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The Departure of Paulinus from Northumbria: A Reappraisal

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PAULINUS (apostle of Northumbria 625–633) has had a bad press. His labours in the gospel, his tireless preaching, his baptizing and catechizing of multitudes, his church building, even his bringing Northumbria into the fold of the Church—of all of these the memory is overshadowed by his departure from his see. It is the aim of this paper to aid the rehabilitation of his reputation.

In the generally accepted¹ sequence of events after Edwin was killed Paulinus stayed on for some time—as did the widowed queen and the royal children—but eventually concluded there was no prospect of useful work. Disheartened and fearful of the future he appointed James the Deacon to remain in the north, then, taking the queen and her family with him, mournfully retired back home to Kent. “To a more congenial sphere of work” was Bishop Lightfoot’s barbed comment.² Howarth wrote: “The terrible desolation of Northumbria after Ædwin’s death left little temptation to remain behind, for [Paulinus] was apparently not made of the same stuff as martyrs are made.”³ Colgrave similarly commented: “The Roman bishops seem to have fled from their sees rather quickly when things went wrong. So Paulinus fled from Northumbria never to return after Edwin’s death.”⁴ While in his volume of the *Oxford History of England* Stenton compressed the episode into a single phrase: “Paulinus escaped to Kent”⁵, Bright spelled it out: “Paulinus may have been bowed down by the shock of seeing Edwin’s head brought to York, and of knowing the misery which had come on the whole kingdom. He thought it was a case of “flying from persecution”; and this, as it would seem, without any such sufficiency of

clergy in the bishop’s absence, as, in St. Augustine’s carefully formed opinion, would alone justify a chief pastor’s flight.”⁶

Several scholars have gone on to propound the issues Paulinus would have long mulled over before reaching the decision to leave his see, pointing out the similarities to those discussed in Kent by Laurentius, Mellitus, and Justus [H.E.ii:5, 6] when in a like quandary; and the rules laid down by Augustine of Hippo.⁷ Whether spelled out or not, the pervading atmosphere of nineteenth and twentieth century writing is that Paulinus showed a streak of cowardice, a “lack of moral fibre” in military parlance.

However that widely accepted scenario is not confirmed by a careful reading of our basic source, the final chapter of Bede’s second book, the book in which he had recorded the Canterbury missions [H.E.ii.20]. That chapter proves to deal with three subjects which, although written in sequence, occurred in parallel.

1. Bede’s first couple of paragraphs detail the defeat and death of Edwin in battle, and the ensuing great slaughter both of the church and of the people of Northumbria. That account leads up to the starting point of Bede’s third book.
2. Having reported that, Bede goes back to record what happened to Paulinus, continuing through to his death: “As the affairs of Northumbria had been thrown into confusion at the time of this disaster, and as there seemed *no safety except in flight, Paulinus took with him Queen Æthelburh whom he had previously brought thither, and returned by boat to Kent.*” There is no necessity to

infer a time gap between the confusion and flight, which we note was for safety, not because of disenchantment with prospects.

3. In the last paragraph Bede goes back yet again to tell of James the Deacon, left in the Church of York, and it likewise continues to his death in Bede's own day.

As these three sections do not follow on chronologically there is no requirement to read the departure of Paulinus as occurring after the ravaging of Northumbria by Cadwallon.

At a conference on Christianity in Roman and Sub-Roman Britain John Morris stated: "The historians of stable Victorian England could afford to deplore the bellicosity of Greek city states, to bewail the blind decadence of the later Roman Empire; the modern veteran of two world wars has less authority to condemn past follies, but is better equipped to understand them."⁸ To a veteran of the first Burma campaign (1941–42) the classical scenario outlined above is unbelievable. That statement requires elucidation.

By late April 1942 the remnants of the Royal Air Force in Burma had reached Lashio in the north-east of the country. One night, before midnight, everyone was shaken awake—"the Jap armour is on the southern outskirts of the town". One can still vividly recall the pounding of feet, the revving of engines, the smell of fear. In Sick Quarters our patients were scooped into ambulances which were heading up the Burma Road well within the hour. The same understandable degree of panic, the same urgent evacuation, occurred in town after town throughout Burma during that campaign.⁹ It can be argued that such panic reaction was unjustified, that it should have been assumed the foe would adhere to the Geneva Convention for the care of prisoners of war. The tales of fellow servicemen who were captured, and who were among those fortunate enough to survive, confirm what folly such procrastination or trust would have been.

With that experience one is "better equipped", in Morris's opinion just quoted, to look at Bede's account [H.E.ii:20] and doing so

identifies a "veterans' scenario" very different from the classical one concocted in the quiet of the scriptorium. The attack on Edwin by Cædwalla [Cadwallon] of Gwynedd abetted by Penda of Mercia had been called "rebellion" by Bede, but Alcuin wrote: "the warrior-king was suddenly murdered by his allies".¹⁰ Treachery had been afoot. Later Bede will record: "Cædwalla, although a Christian by name and profession, was nevertheless a barbarian in heart and disposition and spared neither women nor innocent children, With bestial cruelty he put all to death by torture and for a long time raged through all their land, meaning to wipe out the whole English nation from the land of Britain." [H.E.ii:20] The full scale of his atrocities would not yet be realized but his reputation left no room for chances.

When the calamitous news reached the distraught queen, only Paulinus and a single thegn were available to make decisions. Years before Æthelburh had been put into the charge of Paulinus by her brother, King Eadbald, to bring to her bridegroom.¹¹ At that time, as an anxious bride leaving a Christian community to go to an unknown husband in an un-Christian land, she must have found her chaplain a comforting father-figure. In the years afterwards as they worshipped together and prayed together for the conversion of Edwin¹² that close bond would have been strengthened. He has been at hand and supported her with his prayers in the worrying time of her premature labour.¹³ It would be very surprising were there no bond of father-daughter affection between them. Now in this hour of calamity the charge reverted to him.

In view of the reputation of the enemy and also of Cadwallon's boast that he "was born for the extermination of the Angles"¹⁴ a wait-and-see policy was not a practical option. As there were also Edwin's children to be thought of such a course would have been criminally irresponsible, in fact so fearful was Æthelburh for their safety that, even after they reached Kent, she sent them on to Gaul. [H.E.ii:20]. No, they must have been off on swift horses towards a Humber port without a moment's

delay, any more leisurely scenario flies in the face of experience. Bede's account of the actual behaviour of Cadwallon, as he ravaged Northumbria, confirms that trusting him would have been folly.

The behaviour of James the Deacon is proof of the urgent action postulated above. According to the "classical scenario" it was decided, after weeks of prolonged agonizing during the ravaging of Northumbria, that, while the bishop would leave, James would remain behind. He certainly did remain, and of his courage there can be no doubt, for he could easily have hidden awhile and then cautiously made his escape to Kent or to Scotland. So what was the purpose of his staying? It seems to be assumed that his purpose in remaining was to encourage and strengthen the believers, presumably by circulating quietly around the province and dispensing the sacraments. Just so catholic missionary priests did in Elizabethan England,¹⁵ just so a century later covenanting ministers did in Galloway in the "killing times".¹⁶ There is no record of James behaving like that. What other explanation is there for such an apparent dereliction of duty than that, whatever his importance had been as Paulinus's right-hand man, he really was a deacon—not yet in priest's orders?¹⁷ This would most easily explain his apparent impotence when the bishop left. But surely this must have been foreseen, and in view of the necessity of providing the sacraments he would have been priested¹⁸ prior to the bishop's departure, whether there was any canonical barrier or not, just as the Anglican Bishop of Hong Kong priested women in similar circumstances in 1941, half-a-century before that became canonically legal. The logical explanation for Paulinus's failure to do this is that before his precipitate departure he could not, quite literally, get his hands on his deacon. James had presumably been sent on some task, probably to Catterick area, forty miles from York, and courageously stayed at his post there, not because that had been prearranged, but because he had not been relieved. This powerfully supports the urgent timetable of our "veterans' scenario".

It is here that Paulinus may be faulted. He practised spiritual obstetrics but failed to arrange neo-natal and paediatric care of the new Christians. About a year after the departure of Paulinus Oswald will raise a cross at Heavenfield on the eve of his victory. Recording that incident Bede states: "As far as we know, no symbol of the Christian faith, no church, and no altar had been erected in the whole of Bernicia before . . ." [H.E.iii:2] Yet half-a-dozen years earlier in Bernicia, in the vicinity of Edwin's palace at Yeavering, Paulinus had spent thirty-six days catechizing and baptizing in the river Glen. [H.E.ii:14]. It would appear that he failed to provide then for the spiritual growth and nurture without which new converts backslide.¹⁹ This would require pastors in considerable numbers and their provision should have been his prime responsibility.²⁰ No doubt it was part of his long term strategy destined never to come to fruition. It is noteworthy that in the next decade Aidan will not make that mistake for we are told that many Celtic missionaries came, that churches were established, and that the people flocked together with joy to hear the Word. [H.E.iii:3] Here was Paulinus's failing, and the explanation for the generally assumed disappearance of the church in Northumbria, leaving everything to be done again by Aidan.

But we must not be too hasty. The *Historia Brittonum* [63] records: "Rhun son of Urien (that is Paulinus, archbishop of York) baptized them, and for forty days on end he went on baptizing the whole nation of the Thugs, and through his teaching many of them believed in Christ".²¹ Leaving aside the bizarre bracketed identification²² probably interpolated into this passage, two things are clear. First it reports the baptism of Angles and is therefore not a reference to the Bernician episode where, as the Anglian population was very small, the great majority of those baptized by Paulinus must have been British.²³ Secondly, and much more importantly, the writer, showing real spiritual insight, makes a clear distinction between the "whole nation" who were baptized, and the "many" among them who believed in Christ. Those who merely went

through the motions, who jumped on the new Christian band wagon, would readily jump off again, as the two Pretenders did in the year after Edwin's death. [H.E.iii:1]. But many of those with a personal commitment to Christ would persevere, despite the absence of ecclesiastical authorities, and despite their experience of persecution, to greet the Lindisfarne monks with joy. Paulinus's work was not all wasted. Although no doubt heavy of heart he would be able to leave them in the hands of God²⁴ as he attended to the prime duty that lay at hand.

In the white-heat of the news of the disaster at Hatfield Chase Paulinus had no choice. The king was dead, one son slain with him, one in the enemy's hands (soon to be butchered). But here and now his responsibility was to the queen, and to Edwin's son and grandson, and to Eanflæd. Whether or not he would personally have faced martyrdom is irrelevant, there was a more urgent duty than flamboyant gestures. He did it—and deserves not blame but approbation.

NOTES

¹ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (E) for 633. Translated by G. N. Garmonsway (London, 1972) 25–6.

² J. B. Lightfoot "The celtic mission" in *Leaders in the Northern Church* (London, 1890) 1–18 at 8.

³ H. Howarth, *St Augustine of Canterbury*, (London, 1913) p. 329.

⁴ B. Colgrave, *Bede's Ecclesiastical history of the English people* (eds) Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Myers (Oxford, 1969) [Hereafter H.E.] p. 153 fn. 3 commenting on H.E.ii:5.

⁵ F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1947) 2nd edn, p. 116.

⁶ William Bright, *Chapters of early English church history* (London 1897) 3rd edn, p. 148.

⁷ Henry Mayr-Harting, *The coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1972) p. 76.

⁸ J. R. Morris "The Literary Evidence", in M. W. Barley and R. P. C. Hanson (eds) *Christianity in Britain 300–600* (Leicester, 1968), pp. 55–73, at 56.

⁹ Gordon S. Seagrave, *Burma Surgeon* (London, 1944), pp. 118–52; Helen Rodriguez, *Helen of Burma, the autobiography of a wartime nurse* (London, 1983), pp. 24–52.

¹⁰ Alcuin, *The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York*. Edited and translated by Peter Godman (Oxford, 1982) line 227. Godman comments "If a date before 782 is accepted, it would establish the poem on York as a historical and autobiographical source of singular authority". Although Godman prefers a date some dozen years later, this does not alter Alcuin's revulsion at this treachery.

¹¹ Which I accept as being in 625, as generally agreed. D. P. Kirby, however, has suggested [*Bede and Northumbrian Chronology*, *EHR*, 78 (1963), pp. 514–27] that Paulinus was not consecrated until 20 July 626. But as Easter day (the day of Eanflæd's birth) in 627 was 12 April this compounds the gestational difficulties considered below. Moreover he believes Paulinus (then merely Queen's Chaplain) came north with her at her wedding in late 618 or early 619. On obstetric grounds this seems most unlikely. The queen was highly fertile, producing Eanflæd in 626, and three more children by 633—all of whom (even the neo-natal deaths) Bede names. [H.E.ii:14] He mentions none before them. If her first six years of marriage were infertile, and then she suddenly started to conceive about every twenty-two months, some comment would be expected, no doubt linking this to God's blessing following her husband's interest in her faith.

¹² Stephanie Hollis's claim that during the lengthy process of Edwin's conversion he received neither the advice nor the instruction of his wife [*Anglo-Saxon women and the Church: sharing a common fate* (Woodbridge, 1992) p. 224] reveals a failure to understand the dynamic of the Christian life.

¹³ Eanflæd was born Easter Day, 20 April 626. As an obstetrician I estimate that if this was a normal full-time delivery she was conceived around 27 July 625. But her mother did not leave Kent for her marriage until after Paulinus had been consecrated bishop on 21 July. This allows only six days for the journey and marriage, and demands that Æthelburh's hormonal cycle was such that she ovulated on the wedding day plus/minus one. The timing is too tight. It follows that the pregnancy had not yet reached term when the shock of the assassination attempt on Edwin put the queen into labour. In fact if we allow for reasonable travelling-time, and for the bride to rest before the ceremony while guests are being notified of her safe arrival and forgather, it is unlikely that conception could occur before September, thus the babe was very premature. This explains why Paulinus said to the king that it was in answer to his prayers to God that the queen had been safely delivered [H.E.ii:9] when

one would have expected him to grasp the opportunity of emphasizing that it was in answer to his prayers to God that the king had survived. No doubt Paulinus had prayed about both outcomes, and said as much to the king, but it is interesting to note that Bede gives priority to the birth.

¹⁴ William of Malmesbury i:51. J. A. Giles (trans.), *William of Malmesbury's Chronicle of the kings of England* (London, 1847), p. 46.

¹⁵ for Northumbria see John A. Myerscough, *The martyrs of Durham and the North-East* (Glasgow, 1956), passim.

¹⁶ Alexander Smellie, *Men of the covenant* (London, 1908 2 vols.) vol. 2, passim.

¹⁷ This argument, of course, depends on our interpreting "deacon" in the normal sense. Bishop's deacons, approximately of the status of present-day Anglican archdeacons, but often not in priest's orders, and having largely to do with the temporalities of the see, appear on the scene. [Margaret Deanesly "Archdeacons and Deans", *Sidelights on the Anglo-Saxon Church* (London, 1962) pp. 145-70] but probably not yet in a pioneering situation such as Northumbria. There does not appear any evidence for the common assumption that James had come from Rome. Even so he must have been twenty to be ordained deacon, presumably before he came to Northumberland where we first meet him working with Paulinus in Lindsey [H.E.ii:16]. Although he may have been under the canonical thirty in 633 this would not have been an insuperable barrier.

¹⁸ Deacons were not permitted to say mass, nor to give penance to a layman. *Penitential of Theodore* ii, 14-16.

¹⁹ This has been the experience in all missionary enterprise, the importance of nurture-groups for the

support of new converts is well recognized.

²⁰ In extenuation it has been written "When [Paulinus] had baptized them he had to move on, as the court moved, so that the next *villa regia* to occupy him for a prolonged stay might be right down in the south, upon the banks of the Trent. His Northumbrian converts were left to go home and make what they could of his instructions." Rosalind Hill "Bede and the Boors" in Gerald Bonner (ed.), *Famulus Christi: Essays in commemoration of the thirteenth century of the birth of the venerable Bede* (London, 1976), pp. 93-105 at 93.

²¹ "Nennius": *British history and the Welsh annals*, translated by J. Morris (Chichester, 1980).

²² Which James Raine was at least tempted to accept. Article "Paulinus (20)" in William Smith and Henry Wace (eds), *A dictionary of Christian Biography* (London, 1887) IV:248-9.

²³ It is possible that many of these Britons were already in a Christian community which was the fruit of the earlier missionary journeys of Kentigern, but had not themselves had the opportunity of being baptized. The relationship of the Christian church in Cumbria and Lothian with that of Paulinus requires further study. It is not necessary to assume that there was the same animosity between them as naturally felt by the Christians of Wales in view of the Northumbrian slaughter of their monks at Chester less than twenty years earlier [H.E.ii.2].

²⁴ He was not the first to leave converts to God—Paul had had to do so on bidding farewell to the Ephesians [Acts 20, 17-38] nor would he be the last. The total expatriate missionary body was expelled from China by Mao in the early 1950s, leaving an estimated five million Chinese Christians, they now number seventy-five million.

