

Bede, The Venerable, Monk-Historian

March 31, 2003

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It was a most unlikely country for an historian, there at Jarrow, in the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria, where a group of monks led by the aristocrat Benedict Biscop built a small abbey. It was sited on the north bank of the Tyne river, built on land donated by King Egfrid and completed, as Bede notes in his Lives of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow, in the year of Our Lord six hundred and seventy-four, in the second indiction and in the fourth year of King Egfrid's reign." By Bede's time the foundation had grown to include a modest collection of four main buildings, housing the church, chapel, refectory, dormitory and the necessary support services for a community of perhaps two dozen monks. So primitive was this country at the time that Biscop was forced to send for French glaziers to glaze the windows since that craft was unknown in England. Biscop traveled to Rome as well bringing back with him the necessary vestments, chalices, relics and the like for the church, as well as books for the library. When Bede's parents "gave" him to the monastery in 680 at the age of seven, Jarrow had become a small, tenuous outpost of Roman Christian civilization amid the rude, still semi-pagan borderland between what is now England and Scotland.

There was nothing unusual in being a child "oblate;" literally an offering to the church, and many monasteries contained both children and adults who had grown to adulthood and old age within the same monastic walls. In due time Bede was educated, became a deacon at the age of 19 and then was ordained a priest at the often customary age of 30. He died in 735 at age 62 never, as far as we know, having spent any time outside of his monastic community, true to the last to the Benedictine ideal of stabilitas.

Yet fixity in space did not mean immobility of mind. Northumbria was a meeting place of Celtic civilization, with its roaming monks of great learning, and the Frankish-Roman world where abbot Biscop and his successors journeyed so often as pilgrims, buyers and borrowers. Bede grew up among these men, their books and the accumulated wisdom of the Irish, Greek and Roman past. His learning grew to extraordinary proportions: more than a hundred works were known to him including the great works of Ambrose, Augustine, Gregory and Jerome, and Roman classics by Virgil, Prudentius, Pliny and Cassiodorus. But first and foremost, he was a monk, dedicated to what St. Benedict called the "Work of God" (Opus Dei). This meant that seven times a day he gathered with his brother monks to chant the appointed psalms, beginning with the office of matins at 3 a.m. depending on the season, and ending with compline around 8 p.m. St. Benedict intended that the entire one-hundred fifty psalms be chanting each week, as well as daily and Sunday masses, which would also be sung. Bede's life must be imagined as a constant round of chapel service, with reading and writing interspersed through his day.

Benedict's rule left very little room for learning. A monk was merely required to know enough Latin to perform the Liturgy, and only a single book each year was given to

the monk for "spiritual reading." Writing and book copying was work for specialists, and we know that often Bede dictated his works to a secretary colleague. Most monks, like most undergraduates, were very modest scholars. Yet there was room in the monastery for genius to unfold, for part of the monk's work was to decipher and contemplate Holy Scripture.

No doubt for Bede his most important works were his biblical commentaries and translations. He wrote on many of the most important Old Testament books, as well as on the Gospels of Mark and Luke, as well as the Book of Acts, Canonical Epistles and Apocalypse. At his death he was completing a translation of St. John's gospel into Old English, a remarkably early example of vernacularization of the Bible. Bede the schoolmaster accounts for the second category of his writings, as the needs of the abbey school had to be met as well. He wrote on Latin poetry, rhetoric, and on the scientific subjects that composed the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy). Here he made some scientific observations of his own, discovering the correlation of tides and the phases of the moon, and establishing in his work on chronology the difference between BC and AD, which of course remains the most common way of reckoning time. A third significant part of his oeuvre was made up of martyrologies, saints' lives and chronicles of his abbey. But today Bede is remembered above all as an historian, the writer of the first monument of English history, the Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum.

Monkish histories are very seldom reckoned to be great or even very good examples of the genre. The vast majority across the entire Middle Ages were little more than compendia of facts and dates, of endowments, and notable or fragmentary accounts of great men and occurrences of the age. Very rare was critical and thoughtful commentary, or attention to explanatory structure or individual motivation, which even today separate good historical writing from the journalism that fills most of today's bookstore history sections. What sets Bede's history apart is precisely that quality of historical imagination, coupled with attention to detail, which together mark the work of a great historian.

The Ecclesiastical History is first of all the story of a single people, "our" people the English, as Bede calls them. Yet Bede's history is also the story of an island and he begins with descriptions of its geography as well as its flora and fauna. Its beginnings also predate the arrival of the "English" as Bede begins with the conquest of Julius Caesar in 55 BC when the island was added to the Roman empire. Thus from the beginning, Bede places great emphasis on the "Roman" connection binding England to the continent. And like much of the history written in Roman antiquity, Bede's purpose was a moral one: "For if history relates good things of good men, the attentive hearer is excited to imitate that which is good; or if it mentions evil things of wicked persons, nevertheless the religious and pious hearer or reader, shunning that which is hurtful and perverse, is the more earnestly excited to perform those things which he knows to be good, and worthy of God."

But in the main, The Ecclesiastical History follows the lead of Augustine's On the City of God in imagining all history as the story of the progress of human salvation, from

the first historical act - the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden, through the history of the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, to the inevitable resolution of the dissonance between God and man, which will occur at the Last Judgment. In this sense, Bede's work is a small part of a much larger story, though his narrative in one-hundred forty chapters of the Christianization of the island and its people proclaims English exceptionalism as well. For in a no doubt apocryphal but charming story, Bede ascribes the beginning of the evangelization of England to the visit of Pope Gregory the Great to the slave market of Rome. There the pope saw a new shipment of slaves from the island of Britain, and struck by their angelic faces and the fact that they were pagans, he ordered a missionary expedition be sent there. Thus began the second, and longest Roman conquest of England.

Bede's history has other elements that also set it apart from other historical works. He is scrupulous about his sources, taking great care in the dedicatory letter to King Ceolwulf in chapter one to name the people who had helped him. This most impressive list includes churchmen from all of the seven Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, who either orally or in writing conveyed to Bede the history of their own provinces. Chief among his sources was the Abbot Albinus, educated at school of Canterbury and a direct successor to the missionary monks dispatched by pope Gregory a century and a half before. Thus Bede unites the sources for his history from the places where the events he records took place. He is also admirably skeptical about the miraculous, qualifying these incidents by adding phrases such as "it is said," and "a certain man reported" or "it is generally believed." Any modern historian would recognize these careful qualifiers as an attempt to ameliorate imperfect sources.

And yet Bede still manages to capture the drama of the struggle between Christianity and paganism. In particular, he emphasizes the importance of individual decision and the factors influencing the choice to convert. Of course these are stories of kings and aristocrats, the key leaders on whom the evangelization of their people depends. But there is nothing two dimensional about them for all that. For example, the central figure and event of Bede's history was the conversion of Edwin, king of Northumbria, in 627. Like most Germanic kings, Edwin was first and foremost interested in a God that granted victory in battle. But rather than simply follow the well-worn cliché of conversion through successful slaughter, Bede describes a king whose military successes only render him willing to listen to the Christian message. Edwin believes it necessary to understand something of Christian doctrine and to consult with his advisors and to receive their consent before taking the major step of conversion. And it is the reasoning of one of his counselors that ultimately wins over the king, when he compares human life to the cold, dark, snowy night, from which a bird flies into a warm and brightly lit banquet hall, remaining there briefly before flying out again into the night. If Christianity can shed some light on what human experience means, he says, we ought to give it a try. Bede's God is more than the lord of battles, as Bede's kings are more than absolutist military leaders in horned helmets. However inevitable the triumph of Christianity may be, Bede never loses sight of the fact that the power of the faith lay in its ability to capture the human heart.

A framework of meaning, scrupulous attention to detail, insight into human nature, and grace and ease of written expression in excellent Latin, all these make Bede's Ecclesiastical History perhaps the greatest work of its kind from the entire Middle Ages. The work's reception from both contemporaries and their descendants gives credence to this judgment. No fewer than one-hundred fifty manuscripts of the history survive from the Middle Ages, two from the eighth century. Anglo-Saxon missionaries carried the book to the Frankish kingdom where it was widely admired, particularly in the court of Charlemagne and his successors. Bede's high reputation is nowhere more evident than in the works of twelfth-century historians working both in England and Normandy. Henry of Huntington, for example, calls Bede "that holy and venerable man, a man of brilliant mind, a philosopher of Christ;" and William of Malmesbury not only praises him in similar language but copies much of his text in his own history of England and its kings. Thus Bede ranks with Thucydides and Herodotus on a very short list of historians who are authors of their own histories, which in turn have become sources for other historians to use.

Last but not least, there is one other thing that also sets Bede apart from other historians. Very soon after his death, the honorific "Venerable" became attached to his name denoting holiness. His bones were rescued from the pillaged and burned remnants of his monastery - the victim of Viking attacks - and placed in a shrine in Durham cathedral where they remain to the present day. But not until 1859 was a formal application made to the papal see that Bede be declared a saint and doctor of the church. The petition was granted in 1899 by Leo XIII, who decreed that the feast of the Venerable Bede with the title of *Doctor Ecclesiae* should be celebrated throughout the Church each year on 27 May. Hence we may be sure that however many historians have landed in the fiery pit of Hell, there is at least one (and perhaps only one) who abides in Paradise.
