

Bede and Christian Hope

Who is Bede?

- He lived from 673-735 AD in the kingdom of Northumbria, present day England and southern Scotland.
- At age seven, he was given to the monks at Wearmouth Abbey and never left.¹
- We remember him primarily as being a great story teller and historian.
- Imagine Bede being set in the Lord of the Rings, particularly in Rohan.²
- How do you pass the long winter nights? You tell stories. Bede was an excellent story teller who captured the history of the Anglo-Saxon people.

Significantly for us...

- Bede believed that God was active in history—Bede did providential history. He was not a secular historian in any sense.

What did he contribute?

- “Bede’s greatest work was the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. It was undertaken at the request of King Ceolwulf, and no pains were spared by Bede to make it worthy of its subject.”³
- Despite being most famously known for his *Ecclesiastical History*, the vast majority of his literary works were biblical commentaries. He loved studying and teaching about the Scripture.
 - “I have applied all my diligence to the study of the Scriptures; and observing the regular discipline and keeping the daily service of singing in the church, I have taken delight always either to learn, or to teach, or to write.”⁴

Bede wanted to record what God had done among the Anglo-Saxon peoples.

Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in Broad Strokes:

Book One:

Britain’s Early Evangelization.

- The exact origin of Christianity in Britain is unknown.
- Britain’s close ties with Rome make early Christian contact plausible.
- Some sources suggest St. Paul or other Apostles may have reached Britain.
- Evidence from Roman connections (hostages, education, landowners, Claudia and Pudens) supports possible early Christian influence.

¹Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, “The Venerable Bede,” in *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 340.

²Michael Haykin and Caleb Anthony Neel, *Bede*, “Bede”. Accessed from <https://open.spotify.com/show/46hcKQoQshKAUjrbNXwd5g>

³G. F. Browne, Bede, *The Venerable Bede*, The Fathers for English Readers (London; New York: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; E. & J. B. Young & Co., 1897), 74.

⁴Bede, *Baedae Opera Historica* & 2, ed. T. E. Page et al., trans. J. E. King, vol. 2, The Loeb Classical Library (London; Cambridge, MA; New York: William Heinemann; Harvard University Press; G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1930), 383.

- Direct apostolic introduction is possible but left no clear British tradition.⁵

Celtic Christianity. Patrick left England in the fifth century to evangelize Ireland and God was pleased to make him quite successful. In turn, the Celtic Christians sent missionaries to the continent and to Scotland. Thus, there was both a Roman Christian presence as well as a Celtic presence on the island. Though they were divided by people groups who were often at war with one another.

The Anglo-Saxons.

- Bede's traditions informed him that cruelty, the hatred of truth, and the love of lying, were rampant; so much so that any one who was a little more inclined to the truth than his neighbours was hated and destroyed as a "subverter of Britain." And this was not confined to the laity. The clergy indulged themselves in drunkenness, quarrelsomeness, and so on.
- Sickness came upon them; they were attacked from the north; they asked the Saxons for help.
- The Saxons turned on them and were awful:
 - "The priests were slain at the altar; prelates and people were destroyed with fire and the sword; many who had fled to the mountains were seized, and murdered in heaps; others were more successful, and contrived to find refuge in the mountainous parts on the west of the island..."⁶

Gregory's Interest in Britain.

- Pope Gregory upon seeing a group of British youths had a desire to evangelize the island.
 - "Gregory, once the Prefect of Rome and afterwards its Bishop, was struck by the handsome faces and fine forms of the Yorkshire lads. He asked of what race they were. He was told that they were Angles. Being inveterately addicted to playing upon words, he replied that they were fit to be made Angels. From what province did they come? From Deira. Then they must be freed *de irā*—from the wrath—of God. Who was their king? Ælla. Then they must be taught to sing Alleluia. Gregory set to work with characteristic energy."⁷

Book Two:

Augustine of Canterbury.

- Augustine set up shop in Kent and set about evangelizing the nobles. The King was quickly baptized but beyond that progress was very difficult:
 - Augustine met British bishops twice near Wales; the second meeting failed.
 - Bishops consulted an elder on how to respond.
 - Augustine remained seated, so they broke off negotiations.

⁵Browne, 74.

⁶Browne, 64-65.

⁷Browne, 24.

- This caused British Christians to view the Canterbury mission with distrust.⁸
- The East Angles, the East Saxons, and Northumbria were “converted” by Augustine but they all relapsed into paganism. “By far the larger portion of the island was christianized by means of the Scottish Church...”⁹

Edwin’s Conversion.

- “Convinced of God’s favor by a vision, Edwin called his councilors together to persuade them to accept Christianity. The chief pagan priest declared the old gods had done him no good, and he smashed the altars he had himself dedicated...”¹⁰
- Again, “The king and his chief captains and ministers are sitting in council on a dark winter’s day; rain and snow without; within, a bright fire in their midst. Suddenly a little bird flies in, a sparrow, in at one door and then out at another. Where it came from none can say, nor whither it has gone. So is the life of man. Clear enough itself, but before it, and after the end thereof, darkness; it may be, storm. If the new doctrine will tell us anything of these mysteries, the before and the after, it is the religion that is wanted.’ Others supported this view.”¹¹
 - Edwin was won to Christ through the faithful witness of his Christian wife, Æthelburh of Kent, and Paulinus of York, a missionary sent by Gregory.

Book Three:

Aidan and the Holy Island Lindisfarne. Aidan was an Irish monk and prolific evangelist who busied himself with proclaiming the gospel to those who would listen to him in Northern England. He also established a famous monastery on the island of Lindisfarne. They made some cool books.

Book Four:

Conflict between the Celts and the Romans over Easter.

- A major point of contention arose between the [Roman] British and Celtic Christians over the dating of Easter.
 - Some calculated Easter as the Sunday between the fourteenth and twentieth day of the moon, the Roman Christians on the Sunday between the fifteenth and twenty-first. [Also, t]he Roman tonsure left the hair in the form of a crown around the head; the Celtic shaved the hair at the front of the head. Behind the debate over the date of Easter and the proper tonsure for monks, there were more significant cultural differences, so the considerable learning was compromised by sharp acrimony.
 - The outcome was finally settled by [a Roman representative’s] remark that Peter possessed the keys of the kingdom of heaven, to which [the Celtic

⁸Browne, 66-67.

⁹Browne, 72-73.

¹⁰Ferguson, 356.

¹¹Browne, 29-30.

representative] agreed. [King] Oswy [who presided over the meeting] would take no chances on offending Peter and decided in favor of the customs of Peter's successor instead of those of Columba. Thereafter Roman Christianity prevailed in England for centuries.¹²

- Synod of Whitby (664).
- Wales was independent until the 13th century when it was absorbed into the English church.

Book Five:

Wrap-up.

- Bede's students formed schools and sent out missionaries to the continent—specifically to Holland and Germany.
- He desires that the "earth" would "leap for joy" at the everlasting reign of King Jesus.
- At first, the Anglo-Saxons arrived on Britain's shores to conquer with the sword. Now, they leave Britain and return to continental Europe to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Bede's closing line of his history. "Thus for the present standeth the whole state of Britain, about the 285th year since the English [Anglo-Saxons] came into Britain, but the 731st year since the Lord's incarnation: in Whose everlasting reign let the earth leap for joy, and seeing Britain hath gladness in His faith, let many islands rejoice and sing praise to the remembrance of His holiness."¹³

- Bede died in 735 after finishing his translation of the gospel of John into Old English. It is considered by some to be the "opening scene of the... history of the English Bible."¹⁴

Despite trying circumstances, Bede put his hope in God.

Bede's Understanding of History.

- Believed that God is in control of history.
- Believed that God had a purpose for the Anglo-Saxons.
- Believed that God desired the nations to hear the Gospel and receive Christ.
 - His students formed schools and sent out missionaries to the continent—specifically to Holland and Germany.
 - He desires that the "earth" would "leap for joy" at the everlasting reign of King Jesus.
- Believed that God was guiding history to a glorious conclusion.

God is Sovereign over our History too.

- God is in control of our history, our present, and our future (Isa 46:10)
 - Both in the big picture and in our lives—even down to the smallest of details.

¹²Ferguson, 357.

¹³Bede, 373.

¹⁴Galli and Olsen, 341.

- For those who love God, he works all things together for good (Rom 8:28).
- God loves us. He is present with us. He will never leave us or forsake us (Heb 13:5).
- God has a purpose for the United States of America (Acts 17:26)
- God desires the nations to hear the Gospel and receive Christ (Acts 17:27-31)
- God is guiding history to a glorious conclusion (Acts 17:31; Mt 24:14, 27, 30-31; Jn 14:3; Rev 19, 21:1-8, 22:3-7, 17-21)
 - History as we know it will be concluded when Christ returns.
 - May we remember God as we reflect on history, our personal history, the present, and as we think about where history is headed.
 - Yesterday is gone and there is no retrieving it. Today though is a present. Today we may choose to live in the light, recognizing our immense need for grace in light of our sin and plunge ourselves headlong into the depths of God's love for us in Christ Jesus. He is our only comfort in life and in death. Today we may choose to live in turn away from our sin and put our faith in our Lord Jesus Christ who died for our sins, was buried, and was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures (1 Cor 15:3-4).
 - Today we may choose to live for the glory of Christ and prepare ourselves for the last day. As John writes in 1 John 3:3, we may, knowing that Christ is coming soon, purify ourselves as Christ is pure. That means putting away our sin—knowing that Christ Jesus has already dealt with it—and walk in love for God and one another (obedience).

Questions to Ask.

- Do we have this hope for the last day?
- How do we view history?
 - Do we trust that God is in control?
 - Do we trust that God is working all things together for the good of his church and his own glory?
 - Do we long for the literal coming of Christ's physical kingdom?
- Do we live today in light of eternity future?