

Hilda of Whitby

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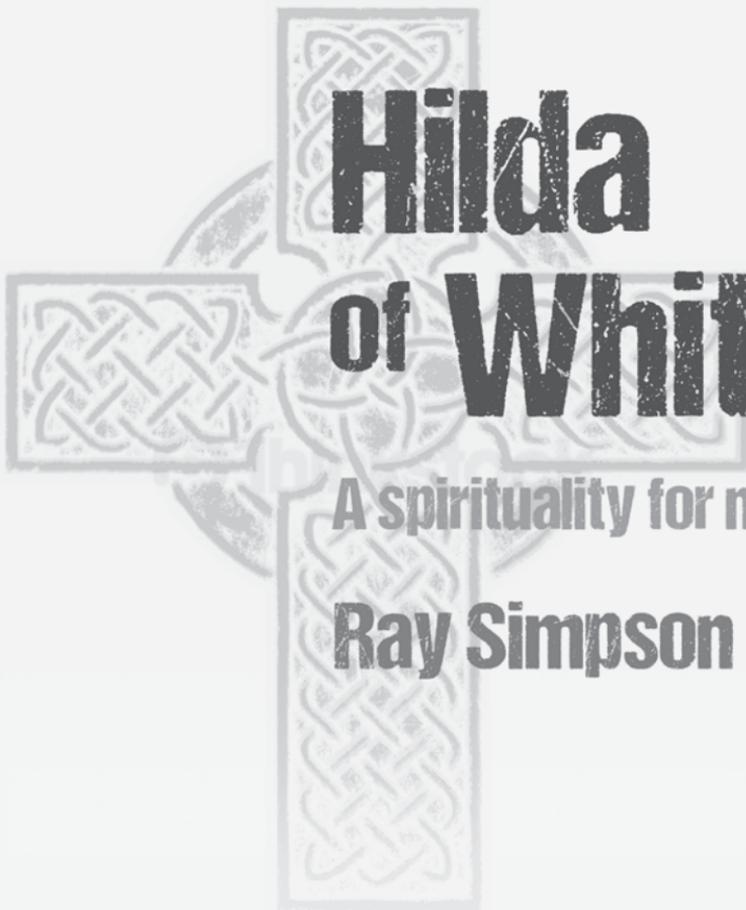
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Hilda of Whitby

A spirituality for now

Ray Simpson

Note

Anglo-Saxon names were spelt in various ways. In this book I have used prevalent modern English spelling for lead names such as Hilda (rather than Hild), Enfleda (rather than Aenflaed) and Elflada (rather than Aelflaed). Some written and online sources use the more exact spellings.

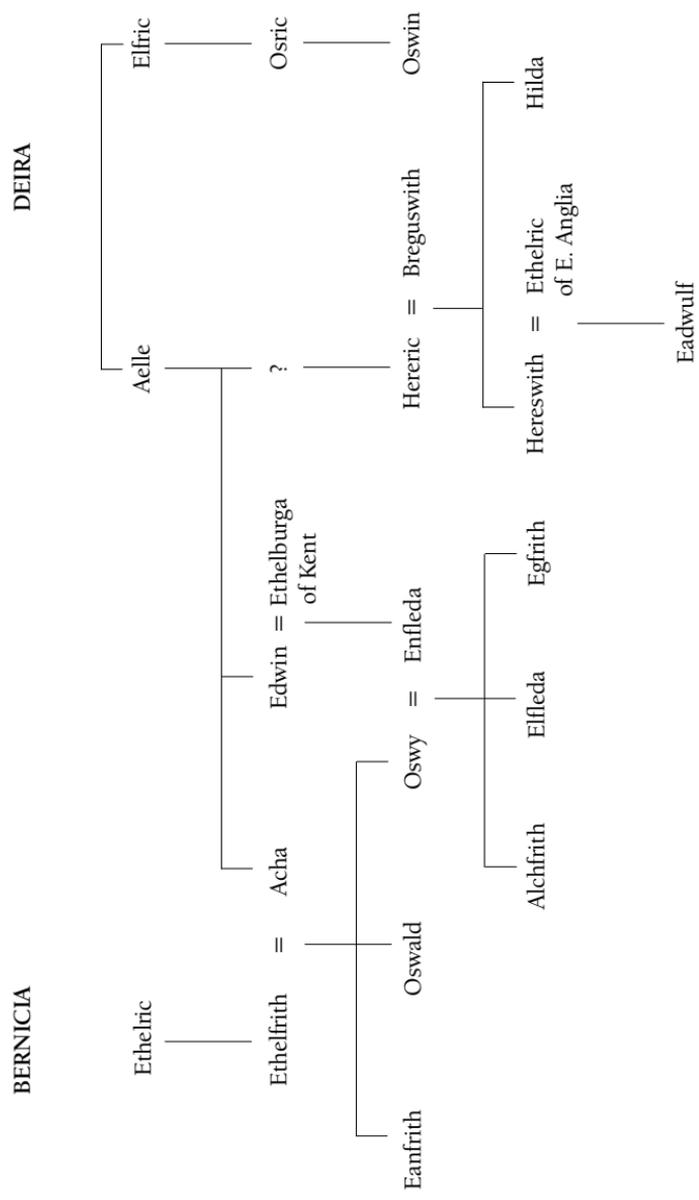
Hilda's father, Hereric, was a nephew of King Edwin, which means that Hilda was Edwin's great-niece. For simplicity's sake, however, I sometimes refer to them as uncle and niece.

I quote often from the Venerable Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People, usually from the Oxford University Press World Classics edition (1994) or the Penguin Classics edition (1990). Where possible, I give a page number from the book rather than directing the reader to the endnotes.

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Family tree of Hilda



Foreword

We have much to be thankful for in God's own county, but of all the bright stars of Yorkshire's rich heritage of Christian witness, for me St Hilda of Whitby shines out as one of the brightest. I am thankful to Ray Simpson for retelling her story in a way that connects so directly with our contemporary world, inspiring prayer and reflection which I trust will bear fruit as it did so abundantly, graciously and quietly in her own life.

I enjoy my visits to Whitby, not just for the fantastic kippers I often come away with, but also because Hilda's memory lives on in the faith, hope and love of today's Christian community in that town. I thank God also that the Sisters of the Order of the Holy Paraclete continue the monastic tradition in that town, with their Mother House, St Hilda's Priory, Sneaton Castle, looking across the bay to the ruins of the abbey where Hilda's church once stood.

Hilda's example of self-sacrificial leadership, and of courageous acceptance of what the gathered church discerned as the will of God, is a particular challenge to us today. At the Synod of Whitby over which she presided, although she was a firm believer in the Celtic way she accepted fundamental changes to the time-honoured ecclesiastical polity of the Celtic church. She was willing to embrace the new ways of the Roman mission for the sake of the unity of the Church's witness in this land.

Hilda was baptised on Easter Day, 12 April 627, on the site where York Minster stands today, along with King Edwin, by Paulinus, first Bishop of York. In recent years I have baptised new believers on the same spot outside the Minster, along with

other local church leaders. I visited Hinderwell a few months after becoming Archbishop of York. I baptised a baby at Hilda's well and drank water from the well too!

My prayer is that those baptised today, and all of us who seek to follow Jesus in the north of England, will follow Hilda's example. With her I hope we shall live wholeheartedly for Jesus, carrying the light of God into the communities to which we belong, and seeing the love of God transform both church and nation.

This book will help us along the way.

+*Sentamu Eboracensis*



Spirituality in a hard place

*When the English nation was being formed,
when the people's gods lost their shine
and the true God began to loom large;
when its church was like a chrysalis emerging from its Irish womb
but did not yet know how to fly—
God placed a shining woman on a throne not made by man
at the centre of two worlds no one else could span.
Her name was Hilda.*

In spring, when 'God's in his heaven—all's right with the world' (Robert Browning, 'Pippa's song'), people usually exude good spirit. When they are in a hard place, however, the spirit of complaint can all too easily take over. Hilda was born in a hard place. Her family were pagans and her people were brutal. While she was still in her mother's womb, her father fled for his life and died by poisoning. Her mother, Breguswith, had to rear two daughters bereft of her home and her husband. Many of us, born into such a situation, would grow up resentful and inward-looking; Hilda grew up caring and outgoing. The ousted ruling family of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Deira, into which she was born, loved power obtained by violence; she empowered people through love. What was the

secret of her transformation? How can so generous a spirituality grow in such a hard place?

Hilda was born in 614 in the eastern part of a Britain that was being colonised by hardened Anglo-Saxons. In other parts of the country, the original Celtic Britons, fiery and fractious though they could be, had been introduced to Christ, the Son of the one true God. Across the sea, Ireland had become a land of saints and scholars. Christian missionaries had established hundreds of 'villages of God', seven-days-a-week communities of prayer and work, serviced by monks, nuns, the local people and the spiritual foster mothers who welcomed people with open hearts. It was now the turn of the Anglo-Saxons to discover fresh gleams of light. Who were they, and how did they discover this 'something more'?

Germanic men began to arrive in longboats on Britain's southern shores before the last Roman troops left in 410. They continued to arrive while Britain's fratricidal Celtic kingdoms strove to reassert themselves. They included Angles, Saxons, Frisians and Jutes. Roman-trained British chiefs employed them as mercenaries and ceded to them certain territories, but the Saxons mutinied because they were not paid their wages, and battles ensued.¹ The Saxons were defeated in a major battle at Mount Badon around AD500, but, after that, things swung their way. These aristocratic male warriors were comparatively few in proportion to the indigenous population, but they captured the hilltop garrisons, slew the tribal leaders and extended their rule over the Celtic population. Tom Holland writes that 'European historians have traditionally seen the arrival of the Franks in the land that would eventually become France, and of the Angles in the future England, as events of far greater long-term significance than the activities of the Caesar of Rome or the Persian King'²—that is, of the Roman and Persian empires.

By the early seventh century, Kent and East Anglia were the leading Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Kent's king, Ethelbert, took a wife from the Franks, Bertha, who was a Christian. In 590, her

husband welcomed Augustine and the mission from Italy sent by Pope Gregory. King Redwald came to the East Anglian throne some three years later and adopted Christianity. He had difficulty in persuading his people to follow his new religion, and perhaps he himself 'halted between two opinions' (1 Kings 18:21, KJV), for he maintained a temple with altars to both pagan and Christian gods.

The other Anglo-Saxons remained stubbornly pagan. From about 450 they gradually spread west and north. Aelle defeated the Britons and colonised land in the Yorkshire Wolds, just to the north of the Humber, in a land they called Deira. He was its first Saxon king. Hilda's father, Prince Hereric, was a nephew of Aelle's son, Edwin. Hereric married Breguswith when he became old enough to be a warrior, and they had their first daughter, Hereswith.

The Angles colonised lowland river valleys of the north-eastern coast, such as the Tyne, Wear and Tees. It is possible that a group of Angles from Lincolnshire (a region then known as Lindis feorna, later Lindsey) colonised the Bamburgh area on the north-east coast and named the nearby island Lindisfarne. Certainly in 547 the coastal stronghold of Bamburgh was seized by the Angle chief Ida the Flame-bearer, who became king of that region in 560; the region became known as Bernicia. Some of the remaining Celtic kingdoms in the north saw his successor, Theodoric, as weak, and in 575 they besieged him on Lindisfarne (known to the Celts as Medcaut, 'island of healing'). Victory was forfeited due to treachery and division in the Celtic ranks.

Rivalry between Deira and Bernicia would be a long-running feature of Anglo-Saxon history in the north. In 588, Ethelric of Bernicia slew Aelle. In 603, at Degastan, Ethelric's son Ethelfrith went on to defeat Aidan MacGabraín, king of Dalriada (Argyll, a colony of the Christian Irish Scots), whom St Columba had anointed king in the name of Christ. With his power assured, Ethelfrith formalised Bernician rule over both Deira and Bernicia, uniting all the Angle territory north of the River Humber into one kingdom called Northumbria.

Deira was reduced to a mere sub-kingdom. Although Ethelfrith took the slain Aelle's daughter Acha as his wife in order to gain a shred of legitimacy (he later killed her), in Saxon law the male heirs of a slain king retained the right to the throne for two generations. For this reason, Ethelfrith, who did not mind the women remaining in Deira, regarded the young male princes as future threats. The two primary threats were Hilda's uncle Edwin and, as he grew to manhood, her father, Hereric.

Hereric became aware that Ethelfrith wanted rid of him just as Breguswith fell pregnant with Hilda. He fled to Elmet, one of the few Celtic sub-kingdoms that remained in eastern Britain, near today's Leeds. Scholars wonder whether they had friends or relatives there.

Recent DNA research shows that British women have a higher percentage of 'aboriginal' (that is, pre-Saxon) genes than do men. That is not surprising, since the Saxon incomers were males and many of them would have married indigenous Celtic women. There is evidence of Anglo-Saxon kings having Celtic ancestors.³ This raises a question about Hilda's maternal line. It is likely that her maternal ancestry included some Celtic Britons; some writers assume that her mother, Breguswith, was Celtic, although the name she was given is Saxon.

Elmet's ruler was King Ceretic. Legends identify his father with the poet Gwallog ap Llaennog, one of the Celtic kings who laid siege to the Saxons on the island of Lindisfarne. The Welsh poet Taliesin associates him with Elmet and makes him the stuff of Arthurian legends. Whatever their connections may have been, Hereric was hunted down and poisoned, probably by agents bribed by Ethelfrith—an echo of King Herod, who slew the male infants around Bethlehem upon learning that a male child had been born who some said would become a king.

The distraught Breguswith, left alone in Deira with her child and unborn baby, and not knowing what had happened to her husband, had a dream in her dark night. As she searched diligently but in

vain for her husband, she found a most precious necklace under her garment. As she gazed at it attentively, it cast a blaze of light that lit up all of Britain. In recording this story, Bede comments that ‘this dream was truly fulfilled in her daughter Hild, whose life was a bright example, not only to herself, but to many who desired to live well’ (OUP, p. 313). The fact that Bede thought that the light radiated all of Britain is significant: Hilda’s influence would shine among other races, not just among the English.



Reflection

Solveig Flugstad of Norway writes:

My first encounter with Celtic Christianity was the story about the dream that Hilda’s mother had when she was pregnant with her. If we believe that the Lord has created us, dreams are an obvious part of his creation and it is strange we do not pay more regard to what happens inside us during the night. People today who are open to this dimension in life live in an unbroken tradition from Old Testament times. Dreams are part of God’s care and counselling for us, also!⁴

The Bible tells stories of people, who were neither Jews nor Christians, to whom God spoke in dreams. Abraham lived before the Bible was written but God spoke to him in visions (Genesis 15:1). God, who had promised Abraham that his descendants would be more numerous than the stars, even though his ageing wife Sarah was barren, said to him, ‘As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah [meaning Princess] shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her... and she shall give rise to nations’ (Genesis 17:15–16).

A friend wrote the following to me:

My father died just a few days after my conception. My mother never really recovered from this terrible loss... Upon discovering that she was pregnant she returned to her family up north, a relationship fraught with conflict, and there I grew up, loved but torn between adults with conflicting emotional agendas, longing to be looked after but locked into my role as caretaker for a parent locked in grief... I was haunted by the feeling that if I hadn't been conceived when I was, my mother would have stayed in the area, remarried, and been happy. I felt that it was all my fault. This caused problems between myself and my own daughter. I have never felt able to give my little girl the closeness and unforced attention she needs. Then... I found myself reading about Hilda.

Hilda, like myself, was a fatherless child. Her mother Breguswith was comforted by a dream which was a prophecy concerning the future of her daughter. Upon reading these words I saw my conception and prenatal development in a completely different light. Rather than imagining myself as the blight upon my mother's future happiness, I pictured the hands of a loving God surrounding me, literally holding me in my mother's womb and bringing me to birth against remarkable odds. My mother was 39 and in poor health when I was born...

I turned to the liturgy for Hilda⁵ and read this verse in Isaiah: 'You will be called Hephzibah (I delight in you).' I was lost in silent prayer and praise. I sensed that just as Jesus said to his disciple John, 'Behold, your mother', so God was now offering me a mother in heaven, no less a person than Hilda herself, who knew my inner pain and was ready with all her wisdom, compassion, diplomacy and grace to guide me and intercede for me.

Even those who do not believe that we should talk to ‘saints’ will recognise that something deeply healing was being wrought by God in my friend.



Even though Ethelfrith had commandeered Deira’s royal quarters at York, Deira’s people remained sympathetic to their ousted royal family. Perhaps a friendly landowner offered Breguswith a property where she could bring up Hereswith and Hilda. It is even possible that Ethelfrith’s wife Acha, who was Hilda’s great-aunt, found them some modest quarters.

The first potential rival whom Ethelfrith sought to eliminate was Edwin, who had been born to King Aelle not long before his death, and was still only a boy. Ethelfrith determined to hunt him down, but God began to work on Hilda’s uncle while he took refuge in hard places. Bede tells of the fatherless child-prince ‘wandering so many years through all the kingdoms of Britain’. Edwin’s experiences must have shaped Hilda, as, in later years, she perhaps listened spellbound to stories of her uncle’s exile.

According to Reginald of Durham, Edwin’s childhood was spent in what is now Wales. He was fostered among the Celtic Britons in the court of King Cadfan of Gwynedd, where some held the Christian faith. There Edwin met Cadfan’s son Cadwallon, who would later become his deadly foe, perhaps because of a boyhood jealousy between son and foster-son. So Ethelfrith declared war on Gwynedd, and then on the neighbouring kingdom of Powys, after Edwin had fled there. By now a young warrior, Edwin went east into Mercia. There he married Coenburg, the daughter of Mercia’s King Cearl. They bore two sons, Osfrith and Eadfrith.

The ears of the infant Hilda must have been filled with news of one horror after another, but her ears would also have been filled with news of her relatives’ visions of a new God.

Edwin then travelled on to the court of the most powerful English king, the half-evangelised Redwald of the East Angles, and begged his protection. Redwald welcomed Edwin. When this reached the ears of Ethelfrith, he sent messengers who offered Redwald a large bribe if he would hand Edwin over. Redwald refused two such bribes but succumbed to a third, no doubt cowed by Ethelfrith's threat of war. A confidante of Edwin informed him of this and offered to aid his escape in the night. Edwin replied, 'I made an agreement with this great king and I cannot be the first to break it when he has done me no harm and has as yet showed no enmity towards me.'

Edwin left his bedroom and stayed outside, alone. As he sat on a large stone, he was alarmed to see an unfamiliar man approaching him. Edwin, whose hoped-for crown seemed now to elude him, looked at this fair young man, who wore a crown—but it was a crown of thorns in the shape of a cross. The man greeted him and asked why he sat alone and distraught while others were at rest. Edwin asked what business it was of his. The stranger replied, 'Do not think I am ignorant of your plight. I know who you are, why you are here, and what evils you fear. But tell me what reward you would give to someone, if there be such a person, who would release you from your anguish and persuade Redwald neither to harm you nor deliver you to your enemies.' Edwin replied that he would give such a person everything in his power to give. The stranger went on, 'And what if he would promise, with power to effect the promise, that your enemies will be destroyed, that you will be king and surpass in power all who preceded you as kings among the English people?' Edwin, feeling encouraged, promised to show fulsome gratitude to such a benefactor. The stranger asked Edwin a third question: 'If this person who can predict and deliver your future can also give you advice for your salvation and way of life, advice that is better than any of your kinsfolk could give you, will you obey him and accept his counsel?' Edwin promised to follow in every way the counsel of such a person.

The stranger placed his right hand on Edwin's head and declared, 'You must obey the one who first appears to you in this form and in this sign. He will teach you to obey the one living and true God who created all things, the God who will give you what I promise, and who will show you through that man all that you must do. When you encounter this sign, remember this encounter and fulfil your promise without delay.' He suddenly vanished. Edwin realised that his visitor was not from this mortal world.

Edwin stayed seated on the stone, feeling greatly heartened, wondering about the identity of his visitor, when his confidante returned, full of cheer, and told him, 'Go inside and put your fears to rest. The king has changed his mind: he has no plan to harm you and, in fact, is determined to keep faith with you. When he disclosed to the queen his plan to hand you over, she talked him out of it and said it was unworthy of so great a king to betray his best friend in his hour of need for love of money.' Soon after this, Redwald raised a great army and defeated Ethelfrith in a battle on the border of Mercia. Edwin then replaced Ethelfrith as king of Bernicia.

Accounts of this story would circulate through the future monasteries and be reported by Bede, but the longer, earlier account in a *Life of Gregory*, written at Whitby shortly after Hilda's death there, probably owes something to Hilda herself. Two separate episodes seem to have become conflated.

Edwin's original vision of a young, fair man with a cross as his crown was surely a vision of Christ. The man Christ refers to, who would carry the sign of the cross and whose advice Edwin should heed, is Bishop Paulinus, who was neither young nor fair. It is feasible that Paulinus may have visited Redwald's court while Edwin was there, and it is certain that he visited him later.

Bede used this story to buttress his thesis that a king and his kingdom flourished in direct proportion to his adherence to Christian teachings.



Reflection

Some of us are born into a hard place; all of us at times find ourselves in a hard place, surrounded by hard people or circumstances. Hilda's story gives us hope that nothing is too hard for God.

The Bible tells stories of fierce, hardened rulers who were not believers, yet God spoke to them through visions. Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Babylonian empire six centuries before Christ, was so troubled by his dreams that sleep deserted him. When none of his sorcerers could interpret these dreams, the godly Jewish exile Daniel got a message to him and was invited to interpret his dreams. After spending much time in prayer, Daniel explained to the king the meaning of his dream: in years to come, his kingdom would come to an end, and the 'God of heaven' would establish a kingdom that would last for ever. Nebuchadnezzar told Daniel, 'Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries' (Daniel 2:47) and he promoted Daniel.

In our story we have three royal pagan women, battered and bowed in a fractious kingdom ruled by a hostile usurper. A pattern is emerging in this extraordinary family: God speaks to them through visions. Edwin shows not only a warrior's courage, and skill in making relationships, but also receptivity to visions from a higher power. Breguswith, instead of 'closing down' her life, allows God to speak to her in the vision of the jewels, even though she does not yet know Christ.

God comes in every voice, behind every face, in every memory, deep in every struggle. To close off any of them is to close off the possibility of becoming new again ourselves.

JOAN CHITTISTER⁶

*Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,
Naught be all else to me save that thou art;
Thou my best thought in the day or the night,
Waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.*

*High King of heaven, when battle is done,
Grant heaven's joy to me, bright heaven's sun;
Christ of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be my vision, O Ruler of all.*

EIGHTH-CENTURY IRISH, TRANS. MARY BYRNE AND ELEANOR HULL

*God, when we are in a hard place,
remind us that you can break through
our brittle shells, our false conditioning
and group mindsets that have no place for you.
You reveal yourself through visions and visitors;
you come in dreams and intimations of the heart;
and we will respond.*



In 616, Edwin reconquered Deira and invited his extended family to move into his headquarters at York, where he had been born. Edwin became the most significant male in Hilda's girlhood. This change of fortune was made possible when Redwald slew Ethelfrith on a Mercian battlefield and gave Edwin military assistance in his securing of Deira.

A place, like a person, can have a spirituality, and York had time-honoured roots. It was founded by the Romans in 71 as a fortress of its Ninth Legion, and was called Eboracum. The Romans evidently recognised that the site was strategically located to control the principal south–north route through the Vale of York. It was also well placed to connect with the inland waterway system that later

developed; the Ouse was part of this system, and connected to the North Sea via the Humber. The fortress, situated in the north-western section of the future medieval York, attracted a civilian population that settled on the opposite bank of the Ouse, and York became one of the provincial capitals.

In 314, its bishop was summoned to the Council of Arles, along with the bishops of London and another diocese, perhaps Caerleon. The Emperor Constantius had died in York and, in 306, his son Constantine, who later became a Christian, had been declared Emperor there. After the Christianisation of the empire, York became Britain's second most important bishopric.

What happened to York after the departure of the Romans is hazy. Little evidence of the Anglo-Saxon newcomers, or of church buildings before Edwin's time, has yet been found in York by archaeologists. Tradition has it that the great Celtic saint Samson was installed there by 'King' Arthur's uncle, Ambrosius Aurelianus, after he repelled a force of Saxon invaders in AD466. Samson is recognised as York's 'archbishop' by Orthodox churches and is commemorated by present York place names such as St Sampson's Square. We know about Samson from an early *Life*.⁷ After education at St Illtyd's great community, at today's Llwantwit Major, he became the abbot of its daughter monastery on Caldey island. Samson modelled an ascetic spirituality. He became a missionary statesman, travelling to Ireland to study, across Cornwall to evangelise, and to Guernsey, where he gave children little treats before telling them Bible stories. Finally he became one of the seven founders of Christian Brittany. It is possible that tradition granted him the status of Archbishop of York because he was pre-eminent among British bishops and made a visitation to York.

The Saxons would have known nothing of Samson, but perhaps the locals passed down stories that the perceptive young Hilda picked up, such as the story of his healing a student brother at St Illtyd's monastery, when everyone else was preparing for the student's funeral.

The Roman roads probably helped to keep York a settlement of some importance as the remnants of the Christian Romano-British society disintegrated. This is supported by the fact that Pope Gregory wrote the following to Augustine of Canterbury in 601:

*We wish you also to send a bishop of your own choice to the city of York, and if that city with the adjoining territory accepts the word of God, this bishop is to consecrate twelve other bishops and hold the dignity of Metropolitan. If we live to see this, we intend to grant him the pallium, but he is to remain subject to your authority. After your death, however, he is to preside over the bishops whom he has consecrated and to be wholly independent of the Bishop in London. Thenceforward, seniority of consecration is to determine whether the Bishop of London or of York takes precedence, but they are to consult one another and take united action.*⁸

York would remain one of England's most important cities for the next 1300 years. It is still one of only two British cities surrounded by Roman walls (the other is Chester) and is the second of the Church of England's two provinces.



Reflection

Jesus speaks to towns and cities. He spoke to Chorazin, a small town in Galilee: 'Woe to you, Chorazin! ... For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago' (Luke 10:13).

York did welcome messengers of Christ, however, and its leading family, Hilda among them, would respond to the message.

York Minster has an online prayer box: www.yorkminster.org/worship-and-choir/prayer-box.html. I sent this prayer:

*May York be a place of
holy learning and hospitality,
divine purpose and prayer,
where the strong serve the weak,
believers listen to the cries of the poor
and share good news with the world.
May her people become one with Hilda and all the saints above.*

In whatever place we live, we may ask Christ, 'May your cross free it; may your gentleness woo it; may your peace still it; may your life fill it.'



Between the years 616 and 627, Edwin had a series of experiences that culminated in the baptism of himself and a host of his subjects, including Hilda.

Hilda was perceptive. Did she ponder these experiences and discern a pattern before she decided to take the plunge?

They were tumultuous years of aggression mixed with respect for the power of a higher order that Christianity seemed to bring. Political expansion and victory in battle were necessary parts of being an Anglo-Saxon king. The legal claimants to the Bernician throne were Ethelfrith's young sons Eanfrith and Oswald, who had fled from Northumbria for safety. Edwin, having seized the Bernician capital, was now in charge of the entire Northumbrian kingdom.

Much of Edwin's early military activity concentrated on the southern borders of Northumbria. Around 626, he evicted King Ceretic from Elmet and then captured the Celtic kingdom of Meicen (Hatfield) near Doncaster and the Anglian kingdom of Lindsey (Lincolnshire). On the death of Redwald, Edwin was able to pursue a grand plan to expand Northumbria to pre-eminence among the

English kingdoms. He built up a navy. Some time during those years, he declared war on Mon (Anglesey) and the Isle of Man. He followed the way of a Saxon warlord. As Hilda grew up, she would have heard little but reports of battles from her male peer.

The king travelled throughout his land, dispensing justice and collecting rents from his estates, visiting each royal villa once or twice a year. Hilda's family may have joined him on his prolonged stay at Bernicia's royal residence at Yeavering. Between 1952 and 1962, the excavator Brian Hope-Taylor rediscovered the long-lost ruins of buildings there, many associated with King Edwin. In discussing the possible uses of the Great Hall, he drew on the story of Beowulf, in which the royal hall is a place of feasting and drinking, and considered the possibility that platforms along the sides of the hall were used to carry tables and benches, beside which revellers would be rolling in the aisles, convivial horns would be refilled and minstrels would play from table to table. These arrangements were also suitable for ceremonies and processions. Beyond the hall was what he thought to be a large cattle corral, which could have been used to round up cattle or horses brought in as taxes from local people. These animals would inevitably be the source of food for the feasting that took place in the Great Hall during Edwin's stay.⁹

Edwin's worldly power exceeded that of any of his predecessors—but what of that non-worldly power, which had so strangely visited him at Redwald's court? In 626, Edwin asked Kent's Christian princess Ethelburga to become his second wife, his first wife presumably having left him or died. This was partly a political marriage: Edwin wanted Kent as his ally. Ethelburga agreed, on three conditions: that she could practise her Christian faith, that she could bring a Roman priest who would teach the faith to Edwin's subjects, and that Edwin himself would consider becoming a Christian. Edwin agreed to all three conditions, so Ethelburga brought with her the Italian priest Paulinus, who had arrived in England by 604 with the second missionary group from Rome. Bede reports that Paulinus, who was made a bishop before or

after his arrival, wished to convert the Northumbrians as well as provide religious services to the new queen. Bede describes him as ‘a man tall of stature, a little stooping, with black hair and a thin face, a hooked and thin nose, his aspect both venerable and awe-inspiring’. The man referred to in Edwin’s prophetic vision at Redwald’s court had arrived. That dream had surely prepared Edwin to be receptive towards his wife’s missionary bishop.

Paulinus typically stayed in a royal centre, taught the locals (who were summoned to attend) for about a month, and then baptised them in a river. He stayed at Yeavinger and baptised thousands in the nearby River Glen. He baptised many at Holy Stone, near Rothbury, whose large well is still preserved. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* states that the River Swale became known as ‘England’s River Jordan’ because Paulinus baptised tens of thousands in its waters at places such as Catterick Bridge. According to Pope Gregory’s plan that York would be England’s second metropolitan see, Paulinus established his church there, although he also built churches on other royal estates. Hilda may have been his star pupil. His coming certainly gave her access to wider sources of Christian learning.

Edwin’s nobles were not opposed to his accepting the new religion. The famous story is told in the *Whitby Life of Gregory*, and retold by Bede, that Edwin gathered his council of elders, which included his pagan high priest, Coifi. Paulinus outlined the gospel message to him, a colleague of Coifi said:

Your Majesty, when we compare the present life of man on earth with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting-hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter’s day with your thegns and counsellors. In the midst there is a comforting fire to warm the hall; outside the storms of winter rain or snow are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a moment of comfort, he vanishes

from sight into the wintry world from which he came. Even so, man appears on earth for a little while; but of what went before this life or of what follows, we know nothing. Therefore, if this new teaching has brought any more certain knowledge, it seems only right that we should follow it. (Bede, Penguin, p. 129)

Edwin was not yet converted, but he received letters from Pope Boniface V, urging his conversion.

The mission that Pope Gregory had sent with Augustine in 597 had aimed to convert the entire English people to Christianity, but it had struggled to gain appeal much beyond Kent. The coming of Ethelburga and Paulinus to Northumbria opened up a large opportunity, which needed back-up from the wider church. This came in the form of two letters, accompanied by gifts, sent to Edwin by Pope Boniface V from Rome, the capital of the Christian world. Hilda would have learned about these letters. Boniface addresses Edwin as ‘the illustrious king of the English’, which must have pleased Edwin.

In his first letter, the Pope explains that it is the ‘will of the Supreme Deity’ (the God who is co-eternal Father, Son and Holy Spirit), who has created all things, to ‘place man above all others’ and to communicate, as Christ commanded, good news of salvation to all peoples, for their greater benefit, even to the places on the extreme edge of the earth, as Britain was then thought to be. He therefore implores them to renounce idols and be baptised. The letter was accompanied by gifts, such as a shirt with gold ornaments, which, Boniface explained, carried the blessing and protection of Peter, the prince of apostles. He did not need to add that it also brought status.

Boniface sent separate gifts and a letter to Ethelburga. He rejoices to hear how the queen practises her faith, is saddened to learn that her husband is still bound to pagan practices, and asks how there can be a true marriage union if there is a clash between truth and error. He implores her to try to soften Edwin’s hard heart,

that the unbelieving husband might be saved, and to inform him when such a conversion takes place so that he may have peace of mind and give thanks.

Paulinus (and God!) kept trying. In 626, Paulinus was with Edwin at the royal quarters near the river Derwent (now known as Londesborough), where the queen had come to celebrate Easter and give birth to their first child. Perhaps Hilda and her mother and sister were there, too. The king of the West Saxons, Quichelm, had sent a message with a man named Eumer, whose real intent was to deprive Edwin of his kingdom and his life. Eumer carried a two-edged knife treated with poison, so that if the blade failed to kill the king, the poison would complete its work. As the emissary delivered his master's message, he suddenly leapt up, drew the knife concealed in his clothes and attacked the king. Immediately a devoted thane named Lilla interposed his body to take the thrust of the dagger. Lilla died and the blade glanced the king behind, who became ill but recovered. Eumer was slain by the thanes. That same night, the holy night of Easter for the queen and Paulinus, Ethelburga gave birth, and Edwin gave thanks to his gods. Paulinus thanked Christ for two safe deliveries and told Edwin that the birth was in answer to his prayers. Edwin promised to convert to Christianity and allow his new daughter, Enfleda, to be baptised—if he won a victory over Wessex.

Even then, according to Bede's account, it was only after Paulinus had reminded him of his night-time encounter at Redwald's court that he finally handed over his life to Christ and arranged for a mass baptism of himself and thousands of his subjects. Among these thousands were Edwin's sons born to him in Mercia, the nobility and ordinary people—and Hilda. They were baptised in the little wooden church that he had built at York. Bede makes a point of saying that later Paulinus began to build a grander church of stone, but that Edwin took care to keep the little oratory within the new church. Did Edwin value a private, simple place of prayer?

What did Hilda and the others promise at their baptism? They

would have followed the rite used at Rome in the sixth century, which reflected the one drawn up by Bishop Hippolytus in the third century. Hippolytus taught:

When the person being baptised goes down into the water, he who baptises him, putting his hand on him, shall say: 'Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty?' And the person being baptised shall say: 'I believe.' Then holding his hand on his head, he shall baptise him once. And then he shall say: 'Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born of the Virgin Mary, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and was dead and buried, and rose again the third day, alive from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and sat at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the living and the dead?' And when he says: 'I believe,' he is baptized again. And again he shall say: 'Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, in the holy church, and the resurrection of the body?' The person being baptized shall say: 'I believe,' and then he is baptised a third time.¹⁰

Baptism was preceded by 40 days of instruction. Some bishops taught that during the 40 days the bishop would go through the whole Bible, beginning with Genesis, first relating the literal meaning of each passage and then interpreting its spiritual meaning. After five weeks' teaching, candidates received the Creed, whose content he would explain in the same way. The following elements were involved in the baptism service: renunciation, profession of faith, blessing of the water, threefold immersion, anointing with chrism and signing with the cross.

Celtic sources portray the baptism of Edwin, and the events before and after it, in a different light from Bede. Bede attaches to his story of the sparrow flight an event that, by other accounts, came later. Edwin asked his pagan high priest Coifi who should destroy the shrines of idols. Bede has Coifi saying, 'I will: I worshipped these things in my foolishness, and now that the true God has granted me wisdom, there is no one who could more fittingly

set an example to all by destroying them.’ Coifi then mounted a horse, girded with sword and spear, and cut down the shrines. The common people thought he was mad but he commanded his staff to do the same. The largest shrine was at the village of Goodmanham, the Village of Seven Wells, in the Yorkshire Wolds. Archaeologists have confirmed that there was an early Germanic settlement here. There is no record of Celtic British or Irish Christians destroying pagan shrines: that was contrary to their indigenous approach. In the years ahead, Hilda would have to evaluate the merits of these different approaches.

Bede fits the stories he heard into his Roman framework, dominated by the church and Bishop Paulinus. Nennius, who probably drew his material for northern affairs from seventh-century sources at Ninian’s Whithorn monastery, fits the stories he heard into his Celtic British framework, which sees little of God in the brutal Saxon invaders. Sometimes their accounts diverge. Nennius, who in this instance is probably more accurate, states that although the infant Enfleda was baptised at Easter in Derwent, the mass baptism of Edwin, his adult family and nobles took place at Pentecost in York, not at Easter as Bede states. The *Annales Cambriae* states that Run, son of Urbgen (probably Urien of Rheged near Carlisle), baptised Edwin, whereas Bede has Bishop Paulinus presiding. The divergent portrayals of these writers reveal a deeper, continuing divergence between two ways of incarnating the Christian gospel—the Celtic and the Roman—which marked the whole of Hilda’s life.

It may be that Edwin remained grateful for the childhood protection offered him by his British friends and invited representatives such as Prince Urien to take some part in the great baptism. Whether it was at Easter or Pentecost, and whether or not Celtic as well as Roman Christians shared in it, we know that Hilda and her sister were among the thousands who were baptised that day.

Afterwards, other children of Edwin by Queen Ethelburga were baptised—Ethelhun, Etheidrith and Wuscfea, the first two

of whom died shortly after birth and were buried in the church at York. Ifli, the son of Osfrid, was also baptised, and many more nobles. No doubt Hilda was present at these baptisms, perhaps as a godparent.

In 634 Pope Honorius, who had succeeded Boniface, sent a papal pall to Paulinus as 'Metropolitan of York' and another to his namesake, Honorius, 'Metropolitan of Canterbury'. A pall was a shoulder band with pendants, which signified a special authority. With Paulinus' pall came letters to Edwin, saying that his faith was reported throughout the world and exhorting him and his people to persist in the faith and, with careful mind and constant prayers, to read the works of Boniface's predecessor Pope Gregory the Great. His niece probably read these more assiduously than did Edwin.

Bede eulogised Edwin's reign. He had heard reports that, wherever Edwin's reign extended, this proverb became current: 'A woman with her newborn babe might walk throughout the island, from sea to sea, without receiving any harm.' In several places on highways Edwin caused stakes to be fixed next to springs, with brass dishes hanging at them, for the convenience of travellers; 'nor durst any man touch them for any other purpose than that for which they were designed, either through the dread they had of the king, or for the affection which they bore him.' Bede continues:

His dignity was so great throughout his dominions, that his banners were not only borne before him in battle, but even in time of peace, when he rode about his cities, towns, or provinces, with his officers, the standard-bearer was wont to go before him. Also, when he walked along the streets, that sort of banner which the Romans call Tufa, and the English, Tuuf, was in like manner borne before him.

The cult of kingship became Christianised and would have influenced Hilda. More than a century later, in 793, Alcuin, writing home to Northumbria from the court of the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne, declared, 'In the righteousness of the king is the

prosperity of the whole people, the victory of the war-host, the mildness of the seasons, the fruitfulness of land.’¹¹

Who were Hilda’s role models during her childhood and adolescence? Her mother, sister and aunt surely ranked among the females. Breguswith, that tough pagan woman with a seer’s eye—did she become a Christian with Edwin? The fact that both her daughters consecrated themselves so completely to Christ might suggest that she did. Hilda’s sister Hereswith married Ethelric, a committed Christian who became heir to the East Anglian throne.

The most dominant male role model in Hilda’s early years was surely Edwin, a man of courage and flair in surviving, in waging battles and in giving loyalty to allies, who was not so wrapped up in himself that he could not take seriously visions from within and new ideas from abroad. The traumatic family saga of Hilda’s childhood must have affected her profoundly, and surely she inherited and imbibed some of her uncle’s characteristics. He had the wisdom to consult with his shrewdest advisers and he often sat alone, in silence, for long periods, deliberating in his heart how he should proceed and which religion to adopt. We do not know if Edwin took upon himself to be something of a surrogate father to Hilda: it would seem to be in character if he did. What we do not know is the dark side that Hilda may also have seen in him, and whether other men modelled for her a different face of Christ.

Nor do we know how Hilda related to her great-aunt Ethelburga, but we can be sure that Hilda would have been included in her aunt’s desire that her chaplain and Christian staff should teach them the Christian faith. The adult Hilda was very well educated, so she no doubt took every opportunity to learn from royal tutors from an early stage. Was it then that Hilda began to learn Latin, the language they used for the Bible and the prayers, and to meditate daily on the scriptures?

Did Hilda follow her sister into marriage? She took no monastic vows of celibacy at the time of her baptism, and it was almost inevitable that a princess not in vows would marry. None of the

early accounts refer to her as a virgin. If she married one of Edwin's nobles, her husband may have been slain in battle with Edwin. Christine Fell asks why Bede is so curiously blank about the first 33 years of Hilda's life but then writes a flurry of words about Hilda at the age of 33, when she sought to become a nun. One explanation would be that she became a widow at that time. Possibly she had been married to a pagan, which would have made all the more poignant Bede's comment that during her first 33 years she preserved her faith 'inviolat'.¹²

So much classic spirituality has been subverted by the idea that saints have to be virgins and that sex and family life are somehow second-rate. The fact that Bede, who calls every woman he wishes to extol a 'virgin', makes an exception for Hilda and describes her as a 'servant of God', makes me think that Hilda did marry. Certainly Hilda did not collude with the heresy that virginity was innately superior. She stands for a spirituality of wholesomeness in marriage, in work and in all of life.

How precarious was the seat of even the most powerful of earthly kings! The growing strength of Edwin's Northumbria forced the Anglo-Saxon Mercians, under Penda, into an alliance with the Welsh King Cadwallon of Gwynedd, and together they invaded Edwin's lands. They slew him at the Battle of Hatfield Chase in 633.

Many of the people who had professed baptism returned to their pagan gods: their faith was skin-deep. Hilda, however, did not. It seems that Christ himself, the King of kings, had attracted her and drawn her allegiance for life. The waters of baptism had flooded her heart and head, not just her body. Bede stresses her achievement in keeping the faith: she would keep the faith during years of pain and exile, and perhaps even while married to a pagan.



Reflection

This entire first chapter is about a hard, pagan people and its princess, whose traumatic birth and girlhood meant that she lived in a hard place. It is also about how, despite this, God spoke to the people around her in visions. The New Testament as well as the Old reminds us that God works in such ways. Acts 10 tells how a pagan (a Gentile) received a vision and how Peter (a Jewish Christian) received a separate but linked vision. This revealed to him that God could speak to anyone in the world who seeks to do what is right. It brought him into touch with the pagan, who was named Cornelius. This kind of thing still happens.

A man phoned me, saying, 'I am not a Christian; I have never read the Bible. I've had a dream, then I read your book.¹³ Can I come to the retreat you are leading in Glastonbury?' Glastonbury, in England, is the Avalon of Arthurian myth. There, pagan, earth, esoteric and religious spiritualities flow and ebb. In his dream, the man saw a pure white hand descend from above and touch his heart. His heart melted. Upon waking, he shook and sobbed for three days. He asked a vicar what it meant, and was told that it was the Holy Spirit. At the retreat, this man read the Bible for the first time, aloud, and he turned to Christ.

Pagans, Muslims and many others are having dreams about Jesus. What significant dream do you know about? If you don't know about any, why not ask people about their dreams? Why not have a pen and paper by your bed so that, if you wake after a dream, you can write it down and reflect upon what it might be telling you?

Also reflect on the fact that before Edwin accepted the new faith, he called a council of his elders and asked them what they thought. He tried to build a consensus and to take people with him. What may you learn from his example about team building?