

# THEOLOGY



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## INTERPRETATIVE PECULIARITIES OF THE COMMENTARY ON THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES BY BEDE THE VENERABLE

### Abstract

In the *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, Bede the Venerable goes beyond the literary level of the biblical text. Wishing to elucidate its message to the readers, he explains historical problems, deals with dating or refers to geographic and topographic data which provide the background to biblical events, so that the meaning of the inspired books could be best understood by his contemporaries. In this sense, the methodology used by Bede can be even more justifiably defined as eclectic and pastoral. Due to this approach, the *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* discussed in this article bears the hallmarks of originality as regards theological, philological as well as geographical aspects of the work.

**Keywords:** Patristic exegesis, Bede the Venerable, biblical theology, Acts of the Apostles

## OSOBLIWOŚCI INTERPRETACYJNE KOMENTARZA DO DZIEJÓW APOSTOLSKICH BĘDY CZCIGODNEGO

### Abstrakt

W *Komentarzu do Dziejów Apostolskich* Beda Czcigodny nie zatrzymuje się jedynie na warstwie literackiej tekstu biblijnego. Pragnąc przybliżyć jego przesłanie swoim czytelnikom, objaśnia on problemy historyczne, zajmuje się datacją, sięga do danych geograficznych i topograficznych, będących sceną biblijnych wydarzeń, po to, by przesłanie ksiąg natchnionych było jak najlepiej zrozumiane przez jemu współczesnych. W tym sensie bardziej metodologię stosowaną przez Bedę należały uznać za eklektyczną i pastoralną. Takie podejście sprawiło, że omawiany w tym artykule *Komentarz do Dziejów Apostolskich* nosi znamiona oryginalności tak pod względem teologicznym, jak również filologicznym i geograficznym.

**Słowa kluczowe:** egzegeza patrystyczna, Beda Czcigodny, teologia biblijna, Dzieje Apostolskie

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## INTRODUCTION

Based on at least partial perusal of Bede the Venerable's works, it can be concluded that his exegetical writings have a didactic character and concentrate on broadly understood pastoral influence accommodating for the needs of the author's contemporaries. The same refers to his *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* belonging, as it might be deduced from the introductory letter in which *Doctor Venerabilis* dedicates his work to the Bishop of Acca of Hexham, to the early writings of his *opera exegetica* and being usually dated for the years between 709 and 716 (Whiting 1966, 17). At that time, Bede intended to provide a comment on the Gospel of Luke, however, compelled by time, he limited his work to the second part of the writings of the third evangelist, because, as he himself explained: "In the meantime, however, lest the authority of your request be disparaged, I have done what I could. I have sent you a little work on the Acts of the Apostles, which was produced not many days ago, and, so as not to impede your most holy will, I put it out as quickly as time permitted in corrected form on little parchments".

In fact, the *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* cannot be regarded as a systematic reference to the entire first history of Christianity, as it is evidenced by the apportionment of the material. Some chapters seem to have been treated rather briefly by Bede, in others his exegesis encompasses philological nuances of individual words and expressions, and still elsewhere, some verses are completely omitted. Probably such an approach to the subject of his study forced Bede the Venerable to write around the year 730, a second work devoted to the Book of Acts of the Apostles - *Retractatio in Actus Apostolorum*, in order - as he himself noted - "to add what I had previously overlooked, or to correct what seems to have been stated differently than I would wish" (PL 92,995C). In the case of both of the above-mentioned works, Bede goes beyond the literary level of the biblical text. Wishing to elucidate its message to the readers, he explains historical problems, deals with dating, refers to geographic and topographic data which provide the background to biblical events, so that the meaning of the inspired books could be best understood by his contemporaries. In this sense, it would be more justifiable to define the methodology used by Bede as eclectic and pastoral (Ray 1982, 9). Indeed, the Doctor of the Church tried to understand the mysteries of the Sacred Scriptures, reaching, inter alia, to the seven hermeneutical principles of Ticonius<sup>2</sup> with which he got acquainted while reading *De doctrina christiana* of St. Augustine<sup>3</sup>. However, Bede was aware that his potential readers, due to the level

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<sup>2</sup> Ticonius was a Christian writer and a Donatist, writing in the years 370-390.

<sup>3</sup> "Tichonius quidam qui contra Donatistas invictissime scripsit, cum fuerit donatista, et illic invenitur absurdissimi cordis, ubi eos non omni ex parte relinquere voluit, fecit librum quem Regularum vocavit, quia in eo quasdam septem regulas exsecutus est, quibus quasi clavibus divinarum Scripturarum aperirentur occulta. Quarum primam ponit, De Domino et eius corpore; secundam, De Domini corpore bipartito; tertiam, De promissis et Lege; quartam, De specie et genere; quintam, De temporibus; sextam, De recapitulatione; septimam, De diabolo et eius corpore. Quae quidem

of their erudition as well as knowledge of Latin, need not so much the “solid food” in the form of systematic, scientific commentaries on individual biblical books, but rather the “spiritual milk”, i.e., simple explanations of pictorial character. Due to this approach, the *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* discussed in this article bears the hallmarks of originality as regards theological, philological as well as geographical aspects of the work.

## 1. THEOLOGICAL PECULIARITIES

Bearing in mind the fact that Bede’s work was primarily addressed to young adepts of religious life and to the relatively young Church of England which was in need of strengthening its faith (Sztuk 2018, 19), one can hardly be surprised at his praise of the perseverance of religious communities<sup>4</sup> founded by Augustine of Canterbury in the spirit of the first Jerusalem community whose picture was presented in Acts 4:32. Following the path set by the patristic tradition, Bede perceived this community as a model to be followed by his brothers, arguing in the *Commentary on the Acts*: “Those who had completely left the world behind by no means pushed themselves forward, one over the other, glorying in the nobility of other birth. Rather, as though born from the womb of one and the same mother, the church, they all rejoiced in one and the same love of brotherhood” (4:32). It also seems that this first Church community, beginning with the apostles, entrusted by Christ on the Mount of Olives with the task of being “witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”<sup>5</sup>, became a model for those who, in Bede’s time, were to set out on the mission of preaching the word.

To point to the universalism of the mission and at the same time to the spread of the Good News both to Jews and Gentiles, Bede enriches interpretation of Acts 4:11 with an excerpt from of a Christological hymn (Eph 2:14-15) and presents Christ as the cornerstone that unites the Church consisting of two peoples: “The builders were the Jews, while all the gentiles remained in the wasteland of idols. The Jews alone were daily reading the law and the prophets for the building up the people. As they

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consideratae, sicut ab illo aperiuntur, non parum adiuvant ad penetranda quae tecta sunt divinatorum eloquiorum” (PL 34,081). Bede quotes and discusses the *Rules* of Ticonius in the Letter to Eusebius, which provides an introduction to his Commentary on the Book of Revelation, and he refers to Ticonius himself as: “vir inter suos eruditissimus” (PL 93,131-134).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *HEGA I*,26: “Ut idem in Cantia primitivae Ecclesiae et doctrinam sit imitatus et vitam, atque in urbe regis sedem episcopatus acceperit. At ubi datam sibi mansionem intraverant, coeperunt apostolicam primitivae Ecclesiae vitam imitari; orationibus, videlicet, assiduis, vigiliis, ac ieiuniis serviendo, verbum vitae quibus poterant praedicando, cuncta huius mundi velut aliena spernendo, ea tantum quae victui necessaria videbantur, ab eis quos docebant, accipiendo, secundum ea quae docebant ipsi per omnia vivendo, et paratum ad patiendum adversa quaeque, vel etiam ad moriendum pro ea quam praedicabant veritate, animum habendo. Quid mora? Crediderunt nonnulli, et baptizabantur, mirantes simplicitatem innocentis vitae, ac dulcedinem doctrinae eorum caelestis”.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 1,8. Many contemporary exegetes see here the programmatic and structuring verse of the Book of Acts (Conzelmann 1987, 7; Kręcidło 2008, 19-24).

were building, they came to the cornerstone, which embraces two walls – that is, they found in the prophetic scriptures that Christ, who would bring together in himself two peoples, was to come in the flesh. And, because they preferred to remain in one wall, that is, to be saved alone, they rejected the stone, which was not one-sided, but two-sided. Nevertheless, although they were unwilling, God by himself placed this [stone] at the chief position in the corner, so that from two testaments and two peoples there might rise up a building of one and the same faith”<sup>6</sup>.

As regards the order of assimilating the Good News, Bede in his commentary was able to combine in an allegorical manner two seemingly distant pericopes recounting successively the story about the lame man healed in the temple by Peter (3:2) and about the Lyconian man taken down by the same affliction and healed by Paul (14:7). According to Bede, who relates material facts to spiritual realities, the first man symbolizes the Jews, and the second the pagans converted to the faith in Christ: “The times are appropriate to the exposition, for the former [i.e., the lame man cured by Peter and John] was cured in the earliest days of faith, when the word was not yet believed by gentiles. The latter [i.e., the lame Lycaonian] was cured in the midst of the new joys of the converted gentile world, when the Jews had been excluded for their lack of faith and sprinkled with the dust of damnation”<sup>7</sup>.

The *Commentary* provides also allegories that bring out a deeper spiritual meaning, such as the interpretation of Acts 27:33, which recounts how St. Paul saved his companions on the cruise to Rome: “When Paul persuaded the men he had promised would be saved from shipwreck to take the food; also in the fact that in the middle of the night they were kept from going wrong by four anchors in the violence of the waves; and that with the coming of day they climbed out onto a point of land. No one escapes the tempests of this world except those who are nourished by the bread of life, and one who in the night of present tribulations depends for all his strength on wisdom, fortitude, temperance, and justice will soon, with the shining forth of divine help, reach the port of salvation which he had”. Also, Bede’s interpretation of St. Paul’s escape from Damascus (Acts 9:25), can be regarded as an in-depth reflection on the universal meaning of this passage of the Acts of the Apostles: “Even today this sort of escape is preserved in the church

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<sup>6</sup> Also in the *Commentary on the Revelation*, Bede, interpreting chapter VII and referring allegorically to the individual tribes of Israel, puts a spotlight on them and brings them out of the “crowd that no one could count” (Rev. 7:9), to point out that that it were the tribes of Israel that the Gospel was preached to first, and only then the pagans were to hear about the salvation heralded (PL 93,0152D: “enumeratis tribubus Israel, quibus Evangelium primo praedicatum est, salvationem quoque velit commemorare gentium”). In this sense, both in the *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* and in his work on the Apocalypse, Bede draws the conclusion on the universal character of the proclamation and propagation of the word of God.

<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere (2:19) Bede, explaining the event of Pentecost and the phenomena accompanying it, says: “It is also possible to understand the fire as the enlightening of the faithful, and the vapor of smoke as the blindness of the Jews who did not believe. Whence also when about to give the law the Lord descended in fire and smoke because through the brilliance of his manifestation, he enlightened the humble, and through the murky smoke of error he dimmed the eyes of the proud”.

whenever someone who has enveloped in the snares of the ancient enemy, or in the traps of this world, is saved through the defences of his hope and faith. For the wall of Damascus (which means *drinking blood*) is the adversity of the world. King Aretas (which means *a descent*) is understood to be the evil. The basket, which is usually constructed of rushes and palm leaves, designates the conjunction of faith and hope, for the rush signifies the freshness of faith, and the palm signifies the hope of eternal life. Therefore, anyone who sees himself encircled by wall of adversity should be quick to climb into the basket of the virtues, in which he may make his escape”.

Closely related to the above-mentioned topic of the assimilation of the Good News is the issue of the continuity and unity of revelation, which means also, the unity of the Old and New Testaments (Holder 2010, 150-154). According to Bede, the 120 people gathered at the gates of the Cenacle (1:15) symbolize the perfection of both the old and the new law. However, according to the Doctor of the Church, the unity of the two Testaments rather than excluding, implies progress, i.e., the transition from one to the other and the superiority of the New over the Old: “The tabernacle of David signifies a trace of the law, which was corrupted and torn to pieces by the betrayals of the Pharisees. However, with the Lord’s return, that is, his appearance in the flesh, it was built up by God with spiritual grace, so that not only the Jews, but also all the gentile nations, would seek after his name” (15:16). Elsewhere, the Doctor of the Church justifies his point further: “The ancient tabernacle indeed had ritual ordinances and a sanctuary, though an early one, embellished with gold and silver, but the blood of the gospel, more precious than the metals of the law, springs forth” (3:6).

In his *Commentary*, Bede does stop at the *expositio* of salvatory facts and history. Following in the footsteps of St. Paul, *Doctor Venerabilis* enriches his reflection with moral guidelines. Here, Bede expresses his conviction that the indwelling of the Holy Spirit allows to “transcend the abode of the flesh by contemplation of the mind”, and “the temporal labor of the church will be rewarded with the eternal denarius” (2:1). Bede’s parenthesis does not bear the features of a systematic lecture, because the very genre of the commented book of Holy Scripture seems to point to the paradigmatic nature of the protagonists of the first history of Christianity, i.e., the apostles. They remain for Bede and for all Christians “those who, radiating virtue, have revealed to all the mysteries of Christ” (4:33). Following the above, moral teaching is conveyed by the author of the *Commentary* in the form of numerous, albeit short, sentences, which are to be remembered by the reader, as if incidentally, on the occasion of learning about the characters and events.

## 2. PHILOSOPHICAL AND TOPOGRAPHIC PECULIARITIES

Bede the Venerable had the unquestionable advantage of the possibility to use the library resources of the abbey in which he lived and wrote, including the Greek

and Latin codes of the Holy Scriptures<sup>8</sup>. Although, in the *Commentary* he does not conduct full and accurate textual criticism in the modern sense and according to modern principles, but in some dubious places he tries to compare different recorded versions of the inspired text and draw conclusions as to the meaning of a given passage of the Acts of the Apostles. Bede does so, among others, in the commentary on Acts 28:11: “After three months we sailed in an Alexandrian ship bearing the emblem of the Dioscurs, which wintered on the island”, in which he writes: “I believe that what was originally written was: insigne Castorum, but through the fault of scribes the letter r was added, just as we often find frustra written for the piece [frusta] of bread, and adpropiat for appropiat in the most of ancient exemplars. For the Greek παρασήμω Διοσκούροις is written for insigne Castorum<sup>9</sup>. The twin Castores, that is, Castor and Pollux, are called Διόσκουροι in Greek”.

Another example of Bede’s reference to different versions of the inspired text is the commentary on Acts 7:14, where in his speech Stephen recalls the story contained in Genesis 46:27: “«He sent Joseph for Jacob and brought his father and his whole family, numbering seventy-five». In his discourse he followed the Septuagint. In the original Hebrew, however, we find only seventy souls. Even if you should wish to count up the same lineage of souls in Genesis, you would find only seventy souls, even with the addition of Jacob himself, and Joseph with his two sons who were in Egypt”. Indeed, the text of the LXX mentions seventy-five members of Jacob’s family who came to Egypt (πάσαι ψυχαι οἴκου Ιακωβ αἱ εἰσελθοῦσαι εἰς Αἴγυπτον ἑβδομήκοντα πέντε), while the Hebrew Bible, as well as Jerome who follows it, gives the number of seventy (מֵרַצְיָאֵם הָאֶרְבָּעָה בְּקֵעֵי־תִיבְלָה שְׁפִנְיָה־לֶפֶךְ הַמִּצְרַיִם). Other examples of passages evidencing that Bede conducted a comparative analysis of different versions of the Biblical text, can be found in other places of the commentary on the Acts of the Apostles (4:1; 10:38; 22:18a; 23:6; 26:2.10).

Another example of Bede’s specific interpretation is also his commentary to Acts 18:3, which recount St. Paul’s arrival to Corinth and his devoting himself with Priscilla and Aquila to the craft of making tents: “Now in Greek tents are called σκῆναι, which is etymologically derived from ‘the giving shade’. Among them [Greeks], shade is called σκία. σκῆναι, or σκηνώματα denote a kind of shady covering, which the ancient constructed from woolen, linen, or haircloth curtains, or from branches or cuttings from trees. Mystically, however, just as Peter by fishing

<sup>8</sup> In Bede’s times, the Wearmouth-Jarrow Abbey was one of the places where the *Codex Amiatinus* was kept. Dated at the turn of the 7th and 8th centuries (698-716), it was copied from manuscripts brought from Italy by Abbot Ceolfrid and, shortly after, moved to the San Salvatore Monastery on Mount Amiata in Tuscany, where it remained until 1786 to be donated later to the Medicea Laurenzian Library in Florence where it has been kept ever since. Moreover, it is believed that Bede had access to at least two other versions of the Vulgate, as well as the *Vetus Latina* manuscripts (including the so-called *Laudianus Graecus* 35) (Farr 1999, 336-344; Meyvert 1995, 348-380).

<sup>9</sup> In fact, Greek manuscripts present another example of a specific *lectio varians*, because some of them contain the name Διοσκοροις (P74, Ψ, 104, 326, 453). However, this Greek *lectio* adds nothing new to the interpretation of the passage in the Acts of the Apostles, as it is an Attic version of the same name (Cf. LIDELL & SCOTT 1968, 435).

draws us out of the waves of the world by nets of faith, so also Paul, by erecting shady coverings of protection, defends us by his word and deeds from the rain of our faults, from the fierce heat of temptations, and from the winds of the snare”.

The above-presented examples illustrate Bede’s attempt to explain thoroughly the mysteries contained in the biblical text. At that stage of his life and knowledge of Greek, it was probably a challenge (Stenton 1970, 181-186; Lynch 1983, 180)<sup>10</sup>.

Bede’s words contained in the Preface to the *Commentary*: “Here I have attempted, insofar as I could, to shed light on those things which seemed to be treated mystically or stated somewhat obscurely” may to a point provide a certain indication as regards the author’s own intention as well as the methodology which he used to create his work. Bede, following the indications of the Fathers of the Church, found it necessary to clarify the details that his great predecessors used to call *swmatika*<sup>11</sup>, and which for the simple recipient of the messages of the Acts of the Apostles could have been obscure due to the use of incomprehensible names and nuances of historical references<sup>12</sup>. Willing to fulfill this task, Bede interprets Stephen’s speech delivered at the gates of Jerusalem (7:16-17) and tries to explain the intricacies of names referring to the burial place of the patriarchs, including Abraham himself, according to the Christocentric key. However, interpretation of the toponyms does not seem to be Bede’s strength which may result from his lack of orientation or more likely, to his disorientation caused by the hypothetical linking of many places in Palestine to a particular toponym in the era of increased interest in holy places in the 5th to 7th centuries. In the same manner, though based on a peculiar philological interpretation of the toponym “Gaza”, Bede explains the passage from the Acts of the Apostles about Philip’s meeting with an Ethiopian courtier (8, 26): “Allegorically this designates the people of the gentiles, who were once separated from the worship of God, uncultivated by the preaching of the prophets. The road which went down to this same place from Jerusalem and opened the fountain of salvation is the Lord Jesus Christ, who said, «I am the way and the truth and the life» (John 14:6). From the Jerusalem above ‘he came down’ to our infirmities, and with the water of baptism he made white the blackness of our guilty condition”.

When explaining the meaning of biblical toponyms and names, *Doctor Venerabilis* likes to refer to the works of Jerome<sup>13</sup>. It should be noted here that Bede

<sup>10</sup> In his article, Lynch made a linguistic comparison of two of Bede’s works on the Acts of the Apostles. Concluding his considerations on the use of the Greek language in the *Commentary*, he states: “The number (one hundred and twenty-five) and the variety of Greek allusions in Re. prove that by that late point in his career Bede was able to translate Greek biblical texts independently” (435).

<sup>11</sup> ὄπερ ἐπιγόνοντα τὸν Πέτρον προτρεπτικῶς μήτε κωλύσαι μήτε προτρέψασθαι. τὸν μὲντοι Ἰωάννην ἔσχατον, συνιδόντα ὅτι τὰ σωματικὰ ἐν τοῖς εὐαγγελίοις δεδήλωται, προτραπέντα ὑπὸ τῶν γνωρίμων, πνεύματι θεοφορηθέντα πνευματικὸν ποιῆσαι εὐαγγέλιον (Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* VI, 14, 7).

<sup>12</sup> One cannot forget another work by Bede, in which he lists and discusses briefly selected toponyms. Cf. *Expositio de Nominibus locorum, vel civitatum, quae leguntur in libro actuum apostolorum* (PL 92,1033-1040).

<sup>13</sup> The works mentioned here are: *De situ et nominibus locorum Hebraeorum and Liber interpretationis nominum Hebraicorum*.

refrains from correcting Jerome of Stridon's intuitions even if some of them are often difficult to justify. This can be read as a proof of his relatively poor knowledge of the Hebrew language from which the saint derived the source of his etymology.

And thus, Bede explains that "Philip means 'the mouth of lamp,' and there is a beautiful meaning in 'the mouth of lamp' opening his mouth as he brought the obscurities of prophecy into the light of knowledge" (8:35). Elsewhere, using the Hebrew etymology, he deduces the meaning of the Greek name and strikes a momentous tone: "In a very beautiful way he anticipated by the portent in his name what he was about to experience in reality – abjectly stoned but crowned on high. In Hebrew, however, his name means *your norm*" (6:8).

## CONCLUSION

Despite the minor imperfections, noted several centuries after the *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* was written, it is difficult to underestimate the wealth of work contributed by Bede the Venerable to the interpretation of Biblical texts. Especially impressive are Bede's broad horizons of interpretation encompassing both the books of the Holy Scriptures and the thoughts of the Church Fathers<sup>14</sup>, from which he skillfully drew knowledge on the ways to approach the inspired texts. Bede's efforts to reach to other historical sources beyond the Bible, such as the writings of Josephus must also be remembered here.<sup>15</sup> All this makes Bede the Venerable's *Commentary* a skillful combination of biblical *circumstantiae* and the traditional doctrine and morals. Thus, the peculiarities discussed in this article can be regarded as Bede's original contribution to the history of Biblical interpretation.

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<sup>14</sup> In the case of the two works on the Acts of the Apostles, it was a very discreet procedure, because Bede had no prior Latin commentary on this book of the Bible at his disposal, simply because there was no such a commentary at that time. However, *Doctor Venerabilis* managed to find in the works collected in the library of the Wearmouth-Jarrow Abbey passages relating to some motifs of the first history of Christianity, and he skillfully integrated them into the content of his own commentary. Sometimes, the used text is properly introduced (e.g., in the commentary on Acts 2:2, where Bede referred to some lines from Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Job* 28,1,2).

<sup>15</sup> This particularly relates to *Antiquitates Judaicae*.

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