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The Synod of Whitby

Nick Ratkay

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

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The Venerable Bede is arguably one of the most important figures of early medieval Christianity. Born in the late seventh century, Bede became the premier scholar of the monastic communities at Wearmouth and Jarrow and was well-known for his scriptural commentaries and other works. His various writings have offered historians insights into the popular customs, beliefs, and spirituality of his era, while simultaneously expressing medieval writing styles and trends. Bede's most famous work is entitled *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, and as the title suggests, it was written to document the history of the English people in relation to the Roman church. Bede wanted to show how God had planned for the English to unite under the Roman church and become the English nation. One must recognize, however, that Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* was not a study of history according to modern disciplines, but was shaped and developed according to Bede's own theological agenda. This particular work was composed under the guise of a "salvation history," whose purpose was to explore how God had been manifested through the medium of human time and events.¹

When one considers Bede and the genre of salvation history, it is important to recognize that the *Ecclesiastical History* conveys Bede's own spirituality and theological outlook. Bede pointed out in the preface to the *Ecclesiastical History* that histories were written in order to serve a moral purpose. Bede states:

For if history relates good things of good men, the attentive hearer is excited to imitate that which is good; or if it mentions evil things of wicked persons, nevertheless the religious and pious hearer or reader, shunning that which is hurtful and perverse, is the more earnestly excited to perform those things which he knows to be good, and worthy of God.²

In response to Bede's view, Caitlin Corning states the following:

Bede viewed it as his responsibility to produce a work of history that would edify his readers, he would not present someone as evil and

yet prospering throughout his/her life, without the eventuality of divine punishment. This is not to imply that all the information in the *History* should be viewed as false. However, Bede constructed his material to emphasize certain viewpoints.³

The theological and spiritual viewpoints of the *Ecclesiastical History* did not end with Bede providing examples for imitation. Bede also wished to stress that unity in the church, under the Roman tradition, was of the utmost spiritual importance.⁴ This was especially true when concerning the celebration of Easter and other festivals. Corning points out that "Bede well understood the harm that division could bring to the Church and its mission if it divided into competing groups,"⁵ so to emphasize the importance of unity, Bede gave the Synod of Whitby a central location in the *Ecclesiastical History* (book III of V; right in the middle). At this synod, which took place in the mid-seventh century, the representatives of Rome persuaded the Celtic Christians of Northumbria to conform to Roman practice. By implementing the Roman liturgical rite throughout the British Isles, the dissident Celtic church was brought into communion with Rome and mainstream Christianity. Bede clearly stated his Roman allegiance in the dialogue between Wilfred, who represented Rome, and Colman, who represented the Celtic rite. At the synod Wilfred stated:

You certainly sin, if, having heard the decrees of the Apostolic See, and of the universal church, and that the same is confirmed by holy writ, you refuse to follow them; for, though your fathers were holy, do you think that their small number, in a corner of the remotest island, is to be preferred before the universal church of Christ throughout the world? And if that Columba of yours (and, I may say, ours also, if he was Christ's servant), was a holy man and powerful in miracles, yet could he be preferred before the most blessed prince of the apostles, to whom our Lord said, "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the

¹ Osmund Lewry, *The Theology of History* (Notre Dame, IN: Fides Publishers, Inc., 1969), 41–46.

² Bede, Preface.

³ Caitlin Corning, *The Celtic and Roman Traditions: Conflict and Consensus in the Early Medieval Church* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 69.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁵ *Ibid.*

gates of hell shall not prevail against it, and to thee I will give the keys of the kingdom of heaven”?⁶

According to Bede the only proper doctrine was the Roman tradition, which “ought to be preferred before all the traditions of the Scots.”⁷ Anything outside the Roman practice was considered to be in error and subject to scrutiny until unity had been achieved.

The strategic placement of the Synod of Whitby in the *Ecclesiastical History* suggests that Bede viewed the adoption of Roman practice as a climax, or turning-point in the history of the English and Irish churches. Bede wanted to stress the harmony that there was between the “divine law” and the “human law.” In class⁸, a fellow-student commented on the relationship between divine law and human law and mentioned the harmony that is recognizable in the church when Catholics throughout the world are celebrating a great feast with a common rite. One might ask what American Catholics would learn of other Catholic cultures if they knew how much they had in common through Christ and the church. Awareness would cultivate the harmony that would lead to a new appreciation for other cultures and increased faith through fellowship. Where can we find the leadership necessary for this type of unity? Bede found it in Rome. The harmony and unity he sought could only be realized through communion with the Roman church and its customs. Thomas O’Loughlin states what is most important to this communion:

What was at stake was the harmony between human and divine law. God had created the universe in an orderly and numbered way; everywhere its order was a testimony to the ideas in mind of God as he created, and to see these patterns in material creation was to see beyond matter into the divine purposes. . . . So fixing any festival, much less the central festival of Easter, was not just a matter of ecclesiastical decision, but of tuning in to the law in the universe around one. Christ had suffered at the time of the Passover; that was when the divinely chosen “hour had come” and it was this key moment in the whole history of the universe that they wanted to relive at Easter. . . . Getting the arithmetic right was a matter of the basic

law of the creation and the divine plan.⁹ Bede felt that Rome knew the “law in the universe” and with that, the precise times and dates in which liturgical celebrations were to be carried out. Celebrating on the correct day ensured that the universal church was fully orthodox and always on par with God in heaven.

Bede’s spirituality can also be seen in the role that he gave to Scripture in the *Ecclesiastical History*. The Easter controversy provided Bede with an opportunity to use Scripture to justify why the Roman Easter was more orthodox. One example of Bede’s use of Scripture to support Roman authority can be found in his description of the conversion of the northern Picts. Bede describes the Picts as being “rude and barbarous,” yet “because they had not laid aside the fervent grace of charity, they were worthy to be informed in the true knowledge of this particular.”¹⁰ From Bede’s perspective only Rome had the scriptural authority to teach the “true knowledge” to the Picts. Bede cites Philippians 3:15 where Paul refers to those of a different attitude (the Celtic church, according to Bede) being corrected by God (the Roman church, according to Bede). Keeping up with the genre of salvation history, Bede wants to stress that it was God’s will that the Picts were to be converted and Bede uses this biblical proof-text to justify Rome’s place in that conversion.

Scripture also played a major role in the Synod of Whitby due to each side citing specific biblical passages and biblical traditions as evidence for their arguments. Colman cited the Johannine tradition of celebrating Easter between the fourteenth and the twentieth moon of Nisan, while Wilfred represented the synoptic tradition of keeping Easter from the fifteenth to the twenty-first moon of Nisan. The difference between the two was clearly biblical. The Celts rightly believed that Christ’s passion took place on the same day in which the Passover lambs were slain (John 19:14). The Romans, however, believed that Christ’s passion took place on the day of Passover and that the last supper was a Jewish Passover meal. This would have meant that the Jewish Sanhedrin would have broken tradition and left their homes on the night of Passover in order to search for Christ to arrest him. With the two practices laid out Bede once again used Scripture to justify the Roman liturgical tradition, despite its inaccuracy. Bede used St. Peter’s

⁶ Bede, III.25.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Celtic Monasticism with Mary Forman, OSB. Saint John’s School of Theology*Seminary (Spring 2007).

⁹ Thomas O’Loughlin, *Celtic Theology* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 76–77.

¹⁰ Bede, III.4.

authority from Matthew 16:16-19 to justify not only his own belief in Roman authority as stated above, but also to prove Rome's authority in scriptural interpretation. Christ had given the ultimate authority to St. Peter and his successors in Rome when Peter received the "keys to the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 16:19). This divinely mandated authority outweighed any authority that the Celtic church believed St. Columba to have had. Bede interpreted Scripture in a way which highlighted the Spirit's actions within the church, including inspiring it to uphold the synoptic tradition. It was the Holy Spirit who had inspired and guided the Roman church since the time of St. Peter; Bede used this divine inspiration and authority as evidence supporting the Roman customs. Although Bede spoke little about the Spirit in his *Ecclesiastical History*, it is implied that the Spirit's presence was perpetually felt throughout the land due to the church's role as the intermediary between God and his people.

The Holy Spirit not only inspired the church to profess the correct doctrine, but it also gave the church the divine authority that served as its basis for ecclesiastical supremacy. As stated above, authority played a major role in the *Ecclesiastical History*, especially when one considers the way Bede used the authority of Scripture as evidence to support his pro-Roman argument. Aside from Scripture Bede also cited the authority of the universal church as evidence for the orthodoxy of the Roman rite. At the Synod of Whitby, Wilfred attested to the universality of the Roman rite:

The Easter which we observe, we saw celebrated by all at Rome, where the blessed apostles, Peter and Paul, lived, taught, suffered, and were buried; we saw the same done in Italy and in France, when we traveled through those countries for pilgrimage and prayer. We found the same practiced in Africa, Asia, Egypt, Greece, and all the world, wherever the church of Christ is spread abroad, through several nations and tongues, at one and the same time; except only these and their accomplices in obstinacy, I mean the Picts and the Britons, who foolishly, in these two remote islands of the world, and only in part even of them, oppose all the rest of the universe.¹¹

Bede also invoked the authority of the decisions of the Council of Nice as well as the authority of the

¹¹ Ibid., III.25.

church father Eusebius, whose *Church History* carried a certain measure of authority in its own right. Bede affirmed their authority by relating: "That this is the true Easter, and the only one to be kept by the faithful, was not newly decreed by the council of Nice, but only confirmed afresh; as the Church History informs us."¹²

When looking at Bede in the context of history one sees a person whose spiritual life dictated his intellectual career. His many writings included biblical commentaries, histories, and works of science, which were all written with the purpose of admonishing his audience to follow true doctrine and live exemplary lives. As a product of "the Golden Age of Northumbria," Bede was the first historian to comment upon the "Saxons" or to portray the English as a religious nation under Christ.¹³ The general culture of Bede's day was one where monastic life flourished and helped to lead the church and society through the supposed "Dark Ages." Bede's own monastic school was influenced by Canterbury, which was, in turn, influenced by Rome, leading Bede to support Roman practice and develop a loyalty to Roman authority.¹⁴ His school also influenced him to take up an interest in calculations,¹⁵ which were believed to reflect the relationship between heaven and earth that was mentioned above.

When a modern historian attempts to use a salvation history (or any spiritual writing for that matter) to reconstruct the past, he or she must remain aware of several things. Philip Sheldrake points out that modern historians must remain aware of the fact that the "spirituality of ideas [in religious writing] is inherently elitist" and that "the [primary] evidence is never complete."¹⁶ Sheldrake also states that "all history is 'controlled history,' as it reflects the interests of chroniclers and other interpreters."¹⁷ Sheldrake advises critical historians to "look beyond the explicit meaning of texts" and to "note the assumptions or bias and, as far as they can, make allowances."¹⁸ With this in mind historians can look at the *Ecclesiastical*

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 351.

¹⁴ Corning, *The Celtic and Roman Traditions*, 69.

¹⁵ Ibid., 70.

¹⁶ Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 19.

¹⁷ Ibid., 20; see Handout I.3 "Outline of Lecture on Historical Approaches to Monastic History" by Mary Forman, OSB (Spring 2007).

¹⁸ Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, 20.

History and note how Bede's agenda and sources had influenced and altered his work. Corning points out how Rome's mission to the Celtic church was aided by the Frankish Merovingians, yet Bede makes no mention of this.¹⁹ Bede's silence on the Merovingian contribution "could reflect the lack of information in his sources."²⁰ At the same time, "Bede may have decided not to focus on the Merovingians in order to highlight the relationship between the papacy and the English Church, something that was important in Bede's own time."²¹ By attempting to understand Bede in his own context, historians stand to make clearer observations and better interpretations when studying his medieval sources. Historians must also bear in mind that Bede's work is primarily a secondary text and "must be used carefully when analyzing Celtic-Roman interactions."²² The events recalled at the beginning of the *Ecclesiastical History* took place over 130 years before St. Augustine's arrival in Canterbury (AD 597) and Bede's sources were limited to the accessible, surviving documents and oral traditions that were still circulating.²³

Henry Mayr-Harting is a modern historian who has commented on Bede and the *Ecclesiastical History* in his work *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*. Mayr-Harting possesses the characteristics of a well-versed historian due to his use of a variety of primary and secondary sources. His primary methodology uses various primary texts composed by Bede in an attempt to make an argument related to Bede's personality. He supports his argument by applying his own research and consulting the opinions of other scholars related in secondary sources. Mayr-Harting used not only the *Ecclesiastical History*, but also Bede's grammar books, sermons, and biblical commentaries to help convey the spirituality and overall personality that influenced the way Bede thought and wrote.²⁴ Additionally, Mayr-Harting also critiques Bede's methodology of compiling sources, demonstrating why Bede has always been considered a reliable source of information. He points out how Bede used Roman archives that had been brought to Canterbury, local ecclesiastical and court records,

annals, oral histories, legends and hagiographies (like the *Life of Wilfred*), and other ecclesiastical histories in an attempt to relay accurate, factual history with the unique purpose of edifying and instructing his Latin literate Christian audience.²⁵

Mayr-Harting also pays close attention to Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* by giving consideration to the genre of the literature. He recognizes the authenticity of the work as a product of salvation history by noting its main purposes of edification and promotion of unity in the nation under God and Rome.²⁶ Mayr-Harting also brings his readers up to date as to the work's origins and the era in which it was written, paying attention to Bede's monastic tradition and the influence that it had over him²⁷ and the eschatological beliefs of the early medieval period.²⁸ Mayr-Harting recognizes the state of the evidence that he analyzed by calling to mind the different dating systems that Bede had to consider and also by examining the gaps that would have confronted Bede. However, Mayr-Harting recognizes enough about Bede and his environment to make the assertion that as a scholar, Bede would have been well-prepared to handle such obstacles.²⁹ Mayr-Harting also recognizes the relationships between the *Ecclesiastical History* and other works popular in Bede's time, attesting to possible influences from people such as Augustine, Gildas, Isidore of Seville, and Orosius.³⁰

The most basic judgment that Mayr-Harting proposes is that Bede's work was influenced and characterized by the social and ecclesiastical affairs of the seventh century. According to Mayr-Harting the purpose of the *Ecclesiastical History* was to first instruct the faithful by providing moral examples to imitate and, second, to show that God had mandated for the English to be united to him under the guidance of the Roman church.³¹ Medieval monks were trained to see the spiritual side of things and were able to understand how God operated in the daily affairs of the people. Mayr-Harting points out that Bede and his contemporaries were not trained to see the cause-and-effect relationships that people observe today, because in their time things took on special spiritual significance that otherwise would

¹⁹ Corning, *The Celtic and Roman Traditions*, 69.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

²² *Ibid.*, 72.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Henry Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1972), 40.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 42–43.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 46–47.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 42–43.

not normally have been associated with it.³²

For the purpose of introducing Bede and his world, Mayr-Harting's judgments are sound. His use of primary and secondary sources has led him to create an accurate and helpful introduction to one of the most famous pieces of Anglo-Saxon literature. His attention to the spirituality and social context which fueled the composition and influenced its outcome are impressive considering the numbers of historians who study the Middle Ages and attempt to steer clear of anything religious. Mayr-Harting's work is well researched and is presented in such a manner that both high school and college level students will find it helpful.

The *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* is certainly one of the greatest examples of the salvation history genre that exists from the Middle Ages. It serves as a window into a far-away era which allows us to peer into a world unlike our own. However, Bede would be the first to say that his book was written in order to draw people closer to Christ; this is something that still speaks to us today. Historians can attempt to put together the pieces of Bede's life and try to decipher why and how he did what he did. What has to be kept in mind is that God was Bede's reason for everything, whether in school, work, or prayer, all was centered on God. If modern Christians read Bede's works in that light, it can still be possible to see how his writings can edify and help to inspire us to live truly Christian lives. It might also teach us something about true devotion to God through our everyday lives. †

³² Ibid., 48.

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