Bede's miracles reconsidered

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*The miracles depicted by the Venerable Bede – particularly in his *Historia ecclesiastica* – have proved problematic for historians. This article will first recapitulate the argument that miracles were not a clearly defined category for Bede in the way they would become for later philosophers and as is often assumed by modern commentators. It will then explore the idea that Bede's miraculous episodes can best be appreciated as signa that point to a meaning beyond the literal. In particular, it will argue against the idea that Bede thought that extra-biblical history could not be read allegorically in the same way as sacred history. It is imperative that we develop a more refined understanding of Bede's conceptualization of the miraculous if we are to better comprehend the mechanics of his celebrated narrative of the English church.*

Miracles are a constant presence throughout Bede's hagiographical and historical narratives, particularly in the text for which he is most famous, the *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*. Unsurprisingly, then, his attitude towards the miraculous has attracted considerable comment from modern historians – comment which, for the most part, has tended to follow the contours of wider Bedan scholarship. Readers of the early and mid-twentieth century were apt to see Bede as a precursor of the modern historian. They praised his careful use of documents and his judicious and unbiased approach to the sea of misinformation that surrounded him. In this context, miracles seemed a superstitious and credulous interruption to the main flow of critical history-writing. Such a view led Bertram Colgrave, in the introduction to his 1969 edition (with Roger Mynors) of the *Historia ecclesiastica*, to the question: 'how is it that one who is supposed to be our greatest medieval historian can spend so much time telling wonder tales?'¹ Early studies of Bede's miracles are tinged with the same concerns, concluding variously that Bede purposefully avoided subjecting such

¹ *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 1969), p. xxxv.

stories to the same close examination as other elements of his history;² that he judiciously expunged the wilder elements from his miracle narratives;³ or that his use of miracles was guided above all by moral and literary concerns.⁴

Since then, Bedan studies have progressed apace. Recent scholarship in the field has tended to assert the close relationship in Bede's world-view between hagiography and history.⁵ The idea that Bede's miracle stories were somehow not reflective of his true beliefs – which were, in actual fact, laudably rational and critical – has been rightfully discarded. Since the 1970s a succession of studies have explored the intricacies of Bede's miracles, emphasizing both the fact that Bede believed in the miracles he was relating and that they possessed important symbolic importance for him.⁶ The most detailed of these studies is William McCready's monograph of 1994, *Miracles and the Venerable Bede*. Most recent overviews of Bede's life and work have not tended to deal in detail with miracles, content instead to refer in passing to McCready's book. However, as I shall argue, the place of the miraculous in relation to Bede's conception of history requires further examination.

An issue with the majority of these studies is that they tend to hold to an unspoken definition that understands miracles as events contrary to the laws of nature.⁷ While Bede and his contemporaries commonly refer to miracles as going against the usual or expected course of things – a concept expressed in phrases such as *contra naturam* – there is a subtle difference between their meaning in such instances and the idea that arose later in western thought which precisely defined a miracle as something completely removed from natural laws. As a number of studies in recent decades have shown, it was not until the scholastic theologians

² B. Colgrave, 'Bede's Miracle Stories', in A.H. Thompson (ed.), *Bede: His Life, Times and Writings: Essays in Commemoration of the Twelfth Centenary of His Death* (Oxford, 1935), pp. 201–29.

³ C.G. Loomis, 'The Miracle Traditions of the Venerable Bede', *Speculum* (1946), pp. 404–18.

⁴ C.W. Jones, *Saints' Lives and Chronicles in Early England* (Ithaca, 1947), pp. 74–5, 88–9.

⁵ See, for instance, G.H. Brown, *A Companion to Bede* (Woodbridge, 2009), p. 113; A. Thacker, 'Bede and History', in S. DeGregorio (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Bede* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 170–89.

⁶ Studies which have dealt with the subject of miracles in Bede include: J.T. Rosenthal, 'Bede's Use of Miracles in "The Ecclesiastical History"', *Traditio* 31 (1975), pp. 328–35; B. Ward, 'Miracles and History: A Reconsideration of the Miracle Stories Used by Bede', in G. Bonner (ed.), *Famulus Christi: Essays in Commemoration of the Thirteenth Centenary of the Birth of the Venerable Bede* (London, 1976), pp. 70–6; L.S. Creider, 'Bede's Understanding of the Miraculous', Ph.D. thesis, Yale University (1979); G.I. Berlin, 'Bede's Miracle Stories: Notions of Evidence and Authority in Old English History', *Neophilologus* 74 (1990), pp. 434–43; W.D. McCready, *Miracles and the Venerable Bede* (Toronto, 1994); K. Lutterkort, 'Beda Hagiographicus: Meaning and Function of Miracle Stories in the *Vita Cuthberti* and the *Historia Ecclesiastica*', in L.A. J.R. Houwen and A.A. MacDonald (eds), *Beda Venerabilis. Historian, Monk and Northumbrian* (Groningen, 1996), pp. 81–106.

⁷ Creider, 'Bede's Understanding of the Miraculous' is an exception.

that the miracle was defined as *super*-natural, something that involved the suspension of the laws of nature, a development that coincided with the emergence of a concern with causation.⁸ Thomas Aquinas, in the thirteenth century, could give examples of events that might seem miraculous to the ignorant – such as solar eclipses and magnetic attraction – but which were not miracles, as they followed the laws of nature.⁹ True miracles, according to this paradigm, broke with these laws. However, this division was not at all self-evident for earlier generations of thinkers. It is worth stating again, then, that Bede's conception of the miraculous did not follow the logic of Thomistic theology, but was closer to that of the patristic and early medieval writers who preceded him.

What then was the miraculous according to pre-scholastic definitions? Augustine wrote that miracles did not operate contrary to nature, 'for how is that contrary to nature which happens by the will of God, since the will of so great a Creator is certainly the nature of every created thing?'¹⁰ Instead, he posited that miracles sprang from inherent but hidden 'causes' or 'seeds' (*semina*) in nature which, when activated, could cause events that seemed miraculous to the observer.¹¹ When a Christian referred to a miracle as being *contra naturam*, therefore, they simply meant that it was 'contrary to what is familiar in nature' ('*contra quam est nota natura*')¹² or 'contrary to that which we are acquainted with in nature' ('*contra id, quod nouimus in natura*').¹³ Augustine's definition firmly placed the cause of miracles in the general unfolding of God's Creation. All of Creation was a miracle, in a sense. But if a miracle could not be defined as being in opposition to nature, how could it be defined? Augustine suggested the following: 'I call a miracle anything which appears arduous or unusual, beyond the expectation or ability of the one who

⁸ L. Daston, 'Marvelous Facts and Miraculous Evidence in Early Modern Europe', *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1991), pp. 93–124, at pp. 95–9; R. Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 12–13; H. de Lubac, *Surnaturel: études historiques* (Paris, 1946), pp. 371–3.

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* III.101, *S. Thomae de Aquino Doctoris Angelici Summa Contra Gentiles*, Editio Leonina Manualis (Rome, 1934), p. 349; *De potentia* VI.2, ed. R. Spiazzi, *S. Thomae Aquinatis Quaestiones disputatae*, 2 vols (Turin, 1949), II, p. 162.

¹⁰ Augustine, *De ciuitate Dei* XXI.8, ed. B. Dombart and A. Kalb, 2 vols, CCSL 47–8 (Turnhout, 1955), II, p. 504: 'Quo modo est enim contra naturam, quod Dei fit voluntate, cum voluntas tanti utique conditoris conditae rei cuiusque natura sit?'; trans. R.W. Dyson, *Augustine: The City of God against the Pagans*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge, 1998), p. 1061.

¹¹ B. Wenisch, *Geschichten oder Geschichte?: Theologie des Wunders* (Salzburg, 1981), p. 152; J.A. Hardon, 'The Concept of Miracle from St. Augustine to Modern Apologetics', *Theological Studies* 15 (1954), pp. 229–57, at pp. 310–11; B. Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind* (Philadelphia, 1982), pp. 3–4; M.E. Goodich, *Miracles and Wonders: The Development of the Concept of Miracle, 1150–1350* (Aldershot, 2007), pp. 13–14; Daston, 'Marvelous Facts and Miraculous Evidence', pp. 95–6.

¹² Augustine, *De ciuitate Dei* XXI.8, ed. Dombart and Kalb, II, p. 504.

¹³ Augustine, *Contra Faustum* XXVI.3, ed. J. Zycha, CSEL 25.1 (Vienna, 1891), p. 731.

marvels at it.¹⁴ This definition suggests that the classification of a miracle lies, quite literally, in the eye of the beholder(s). An event was miraculous if it stood out enough from the usual course of nature for humankind to perceive it as something special.

This view of the nature of miracles was influential on those who came after Augustine. Its apogee is represented by a seventh-century Irish text, *De mirabilibus sacrae scripturae*. This text's author, known appropriately as Augustinus Hibernicus, sought to explain the miracles of scripture by showing that they arose from the natural laws of the universe.¹⁵ There has been a tendency to view Augustinus Hibernicus as a unique and anomalous thinker, but a rationalist understanding of miracles was by no means limited to *De mirabilibus*. It was also the approach used as a matter of course by patristic writers from Hilary of Poitiers to John Chrysostom.¹⁶ This is the reasoning that lies behind patristic attempts to prove the rationality of miracles by using analogies with natural processes like childbirth or the recurring resurrection of the Phoenix. We find the same mode of thought in one of Bede's heroes, Gregory the Great, who sees miracles most importantly as events invoking wonder that function as signs of spiritual import.¹⁷ In the manner of Augustine, Gregory compared miracles like the Resurrection and the blossoming of the dry rod of Aaron to natural processes that occur in the everyday world but which do not seem miraculous to us because we are used to them.¹⁸ Objectively, these events are no more miraculous than any other – all of Creation is, in a sense, a miracle. Again, however, Gregory does not suggest that we should therefore give up on identifying miracles. Rather, it is clear from his writings that these events, which evoke wonder in humans, are worthy of our attention as special signs from God. Within the paradigm promulgated by Augustine, Gregory and others there is no way of defining miracle without reference to the viewpoint of the observer. The unusualness of the miracle is what sets it apart from the everyday and reveals it as a signifier of deeper truths (it should be noted that, despite Aquinas's attempts to objectively define miracles, the ultimate criterion was still for him the wonder of those who witnessed it).¹⁹

¹⁴ Augustine, *De utilitate credendi* XVI.34, ed. J. Zycha, CSEL 25.1, p. 43: 'miraculum uoco quicquid arduum aut insolitum supra spem uel facultatem mirantis adparet'; trans. Hardon in 'Concept of Miracle', p. 230.

¹⁵ For background, see MacGinty, 'The Irish Augustine: *De mirabilibus sacrae Scripturae*', in P. Ní Chatháin and M. Richter (eds), *Irland und die Christenheit: Bibelstudien und Mission. Ireland and Christendom: The Bible and the Missions* (Stuttgart, 1987), pp. 70–83.

¹⁶ M.F. Wiles, 'Miracles in the Early Church', in C.F.D. Moule (ed.), *Miracles: Cambridge Studies in their Philosophy and History* (London, 1965), pp. 219–34.

¹⁷ G.R. Evans, *The Thought of Gregory the Great* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 47.

¹⁸ Gregory, *Moralia in Iob* VI.xv.18, ed. M. Adriaen, CCSL 143 (Turnhout, 1979), pp. 295–6.

¹⁹ Daston, 'Marvelous Facts and Miraculous Evidence', pp. 96–8.

Scholarly interpretations of late antique perceptions of the miraculous have been varied. Maurice Wiles identified an 'inescapable problem' for the patristic writers, namely that 'they want to stress the absolute transcendent nature of the miracle that it may make its point, but at the same time they want to show its congruity with other aspects of experience so that the Christ of faith may be seen to be in harmony with the God of creation'.²⁰ A similar contradiction has been identified by John Carey in early Irish texts: where Augustinus Hibernicus emphasizes the miraculous nature of *all* of Creation, Adomnán of Iona describes Columba's miracles as being *contra naturam*.²¹ Such a difference in opinion can at least partly be explained by a difference in genre: cosmologists would presumably wish to emphasize the fact that all of Creation is a miracle, hagiographers to stress the supramundane power of a saint's miracles. But this seeming incongruity was rarely acknowledged or even caused much of an issue for medieval thinkers. Robert Bartlett has discussed how events with regular causes and scientific explanations that were known to their observers could nevertheless be read as miraculous by some medieval writers, a dissonance that would have been untenable to Aquinas.²² A particularly telling example of this sensibility is found in Gregory of Tours's writings. His *Decem libri historiarum* are full of prodigies and signs that indicate divine disfavour in the form of deaths, plagues or other ravaging disasters.²³ Yet he was happy to discuss a 'hidden poison' (*veninum occultum*) as a possible cause of one of these plagues and to detail how some victims were cured with antidotes. Giselle de Nie has observed that, for Gregory, both natural and divine causes can be ascribed to such events – the existence of one does not preclude the other.²⁴ Elsewhere, Edward James has painted a picture of Gregory's beliefs that fit easily with the patristic understanding described above. He observes of Gregory's views: 'The growth of a seed into a tree and the movement of stars were great wonders, miracles worked every day by God; the removal of a headache by contact with a relic was equally inexplicable to Gregory, but clearly belonged to the same category of phenomena.'²⁵

²⁰ Wiles, 'Miracles in the Early Church', pp. 232–3.

²¹ J. Carey, 'The Nature of Miracles in Early Irish Saints' Lives', in A.K. Siewers (ed.), *Re-Imagining Nature: Environmental Humanities and Ecosemiotics* (Lanham, 2014), pp. 127–39.

²² Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural*, pp. 62–3.

²³ G. de Nie, 'Roses in January: A Neglected Dimension in Gregory of Tours' *Historiae*', *Journal of Medieval History* 5 (1979), pp. 259–89; repr. with revisions in G. de Nie, *Views from a Many-windowed Tower: Studies of Imagination in the Works of Gregory of Tours* (Amsterdam, 1987), pp. 27–69.

²⁴ De Nie, 'Roses in January', pp. 38, 40, 48; Gregory of Tours, *Historiae* V.34, ed. B. Krusch and W. Levison, *MGH* 1 (Hanover, 1951), p. 239.

²⁵ E. James, 'A Sense of Wonder: Gregory of Tours, Medicine and Science', in M.A. Meyer (ed.), *The Culture of Christendom: Essays in Medieval History in Memory of Denis L. T. Bethell* (London, 1993), pp. 45–60, at p. 60.

Defining miracles in Bede

This, then, is the context in which Bede wrote and we must approach his conception of the miraculous with it in mind. A number of scholars have noted that Bede's understanding of the miraculous did not operate according to post-scholastic definitions. Benedicta Ward, in her contribution to the 1976 essay collection devoted to Bede, demonstrated this fact in succinct and convincing fashion: 'For us, the interesting question about a miracle is "how?" . . . For Bede and his contemporaries, the important question was not "how?" but "what?" and "why?" It was not the mechanics of the miracle that mattered, but its significance.'²⁶ Laurence Creider, in his 1979 doctoral thesis, 'Bede's Understanding of the Miraculous', shows a similar appreciation for the meaning of miracle in Bede's world-view, noting the 'the blurring of the distinction between miracle and nature and the very firm rooting of both miracle and nature in God's continuing administration of the universe'.²⁷

Despite these examples, however, the understanding that Bede's conception of the miraculous was fundamentally different to later ideas has not succeeded in permeating all levels of scholarship. Often, scholars have recognized *in the abstract* that Bede's beliefs do not match with later developments, but the categorization of miracles in an anachronistic manner proves hard to escape and the tacit definition of the miraculous as something that goes against the 'laws of nature' is common. McCready makes the following statement about Bede's portrayal of miracles: 'far from stripping nature of any and all consistency of its own, miracles were remarkable precisely because they remained those rare occurrences in which nature was required to yield to the divine, normal human expectations being suspended by the breakthrough of the transcendent'.²⁸ Applying such an anachronistic definition of the miraculous to Bede's thought results in some unconvincing results. For instance, McCready does not classify the cures effected by scrapings from Irish parchment as truly miraculous, 'but rather a product of the natural properties of things Irish'.²⁹ This artificial division between such events and other miracles does a disservice to Bede's world-view for the sake of imposing a clear, post-scholastic definition where none exists. Most studies have thus been concerned to discuss only a small selection of the various representations of the miraculous that populate Bede's writings. This limiting definition is obvious when scholars attempt to count Bede's miracles. C. Grant

²⁶ Ward, 'Miracles and History', p. 71.

²⁷ Creider, 'Bede's Understanding of the Miraculous', p. 78.

²⁸ McCready, *Miracles*, p. 43.

²⁹ McCready, *Miracles*, p. 47 n. 9.

Loomis counted fifty-two miracles in the *Historia ecclesiastica*, Joel Rosenthal 'about 51', and Karl Lutterkort spoke of 'some fifty' – presumably these authors did not include episodes such as the Irish manuscript cures in their count.³⁰ Such conservative estimations contribute to the mistaken idea that the *Historia* is an objective history with occasional intrusions of obligatory hagiographical tale-telling.

A review of the terminology used by Bede is revealing of the limited utility of such approaches. As Creider has noted, Bede's deployment of the terms *signum*, *miraculum* and *uirtus* does not map on to the episodes singled out by modern scholars as 'miracles'. Instead, while all three terms can refer to a saint's wondrous deed, *miraculum* is also used to refer to the holding up of the waters above the firmament; *signum* to the rainbow; and *uirtus* to the virtue of a saint, in the modern sense of the word.³¹ These terms cannot be read as signs of a fixed category of miracle, in the sense either of something defined in opposition to nature or even of a deed performed by a saint.

Instead, an examination of Bede's writings demonstrates that his understanding of the miraculous is of a piece with the patristic model discussed above and that he sees divine involvement at work in the world at large. Bede is not as concerned as the church Fathers to argue for the veracity of Christian miracles using examples drawn from the natural world, but neither is he opposed to the practice. In his commentary on Genesis, for instance, he argues that the solid quality of the waters above the firmament is no more unbelievable than the crystalline rock that, according to antique science, forms from congealed water.³² Furthermore, the wondrous (to humans) nature of the waters above the firmament is really no more miraculous than anything else in Creation: 'is this any greater a miracle than that, as scripture says, the very bulk of the earth he has hanged on nothing?'³³ The miracle of the loaves and the fishes, meanwhile, is well within the capabilities of the Creator of all things, 'who brings forth bread from the earth and gladdens the hearts of human beings with wine'.³⁴ Bede's writings – particularly *De natura rerum* and

³⁰ Loomis, 'The Miracle Traditions of the Venerable Bede', p. 404; Rosenthal, 'Bede's Use of Miracles', p. 329; Lutterkort, 'Beda Hagiographicus', p. 94 (but note Lutterkort's comments on the difficulty of defining miracles).

³¹ Creider, 'Bede's Understanding of the Miraculous', pp. 166–71.

³² Bede, *In Genesim* [henceforth *IG*] II.1, ed. C.W. Jones, CCSL 118A (Turnhout, 1967), p. 10.

³³ Bede, *IG* II.1, ed. Jones, p. 11: 'numquid maioris hoc miraculi est quam quod ipsam terrae molem, ut scriptura dicit, appendit in nihilo?'; trans. Kendall, *On Genesis*, p. 76.

³⁴ Bede, *Homiliae* II.2, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL 122B (Turnhout, 1955), p. 196: 'qui educit panem de terra et uino laetificat cor hominis'; trans. L.T. Martin and D. Hurst, *Bede the Venerable: Homilies on the Gospels, Book Two, Lent to the Dedication of the Church* (Kalamazoo, 1991), p. 17; McCready, *Miracles*, pp. 25–7; F. Wallis, 'Si Naturam Quaeras: Reframing Bede's "Science"', in S. DeGregorio (ed.), *Innovation and Tradition in the Writings of the Venerable Bede* (Morgantown, 2006), pp. 65–99, at p. 94.

In Genesim – reveal a belief in a Creator whose influence continues to be exercised after Creation.

Anyone who reads the *Historia ecclesiastica* will certainly come away with the impression that God is present and involved during every event, and that little or nothing that happens in the world can be ascribed simply to ‘natural’ causes. A telling detail is found in Bede’s depiction of the saintly bishop, Chad. Bede says that the saint used to pray during extreme weather conditions. When questioned by his followers about this behaviour, Chad replies:

‘Have you not read, “The Lord also thundered in the heavens and the Highest gave His voice. Yea, He sent out His arrows and scattered them and He shot out lightnings and discomfited them”? For the Lord moves the air, raises the winds, hurls lightening, and thunders forth from heaven so as to rouse inhabitants of the world to fear him, to call them to remember the future judgment in order that He may scatter their pride and confound their boldness by bringing to their minds that dread time when he will come in the clouds in great power and majesty, to judge the living and the dead, while the heavens and the earth are aflame. And so’, said he, ‘we ought to respond to His heavenly warning with due fear and love; so that as often as He disturbs the sky and raises His hand as if about to strike, yet spares us still, we should implore His mercy, examining the innermost recesses of our hearts and purging out the dregs of our sins, and behave with such caution that we may never deserve to be struck down.’³⁵

The implication here is that the varieties of weather described – which include everything from high winds to terrifying thunder storms – function as *signa* in the same way as the more obviously miraculous tokens of the saints’ Lives. In his commentary on Ezra-Nehemiah, Bede gives a similar reading. There, he implies that divine admonishment should be deduced when the weather turns sour, ‘when the elements are stirred up and weather deteriorates into violent winds, floods of rain,

³⁵ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica* [henceforth *HE*] IV.3, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 342–5: “Non legistis, quia ‘intonuit de caelo Dominus, et Altissimus dedit uocem suam; misit sagittas suas, et dissipauit eos, fulgora multiplicauit, et conturbauit eos?’ Mouet enim aera Dominus, uentos excitat, iaculatur fulgora, de caelo intonat, ut terrigenas ad timendum se suscitet, ut corda eorum in memoriam futuri iudicii reuocet, ut superbiam eorum dissipet, et conturbet audaciam, reducto ad mentem tremendo illo tempore, quando ipse caelis ac terris ardentibus uenturus est in nubibus, in potestate magna et maiestate, ad iudicandos uiuos et mortuos. Propter quod,” inquit, “oportet nos admonitioni eius caelesti, debito cum timore et amore respondere; ut, quoties aere commoto manum quasi ad ferendum minitans exerit, nec adhuc tamen percutit, mox inploremus eius misericordiam, et discussis penetralibus cordis nostri, atque expurgatis uitiorum rudibus, solliciti, ne umquam percuti mereamur, agamus”; McCready, pp. 25–7; Wallis, ‘*Si Naturam Quaeras*’, p. 94.

heavy snowstorms, parching drought or even the death of men and animals, and when the judge himself threatens the force of his anger through open signs'.³⁶

Yet this does not stop Bede from also exploring the natural causes behind wind, thunder and lightning; in his *De natura rerum*, he gives detailed explanations for these natural phenomena.³⁷ As for Gregory of Tours, scientific reasons for storms, plagues and portents could be accepted without weakening his central belief that divine meaning could be read into such occurrences. Similarly, Bede understands rainbows both as natural phenomena with scientific, explainable causes *and* as signs of God's promise not to send another Flood. In *De natura rerum*, he explains how the rainbow is formed when a sunray is reflected by a hollow cloud and gets its colours from the sky, the waters, the air and the grass.³⁸ In his commentary on Genesis, he sees the rainbow as a divine token, signifying both God's promise not to send another Flood and the future destruction of the world by fire.³⁹ The natural world, in Bede's apprehension, seems like a constant stream of symbols and portents, which, if read correctly, encourage spiritual pursuits and eschatological reflection.

In a number of places, to be sure, Bede seems to imply that the unnaturalness of an event is what makes it miraculous. When commenting on biblical miracles, Bede often explicitly specifies that the event went against the usual course of nature – indeed, it was this unusual opposition to the regular course of things that marked these occurrences out as divine signs. For instance, the water and blood that flowed from Christ's side had to be a sign because it was 'contrary to the nature of our bodies';⁴⁰ the fact that Sarah had passed child-bearing age when God promised her a son was underlined by Bede in his commentary on Genesis in order to emphasize the miraculous nature of the subsequent birth of Isaac;⁴¹ while the darkening of the sun at the crucifixion was not a regular

³⁶ Bede, *In Ezram et Neemiam* II.1796–1801, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL 119A (Turnhout, 1969), p. 332: 'turbatis licet elementis et uel uentorum fragore uel inundantia pluuiarum uel niuium aceruis uel ardore siccitatis uel etiam exitio hominum siue animalium desuper ingrauescente atque ipso iudice per aperta indicia uim suae irae minitante'; trans. S. DeGregorio, *Bede: On Ezra and Nehemiah*, Translated Texts for Historians 47 (Liverpool, 2006), p. 146; C. Plummer, *Venerabilis Baedae Opera Historica*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1896), II, p. 209.

³⁷ Bede, *De natura rerum* [henceforth *DNR*], chs 26–30, ed. C.W. Jones, CCSL 123B (Turnhout, 1977), pp. 217–20.

³⁸ Bede, *DNR*, ch. 31, ed. Jones, pp. 220–1.

³⁹ Bede, *IG* II.9, ed. Jones, p. 135.

⁴⁰ Bede, *Expositio actuum apostolorum* II.19, ed. M.L.W. Laistner, CCSL 121 (Turnhout, 1983), p. 19: 'contra naturam nostrorum est corporum'; trans. L.T. Martin, *The Venerable Bede: Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, Cistercian Studies Series 117 (Kalamazoo, 1989), p. 32; Creider, 'Bede's Understanding of the Miraculous', pp. 31–2; Wallis, 'Si naturam quaeras', p. 95.

⁴¹ Bede, *IG* IV.17, ed. Jones, p. 207; Wallis, 'Si naturam quaeras', p. 95.

eclipse and must therefore be a miracle.⁴² Often the reason for such an emphasis is to show that the miracle in question cannot be ascribed to chance or some other cause, to 'counter any attempt to rationalize a miracle as merely an *unusual* event'.⁴³ This rationale lies behind Bede's statement in his commentary on Luke that sweating blood is *contra naturam*; he does not want his reader to think that Jesus' bloody sweat might be related to a health issue, but to understand that it was unequivocally a sign.⁴⁴ Outside of biblical commentary, there are similar examples. In *De natura rerum*, he describes how tempestuous weather can be caused by pestilential air. When this happens in the correct season, he says, they are called 'storms' (*tempestates*); however, if they happen outside of their usual season they gain a miraculous significance and are known as 'portents' (*prodigia*) or 'signs' (*signa*).⁴⁵

At other times the miraculous tends to shade into the everyday; the miracles that Bede reports often seem open to other interpretations, as products of chance or coincidence, rather than events that directly and clearly contradict nature. The healing feats of John of Beverley in the *Historia ecclesiastica*, in particular, tread a line between miracle-working and medicinal aid. In one case, he cures a boy who was dumb and covered in scabbiness and scurf. As has been noted by scholars, John of Beverley's approach is more medical than miraculous.⁴⁶ He patiently but effectively teaches the youth letters, syllables and words, then orders the physician to cure his scabby head. The physician does so, and with the help of the bishop's blessing and prayers (*benedictione ac precibus antistitis*), the boy's skin is cleared and he grows a healthy head of hair.⁴⁷ As McCready comments, its status as a miracle depends 'on nothing more substantive than the reputation of the bishop that performed it and his having begun the process by making the sign of the cross'.⁴⁸ Such thin reasons for dubbing an event miraculous are not unique either to this miracle or to Bede.⁴⁹ These miracles begin to feel a lot like simple providentially guided events rather than 'miracles' *per se*.⁵⁰ But if there is no objective distinction

⁴² Bede, *In primam partem Samuhelis* IV.24, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL 119 (Turnhout, 1962), p. 227; Creider, 'Bede's Understanding of the Miraculous', p. 32.

⁴³ Wallis, 'Si Naturam Quaeras', p. 95.

⁴⁴ Wallis, 'Si Naturam Quaeras', pp. 94–6.

⁴⁵ Bede, *DNR*, ch. 37, ed. Jones, p. 223.

⁴⁶ M.L. Cameron, *Anglo-Saxon Medicine*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 7 (Cambridge, 1993), p. 27; McCready, *Miracles*, pp. 40–1; J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People: A Historical Commentary* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 175–6.

⁴⁷ Bede, *HE* V.2, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 458–9.

⁴⁸ McCready, *Miracles*, p. 41.

⁴⁹ See, for instance, the similar comments in V.I.J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton, 1991), p. 303.

⁵⁰ For a recent discussion of Bede's understanding of God's involvement in history, with a summation of previous scholarship on the subject, see C. O'Brien, *Bede's Temple: An Image and its Interpretation* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 63–72.

between the general providentially guided working of history and a supernatural miraculous event, then an examination of the miraculous needs to cast its net wider than previous studies have done.

If we were to look at this evidence through the lens of a post-scholastic understanding of the miraculous, it would result in an apparent inconsistency in Bede's world-view: how can these events be both part of a regular nature and signs of divine import? Applying the more subjective, eye-of-the-beholder patristic paradigm – a model unconcerned with the distinction between natural and supernatural – allows us to explain such seeming discrepancies. *Signa* could be quite out of the ordinary, and in fact it was often their marvellousness that set them apart as clear signs from God. But this did not mean that Bede had a clear categorization system that drew a line between natural and supernatural events in the same way as would later be attempted by the scholastics. He at no point says that miracles *have to be* contrary to the usual course of nature. Nowhere here is the transcendent and distant watchmaker of later religious thought, happy to set things in motion and then sit back to let things take their course. Rather, God is immanent in the world – at all times his judgement may be felt in the form of natural phenomena and events. In such a conceptualization, the division between natural and supernatural has no meaning. How then does one define miracle in this world-view? Patristic thought provides an answer: a miracle is 'anything which appears arduous or unusual, beyond the expectation or ability of the one who marvels at it'.⁵¹ The central purpose of a miracle was to signify something to humans. The complete unusualness of some events (Sarah's pregnancy, water and blood flowing from Christ's side, an eclipse during a full moon or a storm out of season) serves to mark them as signs for our attention; they are *not* prerequisite traits of something called a miracle – such an objective method of definition would have not occurred to Bede. But more natural events could also stand as divine signs; hence, Chad's reaction to storms. The miraculous is simply a way of describing the particularly exceptional and awesome works of God – people of simple faith are more likely to be impressed by such events, whereas the most holy and mindful, like Chad, see the message of God even in inclement weather. Reading deeply into Bede's writings, one comes away with the impression that almost anything can be a divine sign: storms (in or out of season), pestilences, the marvellous deeds performed by saints, the outcomes of battles, the onset or departure of disease, the landscape in which a saint is martyred or the eclipse of the moon. One can, if one wishes, restrict the discussion of 'miracles' purely to occurrences brought about

⁵¹ Augustine, *De utilitate credendi* XVI.34, ed. Zycha, p. 43: 'quicquid arduum aut insolitum supra spem uel facultatem mirantis adparet'; trans. Hardon in 'Concept of Miracle', p. 230.

by human agency – and separate them from other events that also function as *signa*, such as rainbows – but this would be an artificial division shedding little light on Bede's thought. Instead, the category of the miraculous needs to be extended to include other events that stand as *signa* – in a rhetoric of deeper spiritual meaning.

tf = "P44401A"100\$) = RpEMEDI2277 – GRA – 0001RpWiles and Carey identified a conflict, in patristic and early Irish thought respectively, between a wish to portray miracles as singular events above the ordinary course of nature and a desire to emphasize God's miraculous power over all of Creation. This does not appear to have been an issue for Bede. It could be argued that this difference in portrayal is related to the different genres in which Bede is writing. Following such an argument, we might expect his cosmological writings to reflect the opinions of Augustinus Hibernicus (all of Creation is a miracle) and his hagiography to agree more or less with Adomnán (miracles are *contra naturam*). Instead, as we have seen, *De natura rerum* admits the importance of irregularity in identifying portents, while his hagiographies portray miracles that range from *contra naturam* to barely unusual. He seems closer to de Nie's estimation of Gregory of Tours, cheerfully willing to accept both divine and natural causation, than to the picture painted by Wiles and Carey of a deep intellectual discordance.

Interpretation of *signa*

Given the importance of miracles as signifiers, then, it is worth asking what exactly they signified and how they could be interpreted. An obvious starting point is the method of interpretation used by Bede in his biblical exegesis. There has been some debate, however, about the extent to which Bede thought the events of the extra-biblical world could be read allegorically. Some, notably Calvin Kendall, have seen no distinction between Scripture and the contemporary world in terms of potential for allegorical interpretation.⁵² Others have argued that Bede's historical writing cannot be read in such a manner – that, while it is heavily influenced by biblical ways of narrating history, the allegorical methods used in biblical exegesis cannot be applied to texts like the *Historia ecclesiastica*.⁵³ This argument must be revised in light of recent studies

⁵² C.B. Kendall, *The Allegory of the Church: Romanesque Portals and Their Verse Inscriptions* (Toronto, 1998), pp. 9–10; J.N. Stephens, 'Bede's Ecclesiastical History', *History* 62 (February, 1977), pp. 1–14, at p. 13.

⁵³ Creider, 'Bede's Understanding of the Miraculous', pp. 160–1; A.G. Holder, 'Allegory and History in Bede's Interpretation of Sacred Architecture', *American Benedictine Review* 40 (1989), pp. 115–31; T.J. Furry, *Allegorizing History: The Venerable Bede, Figural Exegesis and Historical Theory* (Cambridge, 2014), *passim*.

that have demonstrated the symbolism, drawn from exegesis, that is woven throughout the narratives of Bede's historiographical and hagiographical works.⁵⁴

A central tenet of Christian exegesis as practised by Bede was that many of the events of Scripture should be understood as genuine historical happenings, in which could also be discerned a spiritual or allegorical meaning.⁵⁵ In his *De schematibus et tropis*, Bede distinguishes between two different types of biblical allegory: verbal and historical. Verbal allegory refers to spoken prophecies and will not concern us here. Historical allegory, on the other hand, is associated with an event in time that 'refers to another reality outside of itself'.⁵⁶ So, for instance, Abraham's two sons represent the Old and the New Testament, an allegorical reading first proposed by Paul (Gal. IV.22–4), but Abraham's sons were also real historical figures.⁵⁷ Under the influence of Augustine, Bede in his biblical commentaries generally refrained from detaching the allegorical reading from the literal.⁵⁸ He reiterates many times in his exegesis, that events such as the Creation, the Fall and the Flood are to be understood literally – as having true historical currency – as well as interpreted mystically. As he says in his commentary on Genesis: 'this was done for the sake of its allegorical meaning, but nevertheless it was done'.⁵⁹ The implication here, then, is that the spiritual meaning is embedded in the events themselves.⁶⁰ As Kendall has noted, Bede's concept of historical 'allegory' is not, strictly speaking, a 'device of language, although it might be said

⁵⁴ For instance: E. Knibbs, 'Exegetical Hagiography: Bede's Prose *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*', *Revue bénédictine* 114.2 (2004), pp. 233–52; A.H. Merrills, *History and Geography in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2005); J. Barrow, 'How Coifi Pierced Christ's Side: A Re-Examination of Bede's Ecclesiastical History, II, Chapter 13', *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 62 (2011), pp. 693–706; J. O'Reilly, 'The Multitude of Isles and the Corner-stone: Topography, Exegesis, and the Identity of the Angli in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*', in J. Roberts and L. Webster (eds), *Anglo-Saxon Traces* (Tempe, 2011), pp. 201–28.

⁵⁵ The following discussion draws from C.B. Kendall, 'Introduction', in *Libri II De arte metrica et De schematibus et tropis. The Art of Poetry and Rhetoric* (Saarbrücken, 1991), pp. 15–35; M. Irvine, 'Interpretation and the Semiotics of Allegory in Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Augustine', *Semiotica* 63 (1987), pp. 33–72; M. Irvine, 'Bede the Grammarian and the Scope of Grammatical Studies in Eighth-Century Northumbria', *ASE* 15 (1986), pp. 15–44; A. Thacker, *Bede and Augustine of Hippo: History and Figure in Sacred Text*, Jarrow Lecture (Jarrow, 2005), pp. 14–28, 33. For introductions to Bede's exegesis, see S. DeGregorio, 'Bede and the Old Testament', in S. DeGregorio (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Bede* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 127–41; A. Holder, 'Bede and the New Testament', in S. DeGregorio (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Bede* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 142–55.

⁵⁶ Kendall, *Art of Poetry and Rhetoric*, p. 26.

⁵⁷ Bede, *DSET* II.2, ed. Kendall, p. 196.

⁵⁸ Thacker, *History and Figure*, pp. 18–26, 33.

⁵⁹ Bede, *IG* I.3, ed. Jones, p. 69: 'Et hoc significationis gratia factum est, sed tamen factum'; trans. Kendall, p. 136. Cf. *IG* I.2, ed. Jones, pp. 46.

⁶⁰ Cf. H. de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: Les quatre sens de l'écriture*, 4 vols (Paris, 1959–64); trans. M. Sebanc and E.M. Macierowski, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, 3 vols (Edinburgh, 1998–2009), II, p. 86.

to be a figure of speech in God's rhetoric . . . the speech that constitutes the world'.⁶¹

The ways in which such historical allegory could manifest itself were many and varied. The allegories embedded in historical reality were to be found, for instance, in the names of people and places. In the New Testament, the many layers of meaning in Peter's name are explicated in Matthew XVI.18: 'you are Peter (*petrus*); and upon this rock (*super hanc petram*) I will build my church'. The paronomastic connection between Peter's name and the Latin word for rock signified a deeper symbolism with cosmic and historical meaning, especially for those who would read in it a cosmic endorsement of the authority of the Bishop of Rome.⁶² Number and order were also capable of being mystically read. Central to Bede's concept of number is the idea, inherited from Isidore and especially Augustine, of God as the divine orderer. The biblical verse Wisdom XI.21, where God is referred to as having 'ordered all things in measure, and number, and weight', was recited to show how numbers provided a glimpse into the divine order that underlay the universe.⁶³ For Bede, as for Augustine before him, the six days of Creation mirrored the entire history of the cosmos – each balancing a different 'age' of the world. In mathematics, six is the first perfect number (a number equal to the sum of its factors); the fact that God created the world in six days, then, demonstrates the completion and perfection of Creation.⁶⁴ Bede interpreted the fact that Enoch lived for 365 years (Gen. V.23) as mirroring the days of the solar year:

The fact that all the days of Enoch are said to be three hundred and sixty-five years, in which number of days the solar year is brought to an end, signifies mystically by the whole period of this age that those who faithfully serve the Lord and strive toward eternal rest will never fail.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Kendall, *The Allegory of the Church*, p. 10.

⁶² Bede, *Homiliae* I.20, ed. Hurst, pp. 144–5. It should be noted that Bede interpreted the 'rock' in this passage to refer to Christ, and not Peter himself as was common: J. Moorhead, 'Bede on the Papacy', *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 60 (2009), pp. 217–32, at pp. 224–5.

⁶³ For instance, Isidore, *Etymologiae* iii.IV.1, ed. W.M. Lindsay, *Isidori Hispalensis episcopi: Etymologiarum siue Originum libri XX*, Scriptorum classicorum bibliotheca Oxoniensis (Oxford, 1911); there are many more examples in Augustine, discussed in C.W. Jones, 'Some Introductory Remarks on Bede's Commentary on Genesis', *Sacris Erudiri* 19 (1969), pp. 115–98, at pp. 166–8.

⁶⁴ Bede, *IG* I.1, ed. Jones, p. 32.

⁶⁵ Bede, *IG* II.5, ed. Jones, p. 97: 'significat mystice per totum huius seculi tempus eos qui fideliter domino seruiunt, et ad aeternum requiem tendunt, numquam defuturos'; trans. Kendall, p. 166.

There is further significance in the three hundred years that Enoch is said to have walked with God:

For this number is usually represented among the Greeks by the letter T, and the letter T contains a symbol of the cross; and if it had only received the upstroke which is lacking in the centre, it would not in that case have depicted a symbol of the cross, but the sign of the cross itself in plain view.⁶⁶

Even physical and topographical details from Scripture could reveal hidden spiritual significance, as in the case of the sons of Eber, whose mountain residence is symbolic of desire for heavenly things.⁶⁷ Bede's scriptural commentaries are full of similar readings; they demonstrate the providentially organized web of meaning that lies behind the events recorded in the Bible.

Despite this emphasis on historical allegories in the Bible, since Arthur Holder's 1989 article on Bede's exegesis of the Temple of Solomon it has been widely agreed that Bede allegorically interpreted only the elements that were mentioned in scripture.⁶⁸ According to Holder, Bede limited this kind of exegesis to the realm of scripture only: 'other sources of information, however ancient and reliable they may be, provided insight into *historia* only'.⁶⁹ Allegorical reading of history 'was appropriate for Bede the exegete, but not for Bede the historian'.⁷⁰ Holder is certainly right to distinguish between Bede the exegete and Bede the historian. The two genres entailed two different approaches and Bede does not generally comment on the allegorical interpretation of the events recorded in his historical writings. But this is not the same as believing that historical allegory is not at play in extra-biblical events. In fact, it is clear that it is. Bede, when commenting on scripture, often brings in facts gleaned from other, non-biblical sources.⁷¹ These facts are not just used to explain historical context, but often contribute to the allegorical reading. Thus, according to Josephus and Jerome, there were seventy-two pomegranates and the same number of bells on the tunic of the high priest.⁷² In his

⁶⁶ Bede, *JG* II.5, ed. Jones, p. 97: 'significat mystice per totum huius seculi tempus eos qui fideliter domino seruiunt, et ad aeternum requiem tendunt, numquam defuturos'; trans. Kendall, p. 166.

⁶⁷ Bede, *JG* IV.11, ed. Jones, p. 159.

⁶⁸ Holder, 'Allegory and History'. For a recent recapitulation of the argument, see Furry, *Allegorizing History*.

⁶⁹ Holder, 'Allegory and History', p. 129.

⁷⁰ Holder, 'Allegory and History', p. 131.

⁷¹ Holder, 'Allegory and History', pp. 129–30.

⁷² Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae* III.vii.4, ed. R. Pollard and J. Timmermann, (2013), <<https://sites.google.com/site/latinjosephus>> [accessed 30 November 2015]; Jerome, *Ep.* LXIV.14, ed. I. Hilberg, CSEL 54 (Vienna, 1910), p. 600. Cf. Bede: *On the Tabernacle*, trans. A.G. Holder, Translated Texts for Historians 18 (Liverpool, 1994), p. 128 n. 3.

De tabernaculo, Bede interprets this number allegorically, as a reference to the seventy-two disciples and the number of hours contained in three days – an allusion to Christ.⁷³ Further examples are to be found throughout Bede's exegesis. Holder argues that by the time Bede composed *De templo*, however, he no longer believed it proper to draw allegory from non-scriptural information. At the start of the second book of that work, Bede spends much time giving information about the inner court and the great hall gleaned from Josephus, Cassiodorus and others. After this he states:

These items of information on the structure of the temple, in our opinion, should indeed be passed on to the keen reader. But among them let us seek out figures of whatever mysteries sacred scripture has thought fit to relate and the rest let us use purely for historical knowledge.⁷⁴

Holder and, more recently, Timothy Furry have read this passage as a proclamation of a rigid exegetical method – a manifesto that shows how Bede was, by the time of the composition of this work, unwilling to read extra-biblical history allegorically. Yet this is not what Bede says here; he merely notes that, in this instance, he will focus on allegorizing the details presented in Scripture and not the information derived from other sources. My reading is not that he makes any grand claim that such information can not or should not be used for figurative interpretation. In fact, he goes on only a few lines later to give an allegorical interpretation of the great hall and the crowds who would gather to worship there, a detail specifically derived from his reading of Josephus.⁷⁵ Elsewhere in the same work he draws on a reference in Josephus to the white walls of the temple (a detail not included in Scripture) to introduce an allegorical interpretation that links the white walls with 'the pure manner of acting of the elect as well as their conscience purified of all blemish of corruption'.⁷⁶ This indicates that it was the historical reality itself – and not just the details

⁷³ Bede, *De tabernaculo* III.737–72, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL 119A (Turnhout, 1969), pp. 111–12.

⁷⁴ Bede, *De templo* II.73–6, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL 119A (Turnhout, 1969), pp. 193: 'Haec quidem de structura templi studioso lectori credidimus intimanda. Verum in eis quaecumque scriptura sacra referre commodum duxit figuras mysteriorum quaeramus ceteris pro historiae cognitione simpliciter utamur'; trans. S. Connolly, *Bede: On the Temple*, Translated Texts for Historians 21 (Liverpool, 1995), p. 68, modified.

⁷⁵ Bede, *De templo* II.95–114, ed. Hurst, p. 194; Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae* VIII.iii.9, ed. R. Pollard and J. Timmermann, (2013), <<https://sites.google.com/site/latinjosephus>> [accessed 30 November 2015]. Bede mentions Josephus as his source for this information in *De templo* II.19–27, ed. Hurst, p. 192.

⁷⁶ Bede, *De templo* I.386–7, ed. Hurst, p. 156: 'mundam electorum actionem simul et conscientiam ab omni naeuo corruptionis castigatam'; trans. Connolly, p. 17.

recorded in Scripture – that was being interpreted. The argument that Bede was averse to allegorical interpretation of extra-biblical history is untenable.

What about history that has happened since the period covered by Scripture? In the same study, Holder argues that not only extra-biblical details about the Temple, but also contemporary church buildings, were out of bounds for allegorical treatment. It is important to deal separately with Holder's two main arguments; he states that Bede does not allegorize contemporary church buildings because 'they were not constructed according to a divinely revealed plan, nor were they described in the Bible'. The first argument is compelling, following the reasoning laid out in Holder's article; the second (that extra-biblical elements cannot carry allegorical meaning) is less persuasively demonstrated. While Bede does indeed appear to have avoided the application of exegetically derived allegory to contemporary church buildings, his reasons for doing so are, I believe, unrelated to the fact that these buildings were not described in Scripture. Instead, the reason may lie (as Holder at one point implies) in the divinely inspired nature of the Temple, a nature that contemporary churches could not claim without some serious theological audacity. Not only that, but the more important link between the present and the Temple, in Bede's vision, lay with the living stones which made up the spiritual church.⁷⁷ Bede may have felt that such an indiscriminate approach to architectural allegory risked muddying the waters, overshadowing the importance of the Temple and its interpretation as the church as a whole, not any individual physical building. As Jennifer O'Reilly has commented, the narrative of the *Historia* 'gives readers no occasion to confuse man-made church buildings, even those built of stone in the Roman manner, with the spiritual edifice prefigured by the temple in Jerusalem'.⁷⁸ Instead, language and imagery borrowed from exegetical commentary on the Temple pervaded Bede's presentation of the *Angli* and the English church as a whole. Bede's disinterest in allegorizing contemporary church buildings was not, therefore, tied to a reluctance to interpret extra-biblical information allegorically.

Furthermore, the architecture of the Temple is just one of the things allegorized by Bede in his biblical exegesis. Names of people and places, historical events and peoples, number and ratio could all be interpreted in the same way, as we have seen. Signs like the rainbow and inclement weather are examples of biblical allegory that break out of the bounds

⁷⁶ Bede, *De templo* I.386–7, ed. Hurst, p. 156: 'mundam electorum actionem simul et conscientiam ab omni naeuo corruptionis castigatam'; trans. Connolly, p. 17.

⁷⁷ A.R. Meyer, *Medieval Allegory and the Building of the New Jerusalem* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 21.

⁷⁸ O'Reilly, 'The Multitude of Isles and the Corner-stone', pp. 209–10.

of Scripture and reach into the present. The rainbow continues to represent God's sign to humanity that He will not send another Flood and its constituent colours are signs of the coming judgement. We must acknowledge, then, that exegetical allegory continues to function in the world, if not widely then at least in the case of the rainbow. It seems clear to me, however, that Bede was not averse to such signs continuing more widely in the contemporary world – what else are miracles but *signa* that speak of something else beyond the literal event? There are of course differences of approach between the allegories of the Bible and the allegories of the contemporary, post-biblical world. It is worth turning back here to Bede's scheme of the different types of biblical interpretation in his *De schematibus et tropis*:

Moreover, whether allegory is verbal or historical, sometimes it prefigures an event literally, sometimes it prefigures typologically an event in the life of Christ or of the Church, sometimes it figuratively expresses a tropological, or moral, principle, and sometimes it figuratively expresses an anagogical sense, that is, a sense leading the mind to higher things.⁷⁹

The crux of history, the Incarnation of Christ, had already happened, and it would not make sense to look for typological meaning in contemporary *signa*. But miracles provided plenty of literal (prefigurative), tropological or anagogical readings, often explicitly highlighted by Bede in his narratives: a healing miracle in the prose *Vita Cuthberti* is linked to the perfection of the resurrected bodies after Judgement Day;⁸⁰ that the monks of Wearmouth happened to be singing Psalm 82 in church at the exact moment of Benedict's death symbolized the indomitability of the deceased abbot's soul;⁸¹ and, in a metaphor for spiritual transformation, Wilfrid's conversion of the South Saxons sees the immediate cessation of a three-year drought and the arrival of gentle rain, green fields and fruitfulness.⁸²

As the line between the miraculous and the general flow of history was not a clear one for Bede, the *signa* that could be interpreted allegorically were not limited to the feats of the saints. An example of this is found in the famous story Bede tells in his *Historia ecclesiastica* of Gregory the

⁷⁹ Bede, *DSET* ii.2, ed. and trans. Kendall, pp. 196, 203: 'Item allegoria verbis sive operibus aliquando historicam rem, aliquando typicam, aliquando tropologicam, id est, moralem rationem, aliquando anagogen, hoc est, sensum ad superiora ducentem figurate denuntiat'.

⁸⁰ Bede, *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, ch. 46, ed. B. Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert* (Cambridge, 1940), pp. 304–6.

⁸¹ Bede, *Historia abbatum*, ch. 14, ed. C. Grocock and I. Wood, *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow* (Oxford, 2013), p. 54.

⁸² Bede, *HE* IV.13, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, p. 374.

Great and the Anglo-Saxon slaves.⁸³ While the story was not original to Bede, his use of it was characteristically modified and recontextualized; he deploys it in a chapter that establishes the Gregorian mission to the *Angli* as a fulfilment of the universal apostolic mission of the church (using imagery drawn from Gregory's own writings).⁸⁴ Gregory's paronomastic response to the words *Angli*, *Ælle* and *Deiri* implies a cosmic model so intricate that almost anything can be read as a sign of deeper realities; as David Orsbon has recently phrased it, the all-encompassing influence of God in historical events is such that 'the words *Angli*, *Ælle* and *Deiri* always contained providential significance, although their import remained latent, because God's order is universal and absolute'.⁸⁵ In a similar example from the beginning of Book III, Bede depicts the victory of the saintly King Oswald over Cædwalla.⁸⁶ The site of this victory is called 'Heavenfield' (*Hefenfelth* or *Caelestis campus*), a name which, Bede says, 'it certainly received in days of old as an omen of future happenings; it signified that a heavenly sign was to be erected there, a heavenly victory won, and that heavenly miracles were to take place there continuing to this day'.⁸⁷ For Bede, then, the hand of providence is involved in the world to such a great extent that, as in the Bible, the very names assigned to peoples or places can resonate with future spiritual significance. The details of the world in general could stand as signifiers of deeper meaning, just as individual miracles did.

That this was also the case for the physical world is illustrated by some further examples from the *Historia*. In the third book, Bede relates a number of miracles associated with King Oswald of Northumbria. Oswald had been killed in battle by a Mercian army led by Penda at *Maserfelth*. Bede recounts how a Briton, passing by the site where the battle had been fought, noticed that 'a certain patch of ground was greener and more beautiful than the rest of the field. He very wisely conjectured that the only cause for the unusual greenness of that part must be that some man holier than the rest of the army had perished there'.⁸⁸ The man takes some soil from the site, the bag containing the soil is later

⁸³ Bede, *HE* II.1, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 132–4.

⁸⁴ O'Reilly, 'Islands and Idols', pp. 221–4.

⁸⁵ D.A. Orsbon, 'Bede's Sacred Order: Schemes and Tropes in the *Historia Ecclesiastica*', *The American Benedictine Review* 62 (2011), pp. 3–26, 125–42, at p. 134.

⁸⁶ Bede, *HE* III.1, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 214–15.

⁸⁷ Bede, *HE* III.2, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 216–17: 'quod certo utique praesagio futurorum antiquitus. .. accepit; significans nimirum, quod ibidem caeleste erigendum tropaeum, caelestis inchoanda uictoria, caelestia usque hodie forent miracula celebranda'.

⁸⁸ Bede, *HE* III.10, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 244–5: 'unius loci spatium cetero campo uiridius ac uenustius, coepitque sagaci animo conicere, quod nulla esset alia causa insolitae illo in loco uiriditatis, nisi quia ibidem sanctior cetero exercitu uir aliquis fuisset interfectus'.

miraculously spared from the flames that destroy a house and it is revealed that it came from the place where Oswald's blood had been spilt. The unusual greenness and beauty of the place where Oswald died is not a miracle performed by a saint, either in life or in death. It is simply, as McCready might put it, a 'product of the natural properties' of a saint's place of martyrdom. But it is clearly a signifier of sanctity; the passer-by is able to tell from this physical fecundity that a holy man had died there. Here is an example of Kendall's idea of 'God's rhetoric' at play in the contemporary world. It demonstrates how a Thomistic reading of the miraculous in the *Historia* misses out on some important layers of meaning.

In the first book of the *Historia*, we find a further example. Bede recounts St Alban's martyrdom at the hands of the Roman authorities during the Diocletianic Persecution. He describes the site of Alban's martyrdom as follows:

The most reverend confessor ascended the hill with the crowds. This hill lay about five hundred paces from the arena, and, as was fitting, it was fair, shining and beautiful, adorned, indeed clothed, on all sides with wild flowers of every kind; nowhere was it steep or precipitous or sheer but Nature had provided it with wide, long-sloping sides stretching smoothly down to the level of the plain. In fact its natural beauty had long fitted it as a place to be hallowed by the blood of a blessed martyr.⁸⁹

This presentation of a nature in sympathy with the events of the narrative is based on the original text of the *Passio Albani*. The author of this work wrote that the scene had been prepared previously to be consecrated by the martyr's holy blood.⁹⁰ Pathetic fallacy at work in the physical world was a common trope in Christian rhetoric and poetry. A poem of Paulinus of Nola, for instance, recollects the conditions of the countryside where St Felix's tomb is soon to be constructed; the natural landscape flourishes 'as if the earth already knew beforehand of the tomb which would be honoured by the worshipping world'.⁹¹ This

⁸⁹ Bede, *HE* I.7, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 32–3: 'montem cum turbis reuerentissimus Dei confessor ascendit, qui oportune laetus gratia decentissima quingentis fere passibus ab harena situs est, uariis herbarum floribus depictus – immo usquequaque uestitus – in quo nihil repente arduum, nihil praecept, nihil abruptum, quem lateribus longe late que deductum in modum aequoris natura complanat, dignum uidelicet eum pro insita sibi specie uenustatis iam olim reddens, qui beati martyris cruore dicaretur'.

⁹⁰ *Passio Albani* V.98–100, ed. W. Meyer, *Die Legende des h. Albanus des Protomartyr Angliae in Texten vor Beda* (Berlin, 1904), p. 43.

⁹¹ Paulinus of Nola, *Carmina* XVIII.133–4, ed. W. Hartel, CSEL 30 (Vienna, 1894), p. 103: 'quasi praescia iam tunc /semper honorandi mundo uenerante sepulchri'; trans. P.G. Walsh, *The Poems of St. Paulinus of Nola*, Ancient Christian Writers 40 (New York, 1975), pp. 118–19.

sympathy of landscape was of course partly rhetorical in the case of Paulinus, and the *Passio* is a short epitaph with arguably exaggerated language, but Bede places the Alban episode in a historical context and it should be read as written. The possibility of such natural anthropomorphism had been authorized in the Gospels by the ultimate expression of cosmic sympathy, the darkening of the sun at Christ's crucifixion (Mark XV.33; Matt. XXVII.45). Bede makes some changes to the *Passio* text, emphasizing the fact that the beauty of the site was most fitting (*decentissima*). The *Passio* text states that 'without a doubt' (*sine dubium*), the hill was prepared in this manner to show sympathy with Alban's martyrdom;⁹² Bede, with a new phrase centred around the word *olim* ('for a long time'/'since long ago'), strengthens the providential undertones of the original and underscores the idea that the hill had long been waiting for this event. The implications of this statement are illuminating; it indicates that the 'sacred order' that Bede discerned in the world on a large scale, was also to be found in events at a more local level. Just as the names *Angli*, *Ælle* and *Deiri* 'always contained providential significance',⁹³ so too was the natural beauty of Alban's hill a *signum* of the important function it would play in divine history.

The examples discussed above demonstrate how Bede's concept of divine *signa* was not limited to the miraculous feats performed by saints – they could be apprehended in the wider flow of history and interpreted allegorically using methodology derived from biblical exegesis. This finding is consistent with recent scholarship that has emphasized the exegetical approach that runs through Bede's historical and hagiographical writing.

Conclusion

The idea that Bede saw miracles as contraventions of natural laws is an anachronistic interpretation of the evidence. This article has demonstrated that in Bede's writings the events referred to by modern scholars as miracles tend to shade into the immanent divine control at work in the world at large. Although he used the term *miraculum* frequently, he did not have in mind the kind of objectively defined phenomena that would later come to be associated with it. The unnaturalness of an event was doubtless important for Bede – it demonstrated the power of God in an indisputable manner – but this did not mean that more 'natural' events were to be excluded from his grand theory of divine signifiers, what Kendall has called 'God's rhetoric'. As we have seen, Bede was

⁹² *Passio Albani* V.98–100, ed. Meyer, p. 43.

⁹³ Orsbon, 'Bede's Sacred Order', p. 134.

not averse to providing exegetically derived interpretations of the world around him, though he does this only occasionally; the marvellous feats of the saints provide the best opportunity for such readings, but he also sees *signa* in storms, rainbows, place names and natural landscapes. In doing so, he implies a level of continuity between biblical history and contemporary events – both could be interpreted to reveal a divine message below the level of the literal. His saintly miracles do not stand alone but must be understood as part of a wider system of divine signs. This conclusion has implications for how we read Bede's historical writings and the view we take of the events that Bede describes so effectively in his *Historia ecclesiastica*. The miraculous episodes that populate this and other of his works must be understood not as temporary interludes in Bede's historical approach but as an important part of the narrative scaffolding, reflecting his understanding of his time and place just as much as the more palatable historical narratives that accompany them.

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