



BOOK REVIEW

**Peter Darby and Máirín MacCarron, eds. *Bede the Scholar*
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This volume adds to the considerable recent literature on the work of the Venerable Bede, the eighth-century English monk once celebrated chiefly for his historical writing but now recognized for the wide-ranging nature of his interests, which included rhetoric, astronomy, natural phenomena, the biblical languages, the lives of saints, and the writings of the Fathers. All of these were important to him because they helped him address his chief interest: interpreting Scripture. In this volume's introduction, the editors rightly note that this collection follows in the footsteps of *Famulus Christi*, a 1973 volume that celebrated Bede's 1300th birthday. That earlier work contained some chapters that connected only tangentially to Bede, including one on early Irish hymn material, another on the Old English *Exodus*, and yet another on the nineteenth-century editor of Bede's historical works, Charles Plummer. This work keeps a steadier focus on Bede's scholarly interests and activities. Of its eleven chapters, two focus on Bede's exegesis: one on his unsung efforts at composing summary *capitula* for some biblical books and another on the exegetical bag of tricks he used in composing *On Genesis*; two others attempt, respectively, to elaborate on Bede's understanding of deification and of what it means to be "perfect." The remaining seven address a potpourri of topics, including Bede's self-presentation at his *Historia*'s end; his affinity for John's Gospel; his innovation in narrating certain kinds of miracles; his scholarly program and Cassiodorus' influence upon it; his knowledge—or what he thought he knew—of Hebrew and its alphabet; his use of Scripture, classical sources, and his own powers of observation to arrive at a rational yet non-scientific understanding of the natural world; and the pastoral and theological aims that guided the writing of his *Martyrology*. What follows is a summary of just a few of the chapters that caught my eye.

Arthur Holder's chapter on Bede's doctrine of deification skirts the problem of Bede's never using any form of the word *deificare* by appealing to the plentiful mention that Bede makes of the following four models of salvation that St. Augustine of Hippo closely associated with his explicit use of the term *deificare*: recapitulation, divine adoption, the exchange of divine and human natures, and moral regeneration. Holder proceeds not only to show how Bede's various writings give voice to each of these four models, but also takes pains to underscore Bede's signature way of articulating the model in question. For example, Holder observes that while Bede agrees with Augustine's understanding of recapitulation as effecting a restoration of the divine image and likeness in the rational soul, Bede stresses how that soul, as divine image, also participates in a divine holiness that is conferred not through human merit but through Christ's generosity.

Celia Chazelle contributes a deeply researched chapter about a little-studied genre of Bede's work, namely, the *capitula*, or chapter headings, that he composed for much of sacred Scripture. Chazelle concludes that this work was important to Bede because he mentions it

in the famous summary of his written work at the end of his *Ecclesiastical History*. As one who read Scripture before it was divided into our modern system of chapters and verses, Bede relied on a sequence of sentences or phrases (*capitula*) that, when taken together, amounted to a sort of précis of an entire biblical book. These *capitula* typically prefaced the book itself. Chazelle identifies several biblical books for which Bede wrote their *capitula* and helpfully shows the acumen and creativity he displayed for a task that, at first glance, might seem to us humdrum. She includes in her chapter—by far the longest in the volume—an illuminating appendix that, among other things, shows side-by-side comparisons of the *capitula* written for the Acts of the Apostles in the Codex Amiatinus with those that Bede composed for the same book. Chazelle observes that when each set of *capitula* are considered in their entirety and then compared, Bede's typical *capitulum* tends to be longer, gives a clearer idea of a passage's narrative development, better captures the passage's thematic scope, and transitions more smoothly between the *capitula* that precede and follow it. More than that, when Bede's *capitula* on Acts are read in order, one clearly discerns in them a thematic unity that highlights the Church's steady growth into a unified community. By contrast, the corresponding Amiatinus *capitula* collectively leave no similar impression of unity.

Alan Thacker's piece marshals new evidence to counter the view, which Paul Meyvaert and others espoused, that Bede did not know of Cassiodorus' *Institutions*. Against Meyvaert—who noted that Bede never mentions this work, was silent about many of its recommendations, and cannot be shown definitively to have quoted from it—Thacker argues not only that Bede and his monastic community knew that work but also that their entire body of scholarship followed a program that it commends. To cite just one piece of that evidence, Thacker highlights the *Institutions*' warm commendation of sources that other Latin Fathers were less likely to use, but that Bede used eagerly and regularly. These include the writings of Josephus, Dionysius Exiguus, and Eugippus. To be sure, much of the evidence that Thacker cites is circumstantial, but where would any of us early medievalists be if forbidden to do that? Plus, the weight of Thacker's evidence, which is too various and detailed to summarize here, is impressive.

Although this volume contains much valuable research on Bede as scholar, some of its chapters left me feeling underwhelmed. A few lacked the pizzazz of either a venturesome thesis or an arresting insight. This lack did not make these chapters bad so much as just not very memorable. Like most collections of edited conference papers, this one lacks a unity that might inspire a reader to want the entire volume, as opposed to the occasional chapter in it.