Jnl of Ecclesiastical History, Vol. 60, No. 2, April 2009. © 2009 Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S002204690800701X Printed in the United Kingdom

Bede on the Papacy

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It is clear from Bede's Historia ecclesiastica *that England then enjoyed close relations with the Roman Church. Some passages in the work have been seen as reflecting a high doctrine of the papacy, but when carefully read they turn out to be devoid of any understanding of the papacy. The same is true of Bede's discussions of Christ's words to Peter (Matthew xvi.18a, 19) in his writing on the Bible. Yet other English authors of the period had attitudes very different to those of Bede; suggestions are offered as to why Bede took the line he did.*

In its early years, the English Church was closely connected with that of Rome. The point can easily be made by comparing it with the Church of early Merovingian Gaul, as described by Gregory of Tours. Thus, while the dedications of the earliest churches in Canterbury give the impression of imitating those of the great churches in Rome,[1] and St Peter was the most

HE = Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*; MGH, SRM = Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum; AA = Auctores Antiquissimi; Ep. = Epistolae

[1] Augustine dedicated churches in the name of the Saviour; the Roman church later called St John Lateran was then known by the same name: Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.33. Bede's language, 'Augustinus, ubi in regia civitate sedem episcopalem … accepit … ecclesiam … in nomine sancti Salvatoris Dei et Domini nostri Iesu Christi sacravit' (*Opera historica*, ed. C. Plummer, Oxford 1896, 70; *Bede's Ecclesiastical history of the English people*, ed. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, Oxford 1969, 114), suggests that Augustine's church was envisaged as a cathedral, as the Lateran then was in Rome. Compare also Mellitus building a church dedicated to the Holy Mother of God (*HE* 2.6) to Pope Boniface's recent dedication of the erstwhile Pantheon to the Holy Mother of God and all the martyrs, recorded by Bede (*HE* 2.4). In the time of Mellitus there was also in Canterbury a church dedicated to the Quattro Coronati (*HE* 2.7); an ancient church dedicated to them stands 400 m. from the Lateran: Hugo Brandenburg, *Ancient churches of Rome*, Turnhout 2005, 195. Non-Roman in its inspiration was the church of the Apostles Peter and Paul, established just outside Canterbury, where the archbishops of Canterbury and the kings of Kent were to be buried; a burial church, similar to the church of the Holy Apostles (viz. Peter and Paul), established by Constantine in Constantinople, had been founded by Clovis and his wife Clotilde in Paris: Gregory of Tours *Libri historiarum* 2.43, MGH, SRM i. 93; this church was later dedicated to Ste Geneviève.

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popular patron of English churches in the seventh and eighth centuries,[2] in Gaul the veneration of him and other saints with Roman connections pales into insignificance when compared with the enthusiasm shown there for the tombs of local, Gallic saints;[3] while the expression 'apostolic see' can only refer to the see of Rome when used by Bede,[4] Gregory uses it of the see of Bordeaux as well as that of Rome;[5] while the flood of early English pilgrims to the thresholds of the Apostles at Rome, two of them kings, can be amply documented,[6] Gregory describes a deaf and dumb man being taken to Rome who was healed by a holy man near Nice and declared that he had found there those he had sought at Rome, and when he discusses a pair of rascally bishops who appealed to Pope John III, the only case he provides of an appeal to Rome, it is clear that he believes that they deceived the pope.[7] There is nothing to be wondered at in this, for whereas Christianity across most of post-Roman Gaul was a development of what had already existed there in antiquity, the form which it took in England was largely that of an import from Rome which owed very little to indigenous traditions.[8] The English

[2] W. Levison, *England and the continent in the eighth century*, Oxford 1946, 259–65. On the possibility that the cathedral built by Augustine at Canterbury imitated St Peter's in some respects see H. M. Taylor, 'The Anglo-Saxon cathedral church at Canterbury', *Archaeological Journal* cxxvi (1969), 101–30.

[3] M. Viellard-Troikouroff, *Les Monuments religieux de la Gaule d'après les œuvres de Grégoire de Tours*, Paris 1974, 381–2, 434–41. It should be noted, however, that, of the Apostles, Peter was overwhelmingly the most popular for dedications in Gaul: E. Ewig, 'Der Petrus- und Apostelkult im spätrömischen und fränkischen Gallien', *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* lxxi (1960), 215–51, esp. p. 243.

[4] See, for example, *HE* 1.23, 1.27, 1.29, 2.1 (Plummer edn, 42, 48, 63, 73, 75, 80; Colgrave–Mynors edn, 68, 80, 104, 122, 124, 134). Two of these references occur in letters of Gregory the Great which Bede reproduces.

[5] Rome: Gregory of Tours, *Libri historiarum* 2.1, p. 38. Bordeaux: ibid. 4.26, p. 158, although King Lothar assumes that the expression refers to the Roman church. Gregory also quotes documents which address, in awkward Latin, Gallic bishops as 'apostolici sede dignissimis' (9.41, p. 468) and 'apostolica sede dignissimis' (9.42, p. 470). Gregory the Great regards Antioch as an apostolic see: *Registrum epistularum* 5.42, CCSL cxl. 326. The adjective must refer to the Apostle Peter.

[6] See W. K. Moore, *The Saxon pilgrims to Rome and the schola Saxonum*, Fribourg 1937. See also Claire Stancliffe, 'Kings who opted out', in Patrick Wormald with Donald Bullough and Roger Collins (eds), *Ideal and reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon society: studies presented to J. M. Wallace-Hadrill*, Oxford 1983, 154–76, esp. pp. 156–7. There was a royal precedent among the Burgundians: R. Kaiser, 'Der Burgunderkönig Sigismund (†523–524): erster heiliger König des Mittelalters und erster königlichen Romfahrer, Busspilger und Mönch', in A. Meyer, C. Rendtel and M. Wittner-Butsch, *Päpste, Pilger, Pönitentiarie: Festschrift Ludwig Schmugge*, Tübingen 2004, 199–210.

[7] Deaf and dumb man: 'Quaerebam Petrum, quaerebam Paulum Laurentiumque vel relinquos, qui Romam proprio cruore inlustrant; hic omnes repperi, hic cunctos inveni': Gregory of Tours, *Libri historiarum* 6.6, p. 275. For the bishops' appeal to Rome see ibid. 5.20.

[8] The arguments of Rob Meens are not entirely persuasive: 'A background to Augustine's mission to Anglo-Saxon England', *Anglo-Saxon England* xxiii (1994), 5–17.

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were therefore prone to regard Gregory the Great, who launched an evangelistic drive there at the end of the sixth century, as their own apostle.[9] Yet just where one would expect a doctrine of papal authority to be expressed most clearly, it proves very difficult to detect. In the following pages it will be argued that Bede, whose narrative is so full of ties between England and Rome and who clearly thought them a good thing, is nevertheless remarkably reticent on the subject of the papacy.

The obvious starting place for an enquiry into Bede's views is his account of the Synod of Whitby, generally dated to 664, at which the Northumbrian King Oswiu decided to adopt the Roman way of calculating the date of Easter, as opposed to the method used by the Irish and their followers, who were then active in Northumbria. The synod marked a decisive stage in the advance of Roman Christianity in England, and Bede seems to have structured his narrative to emphasise its centrality, for he places the synod exactly half-way through his *Historia*.[10] As Bede wrote his account of the synod he seems to have had a source open before him, Stephanus' *Vita Wilfridi*, his *Life* of the chief protagonist of the Roman cause. Whether this was in the form that has come down to us is unclear; the argument advanced here would be stronger if Bede could be shown to have deliberately altered the emphases of his predecessor, but it does not depend on his having done so. Bede seems to have been coy about acknowledging his use of Stephanus' work, for he fails to mention it among the sources he lists in the preface to his *History*, but there can be no doubt that he employed it.[11] Modern scholarship has frequently privileged Bede's account of the Synod of Whitby over that of his predecessor,[12] and it must be said that the version provided by Stephanus is not innocent of artifice, for aspects of his narrative are curiously similar to the account he provides of a council held at Rome in 704, at which Wilfrid

[9] 'Etsi aliis non est apostolus, sed tamen nobis est': Bede *HE* 2.1. Bede's understanding of the role of Gregory in the mission is also expressed in *De templo* 2, CCSL cxixA. 218. On later developments see Paul Hayward, 'Gregory the Great as "apostle of the English" in post-conquest Canterbury', this JOURNAL lv (2004), 19–57.

[10] Benedicta Ward has seen it as 'The central chapter of this [the third] book and of the whole work': *The venerable Bede*, Kalamazoo, MI 1998, 123. It is half-way measured by the length of the book, rather than by chapter.

[11] On the relationship between this text and Bede see G. Isenberg, *Die Würdigung Wilfrids von York in Der* Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum *Bedas und der* Vita Wilfridi *des Eddius*, Münster 1978, esp. pp. 35–7, and W. Goffart, *The narrators of barbarian history*, Princeton, NJ 1988, 307–20, who sees Bede responding to ten points in Stephanus' account. On the possibility that the text now extant is a revised version of that available to Bede see D. P. Kirby, 'Eddius Stephanus and the "Life of Wilfrid"', *EHR* xcvii (1983), 101–14. The *Vita Wilfridi* is cited from the edition in MGH, SRM vi.

[12] Striking examples are John Godfrey, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon England*, Cambridge 1962, 117–18, and G. Musca, *Il venerabile Beda storico del'alto medioevo*, Bari 1973, 316–23.

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was again a protagonist.[13] Nevertheless, when the two versions are placed side by side it becomes clear that Bede's account is subtly different from that of Stephanus.

This can be seen in their presentation of background material. According to Stephanus, when Wilfrid returned to England from Gaul in *c.* 658, Alchfrid, king of the Northumbrians, having heard that Wilfrid 'had come from the apostolic see preaching the true Easter and had learned the various aspects of the discipline of the church of the apostle St Peter', asked him about 'the various disciplines of the constitution of the Roman church' and begged him to stay, 'by the Lord and St Peter the apostle'. So it was that Wilfrid became abbot of Ripon, 'through the Lord and through St Peter the apostle'.[14] Bede, for his part, states that he became a friend of Alchfrid, 'who had learned always to follow the catholic rules of the church and love them', and took the monastery of Ripon away from monks who failed to accept 'the catholic Easter and other canonical rites according to the practice of the Roman and apostolic church', entrusting it to Wilfrid.[15] In Bede's view, while Rome was certainly not excluded, the important thing about Wilfrid was his catholicity; for Stephanus, it was his adherence to the practice of the Roman Church, which was that of Peter. Hence, Stephanus sees the difference at Whitby as being between 'the custom of the Britons and the Irish and all the northern region' and 'the practice of the apostolic see … the practice of the Roman church and the apostolic see'. When Wilfrid spoke it was 'to explain the case of the Roman church and the apostolic see'[16] whereas Bede, in his introductory remarks concerning the meeting at Whitby, summarises the issues as involving a clash between 'the traditions of the Irish' and 'the custom of the universal church … the true and catholic Easter … catholic observance'.[17]

Both authors use the device of speeches to represent what transpired at Whitby, although comparison is made difficult by Bede's allocating each of the speakers, Colman and Wilfrid, three speeches, whereas Stephanus credits each of them with just one. The version of Wilfrid's speech provided by Stephanus, which he describes as presenting 'the case of the Roman church and apostolic see', is much shorter, running to less than a hundred words, and emphasises the system of calculation established at the Council of Nicaea, which formed the basis of the discipline of the apostolic see and nearly the whole world. At its conclusion it describes King Oswiu, smiling (perhaps 'smirking': the word 'subridens' suggests that it was in some way a

[13] Colman is made to conclude his speech at Whitby 'Nostrae partis detuli sententiam, vos vestram dicite' (*Vita Wilfridi* 11), while Wilfrid's opponents in 704 conclude their opening remarks 'Nos nostrae partis sententiam detulimus, vos vestram defensionem dicite' (ibid. 53). More significant are the smiles which follow Wilfrid's speeches on each occasion.

[14] Ibid. 7f.

[15] *HE* 5.19 (Plummer edn, 325; Colgrave–Mynors edn, 520–2).

[16] *Vita Wilfridi* 10.

[17] *HE* 3.25 (Plummer edn, 181–2; Colgrave–Mynors edn, 294–8).

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knowing smile),[18] asked who was greater in the kingdom of heaven, Columba, whose practice Colman had defended, or the Apostle Peter. Stephanus continues:

> The whole synod answered unanimously, with one voice: 'The Lord determined this, when he said: "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."'

Confronted with such powerful words (Matt. xvi.18–9), Oswiu affirmed that he would not quarrel with such a person and would accept his judgements.[19]

Bede, on the other hand, offers his readers a rhetorically superb rendering of the narrative found in Stephanus. There has been some uncertainty as to whether Bede was the author of the speeches he attributed to Wilfrid,[20] but no medieval reader would have been surprised if he had been, and some of Wilfrid's words contain verbal touches which point to their having been written by Bede.[21] Bede's account suggests that the chief issue was that of universal practice versus provincial custom. Hence, he reports that Wilfrid said:

> The Easter which we keep we have seen celebrated by everyone at Rome, where the blessed apostles Peter and Paul lived, taught, suffered and were buried; we noticed that it was followed by everyone in Italy and Gaul, which we traversed in order to study and pray. We have learned that it is observed in Africa, Asia, Egypt, Greece and the whole world, wherever the church of Christ has spread, among different nations and in different languages, at the very same time.

[18] At *Vita Wilfridi* 53, p. 247, the members of another synod are described as 'inter se graecizantes et subridentes'. An English author tells that when a woman who baked loaves used by Gregory the Great to celebrate mass was offered communion, 'subrisit': *The earliest* Life *of Gregory the Great*, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave, Cambridge 1985, cap. 20. Note Ambrose on the sense of the prefix 'sub': 'Aliud est enim subaemulari, aliud aemulari; subaemulation astutiam habet, aemulatio similicitatem': *In Psalmos* xxxviii.10.

[19] *Vita Wilfridi* 10.

[20] '[I]f Bede made all this up … If in fact he made up any of Wilfrid's speech': Henry Mayr-Harting, *The coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edn, University Park, PA 1991, 109, 112. Roger Ray provides an interesting discussion of Bede's account of Whitby as an example of his 'inventional method': 'The triumphs of Greco-Roman rhetorical assumptions in pre-Carolingian historiography', in Christopher Holdsworth and T. P. Wiseman (eds), *The inheritance of historiography, 350–900*, Exeter 1986, at pp. 79–81.

[21] Wilfrid's assertion that Columba and his followers loved God with 'rustic simplicity' ('simplicitate rustica') reproduces a phrase Bede uses in his prose *Vita Cuthberti* 3: *Two* Lives *of St Cuthbert*, ed. B. Colgrave, Cambridge 1940, 164. The source may be Jerome's prologue to his *De viris illustribus*, *PL* xxiii. 634. I concur with the judgement of Plummer (ii. 190) on this matter. Continental scholars differ as to whether Bede spiced up his account with English humour: T. Zwölfer, *Sankt Peter Apostelfürst und Himmelspförtner: seine Verehung bei den Angelsachsen und Franken*, Stuttgart 1929, 52, *contra* Duchesne.

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In the face of such unanimity, 'the Picts and Britons, who live in the two most remote islands in the Ocean, and not the whole of these, struggle with foolish toil against the whole world'. It may well have been, as Colman claimed, that the Apostle John followed Jewish practice in calculating the date of Easter, but Peter had followed a better way, and the Council of Nicaea had confirmed that Peter's was the true Easter;[22] whilst Columba and his followers may have been good men, surely it would be better practice to follow 'the decrees of the apostolic see, or rather of the universal church … the universal church which extends across the whole world'. And while Columba may have been holy, he could hardly be placed before Peter, to whom the Lord addressed the words 'Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it, and I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven.' Wilfrid's speech closed with this quotation from Scripture, and after King Oswiu established that these words had indeed been addressed to Peter, and that Peter was therefore the doorkeeper of heaven, he decided that it would be prudent not to contradict him.

The two accounts point in different directions. In Stephanus, the Roman case is argued on the basis of the Council of Nicaea, and backed up by the whole synod's crying out Christ's words from Matt. xvi. 18–19, whereas in Bede the case is made on the basis of universal rather than Roman practice. The concluding quotation of Matt. xvi. 18–19, which Bede places in the mouth of Wilfrid rather than the whole assembly, is certainly effective, but his point is that Columba could not be placed before the person to whom Christ had given the keys of the kingdom of heaven; as Wallace-Hadrill has pointed out 'it was Peter the doorkeeper, not Peter the bishop of Rome, for whom Oswiu opted'.[23] Further, in the account of the synod provided by Stephanus, the personal name Peter does not occur before Oswiu's question as to whether Columba or Peter were greater in the kingdom of heaven, and the only possible allusions to the Apostle in the preceding narrative occur indirectly, in the repeated phrase 'apostolic see' ('sedes apostolica, apostolica sedes'). In Bede's account, on the other hand, much of the debate turns on the historical figure of Peter, for he makes Wilfrid point out that, whereas John celebrated Easter beginning on the evening of the fourteenth day of the first month, Peter, mindful of the Lord's resurrection, postponed the solemnity until the following Sunday.[24] For Bede, the significance of Peter in his account of the Synod of Whitby is simply that he celebrated Easter on the correct date. Moreover, Stephanus provides a juridical context for the position advocated ('let him who condemns any one of these decrees be

[22] Elsewhere Bede discusses Peter's practice in celebrating Easter: *Libellus retractationis in Actus Apostolorum*, at the point where the commentary discusses ch. xxvi.16, CCSL cxxi. 156.

[23] J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early medieval history*, Oxford 1975, 83.

[24] *HE* (Plummer edn, 185–6; Colgrave-Mynors edn, 302–4).

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anathema') and apparently (the manuscript tradition is not clear) reproduces Christ's words to Peter in a full form which included reference to Peter's power of binding and loosing. Bede, for his part, omits the words about Peter's binding and loosing, an uncharacteristic move in view of his wordiness relative to Stephanus' account. Contrary to what a quick reading of the text has suggested to some scholars, the words of Christ reproduced by Bede do not connect Peter and the Roman Church; nor is anything said about his possessing a power of binding and loosing.[25] While the observation, made on the basis of Bede's account of the Synod of Whitby, that Colman is not reported to have specifically denied the authority of the papacy, is perfectly correct,[26] it would be equally correct to say that neither Colman nor Wilfrid asserted such authority. Modern scholarship has moved too easily from Peter being significant in Bede's narrative to an interpretation of that narrative in papal terms.[27]

A reading of Bede's account of the Synod of Whitby along these lines finds a precise parallel towards the end of his *History*, in the long letter he reproduces written in the name of Ceolfrid (but really by himself) to King Nechtan of the Picts. Christ's words 'Thou art Peter' are quoted in the same form as towards the end of the account of the synod, and operate in the way I have suggested they did at Whitby. Here too, the context in which they occur is not one of papal authority but concerns the practice of the historical figure of Peter, on this occasion with respect to the tonsure, the form of which adopted by Peter is contrasted with that of Simon Magus. Moreover, just as Bede's presentation of the Synod of Whitby ended with King Oswiu invoking Peter the doorkeeper of the kingdom of heaven, the letter to the king is structured to conclude with an assurance that the most blessed prince of the Apostles will open the door of heaven to King Nechtan and his people.[28] Just as he did in Bede's account of the Synod of Whitby, Peter

[25] I disagree with H. E. J. Cowdrey, 'Bede and the English Church', *Journal of Religious History* xi (1981), 501–23 at p. 510, and Karl Morrison, *Tradition and authority in the western Church*, Princeton, NJ 1969, 150. Compare the opinion of Richard Hanning: 'The Roman church founded by Peter is in its universality the type of the kingdom of heaven': *The vision of history in early Britain*, New York 1966, 82.

[26] Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, 111. It is hard to detect in Wilfrid the 'clarion assertion of papal authority' attributed to him at p. 122.

[27] Hence V. Lozito, 'Il primate romano nella Historia ecclesiastica di Beda', *Romanobarbarico* vii (1982–3), 133–59, whose points relate to Peter having been important rather than what the title of the article suggests. While E. Caspar, *Geschichte des Papsttums*, ii, Tübingen 1933, went too far in attributing to Oswiu a Germanic attitude towards Peter (pp. 680, 788), he was certainly correct in providing a reading of the Synod of Whitby in non-papal terms.

[28] *HE* 5.21, esp. Plummer edn, 342–5, and Colgrave-Mynors edn, 548–50. On Bede having written this letter see Plummer, ii. 332–5 and J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede's* Ecclesiastical history *of the English people: a historical commentary*, Oxford 1988, 196. To the evidence presented there can be added the apposition of 'temporalis regni' and 'caelestis … regni' in the second

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played an important role in the letter to Nechtan, but his role on both occasions was that of an exemplar of proper practice rather than arising from any juridical authority he may have possessed.

Was such an emphasis generally true of Bede's thinking? It will be convenient to approach this question by means of a survey of his exegesis of significant portions of the words of Jesus to Peter in Matthew's Gospel:

'Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church' ('Tu es Petrus, et super hanc petram aedificabo ecclesiam meam': Vulgate: Matt. xvi. 18a).

This text was something of a crux for the Fathers, and in his *Retractions* Augustine concluded that he was unable to say whether the rock was Peter or Christ.[29] But in one of his homilies, Bede explicitly commented that the rock was the Lord and Saviour, and in various works he persistently adopted the second of the alternatives proposed by Augustine.[30]

'And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven' ('Et tibi dabo claves regni caelorum': Matt. xvi.19a).

Bede had no doubt that the keys of the kingdom had been entrusted by Christ to Peter[31] but, according to his account of the Synod of Whitby, King Oswiu concluded that these words had been addressed to him 'principaliter'.[32] This was a resonant if ambiguous word in the western Christian tradition, which could be taken as 'chiefly, in the first instance', or as 'in his capacity of being the person in charge'. Bede adopted the former

last sentence, which is characteristic of Bede (cf. for example *HE* 3.1 (Plummer edn, 127; Colgrave-Mynors edn, 212), 3.6 (p. 138; p. 230), 3.7 (p. 140; p. 232), 3.12 (p. 151; p. 250), 3.22 (p. 172; p. 282). Such repetition has implications for Bede's view of kingship.

[29] *Retractationes* 1.21, CCSL lvii. 62. See the discussion of A.-M. La Bonnardière, 'Tu es Petrus: la pericope ≪Matthieu 16, 13–23≫ dans l'œuvre de saint Augustin', *Irénikon* xliii (1969), 451–99.

[30] *Homilia* i.20, in *Homiliarum evangelii libri ii*, CCSL cxxii. 144, line 126. This homily, 'In cathedra S Petri', provides Bede's most sustained discussion of the passage in Matthew. Hence, when Bede writes 'ecclesia quae super eum aedificata erat' (141, line 9), the 'eum' must refer to Christ, not Peter. See further 'fides Christi super quam aedificata eius ecclesia': *In I Samuelem prophetam allegorica expositio* 23.26–8, CCSL cxix. 221, cf 'petra fidei' ibid 2.11, 26; 'petra erat Christus et super hanc, inquit, petram aedificabo ecclesiam meam': *In Lucae evangelium expositio* 2.221, CCSL cxx. 59, lines 1596–7; 'super petram fidei': *In Marci evangelium expositio* 9.33, CCSL cxx. 551. It must be acknowledged that Bede once uses the expression 'ecclesiamque super eum aedificandum' with regard to Peter: *In Lucae evangelium* 9.46, CCSL cxx. 209. However, this is presented as no more than an opinion of the disciples, from which they drew the erroneous conclusion that Peter was appointed the superior of James and John, or of all the Apostles.

[31] See, for example, *Super Acta Apostolorum expositio* 3.2, CCSL cxxi. 23; *In Epistulis septem catholicis* at the point where the commentary discusses 2 Pet. iii.15, CCSL cxxi.281; 1 John ii.9, CCSL cxxi 291, line 96f.

[32] *HE* 3.25 (Plummer edn, 188; Colgrave-Mynors edn, 306).

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interpretation,[33] which left the way open for seeing the keys as also having been entrusted in some sense to people other than Peter. Feeling as he did that Peter frequently signifies the Church in Scripture,[34] Bede was able to take the following passage in Matthew in a broad sense:

'And whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven' ('et quodcumque ligaveris super terram erat ligatum in caelis, et quodcumque solveris super terram erit solutum in caelis': Matt. xvi. 19b.)

Bede omitted this passage when quoting Christ's words at the climax of the Synod of Whitby; nor are they found in the letter to Nechtan. These were contexts where they could only have applied to the historical figure of Peter, but it turns out that Bede did not see them as having been directed to him alone:

The power of binding and loosing may seem to have been given by the Lord to Peter alone, but there can be no doubt that we should recognise that it was also given to the other apostles, as he himself bore witness when, after the triumph of his passion and resurrection, he appeared before them, blew upon them and said to them: 'Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you remit, they are remitted; whose sins you retain, they are retained.' (John xx. 22–3) And so even now the same office is committed to the whole church, in its bishops and priests.[35]

He could therefore see the power of binding and loosing as having been given to all the Apostles[36] and, more generally, to the whole Church.[37]

Bede's handling of the words of Christ to Peter, then, confirms an interpretation of his account of the Synod of Whitby and the content of the letter to Nechtan, which suggests that his thought ran along lines which pointed away from strong papal notions. Reluctant as he was to see special

[33] 'Specialiter', at *homilia* i.20, CCSL cxx.146, line 186. Gregory the Great sees Christ's words 'Simon son of Jonas, do you love me?' as being directed 'specialiter' to the person to whom the holy Church was entrusted: *Homiliae xl in Evangelia* 24.2, CCSL cxli. 199.

[34] See, for example, *In Lucae evangelium* 5.3, CCSL cxx. 114; 5.10, CCSL cxx. 116; 22.54, CCSL, cxx. 390, quoting Augustine, *Acta Apostolorum expositio* 5.15, CCSL cxxi. 30; 10.13, CCSL cxxi. 51.

[35] *Homilia* i. 2, CCSL cxxii. 145, line 165ff. Hence Bede sees the authority as having been given to all the elect of the Church: ibid. 146, lines 183–6. Peter received the keys and primacy of judicial power 'specialiter', so that all would know that whoever separated himself from the unity of his faith or fellowship could not be absolved of his sins or enter the door of the heavenly kingdom: ibid. lines 185–91.

[36] *Hexaemeron* (*seu Libri iv in pincipium Genesis*) 9.3, CCSL cxxii. 145, lines 165–72. See *De templo* 1, CCSL cxixA. 186, lines 1550–3, on the keys of the kingdom and the power of binding and loosing and admitting the worthy through the door of heaven given to Apostles and apostolic men, and 2 (217, lines 997–1003), on holy teachers binding and loosing.

[37] *Explanatio apocalypsis* 11, 20, *PL* xciii. 163A, 191D-192A; *In proverbia Salomonis* 26.2, CCSL cxixB. 131; cf *Salomonis allegorica expositio* 3.26, *PL* xci. 1016B.

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powers as having been given to Peter, it follows *a fortiori* that he will not have been inclined to see such powers residing in those who succeeded him in the see of Rome. An interpretation of Bede's thinking along these lines does not, however, deny that he viewed the Church of Rome as being the head of all churches[38] and that he saw authority as having been invested in its bishops. Hence, he thought of popes as having being twice responsible for the coming of Christianity to Britain, first to the British and then the English, so reflecting a view held by others in the period that the Church of Rome had been responsible for the dissemination of Christianity into some areas.[39] The first of these interventions had been in the distant past, but one none the less could interpret Bede's *History* as being structured around two decisive instances of papal involvement in the history of the English. Thus the second book opens with a long *encomium* to Gregory, described by Bede as holding the first pontificate in the whole world and having been set before the Churches,[40] which was not strictly required by the topic he was concerned with, and the fourth book with Pope Vitalian's appointing an archbishop of Canterbury in the person of Theodore; Bede is not at all surprised that Vitalian ordered the English monk Benedict Biscop, then in Rome, to return home so as to conduct Theodore to Canterbury.[41] Throughout his narrative popes are dispensers of *pallia* and letters of exhortation, sixteen of which are quoted *in extenso* in the *History*, and Bede seems to take a degree of Roman authority for granted. Yet if, as has been observed, it does not seem that the juridical primacy of Rome had dogmatic value in Bede's ecclesiology,[42] it is

[38] 'Caput … omnium ecclesiarum', *chron.* s.a. 535, MGH, AA xiii. 310, although the phrase occurs in a quotation from the *Liber pontificalis*.

[39] *HE* 1.4 (Plummer edn, 16; Colgrave-Mynors edn, 24). A letter of Laurentius, Mellitus and Justus quoted by Bede shows the same understanding: 'When, in accordance with its custom, which holds good through the world, the apostolic see sent us to the western lands to preach the Gospel to the heathen peoples': *HE* 2.4. (Plummer edn, 87; Colgrave-Mynors edn, 146), trans. Leo Sherley-Price and R. E. Latham, Harmondsworth 1990, 109. Later, the English missionary Willibrord would seek papal approval for his evangelising activity: Bede *HE* 5.11. Pope Zosimus had reminded the bishops of Gaul that Trophimus had been sent to Arles from his see: *ep.* i.3, *PL* xx.644–5. The same view is expressed by the bishops under the metropolitan authority of Arles, writing to Pope Leo: Leo *ep.* lxv, *PL* liv.880. Such an understanding also occurs in Gregory of Tours, who sees the first bishop of Tours, Gatianus, as having been sent there by an unnamed pope of the Roman see: *Libri historiarum* 10.31, p. 526; cf 1.30, p. 23, on seven bishops despatched to preach in Gaul, among them Trophimus. Note too that Bede takes for granted the ability of Gregory the Great to place the bishops of Britain (Brittaniarum) under Augustine: *HE* 1.27, *interrogatio* vii (Plummer edn, 53; Colgrave-Mynors edn, 88).

[40] '[P]rimum in toto orbe gereret pontificatum … praelatus ecclesiis': *HE* 2.1 (Plummer edn, 73; Colgrave-Mynors edn, 122).

[41] Theodore: *HE* 4.1 (Plummer edn, 201–3; Colgrave-Mynors edn, 522–6). Benedict Biscop: Bede, *Historia abbatum* 3 (Plummer edn, 366); *homilia* i.13, CCSL cxxii. 91.

[42] So Yves Congar, *L'Ecclésiologie du haut moyen-âge*, Paris 1968, 152.

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harder still to see in his view of the Church a notion of an authority which was based on Peter and subsequently held by the bishop of Rome.

This point becomes more noteworthy when Bede's thinking is placed beside that of other English writers of the same period, for they had exactly such a notion. Thus the author of the Whitby *Life* of Gregory (*c.* 713), for example, credits Gregory the Great with the apostolic power of binding and loosing.[43] Similarly, in a letter he wrote to the British king Geruntius on the tonsure and the date of Easter while he was abbot of Malmesbury (675–705), Aldhelm makes a connection between the teaching of Peter, whom he sees as possessing the keys of the kingdom and the power of binding and loosing, and the statutes of the Roman Church.[44] Two other English authors of the period are more emphatic, and deserve fuller consideration.

Wilfrid's biographer Stephanus took a very different line from that of Bede in his account of the Synod of Whitby, and such a line, which doubtless reflected that of his subject, finds expression throughout his *Vita*. Stephanus gives the appearance of going out of his way to stress the close relationship between Peter and bishops of Rome by the device, recurrently employed, of crediting a wide range of speakers with similar sentiments. So it is that he represents Pope Agatho as stating that his predecessor Peter, whose office he was discharging, would see to a matter being settled through his mouth; a king who spurned a papal decision as condemning himself for having despised the judgements of Peter the Apostle and prince of the Apostles, whom he saw as having from God the power of loosing and binding; an abbess as asserting that the apostolic see had the power of binding and loosing together with St Peter the Apostle; and Berhtwald, archbishop of Canterbury, as telling a meeting that the apostolic see possessed the apostolic power of binding and loosing, which had been given first to Peter the Apostle and the leader of the Apostles.[45] This emphasis, which more often than not occurs in passages of direct speech, receives particularly strong expression in the words Stephanus attributes to bishops Andrew of Ostia and John of

[43] *The earliest Life of Gregory the Great*, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave, Cambridge 1985, 27, 28 (122, 124f). Note too the cry of the people, 'Petrum offendisti', when Pope Benedict allowed Gregory, planning to preach to the Angles, to leave Rome (10, 92).

[44] *Ep.* to Geruntius, MGH, Ep. iii. 234: 'doctrinam et decreta beati Petri … et traditionem ecclesiae Romanae'. After quoting from Matt. xvi. 18–19, Aldhelm mentions the danger of spurning the principal statutes ('statute principalia') of his (sc. Peter's) church (line 21); cf p. 224 above on Christ's words being addressed 'principaliter' to Peter. Yet Aldhelm sees (235, line 9) the foundation of the Church as being placed 'principaliter in Christo et sequenter in Petro'.

[45] Pope Agatho: *Vita Wilfridi* 31 (cf. the words attributed to Pope John at 53); king: 34; abbess: 39; Berhtwald: 60. Needless to say the perspective is also that of the author: a king who failed to accept the decision of Pope Agatho is seen as despising the judgements of Peter the Apostle, who has from God the power of binding and loosing (32: the present tense of 'habet' is noteworthy).

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Porto, speaking before Pope Agatho when Wilfrid came to make his case in 672:

> The ordering of the affairs of all the churches hangs on the decision of your apostolic authority. You fulfil the office of the blessed apostle Peter to whom the Creator and Redeemer of all, Christ our Lord, gave the keys for loosing and binding … [Wilfrid] had recourse to the apostolic see wherein Christ the Almighty Lord who redeemed the church with his blood founded the primacy of the priesthood and confirmed the authority of the prince of the apostles.[46]

The repeated emphasis is the more noteworthy because of Stephanus' practice of frequently speaking of the Lord or God in apposition with St Peter.[47] It goes far beyond the thinking of Bede.

Some of the letters written in the following decades by Boniface, the English missionary on the continent, reflect an understanding similar to that of Stephanus.[48] He visited Rome on three occasions and, 'influenced by his own distinctly Anglo-Saxon view of history', sought the support of a number of popes in the course of his activities.[49] Hence, in 722 or 723 he took an oath 'to blessed Peter the chief of the apostles and to your vicar, blessed Pope Gregory, and his successors', in which he mentioned his loyalty 'to your [Peter's] church, to which the power of binding and loosing has been given by the Lord God, and to your aforesaid vicar and his successors'. In a symbolically powerful act, the oath, which he wrote in his own hand, was placed above the body of Peter.[50] In 742 Boniface wrote to Pope Zacharias, seeking the establishment of sees in Germany 'by apostolic orders through the authority and precept of St Peter'.[51] Such an approach may appear as normative in some narratives of medieval church history, although perhaps it could be taken to reflect the specific needs and agenda of Boniface, for he, no

[46] *Vita Wilfridi* 29, trans. J. F. Webb, in *The age of Bede*, Harmondsworth 1983, 135f.

[47] Hence 'per Dominum et per sanctum Petrum apostolum' (*Vita Wilfridi* 7), 'per Dominum … et per sanctum Petrum apostolum' (8), 'confiteor Domino et sancto Petro apostolo' (43), 'per omnipotentem Deum et beatum Petrum apostolum' (51), 'Deo adiuvante et sancto Petro principe apostolorum' (52), 'votum vovit Deo et sancto Petro' (59).

[48] Th. Schieffer, *Winfrid-Bonifatius und die Christliche Grundlegung Europas*, Freiburg 1954, repr. with additional bibliography 1972, remains fundamental. See, more recently, Ian Wood, *The missionary* Life: *saints and the evangelization of Europe, 400–1050*, Harlow 2002, 58–78.

[49] The words quoted are those of Peter Brown, *The rise of western Christendom*, 2nd edn, Malden, MA–Oxford 2003, 420. The evidence presented in n. 38 above may provide some context for Boniface's concern, which he shared with Willibrord, for seeking approval from the apostolic see for missionary activities, although the support Boniface went on to seek when he encountered difficult local bishops invites comparison with Wilfrid's appeals to Rome.

[50] *Ep.* xvi, ed. MGH, Ep. iii. 265, lines 11–12, 18–19.

[51] *Ep.* l, ibid. iii. 299, line 23; cf 'Excellentissimo patri atque apostolico pontifici et ex auctoritate sancti Petri principis apostolorum magisterio freto, Zachariae papae', ibid. 317, lines 15f; Zacharias will give advice 'ex auctoritate sancti Petri principis apostolorum', ibid. 368, line 12.

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less than Wilfrid, sometimes found himself in awkward situations which called for powerful support, the legitimacy of which need not necessarily have been accepted by others. Be this as it may, the attitude of Boniface towards the papacy, in common with that of Stephanus, was much more developed than that of Bede.

If Bede's position were distinctive in the contemporary English milieu, what had led him to adopt it? Perhaps it was a sign of unhappiness on his part at the way in which the papacy had recently intervened within the English Church. Shortly after his victory at the Synod of Whitby, Wilfrid was consecrated bishop of York, inaugurating a controversial episcopal career during which he twice journeyed to Rome to seek papal judgement against his enemies. On both occasions this was forthcoming, but when Wilfrid returned to England it was to a frosty reception.[52] Wilfrid can thus be placed in a long line of ecclesiastics who, finding themselves defeated at home, took their cases to Rome. Understandably, historians have tended to look at such appeals in the context of a steady accumulation of papal authority, but they can also be set against the histories of the Churches from which they were made, and it is clear that the practice of appealing to Rome over the heads of provincial ecclesiastical establishments could cause resentment locally. While Augustine of Hippo felt able to tell a congregation that, two sets of documents having been sent to the apostolic see and replies received, a particular matter was finished,[53] a canon of a Council at Carthage which seems to date from 424 bluntly decreed that 'No-one should dare to appeal to the Roman Church.'[54] Stephanus may have had good reason to emphasise papal power, since Wilfrid had recourse to it and it was deployed on his behalf; things may have looked very different to Bede, whose attitude towards the troublesome bishop was decidedly cool.[55]

An explanation along these lines would suggest that Bede's attitude to the papacy reflected a response to recent events within the English Church. The role it played in the troubled career of Wilfrid may well have coloured Bede's attitude, but his view of the see of Rome may have developed for quite different reasons. There are two elements deeply embedded within Bede's thinking which are congruent with his position on the papacy. The arguments he attributes to Wilfrid at Whitby stress the importance of universal, catholic practice. An argument based on practice across the broad sweep of the Christian world was traditional in discussions of the dating of

[52] The best study remains Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, at pp. 129–47.

[53] *Sermo* cxxxi.10, *PL* xxxviii.734, apparently the origin of the famous 'Roma locuta est, causa finita est.'

[54] 'Ut nullus ad ecclesiam Romanam audeat appellare': CCSL cxxxix. 266, line 476. On the tensions within the view of papal authority adopted by Augustine and his colleagues see J. E. Merdinger, *Rome and the African Church in the time of Augustine*, New Haven, CN–London 1997.

[55] See Goffart, *Narrators*, 307–20.

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Easter, having been advanced in similar terms by no less a person than Constantine,[56] and it was one that Bede took seriously; towards the end of his life he would recycle it, so to speak, when writing to Bishop Ecbert about frequent reception of the eucharist.[57] That the universality of a practice was a sign of its validity is a constant theme with Bede, not a surprising emphasis in one who was insistent that the apostolic preaching of Christianity had taken place throughout the world.[58] Bede's stress on the catholicity and unity of the Church is of a piece with the rest of his *History*,[59] and can readily be paralleled in his scriptural commentaries.[60] A strong notion of the universality of the Catholic Church and the importance of such universality as being a sign of where the truth lay in matters which were disputed, which may owe something to Augustine's polemic against the Donatists, made the validating role of the see of Rome seem a little less central to Bede than it may have seemed to others.

A second emphasis in his thinking about Peter pointed Bede in a different direction to many of his contemporaries. In his commentary on the Song of Songs, Bede, considering the honeycomb, writes of those who seek out the sweet, spiritual meaning of the Scriptures and, by their preaching, explain it so that those who hear them may be saved.[61] He saw 'pastors' as having been ordained in the Church with the particular function of preaching the word of

[56] 'Quod in Romana civitate, Italia et Africa et universa Aegypto, Hispania, Galliis, Brittaniis, Lybia, tota Helladia, Asia diocese, Ponto et Cilicia libenter sub una concordia custoditur': Cassiodorus, *Historia tripartita* 9.38.15, following Socrates, *Historia ecclesiastica* 5.22, quite understandably omitting the statement that the letter from which these words are taken could be found in the third book of Eusebius' *Vita Constantini* 3.19. One immediately places this list beside that which Bede attributes to Wilfrid: 'Vidimus Romae … hoc in Italia, hoc in Gallia … hoc Africam, Asiam, Aegyptum, Graeciam, et omnem orbem.': *HE* 3.25 (Plummer edn, 184; Colgrave-Mynors edn, 300).

[57] 'Iuxta quod ecclesiam Christi per Italiam, Galliam, Africam, Greciam, ac totum orientem sollerter agere nosti': *Epistola Bede ad Ecgbertum episcopum* 15 (*Opera historica*, ed. Plummer, 419).

[58] 'In toto orbe'. See, for example, *In Marci evangelium expositio* at the point where the commentary discusses Mark iii. 11–2, CCSL cxx. 469, 470; iii. 9, CCSL cxx. 493; vi. 41, CCSL cxx. 514; xi.1, CCSL cxx. 571 etc.

[59] For example, early in his narrative he has Augustine asking British bishops and teachers to join him in catholic unity: *HE* 2.22 (Plummer edn, 81; Colgrave-Mynors edn, 134). He summarises a letter to Irish leaders as beseeching them to hold unity of peace and catholic observance with the Church of Christ spread throughout the world: *HE* 2.4 (Plummer edn, 87; Colgrave-Mynors edn, 146).

[60] For example, 'sanctae ecclesiae, in cuius solum unitate quae "catholica" vocatur … patet': *In principium Genesis* 3.20, CCSL cxviiiA. 69; 'nisi ad catholicam unitatem redeundo respiciant intereunt': ibid. 6.17–8, 111; 'ad catholicae pacis reducit unitatem': *In I Samuelem* 30.18, CCSL cxix. 265; 'in catholica permanens unitate': ibid. 31.4–5, 269; 'supernae pacis unitatisque gaudia': *In Lucae evangelium expositio* 12.13f, CCSL cxx. 250.

[61] *In Cantica canticorum allegorica expositio* 3.5.1, CCSL cxxivB. 272, lines 50–3. See in general T. R. Eckenrode, 'The venerable Bede and the pastoral affirmation of the Christian message in Anglo-Saxon England', *Downside Review* xciv (1981), 258–78.

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God,[62] and he clearly regarded this function as being part of the work of bishops, for whereas the word 'priest', he pointed out on one occasion, signified spiritual wisdom, 'bishop' signified zeal for pastoral care.[63] Hence, in his *History*, Bede gives the impression of reserving the word 'pastor' for bishops.[64] Such an emphasis would have reflected the thinking of Gregory the Great, whose *Regula pastoralis* seems to have been directed at bishops,[65] and indeed Bede saw Gregory, who abandoned the monastic life to assume the *cura pastoralis*, a phrase which he uses three times within a short space to describe Gregory's activities, as providing an excellent example of a pastor.[66] Moreover, for Bede, the function of a pastor, while essentially episcopal, was exemplified in particular by Peter, who seemed to have been appointed to this particular task by Christ himself (John xxi.15–17). Christ's words on this occasion suggest a possible interpretation of the function of Peter within the Church in terms of his being a shepherd rather than someone who bound and loosed.[67] Hence, when Augustine of Canterbury followed the canonically awkward procedure of consecrating Laurence to succeed him as the second bishop in that see, he was seen by Bede as following the example of 'the first pastor of the church, that is the most blessed Peter, first among the apostles', who had consecrated Clement to succeed him.[68] When the disheartened Laurence later decided to leave his post, Peter appeared to him at night and scourged him, asking him why he was leaving the flock entrusted to him and to whom among the pastors he was going to leave the sheep of Christ, placed amid wolves, when he fled. 'Or have you forgotten my example?' the Apostle enquired.[69] And so, when Bede thought of a function which had been passed down from Peter to those who followed him, it was primarily the task of feeding sheep that came to his mind. Hence his comment on words that he believed Peter himself had written, 'Feed the flock of God which is among you' (1 Peter v. 2a): 'Just as the Lord ordered blessed Peter to take care of his entire flock, that is, the church, so Peter himself justifiably commands the

[62] *Homilia* i. 6, CCSL cxxii. 42.

[63] *In Lucae evangelium expositio* 10.1, CCSL cxx. 214, lines 1875–8.

[64] The only occasion where this is not explicit is *HE* 1.14 ('grex Domini et eiusque pastores': Plummer edn, 30; Mynors-Colgrave edn, 48), but Bede is here quoting Gildas.

[65] Bruno Judic, in the introduction to the *SC* edition of the text (ccclxxxi.76–88), an interpretation supported by Bede's seeing the book as dealing with, among other things, the kind of people to be chosen to exercise rule in the Church: 'quales ad ecclesiae regimen adsumi': *HE* 2.1 (Plummer edn, 76; Colgrave-Mynors edn, 126).

[66] *HE* 2.1 (Plummer edn, 74; Colgrave-Mynors edn, 124). Bede follows Gregory's description of himself: *Dialogues* 1 prol. 4, *SC* cclx.12. While Bede is playing off Gregory's life inside and outside his monastery, I suspect that he envisages pastoral care as a consequence of the assumption of episcopal office.

[67] Note, however, that Bede was comfortable in applying juridical language to Peter ('principatus iudiciariae potestatis', *Homilia* i.20, CCSL cxx. 146 line 187), but his emphasis was other.

[68] *HE* 2.4 (Plummer edn, 86f; Colgrave-Mynors edn, 144).

[69] *HE* 2.6 (Plummer edn, 92; Colgrave-Mynors edn, 154).

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succeeding pastors of the church to protect with careful government (*solicita gubernatione*) that flock that each has with him.'[70] An understanding of the role of Peter which emphasised his having been a shepherd was founded on very different criteria to those used by such contemporaries of Bede as Stephanus and Boniface.

It therefore seems that Bede, contrary to what a superficial reading of his best known work may suggest, had a notion of the papacy which was underdeveloped by the standards of his time and place. While the Church of Rome and its bishops were central to his historical vision, the notions of special powers of binding and loosing having been committed to Peter, and of these powers being then transmitted to his successors, seems to have been foreign to his understanding. Yet such concepts were certainly current in circles not far removed from Bede. It may be concluded that some interpretations of Bede's thought on the papacy have made him too much of a papalist. More generally, it may well be that the history of the papacy needs to be considered not merely from the perspective of Rome, but also from that of areas subject to its influence, and that papacy, like many other aspects of Christian thought, should be thought of not merely in terms of the articulation of doctrine, but also of its reception.

[70] *In epistolas septem catholicas*, at the point where the commentary discusses 1 Pet. v. 2, CCSL cxxi. 256, trans. by David Hirst, in *The Commentary on the seven catholic epistles of Bede the Venerable*, Kalamazoo, MI 1985, 114. The example of Peter as shepherd is commended by Bede to Bishop Ecgbert: *Ad Ecgbertum episcopum* 14 (Plummer edn, 417).

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