

The Father of English History

Bede was one of the most influential Bible teachers and historians, and it is from his practice of dating events from the incarnation of Christ *Anno Domini* that our present dating method of separating events before Christ (B.C.) and after Christ (A.D.) came into general use.

Bede was born to Saxon parents in Jarrow, Northumbria, in Northern England. He entered the monastery at age 7 and devoted all of his time to the study of the Scriptures and absorption in monastic disciplines: daily singing, working, worshipping, learning, teaching and writing. In his 19th year, he was admitted to the diaconate and in his 30th year to the priesthood. Bede was a prodigious writer, he wrote 45 books, including commentaries, textbooks, translations and histories. His knowledge was encyclopedic. He wrote grammatical and chronological works, geography, hymns, poems, sermons, Biblical exegesis and the first Martyrology with historical notes. Although most of his works were in Latin, Bede was also the first known writer of English prose.

His didactic and ethical works were so widely spread throughout Europe, and so highly esteemed, that he was described as the Teacher of the Middle Ages. He engaged in lengthy research concerning seasons, cycles, times and events. In 703 he wrote *On Times* and twenty years later, *On the Reckoning of Time*. His chronological research and calculations profoundly affected the way we continue to date events to this day.

Bede led a life of simplicity and devotion, always occupied with learning, teaching and writing. He was zealous in the performance of his duties. He was known as the most learned man of his time. Proficient in Patristic literature, he mastered the classics and studied in Greek, Hebrew and Latin. Bede was described as kind and generous with a tremendous love for truth and fairness. Many expressed admiration for his devotion to the Lord and service to God's people.

Bede wrote that *the door of the Kingdom of Heaven* was not opened to *those who only know in their learned minds the mysteries of faith and the commandments of their Creator, but to those who have progressed far enough to live by them.*

One of his greatest achievements was the invaluable *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* completed in 731 A.D. His authoritative history of the Christian origins in Britain speak of the Celtic people who were converted to Christianity during the first three centuries after Christ, and details the coming of the Anglo-Saxons, and their subsequent conversion by Celtic missionaries. Bede's devotion to truth and accuracy set an unprecedented standard for future historians. His *History* remains the major source of information on life in early England.

Bede described the importance of history: *For if history records good things of good men, the thoughtful hearer is encouraged to imitate what is good; or if it records evil of wicked men, the good religious reader or listener is encouraged to avoid all that is sinful and perverse, and to follow what he is in God.* Bede emphasised the Evangelical and civilizing mission of the church. The history of nations has moral meaning.

The prayer with which Bede closed his *Ecclesiastical History* gives an insight to the motives of this dedicated disciple of Christ: *I pray You, noble Jesus, that as You graciously granted me joyfully to abide in the Words of Your Knowledge, so You will also of Your bounty grant me to come at length to Yourself, the Light of all wisdom, and to dwell in Your presence forever.*

At the end of Bede's long and productive life, as illness and weakness overcame him, he insisted on completing his translation of John's Gospel into English. Despite sleepless nights and days of weariness, he continued his task, taking every care in comparing the text and preserving its accuracy. *I don't want my boys to read a lie or to work to no purpose after I have gone,* he told his

scribe. On his last day, Bede called his scribe, Wilbert, and told him to write with all possible speed: *There is still a chapter wanting, be quick with the writing, for I shall not hold out much longer.*

He worked till nightfall and when his young scribe had completed the task, Bede rejoiced: *It is finished!* He sang the *Gloria Patria*, then breathed his last and entered into the joy of the Lord's presence.

The Teacher of the Middle Ages continued to influence all of Christendom, only not through his writings, but through one of his star pupils Egbert, who established schools throughout Europe and became master of Charlemagne's palace school at Aachen.

Bede lived and ministered during tumultuous times with theological, political and geographical conflicts between the Greek Orthodox church in the East and the Western Roman Catholic church, the rise of Islam which spread through the sword conquering most of the Byzantine Empire and massacring Christian communities across the whole of North Africa and Spain.

However, instead of becoming entangled in the controversies of his day, Bede dedicated himself to serving God in obscurity, and using his gifts to produce some of the most important works of ecclesiastical literature in history. And every time we write the date, we are using the dating method that Bede established.

If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the Words of Faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed. 1 Timothy 4:6