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Gildas's New Testament Models

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*DE Excidio Britanniae*¹ has often been treated as a wreckers' yard, in which historians climb over the debris to find and salvage some item usable for their own purposes. That is not why it was produced. If, as has been maintained, 'much of ultimately historical significance will emerge from increasing refinement of our understanding of Gildas's intentions in writing and of his methods of exposition',² it is surely time to examine his overall plan.

His long quotations from Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel have resulted in Gildas often being himself called an Old Testament prophet. To leave him there diminishes our understanding of the *De Excidio*, for while the Old Testament provided a great deal of material for his purpose, Gildas lived this side of the Incarnation, and was at home in the New Testament.³ We cannot concur with James Bullough who, noting that Gildas ('mistakenly entitled Sapiens') quotes the Old Testament twice as often as the New, added: 'In part this is dictated by the trend of his mind, for he shows little comprehension of the New Testament'.⁴

During the long ten-year gestation of his work Gildas must inevitably have given much thought to the format of what he was to call an epistle, the term applied to all but six of the twenty-seven New Testament books. Both François Kerlouégan and Michael Lapidge have convincingly demonstrated that Gildas was equipped with an excellent education.⁵ He might therefore be expected to employ some classical model; but he is a man of God burdened by the iniquity among fellow believers, writing with urgency, so he turns to Holy Scripture. At the end of the Old Testament period two godly

¹Unless otherwise stated, all references are to Michael Winterbottom's edition, *Gildas: The Ruin of Britain* (Chichester, 1978). ²Michael Lapidge and David Dumville, 'Editors' Preface', in *Gildas: New Approaches* (Woodbridge, 1984), pp. x-xi. ³François Kerlouégan has identified 139 New Testament references: 92 citations, 39 emprunts, 8 allusions (*Le De Excidio Britanniae de Gildas: Les Destinées de la culture latine dans l'île de Bretagne au VI^e siècle* (Paris, 1987), p. 102). ⁴James Bullough, *The Life of the Celtic Church* (Edinburgh, 1963), pp. 113 and 112. ⁵Kerlouégan; Michael Lapidge, 'Gildas's Education and the Latin Culture of Sub-Roman Britain', in *New Approaches*, pp. 27-50.

men, Ezra and Daniel, each found himself faced with a similar burden and, although personally righteous and innocent of the sins condemned, nevertheless identified himself with the sinners and their punishment.⁶ Gildas's predecessor Salvian had followed their Old Testament example, repeatedly identifying himself with the sins of his fellow Christians.⁷ However, Gildas looked elsewhere, for, having 'turned to the New Testament also [I] read there more clearly, what had previously, perhaps, been dark to me: the shadows passed away, and the truth shone forth more brightly' (1.7).

GILDAS AND STEPHEN

Myers wrote: 'In considering the last days of Roman Britain there is a special reason for thinking that it might be profitable to bridge the gap between history and theology, or rather to seek the aid of both to discover what happened, and why it happened in that way'.⁸ It will therefore be worth examining the *De Excidio* from the homiletical point of view. When we do so Gildas's model becomes obvious, although it does not appear to have been previously identified. It is surely to be found in Acts 7, in the speech of Stephen, a man whom he mentions repeatedly (1.11, 67.4, 73.3). That speech has peculiar authority, owing to its circumstances. Stephen, having been arrested and dragged before the Sanhedrin on false charges (Acts 6, 8–15), is given the chance of defending himself. His Lord, while on earth, had warned his disciples that they would be arrested, taken before courts, and flogged in synagogues. However, Jesus had gone on to promise: 'But when you are arrested, do not worry about what you are to say; when the time comes, the words you need will be given you; for it is not you who will be speaking: it will be the Spirit of your Father speaking in you'.⁹ The speech of Stephen, delivered under precisely these circumstances, could therefore be taken as God-given. Certainly Bede thought so, for in commenting on it he added another dominical promise: 'For I will give you eloquence and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to withstand or contradict'.¹⁰ The author of Acts, a few verses earlier (6, 10), has specifically referred to the 'wisdom and the Spirit' with which Stephen spoke.

Whether Gildas reasoned in that way we do not know, but that he took this speech as his model seems almost certain. Had this been

⁶Ezra 9, 3–12; Daniel 9, 3–18. ⁷Salvian, *De Gubernatione Dei*, e.g. III.9 and IV.11 (*On the Government of God*, translated by Eva M. Sanford, Columbia University Records of Civilization, Sources and Studies (New York, 1930)). ⁸J. N. L. Myers, 'Pelagius and the End of Roman Britain', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 50 (1960), 21. ⁹Matt. 10, 17–19. ¹⁰Beda, *Expositio Actuum Apostolorum*, in *Bede: Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, translated by Lawrence T. Martin. Cistercian Studies series, 117 (Kalamazoo, 1989), p. 66, quoting from Luke 21, 15.

recognized earlier, all the years of argument about the unity of *De Excidio*¹¹ would have been unnecessary.

Stephen takes 49 verses to rehearse Old Testament history. Obviously his audience, the Sanhedrin, knew this history at least as well as he did; it can therefore have been repeated only for a specific purpose. Stephen recounts it solely to highlight Israel's repeated rejection of God and of the deliverers he had sent them. Then he suddenly and dramatically turns on his audience: 'You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears, you are just like your fathers, you always resist the Holy Spirit . . .' (Acts 7, 51). As we shall note below, the similarity with *De Excidio* 27 and 66.1 is startling.

As a foil to the sins of its inheritors about to be recorded, Stephen commences by recounting how God gave their ancestors the promised land (Acts 7, 1–5). Similarly, before his denunciations Gildas commences by painting a picture of an idyllic Britain, a veritable Garden of Eden (3).

Stephen quotes God foretelling that Israel would go into a distant land for four hundred years and then liberty would come (Acts 7, 6–7). Gildas quotes a prophecy that the Saxons would dwell in the land to which they going for three hundred years (23.3).

Stephen traces how the Jewish authorities repeatedly refused God's man of the hour, and rebelled against God (Acts 7, 9, 35, and 39). Gildas traces how the Britons time and again proved themselves fearful, feckless, and half-hearted:

4.1 'ungratefully rebelling, stiff-necked and haughty, now against God, now against its own countrymen, sometimes even against kings from abroad and their subjects'

5.2 'unwarlike but untrustworthy'

9.1 'Christ's precepts were received by the inhabitants without enthusiasm'

12.3 'a country that always longed to hear some novelty—and never took firm hold of anything'

14.1 'Quite ignorant of the ways of war she (Britain) groaned aghast'

15.1 'Britain sent envoys with a letter to Rome, plaintively requesting . . .'

17.1 'Like frightened chicks . . .'

19.2 A British force garrisoning the wall was 'too lazy to fight and too unwieldy to flee; the men were foolish and frightened, and they sat about day and night, rotting away in their folly'.

Leslie Alcock has noted how 'altogether sparing' Gildas is with names of persons.¹² In the whole historical section (Chapters 2–26) only *nine* persons are named: Porphyry, Tiberius, and Diocletian; Alban, Julian, and Aaron; Magnus Maximus, Aëtius, and Ambrosius.

¹¹Views discussed by T. D. O'Sullivan, *The De Excidio of Gildas: Its Authenticity and Date* (Leiden, 1978), pp. 19–20. ¹²L. Alcock, *Arthur's Britain* (London, 1971), p. 28.

Checking Stephen's lengthy account of Israel's history we find that (apart from an unidentified Pharaoh and in place-names) he has named *nine* only: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob/Israel, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Joshua, David, and Solomon.

It is in his use of history that Stephen is most daring, bearing in mind that he is facing the highest court of Israel, each member of whom would be thoroughly conversant with that history. It will be worth looking at his technique in some detail, to see what model he provides for Gildas.

The foundational character in Israel's history is Abraham (at first called Abram). In the Genesis account Terah, with no reason stated, took his son Abram and other members of the family and set out from Ur of the Chaldees to go to the land of Canaan. However, they only got as far round the Fertile Crescent as Haran; there they settled and there Terah died.¹³ It is only then recorded that God told Abram to 'get out of thy country and from thy kindred and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will shew thee . . .', which they did.¹⁴ Now Stephen's aim is to show God's initiatives and his people's slowness or refusal to respond (Acts 7, 25, 35, 39, and 51). So he starts by recording God appearing to Abraham in the land of the Chaldeans, saying 'get thee out of thy land and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I will shew thee'. This then was the reason for the initial emigration of the family. However, as Terah had led the company Stephen omits 'and from thy father's house'. It is implied that the long delay in Haran (fatal for Terah) was the first disobedience in the series which Stephen will go on to record.¹⁵

Stephen omits the last nine hundred years of their history, except to take a prophecy of Amos written c. 760–750 B.C. and insert it in the middle of his account of the Exodus of perhaps five hundred years earlier. Moreover he alters it. Amos had concluded his prophecy with God's words, 'therefore I will take you into exile beyond Damascus',¹⁶ a captivity of the northern tribes in Assyria which indeed took place¹⁷ in 722 B.C. However, a century after Amos's death the southern tribes had in their turn gone into captivity, this time into Babylon.¹⁸ Stephen conflates the two captivities by altering his quotation from Amos to read: 'therefore I will take you into exile beyond *Babylon*'.

Stephen's technique of conflation, which Gildas will copy, is even better demonstrated in his reference to the burial of Jacob and his sons. The story as recorded in the Old Testament is of two purchases of land as burial sites: land at Hebron bought from Ephron by Abraham; and land at Shechem bought by Jacob from the sons of

¹³Genesis 11, 31–32. ¹⁴Genesis 12, 1–5, 32. ¹⁵Augustine struggled with these passages in *De Civitate Dei*, xvi.13–16: *St Augustine: City of God*, translated by H. Betterson (Harmondsworth, 1984), pp. 671–76. ¹⁶Amos 5, 25–27. ¹⁷2 Kings 17, 6. ¹⁸2 Kings 25, 8, 21.

Hamor.¹⁹ Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were buried at Hebron²⁰ and Joseph at Shechem.²¹ Stephen merely says: 'Jacob and our fathers were carried back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money' (Acts 7, 16). Bede struggled at great length with that contradiction of Stephen, concluding 'I have given the best explanation that I can not [intending to] pass judgment in advance on a better opinion, if there should be one'. He had eventually decided: 'Truly, when speaking to the populace the blessed Stephen followed the popular opinion in his discourse'. That view we cannot accept in view of the high status of Stephen's audience, but we can go along with Bede's next sentence: 'In conflating the two accounts he concentrated less on the arrangement of the historical details than on the point with which he was concerned'.²²

For Gildas these—presumably divinely inspired—manipulations of history in his model must have been seminal. They freed him to omit a large part of the Roman centuries in Britain and to rearrange material relevant to his hortatory purpose, the building of a foundation for his later denunciations.²³ For instance, his account of the building of the walls is intended to provide one more example of British ineptitude—in building with turf, as compared with Roman efficiency in building with stone. This is not an example of Gildas's naive ignorance, as has so often been imagined, for Hadrian's Wall west of the Irthing was indeed initially built of turf,²⁴ just possibly by local labour,²⁵ and had to be rebuilt in stone and straightened out.²⁶ Although forgotten by recent scholars, this could have been remembered in Cumbria in the time of Gildas.²⁷ There remains no need to

¹⁹Genesis 23, 17–18; 33, 19. ²⁰Genesis 25, 9–11; 35, 29; 50, 13. ²¹Joshua 24, 32. ²²Martin, *Bede: Commentary on Acts*, p. 72. Gildas was not alone in adopting this technique of conflation. Benedicta Ward has shown that the Early Fathers constructed the figure of a redeemed fallen woman, 'Mary Magdalen', from the gospel records of a number of different women. Despite the fact that it was always clear from the Scriptures that several persons had been combined to make her, this conflated woman was employed in the homilies of St Gregory the Great, the sermons of Augustine, and the commentaries of Bede: *Harlots of the Desert* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 11–13. ²³It is therefore a misunderstanding of his purpose which has prompted some scholars to complain of his inadequacy (e.g. Molly Miller, 'Starting to Write History: Gildas, Bede and "Nennius"', *Welsh History Review*, 8 (1977), 456–65) and others to maintain that his history has no relevance to his denunciations (e.g. C. E. Stevens, 'Gildas Sapiens', *English Historical Review*, 55 (1941), 353–73). ²⁴David J. Breeze and Brian Dobson, *Hadrian's Wall* (London, 1978), pp. 32, 52, 74–78, and 125. ²⁵David Divine offers this as one possible, although unlikely, explanation of this construction: *The North-West Frontier of Rome: A Military Study of Hadrian's Wall* (London, 1969), p. 131. ²⁶Breeze and Dobson, pp. 52, 76, and 125. ²⁷This supports David Dumville's suggestion that Gildas came from the north (and by implication north-west) of England, 'The Chronology of *De Excidio Britanniae* Book 1', in *New Approaches*, pp. 61–84, as against the view that he came from the south (N. J. Higham, 'Gildas, Roman Walls, and British Dykes', *CMCS*, 22 (Winter 1991), 1–14).

involve the building of the Antonine Wall nor to chide Gildas for getting them in the wrong chronological order.²⁸

We should have been warned of the subtlety of Gildas's manipulations at the very beginning of the *De Excidio* (1.4) by his reference to Achan (unnamed). The Bible account²⁹ records that, in disobedience to the divine command, Achan, during the sack of Jericho, looted 'a godly Babylonish garment'. The Hebrew (*addereth*)³⁰ and Septuagint Greek (*ψιλλή*) for this garment imply splendour. The Vulgate has 'pallium', but Gildas shrinks it to a small cloak ('palliolum'). Achan also looted 'two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold of fifty shekels' weight' which Gildas devalues to 'a little money' (*aurique parum*). These items must have been extremely valuable to tempt Achan to commit the capital crime of looting them. Despite this, Gildas takes the liberty of down-playing the loot to re-emphasize his point that even small sins have large consequences, for Achan's sin resulted in 'the undoing of many' in the defeat of Joshua's army at Ai.³¹ It is possible that the reference to the first Saxon mercenaries coming in only 'three keels' (23.3) is to teach the same lesson.

Gildas's sole purpose in his selective use of history is to display the ineptitude, cowardice, and fecklessness of the British until they turned on their enemies, when God rewarded them by giving them strength (25.2). Correct chronological sequence is no more a priority for Gildas than it was for Stephen. Their concern is more important and urgent: stimulating conviction of sin in their hearers.³²

Without warning, Stephen leaves history and turns on the Sanhedrin: 'You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you

²⁸Molly Miller, 'Bede's Use of Gildas', *EHR*, 90 (1975), 245. ²⁹Joshua 7, 21. ³⁰*addereth*, which Robert Young defines as 'honourable, glorious, ornamental mantle'. In the Old Testament it is also translated as 'glory' (Zechariah 11, 3), is used of Elijah's prophet's *manile* (1 Kings 19, 13, 19; 2 Kings 2, 8, 13, 14), the King of Nineveh's *robe* (Jonah 3, 6), and adjectivally as 'goodly'/'splendid' (Ezekiel 17, 8): *Analytical Concordance of the Holy Bible* (London, 1879, repr. 1939). ³¹Joshua 7, 2–5. Salvian twice refers to this sin of Achar (*sic*): *Governance*, vi.1; vii.19. ³²However, their case would be lost if they indulged in fiction. Too often scholars make little allowance for oral history. Of an evening in the Dark Age halls of Gwynedd and its sister states, as in those described in *Beowulf*, there was much time to talk and exchange reminiscences; what else did one do while quaffing mead? It is ingenuous to deny that the conversation must repeatedly have run along the lines 'Were you in the fight at Badon?', 'Now my dad fought alongside Ambrosius . . .'. It must have gone like that, with an enlarged corpus of memory as each new traveller was questioned. At our 1992 annual RAF-in-China reunion, a handful of newly contacted veterans turned up for the first time. Their own memories of the 1942 retreat from Burma, while providing additional details, inevitably meshed in accurately with those of the rest of us. There is no reason to believe that sixth-century memories were any shorter than ours, and much evidence that, in the absence of writing available to the commonalty, they were longer.

always resist the Holy Spirit, as your fathers did, so do you . . .' (Acts 7, 51). Just so, equally suddenly, Gildas turns on those he is about to castigate, by name and directly: 'Britain has kings, but they are tyrants; she has judges, but they are wicked . . .' (27). Again 'Britain has priests, but they are fools; very many ministers, but they are shameless . . .' (66).

GILDAS AND THE EPISTOLER TO THE HEBREWS³³

The importance of reading Gildas in a New Testament context is especially clear in Chapters 69–72, where he draws a series of contrasts between even the better bishops and presbyters (69.1) and a series of Old Testament saints. In Winterbottom's useful Index of Biblical Quotations, each of the names in these chapters is given only its Old Testament reference.³⁴ However, the surprising inclusion in this list of Jephthah, a very minor Old Testament character, reminds one that, equally surprisingly, he appears in the list in Hebrews 11. Closer study reveals that Gildas is in fact working carefully through that passage in the Epistle to the Hebrews, possibly for a subtle reason to be discussed below. As this does not appear to have attracted much attention in recent literature, it merits examination.³⁵ Gildas quoted from Hebrews on a number of occasions and, as will be noted below, on more than one he refers to the picture of men of faith (Hebrews 11, 37b–38): 'they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering over deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth'.³⁶

A roll-call of Old Testament saints is not uncommon in Christian preaching and writing, appearing (for example) in two Pelagian letters, that 'To Demetrius' at least having been influenced by

³³The *Epistle to the Hebrews* was ascribed to Paul, for example in the Authorized Version, and as recently as Ronald Knox's translation of 1946. In his count of Gildas's quotations from the New Testament, Kerlouégan included material from it under Paul (personal communication). While unanimously denying its Pauline authorship, modern biblical scholarship has reached no consensus as to the identity of its anonymous author. ³⁴Winterbottom, *Gildas*, pp. 156–59. ³⁵Hugh Williams proves to have noted, almost a century ago, that 'his O.T. sources have a partial resemblance in point of order, though not of fact, to the list in the epistle to the Hebrews, ch. xi'; however, he did not pursue the matter: *Gildas*, 2 vols (London, 1899–1901), I, 174–75. This is true also of Kerlouégan, who tells me that he noted such a connection in his submitted thesis, but with much else it was omitted from the published version. ³⁶A. C. Sutherland notes this (but does not identify its source), inserted into a section where Gildas has been following Rufinus: 'There is nothing in Rufinus which corresponds to this. The statement, whatever its basis in fact, serves as an image and an index of destitution of the faithful; it is an original addition designed to complement in British terms, to add local colour to, the lurid picture painted of the Diocletianic (*sic*) persecution in Gildas's source': 'Gildas's Imagery', in *New Approaches*, pp. 157–68 (p. 166).

Hebrews,³⁷ but what is of interest is the way in which Gildas sticks so closely to his template.

In the first place the similarity of the two lists is striking, but the differences will also prove of interest.

Hebrews	Gildas
Abel 11, 4	Abel 69.2.1
Enoch 11, 5–6	Enoch 69.2.2
Noah 11, 7	Noah 69.3.1
[Melchisedek 5, 6–9; 6, 20–7, 22]	Melchisedek 69.3.2
Abraham 11, 8–10, 12, 17–19	Abraham 69.4.1
Sarah 11, 11	(inappropriate)
Isaac 11, 20	–
Jacob 11, 21	–
Joseph 11, 22	Joseph 69.4.2
Moses' parents 11, 23	(inappropriate)
Moses 11, 24–29	Moses 69.5
–	Phineas 70.1.1; 2.1
(Fall of Jericho 11, 30)	Joshua 70.1.2; 2.1
Rahab 11, 31	(inappropriate)
Gideon 11, 32	Gideon 70.3
Barak 11, 32	(inappropriate)
Samson 11, 32	Samson 71.1
Jephthah 11, 32	Jephthah 70.2.2
David 11, 32	(inappropriate)
Samuel 11, 32	Samuel 70.2
'and the prophets' 11, 32	Elijah 71.3
	Elisha 72.1, 2
	Isaiah 72.3
	Jeremiah 72.4

As Gildas carefully worked down the list in Hebrews 11, there were some names which he had to omit as inappropriate models for bishops: David as a king, and the others as female. Sarah and Rahab are obviously so, the record of 'Moses's parents' actions³⁸ refers solely to his mother, while Barak also proves to have been only the timorous front-man for the judge Deborah.³⁹ As Gildas has to omit these five names, he spells out Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, and Jeremiah for 'and the prophets', and names Joshua, who was referred to in his exemplar by the verse 'By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they were encircled for seven days' (11, 30). His addition of Phineas,⁴⁰ a very

³⁷*The Letters of Pelagius and his Followers*, translated by B. R. Rees (Woodbridge, 1991). In the letter 'On the Christian Life' (pp. 105–26) the writer uses as examples Cain and Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Lot (§7). In 'To Demetrius' (pp. 29–70) there are listed Abel, Enoch, Noah, Melchisedek, Abraham, Lot, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Job (5.1–8.2). ³⁸Exodus 2, 2–10. ³⁹Judges 4–5. ⁴⁰However, he does appear in the Pelagian letter 'On the Divine Law' (5.1): Rees, *Letters*, pp. 88–104.

minor Old Testament character not once mentioned in the New Testament, suggests that he found echoes in this list of the dying speech of Mattathias, the father of Judas Maccabaeus and his brothers, who sought to stimulate the zeal of his sons by reminding them of the faithfulness under testing of Abraham, Joseph, Phineas, Joshua, Caleb, David, Elijah, and Daniel and his companions.⁴¹ In his section *Les exempla de personnages bibliques* Kerlouégan notes 'Chez Gildas, Phinéas est le modèle du prêtre diligent et zélé', citing *De Excidio* 70.⁴²

Gildas also adds Melchisedek. It is this latter name which clinches our argument that Gildas is following Hebrews. Melchisedek is an exceedingly obscure Middle Bronze Age⁴³ Old Testament character whose history is given there in a mere four verses, with a single verse in the Psalter.⁴⁴ He is not mentioned elsewhere in either the Old or the New Testament—except, that is, by the writer of Hebrews, where he has loomed so large that it would have been pointless for the writer to include him yet again in this list. He is the first priest mentioned in the Bible, and therefore very appropriate to Gildas's current theme. He inserts him in the appropriate chronological slot.

Having added these two names, Gildas needed to omit two if he wished to end up with the same number—seventeen—as in his postulated model, for we have already noted him shadowing Stephen in the numbering of names. His otherwise inexplicable omission of Isaac and Jacob here suggests that this was indeed his aim.

If further proof were needed of the model employed in this section, it will be found in the last words of the section (72.4.2), which are a clear quotation from the end of his Hebrews exemplar (Hebrews 11, 37–38).⁴⁵ That he had long been mulling over this passage is perhaps shown by an earlier and fainter echo of the same verse (11.2).

Gildas has been quoting at great length from the Old Testament, and it would have been easy for him to challenge his readers by direct reference back to it, as is standard homiletical practice. In fact this is what students of Gildas have assumed he was doing. So why did he approach via Hebrews? The answer to this may prove to be of much greater importance to the historian than appears at first glance.

Hebrews 11 is recognized as one of the most outstanding chapters on faith in the New Testament, presumably inserted to define and

⁴¹F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London, 1964), p. 279. ⁴²*Les Destinées*, p. 187. ⁴³Bruce, *Hebrews*, p. 134. ⁴⁴Genesis 14, 18–21; Psalm 110, 4. ⁴⁵The Vulgate reads '*lapidati sunt, secti sunt, tentati sunt, in occisione gladi mortui sunt, circuierunt in melotis, in pelibus caprinis, egentes, angustati, afflicti: quibus dignus non erat mundus; in solitudinibus errantes, in montibus, et speluncis et in cavernis terrae*'. Gildas writes '*errare in montibus et in speluncis et in cavernis terrae, lapidari, secari, totius mortis genere...*' (I owe this observation to François Kerlouégan).

describe what is meant by 'the faith',⁴⁶ by 'the trust', which has been emphasized at the close of the previous chapter: 'Not for us to shrink away and be lost; it is for us to have faith, and save our souls'.⁴⁷ The writer to the Hebrews therefore illustrates from Old Testament history the kind of faith by which men and women have been accepted by God. That word 'faith' occurs twenty-five times in Hebrews 11, yet Gildas uses it only once in these sections! Whereas in Hebrews each named person is commended for his *faith* in God, Gildas uses the *works* of these same people to challenge his readers. In other words he takes the locus classicus of faith and stands it on its head. This cannot be accidental, for Gildas has obviously taken a great deal of trouble over it. It requires and deserves further consideration. There are a number of possible explanations.

It may be that Gildas was taking the same saints as examples of some additional grace or behaviour. This seems a promising line of enquiry, as through many of the instances there runs the idea of separation from sin, from sinners, and from sinful desires at whatever personal cost (even death), in order to keep the Church pure. But this is not followed through, is not made clear, and there is none of the powerful reiteration which makes faith the drum-beat of the biblical passage. In fact Gildas wanders far from that point, most notably in writing of Gideon (70.3).

It could be that Gildas, following the apostle James, wished to make the point that 'faith without works is dead'.⁴⁸ However, the apostle's stated point is 'both/and', not 'either/or'; there is no trace of this in Gildas here.

It is clear that he is taking the Hebrews heroes and holding each up for emulation for some activity other than the faith praised in his exemplar. We can only conjecture as to Gildas's purpose, but I suggest that he may have been saying 'Don't delude yourself that it was faith alone which earned these men divine approval, *nor will faith alone earn approval for you*'.

The canard had been levelled against Paul that he preached that because sin is met by God's grace, the more we sin the more opportunity there is for God's grace to abound—so 'why not do evil that good may come?',⁴⁹ a text Gildas will cite later (99.1). Was such a view held, if not preached, by some British clergy? Be that as it may, this section strongly suggests that Gildas saw, in the British Church of his day, a worrying antinomian tendency to rely solely on God's grace irrespective of behaviour.

In view of the Pelagian controversy, which a century earlier had racked the Church, all this cannot have been unintentional—a view

⁴⁶Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, iv (London, 1859, repr. Chicago, 1958), p. 207.

⁴⁷Hebrews 10, 39 (Knox). ⁴⁸James 2, 26. ⁴⁹Romans 3, 7–8.

strengthened by the observation that Gildas's silence about that episode is more remarkable than has usually been noted. Even though historians can find no record of Arianism affecting our islands, Gildas refers to 'the Arian treason' affecting Britain⁵⁰ as proof that it is 'a country that always longed to hear some novelty—and never took firm hold of anything' (12.3). Surely if our modern understanding of the situation is correct, then the most telling and obvious illustration of British waywardness which Gildas could have employed, the climax of his argument, should have been: 'And worse, our island produced the heretic Pelagius and even nurtured the heresy when other parts of the world had condemned it. And when the Church in Gaul sent messengers to root it out here, our reformation was so half-hearted that we soon backslid, and they had to send yet again'. That would have finally clinched his whole argument. But not a word does he utter. Moreover, it is widely accepted that it is a Pelagian text which Gildas quotes, as written by 'one of us' (38.2).⁵¹ In view of the increasing intellectual status being accorded to Gildas it becomes more and more difficult to accept Thompson's view that he was ignorant of this whole Pelagian episode.⁵²

It seems that the evidence of *De Excidio* 69–72 may point to Gildas holding some semi-Pelagian views.⁵³ He would not have thought of them in those terms but rather as the true orthodoxy, with 'faith only' as a new-fangled heresy to be resisted, in this instance by a more profound exegesis of Scripture. Certainly Gildas's views in this passage seem more in line with those found in some Pelagian writings⁵⁴ than those found in the epistles of Paul.⁵⁵ If so, we will have to reassess the effects of the visits of Germanus,⁵⁶ and our understanding of the beliefs of the Church in fifth-century Britain. This demands

⁵⁰A. W. Haddan and W. Stubbs, in a footnote to their section (under A.D. 325), 'British Church assents to the Council of Nice respecting Arianism and Easter', state their view that this passage of Gildas was 'founded on an unauthorised misapplication of general words of Eusebius, respecting the prevalence of Arianism in Britain': *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, 3 vols (Oxford, 1869–71), i, 8. ⁵¹John Morris in his Notes to Winterbottom's *Gildas*, p. 153; but not all scholars accept that Gildas would have recognized the source of his quotation, as discussed by B. R. Rees, *Pelagius: A Reluctant Heretic* (Woodbridge, 1988), pp. 110–11. ⁵²E. A. Thompson, 'Gildas and the History of Britain', *Britannia*, 10 (1979), 211. ⁵³As has been suggested by W. H. Davies, 'The Church in Wales', in *Christianity in Britain 300–600*, edited by M. W. Barley and R. P. C. Hanson (Leicester, 1968), pp. 131–50; Bullough, *The Life of the Celtic Church*, pp. 111–14. ⁵⁴The Old Testament heroes listed in 'Pelagius', 'On the Christian Life' (§7) were praised for their righteousness, as were those named in 'To Demetrius' (§§ 5–8) where righteousness is illustrated and defined: 'For every form of virtue is contained under the name of righteousness...' (5.1). ⁵⁵e.g. Romans 4, 22–25. ⁵⁶Constantius of Lyons, *The Life of St Germanus*, in *The Western Fathers*, translated by F. R. Hoare (London, 1954), pp. 283–320; E. A. Thompson, *Saint Germanus of Auxerre and the End of Roman Britain* (Woodbridge, 1984).

further examination by students of the Augustinian–Pelagian controversy.

Gildas's concern for the spiritual health of the Church in Britain demanded that any false belief which vitiated its life and witness had to be dealt with. However, it would be a grave mistake to imagine that the *De Excidio Britanniae* can be written off as a tract in some theological squabble. His purpose and his results are on a far larger canvas, which demands attention.⁵⁷

⁵⁷They are considered in my companion paper 'The New Testament Motivation of Gildas and his Friends', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, new series, 1 (1995), 1–26.