

8.2. GILDAS, ON THE RUIN AND CONQUEST OF BRITAIN, CA. 525–CA. 540

Gildas (500–570) was a British cleric living when the last of Roman rule in Britain was snuffed out by Germanic invaders (the era that gave birth to the Arthurian legends). As the primary contemporary account of British events in the 6th century, Gildas' three-part sermon offers his explanation of why the situation had become so dire: because of the sins and corruption of the British kings, people, and clergy. The work is modeled on the Biblical prophets who descry the state of the world and warn civilization that it must change, before it is too late.

Translation by Clifford R. Backman.

[1.3–4] The island of Britain sits almost at the edge of the world, off to the west and northwest, where it plays its part in what is called the divine balance that sustains the entire world. From its southwestern tip it stretches some eight hundred miles to the north and another two hundred across, not counting several promontories that reach out from curved bays. It is protected by broad, impassable seas on all sides except for the straits on the southern coast, where ships cross to Belgian Gaul. It benefits from the estuaries of two great rivers—the Thames and the Severn—along which valuable goods from other lands came via ships. There are also many smaller streams, twenty-eight cities, numerous strongholds, and some other major, if unremarkable, monuments—walls, fortified towers, gates, and houses whose roofs are firmly built even though they appear dangerously high. Britain is rich with widespread plains, well-situated hills that are amenable to cultivation, and mountains that provide convenient pasturage for cattle. Colorful flowers line the paths along these highlands, giving them a beautiful appearance like that of a bride adorned with bright jewels. The land is fed by many clear springs, whose flowing waters bring a cascade of snow-white gravel; by many bright rivers that move with a gentle murmur, offering to those relaxing on their banks a promise of sweet sleep; and by many lakes that overflow with cool streams of living water.

The history of this island, so proud and resilient from its origins, is one of ungrateful rebellion—rebellion against God, against its fellow men, and sometimes against distant kings and their peoples. Of all that reckless men are capable of doing, what vileness and unrighteousness can be worse than to deny God the fear that is owed Him, to deny charity to one's fellow man, and to deny honor to those in positions of authority over them? What can do greater harm to our faith than to violate heavenly and human desires, or, having already violated these, to give oneself over to lusts and selfishness?

I pass over in silence the ancient sins by which the whole human race was held in bondage before the coming of Christ; neither will I bother to narrate the most hellish horrors (surpassing in number even those of the Egyptians) of my native land. True, some of these exist even today, to disfigure our land

everywhere according to their savage custom The only evils I wish to publicize are those our island has suffered, and has at times inflicted on others, since the time of the Roman emperors. I will do this to the best of my ability. No native writings or records can assist me, since these (if they even existed!) have been destroyed by fires or carted off in ships carrying our exiled leaders. Instead, I have to rely on foreign writers whose accounts are far from clear, since they contain so many gaps.

[1.23–26] In stout ships of war under full sail came the cries of a brood of fierce cubs born of a savage lioness—the Saxons—whose cries came to us as omens and auguries. A prophecy had foretold that they would occupy for three hundred years the country toward which they directed their prow, half of that time (that is, 150 years) spent in ravaging the land. They sailed under the command of their brutish leader and sank their deadly talons in the eastern shore of our island, and their homeland, seeing the success of this first contingent, sent out another ship, and another, to join their bastard companions. Thus were the seed of iniquity and the root of bitterness planted in our soil, until the poisonous plant grew and developed strong branches and full foliage. Having gained a foothold, the Saxons negotiated to have us supply them with provisions, as though they were our defenders preparing to endure great hardship on our account. For a time our provisions closed the dog's maw, to use an expression; but soon enough they complained that our monthly offerings were insufficient and declared that if we did not increase their volume they would break our treaty with them and lay waste the whole island. They did not wait long to turn their threats into deeds.

Because of our earlier sins, the fire of divine vengeance blazed across our land from coast to coast, stoked continually by the wretches from the east. This fire devoured all the scattered settlements and lands, and did not stop until it had consumed nearly the entire island, licking the western ocean with its red and savage tongue. The catastrophe bears comparison with that of the Assyrians upon Judaea, for there was fulfilled among us, as among the Jews, the prophet's lament, "They have set your sanctuary on fire, profaned your name's abode by razing it to the ground,"

[Ps 74.7] and again, "O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance; they have defiled your holy temple." [Ps 79.1] All our settlements were brought low with the repeated blows of battering rams. Our people were cut down everywhere by gleaming swords and raging fires, including the priests and bishops. Sadly, the streets of our villages are filled with the ruins of once-high towers that have been pulled to the ground, with stones pried from fences or left over from the smashing of sacred altars, with dismembered pieces of human bodies that are so covered with lurid clots of blood that they look as though the people had been run through a wine-press, and whose only chance for any kind of burial is to rot in the ruins of collapsed homes; all the rest will simply fill the stomachs of ravenous beasts and birds . . .

Some surviving wretches were apprehended in the mountains and killed in heaps; others were so overcome by hunger that they surrendered themselves to their enemies, to be enslaved forever . . . Eventually the barbaric raiders returned to their homeland, and what was left of our people came together from all around, as bees rush to their hive when a storm is brewing, and prayed as one to God with their whole hearts. As the phrase goes, "burdening the air with unnumbered prayers" they begged not to be destroyed. Rather, they took up arms and elected to challenge their conquerors in battle under the leadership of Ambrosius Aurelianus, a man of modest character. Alone of all the Romans, he had managed to survive the tumultuous times (his parents, being clothed in imperial purple, had been killed), and his descendants in my own time are fallen far from his ancient nobility. Nevertheless, these people gained a victory, with God's help.

Since that time, our people won some more victories and so did our enemy. Indeed, the Lord is testing our nation—the Israel of today—and the depth of its love for Him. The struggle continued up to the time of the battle of Badon Hill, the last great slaughter inflicted upon us. This was in the year of my birth, one month less than forty-four years ago, and to this very day not one of our villages is what it used to be. Instead, all lie desolate, routed, and ruined . . .

Britain has kings, but they are nothing but tyrants. Britain has judges, but they are wicked men who engage in non-stop plunder and pillage of helpless commoners, to the delight and benefit of criminals and thieves

everywhere. [Our rulers] have innumerable wives—harlots and adulteresses all. They swear oaths only to perjure themselves and to lie every time they make a vow. They fight wars, but evil ones against their own subjects. And while they pursue simple thieves relentlessly throughout the entire country, the robbers who sit with them at their noble tables are not only esteemed but rewarded . . .

[108] But why mince words? . . . I will say what I mean . . . You are not priests of God but enemies to Him, not bishops but practiced sinners! Not ministers of Christ, but traitors to the holy apostles whom you supposedly succeed! You may have heard to words of the apostle Paul but you have not absorbed them and you do not feel their weight. Like stone idols which can neither see nor hear, you stood at the altar while his words came pouring down like thunder at you! "Brethren," he said, "this saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance." [1 Tim 1.15] He spoke of trustworthiness and deserving. "Whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task." [1 Tim 3.1] But you seek the bishops' offices out of covetousness, without even pretending it involves spiritual worthiness; you certainly put no store in good works. "Therefore a bishop must be irreproachable, married only once, temperate, self-controlled, decent, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not aggressive, but gentle, not contentious, not a lover of money." [1 Tim 3.2–3] This calls for tears, not more words . . . How horribly things have changed, to see the commands of heaven crushed under foot. The lot of you arm yourselves with deeds and words in order to attack these teachings, to destroy them. Teachings that one ought to suffer for and lay down one's life for!

[110] Priests! Not a single one of you should flatter yourself on the purity of your body. The souls of your flock . . . will be asked on the Day of Judgment, and they will denounce you as murderers of souls! . . .

May Almighty God, the God of all consolation and mercy, preserve His very few good priests from all evil, and make them citizens of His city the Heavenly Jerusalem, where is the assembly of all saints. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How is the idea of a contract between the Britons and God introduced here, and what hope is there that God will protect against the invaders?
2. What considerations might have prompted the Romans to withdraw from Britain in the 5th century?