

Book Review

Jamie Wood

BOOK REVIEWED: PETER DARBY, *BEDE AND THE END OF TIME, STUDIES IN EARLY MEDIEVAL BRITAIN AND IRELAND* (FARNHAM: ASHGATE, 2012), 276 pp. ISBN: 978-1409430483

In this important book, Peter Darby offers a thorough and convincing analysis of Bede's views on the day of judgement and the end of time. Interest in the end of time recurred across a range of Bede's writings, from his chronicles to his biblical commentaries, and throughout his career. Darby's grasp of the historical context in which Bede operated and the development of his theology of the end of time is impressive. This is historically-grounded theology (or maybe theologically-grounded history) at its best and the book is likely to become required reading for any scholar wishing to engage with the eschatological thought of Anglo-Saxon England's most important writer.

The book is divided into three sections, bookended with introductory and concluding sections, and the reference apparatus (a thorough index, a glossary and a useful appendix on 'Systems of Chronological Division'). In the Introduction ('Bede and the Future', pp. 1-13), Darby provides a concise overview of Bede's writings, especially those on the end of time, a summary of scholarly opinions on medieval eschatology, and a synopsis of recent and not-so-recent scholarship on Bede. Darby situates his work explicitly in relation to recent publications that view Bede as an original and innovative scholar who 'developed, adapted and refined' (p. 12) his ideas about the end of time over the course of a long career.

Part I ('The World Ages Framework') is divided into three chapters and traces the development of Bede's use of the ages of the world as a structuring principle in a range of writings. Chapter 1 ('Chronology and the World Ages in the *De temporibus*', pp. 17-34), examines the chronological framework for the *De temporibus* (completed in 703), focusing in particular on Bede's deployment of the six ages of the world schema in the text and comparing it to earlier Christian models for the organisation of chronographies and the ways in which Bede divided up time in his other writings. In Chapter 2 ('The *Epistola ad Pleguinam* and Its Contemporary Setting', pp. 35-64), Darby moves on to what appears to have been one of the key events in Bede's career: a heresy accusation in 708. Bede's rebuttal of this accusation is contained in a letter that he wrote in 708 to an otherwise unknown monk, Plegwine, in which he restated his chronological calculations and cited a wide range of authorities to support his position. All of this demonstrates convincingly that Bede was working in a society in which speculation about the end of time was rife, that he struggled to discourage eschatological speculation, and that his scholarly approach was not always convincing for contemporaries. The third chapter ('The Expanded World Ages Scheme', pp. 65-91) examines the considerable changes that Bede wrought in the world ages scheme after 708, 'developing a temporal framework that was far more sophisticated than the six-age model outlined in *De temporibus*' (p. 65).

In Part II ('Bede's Eschatological Vision') Darby offers two chapters that provide a thorough explication and analysis of Bede's eschatology. Chapters 4 and 5 ('Signs, Portents and the End-time Sequence', pp. 95-124 and 'The Day of Judgement and the Eternal Afterlife', pp. 125-43) provide a detailed explanation of Bede's views on the run-up to the end-time and on what will happen at judgement day and afterwards. Analysis is not restricted to chronography, history, theology or any other single aspect of Bede's writings. Nor does Darby attempt to 'fix' Bede's views at any one point in time or to construct a monolithic Bedan eschatology. As in other chapters, therefore, the author displays a keen eye for the development of Bede's thinking over time and between different genres.

Part III ('Bede's Eschatological Perspective') develops the conclusions of the previous five chapters and places Bede's eschatology in its broader context. In chapter 6 ('Bede's Eschatological Perspective and Gregory the Great', pp. 147-63), Darby compares Bede's opinions on the end of time with those of Pope Gregory I (d. 604), a figure whose views enjoyed immense prestige within the Anglo-Saxon church. This was due both to the scale of his written output and the fact that he was credited with sending the mission of Augustine of Canterbury that led, ultimately (at least in Bede's version of events in the *Historia Ecclesiastica*) to the conversion of the English to Christianity. The chapter demonstrates that although Bede's eschatology drew on that of Gregory, the borrowing was not slavish. Bede was innovative in his attitude to Gregory's work and modified or omitted passages that did not tally with his own research. Chapter 7 ('Bede's Eschatological Perspective in the Crisis of 716', pp. 165-85) studies Bede's commentary on *In primam partem Samuhelis*, a verse-by-verse commentary on the first book of Samuel from the Old Testament, in the context of 716, a year of political and religious instability that included the departure of Abbot Ceolfrith from Monkwearmouth-Jarrow. Darby demonstrates convincingly that 'Bede's awareness of the approaching end of the world was sharpened by the crisis of 716' (p. 185). The final chapter ('Bede's Eschatological Perspec-

tive: *The Wider Perspective*, pp. 187-214) schematises the findings of earlier chapters, offering an overview of Bede's developing eschatological vision from the early-, mid-, and late-career works. This chapter will be especially useful for those wishing to offer students an overview of the development of Bede's thinking on this topic. It functions as a fitting summary to a fine book and is complemented by a brief conclusion (pp. 215-21) that argues further for the individuality and particularity of Bede as an eschatological scholar.

The penultimate page of the conclusion notes that Bede advocated the use of images for the instruction of the illiterate (p. 220) and this leads me to the one point that I believe deserves attention in future studies: audience and interpretation. Although some of Bede's chronicles and eschatological writings were directed at specific individuals, Darby's work demonstrates that there were occasions on which those who came into contact with his writings just did not understand the depth and subtlety of his scholarship. Whether they did so innocently or deliberately, these episodes raise important questions for those wishing to understand the reception (and possibly also the original intention) of Bede's eschatological works and how they developed over time.