The Venerable Bede

His Life and Times

Bede, a servant of Christ and priest of the monastery of the blessed apostles Peter and Paul, which is in Wearmouth and Jarrow. I was born on an estate of the same monastery and when I was seven years old my kinsmen entrusted me for my education to the most reverend abbot Benedict and later to Ceolfrith…in the 19th year of my life I became a deacon, and in the 30th year I advanced to the office of priesthood.
This brief account given by Bede himself at the close of his *Ecclesiastical History* is the only personal detail of him that we have. However, it is possible to discern much more about him by examining the times he lived in, his environment and his education.

At the time Bede was born, around 672-673 England was in a period of change and uncertainty. It was still recovering from the upheavals caused by the collapse of Roman rule with its subsequent waves of invasions and migration, which had led to fragmentation and internecine wars. By the time Bede was born, England was divided between five Anglo Saxon kingdoms who were moving towards a state of uneasy peace, despite recurrent outbreaks of tribal warfare. The lingering remnants of paganism meant that Christianity was only slowly becoming a dominant force in the country as a Christian king could not guarantee his successor would have accepted the tenets of Christianity. Additionally, the Christian leaders themselves had only recently resolved the conflict between the Roman and Celtic ecclesiastical traditions at the Synod of Whitby in AD 664 in favour of the Roman tradition which paved the way for a more united sense of mission and the planting of a new culture and learning amongst the ruins of Roman Britain. It also helped bring the church in England into closer communion with Western Christendom which in turn allowed for greater cultural and intellectual exchange of ideas, an opportunity which Benedict Biscop the founder of Wearmouth and Jarrow fully utilised.

The sites of the twin monasteries of Wearmouth and Jarrow were on the North-Eastern coast of England not far from Hadrian's Wall which in Roman times had been the northern border of its empire. The terrain was both rugged and beautiful; isolated yet by the time Bede reached adulthood it had become a hub of culture and learning. Land was granted to Benedict for a monastery in 674 and he brought over stonemasons and later, glaziers to build it in the pre-Romanesque style, becoming the first stone-built monastery in England. His use of glass was also novel for its time. In 682 land at Jarrow was granted for a second monastery, which was also built in stone and glass and Bede would later go there under the leadership of Abbot Ceolfrith. Despite its isolation there is a hint in the anonymous *Life of Ceolfrith* that worldly matters did intrude for it states a young boy and the abbot were the only two monks capable of singing the Divine Office after plague had swept through the monastery. It seems highly likely that the young boy was Bede.

Benedict was a bibliophile, and his collection of books formed the basis for the library at the twin monasteries. It eventually became one of the largest libraries of its time with several hundred volumes. It became world famous and manuscripts which were copied there were prized acquisitions throughout Europe. The manuscripts collected by Benedict were not just theological texts but encompassed history, classical literature and science as well, all of which greatly enriched the young Bede's education.

Daily life in the monastery was built upon strict adherence to the Rule of St Benedict of Nursia which emphasises the harmony of prayer, work and study. Each day was ordered around the Divine Office which was a cycle of prayer revolving around the eight canonical hours. Each liturgical service otherwise known as an Office consisted of a chant, three antiphons, three psalms and three lessons, which meant the whole psalter was recited each week. There was also Mass, both a High Mass for everyone and a private mass said by each professed monk. This pattern helped divide the day into regular periods of communal and private prayer, spiritual reading, manual or intellectual labour and sleep.

Although the twin monasteries were situated in isolated places, the vision of Benedict Biscop was that they should become centres of faith, learning and culture preserving the best of Christian and classical scholarship in a land that was still coming out of the dark age between Roman and Anglo-Saxon civilisation. Young monks like Bede were trained in the liberal arts and taught the art of debate. They followed the classical pattern of education beginning with the Trivium which was made up of grammar, rhetoric and logic giving them the tools to analyse and articulate complex ideas. From there they moved onto the *Quadrivium* which was made up of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music which not only deepened their understanding of the natural world and its order but was taught as part of an integrated vision of knowledge where all truth ultimately pointed to God. Theological education was centred upon scripture and the three great doctors of the church, Augustine of Hippo, Jerome and Gregory the Great all of which gave Bede models of how to engage with scripture and interpret faith in the light of tradition. From Jerome's biblical commentaries he developed his own exegetical skills, from Augustine he gained understanding of the relationship between earthly and heavenly realms and from Gregory a profound concern for the salvation of souls. The results of this education can be seen in Bede's scholarly work which encompassed many different fields such as history, science and theology. However, just as Benedict Biscop, Abbot Ceolfrith and his other teachers regarded the educating of Bede as a responsibility and a privilege, so Bede received it as a gift with the knowledge that he, in his turn should pass it on to others for future generations.

The Ecclesiastical History of the English People

This work was completed in 731 and was Bede's masterpiece. Bede saw history as the unfolding of God's plan for humanity, and this is very evident in the *Ecclesiastical History*. It is both a history and a theological reflection which traces the conversion of the English

people to Christianity and the establishment of the Church among them. Bede had two aims with the *History*; to record events and understand them through the lens of Divine Providence. In other words, it was a form of Salvation History – seeing in the history of England God's hand at work. The *History* is not only remarkable for its content but also for the way it was compiled. As he detailed in the preface Bede used a number of sources including oral traditions, earlier chronicles such as that of Gildas and correspondence with other church leaders such as Northelm, who became Archbishop of Canterbury in 735 and Abbot Albinus of the monastery of SS Peter and Paul in Canterbury. Bede was also willing to accept his knowledge was limited in places especially about events in Celtic Britain. But as he wrote in the Preface "*should the reader discover any inaccuracies in what I have written , I humbly beg that he will not impute them to me, because, as a true law of history requires, I have laboured honestly to transmit whatever I could ascertain from common report for the instruction of posterity*" . As a result of his careful work, citing his sources and distinguishing between eyewitness accounts, oral traditions and conjecture Bede's *History* was revolutionary for its time and established principles that remain fundamental to historical methodology in the C21st.

Written in Latin, which was regarded as the universal language, the *History* was more than a chronicle of events it was a guide to the spiritual and cultural identity of the people who inhabited England and a celebration of the Christianisation of England. For Bede, like the C4th church historian Eusebius, who traced the story of the Christian church from Pentecost until his own times, his history was a development of the story of the Acts of the Apostles; just as Christ's apostles had worked preached and suffered to establish the Church so did their successors in England. It is probably no coincidence that Bede wrote his commentary on *Acts* during the time he was writing the *History*. It is also no coincidence that Bede records signs and miracles, for like Eusebius before him he would expect them as part of the spread of the Gospel. The central theme of the *History* was the triumph of the Gospel in uniting a fragmented and warring country under one badge, that of Christ. The agents of this process were the missionaries, kings and local communities. Missionaries first won over the kings who after converting brought their people to faith and they in their turn brought their families and friends. For example, Part 1:25-26 tells how St Augustine preached first to King Ethelberght of Kent the "*very good news, which certainly assured all who would receive it of eternal joy in heaven and an everlasting kingdom with the living and true God".* He was then allowed to preach to the heathen, but it wasn't until Ethelberght was converted that "*great numbers gathered each day to hear the word of God, forsaking their heathen rites and entering the unity of Christ's holy Church as believers.*"

Another key theme of the *History* is that of the unity of the English church which would triumph over the political reality of Bede's time of five kingdoms each vying for supremacy. Bede's vision was for a single unified English Church aligned with the wider Roman Catholic tradition. The lynchpin for this was the Synod of Whitby held in AD644,

and it is this event that is at the dramatic centrepiece of Bede's *History*. The principal sign of this unity was the common celebration by all on the same day of the principal Christian mystery, the Resurrection of Jesus and any deviation from this was unacceptable to Bede. It is a point that he made time and again especially in his treatise *De Temporum Ratione* (see below) Unity was not only a political issue, for Bede it was also a theological one that the church should mirror the unity of the Body of Christ.

The *History* is not only a historical reflection, but also a theological reflection. Scripture is integrated into the narrative and Bede draws parallels between events in English history and the broader soteriological narrative. This makes it unlike the earlier Chronicles such as Gildas that he consulted. They were records of events with little context or analysis. His portrayal of people such as Augustine of Canterbury who is seen as a figure of divine commissioning as well a courageous evangelist is one example. Kings such as Edwin of Northumbria are portrayed as instruments of God's plan emphasising the importance of cooperation between spiritual and temporal authorities in advancing the Gospel. There is also a global perspective whereby Bede sites the story of the English church within the broader story of Western Christendom where God is working out His plan for His Church. In his *History* Bede not only preserved the history of the Christianisation of England, but he also placed it within the much greater picture of Salvation History. It was, for Bede, a story of conversion and unity placing the English people as participants in God's redemptive plan.

In Actus Apostolorum Expositio and De Tempore Ratione

Although the *Ecclesiastical History* can be viewed as Bede's masterpiece, he wrote much more on Theology, Exegesis and Commentaries. Two in particular stand out for their influence and significance *In Actus Apostolorum Expositio (*Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles) and *De Temporum Ratione* (on the Reckoning of Time).

The Commentary on the *Acts of the Apostles* is just one of a whole series of commentaries written by Bede, which span nearly the whole of the Bible. In writing these commentaries Bede was concerned to uncover the multiple layers of meaning which underpinned the text. Bede's method was based on the exegetical traditions of the Church Fathers, in particular the three doctors he studied as a student Augustine of Hippo, Jerome and Gregory the Great. Like them he believed that Scripture could be interpreted in three different senses; the literal, the allegorical and the moral which were collectively known in medieval theology as the *quadriga*. Using this method Bede explored the narratives and drew out of them the connections between the text, the Church and the spiritual life of the reader. The literal sense provided the foundation of this method grounding the text in the reality of God's action in history. The allegorical meaning of the text for Bede pointed towards Christ and how he fulfilled God's plan for the world. The moral sense of the text addressed how believers should live in response to the Word of God. In his commentary on the Acts of the Apostles, Bede considers the work

of the Holy Spirit empowering the apostles to carry out their mission and highlights the continuity between the work of the apostles and the ministry of the church in his own day. The narrative tells a story that is a model for the Christian life and evangelisation, and the Church is seen as the instrument through which God's grace is manifested in the world. Another important theme for Bede is that of the unity of the church. He emphasises the importance of the apostles' efforts to bridge divisions and build a community founded upon faith love and obedience. This reflects his concerns for the English Church that was still in the process of integrating the Roman and Celtic traditions after the Synod of Whitby in AD 664.

Church unity was an underlying principle of *De Temporum Ratione* (the Reckoning of Time) as Bede sought to provide a comprehensive guide to calculating the date of Easter, which had divided the Church in England for much of the preceding century. His method was informed by both the Roman and Alexandrian traditions which were closely aligned. Bede's system accounted for both the solar and lunar cycles and ensured that the celebration of Easter would remain consistent with the biblical narrative of Christ's death and Resurrection thereby linking the liturgical calendar with the cycles of nature emphasising the intrinsic harmony of creation. Written in AD725, *De Temporum* was about more than the date of Easter however. It was a comprehensive exploration of time, its measurement and its theological implications. Bede examined a wide range of topics related to time and creation including the solar and lunar cycles, the seasons and the Platonic concept of the "Great Year". Although dealing with scientific issues, Bede constantly interpreted the issues in the light of scripture using them as a way of meditating upon the majesty of God and the theological significance of Time. Using biblical chronology Bede divided history into six stages each corresponding to a stage of Salvation History. The seventh age represented the eternal rest of saints in the kingdom of God. By siting human history within this cosmic timeline Bede asked his readers to view their lives as part of God's divine plan and to live with the expectation of eternal life. *De Temporum* became one of the most influential documents in the medieval world. Bede's methods for the calculation of Easter became the standard throughout the Western Church and it not only advanced the field of chronology but gave a model for the integration of scientific inquiry and theological reflection showing that science could lead to a deeper awareness of God.

Conclusion

By the time Bede died his reputation as a scholar and teacher had spread not only within his own community, but across Anglo Saxon England and Western Christendom. His writings have already been copied and disseminated throughout Europe. He had always been aware that the riches of Christian literature and liturgy were inaccessible to many of his fellow Anglo-Saxons and in his writings, he had provided translations of the major prayers for their use. His final work was in this area, a translation of the Gospel of John

into Old English, which he dictated to a scribe and finished shortly before his death. He died on the eve of the Ascension AD735 after receiving the Eucharist and reciting the *Glory be*. His canonisation as a saint followed the normal early medieval pattern of a cult gradually growing fuelled by stories of miracles and numbers of pilgrims until in the C11th he was universally recognised as a saint and his feast day established on the date of his death 25th May. In 1899 Pope Leo XIII declared him to be a Doctor of the Church, the only Englishman to receive this honour. Bede is a bridge between the ancient and medieval worlds as well as a great scholar who saw his work as an act of worship and his life as a prayer.

Dr Margaret Turnham

Farmer, D.H. *The Age of Bede* (1965 Penguin Classics)
T., *St Bede the Venerable* (2025 ebook)
Hunter Blair, P., *The World of Bede* (1970 Secker and Warburg)
James, Augustine, *St Bede the Venerable* (2025 ebook)
Kizito, P. *A complete Study of the Writings of St Bede the Venerable* (2024 ebook)
Brown M.E., Bede and the Theory of Everything (2023 Reaktion Books)