

INTRODUCTION

THE SEVEN BRIEF LETTERS of James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2 and 3 John, and Jude, usually given at the end of the New Testament just before the book of Revelation, have never received the same attention from exegetes as has been given to the four Gospels and the Letters of Paul. Throughout the christian centuries commentaries on them have been, comparatively, rare. During the early patristic period, Augustine, bishop of Hippo in North Africa, composed a commentary on 1 John. Given the deep theological content of this Letter, it is understandable why Augustine must have chosen it for exposition.

For some reason now difficult to fathom Bede chose the final part of the New Testament, the book of Acts, these seven Letters, and the book of Revelation, when he first began his attempts at written exegesis of the books of sacred scripture early in the eighth century.¹ For the Letters of Paul he was content to piece together extracts from the writings of Augustine to form a lengthy commentary. Eventually Bede was to expound the meaning of a number of the books of the Bible. But these first efforts of his were unique in that he was more inclined then than later to follow a literal interpretation of the text. The heavily allegorical meaning that he was to adopt later on in explaining the various books of scripture is not nearly so noticeable in his early commentaries. Here allegory and symbolism which are to be found in practically all the exegetical writings of scriptural commentators before Bede's time are employed, but not to the extent that Bede was to make use of later on when he had become a more experienced elucidator of the meaning of the sacred texts.

Bede's reputation as a scripture scholar, in fact, has generally been that of a clever compiler of the insights of previous exegetes rather than that of a thinker of any originality. To some extent this is true. Bede's commentaries have the appearance of being nothing more than a kind of collage of passages gleaned from preceding writers. In his exegesis of these seven Letters from the New Testament this quality of his work can be seen particularly in his exposition of 1 John, where he has borrowed extensively from Augustine's work. An examination of the content of the material contained in the interpretation of the other six Letters will reveal occasional passages—sometimes with no indication given of the author, a standard practice of the time—from other writers, Cyprian, Ambrose, Jerome, and Gregory the Great. The practical and pastoral nature of Bede's approach to the books of the Bible is, however, always apparent. In the ninth century the Englishman Boniface was sending letters back to his native land asking for copies of Bede's commentaries to use in his mission of converting the Germans to Christianity.² And the simple, catechetical nature of Bede's explications, very much suited to a people to whom he refers several times as uneducated and but recently exposed to christian teaching, is obvious to one reading the examination of the meaning and application of the biblical message.

The need for a synthesis of what has been formerly thought out, not only in matters affecting religion but in all branches of human knowledge, makes itself felt from time to time. Cicero was successful in condensing the diffuse philosophical writings of Plato and making them usable for the practical roman mind of the West. Jerome also made much of the work of Origen available to those whose principal language was Latin, not only through translation but also by simplifying and condensing Origen's theological ideas. In fact, these seven scriptural Letters themselves, prescinding from any commentary on them, relied heavily on the Old Testament and on preceding New Testament books and

sought to make former religious thought pertinent to a new and changed external situation. This midrashic mode of religious thinking is built into the canon of the Bible, as is the quality of *paideia*, instruction by the example of admirable individuals or groups who had lived earlier. Bede often uses as models of proper conduct characters mentioned in the Letters and other persons cited in the scriptures.

We should also note that there is a distinctive humane approach to matters regarding religion distinguishable in the writings of Bede. He is quite insistent, for instance, that in the life to come after death God will be an exacting, though fair and just, judge of the actions of every human being; still he states time and again that mankind cannot live a completely sinless existence here on earth, that sins and faults, even serious ones, will be committed, but that the effect of these failures can be mitigated by sincere confession, penance, and acts of charity and forgiveness towards others. The rewards of striving to live a blameless life here and now, and especially the inexpressible happiness that awaits the good person in the after life, he stresses far more than fear of punishment for wrongdoing. This positive and joyful attitude is also apparent in later cistercian writers such as Bernard of Clairvaux and Aelred of Rievaulx. All of their writings have a particularly benevolent character. There should be no reason for surprise, then, that the first Cistercians, who were very conscious of this human aspect of religion, were aware of the importance of the scriptural commentaries of Bede.

In the twelfth century, manuscript copies of this work of Bede were in the libraries of Cîteaux and Clairvaux (and are still preserved respectively in the Public Libraries of Dijon and Troyes in France) and at the Cistercian houses of Beauprés and Vaucelles (now respectively at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and the Bibliothèque Publique of Cambrai).³ Despite differences of national and regional castes of thought that emphasize this or that aspect of religion, there is a remarkable continuity in the development of religious

thought. Perhaps an english translation of one of the earliest of Bede's scriptural commentaries will help manifest this continuity.

The english translation of this work has been made from a new Latin edition of the commentary on these seven Letters from the New Testament prepared for the series, *Corpus Christianorum*.

D.H.