Introduction

What is history? This question can be taken in many ways, including radically skeptical ones, but I ask it not with that axe to grind. Instead, I ask it because it has become clear to me, through my study of Bede and other ancient Christians, that history is not so simple. To be sure, many, if not all scholars, know that thanks to the work of postmodern philosophers and twentieth-century historical theorists like R. G. Collingwood, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Hayden White. In what follows, I will show that there are competing notions and purposes of historical practice, more specifically between Bede and the scholars who have recently studied him. Moreover, I seek to shed light on why this difference matters and what implications result in such competing notions and practices of history, especially in the exegesis of Scripture as well as how exegesis also influences conceptions of history. My work here is an extension of historians and theologians who have sought to blur the lines between theology and other disciplines, like social theory and politics, in both historical and contemporary arguments.[1] In other words, if biblical exegesis was not an isolated discipline for ancient and medieval Christians, then its effects should be seen in other arenas. My argument here is that one of these arenas or disciplines is history.

There have been many recent attempts to understand ancient and medieval Christian exegesis[2] and even attempts to retrieve some kind of

1. Some examples of such works appear in the next footnote, but I will mention two others here: Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* and Caspary, *Politics and Exegesis*.

2. For a sampling of such work see, for example, de Lubac, *Exégèse medieval*. For the English translation, see de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*; idem, *History and Spirit*; Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*; Auerbach, "Figura;" Whitman, *Allegory*; Dawson, *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria*; idem, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity*; Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*; Turner, *Eros and Allegory*; idem, "Allegory in Christian Late Antiquity;" Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture*; Ayres, *Nicea and Its Legacy*; O'Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*; DiTommaso and Turcescu, *Reception and Interpretation of the Bible in Late Antiquity*; Spijker, *Multiple Meanings of Scripture*;

theological exegesis of Scripture from biblical scholars.[3] However, few, if any, have attempted to figurally exegete Scripture in a patristic or medieval mode.[4] I find this lacuna interesting and wish to begin to understand why allegorical/figural readings no longer appear persuasive to modern minds. This book is the start of that inquiry. My initial conclusions are found in what follows and have to do with how theological and philosophical conceptions of history and its practice impact the writing of history and reading of Scripture.

I explore the relationship of the exegetical and historical works of the Venerable Bede to show how conceptions of the past determine the writing of history. I argue that while Bede undoubtedly had a theological conception of the past, his lack of attention to important issues in philosophy and exegesis resulted in ambiguity and problematic readings of the literal sense of Scripture. The contemporary lesson to be learned from Bede is that trenchant philosophical and theological issues matter in the writing of history, since they are part of its inevitable representational structure. Bede is treated, not as object in the past, but as an historian worthy of a place at the table alongside contemporary historians, despite the issues I find in his work. In fact, despite his own separation of exegesis and history, it is shown that Bede did, just like his contemporary interpreters, represent the past in empirically ambiguous ways that includes theology.

On the surface, Bede may appear to be a perfect match for my study, but once one begins reading his work it will be discovered that Bede was not interested in the theoretical questions that animate my work in what follows. Indeed, as Arthur Holder has said, the "non-speculative quality of all Bede's writing is inescapable."[5] From his English upbringing[6] to a void in

Kannengiesser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*; Reventhlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation, Volume 1*; idem, *History of Biblical Interpretation, Volume 2*; McAuliffe, Walfish, and Goering, *With Reverence for the Word*.

3. This literature is also vast and includes entire commentary series, like *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* and Eerdmans' *Two Horizons New Testament Commentary*. Some notable works and authors: Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis*; Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*; idem, *Conversion of the Imagination*; Watson, *Text, Church and World*; Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*; Green and Turner, *Between Two Horizons*; Minear, *Bible and the Historian*.

4. Ephraim Radner might be the sole exception, though he does not address theoretical concerns in the historical task in an explicit manner. See Radner, *The End of the Church*; idem, *Hope Among the Fragments*; idem, *Leviticus*, and most recently, idem, *A Brutal Unity*.

5. Holder, "Bede and the Tradition of Patristic Exegesis," 406.

6. Capelle, "Le rôle théologique de Bède le Vénérable," 1–40.

his library[7] and also his own historical and pastoral situation,[8] scholars have provided differing rationales for why Bede did not undertake "systematic" or speculative theology like Augustine. While these historical speculations are not mutually exclusive, I tend to think that Bede's own circumstances, which included a fledgling church and priests in need of basic training, are what kept him focused on the practical and concrete.

Part of the reason I have worked with Bede is precisely due to his less speculative focus, because I am convinced that philosophical and theological issues matter even in more concrete disciplines like history. I also selected Bede because the relationship between his exegetical and historical works has drawn the attention of many scholars. In what follows, I will show that Bede's narrow, if historically necessary, focus on practical matters actually gets him into unnecessary conundrums, especially in his literal commenting on Genesis. In short, Bede's lack of attention to philosophical issues often impacts his historical writing and literal exegesis, giving him problems that someone like Augustine was able to avoid because of his philosophical and theological "speculations." More specifically, I intend to argue that while Bede did attempt to sharply distinguish the literal and figural senses, thereby prompting him to not figurally exegete non-biblical history, he did it anyway insofar as all historical inquiry is intrinsically constituted by representation; the necessity of representation in history, and what I mean by it, occupies the subject of my final chapter. Ultimately, I will suggest that Augustine and Bede differ in their theologies of nature and grace and that these frame and shape their reading of Scripture and writing of history.

In order to prevent misunderstanding, I think it appropriate to say what I am not arguing or doing at the outset, even before I summarize each chapter and clarify how I am using terms. I am decidedly not advocating merely propositional understandings of texts. Far from it; Bede did not read texts exclusively in this way, but he also did not have our unquestioned impulse to place all texts and events in their historical context; that is, it did not occur to him that there is just *one* proper historical context by which events, persons, and objects *must* be understood. The polarization between such conceptions, either propositional truths or mere historically embodied and contingent claims, is precisely what I want to challenge. I am also not advocating a disavowal of historical inquiry or its usefulness. I use contemporary historical practices and historians to make my argument, and I do not think it inconsistent with the case I am making. More specifically,

7. Bonner, "Bede and Medieval Civilization," 71–90.
8. Davidse, "Sense of History in the Works of the Venerable Bede," 647–95.

I want to demonstrate the limits of history so they can be transcended.[9] I think that can happen, and to invoke Wittgenstein, to think otherwise is to be held captive by a picture. Hence, I am seeking more to disabuse us of certain attitudes and beliefs regarding history than to do away with history itself, whatever that could even mean. If one believes I am doing away with history, then this only reveals that one cannot think of history in a different way—much like a blind person saying there cannot be a chair in the room because she cannot see it.

I beg the reader's patience as I muddle through this difficult terrain hoping to clear a path for subsequent work that will make this argument clearer and more persuasive. Many of the issues I have raised in this introduction so far do not receive direct treatment here. However, I think it important to mention them because it helps properly locate and frame my work both conceptually and even historically. Before proceeding to the body of my argument, I should clarify how I am and will use certain important terms and give a brief summary of Bede's life to offer some historical context to Bede's own writings and theology.

Brief Summary of Bede's Life

The specifics of Bede's life, including his monastic discipline, remain fuzzy. There are no extant English monastic rules from Bede's time, and we possess only one rule prior to the Carolingian reforms. Unfortunately, this rule dates well past Bede's time. There have been attempts to reconstruct and understand Bede's life in some general fashion from Northumbrian culture, but these usually begin by noting the lack of evidence and texts that undergird the necessary confidence to speak with any historical authority specifically about Bede.[10] The best primary source evidence and description we have comes from Bede himself.

> I, Bede, servant of Christ and priest of the monastery of St. Peter and St. Paul which is at Wearmouth and Jarrow, have, with the help of God and to the best of my ability, put together this account of the history of the Church of Britain and of the English

9. On this I am indebted to Fasolt, *Limits of History.*

10. Thompson, *Bede: His Life, Times and Writings*; Blair, *Northumbria in the Days of Bede*; idem, *World of Bede*; Fairless, *Northumbria's Golden Age*; Farrell, *Bede and Anglo-Saxon England*; Higham, *English Empire*; Meyvaert, "Bede and the Church Paintings of Wearmouth-Jarrow," 63–77; Brown, *Bede, The Venerable*; Wormald with Bullough and Collins, *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society*; Goffart, *Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550–800)*; Ward, *Venerable Bede*; DeGregorio, "*Nostrorum socordiam temporum*," 107–22.

> people in particular, gleaned either from ancient documents or from tradition or from my own knowledge. I was born in the territory of this monastery. When I was seven years of age I was, by the care of my kinsmen, put into the charge of the reverend Abbot Benedict and then of Ceolfrith, to be educated. From then on I have spent all my life in this monastery, applying myself entirely to the study of the Scriptures; and, amid the observance of the discipline of the Rule and the daily task of singing in the church, it has always been my delight to learn or to teach or to write. At the age nineteen I was ordained deacon and at the age of thirty, priest, both times through the ministration of the reverend Bishop John on the direction of Abbot Ceolfrith. From the time I became a priest until the fifty-ninth year of my life I have made it my business, for my own benefit and that of my brothers, to make brief extracts from the works of the venerable fathers on the holy Scriptures, or to add notes of my own to clarify their sense and interpretation.[11]

Immediately following this quotation, Bede lists the works he has produced up to that point in his life. There has also been an attempt to reconstruct the books he had available in Wearmouth-Jarrow libraries.[12]

Despite the copious scholarship on later monasticism in England,[13] Sarah Foot has provided the only English account of Anglo-Saxon monasticism in Bede's day.[14] It is reasonable to believe that more general studies on Benedictine monastic life in the late patristic or early medieval time periods would shed light on Bede's life.[15] However, his life at the edges of the civilization at that time might have caused important differences in how monasticism functioned; this is partly what Foot is driving at in her argument that most monastic rules were mixed—that is they contained both

11. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the Anglo-Saxon People*, 5.24.

12. Laistner, "Library of the Venerable Bede."

13. David Knowles is the prime representative of this scholarship. See, for example, Knowles, *Monastic Order in England*; idem, *Medieval Religious Houses, England and Wales*; idem, *Heads of Religious Houses, England and Wales,* 940–1216.

14. Foot, *Monastic Life in Anglo-Saxon England, c.* 600–900.

15. For example, Dalye, *Benedictine Monasticism*; Leclerq, *Love of Learning and the Desire for God*; Clark, *Benedictines in the Middle Ages*. The debate between Francis Clark and Adalbert de Vogüé on the origins of Benedictine monasticism are only ancillary to my concerns, since my focus is on monastic culture in Bede's day. See Clark, *"Gregorian" Dialogues and the Origins of Benedictine Monasticism*; Gregory the Great *Dialogues* and *Commentaire sur le premier livre des Rois*. For more specifics on how Bede's monastic life impacted his exegesis, see DeGregorio, "Bede, the Monk, as Exegete: Evidence from the Commentary on Ezra-Nehemiah," 343–69.

contemplative and secular components making the boundaries between cloisters and the world more porous than most monasteries.

In summary of this literature, we can say about Bede, however tentatively, that his focus was on devotion and obedience to God through learning, teaching, and writing. Moreover, he also sought to reform the monasteries that he thought were becoming lax and unfaithful, and this can be seen in his later exegesis.[16] It is difficult to tell if Bede favored the mixed rule that Foot's scholarship is describing or if it is, in fact, the object of his criticism. Nonetheless, his concern for the education and faithfulness of the English church shines forth on every page of his work. What shaped Bede the most was perhaps liturgical singing and the Office. Cuthbert records that near the time of Bede's death the antiphons of the office came most readily to Bede.[17] In my view, it would be hard to overestimate the importance of the daily office, monastic discipline, and liturgical life on Bede's work and writing. However, the dearth of specifics on Bede's practices makes it difficult to address these with any authority in my subsequent analysis.

Terminological Clarification

I will begin with the easiest, history. The vast majority of times I use the word "history" I do not mean the past or what happened in the past. Instead, I follow Constantin Fasolt's definition: "By history I mean knowledge of the past, as well as the technique by which such knowledge is produced and the activity required to that end, especially in the forms developed by professionally trained historians."[18] Distinguishing the past and how it is known is of utmost importance in my argument because our knowledge of the past impacts what counts as relevant history or *as* historical. Thus, my primary concern is with the discipline that produces knowledge of the past, though I do use history to mean the past at times. Context will clarify.

More slippery and difficult to define is "figural." I will give a brief definition and then provide an argument for it, though I do not take my use of it to be highly contested in current scholarship. Basically, I follow Erich Auerbach, "Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first. The two poles of the figures, are within time, but both, being real events or figures are within

16. For more specifically on Bede's later works and his attempt at reform, see DeGregorio, "*Nostrorum socordiam temporum*;" idem, "Bede's *In Ezram et Neemiam* and the Reform of the Northumbrian Church," 1–25.

17. Cuthbert, "Letter on the Death of Bede," 300–301.

18. Fasolt, *Limits of History*, xiii.

time, within the stream of historical life."[19] This definition could use further elaboration, so perhaps what I take figural to not mean will be helpful to sketch. Figural reading does not proceed by recourse to the category of meaning, if we take meaning to be logically independent from the words or events to which it is related. If meaning is logically independent, then the meaning can then substitute completely for the word or event in question. Once one "gets" the meaning, the original event or language can now be superseded by its meaning. Engaging Auerbach and regarding logical independence of meaning, David Dawson says, "one can state meaning apart from the representation without loss; the representation is, at best, a useful but dispensable illustration."[20] Hence, figural reading decidedly does not imply the loss of the historical event or literal sense of a text.

I use Auerbach cautiously and with some modification, however. While my argument will show where and how I depart from Auerbach, I will give some preliminary details regarding my reservations with his definition. I first want to note that I do not object to the language quoted above in and of itself. I think it adequate as a formal definition. However, Auerbach inflects this definition in potentially problematic ways. Auerbach's very conception of history is what I find problematic and Dawson once again helpfully teases out the issue at hand. Comparing Auerbach to Origen Dawson explains:

> For Auerbach, what is historical is what is real, and what is real is what is material or bodily. Real, material things are what they are, and they do not exist merely to signify other things. So when Auerbach says that figural reading does not undermine the physical or bodily reality, he means that figural reading does not undermine the physical or bodily reality of what the text represents. Origen also has an interest in preserving the historical character of biblical figures, but to him, their historical character consists in their act of occurring in the real world and their continuing capacity to affect individuals. Origen is no less concerned than Auerbach with the historical as the real, but for Origen, reality is a quality first of all of events that engage the spiritual lives of individuals in the present.[21]

My concern is not with Origen, but Dawson's words here show that what one takes to be historical makes all the difference. History is not simply given.

19. Auerbach, "Figura," 53.

20. See Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity*, 86; for more see ibid., 84–91.

21. Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity*, 115. For Dawson's detailed analysis of Auerbach, see *ibid*, 83–113.

There are not facts just "out there," including so-called empirical reality. As a result, I do not adhere to idealism, but I do find problematic philosophical versions of empiricism that have not reckoned with contemporary philosophy of language. I need not give such an explicit philosophical account for my argument here, though I do presume it throughout. Suffice it to say that I find the work of Wittgenstein, Sellars, and Quine congenial.[22]

Figural and allegorical exegesis can but do not have to be distinguished. Sometimes allegorical reading uses historical events and texts as a means to discuss something logically independent from the event or text. The likes of Henri de Lubac have shown why allegory is a complex term and frequently used equivocally in the hands of Christian thinkers through the ages.[23] Aside from my summary of others who use such language, I sometimes avoid the term allegory because of its status as a literary device that can be deployed without reference to historical matters as an intra-textual or extra-textual reference without grounding in physical reality. Again, it has not always been used this way and certainly nothing intrinsic to it, as far as I can discern, requires such an ahistorical deployment. When I do use allegorical, I use it as synonymous with figural as sketched above.

Finally, the literal or historical sense needs clarification. I have yet to find a more concise and accurate description of the literal sense in early church exegesis than Lewis Ayers. Though he prefers "plain sense" on account of modern connotations of "literal," I will use his summary that he borrowed from Eugene Rogers' work on Aquinas. The literal sense "is the way the words run."[24] While seemingly simple, the literal sense itself can be multivalent. Since Christian authors believed that God and humans were both the authors of Scripture, a text can be read literally or plainly by discerning who the speaker is at any given point, along with discerning which, if any, rhetorical device might be at work (i.e. genre).[25] As I will show, what one takes the literal sense to be makes an enormous difference for

22. I am indebted to the following works of each philosopher just mentioned: Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*; idem, *On Certainty*; Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," 20–43; Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," 253–329.

23 de Lubac, *Exégèse medieval*; in English *Medieval Exegesis*.

24. Ayers, *Nicea and Its Legacy*, 32–33. Cf. Rogers, "How the Virtues of an Interpreter Presuppose and Perfect Hermeneutics," 64–81. For more on the literal or plain sense, see Frei, "The 'Literal' Reading of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition," 36–77; Tanner, "Theology and the Plain Sense," 59–78. Specifically on Aquinas, see Johnson, "Another Look at the Plurality of the Literal Sense," 117–41. For an overview of early- and mid-twentieth century views of the literal sense, see Scheidners, "Faith, Hermeneutics, and the Literal Sense of Scripture," 719–36.

25. See Ayers, *Nicea and Its Legacy*, 33–40. See also Rogers, "How the Virtues of an Interpreter Presuppose and Perfect Hermeneutics," 64–68.

subsequent figural readings (or what counts as a figural reading), since the literal is constitutive of the figural. However, the figural also impacts literal due to the representational structure of historical writing.

Summary

My argument is intended to be a contribution to theology today. However, I do make advances in Bedan scholarship, as well as the understanding of *figura* and the figural sense, especially in how they have been conceived in the twentieth century. Regarding scholarship on Bede, my account is probably the most explicitly theological reading of Bede insofar as I seek to understand the theological relationships between his texts, as well as his own theological insights as a Christian thinker. I will highlight both aspects of my contributions in the following summary.

Chapter 1 attempts to focus my argument through a historiography of recent scholarship on Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and how it is conceived in relationship to his exegesis and theology. I begin with Plummer's introduction to his 1896 critical edition of Bede's famous text, which set the stage for most twentieth century Bedan scholarship. Early twentieth-century work on Bede has dogmatic overtones in its evaluation, either positive or negative, of Bede's historical work. Scholars either read Bede as a precursor to modern historical methods and criteria, or they hold him subject to such standards both explicitly and implicitly. Nearly all these early scholars have trouble making sense of Bede's figural exegesis and integrating his obvious theological purposes for the *Historia*, especially the miracles Bede recounts. Bede frequently ends up looking like a schizophrenic scholar lapsing in and out of "true" historical inquiry and theology.

As the century marches onward, scholars become more sensitive to Bede's theological concerns and the difference between the eighth and twentieth centuries. Through attention to Bede's "*uera lex historia*," scholars come to more precise understandings of what Bede thought he was doing. Thus, mid- and late-twentieth-century scholars often level a criticism of anachronism on their predecessors for not reading Bede in his patristic and Augustinian heritage. For the first time, Bede seeks to be understood within a larger theological and even metaphysical framework. Tensions in understanding Bede come to a head in the work of Jan Davidse, who rightly notes that modern conceptions of history, and even fallacies like anachronism, are foreign to Bede. This leaves one asking: How can contemporary understandings of history make sense of Bede's histories when the differences between them seem so great? This question haunts my argument through the final chapters.

The second chapter offers a focused analysis of Bede's *Historia* by comparing it to his commentary on the temple (*De templo*) because Bede was writing both simultaneously. There has been some attention to the relationship between *De templo* and the *Historia,* but my analysis offers an in-depth study of their theological relationship that has only been previously outlined or suggested. While maintaining his broader theology of history, which will be summarized in chapter 4, Bede surprisingly does not figurally exegete historical events. In other words, Bede does not make direct connections between events in the English church and Scripture even when connections seem to be obvious. For example, Bede's insistence about the importance of kings for the building of Christianity in England is not explicitly connected to Solomon's use of gentile leaders in building the temple. To be sure, Scripture makes appearances in the *Historia*, but Bede chooses not to make figural connections between the bible and the history he recounts, despite having examples of such in the preceding tradition. The reason why Bede may not make such connections is the subject of the next chapter.

I argue in chapter 3 that Bede's literal exegesis of Genesis 1 provides a theological rationale for why he does not figurally exegete history. By comparing Bede and Augustine, I show how each read the literal sense of Genesis 1 quite differently. In fact, Bede takes Augustine's reading to be allegorical at places, despite these being in Augustine's literal commentary. A prime example of this is Bede's taking "In the beginning" to refer to the actual start of time in conscious difference to Augustine's reading that understands it as a reference to the Word/*Logos*. Moreover, Bede frequently understands a tension to exist between the literal and figural senses to the point where it becomes hard to see how the literal sense is internal to the figural or how the figural is an extension of the literal. The tension manifested in Bede's exegesis comes from his implicit belief that literal language should describe or refer to empirical events. Though the influence of Augustine on Bede has been noted by scholars, no one has provided a comparison of their commentary on Genesis that highlights their different readings of Genesis 1, nor does anyone highlight their different philosophical and theological perspectives that animate their readings. The upshot for my overarching argument demonstrates that theological and philosophical notions and arguments matter for literal and historical reading and writing.

Contemporary historical theory makes its appearance in chapter 4 regarding how the past has been conceived by Bede and how contemporary historians frequently conceive of it. Beginning with defining and summarizing the rise of anachronism in history, I show that concerns to avoid anachronism arose in a particular setting, the early Renaissance, in the thought of Petrarch. In short, anachronism was born from a sense of loss; that the

present was no longer like the past and understood to be fundamentally different from it. In comparison, I summarize Bede's conception of the past that did not have concerns about anachronism and how this impacted his history writing and exegesis. Furthermore, I argue that Bede's ignorance of anachronism helped enable Bede to write the *Historia* as an intentional piece of theology, though carrying with it the perplexities and tensions mentioned in the previous chapters.

Building on and extending the work of Jan Davidse who has taken a similar approach in using contemporary historical theory to investigate Bede, chapter 5 continues the use of historical theory by using the work of Frank Ankersmit to distinguish between description and representation in historical writing. I summarize my previous work on Bede to show that he thought historical language or the literal sense only described, language about God being the only exception. Using contemporary philosophy of language, Ankersmit's distinction shows that history cannot be reduced to empirical claims about reality or the past. I compare Ankersmit and Bede to suggest that all history, ancient and contemporary, can be called figural or allegorical insofar as it remains about the past but not reducible to description or reference. I also apply the logic of representation that Ankersmit articulates to Bede's figural exegesis. Ultimately, I conclude that Bede was right to do history theologically, but his specific practice runs into problems. More specifically, Bede's understanding of the presence of the past is helpful for theological conceptions of history, but Bede did not take the next steps in his historical work insofar as he refused to figurally exegete history by not distinguishing description and representation and thereby not clearly understanding that the figural/allegorical sense intrinsically constitutes literal/historical language. Because of the representational constitution of history, Bede and contemporary historians can both be understood to be historians, not merely separated by a temporal gap with their own historical circumstances being the only deciding difference.

I conclude by wrapping up some loose ends and discussing in more detail one specific and theological representational frame, nature and grace, as well as offering more conceptual clarification between Ankersmit's representation in the writing of history and the figural reading of Scripture. The final result of my overall work is an interdisciplinary argument around the work of the Venerable Bede about how different conceptions of the past and the function of historical language impact the writing of history and exegesis in both the past and the present.