



Saint Bede the Venerable

Ecclesiastical History of the English People (Books I-III: 15)

Bede was born in Northumbria in northern England in 673. The name is not uncommon and nothing is known about his family history. At the age of seven he was presented to the Abbot of the monastery of Wearmouth and Jarrow to be raised as a monk. There is no record to indicate whether he was an orphan or a child who had been dedicated to God by his parents. He remained in the monastery for the rest of his life, leaving it on only two known occasions, once to visit a fellow monk in nearby York and once to visit the church at Lindisfarne while he was writing his *Life of Cuthbert*. He is thought to have been a good student; he was apparently fluent in Greek and familiar with Hebrew, and he was also acquainted with classical literature. He was ordained a deacon at the young age of nineteen and a priest at thirty. A well respected teacher, he also wrote extensively, composing histories and biographies as well as theological works and translations of books of the Old and New Testaments into English. Although his contemporaries clearly viewed him as a holy man, the source of the title "Venerable" is lost in legend. According to one tale, a particularly dull witted monk was writing Bede's epitaph one night and was unable to complete the phrase "*Hic sunt in fossa Beda ... ossa.*" When he awakened the next morning, an angel had filled in the blank space with the word "*venerabilis.*" Bede died in the monastery where he lived his entire life on the Feast of the Ascension, 735, A.D.

CONTEXT

The Venerable Bede was a prolific writer, composing books on a wide range of theological topics, writing biographies of the saints and of the holy men of England, the history of the Church in England, and translations into English, with commentaries, of many of the books of both the Old and New Testaments. His *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* chronicles the history of the English people from the first Roman invasions to the year 731 AD and the gradual unity of the warring kingdoms that was finally achieved under a common faith. It is an historical resource not only for the Church but also for anyone interested in the history of Britain prior to the 8th century. Bede depended on earlier Roman historians for much of his information on the early Roman missions, but for his histories of Northumberland and Kent he was able to depend on the

written documents found at Canterbury and Lindisfarne as well as on the eyewitness accounts he quotes. He is generally admired for the painstaking efforts he made to determine the truth of the information he included in his works. The *History* was written in five books. Book I covers the early Roman occupations and the missions to England under Pope Gregory; Books II and III cover the ups and downs of the missionary period and the gradual acceptance of Christianity; Book IV describes the years in which the Church secured its place in England and its developing organization; and Book V tells of the English Church's missionary efforts in Germany and its final acceptance of the rule of Rome.

SUMMARY

Book I: The first twenty-two chapters of this first book describe the country of Britain, its inhabitants, and the Roman occupation from the time of Julius Caesar. Late in the second century, King Lucius of Britain requested Christian baptism and Bede reports the Britons preserved their faith until the persecutions of Diocletian one hundred years later. He describes the invasions of the Scots and the Picts, the failure of the Romans to provide protection or aid, the coming of the Saxons, and the ravaging of the island. The coming of the Arian and Pelagian heresies is noted along with the defeat of the Pelagians by the Bishop Germanus. In chapters XXIII-XXXIV, Bede describes the reluctance of Augustine to take up the post of preaching to the Britons; his welcome to the city of Canterbury; the conversion of King Ethelbert; the elevation of Augustine as the first bishop of the Church of England; and his further elevation to metropolitan that he might ordain other bishops to serve the growing Church in England.

Book II: Bede opens Book II with a lengthy biography of Pope Gregory whom he credits with the conversion of Britain. He touches on the pride of Augustine in dealing with the leaders of Britain on the question of the date of Easter, and on the succession of Laurentius as Bishop of Canterbury after Augustine's death. The deaths of King Ethelbert of Kent and King Sabert of the East Saxons (Essex) marked a return to pagan practices with the bishops eventually being driven out of their lands. Bishop Mellitus and Bishop Justus returned to Gaul but Bishop Laurentius stayed in Britain, converting King Eadbald and restoring the Church in Kent. Chapter IX begins the story of the pagan King Edwin of Northumbria who took for a wife Ethelberg, the daughter of Ethelbert and a believing Christian. In thanksgiving for the failure of an assassination attempt, Edwin offers his first child to be baptized. The story of his later conversion is told in detail. Peace reigned and Christianity spread during the years that Edwin was king. Bede quotes a letter from Pope Honorius to the Scots in which the continuing controversy over the date of Easter and the continuing threat of the Pelagian heresy are mentioned. Book II closes on the return of barbarism in Northumbria after the overthrow and death of Edwin in 633. Paulinus takes the widowed queen with him and flees to Kent, leaving only the deacon James to maintain a foothold for the Church.

Book III: Book III opens with the succession following on the death of Edwin. North-umberland, which had been united under Edwin, was once again divided into Deiri under King Osric and Bernicia under King Eanfrid. Both Osric and Eanfrid had claimed to be Christians but had abandoned their faith as soon as they took power. Before the year was over, both kings had been killed by the pagan king Caedwalla of the Britons. In 634 Oswald, brother of Osric, the slain King of Deiri, defeated Caedwalla and restored both political unity and the faith to Northumberland. Bede refers to 633, the year of political upheaval and apostasy, as "hateful" and notes that by common assent it was stricken from memory and assigned as the first year of King Oswald's reign. Having been baptized while in exile with the Scots, King Oswald sent to his former protectors requesting a bishop to teach and minister to his kingdom. Bishop Aiden was sent and the king established his Episcopal see on the island of Lindisfarne. Bede offers a brief history of

the monastery at Iona from which Aidan had come and of the continuing confusion about the date of Easter and then gives two brief character sketches of Aiden and Oswald. He goes on to describe the spread of the faith to the West Saxons with a see established at Dorchester (and later moved to Winchester). Kent passes to Earconbert on the death of his father, King Eadbald, who had reigned in a spirit of Christian peace for twenty-four years. Earconbert continued in the faith of his father and was responsible for the destruction of all pagan idols in his kingdom. His daughter, Earcongota, along with other noble born women devoted their lives to serving God in a monastery in Gaul because English monasteries were few at the time. Returning to the history of Northumberland, Bede relates the death of King Oswald, the miracles that had been attributed to his relics and the treachery of the Bernician King Oswy who succeeded him. Our selection ends with some prophecies of Bishop Aiden and his death shortly after the foretold death of King Oswin.



Things to Think About

1. Notice the prevalence of miracles in Bede's history. Think about what his focus on the miraculous says about his understanding of the history of the English people, his purposes, and his methods.
2. Bede's England is divided by internal rivalries and warfare. Consider the relative importance of miracles and power for overcoming division and achieving unity. Which is the greater power, according to Bede's treatment of them? Can one be effective without the other?
3. Notice the power that the king wields in determining the faith of his people and what happens when the throne is passed on at his death.
4. *Pelagian heresy*: Formulated by the British monk Pelagius early in the 5th century, the doctrine made human free will the source of a man's perfectibility, denying original sin and the need of divine grace or redemption.
5. *Arian heresy*: A heresy that arose in the 4th century that denied the equal divinity of Christ and the Holy Spirit with the Father. The Arians believed that Christ and the Holy Spirit existed at the prior will of the Father and could therefore not have existed from all eternity.



Study Questions

1. Who was the first British king to be baptized Christian (I: IV)?
2. What were the two heresies that undermined the true Christian faith in Britain during the 4th century (I: VIII, X) and what were the effects they had on the people and especially the kings?
3. How did Bishop Germanus defeat the Pelagians (I: XVII-XVIII)? What does the incident bring to light about the motives or spirit of the Pelagians?

4. What does Bede report as the incident that drew Gregory's attention to Britain (II: I)?
5. How does Bishop Laurentius bring about the conversion of King Eadbald of Kent (II: VI)?
6. What was the vision that King Edwin received that finally led to his conversion (II: XII)?
7. What happened at Hefenfelth, the Heavenly Field (III: II)?
8. In Book III, chapter VIII, Bede describes Earcongota, the daughter of Earconbert, speaking to a group of white robed men who had come to the monastery in Gaul. Asking them the purpose of their visit, they are said to have replied that they had been sent to carry away the gold that had been sent there by Kent. To what are they referring?
9. These first three books of Bede's *History* are full of examples of Christian kings succeeded by sons who either adjure or simply fall away from the faith. What does this imply about the work of the missionary Church? Does it have any implications for the Church today? What do these recurrent patterns reveal about the "mystery of the will"?



Questions on Language and Form

1. Bede has written this work as a historian who took real pains to gather written and oral testimony and evaluate it by the critical standards of his time. But like the other historians we have read—Herodotus, Thucydides, Livy—Bede had a particular point of view and a particular end in mind in writing his *History*. What would you say was the purpose that Bede had in mind? What do you think that a modern empirical historian would think of Bede's methods, and his reports of miracles? What's the fundamental difference between them?
2. At what point would the modern empiricist or rationalist historian and Bede be in agreement? Where would their methods come together?



Reflection Questions

1. Bede reports many miracles: healings, prophecies, battles won, churches saved from destruction, visions. Write a brief reflection on the importance of miracles for the missionary Church, but be sure what you write is grounded in natural law. Grace perfects nature; it's not contrary to it.