

Bede of Wearmouth-Jarrow: Man of the Bible

By Bernard Robinson

Introduction

Bede (673-735 AD), England's only Doctor of the Church (he was proclaimed Doctor of the Universal Church in 1899 by Pope Leo XIII), was born at a time roughly two centuries after the Romans had largely departed from this country. Christianity was still a new religion living in the shadow of the old paganism.

In Northumbria, in what Wilfrid at the Synod of Whitby called "a corner of a remote island"¹, Bede lived a quiet monastic life of prayer and scholarship. He worked solo, without an amanuensis to help him. He drew his inspiration from the Christian Fathers. To read the Fathers, said Bede, was to look upon God's face². He had the great good fortune to have in his monastery a fine library thanks to the labours of his mentor, Abbot Benet Biscop, who had brought many volumes over from the Continent. Bede himself travelled no further afield than Lindisfarne, Hexham and York.

Around him battles raged. "In Bede's lifetime," according to George Thornton, "Northumbria had five kings of whom only Alfrid and Oswy died peaceful deaths"³. The monk-scholar pursued his life's work quietly but with a sense of urgency. He had a strong sense that history was moving to its climax. He was living in the final age of the world, to be succeeded by the eternal eighth age.

At the end of his famous *History of the English Church and People* Bede writes: *When I was seven years old, I was, by the care of my kinsfolk, given into the charge of the very reverend abbot Benedict [Benet Biscop, 628-89] and then of Ceolfrith [642-716], to be educated. From then on, I have spent all my life in this monastery [of Wearmouth-Jarrow⁴] concentrating entirely on the study of the Scriptures. [V.24]*

We know, of course, that he did not in fact devote all his energies to scriptural study. He did, after all, produce tide tables that were used for centuries after his death; also works of rhetoric and chronology; and he wrote about the lives of some of his Christian predecessors in Britain; moreover, this is to say nothing of his great *History of the English Church and People*. It was the Bible, though, that was his passion and his chief spiritual nourishment.

He wrote many commentaries. In his early years he concentrated on the New Testament, commenting on the Apocalypse, the Catholic Epistles, Acts, Luke and Mark (his was one of the few patristic commentaries on Mark). Later he turned his attention to the Old Testament, commenting on Genesis, 1 Samuel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Tobit, Proverbs, the Song of Songs, Habakkuk and the accounts of the construction of the Tabernacle and the Temple⁵. He also wrote fifty Homilies, based on Scriptural liturgical readings. (The biblical works of Bede that are currently available in English are listed at the beginning of the Select Bibliography below.)

Bede's approach to the study of the Bible

Before trying to interpret texts it is important, where there are variant readings in different manuscripts, to try to discover which is the original one. This task, called today Textual Criticism, was one which medieval scholars already took seriously. Thus, in his commentary on Genesis, Bede noted that at 2:2 Jerome's Vulgate, translated from the Hebrew, has God completing his works on the seventh day, while the Old Latin version (taken from the Greek) places completion on the sixth day. At 2:8 the Vulgate has God planting the Garden of Eden "from the beginning," whereas the Old Latin, like the Greek, has "towards the East"⁶.

The Bible was, for Bede, unambiguously the Word of God. It was written, it is true, by human authors, but it was God's Word that they were setting down. Through their words God was addressing men and women down the ages, not just their contemporaries. Bede gave a decidedly passive role to the human writers: in his preface to his commentary on Acts, Bede says of Luke that his pen was directed by the Holy Spirit, so that he could in no way write anything untrue.⁷

Bede further thought that God frequently intended a meaning to the words that went beyond what the human writers had in mind, and he gave priority to this Spiritual Sense over the Literal Sense. He wrote that the meaning of the human authors is only the outer rind of Scripture⁸; the pith is the divine message, hidden within⁹. In his commentary on Genesis, Bede noted the danger of allegorical interpretation, in that one may "desert the explicit faith based in history"¹⁰, but in practice he often virtually ignored the Literal Sense.

Thus in his preface to his commentary on 1 Samuel, he tells bishop Acca of Hexham that for a commentator to look to the OT just for the literal meaning, as the Jews do, is insufficient, for what value can it be to two celibates like themselves to hear that Samuel's father, Elkanah, had two wives? One must realise that the two wives have a symbolic reference, standing as they do for the Synagogue and the Church¹¹. When we read the story of the young Saul searching for his father's lost donkeys (1 Sam. 9), according to Bede we should understand that Saul stands for Christ; the donkeys represent the lost souls of men; the four places through which Saul passes stand for the four ages that preceded the coming of Christ; and Samuel, who predicts Saul's future, stands for John the Baptist¹².

Bede, like his predecessors, divided the Spiritual Sense into up to three subdivisions: allegorical; tropological and anagogical. [Allegorical: referring forward to Christian times; tropological: moral; anagogical: eschatological.] Thus in his early work *Schemes and Tropes*, he writes of the text, "Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem; praise thy God, O Zion" (Ps 147:12).

The one and the same Jerusalem may be understood in four ways: on the level of history, the city of the Jews; allegorically, the Church of Christ; anagogically, the City of God; tropologically, the human soul.¹³ Scripture, he says elsewhere, has four

roles: to inform, correct, comfort and point to the consummation of things¹⁴. The patristic type of exegesis, as the PBC document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993) notes, “pays scant attention to the historical development of revelation”; allegorical exegesis, in particular, “runs the risk of being something of an embarrassment to people today,” even though the lessons drawn from it are edifying (III.B).

If today scholars do not usually identify spiritual senses separate from the literal meaning, that is because they look for spiritual meaning within the literal sense. Contrast two ways of reading Deut. 25:4, “*You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.*” (a) In 1 Cor. 9:9, Paul looks in this text for a spiritual, allegorical, sense: “Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Or does he not speak entirely for our sake?” Paul takes the text to mean that ministers of the Gospel have a right to be fed by the Christian community. (b) “The entitlement of the ox to have what it needs of the farmer’s produce for its health is analogous to the rights of the poor and disadvantaged to consume what they need of another’s crops (Deut 23:24-25 [picking rights]; 24:19-22 [gleaning rights]). The wholeness of the covenant society extends even to its livestock¹⁵.”

Bede included commentaries on OT material not previously covered: Proverbs, Tobit, the Tabernacle, the Temple, Ezra-Nehemiah. His aim was not merely to fill in gaps left by previous Fathers but also, in a number of cases, “to show how the history of Israel could be read figuratively as the story of the Church in general and of the Anglo-Saxon Church in particular.”¹⁶ Thus the Tabernacle in the wilderness could be seen as standing for the Synagogue, since only the Hebrews had constructed it, whereas the Temple stood for the Church, since gentiles had helped to build it. Ezra was both scribe and priest. As scribe he was a model for such as Bede himself in preserving and teaching Scripture. As a priest who rooted out abuses, he should serve as a model for bishops in Bede’s own day, since so many of them, says Bede, “exact an immense tax and weight of worldly goods from those they claim to be in charge of while in return giving nothing for their eternal salvation either by teaching them or by providing them with examples of good living.”¹⁷

Bede’s Sources

Bede’s main sources were the four great Latin Fathers – Augustine, Ambrose, Jerome and Gregory the Great – although he also used, among others, Origen, Cassiodorus, Hilary, Cyprian, Victorinus, Arator and Isidore. He always claims to be following in the Fathers’ footsteps¹⁸ but his use of them is far from slavish. I here propose to say a few words about one commentary and one homily.

COMMENTARY ON ACTS [AD 709-16]

None of the Latin Fathers had written a commentary on Acts (and few of the Greek Fathers had) so Bede had to rely on his own resources to some extent, though he made frequent use of an allegorical metrical composition on Acts by the Roman subdeacon Arator. According to one scholar, Bede's commentary was the fruit of notes that he had been keeping for a number of years, but the book was put together "at top speed, so as not to keep Acca [who had commissioned it] waiting."¹⁹ The speed of composition will have accounted for the uneven coverage: chapter 6 gets no more than five brief comments.

He remarks that at Pentecost "the Church's humility recovers the unity of languages which the pride of Babylon had shattered".²⁰ On 2:6, "*Everyone heard them speaking in his own language*", Bede says that this can be taken two ways: (a) The Apostles spoke in all the languages of their audience, using one language after another; (b) The Apostles spoke in their own language but the members of their audience each heard the words in his own language. (The possibility that the Apostles were using *glossolalia*, a form of ecstatic utterance normally intelligible only with the help of an interpreter [cf 1 Cor. 12:10; 14:13-14] is not considered.)

When we come across something particularly down-to-earth, homely even, in Bede, one usually finds that he is leaving his sources to one side and teasing the matter out for himself. So here at Acts 12:8, when the angel who has come to release Peter from prison tells him to gird himself and put on his sandals, Bede suggests a reason why Peter may have been sleeping unbelted and unshod: the cell-floor was doubtless cold (like Bede's own cell?) so he will have taken off his belt and sandals so as to let his tunic down and tuck it warmly under his feet.

Bede, equally characteristically, then finds in this a practical lesson: this provides an example to the weak – when we are tried by bodily affliction or unjust treatment by men, we are permitted to relax somewhat our intended rigour. Then, after this pastoral reflection, he adds a spiritual one: since it is said, *May your loins be girt and your shoes on your feet, making ready for the gospel of peace* [Luke 12:35; Eph. 6:15], spiritually we are commanded to take up again the insignia of the virtues and the preaching of the word.²¹

At 24:14, Bede rightly prefers the Greek reading *the Way which they call a heretical sect* to the Vulgate's *a sect which they call a heretical sect*. (When he wrote the Acts commentary, Bede's Greek was probably rather shaky, and he inferred the Greek reading from a text of the Old Latin version.²²) At 28:11, giving the name on the figurehead of the boat that brought Paul and his companions to Sicily, Bede correctly practises textual emendation, recognizing that in the Vulgate text that he is using *castrorum* [camps] is a scribal error for *Castorum*, Castor and Pollux.

Bede often comments on chronological and geographical matters in the text of Acts, and also on matters of rhetoric. Bede updated his views on Acts later, in a *Retractatio* [c.725-731], treating mainly of questions of textual criticism and down-to-

earth details. Bede liked to get details right (he “detested superficiality”²³); in this respect he was rather more like a modern scholar than were most of the Fathers. Thus on Acts 27:16, where Luke is describing the lifeboat attached to the ship (Gr *skaphē*, Vulgate *scapha*) in which Paul travelled to Rome, in the commentary Bede had said that it was a small boat made with twigs covered with untanned hide, while in the *Retractatio* he says that he had been following Isidore and that his subsequent reading has led him to suppose that the term used could equally well denote a canoe scooped out of a single tree.

Differences between the Vulgate and the Greek are also discussed. By the time he came to write the *Retractatio* it seems that his grasp of Greek had improved somewhat. He therefore notes in the *Retractatio* that, in the Pentecost narrative, the Vulgate’s *variis linguis* [in various languages], Acts 2:4, is an inexact rendering since the Greek has *in other languages*. On 2:6, Bede notes that some have criticised him for saying in his Commentary that this can be taken in two ways. He was following, he retorts, an irreproachable source, St Gregory of Nazianzus²⁴. He still thinks both interpretations tenable, but since Luke does not hint that Peter’s discourse (2:14-36) was uttered in a succession of languages, 2:6 probably means that members of the audience heard each in his own language what had been spoken in only one.

HOMILY II.15: For the Feast of the Ascension [c.730]

All his life long Bede’s motivation for writing may best be described as pastoral. He wrote commentaries to assist bishops to train their clergy and to help other priests who lacked Bede’s own educational advantages to prepare their sermons. We have fifty homilies penned by Bede himself, all towards the end of his life. Whether he preached them himself is uncertain. They are very exegetical, but they are rather less reliant on the Fathers than are his commentaries. They had a profound influence long after Bede’s death.

A century later, at the instigation of Charlemagne, Paul the Deacon, a monk from Monte Cassino, compiled a Homiliary, an anthology of patristic homilies. Almost a quarter of the contents come from Bede. This Homiliary became the standard collection of readings for the monastic Night Office and thus came to instruct monks for centuries to come. One scholar (A. Katzenellenbogen) has argued that the relief sculptures in Chartres cathedral find their primary influence in Bede’s homilies.²⁵

Bede’s homily for Ascension Day derives a special interest from the fact that his death occurred on the eve of that day, after first vespers of the feast. (There is a well-known Ascension hymn attributed to Bede.²⁶) This homily refers to the OT more than do most of his homilies. Bede spends part of the homily, it is true, on explaining the meaning of the Ascension account in Luke 24:44-53, and saying such things as that the way in which the apostles are portrayed as “persevering unanimously in prayer” while waiting for the gift of the Spirit (Acts 1:14) should be a model for us to

follow. Then he lists a number of OT texts which he sees as foreshadowing the Ascension:

- (i) Num. 13:24-25. The Israelites sent by Joshua to reconnoitre the Promised Land see two men carrying a cluster of grapes on a pole. Bede sees the two men as representing the preachers of the Old and New Covenants, and the cluster of grapes him who said "I am the Vine" (Jn. 15:1).
- (ii) Ps 47 [Vg 46]: 6. ("God goes up with a shout, the Lord with trumpet-blast"), a text still used for Ascension Day. Rather than take it, with Bede, as a straight prediction of the Ascension, we might say today that it may well have originally celebrated an annual ceremonial re-coronation, in the Autumn, of the God of Israel, and that in applying it to Christ we are saying that he shares in the kingship of his heavenly Father, and that one of the ways in which we can picture the Ascension is as his ascent to the throne of glory.
- (iii) Gen. 5:23. The translation of Enoch to heaven at the age of 365.
- (iv) 2 Kings 2:8-14. Elijah's assumption to heaven in a fiery chariot.

The end of the homily is more straightforward: *Let us, my dearly beloved brothers, venerate with boundless zeal the glory of the Lord's Ascension, which was hinted at in advance by the words and actions of the prophets, and later fulfilled in our Mediator himself. In order that we too may follow in his footsteps and deserve to ascend to heaven, let us practise while on earth a heavenly humility, bearing in mind Solomon's words, "Pride goes before a fall, while the humble in spirit will be glorified" [Prov. 29:23]. The Ascension of our Redeemer has taught us where all our efforts should be directed. The Ascension to heaven of the Mediator between God and human beings shows us that the door to the heavenly homeland lies open to human beings.*

As the excellent preacher says, "Let us seek the things that are above, where Christ sits at God's right hand; let us savour the things above, not earthly things." [Col. 3:1-2] Let us seek him and have our faith strengthened. Let us seek him with deeds of love. Let us be strengthened by the hope of what we shall find. Let us always seek his face, so that when he who so peacefully ascended shall return in fearful fashion, he, Jesus Christ our Lord, may find us prepared, and take us with himself to the festivities of the city above.

One notes here, as in so much that Bede wrote, a strong sense of the idea of the Church as a pilgrim people. In another homily, he says of the Church that it "is partly a pilgrim on earth, absent from the Lord, and partly it is present with the Lord, reigning in heaven".²⁷ Elsewhere again he says: "The saint is no denizen of earth but a traveller and a stranger".²⁸ Nearly every one of Bede's homilies urges the hearer to press forward to our heavenly "homeland". For better or worse, that is seldom a leading motif in present-day sermons.

Conclusion

Bede's exegetical work is compounded, in varying proportions, of the scholarly, the pastoral, the down-to-earth and the spiritualising (allegorical exegesis being particularly pronounced in the case of the OT books). As one scholar says: although Bede took much from his predecessors, "he chose freely among the solutions that which he preferred; his choice was usually judicious and sensible".²⁹ If in what Bede wrote about the Bible there is much that is time-conditioned and outmoded there is much, too, that can continue to instruct and move us today, and to awaken our sense of the stature of the first English biblical scholar and the only English Doctor of the Church.

This is an edited version of a talk given to the Tyneside Circle in July 2016 by Bernard Robinson. Before his retirement, Bernard Robinson lectured in Sacred Scripture at Ushaw College, Durham. He is a member of the Tyneside Circle of the Newman Association and of the Society for Old Testament Study.

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NOTES (PL=Patrologia Latina, CCSL=Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina)

¹ Bede, *History* III.25; in Sherley-Price edition, 192.

² *In Cant.*, PL 91:1095D.

³ Thornton (1991), 9.

⁴ It was a single monastery, on two sites, seven miles apart. It seems that Bede began at Wearmouth and later moved to the Jarrow house, perhaps on its opening in 682 (so, most recently, DeGregorio, 6), perhaps considerably later (so, for example, Robson; see also Bede, *Ecclesiastical History* ed. McClure and Collins, xiii).

⁵ He never wrote a commentary on the Psalms, though they played a great part in his life: he sang them in church, he studied them, and he prayed them for private devotion. He wrote, though, an Abbreviated Psalter, going through the whole of the Psalter and picking out individual verses. This was intended for private prayer, and because of Alcuin's admiration for it Bede started a fashion for such compilations.

⁶ Bede seems to accept the Vulgate reading in the first case. God finished his works on the seventh day in the sense that, having finished the creation of the world in six days, he then created the seventh day, a prefigurement of the Sabbath. If Eden was planted towards the East, and, as some suppose, in a place remote from human habitation, there are problems, he says, about the statement that the Flood covered the entire surface of the earth, if this means only the presently inhabited world. (*noster orbis*.) But, says Bede, wherever it was planted ("whether here or there"), the important thing is that it was on the earth.

⁷ CCSL 121:4.

⁸ This phrase was derived from Jerome, *ep.* 53, and would be echoed down the centuries, e.g. by Bonaventure.

⁹ CCSL 119A:237.

¹⁰ CCSL 118A:3.

¹¹ CCSL 119:9.

¹² CCSL 119:77.

¹³ CCSL 123A:169.

¹⁴ CCSL 119:9.

¹⁵ McConville, 368-69.

¹⁶ DeGregorio, "Bede and the Old Testament" in DeGregorio, 127-141, here 135.

¹⁷ *Comm. In Nehemiam*, cap.21. DeGregorio's translation, DeGregorio, 138.

¹⁸ E.g. CCSL 119:10; 121:3; *PL* 91:10:77B.

¹⁹ Laistner, xviii.

²⁰ Bede here echoes Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 41:16.

²¹ *Commentary on Acts*, ed. L. T. Martin, 112-13.

²² *Commentary on Acts*, ed. L. T. Martin, xix.

²³ Capelle, 40.

²⁴ *Oration* 41:15.

²⁵ See L.T. Martin, "Bede and Preaching" in DeGregorio, 156-169.

²⁶ *Hymnum canamus gloriae* (or, *Domino*). ("New praises be given...", tr.R. A. Knox; "Sing we triumphant...", tr. B. Webb.)

²⁷ *Hom.* II.1, CCSL 122:19.

²⁸ CCSL 118A:186.

²⁹ Capelle, 26.