



Preachers and Preaching in Bede's *Commentary on the Apocalypse*
La predicación y los predicadores en el *Comentario al Apocalipsis*
de Beda

Pregação e Pregadores no *Comentário ao Apocalipse* de Beda

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Abstract: The present article is dedicated to the *Commentary on the Apocalypse* by Venerable Bede. The close reading of the commentary shows that the leading topic of Bede's commentary is missionary work. By the beginning of the eighth century, the idea of preaching Christianity to the heathens on the continent was widespread in England, especially in Northumbria. While commenting on the verses of the Apocalypse, Bede also expresses his views concerning various aspects of preaching. In the case of Bede's commentary, the genre in question turns out to be lively and full of allusions to current events.

Resumo: O presente artigo dedica-se ao *Comentário do Apocalipse*, escrito por Beda, o *Venerável*. Uma leitura atenta do comentário mostra que o principal tópico do trabalho é o trabalho missionário. No início do século VIII, a ideia de pregar o cristianismo aos pagãos do continente estava disseminada na Inglaterra, especialmente na Nortúmbria. Enquanto comentava acerca dos versos do apocalipse, Beda também expressava suas percepções no que dizia respeito aos vários aspectos da pregação. No caso dos comentários de Beda, o gênero em questão revela-se vívido e repleto de alusões aos eventos coevos.

Keywords: Bede – Biblical Commentary – Preachers – Preaching – Apocalypse.

Palavras-chave: Beda – Comentário Bíblico – Pregadores – Pregação – Apocalipse.

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Bede is well known as ‘the father of the English history’, but, as it follows from the list of his books at the end of the *Ecclesiastical History*, he put his commentaries on the Bible before all the other works. The *Commentary on the Apocalypse* (*In Apocalypsin sancti Ioanni libros III*) is nearly the last one on the list, though it was written first.² The close reading of this commentary shows that Bede was not indifferent to the events and problems of contemporary life. The leading topic of Bede’s commentary is missionary work.

At the beginning of the eighth century the idea of preaching Christianity to the heathens on the Continent was widespread in England, especially in Northumbria. One of the first missionaries in continental Europe was the Northumbrian Wilfrid, who preached Christianity to the Frisians, who were heathens at that time, on his way to Rome.³ It happened in 679, and Bede was a child at that time. Stories about the Anglo-Saxon missionaries, like Ecgbert, a monk from the Irish monastery of Ratmelsigi, or St. Willibrord, were later included by Bede in the *Ecclesiastical History*. The *Commentary on the Apocalypse* was written in the atmosphere of intense interest in missionaries and missionary work, suggesting that Bede’s use of the words ‘praedicatio’ (‘sermon’), ‘praedicator’ (‘preacher’), and ‘praedicare’ (‘to preach’) is not accidental.

The following quotation from the *Ecclesiastical History* demonstrates Bede’s views on the goals of the missionary work. It is said in the story of Ecgbert, who wanted to preach Christianity to the heathen Germanic tribes on the Continent, that he ‘proposuit animo pluribus prodesse, idest, inito opere apostolico, verbum Dei aliquibus earum, quae nondum audierant, gentibus evangelizando committere’⁴ (‘planned to bring blessing to many peoples by undertaking the apostolic task of carrying the word of God, through the preaching of the Gospel, to some of those nations who had not yet heard it’).

² BEDE. *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, COLGRAVE, B. and MYNORS, R. A. B. (eds.). Oxford: Clarendon, 1969, p. 568.

³ LAPIDGE, M. (ed.). *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*. Oxford, 2001, p.319.

⁴ BEDE. *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, p. 476.



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The *Commentary on the Apocalypse* was written for those who would like to follow Ecgbert's example – for the 'fidei praedicatores'⁵ ('preachers of the faith'), as Bede himself states in the very beginning of the *Commentary*.

Bede very often mentions preaching and preachers in this work. Even the first lines of the *Commentary* show that it was written for the use of the missionaries:

Apocalypsis Iesu Christi, quam dedit illi, etc. Fundata per apostolos Ecclesia, quali vel cursu dilatanda vel fine perficienda esset, ad roborandos contra mundi adversa fidei praedicatores oportuit revelari.

The revelation of Jesus Christ. The progress with which the Church that had been founded by the Apostles was to be extended, or the end with which it was to be perfected, had need to be revealed, in order to strengthen the preachers of the faith against the opposition of the world.⁶

While composing his commentary, Bede used the works of his predecessors, who also wrote about missionaries and missionary work. Most of all, he turned to Apringius of Beja, Primasius, Tychonius, but Bede also used other treatises. Their interest in preaching and preachers is rooted in the tradition of commenting on the Bibl. The idea of preaching in the Christian literature of the Early Middle Ages is often expressed with the words 'thunder', 'lightning', 'trumpet', which can be found in some of the verses of the Apocalypse: 'out of the throne proceeded lightning and thunders and voices' (Rev 4. 5) or 'and to them [the angels] were given seven trumpets.' (Rev 8. 2).

Thus, 'thunder', or 'thunders', were understood as 'voces Evangelii' – ('voices of the Gospel') according to Eucherius of Lyons, 'praedicatio veritatis' – ('preaching of the Truth') in Primasius 'praedicationes fidei Christianae' ('preaching of the Christian faith') also in Primasius, 'praedicatio sanctorum' ('the preaching of the saints') in Cassiodorus), 'clamor praedificantium' – ('loud cry of the preachers') in Isidore of Seville, 'praedicatio superni terroris' ('preaching of the Divine terror') in Gregory the Great.⁷ Bede's fellow

⁵ MIGNE, J.-P. (ed.). *Patrologiae Latinae Cursus Completus (PL)*. On CD-Rom. Alexandria, VA: Chadwick-Healy, 1993-1995, 93, col. 133.

⁶ *PL*, 93, col.1 33.

⁷ EUCHERIUS: *PL*, v.50, col. 739. PRIMASIUS: *PL*, 68, col. 814. *PL*, 68, col. 856. CASSIODORUS; *PL*, 70, col. 730. ISIDORE: *PL*, 83, col. 300. GREGORY: *PL*, 76, col. 503.



countryman Aldhelm used the expression ‘verborum tonitrua’ – ‘the thunder of words’, an image which is based on the Gospel.⁸ The apostles James and John, themselves the future preachers of Christianity, are named by Christ ‘the sons of thunder’ (Mk 3. 17). ‘Trumpets’ are also directly connected with the preaching of the Gospel: ‘praedicatio’ (‘preaching’) in Primasius, ‘praedicationis tuba’ (‘the trumpet of preaching’) also in Primasius, ‘sacerdotum praedicantium tubae’ (‘trumpets of the preaching priests’) in Maximus of Turin, ‘praedicatio evangelicae tubae’ (‘preaching of the evangelic trumpet’) in Isidore of Seville.⁹

The case of ‘lightning’ is more complicated, but it also turns out to be connected with preaching and preachers. According to Eucherius of Lyons, lightning can be understood as ‘verba Jesu Christi’ (‘the words of Jesus Christ’), the speech that is both Divine and edifying.¹⁰ ‘Lightning’ usually goes with ‘thunder’, which traditionally stands for ‘preaching’. In the expression ‘thunder and lightning’ – the ‘words and deeds’ of the preachers – lightning is interpreted as the miraculous deeds of those who preach the Truth: ‘miraculorum [...] insignia’ (‘the signs of miracles’) and ‘miracula’ both in Primasius).¹¹

The miracles worked by the preachers of Christianity serve to enlighten the people: ‘fulgura miraculorum illustrant corda credentium’ (‘the lightning of miracles enlightens the hearts of the believers’) in Prosper of Aquitaine.¹² In one case lightning is directly connected with speech and the Divine Revelation: ‘prophetarum verba’ (‘the words of the prophets’) in Cassiodorus.¹³

Thus, the theological tradition existing by the time of Bede already ensured almost the same interpretation of the words ‘thunder’, ‘lightning’, ‘trumpet’ in different commentaries on one and the same text. Primasius explained the meaning of these words in the verse ‘out of the throne proceeded lightning and thundering and voices’ (Rev 4. 5) in the following way: ‘preaching is

⁸ *PL*, 89, col. 122.

⁹ PRIMASIUS: *PL*, 68, col. 909. *PL*, 68, col. 855. MAXIMUS: *PL*, 57, col. 730. ISIDORE: *PL*, 83, col. 339.

¹⁰ *PL*, 50, col. 739.

¹¹ *PL*, 68, col. 814. *PL*, 68, col. 897.

¹² *PL*, 51, col. 410.

¹³ *PL*, 70, col. 684.



symbolised by thunders and voices, the signs of miracles are depicted by the blaze of lightning'.¹⁴ Apringius wrote the following comment on the same verse: 'we interpret lightning as the words of all the saints, and thunder as the voices of preachers'.¹⁵ The same verse is explained by Bede:

hoc est quod Marcus ait: Illi autem profecti, praedicaverunt ubique, Domino cooperante, et sermonem confirmante, sequentibus signis.

This is the same that Mark says, 'But they went forth preaching everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word by signs following.' (Mk 16. 20).¹⁶

Bede does not confine himself to retelling or repeating the ideas and texts of his predecessors. He mentions preaching and preachers in the commentaries to thirteen chapters of the Apocalypse out of twenty two, where he develops the traditional symbolism of 'trumpet'. In his commentary, the trumpet is used not only by the herald, but also by the army trumpeter. While interpreting the verse: 'The first angel sounded' (Rev 8. 7), Bede writes: 'recte *praedicatio* plagarum tubae, quae signum belli est, comparatur' ('this *announcement* of the plagues is rightly compared to a trumpet, which is the signal of battle').¹⁷ This explanation could be suggested by the use of trumpets in real military operations, because Anglo-Saxons conceivably used trumpets together with other wind instruments.¹⁸

While commenting on the verse 'His eyes were as a flame of fire' (Rev 1. 14), Bede gives the following definition of preachers: 'oculi Domini praedicatores sunt, igne spirituali, et fidelibus lumen, incredulis praebentes incendium ('the eyes of the Lord are preachers, who, with spiritual fire, bring light to the faithful, and to the unbelieving a consuming flame').¹⁹ This image is based on the Gospel of Mathew:

¹⁴ *Biblejskie komentarii otsov Tserkvi i drugih avtorov I-VIII veka Novij Zavet, XII. Kniga Otkrovenija Ioanna Bogoslova*. M.: Gernenevtica, 2009 (Originally as *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament XII: Revelation*, WEINRICH, W. C. (ed.). Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2005), p. 69.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁶ *PL*, 93, col. 143.

¹⁷ *PL*, 93, col. 165.

¹⁸ LAPIDGE, M. et al (eds.), *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Anglo-Saxon England*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004, p. 328.

¹⁹ *PL*, 93, col. 136.



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The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness! (Mt 6. 22-23)

In his definition Bede retells Primasius: ‘ignis autem hic praeceptorum, et fidelibus lumen, et incredulis praebet incendium. Ignis enim ante eum praeibit, et inflammabit in circuitu inimicos ejus (‘this fire of [God’s] precepts is light to the faithful, and is the burning fire to the unbelievers, because fire will move in front of Him and will burn His enemies around Him’).²⁰ But Primasius doesn’t use the words ‘eyes’ and ‘preachers’ in the same context with ‘fire’ and ‘light’. Nevertheless, the connection of ‘eyes’ and the idea of preaching can be seen in the theological works of the Early Middle Ages. Gregory the Great puts both words in one and the same context in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*: ‘oculi [...] praedicatores Christi qui viam nobis ostendunt, in simplicitate vivunt (‘the eyes are preachers of Christ, who show us the way and live simply/ in simplicity’).²¹

Thus, Bede’s definition combines various aspects of the same theological concept. Bede’s symbol of a preacher is an angel. Thus, commenting on the verse ‘And the seven angels came out of the temple’ (Rev 15. 6), Bede cites the Gospel of Mark: ‘hoc est, quod Marcus ait: Illi autem profecti praedicaverunt ubique’ (‘this is the same that Mark says, “But they went forth preaching everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word by signs following.”’) (Mk 16. 20).²²

According to Bede, the Church wages war ‘contra mundi adversa’ (‘against the opposition of the world’) – or against the glory of this world.²³ Preachers disclose the vanity of ‘glori[ae] saeculi’ (‘the glory of the world’) with their words, and their speech makes the reader recall an episode from the Book of Joshua concerning the siege of Jericho (Jos 5. 16; 6. 1-4). The verse ‘And the seven angels which had the seven trumpets prepared themselves to sound’ (Rev 8. 6) is explained as follows: ‘ecclesia, septiformi spiritu inflammata, se ad praedicandum fiducialiter praeparavit, gloriam saeculi tubis coelestibus quasi muros Jericho dejectura’ – (‘the Church, inflamed by the sevenfold Spirit,

²⁰ *PL*, 68, col. 801.

²¹ *PL*, 79, col. 522.

²² *PL*, 93, col. 178.

²³ *PL*, 93, col. 133.



prepared herself to preach with confidence, so as to throw down the glory of the world like the walls of Jericho with heavenly trumpets').²⁴

In medieval theological treatises Jericho is looked upon as the symbol of sin and vice: 'Jericho muri [...] intra se continebant peccatorem populum' ('the walls of Jericho [...] contained the people of sinners'), 'maledict[i] mur[i] Jericho' ('the damned walls of Jericho') and even 'angel[i] tenebrarum' ('angels of darkness').²⁵ There existed more moderate interpretations: 'Jericho [...] civitas mundus iste est' - ('the city of Jericho is this world'), or 'Jericho luna interpretatur, et significat mortalitatem nostram, propter quod nascitur, crescit, senescit et occidit' ('Jericho is explained as the Moon, and it symbolises our mortality, because the new Moon is born, waxes, grows old and wanes').²⁶ Thus, 'the glory of the world', which should be destroyed by the preachers of the true faith, is sinful, vain and transient. The medieval reader could feel all these additional connotations, hidden in the comparison of the glory of the world to Jericho.

In Bede's opinion, only the Holy Spirit allows the Church to develop the ability to preach to the full extent. The verse 'and another angel came' (Rev 8. 3) is given the following explanation: 'etsi ante adventum Domini praedicabat Ecclesia, sed non ubique, donec ejus esset confirmata Spiritu' ('although the Church preached before the coming of the Lord, it was not in every place, until it was strengthened by His Spirit').²⁷ Preachers can enlighten their listeners if they themselves turn to God: 'accedat ad Dominum qui velit docendi percipere sacramenta' ('let him come to the Lord who wishes to receive the sacraments of teaching').²⁸ The commentary on the verse reads: 'go and take the little book which is open' (Rev 10. 8).

The topics of the sermons could be quite varied. The preacher explains the Divine Law to his listeners: 'praedicati[o] legis' ('the preaching of the Law').²⁹ He also tells them what happens if they break the Law: 'poenam gehennae sanguinolentis operibus deberi, praedicatorum voce refertur' ('the punishment

²⁴ *PL*, 93, col. 155

²⁵ *PL*, 57, col. 728. *PL*, 58, col. 23. *PL*, 83, col. 124.

²⁶ *PL*, 83, col. 371. *PL*, 62, col. 838.

²⁷ *PL*, 93, col. 155.

²⁸ *PL*, 93, col. 161.

²⁹ *PL*, 93, col. 145.



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of hell due to works of blood is announced by the voice of the preachers').³⁰
According to Bede, the preacher expresses God's wrath in this way:

duplici modo praedicatores phialas irae Dei effundunt, dum poenas impiorum vel eisdem impiis irrogant spiritualiter iudicando, ut Petrus Simoni: 'Pecunia, inquit, tua tecum sit in perditionem' (; vel sanctae Ecclesiae manifestant praedicando, ut idem dixit: 'Quibus iudicium jam olim non cessat, et perditio eorum non dormitat'.³¹

Preachers pour out the wrath of God in a twofold manner, while they either impose the punishments of the ungodly upon the ungodly themselves by judging spiritually; as Peter said to Simon, 'Thy money perish with thee;' Acts 8) or they manifest it to holy Church by preaching, as he also said, 'For their judgment now of a long time lingereth not, and their perdition slumbereth not.' (II Petr 2. 3)

The commentary on the verse: 'and the first went, and poured out his vial upon the earth' (Rev 16. 2). But he heralds 'Ecclesiae [...] futura gaudia' ('the future triumphs [...] of the Church') as well.³²

There is also another important function of the preacher in the Church. He is a link between the past and the present, and the keeper of collective memory. While commenting on the verse 'and at the gates twelve angels, and names written thereon' (Rev 21. 12), a part of the description of New Jerusalem, Bede says that the names written on the gates mean 'memoriam veterum patrum [...] praedicatorum cordibus insitam' ('the memory of the ancient fathers [...] implanted in the hearts of preachers').³³

The role of the preachers in the 'wars', waged by the Church is to 'contra mox secuturam Antichristi perfidiam fidelium corda confirm[ant]' ('confirm the hearts of the faithful against the perfidy of Antichrist').³⁴ If the preacher does not turn to God, he is a false teacher, and his preaching is 'noxia' (harmful).³⁵ These preachers 'poenam sibi suisque generant auditoribus' ('are the source of punishment to themselves and their hearers by their injurious preaching').³⁶

³⁰ *PL*, 93, col. 155.

³¹ *PL*, 93, col. 179.

³² *PL*, 93, col. 195.

³³ *PL*, 93, col. 196.

³⁴ *PL*, 93, col. 164.

³⁵ *PL*, 93, col. 160.

³⁶ *PL*, 93, col. 160.



Bede's statement is accompanied by a quotation from the Old Testament: 'I will bring fire, out of the midst of thee, which is to devour thee' (Ezekiel 28. 18).

Nevertheless, if the preacher strives after the knowledge of God, his preaching can be useful both for his listeners and for himself. While preaching he matures spiritually: 'convenit eos qui coelesti attolluntur volatu, terrenas quoque mentes de sede sui torporis praedicando levare' ('it is fitting that they who are lifted up by a heavenly flight, should also, through preaching, raise up their earthly minds from the seat of their torpidness').³⁷ The commentary to the verse is 'having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth' (Rev 14. 6).

Moreover, to set an example to his congregation, the preacher should not only lead an ascetic life and fight against the influence of the passions, he should become spiritually wise: 'non solum mortificet corpus, sed et pectus auro sapientiae stringat' ('let him who desires to preach strong things not only mortify the body, but also bind the breast with the gold of wisdom').³⁸ Only in this case will preaching be his major achievement.

Bede pays much attention to the topic of teachers and pupils, since every preacher has his pupils, his spiritual children. According to Bede, both the teacher and the taught lead a godly life: 'vita bonorum in doctoribus consistit et auditoribus' ('The life of the good is found in doctors and hearers').³⁹ The commentary on this verse is 'and the third part of trees was burnt up' (Rev 8. 7).

The division into the teacher and the taught serves as a basis for preaching. Bede's attitude to the teachers and pupils is expressed in the commentary on the verse 'blessed is he that readeth' (Rev 1. 3): 'ideo doctores et auditores beati sunt, quia verbum Dei servantibus tempus breve laboris gaudia sequuntur aeterna' ('teachers and hearers are therefore blessed, because they who keep the Word of God find that a short time of labour is followed by

³⁷ *PL*, 93, col. 174.

³⁸ *PL*, 93, col. 160.

³⁹ *PL*, 93, col. 155.



everlasting joys’).⁴⁰ Thus, true teachers, preaching the Word of God, and their pupils choose the good part and lay hold of eternal life.

Bede also knows that there are false teachers leading their pupils to everlasting destruction. Such preachers do evil deeds, they do not know the truth and, more than that, they do not want to know the truth: ‘sic et qui operantur iniquitatem, non cognoscunt Deum, licet ipsum praedicent’ (‘so, again, they who work iniquity know not God, although they preach Him’).⁴¹ The fate of such people is dismal: ‘Deus, licet omnes noverit, non cognovit operarios iniquitatis’ (‘God Who knoweth all men, knoweth not those who work iniquity’).⁴² The commentary on the verse ‘which have not known the depths of Satan’ (Rev 2. 24).

It was difficult to deal with the heretics not only because the common people were uneducated, but because the heretics were supported and helped by the rulers. Bede’s commentary on the verse ‘their tails were like unto serpents’ (Rev 9. 19) is a reflection of the situation: ‘falsi doctores antiqui serpentis, qui hominem deceptit, similes, principum patrocinio fulti, amplius nocent quam si solo sermone suaderent’ (‘the false teachers of the old serpent who deceived man, like those who are supported by the protection of princes, hurt more than if they persuaded by words alone’).⁴³

When Bede comments on the verse ‘notwithstanding, I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel’ (Rev 2. 20), he says that the name of this queen ‘convenit haereticis’ (belongs to heretics’).⁴⁴ The theological treatises mention ‘Jezabel [...] maliloquio’ (‘Jezebel’s slander’).⁴⁵

The medieval reader remembered that she was the descendant of Ham, ‘colebat idolum Sidoniensium Baal’ (‘worshipped the Sydonean idol of Baal’), an adulteress and a murderess, because she wanted to have prophet Elijah murdered – ‘eum Jezabel regina vellet occidere’ (‘She wanted to have Elijah murdered’).⁴⁶ This is why Gregory the Great writes that those who deviate

⁴⁰ *PL*, 93, col. 134.

⁴¹ *PL*, 93, col. 140.

⁴² *PL*, 93, col. 140.

⁴³ *PL*, 93, col. 160.

⁴⁴ *PL*, 93, col. 160.

⁴⁵ *PL*, 57, col. 752.

⁴⁶ *PL*, 59, col. 526. *PL*, 57, col. 576.



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from the true faith 'Jezabel vitam reproba actione secuti sunt' ('imitate Jezebel with their wicked deeds').⁴⁷ When Bede's readers met the comparison of heretics with Jezebel, they could imagine what 'facinora' ('evil deeds') she could teach the credulous listeners.⁴⁸

Bede himself is an experienced preacher. He does not set himself against his listeners, on the contrary, he is together with them: 'nos quoque gloriam Ecclesiae cernere magnis Evangelii vocibus admonemur' ('we also are admonished by the loud voice of the Gospel to behold the glory of the Church'). The commentary for the verse reads 'and I heard, as it were the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, Come and see' (Rev 6. 1).

Bede's understanding of the *Apocalypse* is within the limits of the patristic tradition that existed in Western Europe in the early medieval period. Nevertheless, the analysis of his commentary shows that Bede does not slavishly repeat the interpretations of his predecessors. Only a small part of his interpretations consist of the retelling of certain extracts from the treatises of the holy Fathers. More often Bede summarises various interpretations of one and the same verse.

Sometimes Bede gives his own interpretation of the text, although he uses traditional imagery. The leading theme of Bede's commentary is preaching and preachers. The choice of the theme is suggested by life itself, because at that time Anglo-Saxon missionaries were very active on the Continent. In the case of Bede's commentary, the genre in question turns out to be lively and full of allusions to the current events.

⁴⁷ *PL*, 76, col. 485.

⁴⁸ *PL*, 93, col. 160.