

Bede on Sickness, Episcopal Identity and Monastic Asceticism

Jessica Collett*
University of St Andrews

The value of bodily affliction as a means for integrating an active life of good works on earth with the contemplative values of heaven, prior to the return of Christ and the world's end, remains relatively unexplored, despite suffering saints being a common medieval trope. Using the work of Gregory the Great and the Venerable Bede, this article seeks to explore the interrelation of an active contemplative life and bodily affliction to shed light upon Bede's use of Gregory and his presentation of Cuthbert's episcopate to forge a distinctive understanding of the links between bodily illness, episcopal identity and the biblical ordering of time, as that ordering finds expression in biblical eschatology and apocalyptic.

Bodily suffering and physical affliction are rarely seen as an affirmation of one's identity in our contemporary world. In contrast, early medieval monasticism viewed bodily sickness and affliction as hallmarks for the identification of saints in the church and to the world. Physical suffering places the saints on an interior stairway or pathway of ascent to God, transforming it from a burden to a means of personal assurance that one is God's own. While this view appears to be commonly recognized in medieval scholarship,¹ the value of bodily affliction as a means for integrating an active life of good works on earth with the contemplative values of heaven,

* 31 Lamberton Place, St Andrews, Fife, KY16 8YE. E-mail: jrc29@st-andrews.ac.uk.

¹ See Donald Mowbray, *Pain and Suffering in Medieval Theology: Academic Debates at the University of Paris in the Thirteenth Century* (Woodbridge and Rochester, NY, 2009); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (London, 1987); eadem, 'The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Late Middle Ages', in M. Feher, ed., *Fragments of a History of the Human Body Part I* (New York, 1989), 160–220, where she argues that bodily affliction offers union with the divine; E. M. Ross, *The Grief of God: Images of the Suffering Jesus in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 1997).

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prior to the return of Christ and the world's end, remains relatively unexplored.

In his *Life of St Cuthbert*, the Venerable Bede draws upon the concept of *longa aegritudo* (prolonged sickness) and martyrdom in Gregory the Great's *Dialogues* to mediate a Joban model of suffering piety by presenting Cuthbert's illness and death as a pedagogical model for advancing Gregory's vision of the active contemplative life for church leadership.² For example, Gregory's *Moralia in Iob* and *Regula pastoralis* use the biblical story of Job as an interpretative model for uniting works of piety with contemplative reflection on the theological realities of final judgment and the next life.³ Bede extends this Joban ideal to the question of episcopal identity and church leadership in the context of monastic asceticism, with Cuthbert's life serving as a case in point. Bede's portrayal of Cuthbert exemplifies the widespread medieval trope that physical sickness and suffering is the route to God and the source of one's personal assurance of salvation, but it also provides a model for the shaping of episcopal identity and the reform of monastic asceticism in Bede's own day. This article seeks to explore the interrelation of these threads to shed light upon Bede's use of Gregory and his presentation of Cuthbert's suffering to forge a distinctive understanding of the links between bodily illness, episcopal identity and the biblical ordering of time, as that ordering finds expression in biblical eschatology and apocalyptic writings.

² *Vita sancti Cuthberti prosaica auctore Beda*, in Bertram Colgrave, transl. and ed., *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert* (Cambridge, 1940; reprinted 1985), 142–307 (hereafter: *Vita Cuthberti prosaica*). *Gregorii Magni Dialogi*, ed. U. Moricca (Rome, 1924; hereafter: *Dialogi*).

³ Gregory's *Regula pastoralis* (SC 381–2) was completed in the same time frame as the *Moralia* and advances many of the same directives to church leaders. See R. A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and his World* (Cambridge, 1997), 19–21, 29, who observes that 'a fair number of mini-treatises in the *Moralia* anticipate the pastoral advice' of the *Pastoral Rule*, much of which 'had been foreshadowed in the scarcely penetrable jungle of the *Moralia*' (ibid. 20–1); cf. George Demacopoulos, 'Gregory's Model of Spiritual Direction in the *Liber Regulae Pastoralis*', in Bronwen Neil and Matthew Dal Santo, eds, *A Companion to Gregory the Great* (Leiden, 2013), 205–24, at 211. The most prominent of these shared directives is Gregory's concern to balance 'the *contemplatio* of the isolated ascetic and the *actio* of the well-trained administrator': idem, *Five Spiritual Models of Spiritual Direction in the Early Church* (Notre Dame, IN, 2007), 135; see also Carole Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection* (Berkeley, CA, 1988), 247–51, especially 250; Straw, 'Gregory's Moral Theology: Divine Providence and Human Responsibility', in Neil and Dal Santo, eds, *Companion to Gregory*, 177–204, at 191–2. For examples, see Gregory, *Regula* 1.2, 1.5, 2.7.

It is helpful to begin with the Joban ideal which Bede inherited from Gregory, in order to appreciate his use of models for shaping church leadership through illness and suffering. Commonly known as St Gregory the Great, Pope Gregory I was a well-known figure in the early medieval church. He was bishop of Rome from September 590 until his death in March 604 and is most remembered for his writings and instigation of the Gregorian mission, an effort to convert the pagans of England to Christianity. Although one might run into trouble in some circles by claiming him as a medieval pope, rather than a pope of Late Antiquity, his continuing influence in the Middle Ages cannot be questioned: ‘Throughout the Middle Ages, Gregory was acknowledged as a master of the spiritual life. The *Moralia in Iob*, a commentary in the Old Testament Book of Job and Gregory’s longest work, was copied and circulated for centuries across medieval Europe.’⁴ The key to Gregory’s continuing influence lay in his ‘minute exposition of self-control, in his ability to transform suffering and trial into spiritual progress ... Does not the Lord chasten every son he receives?’⁵ For Gregory, suffering has value, not only because of the transience of this world, but because in suffering the saints find the fortification and renewal of their relationship with God: ‘The suffering of the flesh improves the welfare of the soul; wounds inflicted on the body cure wounds of the soul.’⁶

Bede’s awareness of Gregory’s *Moralia* has been documented by Michael Lapidge and is evident from the many references to it in Bede’s expositions and commentaries on Genesis, Samuel, Proverbs, the Song of Songs, Ezra, Mark, Luke, Acts, the Catholic Epistles and Revelation, as well as Tobit, and his *De tabernaculo*.⁷

⁴ Neil and Dal Santo, ‘Editors’ Preface’, in eidem, eds, *Companion to Gregory*, xvii–xxv, at xviii.

⁵ ‘The passage Gregory cites of Paul expresses his acceptance of life’s ambivalence, and the love enabling him to endure it: “I know both how to be brought low, and I know how to enjoy abundance: everywhere and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry; both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” [Phil. 4: 12–13]: Straw, *Gregory the Great*, 27; cf. Gregory, *Homiliae in Hiezechielem* 2.7.15 (CChr.SL 142, 329; hereafter *Homiliae*).

⁶ Straw, *Gregory the Great*, 45; Gregory, *Moralia* 33.19.35 (CChr.SL 143B, 1705–6).

⁷ Michael Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford, 2005), 210–11. Bede was aware of Philipp the Presbyter’s earlier commentary on Job, as is evident from a reference in his *De temporum ratione*: Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Library*, 222. Philipp, a student of Jerome, may have influenced Gregory’s *Moralia*. Although it remains speculation, some scholars believe that Bede produced his own version of a commentary on Job by reworking Philipp’s

Bede's affection for Gregory's pastoral vision runs deeply throughout his works, which can make it difficult for Bede's interpreters to isolate the strands of Gregory's influence in his writing, especially his exegesis.⁸ Nevertheless, an understanding of the influence which Gregory's view of active spirituality had within the church of Bede's day can help the modern reader discover these strands. Carole Straw argues that Gregory overcomes the dualistic tensions in Paul's 'dialectic of flesh and spirit to stress the reciprocity and complementarity of the carnal and spiritual sides of experience, whether in active and contemplative lives, adversity and prosperity, virtue and sin, or even God and the devil'.⁹ For Gregory, the elect are those who glow with the light of the love and grace of God, in contrast to those who dwell in 'an inner darkness that nothing can illumine'.¹⁰ Such favour is not capable of being earned through word or deed. Rather, as Jane Baun rightly observes, it is by God's grace that the saints are his elect, although this should not encourage presumption on their part: 'And none should presume certainty as to his own status, or that of others – an oft-repeated theme in the homilies, which emphasize the hidden nature of the identity of the elect. Jesus' chilling saying, "Many are called, but few are chosen" (*multi sunt uocati, pauci uero electi*) runs like a mantra through the final sections of Homily 38'.¹¹ As these observations anticipate, and this article hopes to show, Gregory's use of Job's bodily sickness as a model for promoting his episcopal vision seeks to integrate the contemplative graces of heaven enjoyed by the elect with the active life of good works on earth. Because this union serves as a figure of the coming union of heaven and earth at

commentary: see Kenneth B. Steinhauser, 'Job in Patristic Commentaries and Theological Works', in Francis T. Harkins and Aaron Canty, eds, *A Companion to Job in the Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2017), 34–70, at 43–51, 69–70, especially 45. On Bede's library, see Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Library*, 34–7; Rosalind Love, 'The Library of the Venerable Bede', in Richard Gameson, ed., *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, 1: c.400–1100 (Cambridge, 2012), 606–32.

⁸ Dom Paul Meyvaert, *Bede and Gregory the Great*, Jarrow Lecture 1964, in Michael Lapidge, ed., *Bede and His World*, 1: *The Jarrow Lectures, 1958–1993* (Aldershot, 1994), 103–32; Scott DeGregorio, 'The Venerable Bede and Gregory the Great: Exegetical Connections, Spiritual Departures', *EME* 18 (2010), 43–60.

⁹ Carole Straw, 'Gregory's Moral Theology', 179.

¹⁰ Jane Baun, 'Gregory's Eschatology', in Neil and Dal Santo, eds, *Companion to Gregory*, 157–76, at 170; see Gregory, *Moralia in Job* 4.11.19 (CChr.SL 143, 176–7), 9 (CChr.SL 143, 456–533), 15 (CChr.SL 143A, 749–98), 16.26.31–27.33 (CChr.SL 143A, 817–18).

¹¹ Baun, 'Gregory's Eschatology', 170; cf. Matt. 22: 2–14, 20: 1–16.

Christ's return, Gregory's approach to physical illness cannot be appreciated apart from the eschatological framework in which he locates the realities of bodily suffering and death.

THE INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORK OF GREGORY'S MORALIA

To appreciate further Bede's use of Gregory, it is important first to clarify the interpretative context in which he approaches the nature of Job's sickness and suffering, along with its value for monastic life.¹² Building upon the work of Carole Straw, Susan Schreiner argues that the 'rule' or interpretative framework through which Gregory reads Job consists of two presuppositions that we must be aware of if we are to understand Gregory's motivations.¹³ The first is that reality exists within a hierarchical scale and ontological continuum that links the lower historical levels of existence with the highest level (God) in order to create a chain of being. The second is that an understanding or perception of the true nature of reality can only be gained by an inward ascent from the lowest to the highest level of reality, which is made possible through suffering.¹⁴

Although Schreiner's reading of Gregory offers some important insights, it has a tendency to locate the pressures at work in Gregory's reading of Job's suffering and bodily affliction within the thought world of Neoplatonism. For Gregory, however, the book of Job is a theological reflection on the suffering of a particular man viewed within the biblical eschatology of creation, and his exegesis reflects this perspective. Indeed, as Baun affirms, his eschatological exegesis 'lifts the book above all the unresolved questions that plague a literal reading, offering the believer a life's model, and a way of understanding, that can turn doubt into trust, lament into praise, desolation into consolation, and despair into hope'.¹⁵ The

¹² For more on Gregory and his work, see George E. Demacopoulos, *Gregory the Great: Ascetic, Pastor, and First Man of Rome* (Notre Dame, IN, 2015); Markus, *Gregory the Great*; Jeffrey Richards, *Consul of God: The Life and Times of Gregory the Great* (London, 1980); Straw, *Gregory the Great*.

¹³ Straw, *Gregory the Great*, 28–46; cf. Susan Schreiner, *Where shall Wisdom be found? Calvin's Exegesis of Job from Medieval and Modern Perspectives* (Chicago, IL, 1994), 24; Straw, 'Gregory's Moral Theology', 179–82, especially 180: 'The two worlds are joined materially, being literally continuous.'

¹⁴ Schreiner, *Where shall Wisdom be found*, 23.

¹⁵ Baun, 'Gregory's Eschatology', 163.

contrast we see in the *Moralia* between this world and the next is not a vertical or ontological contrast between the temporal and eternal worlds of Neoplatonism, but a horizontal and historical contrast between this world and the eternal world to come, a contrast rooted in the New Testament and the eschatology of the apostle Paul.¹⁶ This rule for reading history makes a distinction between this transient world,¹⁷ which is passing away under the sentence of sin and death, and the world to come, where the saints of God will experience the *visio Dei* or beatific vision of God. The contrast between these two worlds is not metaphysical but ethical: this world is passing away, not because its transience marks it as a less real world, but because it is under God's judgment. Commenting on Job 3: 18, Gregory writes:

Thus it is well said by Paul, For the creation is made subject to vanity, not willingly, but for the sake of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be liberated from the bondage of corruption, into the glorious liberty of the children of God [Rom. 8:20–1]. For 'the creation is made subject to vanity, not willingly', because human beings, who willingly deserted the state of inborn constancy, being pressed down by the weight of a deserved mortality, involuntarily serve the corruption of their mutable condition. But this creation is then rescued from the bondage of corruption, when it will be raised by being elevated to the incorruptible glory of the children of God.¹⁸

For Gregory, it is not the transient character of the world that brings about the deserved mortality and ethical corruption of humankind, but the fact that Adam '*willingly* deserted the footing of *inborn constancy*'. Given the passing character of this world and the certainty of its end in God's final judgment, Gregory's main concern is with the object of our desires in this world, rather than with a hierarchical view

¹⁶ According to the letters of Paul, Christ's death and resurrection usher in the new reality of heaven and earth. For example, Rom. 8: 22–5 NRSV: 'We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.'

¹⁷ Gregory, *Moralia* 17.9.11 (CChr.SL 143A, 857–8).

¹⁸ Gregory, *Moralia* 4.34.68 (CChr.SL 143, 213), cf. 8.8.13 (CChr.SL 143, 390–1), 8.10.19 (CChr.SL 143, 395–6), 12.13.17 (CChr.SL 143A, 638–9). In these passages Gregory appeals to Rom. 8: 20–2, describing the world as 'corruptible' and under the bondage of sin. All translations of the *Moralia* are mine unless otherwise noted.

of reality. What is the object of our desires? Are they focused on that which is passing and subject to the bondage of corruption, or that which is eternal?

The focus of our desires lays bare what we are truly living for, whether that is this world and its passing desires, or the world to come.¹⁹ The problem arises from the disordered desires with which the saints of God continue to struggle due to the corruption of the flesh. As a result, the object of their desires is divided, and a holy conflict arises even within the saints between their desire for the things of this passing world and their desire for the beatific vision of God in the world to come, as Gregory observes: ‘Are they not firmly bound by an inflexible chain of vexation, who, when their inflamed soul draws them with full desire into the bosom of inner peace, suffer disturbance from the flesh in the heat of the conflict?’²⁰ For this reason, as James Palmer observes, worldliness is the real problem for Gregory, rather than the world’s imminent end:

Gregory the Great repeatedly urged his audiences not to fear the world’s passing for this reason: the world was transitory and not worth loving ... In many ways, the imminence or not of the end is irrelevant in this mode of living: one has already divorced oneself from the things that will fall away in the End Times.²¹

Palmer rightly recognizes that biblical eschatology forms the primary force that motivates Gregory’s approach to reform through suffering and apocalyptic. At the level of Gregory’s basic commitments, neither Neoplatonism nor socio-political upheaval served to motivate his worldview or the value he placed upon suffering, although this is not to deny that they were contributing factors on some level. Rather,

¹⁹ Gregory, *Moralia* 1.25.34 (CChr.SL143, 43–4), 1.31.43 (CChr.SL143, 48), 17.9.11 (CChr.SL 143A, 857–8), 20.15.39 (CChr.SL143A, 1030–2), 27.17.33 (CChr.SL 143B, 1355–6); cf. 1 Cor. 7: 29–31 NRSV: ‘I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away’; 1 John 2: 17 NRSV: ‘And the world and its desires are passing away, but those who do the will of God live for ever.’

²⁰ Gregory, *Moralia* 4.34.68 (CChr.SL 143, 212).

²¹ James T. Palmer, ‘To be found Prepared: Eschatology and Reform Rhetoric ca.570–ca.640’, in Matthew Gabriele and James T. Palmer, eds, *Apocalypse and Reform from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (London, 2019), 31–49, at 42.

for Gregory, suffering is inherently linked to the passing character of this world and its final judgment, which means that the value it has for reordering our desires and preparing us for the world to come cannot be separated from his views on biblical eschatology. The eschatological and apocalyptic narrative at work in the biblical ordering of time are what contribute to the Gregorian ideal of reform by serving a practical role and function in the life of the church. Commenting on Job 6: 19, Gregory therefore writes:

But it is well said, wait a little; for it is often the case, that while the brevity of the present life is loved as if it were for a long time, the soul is broken loose from its eternal hope, and being seduced by present things, is thrown back by the darkness of self-despair ... They of course 'lose patience', who, while they reckon to dwell long among visible things, abandon the hope of the invisible. And while the mind is fixed on present things, life ends, and they are suddenly brought to unforeseen punishments, which, being deceived by their presumptions, they believed they would never meet with, or not until later. Hence the Truth says: Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour [Matt. 25: 13]. Hence it is written again, The Day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night [1 Thess. 5: 2]; for since it is never seen drawing near to seize the soul, it is compared to a thief in the night. It ought therefore to be understood as always coming, since it cannot be foreknown by us when it is about to come. Whence holy men also, since they incessantly gaze on the brevity of life, live daily as if they were dying; and thus prepare themselves more solidly for the things that will endure, in proportion as they are always meditating until the end that transitory things are nought.²²

It is important to recognize that Gregory believed that the world in his own day was near its end.²³ Rome was in decline and the threat of the Lombards and the Greeks meant that the fate of Rome was

²² Gregory, *Moralia* 7.30.45 (CChr.SL 143, 368–9), cf. 19.8.14 (CChr.SL 143A, 966), on Job 28: 28: 'Hence also it is said by the Psalmist: *The beginning of Wisdom is the fear of the Lord* [Psalm 111: 10], because it then begins to penetrate the heart, when it disturbs the heart by dread of the final judgment.' See also *ibid.* 3.21.41 (CChr.SL 143, 141–2), 8.8.14 (CChr.SL 143, 391–2), 27.17.33 (CChr.SL 143A, 869).

²³ 'Quia enim mundi iam tempora malis crebrescentibus termino adpropinquante turbata sunt, ipsi nos, qui interius mysteriis deseruire credimur, curis exterioribus implicamur': Gregory, *Epistola reverendissimo et sanctissimo fratri Leandro coepiscopo Gregorius servuus servorum Dei* 27 (CChr.SL143); cf. Gregory, *Dialogi* 4.43.

hanging in the balance.²⁴ This apocalyptic conviction greatly shaped Gregory's thoughts on the worth of suffering, the nature of the church and especially the shaping of its leadership. But the framework in which Gregory understands the interrelation of these things is strictly tied neither to political strife or social upheaval nor to the precise timing of the judgment, as Palmer observes: 'Apocalypse has also been taken seriously as part of traditions of biblical exegesis, many of which centred on ecclesiology (what the imagery said about the nature of the church) rather than on the timing and events of the Last Days specifically.'²⁵ Citing Bernard McGinn, Palmer also notes that apocalyptic thought is a continuous presence in the early church and medieval world, and not always tied to the presence of social upheavals or widespread bodily sickness, such as the plagues during the reign of Justinian in the sixth century. This suggests that there is not a direct correspondence between social-physical crises and the appeal to apocalyptic as a way to motivate behaviour and promote reform:

Crucially, Gregory also saw little distinction between apocalyptic thought and the 'everyday eschatology' in which people were encouraged to be penitent for their sins so that they might still gain salvation. The pope saw the urgent need for people to prepare themselves for Judgement Day: whether those people died sooner or later, it was coming.²⁶

The saints were to be prepared whether judgment was upon them today or tomorrow, which suggests that the precise timing of the end, while a topic for continuing speculation,²⁷ did not form the primary motivation for Gregory's interest in the world's end as a means of behavioural reform.

²⁴ Straw, 'Gregory's Moral Theology', 177; Gregory, *Regula* 3.29, 61 (CChr.SL 140, 175, 209–11), 11.37 (CChr.SL 140A, 931–2).

²⁵ Palmer, 'To be found Prepared', 32.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 31–2. See also Baun, 'Gregory', 157–8: 'Whether teaching, dispensing pastoral advice, responding to queries, ruling on papal matters, or writing to intimate friends, Gregory's conviction that all must face the Judge – *soon* – infused his every word and deed with urgency. Throughout his pontificate, Gregory's focus on the End and its implications for present-day behaviour was consistent, no matter who the audience; none escaped his call for increased eschatological mindfulness.'

²⁷ E. Ann Matter, 'Exegesis of the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages', in Michael Frassetto, ed., *The Year 1000: Religious and Social Response to the Turning of the First Millennium* (New York, 2002), 29–40, especially 36–7.

BEDE'S USE OF GREGORY ON SICKNESS AND SUFFERING

How did Bede appropriate these Gregorian Joban ideals, and in what ways do they shed light upon his understanding of the value of bodily sickness and affliction in this life? A useful lens for exploring these questions can be found in Bede's reworking of the earlier account of Cuthbert's life. Bede's prose reworking of the *Life of St Cuthbert* in 721, while a notable improvement on the style of an earlier anonymous *Life*, also included the addition of ten new chapters of material.²⁸ Cuthbert's enduring popularity from the Middle Ages to the present serves as an example of Bede's 'superior narrative gifts, his theological depth, and his ability to portray so arrestingly Gregory's idea of sanctity', as Foley puts it, providing a portrait of Cuthbert as one who embodies the Gregorian ideal of suffering unto death for the sake of union with Christ.²⁹ To this end, Bede's *Life* adds considerable detail in order to produce a longer account of Cuthbert's illness and death,³⁰ sharing 'verbal reminiscences' with Gregory's *Dialogues*, a work that Bede held especially dear.³¹ Living during a time when persecution of the saints was largely a past reality, Bede looked to the *Dialogues* for models of martyrdom and saintly suffering which he could appropriate in his account of Cuthbert's life. In Bede's 'longer, grimmer, and more agonising account', we are presented with a struggling Cuthbert who stood firm against both physical and mental assault in the form of

²⁸ Bede wrote two versions of the *Life of St Cuthbert*. The first, written in metre, followed approximately seven years after the anonymous *Life*. Fourteen years later, Bede produced the prose *Life*. Bede's metrical *Life* expanded the treatment in the anonymous *Life* of Cuthbert's death, while the second prose *Life* expanded even further that of Cuthbert's illness and death. For more on the differences between Bede's earlier and later *Lives*, see Colgrave's introduction to *Two Lives*, 11–16; W. Berschin, 'Opus deliberatum ac perfectum: Why did the Venerable Bede write a second prose Life of St Cuthbert?', in Gerald Bonner, David Rollason and Clare Stancliffe, eds, *St Cuthbert: His Cult and his Community to A.D. 1200* (Woodbridge and Rochester, NY, 1989), 95–102; W. Trent Foley, 'Suffering and Sanctity in Bede's Prose Life of St Cuthbert', *JThS* n.s.50 (1999), 102–16, at 102–5; Alan Thacker, 'Bede's Ideal of Reform', in Patrick Wormald, Donald A. Bullough and Roger Collins, eds, *Ideal and Reality in Frankish Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford, 1983), 130–53, especially 136–43.

²⁹ See *Vita Cuthberti prosaica* 28, 37–9, 43, where the Christian virtue of prolonged illness issuing in death is discussed with reference to the cases of Hereberht, Cuthbert and Eadberht; cf. Foley, 'Suffering and Sanctity', 114–15.

³⁰ Foley states that Bede's version of Cuthbert's ailments and death is almost twenty times longer than its counterpart: 'Suffering and Sanctity', 105.

³¹ Colgrave notes Bede's debts to Gregory's *Dialogues* and describes it as 'a favourite work of Bede': *Two Lives*, 14, 16.

bodily affliction and demons.³² What is surprising about Bede's account is the sheer quantity of examples of bodily ailments to which Bede alludes, 'ailments which are not miraculously cured, but typically end in death'.³³

In his helpful study of Bede's prose *Life*, W. Trent Foley argues that Bede took over Gregory's theological reading of bodily affliction, noting that the Latin phrase *longa aegritudo* used in Gregory's *Dialogues* to describe the paralysed man named Servulus is used three times by Bede in the prose *Life* to describe prolonged bodily illness, leading to death in two cases (Hereberht and Eadberht).³⁴ This verbal link with Gregory's account of Servulus, as well as Gregory's description of Servulus's suffering unto death, appears to be the model on which Bede drew to present the deaths of Hereberht and Eadberht in his prose *Life*, both of whom are identified with Cuthbert in their deaths.³⁵ Thus, while Bede does not explicitly refer to Gregory's *Moralia* or the book of Job in his prose *Life*, the influence of Gregory's *Dialogues* in Bede's prose *Life* serves to mediate Gregory's Joban ideals of suffering in the form of the concept of *longa aegritudo* (prolonged illness), especially its theological application to illness, affliction and sanctity.³⁶

These observations shed light upon the Gregorian ideal of sainthood and its influence on Bede. However, they do not explore the interpretative rationale that links the prose *Life* with Gregory's *Moralia* via the *Dialogues*. Neither the biblical figure of Job nor Cuthbert the martyr suffered for suffering's sake. Instead, their suffering serves as an embodiment of Christ's suffering unto

³² See *Vita Cuthberti prosaica* 22, 37, 39–40, where Cuthbert is described as being stricken with agonizing pain in his limbs while also being under attack by demons; cf. Foley, 'Suffering and Sanctity', 102.

³³ Foley, 'Suffering and Sanctity', 103.

³⁴ The phrase is used to describe Servulus in Gregory, *Dialogi* 4.15. For references in the prose *Life*, see *Vita Cuthberti prosaica* 28, 32, 43, cf. *ibid.* 44, cited in Foley, 'Suffering and Sanctity', 110 n. 30. For references on *longa aegritudo* in Gregory's *XL homiliae in Euangelia* 15, see Foley, 'Suffering and Sanctity', 109 n. 38.

³⁵ Colgrave observes that the Anonymous *Life* 'has nothing to say of the sufferings endured by Hereberht in order that he might be accounted worthy to die on the same day as Cuthbert': *Two Lives*, 352.

³⁶ While Bede's prose *Life* does not cite the *Moralia*, the influence of its eschatology upon Bede's presentation of Cuthbert's theological values may be seen in *Vita Cuthberti prosaica* 22, where Cuthbert is described as one who knows how to refresh those who are afflicted in this life by reminding them of the joys of heavenly life in contrast to the fleeting pleasures and sorrows of this transient world.

death,³⁷ for it is the union of head (Christ) and body (Church) that gives theological and practical value to physical illness and suffering unto death in this life. The text of Colossians 1: 24 was often cited in Gregory's *Moralia* to justify this understanding of the relation between Christ's suffering and that of the Church.³⁸ This suffering unto death may be the result of external physical persecution or of bodily illness: according to Gregory both are to be viewed as forms of martyrdom. In the *Dialogues* he argues that the Gospels assure us that martyrdom is possible without external or public suffering, for there are two kinds of martyrdom: outward and one inward. Citing the examples of James and John in Matthew 20, Gregory reasons that although James was put to death, John was also made to drink from the cup of the Lord's suffering, even though he did not die as the result of persecution.³⁹ In this way Gregory reinterprets the earlier history of the deaths of martyrs, most of which were external and public, in order to appropriate that history for the monasticism of his day, along with its ideals. As Felice Lifshitz has argued, Bede later receives this history of martyrdom in the form of lists and transforms it into a narrative to serve as 'the liturgical pendant' to his *Historia ecclesiastica*.⁴⁰

Building upon Gregory's account of martyrdom, Cuthbert's *longa aegritudo* is characterized by Bede as a sickness unto death in which God's elect experience the inward death of

³⁷ Bernard Green, 'The Theology of Gregory the Great: Christ, Salvation and the Church', in Neil and Dal Santo, eds, *Companion to Gregory*, 135–56, at 154–6.

³⁸ 'I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church' (NRSV). For references in Gregory's *Moralia*, see Praefatio 6.14 (CChr.SL 143, 19–20), 1.24.33 (CChr.SL 143, 43), 3.13.25 (CChr.SL 143, 130–1), 6.1.1 (CChr.SL 143, 284), 23.1.2 (CChr.SL143B, 1144–5). Both Bede and Gregory follow the head / body principle in the exegesis of biblical texts, a principle used by Tyconius the Donatist and modified by Augustine. In his early work *De schematibus et tropis*, Bede appeals to Gregory's *Moralia* as a precedent for reading the church as an allegory of Christ's body: Gussie Hecht Tanenhaus, 'Bede's *de schematibus et tropis*: A Translation', *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 48 (1962), 237–53, at 252. For discussions of Augustine's use of the 'prosopological' exegesis founded upon this principle, see Michael Cameron, *Christ meets me everywhere: Augustine's Early Figurative Exegesis* (Oxford, 2012), 165–212; cf. Michael Fiedrowicz, 'General Introduction' to 'Expositions of Psalms 1–32', transl. Maria Boulding, *WSA* III/15, 13–66, at 50–60.

³⁹ Gregory, *Dialogi* 3.26; cf. Colgrave, ed. and transl., *Two Lives*, 315–16.

⁴⁰ Felice Lifshitz, 'Bede, Martyrology', in eadem, transl., Thomas Head, ed., *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology* (New York, 2000), 169–97, especially 171–3.

martyrdom.⁴¹ Prolonged suffering even to the point of death is a means through which a believer shares in the experience of Christ's incarnation and death on the cross, and thus to be martyred is to follow in the footsteps of Christ. Martyrdom is thus caught up in the mystery of Christ's death and the end of the world. Because Christ ascended to heaven after his death, foreshadowing the union of heaven and earth through his suffering unto death, the death of his saints also anticipates the union of heaven and earth at the end of time.⁴² Like Gregory before him, Bede interprets suffering and martyrdom in the biblical framework of eschatology and apocalyptic.⁴³ However, according to Ann Matter, the early church espoused the 'radical assumption of the imminent end evident in the Apocalypse', while Bede's world and the Carolingian world that followed tended to read the Apocalypse as an allegory of the church in the present world: 'All the Apocalypse commentaries from the Carolingian world thus show the continuing assumption of the text as an allegory of the Church, and a continuing process of filtering specific interpretations from earlier commentaries to support that assumption.'⁴⁴ If 'apocalyptic' is understood to mean a concern with the imminent end of the world, rather than the shape of ecclesial life in the present world, then on Matter's reading of things it would be better to describe early medieval readings of Revelation as *anagogic* rather than *apocalyptic*. This helps us distinguish between the concern of Gregory and Bede to understand the nature of the Church in light of history's end (ecclesiological symbolism), and apocalyptic concerns with the timing of that end (apocalyptic symbolism). While these apocalyptic concerns were always present to some degree in the early medieval world, they become dominant only after Gregory and Bede.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Cuthbert is called a martyr by Bede in two places: *Vita Cuthberti prosaica* 15, 17.

⁴² For general examples, see Gregory, *Dialogi* 4.49; cf. his account of the death of Benedict, *ibid.* 2.37; and Bede's account of the death of Cuthbert in *Vita Cuthberti prosaica* 39.

⁴³ *Bede: Commentary on Revelation*, transl. Faith Wallis, TTH (Liverpool, 2013); Robert Boenig, 'The Apocalypse in Medieval England', in Michael A. Ryan, ed., *A Companion to the Premodern Apocalypse* (Leiden, 2015), 297–330; George Hardin Brown, *A Companion to Bede* (Woodbridge, 2009), 69–70; Peter Darby, *Bede and the End of Time* (Farnham, 2012).

⁴⁴ Matter, 'Exegesis of the Apocalypse', 36.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 37.

These observations provide insight into the reason why the biblical account of Job's sickness and suffering was valued by both Gregory and Bede. On the practical level of human existence in this world, suffering is the means through which the contemplative values of the world to come are united with the active values of this present world. The actualization of this union through suffering, read in the light of the world's end, is thus a microcosm or anagogic figure of the final joining of heaven and earth at Christ's return,⁴⁶ as suggested by Matter's study of early medieval exegesis of the Apocalypse. The concern of Gregory and Bede with bodily sickness and the world's end thus arose out of a distinctly ecclesiological concern, namely, the integration of the active and contemplative life, a union which 'pulls' the contemplative values of heaven into the midst of this passing world. This is perhaps why both Gregory and Bede found in the book of Job a helpful model for reforming monasticism and shaping pastoral leadership in the church. The providential trial and suffering God brought upon Job, the man of action and good works (Job 1: 1–5), forced him to contemplate and reflect theologically on what those good works said about the nature of his piety. Was Job serving God for gain, as his accuser asserted? It was in his suffering that Job was forced to reflect on his actions and what they said about the nature of his service and obedience to God, and in this way he serves as a model of the active contemplative life by promoting their integration.⁴⁷ In its usefulness for integrating the contemplative and active spheres of existence in the life of the church, suffering anticipates in this life the 'expectation of the final joining of the spiritual and physical churches' made possible by Christ's passion on the cross.⁴⁸

Bede's own model for illustrating this union finds expression in his *Life of St Cuthbert*. For Bede, Cuthbert was virtually a textbook example of Gregory's Joban ideals in practice, and also on a par with Benedict of Nursia, one of Gregory's heroes in the

⁴⁶ Cf. Straw, *Gregory the Great*, 39: 'In this traditional view of man as microcosm, Gregory sees man as an image of the whole universe and as a mediator participating in its various levels of existence.'

⁴⁷ See Demacopoulos, *Gregory the Great*, 57–60, especially 60: 'It is particularly significant that even though Job was not a priest, Gregory is able to emphasise Job's role as "preacher" and "holy man" precisely because he struck the proper balance of action and contemplation'; cf. Gregory, *Moralia* 6.37.56 (CChr.SL 143, 325–6).

⁴⁸ Matter, 'Exegesis of the Apocalypse', 36.

Dialogues.⁴⁹ Like Gregory before him, Bede held strongly to the belief that monastic spirituality is to be an active spirituality. Through the model of Cuthbert's episcopate, Bede sought to stress the importance of teaching *and* leading by example rather than by word alone. Both action and contemplation are needed, which required Bede to interpret Cuthbert's own spirituality along these same lines: 'In his prose *Life of Cuthbert*, for example, he removed many of the details from the earlier anonymous life depicting Cuthbert as a contemplative and instead stressed his role as an active and prayerful preacher.'⁵⁰ The means for this reinterpretation of Cuthbert, along with the editorial activity it produced, are found in Gregory's concept of *longa aegritudo* and Bede's shared concern to shape the church's episcopal leadership in light of biblical eschatology.

SICKNESS AND SUFFERING IN BEDE'S PORTRAYAL OF CUTHBERT
AND WILFRID

Bede's account of bodily sickness in the *Life of Cuthbert* allows him to bring together the active and contemplative life made possible through suffering, the glue that holds together word and deed in the life of the church. In this way, Cuthbert's life becomes the ideal embodiment of Gregory's teachings, over against Bede's near contemporary, Bishop Wilfrid, whose active life as a bishop lacked the needed inner dimension of 'suffering unto death' required for the proper integration of word and deed. Wilfrid functioned as an example of a bishop whose primary function was that of an administrator, rather than as a child and servant of the word who, through bodily illness and suffering, has learned how to integrate contemplation and action. Like Wilfrid, Cuthbert suffered persecution from worldly church leaders. But in addition to suffering persecution from Celtic schismatics and wicked monks, Cuthbert and his fellow brethren were also subject to prolonged bodily affliction.⁵¹ By the theological standards Bede inherited from Gregory, this distinguished him from Wilfrid.⁵²

⁴⁹ Alan Thacker, 'Bede and History', in Scott DeGregorio, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Bede* (Cambridge, 2010), 170–89, at 182.

⁵⁰ Scott DeGregorio, 'The Venerable Bede on Prayer and Contemplation', *Traditio* 54 (1991), 1–39, at 6.

⁵¹ Bede, *Vita Cuthberti prosaica* 22, 37, 39.

⁵² Foley, 'Suffering and Sanctity', 114–15.

Bede depicted Cuthbert's relationship with Bishop Wilfrid as somewhat less than cordial.⁵³ Others suggest that Bede's 'frosty' demeanour towards Wilfrid in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* is the product of our own modern reading.⁵⁴ In light of the arguments put forth here, a more plausible explanation is that Bede's portrait of Wilfrid stems from his Gregorian ideals of what a bishop should be. It is not that Bede has a personal dislike for Wilfrid, or that we are committing the *faux pas* of a Whig historian by reading our own modern notions into the actions of an early medieval scholar and saint. Instead, the spiritual distance one senses between Cuthbert and Wilfrid in Bede's writings is a matter of the spiritual and moral compass Bede inherited from Gregory. Just as the Gregorian ideal calls for the integration of contemplative and active spirituality, so also it requires the integration of official and personal sanctity. Foley suggests that the scarcity of miracles attributed to Wilfrid's ministry in the *Historia Ecclesiastica* is due to the fact that for Bede, Wilfrid's piety was largely an 'official' sanctity, arising from the execution of his public duties as bishop, while Cuthbert's sanctity was not merely official, but also personal.⁵⁵ In Bede's eyes, Wilfrid failed to live up to the integrated piety of the Gregorian ideal found in bishops such as Cuthbert. The lack of this integration in the life of Wilfrid, at least when measured according to the Gregorian ideal Bede inherited from Gregory, helps explain the relative lack of miraculous attestation in Bede's account of Wilfrid's episcopate when compared to that of Cuthbert. Yet this does not make Wilfrid a bad bishop. He is merely not the *ideal* bishop.⁵⁶

That the ideal for bishops forged by Gregory and inherited by Bede was not limited to the early mediaeval church is evident from Katherine Harvey's study of the thirteenth-century bishop Richard

⁵³ See Bertram Colgrave, introduction to *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid* (Cambridge, 1985), xii.

⁵⁴ See J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, 'Bede and Plummer', in Gerald Bonner, ed., *Famulus Christi: Essays in Commemoration of the Thirteenth Centenary of the Birth of the Venerable Bede* (London, 1976), 366–85, at 380.

⁵⁵ See W. Trent Foley, 'Suffering and Sanctity in Bede's *Prose Life of St Cuthbert*', 102–16. Foley's arguments grow out of his earlier study, *Images of Sanctity in Eddius Stephanus' Life of Bishop Wilfrid, an Early English Saint's Life* (Lewiston, ME, 1992).

⁵⁶ Foley tends to contrast official and personal forms of sanctity, while for Bede they are integrated. Bede did not think official sanctity was unimportant, but simply insufficient.

of Chichester.⁵⁷ Harvey's essay suggests that the genre of the *Vita* continued to serve as a model for sanctity well into the high Middle Ages, citing the thirteenth-century author Ralph Bocking's *Life of St Richard, Bishop of Chichester* as a notable case in point. While she does not mention Bede's writings on Cuthbert, his *Vita sancti Cuthberti* and Bocking's *Vita Sancti Ricardi* share in common the idea that the sanctity which arises from performing the duties of the office of bishop (official sanctity) is not enough to qualify a bishop to serve as a model of episcopal sanctity for future generations. In order for a particular bishop to qualify as a model and have a *Vita* written about them, a bishop must also possess personal sanctity. Someone can be a bishop who faithfully executes the duties of one's episcopal office in a way that is commendable, but in order to qualify as a 'Saint-Bishop' and not merely a good bishop, he also needs personal piety.⁵⁸

Harvey also discusses the way in which this personal sanctity was achieved in Richard's life through his cultivation of proper attitudes toward food, drink and sleep. These mostly took the form of abstinence of some kind, for example, fasting from food and drink, as well as denying oneself sleep. Because these practices were integral to the idea of masculinity in Richard's day, they defined what the idea of a 'perfect man' consists in, namely, one who is able to control his body and its desires.⁵⁹ These practices demonstrated personal sanctity by showing that a man had mastery of his body and its desires. This aspect of sanctity had to be present, as well as the aspect of official sanctity. The two realms of the official and the personal must be integrated, hence the title of Harvey's essay: 'Perfect Bishop, Perfect Man.'

CONCLUSION

Just as the question of Job's sickness and suffering⁶⁰ was theologically significant for Gregory's vision of the episcopate, so also the question

⁵⁷ Katherine Harvey, 'Perfect Bishop, Perfect Man? Masculinity, Restraint and the Episcopal Body in the Life of St Richard of Chichester', *Southern History* 35 (2013), 1–22. I am indebted to the editors of SCH for this reference.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 3.

⁵⁹ Harvey notes that another historical factor shaping the ideal of the perfect man stemmed from the state of medical theory in Richard's day, which sought to eliminate sexual lust through immersion in cold water and bloodletting; *ibid.* 8.

⁶⁰ The continuing influence of Gregory's episcopal vision during the Reformation era is evident from Calvin's lengthy discussion of this vision in Book Four of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

of why Cuthbert suffered was significant for Bede's monastic ideal for church leadership. Job and Cuthbert did not endure sickness and suffering for their own sake, but for the sake of their union with Christ, their head, and also for the sake of the cleansing renewal of the church's leadership. In the *Moralia* and the *Dialogues*, Bede found the needed resources for addressing the question of the value of suffering and bodily affliction, and his solution took the form of an interpretative rule that integrated the active and contemplative life through suffering, even prolonged suffering unto death (*longa aegritudo*). In this visionary and Joban ideal forged by Gregory for episcopal identity, Bede recognized his own belief that the active contemplative life should define monastic spirituality, an ideal that Bede also extended to the integration of official and personal sanctity in his *Life of St Cuthbert*.

Prolonged sickness and suffering unto death unite the contemplative values of heaven with our active life on earth, serving as a figure and anticipation in this life of the final union of heaven and earth at Christ's return. The integrative capacity of bodily sickness is a distinct quality of Gregory's exegesis that is also harnessed by Bede, especially in his prose *Life of Cuthbert's* episcopate, and also motivates his portrait of Cuthbert as a compelling example of this integrative model and Joban ideal. In this Gregorian vision of church leaders as the suffering servants of God, the experience of *longa aegritudo* and suffering unto death in this life prefigures the union of heaven and earth at Christ's return. Here biblical eschatology serves as the interpretative framework in which the integrative qualities of suffering are given purpose in this present life. In this way, the biblical ordering of time served the end of reforming the church's episcopal leadership, as well as the nature and desires of the saints in this life. In this reordering of desire through bodily suffering, Gregory's *Moralia* and *Dialogues*, along with Bede's *Life of St Cuthbert*, were literary tools by which to accomplish this purpose and promote its ideals.