

Some Chapters in the History of the Early English Church.

BY THE REV. ALFRED PLUMMER, D.D.

V. THE VENERABLE BEDE.

BEDE was born in 672 or 673, and therefore he was thirty-six or seven when Wilfrid died. Almost the whole of his simple career is contained in the very brief autobiography which he has placed at the end of his "Ecclesiastical History."

"Thus much concerning the ecclesiastical history of Britain, and especially of the race of the English, I, Bæda, a servant of Christ and priest of the monastery of the blessed Apostles, St. Peter and St. Paul, which is at Wearmouth and at Jarrow, have with the Lord's help composed, so far as I could gather it, either from ancient documents, or from the tradition of the elders, or from my own knowledge. I was born in the territory of the said monastery; and at the age of seven I was, by the care of my relations, given to the most reverend Abbot Benedict, and afterwards to Ceolfrid, to be educated. From that time I have spent the whole of my life within that monastery, devoting all my pains to the study of the Scriptures: and amid the observance of monastic discipline, and the daily charge of singing in the Church, it has ever been my delight to learn, or to teach, or to write. In my nineteenth year I was admitted to the diaconate, in my thirtieth to the priesthood, both by the most reverend Bishop John (of Hexham), and at the bidding of Abbot Ceolfrid. From the time of my admission to the priesthood to this my fifty-ninth year, I have endeavoured, for my own use and that of my brethren, to make brief notes upon the Holy Scripture, either out of the venerable Fathers, or in conformity with their meaning and interpretation."

He then gives the long list of his works, so far as they were written at that time (A.D. 731), and he ends with a prayer, which is a fitting one still for all Christian students. "And I pray Thee, good Jesus, as Thou hast graciously granted to me

sweetly to drink the words of Thy knowledge, so Thou wouldest also mercifully grant me to attain one day to Thee, the Fountain of all wisdom, and to appear for ever before Thy face."

No one knows the origin of the epithet "venerable," but it is said to have been applied to Bede as early as the ninth century; and no one who knows his character can doubt that it has been rightly applied. As William of Malmesbury says of Bede, he was "a man whom it is easier to admire than to extol as he deserves." And it is still easier to love him. In the whole of our national history there is no one more truly lovable than Bede.

Yet, well as the epithet "venerable" suits him, it has one disadvantage. People think of him as a very old man. J. R. Green speaks of "the old man laying down his pen" at a time when Bede was only fifty-eight. Dr. Hodgkin calls him the "aged saint." And the window at Jarrow, which aims at depicting his death, represents him as a patriarch of eighty or ninety. Yet Bede was (at most) sixty-three when he died.

The age into which Bede was born had some remarkable features in Britain. It had seen the dawn of peace between the two irreconcilable nations in the island. It had seen the beginnings of order and organization in the new-born English Church. It had seen the birth of English literature in the sacred poems of Cædmon. And, in Theodore's school at Canterbury, it had seen the first attempt at a permanent centre of English education. As compared with the age which preceded it and the age which followed it, it was a time of great peace and hopefulness, though not without signs of the corruption which often accompanies peace, and which grew darker during the latter part of Bede's life. But during the earlier part it was a time when a son of peace might live and work with contentment. To study the life of Bede in its chronological position, between the conquests of the English invaders which preceded it and the conquests of the Danish invaders which followed, is like reading the Book of Ruth

between the Book of Judges and the Books of Samuel and of Kings. It is a peaceful idyl between two stormy epics; a beautiful episode, on which the student of history, bewildered by rapid changes and wearied by the din of countless battle-fields, lingers with singular pleasure. In the sketch which Bede gives us of his own career we have the clear outlines of a happy, beneficent life—a life spent in quietude, in intelligent self-culture, in veneration for the past, in sympathy with the present, in large-hearted usefulness to man, in profound devotion to God. He probably never went outside Northumbria, and (excepting one visit to Lindisfarne and one to York) he probably never went far from his beloved monastery of Wearmouth and Jarrow—two houses, which in his eyes were one. Stories of his having gone to Rome at the invitation of the Pope are worthless, except as evidence of the European reputation which Bede quickly acquired. It was thought probable that the Pope might send for the far-famed teacher of Jarrow to consult with him respecting difficult questions. But that he did sometimes travel in the neighbourhood of Jarrow we seem to have evidence in his commentary on St. Mark's account of our Lord's visiting the Temple after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem; and those who in their wanderings are fond of visiting churches may care to know what he says of such a practice: "So we, when we come to any town or village, in which there is a house of prayer dedicated to God, first turn aside to this, and when we have commended ourselves to God in prayer, then go about the worldly business for which we came." That implies occasional journeys.

We must pass over the charming story of Bede as a chorister helping the Abbot Ceolfrid to keep up the services at Jarrow, when every other inmate who could take part in them had been carried off by the pestilence; also the well-known saying about the angels perhaps missing Bede, if he came not to the prescribed devotions with the brethren. Let us return to his autobiography. "Amidst the observance of monastic discipline and the daily charge of singing in the church, it has been ever

my delight to learn, or to teach, or to write." There, in a single sentence, we have the life of the Christian scholar; the life of one who has consecrated his career to study; and to study, not for the mere excitement of learning some new thing, nor for the miserly accumulation of knowledge, but to study for the sake of imparting knowledge that might be a help to others. Bede lived for his pupils, for his hearers in that generation, for his readers in those which were to come. As he lies on his death-bed, almost his last thought is of them: he insisted on going on teaching and dictating, for, said he, "I don't want my lads to read what isn't true, and to spend their labour for nothing when I am gone." A little nearer his end he would say, "Learn quickly, for I know not how soon He who created me may take me away." No wonder that, when he was in health and strength, his enthusiasm and skill in teaching attracted hundreds of students; some say six hundred, but *sexcenti* sometimes means simply "very many."

The causes of Bede's success as a teacher are patent. It is scarcely too much to say that he had gradually accumulated all that was best worth knowing in the learning that was accessible. He wrote more than sixty distinct treatises, and they may be called an encyclopædia of the knowledge of Western Christendom in the eighth century. As we might expect in one who tells us that he "devoted all his pains to the study of Scripture," the majority of his works are on Biblical subjects. The remainder are treatises on astronomy, chronology, arithmetic, medicine, philosophy, grammar, rhetoric, poetry, and music; biographies of saints and other famous men; a book of hymns and a book of epigrams; and, chief of all, the "Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation." Bede had great advantages besides his personal endowments. Thanks to the abbots Benedict and Ceolfrid, the libraries at Wearmouth and Jarrow were excellent. Benedict made no less than five journeys to Rome, and brought back many precious books, and this collection was augmented by Ceolfrid. Ceolfrid procured three copies of Jerome's revised translation of the Bible, commonly called the Vulgate, and one

copy of the old Latin translation. Bede often compares the two versions. When Ceolfrid went on his last journey to Rome, he took with him a copy of the Vulgate, written by his Order, as a present to the Pope, and copied from MSS. brought from Italy by himself, or Benedict, or Theodore of Tarsus. Ceolfrid died on the way, September 25, 716, but the MS. went on to Rome, and has been identified as the famous *Codex Amiatinus*, now at Florence, our best authority for the readings of the Vulgate. Bede must have known it while it was in course of preparation.

Besides this advantage of libraries Bede had good instructors—Scottish, Roman, Gallican, and English. From Trumbert, the disciple of Chad, and from Sigfrid, who was “thoroughly skilled in the knowledge of the Scriptures,” he would learn Biblical interpretation as it was understood in Ireland and Iona. Acca, Bishop of Hexham and pupil of Wilfrid, would teach him much of the learning of the Roman school, and perhaps something of music, in which he was skilled. Acca and Bede corresponded on Scriptural questions, and Bede dedicated some of his commentaries to Acca. It was at Acca’s suggestion that Bede wrote his “History,” in which he sometimes quotes Acca as his authority (iii. 13, iv. 14). Bede’s monastic learning was Benedictine, and of Gallican origin. With the great English school he corresponded, and it is probable that some of his teachers and assistants were educated there.

Bede had one serious disadvantage. Many monasteries had a *scriptorium*, a large room set apart for the multiplying of books, with a staff of monks trained in the art of copying MSS. and writing from dictation. There was no *scriptorium* at Jarrow. Bede tells us that, in addition to all his monastic duties, he had to be his own dictator, and shorthand-writer, and copyist. That meant slow work, especially as unwarmed rooms in a cold climate often made writing impossible during the winter. At Lindisfarne there was a good writing school, derived from Iona, and at Canterbury there was another, derived from Rome; at Jarrow there was none.

But his personal endowments and character were the chief causes of his success as a teacher. He had an enthusiastic love for his work and a power of kindling enthusiasm in others. To learn, and to teach, and to write, he says, were always a delight to him. Hence his refusal of the dignity of abbot; for, he said, "The office demands household care, and household care brings distraction of mind, which hinders the pursuit of learning." His industry must have been immense. Consider the difficulties of correspondence in those days, and then think what it must have been to have collected the materials for his "Ecclesiastical History," while he was studying, and teaching, and commenting on the Old and New Testaments at Jarrow. He had correspondents who were gathering information for him in Lindsey, in East Anglia, in Mercia, in Wessex, in Kent, and in Rome. This fact, and the gradual dispersion of his numerous scholars, easily explain the fame which Bede acquired in many parts of Europe even during his life-time. He was a man under whom and for whom it was a gain and a delight to work.

Above all, Bede succeeded, because his work was done in a spirit of profound devotion. It was work penetrated through and through with prayer. He was not one of those who think that time spent in praise and prayer is just so much time lost for the work of life. "Amidst the observance of monastic discipline and the daily charge of singing in church," to quote his words once more, his reading and teaching and writing were done. Nor was he one who left his religion behind him on the doorstep, when he returned from service in the church to work elsewhere. His reading and teaching were to him a religious service, and his chief delight was in the spiritual progress of his pupils. The joy of teachers is made full, he tells us in his commentary on the First Epistle of St. John, when, by their teaching, many are brought to the communion of the Church and of Him by whom the Church is strengthened and increased. And the work which he thus did for God and God's children was done also in humble reliance on God's

blessing. Bede had a sure hope that what God helped him to accomplish would, by God's bounty, be blessed to himself and to his readers. And he entreats all who hear or read his "Ecclesiastical History" to offer frequent supplications for him to the throne of grace.

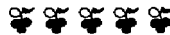
Let us look back to the beginning of his life before we touch upon the end. "At the age of seven, I was, by the care of my relations, given to the most reverend Abbot Benedict, and afterwards to Ceolfrid, to be educated. From that time I have spent the whole of my life within that monastery." He says, "by the *care* of my relations." It never occurs to him that his relations were freeing themselves from care by getting rid of him. He never doubts for a moment, nor probably did they, that in consigning him to be kept and trained by these excellent Benedictines, they were doing the very best thing possible for him, both as regards this world and as regards the world to come. Such dedications of children, like that of the little Samuel, were common in those days, and Bede's relations, who were probably not his parents, otherwise he would have said so, perhaps made a real sacrifice in parting with him. Be this as it may, who will venture to say that they made a mistake in thus transferring him to what was, perhaps, one of the best monasteries in England at a time when monasticism had already begun to decline? Bede's perfect contentment with it, his almost unbroken life in it for more than half a century, and the transparent goodness of his own life in these surroundings, must convince us that the choice was a wise one.

The beautiful story of Bede's death has been often told, and may be found in the various books which treat of him or of the period in which he lived, but it is almost always given in an abbreviated form. It is worth while to read it in its entirety in the letter "to Cuthwin, his most dearly-beloved fellow-student in Christ" from "his fellow-disciple Cuthbert," who was with Bede at the time of his death. This Cuthbert was afterwards Abbot of Jarrow and Wearmouth, and he corresponded with

persons on the Continent, sometimes respecting Bede and his writings.

Bede passed away on the evening before Ascension Day, which in A.D. 735 would be May 25. In our calendar, therefore, he is celebrated two days too late. He had just dictated the last sentence of the part of the Gospel of St. John, which he had been translating. "After a little while, the youthful scribe to whom he had been dictating, said: 'Now the sentence is finished.' He answered: 'You have spoken the truth; it is indeed finished. Raise my head in your hands, for it pleases me much to recline opposite to that holy place of mine in which I used to pray, so that, while resting there, I may call upon God my Father.' And being placed upon the pavement of his cell, he said: 'Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost,' and as soon as he had named the name of the Holy Spirit, he breathed out his own spirit, and so departed to the Kingdom of Heaven."

It will be a sad day for the Church of England when none of its members draw either instruction or inspiration from the life and death of Bede.



The Study of the Septuagint Version of Amos.

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A BOOK should, whenever possible, be studied in the original language in which it was written. This is especially true of the books of the Bible; but as, unfortunately, so few, comparatively speaking, know Hebrew, the best substitute is, of course, the Septuagint Version. But the Septuagint Version has a very special value of its own, and it will be well to say a word about this first before dealing specifically with the Book of Amos.