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What do we know about Bede’s Commentaries?

One often reads that Bede thought of the *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* as his greatest book. He must have considered it his unmatched literary creation; a work of nearly unprecedented design, it was built with self-conscious rhetorical art largely from folk traditions and meant to give his people a history they never before had. Yet it is precisely the *Historia ecclesiastica* which makes it plain that “Bede was not only, or even primarily, a historian”\(^1\). In an autobiographical note appended to the narrative, in words written perhaps after the onset of his final illness, he leaves no doubt about his great lifework. It was biblical exegesis: “I have given my all to the study of Scripture”\(^2\). In the same place he names all but a few of his writings. They do not come in chronological order; nor does the *Historia ecclesiastica* have a favored position. First of all he lists his biblical titles, which number more than twenty (better than half of his total œuvre) and cover a large part of both Testaments. Actually the bibliography is two exegetical works short\(^3\). The eyewitness account of Bede’s death claims that he was still on the job as a biblical scholar until the very last\(^4\). It is not hard to believe if one considers how many of Bede’s Scriptural writings were finished in the final decade of his life. Perhaps Bede composed some of the commentaries “with a sense of tearing hurry”, as Mayr-Harting has recently suggested\(^5\). It is apparent

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3. The list makes no mention of the *De locis sanctis*, even though Bede refers to it in *HE* 5.17; nor of the *Aliquot quaestionum liber*, the first eight questions of which (PL 93.455-462) are now generally recognized as genuine.
that a few took decades to complete. At any rate only a handful are now lost, which is not the only thing that attests the high esteem the rest enjoyed for centuries.

In fact Bede's commentaries were treasured all over Europe throughout the Middle Ages. The number and diffusion of MSS (they run on for more than sixty pages of Laistner's *Hand-List of Bede Manuscripts*, and the list is incomplete) argue that the biblical works were the bedrock of Bede's immense medieval fame. They caused the great missionary Boniface to speak of Bede as "candela ecclesiae" and Alcuin to put him among the five fathers of the Church. In modern scholarship, however, they have suffered remarkable, I would say regrettable, neglect. To this day one of the commentaries, the *collectio* on the Pauline Epistles, lies in MS. Of the rest many must still be read in the defective editions of Giles and Migne. The situation has been scarcely better for the study of the methods and contents of the exegetical works. *The Cambridge History of the Bible* devotes all of four sentences to Bede's

6. This is true of *In Genesim*, ed. C. W. Jones, CCSL 118A; see the editorial remarks, pp. vii-x. P. Meyvaert, *Bede the Scholar*, in G. Bonner, ed., *Famulus Christi*, Essays in Commemoration of the Thirteenth Centenary of the Birth of the Venerable Bede (London, 1976), pp. 63-64, note 20, argues that the *In Cantica Canticorum allegorica expositio* (PL 91.1065-1236) was written over a long period of time. In *HE* 5.17 Bede says that his *De locis sanctis* was finished "not long ago", *dudum*. According to M. L. W. Laistner, materials from this work appear in Bede's first commentary on Acts, which was composed ca. 709; see Laistner, ed., *Venerabilis Bedae Expositio Actuum Apostolorum et retractatio* (Cambridge, Mass., 1939), p. xxxvii. Since Bede wrote the *HE* toward 731, it would appear that the *De locis sanctis* is another book that was prepared in stages. For the dates of the remaining exegetical works, where it is possible to give dates at all, see M. L. W. Laistner and H. H. King, *A Hand-List of Bede Manuscripts* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1943), pp. 20-82.

7. One of the lost items (*HE* 5.24) is described as "distinctiones capitulorum" on the prophets, excerpted from a treatise of Jerome; the other two are said to be "capitula. lectionum" (excerpts for liturgical reading?), one on the Pentateuch, Joshua, and Judges, and the other on the whole New Testament except the Gospels.


WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT BEDE'S COMMENTARIES?

exegesis. Spicq and Smallley, in their respective histories of medieval biblical study, are little more expansive, and by a prodigious effort in the indices one can piece together from Lubac's massive Exégèse médiévale only a narrow view of the Bedan commentaries. Among general books on Bede, the only one that gives due place to his lifework is now a century old. The most recent synthesis, Hunter Blair's The World of Bede, omits exegesis altogether. No contributor to Famulus Christi, the anthology that marked the 1300th anniversary of Bede's birth, addressed himself strictly to biblical scholarship. The sole book-length discussion of the commentaries is Carroll's The Venerable Bede: His Spiritual Teachings; published just after the war, it stresses theological conclusions, not the methods that led to them, and was written at a moment when one still had no choice but to rely for the most part on editions that tell little about the extent of Bede's theological reading. On the Bedan hermeneutics short studies are more helpful, though precious few and never more than exploratory. No doubt the state of the texts long discouraged research, while some scholars have likely thought that the commentaries, with all their allegorical flights and patristic quotations, are jejune and scissors-and-paste, not a true measure of the mind that made the Historia ecclesiastica.

12. K. Werner, Beda der Ehrwürdige und seine Zeit (Vienna, 1881), pp. 150-203.
At least we now have a good sampling of the commentaries in critical editions, thanks mainly to the CCSL. In time all Bede’s exegetical works, even the collectio on the Pauline Epistles, will appear in the series. It is disappointing that the CCSL editors have not always met the standards set in 1939 by Laistner, in his edition of the two commentaries on Acts. In any case the new texts, besides saving us in part from Giles and Migne, cast further light on the Wearmouth and Jarrow library, enough to warrant a thorough revision of Laistner’s catalogue of it. I might mention here that Bede’s Augustinian collection included not only the De trinitate but also several other items that do not appear in Laistner’s list.

For future research it is a good sign that some have begun to recognize that exegesis was the driving force of all Bede’s learning and that strong ties link the commentaries to his other writings. For example, Campbell is only one of the scholars who have seen that the exegetical works attest important features of Bede’s historical intelligence and so are inseparable from the Historia ecclesiastica. In the study of sacra historia Bede often dealt with


19. In his edition of the two commentaries on Acts (see above, note 6), Laistner himself gave evidence of many further things, including the De trinitate and a number of sermons and letters; see Expositio Actuum Apostolorum et retractatio, pp. xxxix, 7, 15, 46, 50, 65, 67, 73, 77, 98, 118, 119, 127, 130. A critical edition of the now unprinted collectio on the Pauline Epistles will carry the Augustinian list further. Wilmart has already found that the MSS indicate that Bede knew at least six of the anti-Pelagian treatises; see La Collection, pp. 49-52, as cited above, note 9. In Lucam 4, lines 765-766, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL 120, makes it certain that Bede had seen Augustine’s De sermone domini in monte.

20. Campbell, Bede, esp. p. 165 (see above, note 1). See too R. W. Hanning, The Vision of History in Early Britain (New York, 1966), pp. 63-90; J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, Bede and Plummer, in Bonner, ed., Famulus Christi, p. 373 (see above, note 6), and in the same volume mv Bede, the Exegete, as Historian, pp. 125-140;
the historian's problems—conflicting, vague, and omitted dates and time references; divergent accounts of the same events; sources of different kinds, from eyewitness testimony to popular opinion; topographical, geographical, and circumstantial details; corrupt texts; among others. Bede's commentaries explore ideas that become formative in the *Historia ecclesiastica*, such as the English *gens* as an elect People of God\(^{21}\), the godly king\(^{22}\), and the saints and their miracles\(^{23}\). To interpret the Bible Bede turned for details to non-biblical works of history, like the *Historia ecclesiastica* of Eusebius and Rufinus, which provided opportunities to observe the practice of the craft. For Bede, the same as for Augustine and Jerome, the competent exegete was *ipso facto* a student of history and historical literature. Hence if his chronological and hagiographical studies were, as if often said, two important paths to the *Historia ecclesiastica*, exegesis was certainly a third and probably the broadest. In fact some knowledge of Bede's least-known writings, the commentaries, now seems preparatory to an adequate reading of his acclaimed masterpiece.

"It may here be further remarked that a proper understanding of Bede's methods as a commentator will help to illuminate the general practice of a medieval scholar, save that, at least in the early centuries, few approached within measurable distance of his standards"\(^{24}\). Nearly fifty years after Laistner wrote these words we still do not have that "proper understanding", studies that represent the range and quality of Bede's hermeneutical style. But we know some things which I shall now illustrate. It seems correct to say, at the outset, that Bede's method was not just allegorical and figural but mainly eclectic and pastoral. He used any device, or combination of devices, that might make the biblical text

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edifying to his audience. He even took some tools, via Augustine, from a notorious schismatic, Tyconius. Exegetical theory, as Jones has stressed, never forced Bede’s hand, and the display of it is sometimes a show of topoi. Yet some of his methodological utterances were not said for nothing, as Jones has also shown. I want to draw attention to a crucial premise planted in the autobiographical note attached to the Historia ecclesiastica.

There Bede claims that his major task had ever been to abbreviate selections from patristic exegesis and add such things as help to clarify sense and meaning: “... in Scripturam sanctam meae meorumque necessitati ex opusculis uenerabilium patrum breviter adnotare, siue etiam ad formam sensus et interpretationis eorum superadicere curaui” 27. These words tell more about the making of the commentaries (and homilies) than anything Bede otherwise said about exegetical theory. For him interpreting the Bible was almost the same thing as studying the works of Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, and Gregory. They were the standard bearers of that community of Roman religious thought within which Bede wanted his countrymen to feel at home. About the prospects of this needed domestication he was not naive. More than once he points out that the general run of his readers were not quick in matters of spiritual learning. It was not that his exegetical works were meant for the castigation of rustics, among whom pictures, monumental symbols, or even singing were usually more effective than biblical exposition. Nor were the commentaries written only for the monks of Wearmouth and Jarrow. Some were composed at the request of prelates elsewhere, above all Bishop Acca of Hexham; and all were directed

25. This is emphasized by Willmes, Bolton, and Jones, in the studies cited above, note 16.

26. In Some Introductory Remarks, pp. 131-151, Jones reviews several of Bede’s statements about theory, but by no means all of them.

27. HE 5.24 (see above, note 2).

28. On the patristic sources of Bede’s commentaries, see, besides the apparatus to the critical editions, Laistner, Bede as a Classical and a Patristic Scholar, pp. 202 ff., as cited above, note 24.

29. E.g., In Apocalypsin, PL 93.134; In Genesim, Praef., lines 24-29, CCSL 118A.

to a broad audience of professional churchmen. Yet Bede was not sanguine about the intellectual caliber of barbarian religious. In the *Epistola ad Ecgbertum*, written in the autumn of 734, he complained that some remained “idiotae”, persons who knew only the vernacular. No doubt those who understood Latin were in many cases hard put to concentrate at length, think elevated thoughts, and comprehend ideas taken from books prepared for audiences distant in time and culture. Thus if they were to read or hear the Scriptural wisdom of, say, Augustine, it would have to be in short extracts, clarified in sense and meaning. For instance, Augustine’s *De consensu Evangelistarum* is an urbane and highly rhetorical answer to a question which, I dare-say, few if any of Bede’s readers would ever have thought to raise: how can the Gospel be true if its historical records do not always agree about the life of Jesus? All the same, Bede composed his own commentary on Luke with Augustine’s book virtually in hand. He shaped all the borrowed material to his own purposes, condensing, resetting, explaining, and in measured ways amplifying, but never losing track of the meaning. Augustine wrote *De consensu Evangelistarum* for the sophisticated Late Roman reader; Bede brought it down to his own “lector rudis”.

So Bede did much more than edit and abridge the Fathers for barbarian reading. For this reason the words quoted a moment ago from his autobiographical note are too modest. And there is no reason to dismiss the commentaries as merely secondhand. They belong to Bede. In them it was his practice to deploy the clarified and inflected patristic texts according to didactic aims that make the resulting works his own. This is the method of “critical synthesis” that Bede used in all but a few of his writings, no matter what the sources. In the exegetical works it yields exposition that...


lies, as Willmes has said, "zwischen Rezeptivität und Selbstständigkeit"\textsuperscript{34}. Even the first book of the commentary on Genesis fits Willmes's words. Through most of it the young Bede seems to have done little more than copy furiously from Augustine. From a close study of the relation of the text to its sources, Jones has seen, however, that Bede "chose what he wanted", that is, took materials which in the aggregate produced unmistakably idiosyncratic hexameral exegesis\textsuperscript{35}. A certain simplicity masks the discerning intelligence with which Bede built his commentaries from received authorities. It is important to recognize that this simplicity, which may not be to our taste and for that matter was probably not always to Bede's, attests the intellectual capacity of his anticipated audience, idiotae and all, much more than the power of his own mind. Of course the commentaries were not meant to supersede their patristic sources nor in any way to compete with them. In fact Bede sometimes recommends that his reader consult the text itself from which materials have been taken\textsuperscript{36}. He did not hesitate to expound biblical books, like the Acts of the Apostles, for which there was no patristic commentary. Nevertheless, for the two volumes on Acts Bede ransacked his patristic library for things that were relevant\textsuperscript{37}. This devotion to the Fathers was not scholarly deference, personal reticence, or even monastic humility. It was programmatic. Bede set himself the task of appropriating patristic exegesis to a Saxon church which needed to be drawn gently into the Christian mainstream. It was a task that required pastoral synthesis, not original analysis; straightforward verse-by-verse commentaries, not complex discursive tractates\textsuperscript{38}.

\textsuperscript{34} Willmes, Bedas Bibelaustegung, p. 291 (see above, note 16).
\textsuperscript{35} Jones, Some Introductory Remarks, p. 121 (see above, note 16).
\textsuperscript{36} E.g., in the Expositio Actuum Apostolorum, p. 10 (see above, note 6); In Lucam 4, lines 765-766, CCSL 120.
\textsuperscript{37} See Laistner, ed., Expositio Actuum Apostolorum et retractatio, pp. xxxviii-xli, as cited above, note 6.
\textsuperscript{38} What Bede calls "quaestiones" determine the form of the In Reges and the Aliquot quaestionum liber; the rest of the commentaries are verse-by-verse exegesis.
In a major study Jones has written that Bede’s exegesis was “literary criticism, not theology”\textsuperscript{39}. It is an overstatement, perhaps deliberate; but it makes a needed point. A fundamental aspect of the Bedan hermeneutics is rhetorical analysis. In a way it subsumes even his well-known pursuit of allegories, since \textit{allegoria} was after all a Latin trope. I am sure that one of his two rhetorical works, the \textit{De schematibus et tropis}, was partly meant to serve as an aid to exegesis. The prefatory remarks give this impression, and the second part of the manual, on tropes, leaves no doubt. The basic premise of the work is that the Bible is the original exemplar of all literary art. It outstrips other writings not only because it is divine, redemptive, and ancient, but also because of its preeminent manner of speaking, its “positio dicendi”. This rhetorical excellence is not different from that of the pagan masters, only earlier and better\textsuperscript{40}. Schemes and tropes are locutions that usually do not occur in ordinary speech; Bede illustrates seventeen of the one and twenty-eight of the other entirely from biblical texts. It was an approach to the rhetorical theory of figures that was to “grow like a mustard-seed” in the early medieval cloister\textsuperscript{41}. Jones has said that exegesis was for Bede “a never-ending quest for new points of view”\textsuperscript{42}. As Bede discusses figures of speech the viewpoint often shifts. Some, like the trope \textit{antonomasia}\textsuperscript{43}, have to do with factual information. Others, such as the trope \textit{allegoria}\textsuperscript{44}, use facts to symbolize or typify further facts or meanings. Under allegory Bede spells out the various senses of Scripture, in what Lubac calls a locus classicus of all medieval exegesis\textsuperscript{45}. The literal form of the text may figure (1)

\textsuperscript{39. JONES, Some Introductory Remarks, p. 151, as cited above, note 16.}

\textsuperscript{40. \textit{De schematibus et tropis} I, lines 12-19, ed. C. B. KENDALL, CCSL 123A: “Sed ut cognoscas, dilectissime fili, cognoscant omnes qui haec legere voleant quia sancta Scriptura ceteris omnibus scripturis non solum auctoritate, quia diuina est, uel utilitate, quia ad uitam ductit aeternam, sed et antiquitate et ipsa praeeminet positione dicendi, placuit mihi collectis de ipsa exemplis ostendere quia nihil huiusmodi schematum siue troporum ualent praetendere saecularis eloquentiae magistri, quod non in illa praecesserit”.}

\textsuperscript{41. E. R. CURTIS, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. W. TRASK (New York, 1953), p. 47.}

\textsuperscript{42. JONES, Some Introductory Remarks, p. 133, as cited above, note 16.}

\textsuperscript{43. \textit{De schematibus et tropis} 2, lines 63-67, CCSL 123A.}

\textsuperscript{44. \textit{Ibid.} 2, lines 177-283.}

\textsuperscript{45. DE LUBAC, \textit{Exégèse médiévale}, 2.1, p. 664, as cited above, note 11.}
history, as when the days of creation reflect the ages of the world; (2) spiritual meaning, the allegorical sense proper, as when facts and words suggest the sacraments; (3) moral perfection, a tropological significance, as when Joseph's multicolored coat calls to mind the virtues with which God clothes the faithful; and (4) a mystical or anagogical sense, as when the letter of the text intimates the delights of eternal blessedness. Actually all this involves not four but five levels of meaning, since the letter of the text can have both an external and an internal "historical" sense. At any rate it is possible to overestimate the importance of this scheme for the actual making of Bede's commentaries. So far as I know he never used it as a program. Nor did he feel tied to the terminology of the formula. A study of the allegorical exposition of the Song of Songs has shown that the word *allegoria*, despite the nature of the commentary, appears rarely and that other terms (*typus, figura, mysterium*, among others) dominate Bede's critical vocabulary. *De schematibus et tropis* is in fact the only work in which Bede names all the senses of Scripture in a systematic way; elsewhere he never mentions more than three of them together. In practice he usually responded to the text at whatever level it seemed to speak.

In several places Bede, like the Fathers, employed such language as "*mos scripturae*" and "*consuetudo scripturae*" to designate variations on normal rhetorical usage. It was sometimes "the manner of Scripture" to teach, for example, good morals from evil human conduct or things to be shunned from the lives of otherwise virtuous men. The customary rhetorical *exemplum* praised imitable

46. This is also the view of Bolton, *History*, I, p. 114 (see above, note 16), and of Jones, *Some Introductory Remarks*, pp. 135-141 (see above, note 16).

47. M. P. Barrows, *Bede's Allegorical Exposition of the Canticle of Canticles*, a dissertation for the University of California, Berkeley (1963), p. 164, as quoted at length by Jones, *Some Introductory Remarks*, p. 140 (see above, note 16). Jones, a few pages later (151-166), provides an important discussion of the interpretive nomenclature in *In Genesim*.


49. In *primam partem Samuhelis* 2, lines 993-1049, CCSL 119. Other cases of "*mos scripturae*" statements: In *primam partem Samuhelis* 1, lines 994-1005, 1767-1797, and 4, lines 1859-1865, 2104-2123; In *Reges* 29, lines 7-16, CCSL 119; De *templo* 2, lines 1431-1451, CCSL 119A.
deeds in worthy actions or taught cautionary truths from bad deeds. For Bede the Bible was certainly not the slave of ancient literary theory and in many instances had a way of artful speaking that the rhetorical literature did not illuminate. The seven exegetical rules of Tyconius, which Bede knew from Augustine and copied into the *In Apocalypsin*, were attractive because they helped to understand figures of speech and thought that were distinctively used by the sacred writers.\(^{50}\)

For the most part, however, Bede studied the Bible in light of prevailing Latin literary norms. Genre was a matter of recurrent interest to him. In the *De arte metrica* he wrote that the "historia" of the Book of Job is something of a medley: "... non tota poetico, sed partim rhetorico, partim ... metrico vel rithmico ...".\(^{51}\) The same belief that the biblical *historia* may combine prose and poetry comes out in the *Historia ecclesiastica* where Bede, before inserting one of his own poems into the narrative, explains that he is following the custom of Scripture, "cuius historiae carmina indita et haec metro ac versibus constat esse conposita".\(^{52}\) In the commentary on I Samuel, he used the term "officium historici" in its technical sense, to speak of the literary duty of the historian Luke.\(^{53}\) Following Jerome with discernment, Bede once mentioned the "vera lex historiae" that permitted the Gospel narrators, in keeping with their genre, to depart momentarily from the actual truth in order to make a tactical use of "opinio uulgi", even though the vulgar belief that Joseph was the natural father of Jesus was false.\(^{54}\) The misinterpretation of this passage from *In Lucam* has done much mischief to the proper reading of the preface of the *Historia ecclesiastica* in which, as I have shown elsewhere,\(^{55}\) Bede appeals to not this but an entirely different "vera lex historiae". At all odds the exegesis of *Luke* 2.33 is not the only evidence that Bede knew more about rhetorical discourse than he could ever have gathered from the faded cut-flowers of Isidore's *Etymologiae*, which is widely thought

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50. On Bede and the Tyconian rules see BONNER, *Saint Bede*, as cited above, note 16.
51. *De arte metrica* 25, lines 20-25, ed. C. B. KENDALL, CCSL 123A.
52. HE 4.20.
53. *In primam partem Samuhelis*, Prol., lines 34-57, CCSL 119.
54. *In Lucam* 1, lines 1904-1911, CCSL 120.
55. See my *Bede's 'vera lex historiae'* in *Speculum* 55 (1980) 1-22.
to have been his only source of ancient theory. The comment on Acts 7.16, like that on Luke 2.33, rests on an inventional principle that Isidore does not discuss; and this exegesis, unlike that on Luke 2.33, came entirely from Bede's own knowledge of the theory, not partly from Jerome or another Christian commentator. He handles the rhetorical ideas and even some forensic language with much skill—as if he had learned it all from a textbook that directly describes courtroom oratory. There is a passage in the commentary on I Samuel which by itself makes it probable, I think all but certain, that Bede had seen one or more of the pagan rhetors. Having just alluded to Jerome's Letter 22 and quoted the memorable words of the dream it reports ("non christianus, sed Ciceronianus"), Bede enters the expected demurrer about pagan literature, then goes on to say cautiously that the very learned and truly responsible teacher knows that he must sometimes be helped by the "argumenta sive sententiae" of the gentiles. Considering the nature of Jerome's letter, I am sure that the words "argumenta sive sententiae" refer to Roman rhetoric. And clearly Bede points to works that should not circulate except among experts, which perhaps explains why he never (so far as we now know) gives evidence of having used a specific rhetor. A generation after Bede, Alcuin studied Cicero's De inventione at York. I am convinced that this or some other Roman rhetorical manual was available to Bede at Wearmouth and Jarrow.

What is certain is that the rhetorical aspect of Bede's exegetical method embraced not only elocution but also invention, both the study of biblical style and the discovery of contents for capable discourse about the text. Perhaps the most recurrent evidence of this lies in his use of the circumstantiae. All the rhetors taught that one talks competently about things of the past if one gives attention to their "circumstances," namely, persons, places, times, motives,

56. Expositio Actuum Apostolorum, pp. 32-33 (see above, note 6). After giving his comment, Bede says, "Haec, ut potui, dixi, non praeiudicans sententiae meliori si adsit", which makes it certain that the exegesis was completely his.

57. For a full discussion of the comment on Acts 7.16, see my Bede's 'vera lex historiae', as cited above, note 55.

58. In primam partem Samuhelis 2, lines 2173-2196, CCSL 119.

means, and so on\textsuperscript{60}. These \textit{circumstantiae} were invention\textit{al loci communes}, common places in which one found material for effective speech about one’s subject. I might mention that they were a fascination of the Irish exegetes, and very probably of Theodore and Hadrian of Canterbury\textsuperscript{61}. They were certainly important to the Fathers. Bede’s interest in them ran in two directions. On the one hand, he often tried to clarify the concrete details of biblical narrative, to give \textit{saecra historia} further focus and verisimilitude. To this end he wrote an entire book about the holy places; appended to his first commentary on Acts a topographical glossary; and toiled much over problems of biblical chronology\textsuperscript{62}. On the other hand, by pondering the biblical \textit{circumstantiae} Bede “invented” (found) links between the text and traditional doctrine and morals. He liked to quote, or allude to, the Pauline dictum that all things in Scripture are said in figure. This premise was, of course, the fountainhead of the Christian penchant for figural, typological, and allegorical exegesis. It was a kind of exegesis that might begin with the \textit{circumstantiae}, as Bede makes plain in the methodological beginning of the commentary on the tabernacle:

\begin{quote}
Locuturi iuuante domino de figura tabernaculi et uasorum atque utensilium eius primo situm loci et circumstantiam rerum quomodo sese haberint quando haec fieri quae precepta sunt inspicere atque attentius considerare debemus. “Omnia” enim, sicut apostolus ait, “in figura contingebant illis scripta sunt autem propter nos”, omnia uidelicet non solum facta uel uerba quae sacris litteris continentur uerum etiam locorum
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{60.} For a convenient conspectus of the theory, see H. LAUSBERG, \textit{Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik} 1 (Munich, 1960), pp. 179-184.


\textsuperscript{62.} See \textit{De locis sanctis}, ed. J. FRAIPONT, CCSL 175, pp. 249-280, in which there is nothing of allegory; and \textit{Expositio Actuum Apostolorum et retractatio} (see above, note 6) for the glossary (pp. 149-158) and an example of Bede’s chronological studies (pp. 131-132). Actually his work on biblical chronology once got him into trouble with certain Northumbrian millenialists who could not accept his conclusion that there were only 3952 years from Adam to Christ; for Bede’s heated reply to them, see \textit{Epistola ad Pleguinam}, ed. JONES, in \textit{Bedae Opera de temporibus}, pp. 307-315, as cited above, note 33.
et horarum et temporum situs et ipsarum quoque in quibus gesta siue dicta sunt circumstantia rerum. These are not mere fine exordial words but precisely the premise on which *De tabernaculo* stands throughout. Here Bede articulates a Christian rhetorical method, an adaptation of an invention principle to promote the reign of charity. In the *circumstantiae* of the tabernacle he will find what is said in figure.

The higher understanding of Scriptural words, numbers, and events is the driving force of Bede’s exegesis. In light of previous practices of biblical scholars in Ireland and at Canterbury, Bede’s commentaries may represent “a decisive return to the tradition of the ancient Latin exegesis”, as Bischoff has remarked in a masterly article, noting the rise of the Alexandrian style in the British Isles. For Bede himself the emphasis on spiritual meaning was never a question of exegetical schools but of pedagogical strategy. The newly-converted English needed *intelligentia spiritualis*, especially when it came to the Old Testament. He did not want his public to take literally, “Judaico more”, the parts of the Old Testament that are at odds with Christian thought and practice. Yet it is wrong to conclude from isolated and specialized comments about the killing letter that Bede stooped to the historical sense. One must remember that the great part of his New Testament exegesis makes much of *historia* and that a fair amount of his Old Testament comment does the same. Even when confronted with the Apocalypse, where symbols crowd every page, Bede did not lose sight of the letter. At any rate it is salutary to read in a recent publication that Bede was “clearly most at ease when dealing with the *littera* of Scripture, with the actual historical meaning of the text, and the problems that grow therefrom.” Bede tried hard at textual criticism, the activity with which the historical study of the Bible begins. He waged polemical war for *Hebraica veritas*, Jerome’s

63. *De tabernaculo* 1, lines 1-9, CCSL 119A.
64. On number symbolism in *In Genesim*, see Jones, *Some Introductory Remarks*, pp. 166-174, as cited above, note 16.
66. *In primam partem Samuhelis*, Prol., lines 10-34, CCSL 119.
68. Meyvaert, *Bede the Scholar*, p. 61, as cited above, note 6.
translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. His own acquaintance with Hebrew was apparently passive, and his knowledge of Greek is still a matter of scholarly disagreement, but he had enough of the latter language to make the following remark about certain differences between available Latin and Greek codices of Acts:

In quo etiam quaedam quae in Graeco sive aliter seu plus aut minus posita vidimus, breviter commemorare curavimus; quae, utrum nelegentia interpretis omissa vel aliter dicta an inuria librarium sint depravata sive relictta, nondum scire potuimus. Namque Graecum exemplar fuisse falsatum suspicari non audeo; unde lectorem admoneo ut haec ubicumque fecerimus gratia eruditionis legat, non in suo tamen volumine velut emendaturus interserat, nisi forte ea in Latino codice suae editionis antiquitus sic interpretata reppererit.

"On any showing that is a quite sophisticated view of the matter", a leading authority on medieval MSS has said of these words. Bede wrote them in the preface of his Retractatio on Acts, a work which, partly because of his cautious but recurrent attempt to improve the readings, bids fair to rank with the Historia ecclesiastica as one of the maturest products of all his scholarship.

These two works may well have been concurrent projects. This possibility gathers interest once one recognizes that the Acts of the Apostles and the Historia ecclesiastica have several similar themes. Each relates the struggling beginnings of a new church, its growth from mixed early practices to a fuller grasp of the faith, the pivotal importance of an ecclesiastical council, and the appearance of a missionary outlook among an elect people of God. I doubt that this parallelism was entirely lost on Bede, though this is not

69. See Epistola ad Pleguinam, as cited above, note 62.
70. Retractatio in Actus Apostolorum, Praef., p. 93 (see above, note 6). E. J. Sutcliffe, The Venerable Bede's Knowledge of Hebrew, in Biblica 16 (1935) 300-306, showed that the bits of Hebrew in Bede's works all come from Jerome and are no evidence of a working knowledge of the language. Hunter Blair, The World of Bede, p. 249 (see above, note 13), thinks it possible that Bede had enough Greek to teach it; but W. F. Bolton, An Aspect of Bede's Later Knowledge of Greek, in Classical Review 13 (1963) 17-18, has argued that his Greek was little better than his Hebrew.
71. Meyvaert, Bede the Scholar, p. 50, as cited above, note 6.
72. In his edition of the Expositio Actuum Apostolorum et retractatio, p. xvii (see above, note 6), Laistner puts the Retractatio between 725 and 731. The narrative of the HE ends in 731, and it must have been years in the making.
the place to press the point. Here I want to stress that Bede's two commentaries on Acts contain something of the historian's attempt to reconstruct the life of the church after the Ascension. In important recent research Professor Glenn Olsen has found that Bede, compared to the Fathers and other earlier commentators, even takes an empirical approach to the "judaizing" phase of early Christianity. He treats the relevant texts on the apparent assumption that new believers cannot be expected to spring full grown into the faith, that it takes time to separate converts from their old ways. So the "judaizing" period of the primitive church reflects human limitations—limitations, I might add, which Bede knew very well from the Christian experience of his own people. And the growth of the early church to maturity witnesses not only to the power of God but also to a human developmental process. Bede wrote the two commentaries on Acts partly to aid allegory, but he pursues this goal by enlarging on the historia within which the docile mind might find the evidence of higher meanings. In any case the Historia ecclesiastica is but one measure of his power as a historian; the commentaries are another.

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Summary

Bede's biblical commentaries are the largest single group of his extant writings, the embodiment of his avowed lifework, and the cornerstone of his immense medieval fame. Critical study of them has just begun, but it has already become clear that they shed important light on his better known works, like the Historia ecclesiastica. It is also certain that they can no longer be dismissed as merely derivative and allegorical. This essay argues that their patristic contents serve a well-conceived program of pastoral instruction for a new Christian people and that their allegorical aspects spring from a lively method of rhetorical analysis.

I thank him for sending to me his unpublished paper entitled Bede as Historian: The Evidence from his Reconstruction of the First Christian Community at Jerusalem, which contains especially interesting remarks about Bede's exegesis of Acts 15.21 and other texts that have to do with "judaizing" Christianity. See Expositio Actuum Apostolorum, p. 62, as cited above, note 6; In Genesim 4, lines 1692-1721, CCSL 118A; In primam partem Samuahelis 3, lines 1954-1986, and 4, lines 1763-1788, CCSL 119.

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