

CONCEPT ANALYSIS AND CHARACTER STUDY IN THE *OPERA*
HISTORICA OF THE VENERABLE BEDE WITH PARTICULAR
REFERENCE TO HIS ACCOUNT OF EARLY PAPAL
POLICY IN BRITAIN

by


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I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

(Signed) ..



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PREFACE

The focal point of all English historiography prior to the Conquest must of necessity be the "Ecclesiastical History of the English People" written by Bede the Venerable. The fact that he stands as a literary colossus of this period is justification enough for a student to devote his energies and research skills in attempting to throw new light on a man, who, though known to all, is known by few.

I cannot claim to have substantially lifted the veil that has hidden this genius from his reading audience for well over a thousand years: I doubt if that is possible. What I have attempted to do in this modest work is to try and penetrate the thought processes, the prejudices and the methodology of a man who can only be reached through his writings. The task has not been easy for, despite the voluminous quantity of extant material directly or indirectly attributed to Bede's pen, he remains something of an enigma: he is both innovator and product of his time. Self-contradictory, perhaps, but, then, Bede was a man full of contradictions and his own sentiments, beliefs and methods can only be described as orthodox, in an unorthodox way.

Few have attempted to dig deeper than the surface of Bede's works and most research done on him appears to have concentrated on appraisal of his data, the identity of his sources, and on finding a satisfactory category for him as a writer of Scriptural exegesis, history, hagiography and biography. Such studies as these provide little insight into Bede's mind, how it worked, and why it worked the way it did. It is the purpose of this work to provide at least a starting point for further research in this area. Its shortcomings can be attributed, perhaps, to the narrowness of its scope in tackling only one segment of Bede's writings and to the lack of skill of the author, who has achieved his reward already in being brought into intimate contact with one of England's finest literary minds. Though his greatest work was his monumental History, I have chosen not to confine my attentions to it alone but have closely analysed his *opera historica minora* as well--in particular the "Lives of the Holy Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow" and the two versions of his "Life of St. Cuthbert". In this way I hope to have corrected the imbalance caused by choosing only to examine his *opera historica* and not to extend the inquiry to his other works as well.

The thesis itself can well be divided into two parts. Part I would

consist of Chapters I to IV which involve an analysis of the key factors to be considered in appraising Bede's merits as an historian--his method, his attitudes, his bias. Part II, made up of Chapters V and VI, would then apply these findings to his treatment of the major themes of his History and, to a lesser extent, the minor works as well--the sending of the Augustinian Mission to the Angles and Saxons by Gregory the Great, and the means by which conversion and salvation was brought to the inhabitants of the islands of Brittania and Hibernia. These were the issues with which Bede was concerned when he put his pen to paper to write history and these ought, therefore, to be the issues with which the student of Bede is concerned. Only when such a student feels confident enough in his understanding of this noble monk and his historical approach can an analysis of these issues be undertaken.

Chapter I consists of an analysis of Bede's own statements concerning the writing of history, what he terms, in his Preface to the History, the *vera lex historiae*. This term, as well as its application and derivative methodology, occupies the whole of the subject matter of the Chapter: how it can be applied to the History, the Vita Cudbercti and the Lives and how it affects all of Bede's attitudes towards the writing of history.

Chapter II undertakes to explain the significance of Bede's miraculous

content in his works. It is in this area that least research has been done for, as late as 1969, writers were still puzzled as to how such a competent historian as Bede could resort to narrating "wonder tales". This analysis demonstrates that Bede was not simply excessively pious and devout in recounting these stories but that he subjected them to the same rigorous criteria of selection as the other materials incorporated in his works. On the miracles Bede must stand or fall as a *verax historicus*.

Chapter III approaches the problem of Bede's selectivity in a somewhat unorthodox manner. It consists mainly of a detailed analysis of the *Vita Cudbercti* from the point of view of discerning the nature of the materials which Bede confesses, in the Preface to the work, he has omitted. The conclusion reached is that selectivity and relevance are indissoluble concepts in the mind of Bede.

Chapter IV delves deeply into Bede's prefacial claim (in the Preface to the *History*) that the writer of history must relate events and individual deeds which fall into the moral and religious categories of Good and Evil. Without such an analysis as this, a study of the mental processes of Bede would be rendered almost useless for it is here that Bede reveals his basic emotions and convictions.

Chapter V introduces a study of the personalities and events that led up to the sending of Augustine and his courageous band of monks to heathen Britain. It shows how Bede's historical method, as outlined in the early Chapters, has affected his historical account of the mission--and why.

Chapter VI continues the theme of the previous Chapter with relation to the overall task of conversion, a subject dear to the heart of the author and, on this subject, the thesis reaches its conclusion.

Appendices I and II are included as elaborations of two issues raised in the body of the text and which could not be incorporated in it.

I must acknowledge the assistance I received from Professor R.G. Tanner in conceiving the topic for the thesis, for the inspiration he provided in arm-chair discussions and his critical appraisal of the work as it progressed. I am also indebted to Miss Sue Dorahy for her tireless efforts in aiding me to get the work "into shape" for presentation: without her typing skill and her seemingly endless resources of patience completion of the work would have been impossible.

On a more general level, no writer on Bede could omit to mention the invaluable assistance of Charles Plummer's edition of Bede's works and the incredible notes that that edition contains. That work ranks second only

in importance to the works of Bede himself--without Bede English historiography and literature would have lacked a founding father.

T. J. R.
September 1971.

LIST OF DIAGRAMS

Figure -

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|----|-------------|--|
| 1 | p. 3 | Components of the Preface to the <u>History</u> . |
| 2 | p. 14 | Components of the Preface to the <u>Vita Cudbercti</u> . |
| 3 | p. 27 | The meanings of <i>instructio</i> . |
| 4 | p. 40 | The traditional view of a miraculous event. |
| 5 | opp. p. 41 | Analysis of a miraculous event. |
| 6 | p. 72 | The process of revelation. |
| 7 | p. 89 | Criteria for selection of sources. |
| 8 | opp. p. 119 | The process of achieving <i>sanctitas</i> . |
| 9 | p. 123 | Components of <i>Gratia Perfectionis</i> . |
| 10 | opp. p. 137 | Demonstration of achievement of <i>sanctitas</i> . |
| 11 | p. 153 | Derivatives of <i>luxuria</i> . |
| 12 | p. 153 | Derivatives of <i>sanctitas</i> . |
| 13 | opp. p. 172 | The Chosen People. |
| 14 | opp. p. 217 | Imperial Administration of Britain. |
| 15 | p. 226 | Papal Administration of Britain. |
| 16 | p. 248 | Pressures operative on the Roman Church in Britain. |

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

History and Hist.

"The Ecclesiastical History of the English People" by Bede.
All references (book, chapter, page numbers) are to the edition of C. Plummer, (cf. Bibliography) unless otherwise stated.

Lives

"The Lives of the Holy Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow" by Bede
All references (chapter, page numbers) are to the edition of C. Plummer unless otherwise stated.

Vita Cudbercti and
Vita Cud.

"The Life of St. Cuthbert"--prose version by Bede.
All references (chapter, page numbers) are to the English Historical Society edition (cf. Bibliography) unless otherwise stated.

Vita S. Cuthberti Metrica

"The Life of St. Cuthbert"--verse version by Bede.
All references are to the English Historical Society edition.

EHS

"*Beda Venerabilis*": English Historical Society edition, 2 vols.

MGH

Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Gregory the Great's correspondence.

EHR

English Historical Review.

NT ; OT

New Testament ; Old Testament.

Textual Readings: I have taken the liberty to replace the letter "u" in Plummer's edition with "v", where applicable (e.g. *divina* for his reading *diuina*) and "j" with "i" in the EHS edition where applicable (e.g. *iam* for *jiam*).