

BEDE

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Abstract: Bede (c.673 - 735), priest, monk, and teacher at Wearmouth-Jarrow in Anglo-Saxon Northumbria.

Born around 673, Bede became a monk, priest, and teacher in the twin monasteries of Wearmouth and Jarrow in the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria. He is the most accomplished author of early medieval Britain. Bede wrote grammatical textbooks, a history of the abbots of Wearmouth-Jarrow, a chronicle, an abbreviated Psalter, martyrologies, *vitae* (saints' lives), a guide to holy places, a treatise on music, fifty homilies, letters, epigrams, hymns and lyrics, as well as a long poem, *On the Day of Judgment*. His grammatical treatise was a standard school text into the fifteenth century. Bede has been called "the greatest hagiographer of the Anglo-Saxon church" (Lapidge, 324). A list of his writings takes up almost six pages in Richard Sharpe's *Handlist* (2001). In an age before sextants and long division, Bede computed tides and phases of the moon. He suggested dating years from the birth of Christ (A.D., or *Anno Domini*). Always scrupulous in his scholarship, he is credited with inventing the footnote. Bede wrote primarily in a correct, classical Latin. Only one Old English poem survives, a brief "Death Song." Bede composed other Old English poems, now lost, and he was translating Scripture on his deathbed. Bede is known informally as the Father of English History, chiefly on account of his masterful *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (hereafter *HE*) of 731. This work became important to King Alfred's program of education and literary revival in the ninth century, when it was abridged and translated into Old English. It is still our primary source on seventh- and early eighth-century Britain. Since then, the *HE* has characterized Bede's achievements to post-Reformation audiences. But during the Middle Ages, Bede was known primarily as an exegete, a commentator on Scripture. In 836, Bede was formally acknowledged to be as authoritative as the famous Latin fathers of the Catholic Church, Augustine of Hippo (354-430), Gregory the Great (540-604), Jerome (c.347-420), and Ambrose of Milan (c.333-397). In 1899, Pope Leo XIII declared Bede a Doctor of the Church. Bede, called the Venerable, died 26 May 735, and his feast day, formerly 27 May, is now celebrated on the 25th of May.

During the Old English period, monks and nuns copied out books and documents by hand, pursued grammatical and literary studies, ran schools, and maintained libraries. They believed in salvation achieved through good works and prayer. Consequently, these men and women religious sought to lead others by exhortation and example. Their literature was, to varying degrees, part of that effort. At Wearmouth-Jarrow, this effort was enabled by one of the best libraries in Western Europe. Students of the various kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England flocked to study there. Wearmouth-Jarrow was a center of the Northumbrian Renaissance, which produced some of the most beautiful art of the early middle ages including the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Codex Amiatinus. In the midst of this flowering of English arts, Bede wrote that his greatest joys were to learn, to teach, and to write. As a teacher, Bede wrote textbooks to instruct students in grammar and poetic form so that they might read Scripture. (His manual on meter contains virtually no examples from pagan literature.) He wrote commentaries to teach students and others to read Scripture well. He wrote scientific works to explain creation and humanity's role in it. And he wrote poems and hymns to make more effective and complete a Christian's praise of God. Bede wrote for an audience who understood the complex methods of reading Scripture.

DIVINE READING

In his handbooks and commentaries, Bede schematized the levels of narrative found in Scripture. Like Augustine and the Greek commentator Origen before him, Bede distinguished between a literal sense and a figurative sense. The figurative sense might be allegorical, in which a word or an image signifies similar terrestrial things; anagogical, in which a word or an image signifies heavenly things; or tropological, in which a word or an image signifies a moral duty. So, the Temple of Solomon in the First Book of Kings “was made as a figure of the holy universal Church” (*De Templo*, 1.1). Literally (or historically), it was a building, a Jewish temple. Allegorically, it signifies the Christian Church on earth. Anagogically, it signifies the chosen angels of Luke 20:35, who are the redeemed elect of humanity. And tropologically, it signifies the soul, and obliges people to fulfill God’s law in return for eternal reward. This habit of reading was also a habit of writing. Bede’s histories and poems are filled with Scriptural allusions, some allegorical, some anagogical. Thus, his *HE* opens with a description of the water and land of Britain, then her crops, then her trees, then her animals. This alludes to the first chapter of Genesis, in which God creates water, then land, then grasses, then trees, then beasts. (Bede first lists land animals, then birds, then fishes in a perfect allegorical parallel of the fifth day of Creation). This systematic allusion sets Britain within the immediate context of Scriptural history. Bede then mentions Britain’s twenty-eight cities. Historically, there may have been twenty-eight cities. But, as was traditional since the Greek mathematician and philosopher Pythagoras, a number can also be figurative: in this case, seven days of creation multiplied by four elements (signifying the material world) yields twenty-eight. Tropologically, this signifies the material nature of these cities, versus a spiritual nature which came about with their acceptance of Christianity. The five books of the *HE* are likely numbered in imitation of the five books of Torah. Thus, the allegory implicit in the *HE* is that early English history parallels, then fulfills, the history of the Jewish people.

Bede’s art infused even an apparently factual narrative with Scriptural themes and lessons. In the *HE* (IV.24), Bede tells the story of Caedmon, the first named vernacular English poet. During a feast at Whitby monastery, a harp was passed around the table, and people were called on to sing Old English songs. When it neared Caedmon, a lay brother who knew no secular songs, he fled outside to a cow shed. He soon fell asleep and dreamed that an angel or spirit came to him. It instructed Caedmon to sing the story of Creation, known now as “Caedmon’s hymn.” In the morning, he described everything to his master, who brought him before Abbess Hild. She read Caedmon a passage from Scripture, then told Caedmon to turn it into an Old English poem. He did, magnificently. Hild then made Caedmon a monk, and had him instructed in Scripture, from which he made Old English poems. These, Bede tells us, inspired many Anglo-Saxons to become faithful Christians. With this story, Bede illustrates a Gregorian approach to literature that characterized a larger melding of Anglo-Saxon pagan and Christian traditions. In 597, Pope Gregory the Great had instructed his Christian missionaries to Britain to keep the pagan feast days and temples, but to reconsecrate them to Christian use. Thus, a celebration of Eostre, a pagan fertility goddess, became Easter, a celebration of spiritual rebirth. Likewise, Caedmon reconsecrated Old English pagan poetry to religious use. (Bede similarly reconsecrates Roman genres like history and elegiac verse to Christian use.) Caedmon’s story represents themes familiar from the Nativity narratives of the Gospels. Caedmon’s new song (allegorically, the New Testament) fulfills an old form (allegorically, the Old Testament). The new song begins in a manger, just as the NT begins in a manger—more accurately, the Word of God is revealed

to Anglo-Saxons in Caedmon's manger as the Word (or Christ, see John 1:1) is revealed to humanity in a Bethlehem manger. The new song is dictated by a heavenly spirit, but made by a man—just as the NT was dictated by the Holy Spirit but written by men. And Caedmon's new song is composed in the common language of Anglo-Saxons, just as the NT was composed in Greek, the common language of early Christians.

WORKS AND CRITICISM

As nascent European peoples struggled to define themselves, their historians cobbled national narratives together. Gregory of Tours wrote of the Franks, Jordanes of the Goths, Paul the Deacon of the Lombards, and Bede of the English. Bede's concern was to give English history a purpose: to show how the English had been singled out by God as His new chosen people. Bede emphasized the analogues between Hebrew and English history. Just like the Jews in the Torah, the English made their way as an entire people into a promised land. Just like the Jews, they comprised three tribes (Levi, Benjamin, and Judah parallel Angles, Saxons, and Goths or *Iutae*). Just like the Jews, they came across water. Just like the Jews, the English accepted, then rejected divine law. Just like the Jews, their backsliding was punished by successive waves of invaders and national suffering. Bede described suffering brought on by irreligious and pagan kings and the success of religious and Christian kings. In celebrating Christian success, Bede hoped that "the thoughtful listener is spurred on to imitate the good" (*HE*, Preface). Bede was typical in seeing patterns in history conducive to the Christian message. But this did not interfere with his historian's need to verify evidence and to establish fact. During the Protestant Reformation, the *HE* was employed to demonstrate the early independence of the English church from Rome. It has, since its publication, remained one of the greatest works of English history.

Interest in Bede's commentaries has been sporadic. Bede's religious writings struck many Early Modern sectarians as too Catholic, and so were disregarded. In partial justification, Bede was thought to have parroted Augustine, Ambrose, and Jerome; and any study of his commentaries was on that account arguably superfluous. But that view has changed largely as a result of mounting scholarship based on new editions and translations. Assembling Bede's corpus has proven difficult. Bede was so highly esteemed in the Middle Ages that his works are extant in hundreds of manuscript copies. Not all of these manuscripts were consulted when producing printed editions, and almost none have been reproduced. As the manuscript trail is clarified, editions of Migne's voluminous but hasty *Patrologia Latina* are slowly being reedited in the Brepols *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*. Bede's Latin works rarely appeared in translation, and it was not until 1986 that the first English translation of a complete Bedan commentary was published. By 2000, almost all of his commentaries had been translated. Not only do the commentaries allow us a view of theology and spiritual life in early Anglo-Saxon England, but also a view of the interpretative arts. Scripture is filled with poetry and allusive language, and Bede tried to demonstrate how these reveal profound truths. Bede sought to offer, in George Brown's phrase, a general theory of the symbol. His approach, known as *lectio divina* (divine reading, see above), was also employed in his sermons.

Bede's poetry has, with a handful of exceptions, escaped the attention of literary critics. His contemporaries and successors were not as inattentive. Generations of poets studied Bede's virtually flawless Latin verses. His hymns were incorporated into liturgies which to this day echo off the walls of St. Paul's church at Jarrow. Bede wrote epigrams in a form that by his time had been traditional among Christians for four hundred years.

Unfortunately, almost all of these are lost. Bede wrote dozens of hymns in iambic dimeter on the model of Ambrose of Milan. And he wrote a metrical life of St. Cuthbert intended as a meditative guide to a familiar prose life. This is in Latin hexameter, which St. Augustine recommended for religious verse. In one section, Bede describes the whitening of the air, perhaps a hoar-frost. Michael Lapidge writes, “But if we think that Bede’s primary intention here was to paint a naturalistic description of the Scottish landscape in winter, we miss the point” (335). The point is that Bede’s words evoke the crossing of the Red Sea, manna, and Moses bringing water from a rock. Each word is carefully chosen and deftly handled. Bede brilliantly adapted the formal traditions of Latin verse to control the allusive language of Christianity. Lapidge, who compares Bede to George Herbert (1593-1633), concludes that “Bede was a poet of great refinement and subtlety” (336). And, one might add, of wide learning, genuine humility, and profound wisdom.

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