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BEDE

*The Ecclesiastical History
of the English People
The Greater Chronicle
Bede's Letter to Egbert*

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Edited with an Introduction and Notes by

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and

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Disease aghast yields to those holy weeds.
Zeal frenzied tears the foe that conquered Eve;
Triumphs the saint, zeal frenzied tears the foe.
Affianced to the Lamb, now famed on earth!
Soon famed in heaven, affianced to the Lamb!
Many thy wedding gifts while torches blaze.
The Bridegroom comes; many thy wedding gifts.
Ever on sweetest harp thou sing'st new songs.
Hymning thy Spouse ever on sweetest harp;
Ne'er parted from the Lamb's high company,
Whom earthly love ne'er parted from the Lamb.

CHAPTER 21 (19)

IN the ninth year of King Ecgrith's reign a great battle* was fought between him and Æthelred, king of the Mercians, near the river Trent, and Ælfwine,* brother of King Ecgrith, was killed, a young man of about eighteen years of age and much beloved in both kingdoms; for King Æthelred had married his sister whose name was Osthryth. Although there was good reason for fiercer fighting and prolonged hostilities between the kings and between these warlike peoples, Archbishop Theodore, beloved of God, trusting in God's help, completely extinguished this great and dangerous fire by his wholesome advice. As a result, peace was restored between the two kings and between their peoples and no further lives were demanded for the death of the king's brother, but only the usual money compensation which was paid to the king to whom the duty of vengeance belonged. So peace was maintained for a long period between these kings and their respective kingdoms.

CHAPTER 22 (20)

IN this battle in which King Ælfwine was killed, a remarkable incident is known to have happened which in my opinion should certainly not be passed over in silence, since the story may lead to the salvation of many. During the battle one of

the king's retainers, a young man named Imma* was struck down amongst others; he lay all that day and the following night as though dead, amongst the bodies of the slain, but at last he recovered consciousness, sat up, and bandaged his wounds as best he could; then, having rested for a short time, he rose and set out to find friends to take care of him. But as he was doing so, he was found and captured by men of the enemy army and taken to their lord, who was a *gesith* of King Æthelred. On being asked who he was, he was afraid to admit that he was a thegn; but he answered instead that he was a poor peasant and married; and he declared that he had come to the army in company with other peasants to bring food to the soldiers. The *gesith* took him and had his wounds attended to. But when Imma began to get better, he ordered him to be bound at night to prevent his escape. However, it proved impossible to bind him, for no sooner had those who chained him gone, than his fetters were loosed.

Now he had a brother whose name was Tunna, a priest and abbot of a monastery in a city which is still called *Tunnacæstir* after him. When Tunna heard that his brother had perished in the fight, he went to see if he could find his body; having found another very like him in all respects, he concluded that it must be his brother's body. So he carried it to the monastery, buried it with honour, and took care to offer many masses* for the absolution of his soul. It was on account of these celebrations that, as I have said, no one could bind Imma because his fetters were at once loosed. Meanwhile the *gesith* who kept him captive grew amazed and asked him why he could not be bound and whether he had about him any loosing spells such as are described in stories. But Imma answered that he knew nothing of such arts. 'However,' said he, 'I have a brother in my country who is a priest and I know he believes me to be dead and offers frequent masses on my behalf; so if I had now been in another world, my soul would have been loosed from its punishment by his intercessions.' When he had been a prisoner with the *gesith* for some time, those who watched him closely realized by his appearance, his bearing, and his speech that he was not of common stock as he had said, but of noble family. Then the *gesith* called him

aside and asked him very earnestly to declare his origin, promising that no harm should come to him, provided that he told him plainly who he was. The prisoner did so, revealing that he had been one of the king's thegns. The *gesith* answered, 'I realized by every one of your answers that you were not a peasant, and now you ought to die because all my brothers and kinsmen were killed in the battle: but I will not kill you for I do not intend to break my promise.'

As soon as Imma had recovered, the *gesith* sold him to a Frisian in London;* but he could neither be bound on his way there nor by the Frisian. So after his enemies had put every kind of bond on him and as his new master realized that he could not be bound, he gave him leave to ransom himself if he could. Now the bonds were most frequently loosed from about nine in the morning, the time when masses were usually said. So having sworn that he would either return or send his master the money for his ransom, he went to King Hlothhere of Kent, who was the son of Queen Æthelthryth's sister* already mentioned, because he had once been one of Æthelthryth's thegns; he asked for and received the money from him for his ransom and sent it to his master as he had promised.

He afterwards returned to his own country, where he met his brother and gave him a full account of all his troubles and the comfort that had come to him in those adversities; and from what his brother told him, he realized that his bonds had generally been loosed at the time when masses were being celebrated on his behalf; so he perceived that the other comforts and blessings which he had experienced during his time of danger had been bestowed by heaven, through the intercession of his brother and the offering up of the saving Victim. Many who heard about this from Imma were inspired to greater faith and devotion, to prayer and almsgiving and to the offering up of sacrifices to God in the holy oblation, for the deliverance of their kinsfolk who had departed from the world; for they realized that the saving sacrifice availed for the everlasting redemption of both body and soul.

This story was told me by some of those who heard it from the very man to whom these things happened; therefore since

I had so clear an account of the incident, I thought that it should undoubtedly be inserted into this *History*.

CHAPTER 23 (21)

IN the following year, that is, the year of our Lord 680, Hild* who, as previously stated, was abbess at the monastery called Whitby and a most devoted servant of Christ, departed on 17 November, after having done many heavenly deeds on earth, to receive the rewards of the heavenly life, at the age of sixty-six. Her career falls into two equal parts, for she spent her first thirty-three years very nobly in the secular habit, while she dedicated an equal number of years still more nobly to the Lord, in the monastic life. She was of noble birth, being the daughter of Hereric, King Edwin's nephew. It was in company with Edwin that she received the faith and the mysteries of Christ through the teaching of Paulinus of blessed memory, the first bishop of the Northumbrians, and she preserved that faith inviolate until she was counted worthy to behold Him.

When she had decided to give up the secular habit and serve the Lord alone, she withdrew to the kingdom of the East Angles, for she was a relation of a king of that land. It was her wish, if possible, to cross over to Gaul, leaving her home and all that she had, to live as a stranger for the Lord's sake in the monastery of Chelles,* so that she might the more easily attain to her eternal home in heaven. Her sister Hereswith,* mother of Ealdwulf, king of the East Angles, was at that time living in the monastery under the discipline of the Rule and awaiting her heavenly crown. Inspired by her sister's example, Hild continued a whole year in the kingdom of the East Angles with the intention of going abroad; but then Bishop Aidan called her home and she received a hide* of land on the north side of the river Wear, where, for another year, she lived the monastic life with a small band of companions.

After this she was made abbess in the monastery called *Heruteu* (Hartlepool) which had been founded not long before

by Heiu, a devoted handmaid of Christ, who is said to have been the first woman in the Northumbrian kingdom to take the vows and habit of a nun, having been ordained by Bishop Aidan. But soon after she founded the monastery, she retired to the town of *Calcaria* which the English call *Kælcacæstir* (Tadcaster?)* and there she made her dwelling. Hild, the handmaiden of Christ, was appointed to rule the monastery and at once set about establishing there a Rule of life in all respects like that which she had been taught by many learned men; for Bishop Aidan and other devout men who knew her visited her frequently, instructed her assiduously, and loved her heartily for her innate wisdom and her devotion to the service of God.

When she had ruled over the monastery for some years,* wholly occupied in establishing a Rule of life there, it happened that she undertook either to found or to set in order a monastery at a place called *Streanæshalch* (Whitby), a task imposed upon her which she carried out with great industry. She established the same Rule of life as in the other monastery, teaching them to observe strictly the virtues of justice, devotion, and chastity and other virtues too, but above all things to continue in peace and charity. After the example of the primitive church, no one was rich, no one was in need, for they had all things in common and none had any private property. So great was her prudence that not only ordinary people but also kings and princes sometimes sought and received her counsel when in difficulties. She compelled those under her direction to devote so much time to the study of the holy Scriptures and so much time to the performance of good works, that there might be no difficulty in finding many there who were fitted for holy orders, that is, for the service of the altar.

We have in fact seen five from this monastery who afterwards became bishops, all of them men of singular merit and holiness; their names are Bosa,* Ætla,* Offfor,* John,* and Wilfrid.* The first, as already related, was consecrated bishop of York: of the second it may be briefly stated that he was consecrated bishop of Dorchester: of the last two it will later be told that John became bishop of Hexham and Wilfrid,

bishop of York. Of Offfor it may be said that after he had devoted himself to the reading and observance of the Scriptures in both of Hild's monasteries, being anxious to reach still greater heights, he went to Kent to join Archbishop Theodore of blessed memory. After he had spent some further time in sacred studies there, he decided to go to Rome too, which in those days was considered to be an act of great merit. After his return to Britain he went to the kingdom of the Hwicce of which Osric was then king; there he remained for a long time, preaching the word of faith and setting an example of holy life to all who saw and heard him. At that time the bishop of the kingdom, whose name was Bosel,* was greatly troubled by ill-health so that he could not carry out his episcopal duties himself; so Offfor was appointed bishop in his place with universal approval and was consecrated at Æthelred's command by Bishop Wilfrid of blessed memory, who was at that time acting as bishop of the Middle Angles; for Archbishop Theodore was now dead* and no one had been appointed bishop in his place. Shortly before Bosel became bishop, a most energetic and learned man of great ability named Tatfrith, who was also from Hild's monastery, had been appointed to the see; but he was carried off before his consecration by an untimely death.

All who knew Hild, the handmaiden of Christ and abbess, used to call her mother because of her outstanding devotion and grace. She was not only an example of holy life to all who were in the monastery but she also provided an opportunity for salvation and repentance to many who lived far away and who heard the happy story of her industry and virtue. This was bound to happen in fulfilment of the dream which her mother Breguswith had during the child's infancy. While her husband Hereric was living in exile under the British king Cerdic,* where he was poisoned, Breguswith had a dream that he was suddenly taken away, and though she searched most earnestly for him, no trace of him could be found anywhere. But suddenly, in the midst of her search, she found a most precious necklace under her garment and, as she gazed closely at it, it seemed to spread such a blaze of light that it

filled all Britain with its gracious splendour. This dream was truly fulfilled in her daughter Hild; for her life was an example of the works of light, blessed not only to herself but to many who desired to live uprightly.

After she had presided over the monastery for many years, it pleased the blessed Author of our salvation to subject her holy soul to the trial of a long bodily sickness so that, like the apostle, her strength might be made perfect in weakness. She was attacked by a fever which tortured her with its burning heat, and for six years the sickness afflicted her continually; yet during all this time she never ceased to give thanks to her Maker and to instruct the flock committed to her charge both in public and private. Taught by her own experience she warned them all, when health of body was granted to them, to serve the Lord dutifully and, when in adversity or sickness, always to return thanks to the Lord faithfully. In the seventh year of her illness she began to suffer internal pain and her last day came. About cockcrow she received the viaticum of the most holy communion and, summoning the handmaidens of Christ who were in the monastery, she urged them to preserve the gospel peace among themselves and towards all others; even while she was still exhorting them, she joyfully saw death approach or rather, to use the words of the Lord, she 'passed from death into life'.

One the same night it pleased Almighty God by a vision to reveal her death in another monastery some distance away called Hackness,* which she had built that very year. In this monastery there was a nun named Begu who for thirty or more years had been dedicated to the Lord in virginity and had served Him in the monastic life. As she was resting in the sisters' dormitory, she suddenly heard in the air the well-known sound of the bell with which they used to be aroused to their prayers or called together when one of them had been summoned from the world. On opening her eyes she seemed to see the roof of the house rolled back, while a light which poured in from above filled the whole place. As she watched the light intently, she saw the soul of the handmaiden of the Lord being borne to Heaven in the midst of that light, attended and guided by angels. Then awaking and seeing the

other sisters lying around her, she realized that what she had seen had been revealed to her either in a dream or in a vision. Greatly afraid, she rose at once and ran to the maiden named Frigyth, who was then presiding over the monastery in place of the abbess. With many tears and lamentations and sighing deeply, she announced that the Abbess Hild, mother of them all, had departed from this world and that she had seen her ascend in the midst of a great light and escorted by angels to the abode of eternal light, to join the company of the citizens of heaven. When Frigyth heard this, she aroused all the sisters, called them to church and ordered them to devote themselves to prayer and psalm-singing on behalf of the soul of their mother. This they did diligently for the rest of the night and, at early dawn, there came brothers from the place where she had died to announce her death. The maidens answered that they already knew of it and, when they explained in detail how and when they had heard of it, it was found that her death had been revealed to them in a vision at the very hour at which the brothers said that she had died. By a beautiful harmony of events, it was divinely ordained that while some of them watched her departure from this life, others watched her entrance into the everlasting life of the spirit. Now these two monasteries are nearly thirteen miles apart.

It is also related that, on the same night and in the same monastery in which this servant of God died, her death was seen in a vision by one of the devoted virgins of God, who had been deeply attached to her. She saw Hild's soul ascend to heaven in the company of angels. She related this openly to the servants of Christ who were with her at the very hour it happened and aroused them to pray for her soul, and this before the rest of the congregation knew of her death, for it was only made known to them as soon as they met next morning. This nun was at the time with some other handmaidens of Christ in the remotest part of the monastery, where the women who had lately entered the monastic life used to spend their time of probation until they were fully instructed and admitted into the fellowship of the community.

CHAPTER 24 (22)

IN the monastery of this abbess there was a certain brother who was specially marked out by the grace of God, so that he used to compose godly and religious songs; thus, whatever he learned from the holy Scriptures by means of interpreters, he quickly turned into extremely delightful and moving poetry, in English, which was his own tongue. By his songs the minds of many were often inspired to despise the world and to long for the heavenly life. It is true that after him other Englishmen attempted to compose religious poems, but none could compare with him. For he did not learn the art of poetry from men nor through a man but he received the gift of song freely by the grace of God. Hence he could never compose any foolish or trivial poem but only those which were concerned with devotion and so were fitting for his devout tongue to utter. He had lived in the secular habit until he was well advanced in years and had never learned any songs. Hence sometimes at a feast, when for the sake of providing entertainment, it had been decided that they should all sing in turn, when he saw the harp approaching him, he would rise up in the middle of the feasting, go out, and return home.

On one such occasion when he did so, he left the place of feasting and went to the cattle byre, as it was his turn to take charge of them that night. In due time he stretched himself out and went to sleep, whereupon he dreamt that someone stood by him, saluted him, and called him by name: 'Cædmon,' he said, 'sing me something.' Cædmon answered, 'I cannot sing; that is why I left the feast and came here because I could not sing.' Once again the speaker said, 'Nevertheless you must sing to me.' 'What must I sing?' said Cædmon. 'Sing', he said, 'about the beginning of created things.' Thereupon Cædmon began to sing verses which he had never heard before in praise of God the Creator, of which this is the general sense: 'Now we must praise* the Maker of the heavenly kingdom, the power of the Creator and his counsel, the deeds of the Father of glory and how He, since he

is the eternal God, was the Author of all marvels and first created the heavens as a roof for the children of men and then, the almighty Guardian of the human race, created the earth.' This is the sense but not the order of the words which he sang as he slept. For it is not possible to translate verse, however well composed, literally from one language to another without some loss of beauty and dignity. When he awoke, he remembered all that he had sung while asleep and soon added more verses in the same manner, praising God in fitting style.

In the morning he went to the reeve who was his master, telling him of the gift he had received, and the reeve took him to the abbess. He was then bidden to describe his dream in the presence of a number of the more learned men and also to recite his song so that they might all examine him and decide upon the nature and origin of the gift of which he spoke; and it seemed clear to all of them that the Lord had granted him heavenly grace. They then read to him a passage of sacred history or doctrine, bidding him make a song out of it, if he could, in metrical form. He undertook the task and went away; on returning next morning he repeated the passage he had been given, which he had put into excellent verse. The abbess, who recognized the grace of God which the man had received, instructed him to renounce his secular habit and to take monastic vows. She and all her people received him into the community of the brothers and ordered that he should be instructed in the whole course of sacred history. He learned all he could by listening to them and then, memorizing it and ruminating over it, like some clean animal chewing the cud, he turned it into the most melodious verse: and it sounded so sweet as he recited it that his teachers became in turn his audience. He sang about the creation of the world, the origin of the human race, and the whole history of Genesis, of the departure of Israel from Egypt and the entry into the promised land and of many other of the stories taken from the sacred Scriptures: of the incarnation, passion, and resurrection of the Lord, of His ascension into heaven, of the coming of the Holy Spirit and the teaching of the apostles. He also made songs about the terrors of future judgement, the horrors of the pains of hell, and the joys of the heavenly

kingdom. In addition he composed many other songs about the divine mercies and judgements, in all of which he sought to turn his hearers away from delight in sin and arouse in them the love and practice of good works. He was a most religious man, humbly submitting himself to the discipline of the Rule; and he opposed all those who wished to act otherwise with a flaming and fervent zeal. It was for this reason that his life had a beautiful ending.

When the hour of his departure drew near he was afflicted, fourteen days before, by bodily weakness, yet so slight that he was able to walk about and talk the whole time. There was close by a building to which they used to take those who were infirm or who seemed to be at the point of death. On the night on which he was to die, as evening fell, he asked his attendant to prepare a place in this building where he could rest. The attendant did as Cædmon said though he wondered why he asked, for he did not seem to be by any means at the point of death. They had settled down in the house and were talking and joking cheerfully with each of those who were already there and it was past midnight, when he asked whether they had the Eucharist in the house. They answered, 'What need have you of the Eucharist? You are not likely to die, since you are talking as cheerfully with us as if you were in perfect health.' 'Nevertheless,' he repeated, 'bring me the Eucharist.' When he had taken it in his hand he asked if they were all charitably disposed towards him and had no complaint nor any quarrel nor grudge against him. They answered that they were all in charity with him and without the slightest feeling of anger; then they asked him in turn whether he was charitably disposed towards them. He answered at once, 'My sons, I am in charity with all the servants of God.' So, fortifying himself with the heavenly viaticum, he prepared for his entrance into the next life. Thereupon he asked them how near it was to the time when the brothers had to awake to sing their nightly praises to God. They answered, 'It will not be long.' And he answered, 'Good, let us wait until then.' And so, signing himself with the sign of the holy cross, he laid his head on the pillow, fell asleep for a little while, and so ended his life quietly. Thus it came about that, as he had served the Lord

with a simple and pure mind and with quiet devotion, so he departed into His presence and left the world by a quiet death; and his tongue which had uttered so many good words in praise of the Creator also uttered its last words in His praise, as he signed himself with the sign of the cross and commended his spirit into God's hands; and from what has been said, it would seem that he had foreknowledge of his death.

CHAPTER 25 (23)

ABOUT this time, the monastery of virgins at Coldingham, which has previously been mentioned, was burned down through carelessness. However, all who knew the truth were easily able to judge that it happened because of the wickedness of those who dwelt there and especially of those who were supposed to be its leaders. But God in His mercy did not fail to give warning of approaching punishment so that they might have been led to amend their ways and, by fasting, tears, and prayers, to have averted the wrath of the just Judge from themselves as did the people of Nineveh.

Now in this monastery there was an Irishman named Adamnan who led a life so devoted to God in austerity and prayer that he never took food or drink except on Sundays and Thursdays and often spent whole nights in vigils and prayers. He had first adopted this strict and austere way of life because of the necessity of atoning for the evil he had committed, but in course of time what he was once compelled to do as a penance became a habit.

In his youth he had been guilty of a certain sin but when he came to his senses he was utterly horrified and feared that he would be punished for it by the righteous Judge. So he went to a priest who, he hoped, could show him the way of salvation. He confessed his guilt and asked for advice as to how he could flee from the wrath to come. When the priest heard his offence he said, 'A severe wound calls for an even more severe remedy: so give yourself up to fastings, psalmody, and prayer to the utmost of your ability, so that, when you come