered assurances that Æthelburg could practice her religion unimpeded and suggested he might in time consider converting to Christianity, after which the marriage took place. Paulinus was consecrated bishop, on 21 July 625, and sent to Northumbria to protect the faith of Æthelburg and her companions (HE 2.9).⁴⁴ Whether or not concerns about Æthelburg's faith were raised in Kent at the time of the

⁴³ On the problem of apostate or un-baptised royal sons, see Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 75-6; B. Yorke, 'The Adaptation of the Anglo-Saxon royal courts to Christianity,' in M. Carver (ed), *The Cross Goes North: processes of conversion in Northern Europe 300-1300* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2003), pp. 243-57.

⁴⁴ Bede's dates for the early history of Northumbria have been much discussed. They have been challenged by: D.P. Kirby, 'Bede and Northumbrian Chronology,' *English Historical Review* (hereinafter cited as EHR) 78 (1963), pp. 514-27; and P.H. Blair, 'The Letters of Pope Boniface V and the mission of Paulinus to Northumbria,' in P. Clemoes and K. Hughes (eds), *England before the Conquest: studies in primary sources presented to Dorothy Whitelock* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 5-13 at 11-2. And more recently upheld by: K. Harrison, *The Framework of Anglo-Saxon History: to A.D. 900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 86; S. Wood, 'Bede's Northumbrian dates again,' EHR 98 (1983), pp. 280-96; and N.J. Higham, *The Convert kings: power and religious affiliation in early Anglo-Saxon England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 158-63.

marriage negotiations cannot be known,⁴⁵ but it is likely that Æthelberht and Bertha's marriage provided a precedent for Edwin and Æthelburg. Bede's depiction of the negotiations between Kent and Northumbria is in keeping with our understanding of the practice of marriage among the Anglo-Saxons, and the roles of Paulinus and, earlier, Liudhard are part of this tradition.⁴⁶

Bede's description of the marriage arrangements between Northumbria and Kent is illuminated when considered in relation to exegesis on mixed marriages. Bede focused attention on the threat to Æthelburg, as did Pope Boniface in his letter to the queen (HE 2.11). The pope urged Æthelburg to labour to convert her husband so that their marriage union would be undefiled, and he explained that there could not be full unity between Edwin and Æthelburg while Edwin remained a stranger to Æthelburg's 'shining faith' and the 'darkness of detestable error' was between them.⁴⁷ Hollis has argued that the shared concern for Æthelburg in Bede's narrative and Boniface's letter reveals the influence of Paulinus on the official history of Canterbury, and this 'Canterbury source' explains Bede's emphasis on Edwin's marriage in his account of the king's conversion.⁴⁸ This overlooks the attention given to mixed marriages in patristic discourse, and Bede's interest in these marriages – which was not shared in contemporary Anglo-Saxon sources – along with his concern for the proper practice of marriage throughout the HE.⁴⁹ Indeed the attention paid to marriage in the HE may have been recognised as early as the late eighth century because the text, De

⁴⁵ Hollis has suggested that this reflects the influence of the church leaders in Canterbury on the Kentish court: *Anglo-Saxon women*, p. 223.

⁴⁶ See note 4.

⁴⁷ *Quomodo ergo unitas uobis coniunctionis inesse dici poterit, si a uestrae fidei splendore, interpositis detestabilis erroris tenebris, ille remanserit alienus?* HE 2.11, pp. 172-4. Cf. Ambrose, *Expositio evangelii Lucae*, 8.3.

⁴⁸ Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon women*, pp. 219-24.

⁴⁹ Along with Eadbald's unlawful marriage to his step-mother (HE 2.5-6), see also: HE 1.27, Questions 4 and 5 of the *Libellus Responionum*; HE 3.22, Sigeberht of the East Saxons was murdered in the house of one his *gesiths*, who had been excommunicated by Bishop Cedd for an unlawful marriage, but Sigeberht ignored the bishop's command; HE 4.5, Canon 10 of the Synod of Hertford (held in AD 673) concerned marriage.

consanguinitate, written in a Carolingian hand, was added to the end of the manuscript of the *Historia ecclesiastica* known as the Moore Bede. This manuscript also contains two sets of Tironean notae in the margins, one of which was placed alongside the discussion of the prohibited degrees of marriage in HE 1.27, the *Libellus Responsionum*.⁵⁰

In describing the marriage negotiations between Northumbria and Kent, Bede wrote that it would not be lawful to give a Christian virgin in marriage to a heathen. He then introduced a second virgin, noting that Paulinus brought Æthelburg to her earthly marriage but his hope was to convert the Northumbrians to Christianity: ‘For I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ’ (2 Cor. 11:2; HE 2.9).⁵¹ This verse was often related to the Church, and appears to represent the future Northumbrian church here. However, in scriptural exegesis it could also refer to an individual, especially when considered with the following verse: ‘But I fear lest, as the serpent seduced Eve by his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted and fall from the simplicity that is in Christ’.⁵² In commenting on 2 Corinthians 11:2-3, Augustine of Hippo related these verses to individual Christians and argued that virginity of the heart was worth more than bodily virginity. He warned that if a Christian was corrupted internally, their bodily virginity was worthless, and urged all Christians, both married and celibate, to be virgins in matters of the faith.⁵³ Jerome

⁵⁰ The Moore *Bede: an eighth century manuscript of the Venerable Bede’s Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* in Cambridge University Library (Kk.5.16), ed. P. H. Blair (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1959): f. 128v and what remains of f.129 for *De consanguinitate*, and f.17v for the marginal note in HE 1.27. See: J. Story, ‘After Bede: continuing the Ecclesiastical History,’ in S. Baxter and others (eds), *Early Medieval Studies in memory of Patrick Wormald* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 165-84 at 175-7 and note 34. I am grateful to Jo Story for discussion of this topic.

⁵¹ [D]espondi enim vos uni viro virginem castam exhibere Christo.

⁵² [T]imeo autem ne sicut serpens Evam seduxit astutia sua ita corrumpantur sensus vestri et excidant a simplicitate quae est in Christo: 2 Cor. 11:3. Jerome indicates that this verse particularly applied to Christian virgins as he suggests that it was spoken at the ceremony when a virgin received her veil from the bishop: Ep. 130.2, ed. Labourt, 7, p. 167. He also revealed that Jovinian, who was condemned for arguing that celibacy was not superior to marriage, believed these words applied to the whole Church of believers: *Jov. 1.37*, PL 23.225-6. See: D.G. Hunter, *Marriage, celibacy, and heresy in Ancient Christianity: the Jovinianist controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 33.

⁵³ Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, on Ps 90 (91), sermo 2.9, ed. E. Dekkers and J. Fraipont, CCSL 39 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1956), p. 1276; *Sermo 192.2*, PL 38.1012.

had similarly noted that bodily chastity would not save someone who lacked chastity of the mind.⁵⁴ Bede regarded idolatry as one of the greatest threats to the spiritual integrity of Christians, and marriage to an unbeliever accentuated this danger.⁵⁵ In becoming one with Edwin through marriage, Æthelburg risked corruption from her husband's idolatry and was in danger of losing her spiritual purity. Paulinus' primary responsibility in Northumbria was to Æthelburg, the first virgin we encounter in HE 2.9, which was why he left the fledgling church to accompany her back to Kent after Edwin's death (HE 2.20).

The very real nature of the threat posed by mixed marriages is revealed in the third royal marriage in HE 2, that of Rædwald of East Anglia (d. c. AD 624-5). Rædwald converted to Christianity in Kent during the reign of Æthelberht, but Bede inserted this episode into his account of Edwin's reign in HE 2.15. On becoming Christian, Edwin encouraged other kings to convert, and succeeded in persuading Eorpwald of East Anglia, Rædwald's son, to accept the faith. Bede recounted that Rædwald had converted many years earlier, but on returning to East Anglia he was persuaded by his wife and 'certain evil teachers' not to renounce his old gods. Rædwald compromised by placing an altar to Christ in the same temple where he had another altar for pagan offerings (HE 2.15). The nature of Anglo-Saxon paganism and whether or not Bede provided an accurate representation of it here has been much discussed.⁵⁶ Jennifer O'Reilly has argued that Bede's descriptions of

⁵⁴ Jerome, Ep. 125.20, ed. Labourt, 7, pp. 132-3.

⁵⁵ Bede's writings reveal an on-going concern about dangers from pagan practices and all forms of idolatry, interpreted broadly. See: HE 3.1; 3.30; *Vita Cuthberti* 3, ed. B. Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), pp. 142-307 at 162-5; *Epistola Bede ad Ecgbertum episcopum* 14-16, ed. C. Plummer, *Venerabilis Baedae opera historica* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 405-23 at 417-21. Cf. *Earliest Life of Gregory the Great* 15, pp. 96-8, on idolatry at Edwin's court. See Barrow, 'How Coifi pierced Christ's side', for Bede's relationship to the *Whitby Life* in his account of Edwin.

⁵⁶ See: C.W. Jones, 'Some introductory remarks on Bede's Commentary on Genesis,' *Sacris Erudiri* 19 (1969-70), pp. 115-98, repr. in *Bede, the schools and the computus*, ed. W.M. Stevens (Aldershot: Variorum, 1994), article IV; J. Campbell, 'Some considerations on religion in early England,' in M. Henig and T. J. Smith (eds), *Collectanea antiqua: essays in memory of Sonia Chadwick Hawkes* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2007), pp. 67-73. R. Page, 'Anglo-Saxon paganism: the evidence of Bede', in T. Hofstra, L.A.J.R. Houwen and A.A. MacDonald (eds), *Pagans and Christians: the interplay between Christian Latin and traditional Germanic cultures in early medieval Europe* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1995), pp. 99-129; O'Reilly, 'Islands and idols'; S.D. Church,

Anglo-Saxon idol-worship are closely linked to the papal letters in which descriptions of paganism were taken from Old Testament texts and patristic teaching.⁵⁷ In this regard, it is notable that Bede likened Rædwald to the ancient Samaritans (HE 2.15). Whatever form Rædwald's apostasy may have taken, it is clear that his spiritual integrity was compromised by his religious syncretism. The so-called temple within which Rædwald had altars for Christ and other gods can figuratively represent Rædwald's internal temple which was profaned by his return to idolatry.

The role of Rædwald's wife was significant as her encouragement brought about her husband's spiritual downfall, and, according to Bede, his last state was worse than his first (HE 2.15). This marriage is important in the HE, as it is the only mixed marriage where a pagan queen was married to a Christian king – despite the brevity of Rædwald's brush with Christianity – and Rædwald's fate illustrated the threat facing Christians married to idolaters. It is significant that Bede placed this episode in the middle of his account of Edwin's conversion, chronologically out of sequence, thereby underlining the danger that Christians, and specifically in this case, Æthelburg, faced through marriage to idolaters. However, this threat aside, Bede was also aware that such marriages did lead to conversion. In the five mixed marriages that he described the king accepted the religion of his wife in every case, which means that four Christian queens saw their pagan husbands accept Christianity.

5. Queens and Conversion

Rædwald's queen is significant in the HE as she is the only woman who overtly influenced her husband's choice of religion. His apostasy was credited to her and some unknown 'evil'

'Paganism in conversion-age Anglo-Saxon England: the evidence of Bede's Ecclesiastical History reconsidered', *History* 93 (2008), pp. 161-80; Barrow, 'How Coifi pierced Christ's side'.

⁵⁷ O'Reilly, 'Islands and idols', pp. 126 and 135-6.

teachers. It is notable that Bede did not apply a pejorative term to the East Anglian queen nor is she a negative character in the book. Our first encounter with Rædwald's wife occurred during Bede's description of Edwin's accession to the Northumbrian throne. During the reign of his predecessor, Æthelfrith, Edwin took refuge at Rædwald's court, only to learn that he would be betrayed. At this moment, a mysterious stranger told Edwin that he would defeat Æthelfrith and ascend to the throne of Northumbria, and Edwin assured the stranger that if this took place he would accept a new religion. Immediately afterwards Edwin discovered that the East Anglian queen had persuaded Rædwald to change his mind, having argued that he should not sacrifice his honour by betraying his friend for gold. Instead, Rædwald joined forces with Edwin, together they defeated Æthelfrith, and Edwin became king of Northumbria (HE 2.12).

This episode is critical in Edwin's broader conversion narrative, as Bede emphasized Edwin's exile experience in his acceptance of Christianity and highlighted the providential nature of the king's conversion.⁵⁸ He suggested that Paulinus was made aware of Edwin's conversation with the mysterious messenger in East Anglia and, by reminding the king of his earlier promise, Paulinus finally secured Edwin's conversion. The earliest *Life of Gregory the Great* also included Edwin's nocturnal encounter at Rædwald's court in describing the king's conversion but, unlike Bede, identified the mysterious stranger as Paulinus himself and did not afford the East Anglian queen any role.⁵⁹ In Bede's account the queen's intervention was instrumental in Edwin's accession to the throne of Northumbria which led to his eventual acceptance of Christianity.

The East Anglian queen is a significant figure in the HE and, perhaps more than any other in the book, fulfilled the traditional role of an Anglo-Saxon queen as advisor to her

⁵⁸ HE 2.9; which expands on a similar view expressed in Bede's earlier *De temporum ratione*, 66, s.a. 4591, p. 525. Cf. also *Earliest Life of Gregory the Great* 16, pp. 98-100.

⁵⁹ *Earliest Life of Gregory the Great* 16, p. 100.

husband.⁶⁰ However, it is notable that of the mixed marriages Bede described, Rædwald's is the only one not expressly a political alliance, as his wife's background is unknown. The others (Æthelberht, Edwin, Peada, and Æthelwealh) all married women from other kingdoms and the overt influence of their wives in bringing them to Christianity would very likely have had political repercussions.⁶¹ These women were not presented as active evangelisers perhaps because the nature of their role in Anglo-Saxon society would have acted against any such impulse. They did not behave like Gregory of Tours' Clotild, but there was no political threat to Clovis in accepting his wife's religion as her people had already been conquered. Dorsey Armstrong suggests that, according to Bede, kings were not converted by women, rather they converted because of their own desire to learn about the faith, and the agents are kings and bishops.⁶² Stacy Klein has argued that Bede wanted to focus attention on the faith and sincerity of these conversions, and paid little attention to political marriages as a means of conversion because he did not want to depict the Anglo-Saxons as motivated by securing earthly power and prestige through diplomatic alliances.⁶³ However, this overlooks the role of mixed marriages in the *Historia*, and the fact that Bede's contemporaries largely ignored these unions. As noted above, the threat to Christians from marriage to pagans is most apparent in Bede's account of Edwin and Æthelburg's marriage, and the role of queens in conversion is also most evident here.

Bede inserted Boniface V's letter to Æthelburg into his narrative (HE 2.11), in which the pope encouraged the queen to bring her husband to Christianity, assuring her that if she

⁶⁰ On the role of Anglo-Saxon queens, see: Hollis, *Anglo-Saxon women*, pp. 101, 154 and 208-42; C. Neuman de Vegvar, 'Saints and companions to saints: Anglo-Saxon Royal Women Monastics in Context,' in P.E. Szarmach (ed.), *Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Prose Saints' Lives and their contexts* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 51-93 at 54; M.A. Meyer, 'Queens, convents and conversion in early Anglo-Saxon England,' *Revue Bénédictine* 109 (1999), pp. 90-116.

⁶¹ See: Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 63-7; Nelson, 'Queens as converters'.

⁶² Armstrong, 'Holy Queens', pp. 234-41.

⁶³ Klein, *Ruling women*, pp. 29-39 and 45-52.

did, ‘then the testimony of holy scripture will be clearly and abundantly fulfilled in you: “The unbelieving husband shall be saved by the believing wife” (1 Cor. 7:14)’.⁶⁴ This letter is key to understanding Bede’s narrative which is very closely related to the Pauline pericope, particularly when the second part of this verse is considered: ‘Otherwise your children should be unclean: but now they are holy’. Edwin and Æthelburg’s daughter, Eanflæd was baptised a year before Edwin accepted Christianity, and this is the only conversion story in the HE where we are told that a child of a mixed marriage was baptised prior to an unbelieving parent. Boniface’s letter was included after Eanflæd’s baptism, at Pentecost in AD 626, even though it had been written much earlier: Boniface died on 25 October 625. The pope’s letters were deliberately out of chronological sequence so the scripturally-aware reader encountered Boniface encouraging Æthelburg to fulfil 1 Corinthians 7:14 in her own life, knowing that her daughter had already been baptised in fulfilment of the second part of this verse. The papal letter established the scriptural precedent for Edwin’s conversion, which Bede worked out in the narrative.⁶⁵

The congruence between Bede’s narrative and Boniface’s letter to Æthelburg is worth noting because Bede did not include the earlier letter from Gregory the Great to Bertha of Kent (11.35 in Gregory’s Register), but did reproduce Gregory’s letter to Bertha’s husband (HE 1.32). The content of the papal letters to these queens is crucial here because Gregory’s letter to Bertha differed significantly from Boniface’s to Æthelburg. Both popes encouraged the queens to convert their husbands and praised their good deeds. However, Boniface outlined the threats facing Æthelburg through her marriage to an idolater, and stressed the need to convert her husband, while Gregory – perhaps prudently – refrained from expressing

⁶⁴ [U]t profecto sacrae scripturae testimonium per te expletum indubitanter perclareat: ‘Saluabitur uir infidelis per mulierem fidelem’: HE 2.11, pp. 174-5.

⁶⁵ On the importance of the papal letters in the HE, see O’Reilly, ‘Island and idols’. See also: J. Story, ‘Bede, Willibrord and the letters of Pope Honorius I on the genesis of the archbishopric of York,’ EHR 127 (2012), pp. 783-818.

such warnings: Bertha and Æthelberht had been married for a number of years before the Roman missionaries' arrival.⁶⁶ The papal letter to Æthelburg is in keeping with Bede's exegesis on mixed marriages, and his focus on the threat facing the queen from marriage to an unbeliever. Had Bede known of and included Gregory's letter to Bertha in HE 1, it would have significantly undermined the dramatic tension in his account of Edwin's conversion, and, more generally, challenged accepted views on the dangers from mixed marriages which were held in eighth-century Anglo-Saxon England.⁶⁷

The number of mixed marriages that lead to conversion in the HE reveals the importance of this topos in Bede's thought. The queens were not depicted as actively teaching their husbands, but Christians in mixed marriages were not required to proselytise, rather they were expected to continue following Christian practices despite their spouse's unbelief and possible idolatry. Augustine of Hippo wrote that the Christian life led in the home could help bring an unbeliever to the faith.⁶⁸ Bede shared this view: in his commentary on 1 Peter, he wrote that Christian wives could be important examples of faith for their unbelieving husbands.⁶⁹ He also believed that all Christians, regardless of their position in society, should act as teachers for those around them. In a homily on the Nativity, he explained that the shepherds in Bethlehem spread the word about Jesus' birth because all the faithful who watch over their families can be regarded as pastors for the faith.⁷⁰ This exegesis was given narrative expression in the *Historia* in the repeated references to Christian queens at non-Christian courts. We are told, for example, that Æthelburg led the Christian life in Northumbria because Bishop Paulinus provided daily instruction and celebration of the

⁶⁶ See Nelson, 'Queens as convertors', pp. 100-1, on Bede's reasons for not including Gregory's letter to Bertha.

⁶⁷ See the Penitential of Theodore above. Bede may also have wished to downplay the Gaulish influence in Æthelberht's conversion and credit it entirely to the Roman missionaries and Gregory the Great; however, it is notable that we know about Bertha's Christianity from Bede, HE 1.25-26. See: Wood, 'Augustine and Gaul'.

⁶⁸ Augustine, *De peccatorum meritis et remissione*, 3.21, PL 44.199.

⁶⁹ Bede, *In epistolas septem catholicas*, 1 Pet. 3:1, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL 121 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1983), p. 243.

⁷⁰ Bede, *Homelia* 1.7, p. 49 (lines 104-8). Cf. Bede, *In Ezram et Neemiam*, 1, p. 257.

sacraments (HE 2.9). Bede clearly believed in the efficacy of marriage as a method of conversion. The actual influence of each queen on her husband is unknown, but the cumulative effect of mixed marriages leading to conversion in the HE cannot be dismissed or ignored. Whether active proselytisers or not, each queen fulfilled the precepts of 1 Corinthians 7:14 and 1 Peter 3:1, by virtue of being a Christian married to an unbeliever who consequently converted to Christianity.

Conclusion

The primary actors in the extant descriptions of the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons were men, both kings and bishops, but the emphasis that Bede placed on royal marriages is revealing. There are five examples of mixed marriages in the book, and in each case the king ultimately followed the religious practice of his wife. Much contemporary historiography has argued that Bede reduced the role of queens in conversion, but tends to ignore the fact that Bede's *Historia* is the only early Anglo-Saxon source which tells us about these queens. Patristic commentaries highlighted the ambiguity surrounding unions between Christians and non-Christians in this period, as they recognised that a Christian was in danger from their spouse's unbelief but such marriages were successfully exploited as a conversion strategy in the Late Roman World, sixth-century Francia, and seventh-century Anglo-Saxon England. Bede's presentation of these royal marriages may not tell us much about the actions of individual queens, but it has much to tell us about expectations of queens in mixed marriages. The number of these unions that lead to conversion in the *Historia ecclesiastica* reveals the importance of this topos in Bede's account of Anglo-Saxon conversion to Christianity.

Appendix

Royal marriages from Bede's HE discussed in the essay

Kingdom	King	Queen (origin)
Kent	Æthelberht, d. 616	Bertha (Francia), d. c. 612
	Eadbald, d. 640	Unnamed step-mother
East Anglia	Rædwald, d. c. 624–5	Unnamed wife
Northumbria	Edwin, d. 633	Æthelburg (Kent), d. c. 647
	Oswiu, d. 670	Eanflæd (Kent; b. 626 in Northumbria), d. c. 685
Mercia	Peada, d. 656	Ealhflæd (Northumbria), unknown
The South Saxons	Æthelwealh, d. c. 685	Eafe (the Hwicce), unknown