

Excerpt from the Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (London: Penguin Books, 1990, pages 130-31), as reproduced in English translation. This text is Bede's account of the Anglo-Saxon's religious beliefs around the year 627 A.D. I have altered the spelling to match American conventions.

Book 2, Chapter 13:

He [the King] summoned a council of the wise men, and asked each in turn his opinion of this strange doctrine [Christianity] and this new way of worshipping the godhead that was being proclaimed to them.

Coifi, the chief Priest, replied without hesitation: "Your Majesty, let us give careful consideration to this new teaching.

"For I frankly admit that, in my experience, the religion that we have hitherto professed seems valueless and powerless. None of your subjects has been more devoted to the service of our gods than myself; yet there are many to whom you show greater favor, who receive greater honors, and who are more successful in all their undertakings. Now, if the gods had any power, they would surely have favored myself, who have been more zealous in their service. Therefore, if on examination you perceive that these new teachings are better and more effectual, let us not hesitate to accept them."

Another of the king's chief men signified his agreement with this prudent argument, and went on to say: "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 counselors. 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 few moments 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." The other elders and counselors of the king under God's guidance, gave similar advice.