

BEDE VENERABLE (Venerabilis)—theologian and philosopher, doctor of the Church, b. around 672 in southeast England, not far from today's Newcastle, d. May 26, 735 in Jarrow.

At seven years of age, Bede was placed under the tutelage of Benedict Biscop, the founder of the Abbey of Wearmouth in 674, and later under Coelfrid, the abbot of a nearby abbey in Jarrow. In Jarrow Bede devoted himself to asceticism, learning, and the practices of the internal life. At thirty years of age he was ordained a priest. He remained in Jarrow and led a life full of study, teaching, and literary work. His studies were made possible by the rich collection of manuscripts accumulated as gifts to the abbots on their journeys to Rome and continental Europe. In the abbey he became friends with his teachers and students (later to be eminent persons in the Church in England), including Vertbert, Cuthbert, Nothelm (Archbishop of Canterbury), Albinus (abbot of another abbey in Jarrow) and Acca (Bishop of Hexham), who offered him manuscripts of numerous works. In 734 he went to Egbert, Bishop of York, to whom he had earlier written a letter about the dignity of a bishop. There, while ill, he worked on translating into English fragments of the works of St. Isidore of Seville and the Gospel of St. John. These works were interrupted by his death.

Biographical data and a list of Bede's works is found in the conclusion of *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (V, 24) written toward the end of 731.

Along with Isidore of Seville, Bede is the one of the greatest scholars of the early Middle Ages and one of the Fathers of the Church important to the culture of that time and the conditions of his land. He primarily influenced the school in York, which through Alcuin had an influence not only on England, but also on the entire European culture of the Carolingian period. In Bede's work the Irish and Anglo-Saxon cultural traditions bore fruit, but the classical world, and especially the Christian world that had its center in Rome had the greatest influence on him. He wrote clearly and lucidly in Latin and Greek. He also knew Hebrew. He was a man of unusual erudition, as seen from the topics he discussed (the mathematical-natural sciences, grammar, hagiography, history, theology, and scriptural exegesis). He knew many of the writings of the Fathers of the Church, which he included in his works in summarized form, especially his theological-exegetical works. Hence his writings have an encyclopedic character, which was dictated by the didactic needs of the time and by literary custom. As a Latin writer, Bede reflected the spiritual profile of the early Middle Ages. Almost none of the domains of knowledge were neglected, and there is almost no essential direction in early medieval literature that did not occur in his works.

His mathematical-natural writings include the treatise *De natura rerum* (PL 90, 187–278) in which the influence of Pliny and St. Isidore of Seville is evident. *De temporibus* and *De ratione temporum* present a division of time and the seasons of the year.

His grammatical works are an expression of his interests in Latin grammar with respect to learning it as a foreign language, but in particular his treatise *De schematibus et tropis Sacrae Scripturae* (PL 90, 175–186) shows Bede as a scholar who applies grammar to the study of the Sacred Scriptures, in which he used a method developed by earlier writers (St. Augustine, Cassiodorus, and St. Isidore).

In the entire variety of topics Bede's main interest is evident: edification and moral teaching through the study of the Sacred Scriptures and the natural sciences that serve this study, and in the historical sciences. His literary work shows less concern for the beauty of language than for an accent on the spiritual-didactic value of what is presented.

School manuals for teaching: *De orthographia* (in 701–702, PL 90, 123–150), an alphabetically arranged lexicon providing the meaning and use of words, sometimes with the Greek equivalents; and *De metrica ratione*—collected examples of different forms of verse with explanations constitute an important part of his literary work. In the second work Bede for the first time showed the difference between *metrum* and the rhythmic versification that had long been cultivated in the Middle Ages. He also deliberately introduced Christian Poets up to Venantius Fortunatus only where pagan authors were cited in the works he used. The tradition of reading Christian poets as models was started in Bede's *De metrica ratione* and continued into the late Middle Ages. With regard to tradition and aim, Bede's *De schematibus et tropis (Sacrae Scripturae)* went in the same direction as *De metrica ratione*: the explanation of rhetorical figures applied in the Bible in order to show the superiority of Sacred Scripture over pagan history. This work takes up the literary tradition based on the *Ars grammatica* of Julian of Toledo and St. Augustine.

Bede's historical works are composed of two groups of works. The first group includes chronological and cosmographic works, include a short treatise *De temporibus liber* (around 703, PL 90, 277–292) and a manual for reckoning time *De ratione temporum* (PL 90, 204–578) in which he looks to Macrobius and St. Isidore of Seville. In the work we find the earliest treatise on counting with the fingers, which was published as a separate treatise *De loquela digitorum*. In a work that is probably inauthentic, *De arithmetiis proportionibus* we find for the first time in western Europe an exposition of the principles of arithmetic operations on negative numbers. *De natura rerum* is a critical reworking of St. Isidore of Seville's work of the same title and drew upon Pliny's *Naturalis historia*. In comparison with St. Isidore, Bede put the allegorical element in the background and used historical and factual material in abundance. The second group includes hagiographic works and new versions of earlier biographies of the saints, e.g. *Vita Guthberti metrica*. Bede later wrote this biography in prose in order to present the documents as accurately as possible, but the "hagiographic interpretation" that was important in this literary genre, i.e., the explanation of the deeds of a hero in terms of his sanctity, made this impossible. Bede also created the genre of the literary martyrology: *Martyrologium Bedae* published between 725 and 731 (PL 94, 799–1148). It was based on additional sources such as Eusebius' *History of the Church* as developed by St. Rufinus of Aquileia. This literary genre was continued (e.g. with Hrabanus Maurus) or reworked up to the eleventh century.

Bede's historical works include *Historia Abbatum (Vita beatorum abbatum Benedicti, Ceolfredi, Eostervini, Siegfridi et Hwaetbercti)*; PL 94, 713–730) written in its final version after 716, a work that brings together the biographies of abbots from Wearmouth and the history of the abbey. It is the richest source of information about the life of Benedict Biscop and his trips to Rome on which he received numerous books for the abbey. Bede's work called *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (PL 95, 21–290) is important as a historical and literary document. It is not only a history of the Church, but also a political and cultural history of his nation. The work is characterized by its fidelity and at the same time its critical attitude to sources in greater measure than applied to his time, its factual stance, and the clear language modeled on examples from the late ancient period. With respect to the literary genre, it should be included in a series of works that includes Cassiodorus' *History of the Goths*, St. Isidore of Seville's *Historia Vandalorum, Suerborum, Gothorum*, Paul the Deacon's *Historia Longobardorum*, and Gregory of Tours' *Historia Francorum*. He probably used St. Rufinus of Aquileia's *History of the Church* as an example. More than 160 preserved manuscripts show the interest in Bede's works up to the late Middle Ages.

Bede's theological works occupy the most important place in his work. We can see to what degree Bede was regarded in the Middle Ages as a theologian in the fact that works of St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, and St. Augustine were falsely attributed to him, in the popularity of his works, and in the transmission of his commentaries and homilies in *Florilegia* and *Homilaria*. Bede's most influential works were *Expositio* and *Retractio in actus apostolorum*, *Super epistolas catholicas expositio*, a commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke, and somewhat later a commentary on the Gospel of St. Mark, which in large measure repeats the earlier commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke, as well as two books of collected homilies. In his exegetical works Bede was influenced by the Alexandrian tradition (Origen).

The patristic writings in the abbey of Wearmouth-Jarrow were in large measure accessible. The use of the works of the Church Fathers in the early Middle Ages consists in an almost literal assumption of the source, but Bede rejected this approach. He cited and compared many patristic and biblical texts, as well as early Latin translation of the Bible. The most frequently cited biblical text was that of the Vulgate in the form represented by the *Codex Amiatinus*, which was not uniformly pure in all passages. Bede introduced an *alia, antiqua, vetus translatio* along with the old Latin text (*Vetus Latina*). Bede cites the Greek text of the Scriptures (the Septuagint) in an interlinear version in *Expositio*, a treatise that supplements *Retractio in actus apostolorum*, one of the earliest commentaries on the Acts of the Apostles. *This work is one of a few examples in which Bede's connection with Theodore of Canterbury's Antiochian school of exegesis is apparent. It probably comes from Benedict Biscop under whose tutelage Bede was accepted into the abbey in Wearmouth-Jarrow, and who for two years was the abbot in the abbey of St. Peter in Canterbury. His In libros Regum quaestiones XXX are another example.*

*Bede's verses occupy the least important position in his work. They are basically metrical (not rhythmic) and, with one exception, they do not rise above the level of school exercises. We should remember here the Liber hymnorum with the first Hymnus de opere sex dierum primordialium et de sex aetatibus mundi, the hexameter verse De die iudicii, which was translated into the Old English language, as the versified Psalms, which were continued by the tradition of paraphrasing biblical psalms introduced by Paulinus of Noli.*

*Many works were wrongly attributed to Bede already in the Middle Ages. From the complete edition in 1563 (Herwagen) many works were wrongly printed under Bede's name. Of two treatises on music attributed to him from the first edition, Musica quadrata seu mensurata (PL 90, 919–938) has long been regarded as inauthentic based on an analysis of its content. The treatise Musica theoria (PL 90, 909–920) also does not come from Bede (it is a compilation of various glosses to Boethius). The information found in the fourth book of his Historia ecclesiastica about the early period of Gregorian choral music in England is of interest for musical investigations today.*

*Only the so-called Song of mourning has been preserved from among the other works that Bede supposedly wrote (e.g. a commentary on the Gospel of John). Written in old English it consists of five verses. It calls people to be prepared spiritually for death and for judgment, which, in keeping with the opinion in Epistola Cuthberti de obitu Bedae, he supposedly recited when on his deathbed. The text has been preserved in three versions (the Northumbrian dialect, the West Saxon, and the Middle) and in at least 38 manuscripts. It is Bede's most widespread Old English text. The Historia ecclesiastica to the end of the ninth century in the circle around King Alfred was translated into Old English prose. It was probably not translated by Alfred, but by one of those who worked with him. The work has been preserved*

*in six fragments. Probably toward the end of the tenth century, an anonymous old English poet translated Bede's verse De die iudicii into old English. The verse was published under the title Be Domas Daepe and has been preserved only in one manuscript.*

*Bede's works are published in: PL 90–95; Venerabilis Bedae Opera Historica, ed. C. Plummer, I–II, Ox 1896, republished with an introduction and clarifications in 1956.*

*Ueberweg II; G. F. Browne, The Venerable B., Lo 1919; A. H. Thompson, B. His Life, Times and Writings, Ox 1935; B. Capelle, M. Inguanez, B. Thum, Saint B. Venerabilis, Studia anselmiana VII, 6 (1936), 1–71; A. Ferrua, ECat II 1132–1137; A. Bober, Studia i teksty patrystyczne [Patristic studies and texts], Kr 1967, 74–113; Lexikon des Mittelalters, Mn 1980, I 1774–1779; R. Gregoire, DPAC I 515–518; B. and His World, I–II, Brokfield 1994; J. Stanley, The Venerable B. as Exegete, Dr 112 (1994), 201–226; M. L. Silvestre, B. La natura e i tempi, Na 1995.*

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