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'Signs and Wonders' and the Venerable Bede

Mr Cavill gave this paper at a meeting of the UCCF Historians' Study Group in 1986. Although the subject may appear to be one of interest only to specialists in the author's field of Anglo-Saxon literature, it quickly becomes evident that it has considerable relevance to modern discussions of the evidence for charismatic 'signs and wonders' in the church today.

The attention of evangelicals has been directed to the miracle stories of Bede and his contemporaries¹ by the writers of two recent publications: Donald Bridge, in his book *Signs and Wonders Today* (IVP: Leicester 1985), and Rex Gardner, in his article 'Miracles of Healing in Anglo-Celtic Northumbria as Recorded by the Venerable Bede and His Contemporaries: A Reappraisal in the Light of Twentieth Century Experience' (*British Medical Journal*, 287 (1983), 1927-1933).² The debate over how and why miracles might happen today continues, and the independent evidence of healings in recent years presented by Mr Gardner is properly to be considered in that debate. But whether the strictures of both Mr Gardner and Mr Bridge upon scholars who find miracle stories difficult to assimilate are just, remains open to question. It is true that some writers have used language offensive to evangelical Christians in referring to miracle stories in Scripture and Church tradition as 'white magic'³ and to belief in such as 'credulity . . . beyond measure'⁴

¹ The texts used are as follows:

B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History* (Oxford 1969). Cited as HE.

B. Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert* (Cambridge 1940). Cited as VA for the Anonymous *Life*, and VC for Bede's *Life*.

B. Colgrave, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus* (Cambridge 1927). Cited as VW.

B. Colgrave, *The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great* (reprint, Kansas 1968). Bede's *In Marcum* is found in *Corpus Christian Series Latina CXX*.

² I believe the text of Mr Gardner's article has been popularised in the Campus Crusade for Christ publication *Mouth*.

³ C. G. Loomis, 'The Miracle Traditions of the Venerable Bede', *Speculum* 21 (1946), 404-418. Quotation from 404.

⁴ E. W. Watson, 'The Age of Bede' in A. H. Thompson, ed. *Bede: His Life, Times and Writings* (Oxford 1935), 39-59. Quotation from 44.

by which the Church contributed greatly to intellectual 'decadence'.⁵ But their views cannot be dismissed for that reason alone. There are serious questions to be considered before we can ask, with Mr Gardner, of the healing stories, 'Were these patients healed as described or not?' (p. 1928); or with Mr Bridge, of the 'remarkable happenings', 'Can we trust Bede—not because he is a Bible writer but because he is accurate?' (p. 162). In this paper I want to comment briefly on three aspects of Bede's attitude to miracles: the inconsistency between his theory and his practice; his treatment of sources; and his treatment of one particular character, Bishop Wilfrid. Then I will go on to give my own answers to the questions asked by Mr Bridge and Mr Gardner.

Both writers refer to Bede's commentary on Mark in their work. Here Bede writes:

Miracles (*miracula*) were necessary in the early days of the Church. She was nourished with them in order that She might grow in faith. When we plant bushes we water them until they begin to stand firm, but once they have taken root the watering ceases. For this reason St Paul says the gift of tongues is a sign (*signum*) intended not for the faithful but for unbelievers.

This passage gives reason for the common distinction made between Bede the theologian, Bede the historian, and Bede the hagiographer, for it is plain that in the multiplicity of miracles he records, he contradicts his theological statement. Bede was impeccably orthodox, and he would certainly have been concerned about this inconsistency were it not for the fact that it was not of his making. The passage quoted from Bede's *In Marcum* is part of a long tract copied nearly verbatim from Gregory the Great's twenty-ninth *Homily on the Gospels*.⁶ And Gregory himself had in mind the views of Origen and probably Tertullian when he wrote.

Gregory's works were well-known in Anglo-Saxon England. Bede borrowed phrases and incidents from his work in a number of places: his *Life of Saint Cuthbert* borrows phrases, and almost certainly miracle paradigms from Gregory's *Dialogues*.⁷ Gregory's attitude to miracles was not, in practice, what his statements in the *Homily* would suggest. In fact, the greater part of the *Dialogues* is a narration of the miracles of past and contemporary Italian saints, as its subtitle suggests, *De Miraculis Patrum Italicorum*. And in his response (recorded by Bede, *Historia*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁶ *Patrologia Latina* LXXVI, col. 1215.

⁷ *Patrologia Latina* LXXVII cols. 149ff.

Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum, I, 31) to reports that Augustine of Canterbury and his companions had been performing miracles, Gregory clearly acknowledges that these powers derive from God, and are 'for the salvation of the people'. He does not discourage expectations of divine healing as Mr Gardner suggests (p. 1932), but rather warns against an increased temptation to pride and vainglory. This concern for humility was a profound one with Gregory.

Not only does Gregory contradict himself in this matter of miracles, he is also contradicted by an anonymous monk of Whitby who wrote his *Life*, including in it a good number of supernatural signs performed by Gregory. The writer seems conscious of the inconsistency when he complains, in his third chapter, about the paucity of miracles in the 'record of his deeds', and goes on in the following chapter to maintain that not all holy men are given miracles, but that they are given 'most of all . . . to those who instruct the pagans'. The inconsistency appears to give Bede no trouble: he is content with Gregory's good authority in these matters. Moreover, when writing his miracle stories he probably had in his mind another of Gregory's statements on the matter, from the *Dialogues*, where he opines 'The mind which is full of the Holy Spirit will very evidently have His signs (*signa*), miracles (*virtutes*), and especially His humility.'⁸

Bede's zeal for orthodoxy and authority bears not only on his theory of the miraculous (or lack of it), it also bears on his treatment of his material. The influence of Gregory's *Dialogues* is clear. But there were also standard works of hagiography on which Bede drew to a greater or lesser extent, the *Lives* of Saint Germanus, Saint Paul of the Desert, Saint Anthony, and Saint Martin, by Constantius, Jerome, Athanasius (translated from Greek by Evagrius) and Sulpicius Severus. Among these authors are the great names of Jerome, the translator of the Scriptures whose Vulgate version was to remain authoritative in Western Christendom for over a thousand years, and Athanasius, the defender of Trinitarian orthodoxy *contra mundum*. Their authority was scarcely to be questioned. In all these writings of hagiography there is the pervasive influence of Scripture: perhaps half of the miracles attributed to the saints are acknowledged to be parallel with scriptural examples, and many others automatically bring scriptural miracles to mind.

Bede not only had these works around him when he was

⁸ Gregory's *Dialogues* I, 1, 6. My translation of 'Mens autem quae divino Spiritu impletur habet evidentissime signa sua, virtutes scilicet et humilitatem'.

writing. For his *Life of Saint Cuthbert* he had a more immediate source, the *Life* written by a monk of Lindisfarne. This monk quotes scriptural authority for a transparently fabulous animal story, of a type much loved by the Celts:

And this incident I think should also be related, which I learned from the account of many good men, among whom is Plegcils a priest, at the time when he was in the monastery which we call Melrose; Cuthbert was sent for by the nun Aebbe, a widow, and the mother of them all in Christ. He came to the monastery which is called Coldingham, in response to the invitation, and remaining there some days, did not relax his habitual way of life but began to walk about by night on the seashore, keeping up his custom of singing as he kept vigil. When a certain cleric of the community found this out, he began to follow him from a distance to test him, wishing to know what he did with himself at night. But that man of God, approaching the sea with mind made resolute, went into the waves up to his loin-cloth; and once he was soaked as far as his armpits by the tumultuous and stormy sea. Then coming up out of the sea, he prayed, bending his knees on the sandy part of the shore, and immediately there followed in his footsteps two little sea animals, humbly prostrating themselves on the earth; and licking his feet, they rolled upon them, wiping them with their skins and warming them with their breath. After this service and ministry had been fulfilled and his blessing had been received, they departed to their haunts in the waves of the sea. But the man of God, returning home at cockcrow, came to the church of God to join in public prayer with the brethren. The above-mentioned cleric of the community laid hidden amid the rocks, frightened and trembling at the sight and, being in anguish all night long, he came nigh to death. The next day he prostrated himself before the feet of the man of God and, in a tearful voice, prayed for his pardon and indulgence. The man of God answered him with prophetic words: 'My brother, what is the matter with you? Have you approached nearer me, to test me, than you should have done? Nevertheless, since you admit it, you shall receive pardon on one condition; that you vow never to tell the story so long as I am alive.' The brother made the vow and kept it afterwards and departed with his blessing, healed. But after Cuthbert's death he told many brethren how the animals ministered to the saint, just as we read in the Old Testament that the lions ministered to Daniel, and related how Cuthbert, to his amazement, had seen him with his spiritual eyes, when he was lying hid and testing him, just as Peter detected Ananias and Sapphira when they were tempting the Holy Spirit.

(VA II, 3)

Bede's treatment of this story is interesting. Firstly, he adds little more than circumstantial detail, but his last word is rather quizzical: 'the brother kept silence about the miracle he had seen so long as Cuthbert was alive, but after the saint's death he *took*

care (curabat) to tell it to many' (VC p. 191, my italics). This may be read to imply that perhaps Bede found the monk's insistence in telling the story rather tiresome, especially when it was to his own discredit.

Secondly, Bede removes the reference to Daniel, thereby denying the story the authority and dignity of Scriptural precedent. Bede was probably aware that the precedent for the episode was not so much the lions ministering to Daniel, as the lions ministering to St Paul of the Desert in Jerome's *Vita Pauli*.⁹ In that work two lions dig a grave, mournfully howling, for St Anthony, so that St Paul, who has travelled a great distance in the desert, is spared the fatigue. The motif of two animals relieving the physical discomfort of the saint is treated in a vigorous, native fashion in the VA.

Thirdly, the VA's reference to Peter detecting Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 is removed by Bede, who instead puts Matthew 17:9, 'tell the vision to no man until the Son of Man be risen again from the dead' into Cuthbert's mouth as the reason for binding the man to secrecy. These three observations indicate to me a deliberate shift of emphasis in Bede's relation of the story; away from scriptural authority for the miraculous element, and towards slight doubt of the absolute veracity of the monk who told it.

Bede may have doubted the truth of this story, but since it was in his source, the VA written by a monk of Lindisfarne, and since his commission was to rewrite that source subject to the approval of the brethren at Lindisfarne, he did not have a real choice whether to include it or not. Nor, effectively, could he deny its miraculous status, though the VA avoids any explicit term to denote that. Bede refers to what the man saw as *virtus*, 'a mighty work'. His usual word for miracle is *signum*.¹⁰ In using these terms Bede is echoing not only Gregory's ideas as to the evidence of a Spirit-filled mind, *signa et virtutes*, but Scripture also. The Vulgate rendering of 'signs and wonders' is *signa et prodigia* in Acts 2:43 and *passim*. All three, *signa*, *virtutes* and *prodigia* are, in Peter's sermon in Acts 2:22, the attestations of the Lord's ministry. Bede's terminology is vague and conventional here, but he fails to discriminate between beast fable and apostolic 'works',

⁹ *Patrologia Latina* XXIII, cols. 18ff.

¹⁰ See B. Ward, 'Miracles and History: A Reconsideration of the Miracle Stories used by Bede' in G. Bonner, ed. *Famulus Christi* (London 1976), 70-76, particularly 71. It is interesting that, according to P. F. Jones, *A Concordance to the Historia Ecclesiastica of Bede* (Cambridge, Massachusetts 1929), Bede does not use the word *prodigium* in HE.

or even those of the Lord himself. This is not to say that there was no distinction between them in Bede's mind: but it is a warning to the reader that he must discriminate.

Authoritative sources notwithstanding, Bede was not an uncritical recorder of miracle stories, but had self-imposed limits. He has no record of a saint raising a person from the dead, though such stories were popular elsewhere—the case of Bothelm, who fell off the roof of Hexham Church, recorded in Eddius Stephanus' *Life of Wilfrid* being one of them. A return from death is recorded by Bede in *HE* V, 12, as Mr Gardner notes; but Bede carefully avoids any reference to human agency in the return of Drythelm. Of another popular type of miracle Bede only records one, in his *VC*, 41. Colgrave notes (p. 358):

This is the only example in Bede of the widespread type of relic miracle in which, other relics having been unsuccessful, the relic of some particular saint proves effective, thereby showing his superior virtues. The incident in both form and language closely resembles the healing of a cleric through the power of St Benedict when the relics of other martyrs were unavailing. (Greg. *Dial.* II, 16 . . .)

The reference to Gregory's *Dialogues* comes as no surprise here.

In addition to written sources, Bede was obliged to deal with oral sources for which he often gives circumstances and names as assurances of the validity of the details. In both the Prologue to his *Life of Cuthbert* and the Preface to the *HE*, he reports the diligent research that went into checking the traditions he records. Now this is a hagiographical and literary commonplace, as Bede acknowledges, ('as is customary' *iuxta morem*, Prologue *VC*). But Bede goes a good deal beyond the typical in detailing sources, and this, it has been suggested, is the writer disclaiming final responsibility for the factual accuracy of the traditions which he records.

The example of Cuthbert is instructive in demonstrating how dependent Bede was on his sources, oral and written, and also in demonstrating something of how traditions developed. His *VC* (721) is an expanded version of the *VA* (699), in which Bede rearranges and for the most part improves his source. Two miracles which are only mentioned in *VA* (IV, 18) are expanded in Bede's version (*VC* 31, 35). A further six are added by Bede, two on the testimony of Herefrith, later Bishop of Lindisfarne (*VC*, 3, 8, 19, 23, 36, 46; 8 and 23 are confirmed by Herefrith). In the *HE* (731) Bede adds a further two miraculous events from tradition to Cuthbert's credit (*HE* IV, 30, 31). Though some of the traditions of miracles recorded by Bede in later works actually became current after the death of Cuthbert, it is clear that the saga

was growing in popular and clerical circles, and two of his comments show that the writer could plead literary reasons for his selectivity:

... consulting together in our presence, you (sc. the community at Lindisfarne) brought forward many other facts concerning the life and virtues (*virtutibus*=miracles?) of the blessed man (sc. Cuthbert) no less important than those which we have written down, which well deserved to be mentioned if it had not seemed scarcely fitting and proper to insert new matter or add to a work which was planned and complete. (*VC Prologue*).

It is related that miracles of healing often happened in this place, bearing testimony to the merits of them both (sc. Cuthbert and Bishop Eadberht). Some of these I have recorded in my book about his life: but I have judged it convenient to add to this book some which I have recently chanced to hear. (*HE IV, 30*)

It seems that Bede was unwilling to accept all the reminiscences of the Lindisfarne brethren as authoritative testimony about the saint, but on another occasion he found it 'convenient' (*commodum*) to give details of the posthumous miracles wrought by the saint's relics and appendages.

There could scarcely be a starker contrast in Bede's writings than that which appears in the way he deals with the two great figures in the Church of his day, Cuthbert and Wilfrid. The contrast between their characters is obvious, and not of Bede's making. But Cuthbert's miracles are described in loving detail in the *VC*; some of the same miracles are related in the *HE*, and in both works Bede frequently refers to 'the many miracles of Cuthbert' (see above, for example): of Wilfrid on the other hand, only one marvel is recorded, a vision, though Bede certainly knew the *Life of Wilfrid* by Eddius Stephanus, which records many miracles. Wilfrid was undoubtedly the greater man in terms of his practical achievements. He was a pioneer missionary in two major areas, Sussex at home and Frisia abroad; his advocacy of the Roman rite and tonsure at the Synod of Whitby in 664, was successful against the claims of the Celts; his appeals to the Holy See of Rome in matters of dispute established a pattern of practice for the English Church; he championed the Benedictine Rule in the monasteries he built up at Ripon and Hexham; he was a personal friend of Benedict Biscop, founder of Bede's monasteries of Monkwearmouth and Jarrow. Certainly he was an able and influential man, who could inspire devotion and confidence, two prominent characteristics of Eddius' *VW*, written between 710 and 720.

To make the contrast between Wilfrid and Cuthbert in Bede's

writings even clearer, it is worth looking at the vision Wilfrid had as Bede records it (*HE V*, 19). The vision is one where Wilfrid, like Hezekiah, is told he has a few more years to live, in Wilfrid's case, four. The authority for the story is Acca, Bede's particular friend, and later Bishop of Hexham. Though this kind of vision is traditionally attributed to saints (including Cuthbert, *VC 28*) in hagiographic writing, Bede uses no word which would signify that it was a miracle in Wilfrid's case. And similarly, when Wilfrid's preaching to the drought-ridden people of Sussex (*HE V*, 11) was accompanied by rain, Bede makes no mention of a miracle, or of the efficacy of Wilfrid's merits or holiness.

The usual explanation of this bias in Bede's writing is that he disliked Wilfrid. Cuthbert's asceticism, retiring nature, and devotion to the politically and socially insignificant people in his diocese inspired Bede, whereas Wilfrid's contentious, active, possibly even proud nature seems to have irked him. Cuthbert's *nolo episcopari* was a cry of the heart; Wilfrid loved his bishopric and its pomp enough to travel twice to Rome to be reinstated. Bede had no sympathy for the errors of the Celtic Church in their calculation of the date of Easter, against which he wrote voluminously, but he realised that Northumbria owed a great debt to the Celtic missionaries from Lindisfarne, not only for their evangelistic work, but also for their learning. It was in this latter area that Wilfrid fell short in Bede's estimation, since Bede was accused of heresy on account of views expressed in one of his chronological works, in the presence of Wilfrid, without the accusers being contradicted.¹¹ For one as carefully orthodox as Bede, this was a grave insult, and C. W. Jones remarks that the *Epistola ad Pleguinam*, where Bede's defence is given, 'only thinly veils an attack on the bishop of the diocese and Bede's superior (sc. Wilfrid), under the guise of an attack on a lesser man'. Bede had reason, if he disliked Wilfrid. But there may be other causes for his silence on the subject of Wilfrid's miracles.

It is not certain, but is very likely that Bede knew Cuthbert. The saint died when Bede was thirteen or fourteen, and was obviously the young man's hero. Though Wilfrid was born in the same year as Cuthbert, 634, he did not die until 709, when Bede was in his maturity. Wilfrid was Bede's diocesan, and there was some communication between them since Bede acknowledges Wilfrid's word of confirmation of Æthelthryth's twelve years of married virginity (*HE IV*, 19). Moreover, Acca was a close friend to both

¹¹ See C. W. Jones, *Beda's Opera de Temporibus* (Cambridge, Massachusetts 1943), 132-135. The quotation is from 135.

Wilfrid and Bede, and Bede dedicated several of his works to Acca. This same Acca who told Bede of Wilfrid's vision also recommended that Eddius write the *Life* of the bishop (VW Preface). But Acca is not mentioned except as patron, and as the one to whom the vision was told, in Eddius. It is just conceivable, then, that Bede's account of Wilfrid is based on his personal knowledge of the man (perhaps coloured by prejudice), and either that he sought no further information about miracles from Wilfrid himself or Acca, or that he disregarded the testimony of both men, and Eddius.

The Anglo-Saxon mind was peculiarly susceptible to nostalgia, and its influence on Bede may well have been towards shrouding Cuthbert in an aura of sanctity: which nostalgia may well have fed on Bede's youthful impression of the saint. Wilfrid was a much more immediate and problematical person for Bede. But looking at the chapter in the *HE* (V, 19) where Wilfrid's life and death are recorded, Bede treats his subject with consistent moderation, praising him for his worthy life, and refraining from any criticism. Also, the major events in Wilfrid's life are clearly recorded. In these ways there is a great measure of similarity between Bede's *Historia Abbatum* and his version of the life of Wilfrid. Neither of these deal with miraculous events, and in both Bede was writing from experience, and to a degree, from first-hand knowledge. I suggest that there is more in Loomis' comment, 'upon home ground, and with local records at hand, Bede chose to be altogether realistic',¹² than Mr Gardner acknowledges. Except in the affection he entertained for his subject, Bede could be writing in the same mode of Wilfrid as of Benedict Biscop, or Ceolfrid.

If we are to accept Bede's authority 'not because he is a Bible writer, but because he is accurate', we are left with several difficulties. First, we will have to accept fantastic wonders along with the healings, wonders with no higher theological purpose than to show 'how obedient we ought to be to holy men, even in those matters about which they seem to give very casual command' (VC 36). Second, if Bede is accurate, then we will have to discount Eddius' *Vita Wilfridi* as a credible witness to Wilfrid's life, despite the fact that there is a consensus among scholars that Eddius' Wilfrid is much more of a man, with real problems and aspirations, than, say, Bede's Cuthbert. And third, there is a theological inconsistency, again with regard to Wilfrid; that as a pioneer founding the Church in both Frisia and Sussex, his

¹² Loomis, *op. cit.*, 418.

ministry should have been accompanied by 'apostolic' signs and wonders, according to the theories of both Gregory the Great and Mr Bridge (p. 174, etc). Bede was aware of this theory, yet ignores the evidence to hand of Wilfrid's miracles.

Most Bede scholars concur with Colgrave, that 'there can be no doubt that Bede himself sincerely believed that the miracles he described really happened.'¹³ My own view, and the general drift of the evidence presented here, is that Bede was rather more subtle than these scholars believe him to have been. There can be no question that his world view included belief in miracles generally. But there were limits to his credulity, as I suggest above, not only with regard to miracles Bede omitted, but also, perhaps, with regard to those he recorded. Bede would wish to be thought of as a reliable and interesting writer; but his concern to give the sources of his information was not so much to assert the truth of what was written, as to make clear that the responsibility for understanding the literary, historical and theological issues was with the reader: in short, *caveat lector*. We fail in this responsibility if we accept without question the miracle stories Bede presents to us.

Ray has pointed out that for exegetical, and more obviously theological works, there could be no valid disclaimer if the writer included heretical opinions.¹⁴ But in the Preface to the *HE* Bede writes:

I humbly implore the reader that he not impute it to me if in what I have written he finds anything other than the truth. For, in accordance with a true law of history, I have tried to set down in a simple style what I have collected from common report, for the instruction of posterity.

This 'instruction of posterity', as Bede wrote earlier in the Preface, lay in the fact that:

... Should history tell of good men and their good estate, the thoughtful listener is spurred on to imitate the good; should it record the evil ends of wicked men, no less effectually the devout and earnest listener or reader is kindled to eschew what is harmful and perverse,

¹³ B. Colgrave, 'Bede's Miracle Stories' in A. H. Thompson, op. cit., 201-229. The quotation is from 227. See also B. Ward, op. cit., 71, 'Bede certainly believed that miracles happened'.

¹⁴ R. Ray, 'Bede's *Vera Lex Historiae*', *Speculum* 55 (1980), 1-21. See 13. The following quotation from the Preface to *HE* is Ray's. Colgrave and Mynors, quoted by Mr Gardner, translates *vera lex historiae* as 'in accordance with the principles of true history'. *Vera* may be a transferred epithet modifying *historia*, but it is a bold translation.

and himself with greater care pursue those things which he has learned to be good and pleasing in the sight of God.

On this definition, the role of *historia* for Bede was exemplary and as nearly true as it was possible to be, but shaped and directed by a moral purpose. So in his *HE* Bede records only good of Wilfrid, though doubtless he could have thought of some bad things to write. On the other hand, Wilfrid is not attributed the signs of particular sanctity, though reports were to hand. Bede consciously selects details for quite other reasons than a concern for factual accuracy.

From the evidence above it will be clear that my answer to Mr Bridge's question, 'Can we trust Bede, . . . because he is accurate?' will be that his accuracy lies mostly in his reportage, and in that he is reliable so far as we can ascertain. But we cannot trust indiscriminately the traditions he records. My answer to Mr Gardner's question 'were these patients healed as described or not?' is a cautious 'Maybe'. In popular tradition, as in other areas of life, there is seldom smoke without fire: it is highly improbable that none of these healings ever took place. Some of Mr Gardner's parallel miracles from modern medicine (or lack of it) may suggest a pattern of experience which obtains now as much as then; may suggest, in fact, that God chooses to respond to prayer now as he did then. But we must still examine Bede's reports carefully and critically, and avoid the mistake of assuming that because a modern miracle seems to have occurred under similar circumstances to one 1200 years ago, that the ancient tradition is true and the story accurate: it may in fact be simply hearsay, or an example of literary plagiarism, or pious imagination at work.

Colgrave likens miracle stories in Bede to 'the illustrative anecdotes with which preachers nowadays sometimes brighten their sermons', and continues, 'and how many of these stories, which, in all sincerity, are put forward as true, would bear a close investigation?'¹⁵ The parallel is a good one, especially when one considers the wholly specious air of authenticity which an anecdote gains when one hears it from different sources. But in the Anglo-Saxon Church, the saint's life was not so much an illustration for a sermon, as the sermon itself. Ælfric, the great homilist of the tenth and eleventh century Anglo-Saxon Church, simply translates parts of Bede's *VC* without comment in his sermon *Depositio Sancti Cuthberthi*,¹⁶ trusting that this victory

¹⁵ B. Colgrave, 'Bede's Miracle Stories', 226.

¹⁶ Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies*, ed. M. Godden (London 1979), 81-91.

would have the effect that Bede proposed above for his *HE*. Inundated with fiction as we are, we are perhaps immune to the salutary effects of exemplary moral literature: to this extent we have lost the perspective of Bede, and of the age in which he lived.

To summarise, then, the material concerning the miraculous which is found in Bede's writings went through a process of sifting and refining before it was recorded. The first part of this process was a theological test, in which the miracle lore was measured against scriptural and patristic precedent: to a large extent this defined what was possible in the realm of the miraculous, or as much of the theoretically possible to which Bede was prepared to put his name. Another test was the literary one: did the material follow the conventions of the genre, and was the source, if not patristic, a good and acceptable one? Further, there was the credibility of the witnesses to be considered: was the story attested by reliable and sober people, clerical or lay? Another test was that of personal experience: did the stories tie in with what Bede knew of the person and of the circumstances? And then there was the moral purpose test: was the story an edifying one, which encouraged people to emulate the good, and to seek to please God?

Bede recorded miracles which fell within the limits of his understanding of the world, rather than miracles which he himself had experienced or seen: he had little chance of testing the factuality of the stories. It is clear that Bede's selection criteria were very different from our own, and many miracles which he could accept, we would find difficult to believe on *a priori* grounds. Perhaps our rationalistic presuppositions are as much in error as Bede's notions: but that is a quite different question from that of whether Bede's stories have a factual basis or not. It is proper that these two questions be considered separately.¹⁷

¹⁷ John Wimber, in his *Power Evangelism* (London 1985), 151f, confuses these two questions in accepting without question the testimony of early sources on the occurrence of the miraculous. Some of these sources are more reliable than others.