



## THE CREDIBLE WITNESS: BEDE'S RESPONSE TO DOUBT<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on miracle accounts in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, especially accounts of visions of divine light, and argues that in order to understand the meaning and rationale of such accounts Bede's understanding of the reliability and trustworthiness of his witnesses also needs to be considered. The paper argues that Bede attributes to those witnesses whom he perceives as credible in these matters not only rational and moral but also certain religious qualifications, which enable them to perceive and understand the spiritual meaning of the events which they relate and thus underpin their credibility.

Doubt is something which historians must always face as they strive to provide trustworthy accounts of events in the past. Bede responds to doubt and at the same time establishes his own credentials as a trustworthy historian by describing the people whom he has consulted for their knowledge of the English past.<sup>2</sup> These people are his credible witnesses. Since accounts of miracles are especially open to doubt, Bede responded by identifying the witnesses of the miracles and establishing their credibility. These witnesses had the ability to see the miracles accurately, to report honestly what they had experienced and to discern their meanings, in short, their moral and religious qualifications. Their moral qualifications and their religious qualifications must be carefully distinguished. The moral qualifications such as honesty and good works made them accurate reporters. The religious qualifications such as their ecclesiastical status as bishops or priests or religious sisters or monks and their monastic education enabled them in addition to understand the spiritual meaning of their experiences. Bede valued his witnesses' religious qualifications. Since, for Bede, miracles had both historical and theological significance, they needed witnesses with spiritual eyes to perceive and to understand their spiritual meanings. The ability to see the spiritual meaning of a miracle is a form of spiritual discernment.

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<sup>2</sup> Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Preface, B. Colgrave & R.A.B. Mynors, eds., *Bede's Ecclesiastical History* (Oxford, 1972), 2-7, (subsequent refs.: Bede, *HE*, page numbers).

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In this paper I will focus on Bede's accounts of visions of divine light and the religious qualifications of their witnesses. I shall argue that the religious qualifications enabled the witnesses to understand the spiritual meaning of what they experienced, enhanced their value as witnesses and served to dispel doubt.

Modern study of Bede's use of credible witnesses begins with Bertram Colgrave's essay of 1935.<sup>3</sup> Colgrave was sceptical about value of accounts of miracles as history. He concluded that, in providing witnesses for miracles, Bede 'is acting in accordance with hagiographical traditions of his times.'<sup>4</sup> This judgement is repeated by Joel T. Rosenthal who claims that Bede was using 'the best professional canons of the day.'<sup>5</sup> These traditions or canons were set by Pope Gregory the Great as Brian Butler has suggested in a recent article. He considers that Gregory's 'acceptance of their [i. e. the miracles'] historical truth was not dependent upon scientific criteria, but rather upon the moral character of the witness or witnesses involved.'<sup>6</sup> Butler argues that the moral character of the witness guarantees the accuracy of the account of a miracle. Historians who have studied Bede's use of credible witnesses are more likely to be interested in the witnesses' ability to make accurate reports. Alan Thacker as a historian has recently drawn attention to 'a governing principle,' that is, 'the straightforward faith of the hagiographer in the stories offered by his trustworthy witnesses.'<sup>7</sup> The hagiographer accepts as true the reports which his sources have given to him. Thacker's reference to 'grand ecclesiastics' suggests that he thinks that religious status might play a role in their status as credible witnesses but he does not explore this possibility further.<sup>8</sup> George Hardin Brown shares the view that the witnesses' role is to report accurately what they had experienced.<sup>9</sup> Gail Ivy Berlin, in her study of Anglo-Saxon methods of evaluating the truth of accounts of historical events, identifies the importance of credible witnesses as a means of dispelling doubt.<sup>10</sup> She writes, 'most reliable of all was an account given by an eye-witness to the events, or by someone who had had direct contact with such

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<sup>3</sup> B. Colgrave, 'Bede's Miracle Stories,' in A. Hamilton Thompson (ed.), *Bede, His Life, Times and Writings* (New York, 1966), 201-29.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 225.

<sup>5</sup> J. T. Rosenthal, 'Bede's Use of Miracles in the *Ecclesiastical History*,' *Traditio* 31 (1975): 328-35 at 332.

<sup>6</sup> B. Butler, 'Doctor of Souls, Doctor of the Body: Whitby *Vita Gregorii* 23 and its Exegetical Context,' in E. Mullins & D. Scully (eds) *Listen, O Isles, unto Me: Studies in Medieval Words and Images in Honour of Jennifer O'Reilly* (Cork, 2011), 169; see also W. D. McCready, *Signs of Sanctity: Miracles in the Thought of Gregory the Great* (Toronto, 1989), 54: 'To remove any reason for disbelief on the part of his readers [of the *Dialogues*], Gregory declares that he will give the authority on which each of his miracle stories is based, a promise which, for the most part, he is faithful in keeping.' For Gregory's use of witnesses, see McCready, *Signs of Sanctity*, 173-4.

<sup>7</sup> A. Thacker, 'Bede and History,' in S. DeGregorio (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Bede* (Cambridge, 2010), 170-89 at 175.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 179.

<sup>9</sup> G. H. Brown, *A Companion to Bede* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2010), 84, 113.

<sup>10</sup> G. I. Berlin, 'Bede's Miracle Stories: Notions of Evidence and Authority in Old English History,' *Neophilologus* 74 (1990): 434-43.

an eyewitness' and 'assertions that the source is worthy, faithful, truthful, or that he is known to the writer personally serve the same purpose.'<sup>11</sup> Bede's witnesses have these qualities to which he adds their religious standing which Berlin does not consider in her analysis.<sup>12</sup> Joel T. Rosenthal argues that Bede's witnesses, 'men of holy life and good repute,' have moral qualities which establish their credibility but he does not examine the role which their religious status plays in establishing their credibility.<sup>13</sup> William McCready identifies the 'moral' qualifications of the witnesses and argues that doubt is 'an ethical issue ... to be countered with a moral rather than a scientific challenge.'<sup>14</sup> He is examining doubt about a miracle's veracity. He does not consider the witnesses' religious qualities as necessary for their ability to see and understand the religious significance of a miracle. Paul Meyvaert and Benedicta Ward, on the other hand, suggest that Bede valued witnesses for their reliability and their ability to detect the significance of the miracles.<sup>15</sup> For Ward, this is an 'inner significance' which one might equally call a religious significance.<sup>16</sup> The interpretation of a wondrous event identifies it as a miracle and discerns its meaning. Accuracy, of course, is important, but that is guaranteed by the quality of the witness. Benedicta Ward is, perhaps, the most useful authority on Bede's use of witnesses, since her combined vocation as historian and theologian enables her to see both the historical and theological elements in Bede's accounts of miracles.<sup>17</sup> Hence she understands that the witnesses need religious qualities and status to see the theological meaning of a miracle. More recently Andrew Rabin and Brian Butler have revisited the qualities of the witnesses of miracles to stress their role not only as eye-witnesses but also as people who could understand their spiritual and religious meanings.<sup>18</sup> Bede, as we will see in this paper, uses his witnesses as eye-witnesses and as interpreters of the miracles. This paper will, therefore, build upon this recent work and examine the religious status of Bede's credible witnesses.

In the beginning of his *Prose Life of Cuthbert*, Bede, acknowledging his need for reliable sources, writes of his intention to use 'the scrupulous examination of credible witnesses.'<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 440-441.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 442; for the importance of social rank of witnesses, see the Code of King Wiltred, *EHD* 363.

<sup>13</sup> Rosenthal, 'Bede's Use of Miracles,' 330.332.

<sup>14</sup> W. McCready, *Miracles and the Venerable Bede* (Toronto, 1994); 'Scepticism, Credulity and Belief,' 44-74 at 72.

<sup>15</sup> P. Meyvaert, 'Bede the Scholar,' in G. Bonner (ed.), *Famulus Christi* (London, 1976), 40-69 at 54; B. Ward, 'Miracles and History: A Reconsideration of the Miracle Stories used by the Venerable Bede,' Bonner, *Famulus Christi*, 70-6 at 72.

<sup>16</sup> Ward, 'Miracles and History,' 72-3.

<sup>17</sup> Ward, 'Miracles and History,' 72.

<sup>18</sup> A. Rabin, 'Bede, Drythelm, and the Witness to the Other World: Testimony and Conversion in the *Historia Ecclesiastica*,' *Modern Philology* 106 (2009): 375-98; Butler, 'Doctor of Souls, Doctor of the Body,' 168-80.

<sup>19</sup> Bede, *Prose Life of Cuthbert*, Preface, ed. B. Colgrave, *Two Lives of St Cuthbert: A Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede's Prose Life* (Cambridge, 1985), 143.145; cf. Sulpicius Stephen Sharman, 'The Credible Witness: Bede's Response to Doubt,' *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 10 (2016) 1-11; ISSN 1754-517X; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18573/j.2016.10114>; website:

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In the preface to the *HE* he writes of the need ‘to remove all occasions of doubt’ by using ‘the faithful testimony of innumerable witnesses’ and ‘the trustworthy testimony of reliable witnesses.’<sup>20</sup> The words ‘faithful’, ‘trustworthy’ and ‘reliable’ are significant. Witnesses with these qualities are credible, their report can be believed and any doubt about the truth of the events can be removed. Bede expresses his confidence in the reliability of such witnesses, writing of one witness, ‘what cannot be uncertain is that whatever such a man said must be true.’<sup>21</sup> Many of these witnesses are ecclesiastical persons who might be known and trusted by other ecclesiastical people such as Bede.<sup>22</sup>

Bede recognises the importance of social and ecclesiastical status among the qualifications of his witnesses but he also values their experience of religious life, perseverance in their vows and sufferings in ascetical lives as means of enhancing their ability to see and to understand religious events. He describes these qualities of witnesses in his accounts of visions of light. His witnesses have eyes which can see the presence of God in the visions and miracles which they witness and hence their testimony is trustworthy.<sup>23</sup> Bede, then, becomes only the faithful relater of what others have told him. This is the *vera lex historiae* in action.<sup>24</sup> Bede never relates an account of a miracle which he himself has experienced. He depends upon his witnesses.

Bede’s *Prose Life of Saint Cuthbert* provides an example of doubt in an account of a miracle. Here the doubt concerns the whole preaching of the Christian Gospel. A group of countrymen watching a party of monks being carried out to sea on a raft say, ‘Let no man pray for them, and may God have no mercy on any one of them, for they have robbed men of their old ways of worship, and how the new worship is to be conducted, nobody knows.’<sup>25</sup> They have lost their old religion and have not yet become at home in the new religion. Hence we find their doubt, or lack of confidence, in the new religion and its adherents, the monks. Cuthbert responds to their doubt by praying. The winds change and the monks are blown back to shore and to safety. This miracle appears to cure the doubt of the countrymen. Then Bede introduces a credible witness to this event, ‘a very worthy brother of our monastery.’<sup>26</sup> As a brother of Bede’s community, he is a

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Severus’ use of witnesses in his life of Saint Martin of Tours. He states, ‘I shall repeat no stories emanating from uncertain sources; I shall tell only those I have learnt from reliable men.’ Sulpicius Severus, *Dialogues of Sulpicius Severus, Postumianus, XV*. Trans. F. H. Hoare, *The Western Fathers*, (London, 1980), 85-6.

<sup>20</sup> Bede, *HE*, Preface, 1. 2. 6. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Bede, *HE*, IV.3, 344. 345.

<sup>22</sup> J. R. Hustler, ‘*Nec silentio praetereundum: The Significance of the Miraculous in the Anglo-Saxon Church in the Time of Bede*’ (Durham Theses, Durham University, 1997), 308.

<sup>23</sup> Lk 10.23, ‘Then turning to the disciples he said privately, “Blessed are the eyes which see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it”, RSV; Mt 13.16, Mk 8.18.

<sup>24</sup> Bede, *HE*, Preface; W. Goffart, ‘Bede’s *Vera Lex Historiae* Explained’, *ASE* 34 (2005): 111-6; R. Ray, ‘Bede’s *Vera Lex Historiae*’, *Speculum* 55 (1980): 1-21.

<sup>25</sup> Bede, *Prose Life of St Cuthbert*, III, 164. 165.

<sup>26</sup> Bede, *Prose Life of St Cuthbert*, III, 164. 165.

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known person. Further, his religious standing as a member of a monastic community establishes him as a credible witness. He has eyes to see and to understand what he has seen. The event is not only a change in the wind, a normal event of the weather, but a miracle in that God has intervened in the weather to rescue his servants. This witness is himself a member of a chain of witnesses. He ‘declared that he himself had often heard these things related in the presence of many by one of these same people, a man of rustic simplicity and absolutely incapable of inventing an untruth.’<sup>27</sup> We have here doubt, a miracle which cures the doubt and two credible and reliable witnesses. We also see two interrelated themes. One witness has a religious status as a member of a monastery, which strengthens his standing as a credible witness. The second witness has a moral standing which also establishes his role as a credible witness. The focus here is on the religious status of the witnesses which enables them to see the religious meaning of a vision of light without losing sight of their moral qualities which enhance the credibility of their reports of the miracles.

The witnesses were observers and reporters of their experiences of miracles. In Andrew Rabin’s perceptive words, ‘the reader, like the witness, becomes one who recognises the significance of what he has seen, internalizes its message, and testifies to its meaning through penance and conversion.’<sup>28</sup> Bede’s credible witnesses could by virtue of their religious qualifications penetrate into the inner meaning of the event and see God at work in their experience. This is a form of spiritual discernment which enabled them to understand the significance of visions of light. Benedicta Ward stresses this point:

The miracle was part of a living tradition for Bede and its interpretation is vital. The witnesses are ‘true and religious men’, those in fact who can be relied upon to judge events rightly and see what is significant about them, rather than the most accurate observers of facts.<sup>29</sup>

Bede thought that the witnesses’ lives would be changed by their experiences of miracles and visions of light.<sup>30</sup> Such a transformation becomes a testimony to the reality of their experience and the accuracy of their reporting and interpretation of it. At the beginning of homily II.2, Bede writes about the effect that the miracles could have on the witnesses. He speaks of ‘signs and miracles’ which have two parts, namely, 1) ‘what

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<sup>27</sup> Bede, *Prose Life of St Cuthbert*, III, 64. 165.

<sup>28</sup> Rabin, ‘Bede, Drythelm and the Witness to the Other World,’ 377-8.

<sup>29</sup> Ward, ‘Miracles and History,’ 72; for the role of a witness’ ability to interpret what he experiences, see Rabin, ‘Bede, Drythelm and the Witness to the Other World,’ 397.

<sup>30</sup> Rabin, ‘Bede, Drythelm and the Witness to the Other World,’ 380, ‘Moreover, the witness, and especially the witness to a miracle, becomes the means by which Bede communicates the subjective experience and moral impact of the event described. The witness testifies not merely to the facts of history but to his own transformation and participation in that history, a conversion that provides a paradigm for the reader’s own reaction to the narrative.’

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in them produces outward astonishment,' and 2) 'mystical truths ... in these (stories).'<sup>31</sup> Then he insists that the witnesses of the miracles 'consider what they themselves ought to be doing inwardly, following the example of these (signs), and what mystical truths they ought to be pondering in these (stories).'<sup>32</sup> This pondering may well lead to a transformation of the witnesses' lives. The religious sisters who are often the witnesses of visions of light have been transformed by their long devoted lives in monasteries and have received eyes which see and understand the religious significance of the miracles and visions of light. This, then, is a form of spiritual discernment and a part of the monastic life of prayer, repentance and conversion of life.

The next section of this paper presents a number of examples of credible witnesses to illustrate the ideas presented in the first part. In each case I have demonstrated that the witnesses were religious people with religious qualities. These qualities could also be described as monastic qualities since all of the witnesses except one, a king, were members of monastic communities. Their spiritual discernment enables them to see visions of light and to understand the significance of what they experienced. They see visions of light and perceive the presence of God in His holy saints.

We begin with a religious sister named Begu who saw a vision of divine light at the time of the death of St. Hilda of Whitby. Begu was a senior nun 'who for thirty or more years had been dedicated to the Lord in virginity and had served Him in the monastic life.'<sup>33</sup> Her long monastic life enabled her to understand the spiritual meaning of the event and also to report truthfully what she saw. We have in Begu a combination of ecclesiastical status and moral qualities. St. Hilda was a 'most devoted servant of Christ' *religiosissima Christi famula* whose sanctity was revealed by this vision of light.<sup>34</sup> This was Begu's experience:

as she was resting in the sisters' dormitory, she suddenly heard in the air the well known sound of the bell with which they used to be aroused to their prayers or called together when one of them had been summoned from the world. On opening her eyes she seemed to see the roof of the house rolled back, while a light which poured in from above filled the whole place. As she watched the light intently, she saw the soul of the handmaiden of the Lord being borne to heaven in the midst of that light, attended and guided by angels. Then awakening and seeing the other sisters lying around her, she realised that what she had seen had been revealed to her either in a dream or in a vision.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Bede, *Homiliae evangelii*, II.2, L. T. Martin & D. Hurst (trans.) *Bede the Venerable Homilies on the Gospels Book Two* (Kalamazoo MI, 1991), 13.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Bede, *HE*, IV 23, 412. 413; See J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford, 2002), 165.

<sup>34</sup> Bede *HE*, IV 23, 404. 405.

<sup>35</sup> Bede, *HE*, IV 23, 412. 413.

Two parts of this vision might have reminded Begu of the *Life* of St. Antony by St. Athanasius. She saw her roof rolled back and light pouring in. St. Antony had a similar vision in which the roof of his cell was opened and a ray of light poured in.<sup>36</sup> She saw a holy soul being carried to heaven by angels who are beings of light. He also saw a holy soul being carried into heaven.<sup>37</sup> Evagrius' translation of the *Life* of St. Antony was known in Western monasticism.<sup>38</sup> Begu's knowledge of the *Life* and her monastic life and reading enabled her to understand that in her vision she saw the holy soul of Abbess Hilda being carried in light into heaven and to know that it was the light of God. In the last part of this account, she wonders whether she had dreamt or seen a vision. In his *In Cantica Cantorum*, Bede states that a soul, 'who has closed her bodily eyes to exterior things, as if she were asleep, may open the eyes of her heart to a vision of hidden things and thereby make herself foreign to the cares of visible things in order to keep awake for the contemplation of invisible things.'<sup>39</sup> This is the vocation and life of a religious sister. Begu's many years of living this life has awakened her sight and enabled her to understand the vision of divine light which was revealed to her. She is, therefore, an example of the credible witnesses whom Bede seeks to dispel doubt from his accounts of miracles and visions of light. Another witness of the vision of light was 'one of the devoted virgins of God, who had been deeply attached to her.'<sup>40</sup> Her devoted religious life establishes her credibility as a witness. She understands what she sees. Her devotion to her abbess is a moral quality which enables her to report accurately what she saw. We have, therefore, two witnesses with religious qualities who experience and understand the religious event of a vision of heavenly light.

The senior sister of Barking Abbey, Torhtgyth, is a witness to a vision of light which appeared at the time of the death of Abbess Æthelburh.<sup>41</sup> This faithful nun

had lived for many years in the monastery, always seeking to serve God in all humility and sincerity and endeavouring to help the mother to keep the discipline of the Rule by teaching and reproofing the younger ones. Now in order that her strength, like the apostle's, might be made perfect in weakness, she was suddenly afflicted with a most serious bodily disease and for nine years was sorely tried, under the good providence of

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<sup>36</sup> Athanasius, *Vita S Antonii*, 10.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 60.

<sup>38</sup> For Aldhelm's, Bede's and Alcuin's knowledge of the *Life* of Antony, see M. Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford, 2008), 179, 196, 234.

<sup>39</sup> Bede, *In Cantica Cantorum Allegorica Expositio*, PL Vol. 91, col 1120 lines 43-45: *Sicut dormiens quis a rebus exterioribus oculos corporis clausit, et in visione occultorum saepius oculos aperuit cordis; sic nimirum, sic mens supernae delictioni dedita, a visibilibus se curis alienat, ut invisibilibus contemplatione perfectius liberiusque evigilet.* My translation.

<sup>40</sup> Bede, *HE*, IV 23, 414, 415.

<sup>41</sup> For a study of the visions of light seen at Barking Abbey, see D. K. Fry, 'Bede Fortunate in his Translators: the Barking Nuns,' in P. E. Szarmach (ed.) *Studies in Earlier Old English Prose* (Albany, NY, 1986), 345-62.

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our Redeemer, so that any traces of sin remaining among her virtues through ignorance or carelessness might be burnt away by the fires of prolonged suffering.<sup>42</sup>

This description gives her a number of moral qualities, humility, sincerity and patience which are tested and strengthened by her long illness. She had a long life in the monastery, a shared responsibility with the abbess for running the monastery, a special care for training the younger sisters and the testing of a long illness all of which made her a credible witness of a vision of light. Her monastic experience enables her to understand what she saw and her moral qualities help her to report her experience accurately. Together these qualities remove any doubt from her account of the vision of light. She saw ‘a human body, wrapped in a shroud and brighter than the sun, being apparently raised up from within the house in which the sisters used to sleep ... until it was drawn up into the open heavens and she could see it no longer.’<sup>43</sup> Bede concludes that ‘there remained no doubt in her mind that some member of their community was about to die whose soul would be drawn up in the skies by the good deeds she had done, as though by golden cords.’<sup>44</sup> Her experience removes her doubt and her ecclesiastical status removes doubt from the minds of readers. The ascents of holy souls into heaven in visions of light are relatively common in hagiographic literature. St. Antony’s vision of Amun’s ascent discussed above, St. Benedict’s vision of the ascent of the soul of Germanus of Capua and St. Cuthbert’s vision of the ascent of St. Aidan’s soul are three examples.<sup>45</sup> What is interesting in Torhtgyth’s vision of light in contrast is that she does not ‘see’ a human soul but a ‘human body’ carried up to heaven.

Drythelm saw visions of light in heaven during his journey through hell and heaven.<sup>46</sup> This divine light was an important feature of his experience of heaven since it revealed the presence of God. After these experiences he retired to an ascetical life in a monastery where he related the experience of his journey ‘only to those who were terrified by fear of the torments or delighted with the hope of eternal joys and were ready to make his words a means of spiritual advancement.’<sup>47</sup> This custom gave Bede a number of credible witnesses to draw upon when he came to record Drythelm’s experience.<sup>48</sup> These witnesses had both moral qualities and ecclesiastical and religious status. First is ‘a monk named Hæmgisl, who was an eminent priest and whose good works were worthy of his rank. He is still alive, living in solitude in Ireland and

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<sup>42</sup> Bede, *HE*, IV 9, 360. 361.

<sup>43</sup> Bede, *HE*, IV 9, 360. 361.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, Book two, chapter XXXV and Bede, *Prose Life of St Cuthbert*, chapter IV; Aldhelm dedicated his *de Virginitate* to Abbess Hildelith and the nuns of Barking Abbey which is an indication of their erudition.

<sup>46</sup> Bede, *HE*, V.12, 489-499.

<sup>47</sup> Bede, *HE*, V.12, 497.

<sup>48</sup> Rabin describes the witnesses as ‘a very few individuals of outstanding virtue’, Rabin, ‘Bede, Drythelm and the Witness to the Other World,’ 377.



supporting his declining years on a scanty supply of bread and cold water.<sup>49</sup> His ecclesiastical rank of priest, monastic life of strict asceticism and good works make him a credible witness. The second witness, King Aldfrith, is ‘a most learned man in all respects’ who combines a high social standing with great learning.<sup>50</sup> As an exile in Ireland, Aldfrith had lived and learned in Iona which gave him religious qualifications as a credible witness. His monastic education would enable him to understand the meaning of Drythelm’s journey in the afterlife. In Iona he would have heard of the visions of light that were an important part of St Columba’s life and therefore to recognise the importance of the light which Drythelm had seen in his time near heaven.<sup>51</sup> Third, abbot Æthelwold of the monastery where Drythelm retired for a religious life is ‘a man of pious and sober life’ whose attainments in the religious life and his monastic education make him another credible witness.<sup>52</sup>

These three witnesses also have high moral qualities. They do good works and lead a ‘pious and sober life’. This makes them reliable reporters of Drythelm’s experiences. Their ecclesiastical status and monastic education enable them to understand the visions of the afterlife which Drythelm relates to them. They are the reliable witnesses not of Drythelm’s journey but rather of Drythelm’s accounts of his experience. They can say that they are reporting accurately what he told them, and they can claim that they understand the significance and importance of Drythelm’s vision. Drythelm is himself the only credible witness to his own experience. His credibility as a witness to his experience is based upon his conversion to monastic life, his strict ascetic life of conversion and repentance and his attainment of the religious qualities which Bede prizes in his witnesses.

Fursey is the only witness of his own journey through hell and heaven, but his combination of moral and religious qualifications makes him a credible witness. The first enables him to report accurately what he experienced and the second to understand the meaning of his experience. Fursey was, in Bede’s words, ‘renowned in word and deed and remarkable for his singular virtues’ and ‘anxious to live the life of a pilgrim for the Lord’s sake, wherever opportunity offered.’<sup>53</sup> As Drythelm did, Fursey told his experiences to people ‘who questioned him about them, because they desired to repent.’<sup>54</sup> Consequently they could understand that a vision of the pains of hell could be a motive for repentance and amendment of life. They became credible witnesses to both the vision and its meaning. Bede learned of Fursey and his vision through a chain

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<sup>49</sup> Bede, *HE*, V.12, 497.

<sup>50</sup> Bede, *HE*, V.12, 497, see also Bede, *HE*, IV.26, 431

<sup>51</sup> St. Sharman, ‘Visions of Divine Light in the Writings of Adomnán and Bede,’ in J. Wooding (ed.) *Adomnán of Iona Theologian, Lawmaker, Peacemaker* (Dublin, 2010), 289-302.

<sup>52</sup> Bede, *HE*, V.12, 497.

<sup>53</sup> Bede, *HE*, III.19, 268. 269, for an account of The Vision of Fursey in the context of its times, see Isabel Moreira, *Dreams, Visions and Spiritual Authority* (Ithaca, 2000), 155-8.

<sup>54</sup> Bede, *HE*, III.19, 274. 275.

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of credible witnesses. One witness is ‘a most truthful and pious man’ and the second ‘an aged brother still living in our monastery.’<sup>55</sup> The first has moral qualities and the second ecclesiastical status. Here again we have witnesses with both moral and religious qualities.

Other credible witnesses have significant religious qualifications which include ecclesiastical status and monastic education and hence the ability to perceive and to understand the inner meaning of the visions of light which they have experienced.<sup>56</sup> St. Cuthbert saw a vision of light and understood that he was seeing the holy soul of St. Aidan ascending into heaven. His life as a monk, a hermit, a missionary, a bishop and a miracle worker make him a credible witness of this experience although, at the time of the vision, he had not yet begun his monastic life and had not gained these qualifications.<sup>57</sup> Moreover he was the only witness of the vision of light. The other shepherds were asleep. The monks of Lindisfarne and Bede accepted Cuthbert’s account of the vision of light and his interpretation of it on the basis of his credibility as a witness. Egbert was a very holy man whom Bede considered a trustworthy witness, ‘what cannot be uncertain is that whatever such a man said must be true.’<sup>58</sup> Bede praises him as ‘the greatly revered and holy father and priest Egbert,’ ‘the venerable servant of Christ and priest Egbert’ and ‘beloved of God.’<sup>59</sup> These words establish Egbert’s religious status and his value as a credible witness to the vision of light which accompanied Bishop Chad’s ascension into heaven.<sup>60</sup> Tilmon is ‘a distinguished man and noble also in the worldly sense, who had been a soldier and become a monk.’<sup>61</sup> He has high secular status which, according to Anglo-Saxon law codes, makes him a trustworthy witness. He has religious status in his vocation as a monk. He receives a dream which explains that the ‘great ray of light’ which people see marks the graves of two martyrs, the two Hewalds.<sup>62</sup> This credible witness can reassure the people who saw the ray of light and misunderstood or doubted its meaning. Thus we have a pattern of credible witnesses of visions of light with religious qualifications.

Bede is himself the trustworthy witness to the reports of the credible witnesses which he relates to his readers. Donald Fry has argued that Bede persuades his readers to trust him by his ‘narrative techniques’ especially ‘a projected persona of himself as a reliable narrator.’<sup>63</sup> Fry points to Bede’s moral standards as his credentials as a reliable narrator

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<sup>55</sup> Bede, *HE*, III.19, 274. 275.

<sup>56</sup> Heb. 11.32.

<sup>57</sup> Bede’s *Prose Life of St Cuthbert IV*; *Anonymous Life of St Cuthbert*, I.5.

<sup>58</sup> Bede, *HE*, IV.3, 344. 345.

<sup>59</sup> Bede, *HE*, III, 4, 224. 225; Bede, *HE*, V, 9, 474. 475; Bede, *HE*, V, 22, 552. 553.

<sup>60</sup> Bede, *HE*, IV.3, 344. 345.

<sup>61</sup> Bede, *HE* V.10, 482. 483.

<sup>62</sup> Bede, *HE* V.10, 482. 483.

<sup>63</sup> D. K. Fry, ‘The Art of Bede II: The Reliable Narrator as Persona,’ *The Early Middle Ages* 6 (1979): 63-82 at 64; see also 66, 67, 69 & 79.

arguing that, ‘the list of moral virtues praised in Aidan by the persona emblazons the narrator’s own moral standards, authenticating his own reliability as our guide through the book and English history.’<sup>64</sup> Fry does not discuss Bede’s religious qualities which are an important part of his credibility. Here we have a fine distinction between moral and religious qualifications. Bede possesses the religious qualities which he ascribes to his credible witnesses as his autobiography shows:

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 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 of nineteen I was ordained deacon and at the age of thirty, priest, both times through the ministrations of the reverend Bishop John on the direction of Abbot Ceolfrith.<sup>65</sup>

These qualities, long service in a monastery, ecclesiastical status as a deacon and priest, a life of devotion and prayer and a good education, which he shares with his credible witnesses, enable him to see the religious meaning in the accounts of visions of light and of miracles. He could share the conviction that the visions of light which they had perceived revealed the holiness of saints and so the holiness of God. This is, as we have argued above, a form of the spiritual discernment which experienced and inspired monastics, such as Bede, might possess as a gift of God. The monk Cuthbert, in his letter about Bede’s death, suggests that Bede foreknew the time of his death. This is an example of spiritual discernment. All this, therefore, makes Bede the model of a credible witness.

In his accounts of visions of light, as we have now seen, Bede described the moral and religious qualifications of his witnesses. The moral qualities establish the witnesses’ credibility as accurate reporters of the visions which they have seen. Bede, however, understands the visions of light as religious experiences. Hence, they need credible witnesses whose religious qualifications enable them to understand the visions as religious events and to discern within them the presence of God. These credible witnesses are Bede’s strategy against the doubt that might otherwise be the response to an account of a miracle.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 74 & 76.

<sup>65</sup> Bede, *HE*, V.24, 566. 567.