Bede's *uera lex historiae* explained

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Near the end of the preface to the *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (hereafter *HE*), Bede mentions the possibility of disputed truth, refers to 'common report' (*fama uulgans*) and invokes the, or a, *uera lex historiae*, literally, 'true law of history'. The most troubling aspect of the passage is that Bede seems to be disclaiming responsibility for mistakes.[1]

1. Lectoremque suppliciter obsecro ut, siqua in his quae scripsimus aliter quam se ueritas habet posita reppererit, non hoc nobis inputet, qui, quod uera lex historiae est, simpliciter ea quae fama uulgante collegimus ad instructionem posteritatis litteris mandare studuimus.[2]
[So I humbly beg the reader, if he finds anything other than the truth set down in what I have written, not to impute it to me. For, in accordance with the principles of true history, I have simply sought to commit to writing what I have collected from common report, for the instruction of posterity.][3]

Several things are wrong with this passage. For one thing, Bede appears to be telling readers not to blame him if he strayed from the truth. Yet the historian's duty to tell the truth was an ancient commonplace; the offloading of responsibility seems out of character with Bede, to say the least. A second anomaly is Bede's ostensible claim that he has taken 'common report' and, without further processing, written it out for the sake of remembrance. Such a claim would be a flagrant internal contradiction. The Preface has just told us in great detail what named authorities have provided Bede with information about the English church. He cannot be expected to turn around and say, forget what you

[1] This and later extracts are numbered consecutively for ease of citation. Translations are representative of how these passages are currently read.

[2] *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, OMT (Oxford, 1969), pp. 6–7. Colgrave–Mynors is used to abbreviate references to this edition. The passage cited was left out of the Old English translation of Bede's history.

[3] See also *Bède le Vénérable. Histoire ecclésiastique du peuple anglais*, trans. O. Szerwiniack *et al.* (Paris, 1999) I, 5–6: 'Je conjure humblement le lecteur, au cas où il découvrirait dans ce que nous avons écrit quelque fait disposé autrement que ne le veut la vérité, de ne pas nous l'imputer, nous qui – c'est une vrai loi de l'histoire – nous sommes efforcé de confier à l'écriture en un style simple ce que nous avons rassemblé d'après la tradition pour instruire la postérité.' The translation specifies *factual errors*, simple *style*, and collection of *tradition* (= *fama uulgans*), and leaves vague what the 'true law' might refer to. These possible but risky interpretations underscore the need for Bede's meaning to be more securely grasped.

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have just been told about my sources; what I have really done is record a lot of gossip. A third problem is Bede's arresting invocation of *uera lex historiae*, a true law of history. Antiquity had no obvious laws of history. What could Bede have had in mind? These lines continue to be 'a crux much commented upon', as Michael Wallace-Hadrill said. Roger Ray's long article on the subject in 1980 did not settle the problem and neither did the Oxford commentary of 1988.[4]

I suggest that Bede supplies enough information to clarify his meaning without our having to seek far afield for enlightenment. As has long been known, he borrows the phrase 'true law of history' from Jerome's *Adversus Helvidium* and originally introduced it into his *Commentary on Luke*:

2. Neque enim oblitus euangelista quod eam de spiritu sancto concepisse et uirginem peperisse narrarit sed opinionem uulgi exprimens quae uera historiae lex est patrem Ioseph nuncupat Christi.[5]
[(my literal translation) when the Evangelist narrated, he did not forget that (Mary) conceived of the Holy Spirit and gave birth as a virgin; expressing the common belief, which is the true law of history, he called Joseph the father of Christ.]

There are four places in the *HE*, in addition to passage no. 1, in which Bede sheds light on what he meant when invoking this 'law'. These passages are found when we look away from *lex*, *historia* or *fama uulgans* and focus instead on *simpliciter*, the emphatic adverb, sparingly used by Bede, that leads to all the sentences in which he plays with these ideas.[6]

3. [Bede's information about St Cuthbert] partim ex eis, quae de illo [Cuthberto] prius a fratribus ecclesiae Lindisfarnensis scripta repperi adsumsi, simpliciter fidem historiae quem legebam accommodans.
[I took partly from what I had previously found written about him by the brethren of the church at Lindisfarne, accepting the story I read in simple faith . . .][7]

4. [About St Aidan, the Irish apostle of Northumbria] Scripsi autem haec de persona et operibus uiri praefati, nequaquam in eo laudans . . . hoc, quod . . . minus perfecte

[4] R. Ray, 'Bede's *Vera lex historiae*', *Speculum* 55 (1980), 11–41 (besides raising the interesting possibility that Bede referred to 'a' law of history, rather than 'the', Ray argued that Bede was disputing Isidore of Seville's definition of history); J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People. A Historical Commentary*, ed. T. Charles-Edwards, *et al.* (Oxford, 1988), p. 5, and the supplement, p. 207. Diverse and contradictory views of what Bede meant have been expressed. See, for example, W. Levison, 'Bede as Historian', repr. in Levison, *Aus rheinischer und fränkische Frühzeit* (Düsseldorf, 1948), pp. 373–4; C. W. Jones, *Saints' Lives and Chronicles in Early England* (Ithaca, NY, 1947), pp. 83–5, 88; P. Hunter Blair, *The World of Bede* (1970, repr. Cambridge, 1990), pp. 78, 303; J. Campbell, 'Bede I', in his *Essays in Anglo-Saxon History* (London, 1986), p. 25; G. H. Brown, *Bede the Venerable*, Twayne's Eng. Authors Series 443 (New York, 1987), 89.

[5] Bede, *In Lucae euangelium expositio* II.33, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL 120 (Turnhout, 1960), 67.

[6] *Simpliciter* occurs only once in the *HE* in addition to the five extracts I quote, in *HE* IV.xxii, Colgrave–Mynors, p. 402. It is widely used in many different contexts in Bede's other works.

[7] *HE*, praefatio: Colgrave–Mynors, pp. 6–7.

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sapiebat; . . . sed quasi uerax historicus simpliciter ea, quae de illo siue per illum sunt gesta, describens, . . . atque ad utilitatem legentium memoriae commendans.
[I have written these things about the character and work of Aidan, not by any means commending . . . his lack of knowledge . . . but, as a truthful historian, I have described in a straightforward manner those things which were done by him or through him, . . . preserving their memory for the benefit of my readers.][8]

5. [Dryhthelm is asked how he could endure the cold of the water in which he was standing] respondebat ille simpliciter (erat namque homo simplicis ingenii ac moderatae naturae): 'Frigidiora ego uidi'.
[He answered them simply, for he was a man of simple wit and few words, 'I have known it colder'.][9]

6. [At the close of a miracle story] Hanc historiam, sicut a uenerabili antistite Pecthelmo didici, simpliciter ob salutem legentium siue audientium narrandam esse putaui.
[I thought I ought to tell this story simply, just as I learned it from the venerable Bishop Pehthelm for the benefit of those who read or hear it.][10]

The extract from Bede's biblical commentary (passage no. 2) is absolutely decisive for a correct understanding of his meaning. Bede did not expect readers to think that the Evangelist who knew the truth about the virgin birth turned around and told a lie about Jesus's being the son of Joseph. The contrast was not between truth and falsehood (or error), but between theological truth and common perception, each having its place. The place for common perception (*opinio uulgi*) was history. In passage no. 6, Bede cites a bishop as the authority for the story he has just told. The bishop, not a purveyor of vulgar rumour, was expressing the common perception which Bede passes on *simpliciter*. The same applies to the brothers of Lindisfarne in passage no. 3. They, too, were not purveyors of vulgar rumours but a respectable source of information. Yet their writings about Cuthbert had to be believed *simpliciter*; the truth they conveyed was of the same order as the Evangelist's statement that Joseph was the father of Jesus.

Walter Berschin has very clearly shown how Bede modified the *Anonymous Life of St Cuthbert* in the rewritings he produced in both verse and prose, and why he thought it necessary to change the original version.[11] Bede took a (woefully) historical text and revised it theologically, cutting away what in a religious perspective were picturesque irrelevancies and expounding the spiritual dimension of Cuthbert's life and works in badly needed additions. The

[8] *HE* III.17: Colgrave–Mynors, pp. 264–7.
[9] *HE* V.12: Colgrave–Mynors, pp. 498–9.
[10] *HE* V.13: Colgrave–Mynors, pp. 502–3.
[11] W. Berschin, '*Opus deliberatum ac perfectum*: Why Did the Venerable Bede Write a Second Prose Life of St Cuthbert'?, *St Cuthbert, His Cult and His Community to AD 1200*, ed. G. Bonner *et al.* (Woodbridge, 1989), pp. 95–102. See also M. Lapidge, 'Bede's Metrical *Vita S. Cuthberti*', in the same collection, pp. 77–93, for the didactic nature of the verse life.

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resulting revision was no longer *historia* but an *opus deliberatum ac perfectum*.[12] No one would claim that the *Anonymous Life* of the saint did not tell the truth, but it was untheological; like the gospel of St Luke, it bowed to the *uera lex historiae*. Bede effaced its shortcomings and, in verse and prose, produced pieces of properly religious literature.

The contrast between theological truth and common perception – not a contrast of truth to error – is again dramatized by the line from the vision of Dryhthelm (passage no. 5). It is a popular belief and teaching that Hell is a place of extreme heat and cold, but Bede cautions that to say so is to discourse *simpliciter*. The this-worldly categories of heat and cold are theologically naive, for Hell is a place of spiritual torment. Dryhthelm's memorable 'I have seen colder' reflects his bluntness and theological naivety.

Simpliciter is the guiding thread through these passages. It tends to be lost in translation, in the unassuming modifiers 'simple' or 'simply', but it rings out in the original and needs a comparably emphatic equivalent. Possible translations are 'innocently' or 'naively'. I suggest 'untheologically', not a pretty adverb but suitably arresting. It also conveys most, though certainly not all, of what Bede intended to say.

Bede's lyrical account in the *HE* of the life and works of Aidan, the Irish apostle of Northumbria, is deservedly famous. It culminates in a long and conspicuous plea (passage no. 4). Bede says, in effect, just because Aidan was theologically wrong as regards the date of Easter is no reason why his life and works cannot be written about as history, truthfully and untheologically, for the profit of readers. The edifying story told by Bishop Pehthelm (passage no. 6) was reported 'ob salutem legentium siue audientium'; Aidan's virtues were related more modestly, only 'ad utilitatem legentium'. Bede knew he was on thin ice in extolling Aidan; he was just a 'truth-telling historian' proceeding 'untheologically' and relating *gesta* at the level of common perception. Here in particular Bede had to be clear that no contrast between truth and error was in question. Aidan's theological blemish was manifest, but it was nevertheless possible for the *uerax historicus* to venture *simpliciter* and report Aidan's edifying *gesta*.

In turning to the sensitive words *uera lex historiae* in passage no. 1, it needs to be emphasized at the outset that 'law of history' did not have the same resonances for Bede (or Jerome, for that matter) as it has for us. Laws of history, both speculative and critical, are a modern forte; to cite only Karl Marx, such laws have been understood to govern our existence, to be deeply serious and a

[12] See *Venerabilis Bedae Opera Historica*, ed. C. Plummer, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1896) I, xlvi, for the older opinion that the *First Life*, full of historical and picturesque details, was superior to Bede's rewriting. Berschin's account suggests that our understanding of medieval views has gained depth and sophistication.

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cause for anguish.[13] Classical antiquity certainly had rules or injunctions for historians, but had anyone before Jerome spoken of *lex historiae*? Even if the idea of a 'law' of history was not unique with him, it was very rare and had no agreed-upon content. No more relevant than 'historical law' to an understanding of these lines are Bede's care in using sources and the evidentiary standing of *fama uulgans*. Many earnest sentences have been written praising Bede for approximating modern standards of source citation and scrupulous accuracy. How true or not these judgements may be has no bearing on the passage in question, in which neither the documentation of history nor its verifiability was Bede's concern. The Evangelist was not lying, nor was he factually wrong, when he called Jesus the son of Joseph: these are the terms in which *uera lex historiae* has to be understood.

When modern preoccupations are set aside, we are led to wonder whether *lex* in this context is correctly interpreted as 'law' and *historia* as 'history'. Less categorical renderings may be more appropriate. *Historia* occurs too often in the Preface for it to be less weighty in the impugned sentence than in the title *Historia ecclesiastica* itself; but 'story' or 'narrative' or 'historical discourse' are available as softenings of 'history', and nothing should make us think that Bede was referring to history with a capital H. As for *lex*, it need not be equated to the commandments of the Decalogue. *Lex* can mean something as qualified (according to Lewis and Short) as a 'condition' or 'stipulation', in other words, a rule or limitation, rather than, for example, Colgrave's clearly mistaken 'principles of true history'.[14] Instead of dealing with the, or a, 'true law of history', we would be faced in *uera lex historiae* with something more precise, such as, the 'inherent limitation of historical discourse' – the limitation that made the Evangelist speak of the son of Joseph and keep the immaculate conception to himself.

While indebted to Jerome, Bede was also saying something important about the nature of his narrative in the *HE*. Things might indeed be found written in it 'aliter quam se ueritas habet', on the understanding that the 'truth' absent from the *HE* was not factual error but, instead, hinged on a theological definition or on a perception limited to a few people, like the secret of Jesus's parentage. The truth embodied in the *HE* was that of *fama uulgans*, unsophisticated common report, the possession of everyone, not of a specific segment of society, and reported 'untheologically', *simpliciter*, like Dryhthelm's 'I have seen colder'. Bede was not at fault: it was in the nature of history to be like that; the *HE* was no exception to the limitation that the Evangelist himself accepted. If you set about evoking Nazareth in Jesus's infancy, you are bound to record the perceptions

[13] I am grateful to Eric Knibbs, doctoral candidate at Yale, for reminding me of the relevance of Marx to this point.

[14] C. T. Lewis and C. Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1879), p. 1055.

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common at that time regardless of how different they might be from the truth now known to you. In its imperfections the *HE* more closely resembled the *Anonymous Life of St Cuthbert* than its theologically refined rewritings.

Bede, in sum, was giving notice of the inherent superficiality of history. There is a point in the *HE* where, thanks to external evidence, we can very clearly see him writing *simpliciter*, 'innocently', without distinctly advertising that fact. One of his last works is the well known letter of admonition to Bishop Egbert of York, cousin of the reigning king. A salient feature of it is Bede's vehement attack on the monasteries proliferating in Northumbria, 'useless to God and man', which he advises Egbert and the king to suppress or at least turn to properly religious uses, such as the endowment of new bishoprics.[15] A very different account of the blossoming of these monasteries in Northumbria is encountered in the next-to-last chapter of the *HE*:

> Qua adridente pace ac serenitate temporum, plures in gente Nordanhymbrorum, tam nobiles, quam priuati, se suosque liberos depositis armis satagunt magis, accepta tonsura, monasterialibus adscribere uotis, quam bellicis exercere studiis. Quae res quem sit habitura finem, posterior aetas uidebit.
> [In these favourable times of peace and prosperity, many of the Northumbrian race, both noble and simple, have laid aside their weapons and taken the tonsure, preferring that they and their children should take monastic vows rather than train themselves in the art of war. What the result will be, a later generation will discover.][16]

The Bede who wrote these lines knew perfectly well how dimly he judged this practice, but the *HE* spoke at the level of the *opinio uulgi*: Northumbrians thought these monasteries were just wonderful. Like knowledge of Jesus's true origins, condemnation of these foundations was limited to a few and needed a different forum in order to be aired. There surely are other places in the *HE* in which Bede, bending to the limitations of the genre, spoke *simpliciter* without giving notice that he was doing so.[17] He was thoroughly aware that, now and again, the truth of history could not overstep the bounds of common belief.

[15] *Epistola Bede ad Ecgbertum episcopum,* x–xiii, ed. C. Plummer, *Bedae Opera Historica* I, 413–17; 'neque Deo neque hominibus utilia sunt' (I, 414).

[16] *HE* V.23: Colgrave–Mynors, pp. 560–1.

[17] A salient example is *HE* IV.ii, Colgrave–Mynors, pp. 334–5, in which Bede affirms that the famous Wilfrid 'primus inter episcopos qui de Anglorum gente essent catholicum uiuendi morem ecclesiis Anglorum tradere didicit [was the first bishop of the English race who introduced the catholic way of life to the English churches]'. Plummer, *Bedae Opera Historica* II, 206, keenly sensed that, in this sentence, *aliter se ueritas habet* (he commented, 'This is an extraordinary statement'), and he identified in the *HE* five English bishops earlier than Wilfrid whose teachings would have been impeccably Catholic. But Bede's statement conveyed *fama uulgans*, that is, Wilfrid's established Northumbrian reputation as the fountainhead of Roman (universal) teaching. Other passages in which Bede may have recorded *fama uulgans* in the *simpliciter* mode include the hyperbolic description of Ireland at the end of *HE* I.1, and the characterization of King Edwin's rule in *HE* II.16.

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