

The Renunciation of Wealth as a Rite of ‘the poor’ and ‘perfect’: Bede and his Successors

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The renunciation and abandonment of wealth are rarely described as Christian rites of passage. Yet, for many medieval commentators on Scripture, such as the Venerable Bede and his successors, they were necessary rites, preliminaries to entry into the kingdom of heaven and into the class of ‘the perfect’. This article explores Arnold van Gennep’s description of rites of passage in conjunction with the discussion of poverty in the Western exegetical tradition, centred in particular on Jesus’s statements about poverty in Luke. It focuses on Bede’s models of renunciation and abandonment of wealth which influenced Latin theology at least until the Reformation. The renunciation and abandonment of wealth provide an excellent test case for exploring van Gennep’s ritual framework and its utility within the discipline of ecclesiastical history.

‘If you would be perfect: go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me.’ Jesus addressed a rich man with these words in Matthew 19: 16–30; they are recorded with small differences in Mark 10: 17–31 and Luke 18: 18–30. This exhortation inspired many in the earliest centuries of the Church to relinquish their property and seek an intense life of ascetic discipline. Some went to Syria, the Holy Land or the Egyptian desert. Others sought perfection closer to home, in repurposed country estates or inner *sancta* within city houses, or as hermits in a local wilderness.¹ In doing so, they became, in the eyes of some contemporaries, living fulfilments of the gospels, signs of endless potential. The perfection held out by Christ is within reach; the impossible is possible with

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¹ For the range of practice, see Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton, NJ, 2012), 72–90, 135–47, 224–58, 273–88, 528–30; more briefly, Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton, NJ, 1999), 33–8.

God, as Martin of Tours wrote, speaking of Paulinus of Nola and his dramatic conversion.²

The dispersal of wealth, however, brought various difficulties, both for followers of ascetic discipline and for commentators on Scripture. The hyper-wealthy, late Roman elite, such as Paulinus of Nola or Melania the Younger, often found it hard to divest themselves of far-flung estates or goods not readily transferred into glittering gold and silver coins for distribution to the poor or filling church coffers. They might frame their renunciation as a matter of ‘salvation economics’, trading earthbound material goods for splendid spiritual treasure, kept safe beyond the stars,³ but it was rarely so simple. Practical problems arose; other people and their interests stood in the way (in Melania’s case, even the Roman senate).⁴

Would-be seekers of perfection had to reckon, too, with the popularity of their asceticism, and with money and land acquired by their institutions, later to be managed by them. Sometimes, as in the case of Benedict Biscop in late seventh-century Northumbria, a warrior departing royal service might relinquish a claim on ancestral land, honours and dignities, or on property rewarded to martial prowess, only to acquire far more as a venerable and austere figure, a demonstration of Christ’s promise that ‘a hundredfold’ reward came ‘in this time’ to those who gave up everything for the gospel: ‘houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands’ (Mark 10: 30).⁵ Those abandoning wealth generally found they still had to live with it, and to continue to make their way in the economic order of their times.

From Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages, authors of biblical commentaries had to deal with problems of exegesis and ambiguities in scriptural teaching. Was a one-time relinquishment of wealth what it meant to ‘renounce’ possessions, as Jesus had commanded? Was this gospel ‘perfection’? Or was more required? And how many had to renounce wealth? These problems could become acute when individual interpreters wrestled with the diverse witness of patristic exegesis and the examples in their community. Bede, for example,

² Brown, *Eye of a Needle*, 216–17, citing Sulpicius Severus, *Vita Sancti Martini* 22.

³ Dennis E. Trout, *Paulinus of Nola: Life, Letters, and Poems* (Berkeley, CA, 1999), 133–59.

⁴ *Ibid.* 216–18, 226–7, 295–300.

⁵ See Bede, *Homily* 1.13 (CChr.SL 122); *idem*, *History of the Abbots* 1.1 (C. W. Grocock and Ian Wood, eds, *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow* [Oxford, 2019], 21–5).

undertook his work in the company of various abbots and monastic contemporaries, often of noble birth, and in a landscape of diverse approaches to ascetic life in early medieval Northumbria and Western Europe.

RENUNCIATION AND 'RITES OF PASSAGE'

Such issues and questions may seem peculiar in relation to *The Churches and Rites of Passage*. Rites of passage are generally regarded as significant life events shared and ritualized by most human beings throughout history. We may think of them as a natural category, indeed, a necessary and useful one, providing a 'fundamental clue to the essence of religion'.⁶ A whole area of law sprang up in response to the COVID-19 pandemic reflecting such an assumption. In order to regulate religious practices and render them safe – or, at least, less prone to increasing viral transmission – government guidance divided them into 'private prayer', 'communal worship', 'festivals', 'voluntary or public services' and 'significant life events'. The guidance also regulated the actions, environments and objects that could surround or be used in every kind of religious observance.⁷ The urgency of the moment required vast areas of commonality, a set of categories that could apply across and within religious traditions. It found one close at hand, due to the long-standing influence of anthropologists such as Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner.

The reason I have taken the renunciation of wealth as a topic is that it could trouble or affirm an understanding of Christian practices across time as fundamentally comprising recognizable sets of activities, whether they be forms of worship and prayer, methods of structuring and inhabiting time, models of service, or, indeed, rites for managing or effecting transitions from one stage of life to another. A rite may appear to be necessary in one time or within one community, and superfluous in another time and place. Even within a single time and place, like Northumbria in its monastic 'Golden Age',

⁶ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Against Secular Reason* (Malden, MA, 1990), 123.

⁷ See 'Places of Worship Guidance' (19 July 2021), online at: <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic-from-4-july/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-from-2-december>>.

accounts of the requirements of certain rites or states of life could differ, based on differing assessments of scriptural and patristic teaching. For this reason, any historical approach to the churches and rites of passage should not focus too strongly upon commonalities, but must also consider sporadic, specific and time bound instances of ritual invention or redefinition. The renunciation of wealth may be one of these: one way in which ‘Christian communities were increasingly stratified and hierarchalized by an axiology ... of “difference” centered on ascetic renunciation’, and then, just as increasingly, were not.⁸ Renouncing wealth was a significant, and increasingly dominant, part of Christian reading strategies and revered forms of life from Late Antiquity onward. It received dramatic validation in the early Middle Ages and was just as forcefully revised in the Reformation and afterwards.

My inspiration for this topic arises, too, from ambiguities in the work that originated the term ‘rites of passage’ and the difficulties in using its concepts for contemporary work in ecclesiastical history. Van Gennep’s *Les Rites de passage* (1909) rarely placed Christian rites within the same framework as those of other cultures. He explicitly contrasted Western European Christianity, and its limited number of formal rituals, with the patterns of life in cultures he deemed more primitive, those further ‘downward on the scale of civilizations’:

We see that in the least advanced cultures the holy enters nearly every phase of a man’s life. Being born, giving birth, and hunting, to cite but a few examples, are all acts whose major aspects fall within the sacred sphere. Social groups likewise have magico-religious foundations, and a passage from group to group takes on that special quality found in *our rites* of baptism and ordination.⁹

Van Gennep worked within the social and religious imaginary of early twentieth-century Christianity, upholding cultural simplicity as a sign of civilizational progress. Yet, he said, ‘to the semi-civilized mind no act is entirely free of the sacred’, and consequently all of life must be enveloped in ceremonies.¹⁰ Civilization and modernity, he thought,

⁸ Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 5, but see *ibid.* 3–13; and compare David C. Fink, ‘Unreading Renunciation: Luther, Calvin, and the “Rich Young Ruler”’, *Modern Theology* 32 (2016), 569–93.

⁹ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, transl. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle I. Caffee (Abingdon and New York, 2004; first publ. 1960), 2, emphasis added.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 3.

are freed from such complications. For van Gennep, this had practical outworkings. He analysed rites of passage in faraway lands or on peripheries: at the farthest, South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, Madagascar and Oceania; at the closest, the Savoy or the Balkans, the outer regions and small places of ‘civilized’ nations and continents, rather than larger centres such as Paris, London or Berlin. Rites of passage were usually confined to other religions, or to an ambiguous category of semi-pagan survivals within Christianity. At times, van Gennep noted analogies between the rites he was discussing and those of the churches, but he refused to draw the latter fully into his analysis, suggesting for example that ordinations in Roman Catholicism or Orthodoxy are ‘systematized in their own ways’, even if they shared some commonalities with modes of consecration or ordination in other religions and cultures.¹¹ One must analyse them on their own terms. He did not always acknowledge similar systems in other cultures or religions, however long-standing or systematic their approaches (such as the Brahmanical priesthood).

An interesting comparison lies in van Gennep’s examination of rites in Savoy, where he partly grew up and later worked. *De Quelques Rites de passage en Savoie*, a shorter work published only two years after *Les Rites de passage*, tended to treat popular and local observances associated with an individual’s life stages, rather than the universal, institutional or sacramental forms of Christianity as they were expressed in the area.¹² It made few connections between the ‘systematized’ understanding of a rite like baptism and local customs surrounding it. The closest moment comes in the opening pages, when van Gennep described how Christianity took in and transformed local customs, replacing ‘les temples gallo-romains’ with sanctuaries dedicated to the Holy Virgin and other saints.¹³ Despite declaring such overlaps to be numerous, van Gennep rarely drew connections.

¹¹ Ibid. 106. References to baptism are relatively more frequent in *Rites of Passage* (e.g. 93–7, 107–8). This is for a specific reason: van Gennep analyzes the extensive preliminaries to baptism in the Latin West because he was confident they were ‘borrowed so extensively from the Egyptian, Syrian, Asian, and Greek mysteries’: *ibid.* 88. See also, in this volume, Thomas O’Loughlin, “Rites of Passage” and the Writing of Church History: Reflections upon our Craft in the Aftermath of van Gennep’, 8–26, at 17–19, 20, 22–3.

¹² Arnold van Gennep, *De Quelques Rites de passage en Savoie* (Paris, 1910).

¹³ *Ibid.* 2–4.

The prejudices or peculiarities in his writings may appear obvious, but some of them are worth exploring briefly. First, we should query his suggestion that Christian rites are reasonably limited and identifiable (such as baptism and ordination) and that ‘the sacred’ is approached only at specific times. No historian could cast their eye over the Christian past and suggest that ecclesiastical cultures in numerous times and places have been largely free of ceremonial or, indeed, a sense of the all-pervading presence of the divine. Christian centres of culture (cathedrals, monasteries, royal courts, universities, parishes), have regularly been sites of elaborate and time-consuming ritual observance: places of encountering, but not containing, numinous presence. To set aside such a history, or to regard elaborate ceremony or a pervasive sense of holiness as less than ‘Christian’ or ‘ours’, is to work within an ideological frame. Moreover, the frame appears to be one stamped by the influence of sacramental theologies developed in the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, since gone secular and decadent.

Before the advent of scholasticism, the identification of the sacraments was not focused narrowly on those rites commonly identified as such in modern Catholic and Protestant teaching. Words like *sacramenta* or *mysteria* or *figura* had varied meanings into the High Middle Ages. As Dominique Poiret notes with regard to Hugh of St Victor, ‘the Hugonian idea of the sacrament is larger, more complex, and more supple than ours’.¹⁴ Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*, however, with its reduction of primary sacraments, in which salvation was regarded as principally consisting (*sacramenta salutaria*), to seven, had lasting influence. It helped define a new theological imaginary, to which Protestant and Catholic reformers would respond in confessional statements and canonical definitions that continue to shape churches worldwide. These approaches would eventually affect nascent anthropological disciplines and other developing realms of inquiry. ‘Sociology is the heir of theology’, as Philippe Buc affirms,¹⁵

¹⁴ Dominique Poiret, ‘Sacraments’, in Hugh Feiss and Juliet Mousseau, eds, *A Companion to the Abbey of Saint Victor in Paris*, Brill’s Companions to the Christian Tradition 70 (Leiden, 2017), 277–97, at 277; Hugh Feiss, *On the Sacraments: A Selection of Works of Hugh and Richard of St Victor, and of Peter of Poitiers*, Victorine Texts in Translation 10 (Turnhout, 2020), 61–2.

¹⁵ Philippe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton, NJ, 2001), 194, referencing Émile Durkheim, Robert Nisbet and John Milbank, among others.

and the social sciences can seem at times ‘doomed to repeat the self-understanding of Christianity’ arrived at in the late Middle Ages and early modernity.¹⁶ For those reasons alone, we should observe caution in applying the idea of ‘rites of passage’ to earlier times, and recognize that contemporary historical inquiry is more theological than many would imagine. Moreover, where van Gennep excluded ‘our rites’ from his consideration of rites of passage, due to their systematized and limited character, this volume broadens his category in a significant way, by suggesting that rites of passage appear in the churches.

The identification of rites of passage is only one of the ambiguities present in van Gennep’s work, which remain relevant to this volume. There are others, not least around the definition of a ‘ritual’, ‘ceremony’ or ‘rite’. As Buc argued some time ago: ‘historians have, collectively at least, piled a vast array of motley practices into the category’, freely enriching their inquiries with piquant insights from anthropology or sociology, without fully interrogating the origin and genealogy of their methods.¹⁷ Van Gennep’s primary examples were major events marking or effecting movement from one age to another, one state of life to another, one community to another, one time to another. The impetus of such a focus would drive us to look for analogies in Christian cultures. But van Gennep’s definition of ‘rites’ or ‘ceremonies’ encompassed much more than this, perhaps an unacknowledged inspiration for the ‘hazy laundry list’ of rituals identified by historians.¹⁸

For van Gennep, a rite required no formal words or elaborate actions; it could happen in an instant and still be ‘a rite’.¹⁹ He cites examples of a woman ‘abstaining from eating mulberries for fear her child would be disfigured’ and a sailor ‘in danger of perishing in a shipwreck’ making a vow ‘to Our Lady of Vigilance’.²⁰ These customary actions emerge in particular moments; they would have formal and informal precedents in their cultures, interacting with differing understandings of cosmic or divine order. Despite their

¹⁶ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 9.

¹⁷ Buc, *Dangers of Ritual*, 1, 5.

¹⁸ ‘[T]he baptism of rulers, coronations and crown-wearings; princely funerals; entries in cities (or churches) and other processions or parades; civic games; banquets; the hunt; relic translations and elevations; oath-takings; acclamations or laudes; knightings; ordeals; public penances; and acts of submission or commendation’: *ibid.* 5.

¹⁹ Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

lack of formalism or their rational incorporation into a broader set of rites, in both instances the subjects of these rites invite or prevent significant life-altering. But, truly, when are such customs or senses of agency absent? Taken to their logical extreme, van Gennepe's examples make it difficult to see what is and what is not a rite, unless we accept his civilizational and hierarchical definition of rites and ceremonies as features of 'primitive' cultures pervaded by 'the holy'. In such a case, a rite of passage could hardly exist within a secular or highly literate culture.

These ambiguities have broader relevance in relation to the renunciation of wealth. The examples I will explore could be seen either to affirm or to trouble such ritual categories. The renunciation of wealth could be understood within the framework of rites of passage, and particularly as a preliminary to other rites. Whether one sought rebirth or the recognition of Christian maturity, the renunciation of wealth might play a part. For many medieval exegetes grappling with the gospels, it did. Beginning with Bede and his influential gathering of patristic traditions, a common exegetical framework emerged, which retained significant impact until the Reformation. Guided by such texts, we might label renunciation a rite of passage. On the other hand, we might want to label the renunciation of wealth as a rite or ceremony of some kind, but still hesitate to set it alongside rites of passage. I will return to these points in the conclusion, noting how renunciation appears to relate to other rites like baptism, ordination or monastic profession.

BEDE AND RENUNCIATION IN CHRISTIAN LITURGY AND ECONOMY

I limit myself primarily to statements by the Venerable Bede, particularly his *Exposition of the Gospel of Luke* (hereafter: *On Luke*).²¹ It is a useful text for this discussion, not only because it deals with many scriptural passages which were significant in the history of asceticism, but also because of its gathering of earlier traditions and its influence

²¹ I have used the following editions: Bede, *On Genesis* (CChr.SL 118); *On Samuel* (CChr.SL 119); *On the Tabernacle* (CChr.SL 119A); *On the Temple* (CChr.SL 119A); *On Ezra* (CChr.SL 119A); *On the Song of Songs* (CChr.SL 119B); *On Proverbs* (CChr.SL 119B); *On Mark* (CChr.SL 120); *On Luke* (CChr.SL 120); *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* (CChr.SL 121); *Retraction on Acts* (CChr.SL 121). All translations are mine unless indicated otherwise.

on later exegesis. Bede's interpretations were cited in gospel commentaries and homilies throughout the Middle Ages, so there are important commonalities here.²² Firstly, I will consider his suggestion that the renunciation of wealth is a universal commitment required for salvation. Secondly, I will examine those passages that discuss the relinquishing or dispersal of wealth as an action incumbent upon all those who would be 'perfect'. These suggest that renunciation or dispersal is a one-time action, so, thirdly, I will consider a few passages which show that the paradigm is not so simple.

The clearest statements on renunciation come in Bede's comments on Luke 14, where Jesus describes the kingdom of God as a 'banquet' to which many are invited. He describes 'the cost' of being his disciple. God's house must be filled, but Jesus says:

If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not carry his cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple. ... So likewise every one of you that doth not renounce all that he possesseth, cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14: 26–7, 33, Douay-Rheims)

For Bede, this is a clear teaching. The Christian must be ready to give up everything: loved ones, neighbours, possessions, even life, that is, 'the soul'. This is what it means 'to count the cost' of discipleship.²³ However, it may not actually be necessary to leave things behind. He comments on Luke 14: 33, finding a distinction in the works of Augustine and Gregory: 'Clearly there is a difference between "renounce all things" and "relinquish all things".'²⁴

It is for all of the faithful to 'renounce all things that they possess', that is, *so to hold those things of the world, that they might not be held in the*

²² See Zachary Guiliano, 'Holy Gluttons: Bede and the Carolingians on the Pleasures of Reading', in Naama Cohen-Hanegbi and Piroska Nagy, eds, *Pleasure in the Middle Ages*, International Medieval Research 24 (Turnhout, 2018), 281–308; idem, *The Homiliary of Paul the Deacon: Religious and Cultural Reform in Carolingian Europe*, Studies in Patristic, Medieval and Reformation Sermons 16 (Turnhout, 2021). I am currently preparing a monograph, provisionally entitled *Bede's Economy: The Commentary on Luke in the Temple Society of the Latin West*.

²³ Bede, *On Luke* 4.2113–16 (CChr.SL 120: 283).

²⁴ 'Distat sane inter renuntiare omnibus et relinquere omnia': Bede, *On Luke* 4.2122–3 (CChr.SL 120: 283–4). Bede responded to the difference in terminology in Augustine, *Questions on the Gospels* 2.31; and Gregory the Great, *Homilies on the Gospels* 36.

*world through them, to hold the temporal thing in use, the eternal in desire; thus to conduct earthly affairs so that, still, with the whole mind they stretch toward the celestial.*²⁵

The renunciation of wealth on this model is dramatic and fundamental, but primarily a re-orientation of desire, intent and use, a preliminary step with enduring consequences. Just as one must be ready to take up the cross and follow Jesus in martyrdom – but may not actually die for the faith, because one lives in a time of peace – so one must be ready to leave all things behind, even if one retains wealth. This is how ‘so many rich people’ in the Old Testament, including Abraham and David, retained their wealth while entering the kingdom of heaven: they learned to ‘hold riches as nothing’, even as their possessions multiplied. David exhorted his hearers in Psalm 61: 11: ‘If riches increase, set not your heart upon them’. But, Bede claims, ‘I believe he did not dare to say, “Do not take them.”’²⁶

In Bede’s mind, there is a clear preliminary to entering the kingdom of heaven: acquiring the right attitude to property, kinship and even one’s soul, renouncing ‘carnal desires’.²⁷ This applies across times and places, as well as across the Old and New Testaments. It was exemplified by Abraham, even as he wandered through the Ancient Near East and acquired ever more ‘sheep and oxen, and he asses, and menservants and maidservants, and camels’ (Gen. 12: 16, Douay-Rheims). The father of faith serves as a figure of renunciation to all the faithful, despite his great wealth.²⁸

When does this renunciation of loved ones, possessions and life take place? At first, it is not clear. In this part of his commentary, Bede does not remark explicitly on the relationship between this preliminary to salvation and the formal rites of baptism, by which the Christian faithful receive rebirth. Nonetheless, in his discussion of John the Baptist and the ‘fruits worthy of repentance’ (Luke 3), he makes it clear that repentance and renunciation at baptism are

²⁵ Bede, *On Luke* 4.2125–39 (CChr.SL 120: 284). Words in italics are Bede’s combination of phrases from Gregory, *Homilies on the Gospels* 36.292–3, 297, 309–10 (CChr.SL 141: 342–3).

²⁶ Bede, *On Luke* 5.1288–94 (CChr.SL 120: 328).

²⁷ Bede, *On the Song of Songs* 1.1.245–6 (CChr.SL 119B: 196); cf. ‘we teach those new peoples of the Church to renounce the devil and to believe in and confess the true God’: *On Ezra* 2.1400–2 (CChr.SL 119A: 322).

²⁸ Bede, *On Genesis* 3.1232–44 (CChr.SL 118: 176–7).

inextricably tied to particular financial practices like almsgiving.²⁹ ‘After the washing of baptism’, entry into the ‘hall of heaven’ is gained, not by leisure, but ‘by fasts, prayers and alms’.³⁰ Moreover, Bede’s narrative examples (Abraham, John the Baptist’s call to repentance, and Jesus’s statements on renunciation) involve dramatic moments of decision, making the connection to baptism clear. Bede’s language also evokes the formal renunciations made at baptism, which since early days had included renunciation of Satan, ‘all his works’ and ‘all his pomps’.³¹ For example, Bede makes a direct connection between baptism and Abraham’s abandonment of family and land in his commentary *On Genesis*:

For it is certain that the fact that he went out from his country and from his kindred and from the house of his father when he was commanded to do so should be imitated by all the sons of that promise, among whom we too are included. Certainly we go out from our country when we renounce the pleasures of the flesh, from our kindred when we strive to strip ourselves of all the vices with which we were born (insofar as this is possible for men!), and from the house of our father when we struggle out of love for the heavenly life to abandon this world with its prince the devil. For we are all born into the world as sons of the devil on account of the sin of the first transgression; but by the grace of rebirth all of us who belong to the seed of Abraham are made the sons of God.³²

‘All the elect’ follow this example of Abraham ‘by renouncing the custom of the vices’.³³ Bede’s explicit reference to ‘the grace of rebirth’ makes it clear that he has in mind the moment of baptism, and suggests that his other descriptions – renouncing pleasures, stripping off the vices, abandoning the world – are in themselves examples of both pre-baptismal intentions and post-baptismal life, at least ideally. His *Homily 2.6* confirms this, suggesting that the meaning of one of the pre-baptismal rites, the ‘Effeta’ (or ‘Ephphatha’), was the casting off

²⁹ For example Bede, *On Luke* 1.2340–57, 2369–74 (CChr.SL 120: 78–9, 79).

³⁰ Ibid. 1.2556–9 (CChr.SL 120: 84).

³¹ Maxwell Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation*, rev. edn (Collegeville, MN, 2009), 111, 132, 148, 240, 260, 322, 327, 331, 340, 343, 403, 405, 418.

³² Bede, *On Genesis* 3.1008–22 (CChr.SL 118: 170–1; transl. Calvin Kendall, *Bede: On Genesis*, TTH 48 [Liverpool, 2008], 247).

³³ Ibid. 3.1026–32 (CChr.SL 118: 171).

of harmful desires (*abiectionibus noxiis*).³⁴ The desire for wealth may safely be included amongst these, for, in Bede's view, 'he who bends himself to multiplying wealth here scorns to seek the joys of the other life',³⁵ and 'they who are arrogant, glorying in earthly riches ... shall be left emptied of the light of truth'.³⁶ In this way, renouncing wealth is not only a preliminary to salvation, but Bede appears to have, mentally at least, nested this category of renunciation within the broader renunciations of baptism.

It is impossible to establish the precise sequence or form of the preliminaries to baptism in Bede's milieu to shed light on how renunciation was integrated into them, not least because no full baptismal liturgy from Bede's Northumbria is extant. His own comments on the rites are minimal and normally come in passing as part of his practice of preaching or commentary; he mentions aspects such as the *apertio aurium* ('the opening of the ears'), the *traditio euangeliorum* ('the handing on of the Gospels') and the Effeta, along with the custom of baptizing at Easter and Pentecost.³⁷ Baptismal rites contemporary to Bede, however, reveal a variety of links to the memory of Abraham. Sixth-century rites, such as those in the Veronese sacramentary, mentioned Abraham during the blessing of milk and honey used in the baptismal rites. In the Bobbio Missal, a seventh-century Frankish text, he is briefly mentioned as Christ's progenitor during the practice of the *traditio euangeliorum*, and the priest also prays at the Easter Vigil that God might 'bless and sanctify' those about to be baptized, as 'you blessed the house of Abraham, Isaac,

³⁴ Bede, *Homily* 2.6.86 (CChr.SL 122: 222). In the Latin West, the 'Effeta' or 'Ephphatha' took place before baptism, inspired by Mark 7: 31–7. The rite has undergone numerous transformations during the Middle Ages, the early modern period and since the Second Vatican Council: Johnson, *Rites*, 170, 222–3, 240–3, 259–60, 312–13, 366–9, 393–405; David Andrew Pitt, 'Revising the Rite of Adult Initiation: The Structural Reform of the *Ordo Initiationis Christianae Adulorum, Ordo Catechumenatus Per Gradus Dispositus*, 1964–1972' (PhD thesis, University of Notre Dame, 2007).

³⁵ Bede, *On Luke* 5.1268–70 (CChr.SL 120: 327).

³⁶ Bede, *Homily* 1.4.271–4 (CChr.SL 122: 28).

³⁷ Mary T. A. Carroll, *The Venerable Bede: His Spiritual Teaching*, Catholic University of America Studies in Medieval History n.s. 9 (Washington DC, 1946), 104–5. See, for the *apertio* and *traditio*, Bede, *On the Tabernacle* 2.1844–94 (CChr.SL 119A: 89–90); for the Effeta, Bede, *Homily* 2.6.80–96 (CChr.SL 122: 222); *On Mark* 1433–1502, especially 1461–3 (CChr.SL 120: 525–26); for baptizing at Easter and Pentecost, *Homily* 2.6.93–7, 2.17.254–69 (CChr.SL 122: 222, 307–8).

and Jacob'.³⁸ Notably, the Bobbio Missal's renunciations include Satan's 'luxuries' and further baptismal rites include a foot-washing ceremony that commits the baptized to wash the feet of 'pilgrims, guests, and the poor'.³⁹

Most substantively, the Gelasian sacramentary, reflecting seventh-century practice in Rome and elsewhere, witnesses to a general invocation of 'the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob' during a prayer of exorcism. Abraham appears here, too, in the rite of the *traditio evangeliorum* as part of the explanation of Jesus's genealogy.⁴⁰ The most explicit link, however, comes in the sacramentary's final set of rites to be performed on Holy Saturday, including, like Bede, the Effeta ritual, here preceding the Easter Vigil. The Gelasian sacramentary links the Effeta to an anointing with oil and the renunciation of Satan, all his works and all his pomps, as Bede had done. Later in the liturgy, a biblical lesson about Abraham is mentioned (but not identified), along with a prayer to be said after the lesson is read. God is said to be making children of Abraham through 'the Paschal sacrament', and the priest prays that 'your people ... may worthily enter into the grace of your calling'.⁴¹ Antoine Chavasse has suggested, based on the evidence of other early medieval sacramentaries and lectionaries, that the reading was Genesis 22: the binding and near-sacrifice of Isaac.⁴² Abraham is kept from losing his son only by the miraculous provision of a ram. God safeguards the divine promise of countless offspring. Linked with its prayer in the vigil, this lection offers a significant suggestion: God honoured Abraham's willingness to give up all, including his child; so too, will the renunciations of the baptized result in untold rewards, if they retain, and enter fully into, their high calling. We might remember, too, that the primary eucharistic prayer of the Western tradition and the Roman rite (past and present) particularly links the sacrifices of the faithful – in praise, in bread and wine – with

³⁸ *The Bobbio Missal: A Gallican Mass-Book (MS Paris. Lat. 13246)*, ed. Elias A. Lowe, HBS 53 (Woodbridge and Rochester, NY, 1991), 55, 71.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 74–5.

⁴⁰ E. C. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, ed. M. E. Johnson, 3rd edn (Bristol, 2003), 207, 217, 219.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 229–31.

⁴² Antoine Chavasse, *Le Sacramentaire gélisien, Vaticanus Reginensis 316. Sacramentaire presbyteral en usage dans les titres romains au VIIe siècle* (Paris, 1958), 115–23.

‘the gifts of your servant Abel the just, and the sacrifice of Abraham our patriarch, and what your high priest Melchizedek offered’.⁴³

We have here a liturgical counterpart to Bede’s thought, linking the renunciations and sacrifice of Abraham with the baptismal renunciations of the faithful. Further corroboration appears in Bede’s commentary *On Genesis*, where the connection between baptism and the sacrifice of Isaac as ‘the son of promise’ is clear.⁴⁴ Later liturgical texts include similar evocations of the God of Abraham in scrutinies or baptism, and varied discussions of baptismal renunciation – including the renunciation of greed – but these are not easily mined for information on the liturgy at the time that Bede was writing.⁴⁵

BEDE ON THE ABANDONMENT OF WEALTH BY ‘THE PERFECT’

Renunciation, of course, was only a first step in Bede’s mind. What did he say about those who ‘relinquish all things’? He follows Gregory the Great by saying that the abandonment of possessions is a step for the spiritually mature: ‘It is for *the few* and perfect *to relinquish everything, to set aside the cares of the world, to gasp for eternal desires only.*’⁴⁶ This distinction mirrors a division Bede frequently draws between typical Christians and the *perfecti*, often in regard to possessions. He writes in his commentary *On the Song of Songs*: ‘And indeed it is for all Christ’s sheep to be purified by the washing of life, because “unless someone be reborn from water and the Spirit” (and the rest); but it is for the perfect to renounce all which they possess, and especially for those to whom care is given for feeding the sheep.’⁴⁷ His *Homily* 1.13 carried the image further. The present distinction between the ‘two orders of the elect’ is their handling of possessions,

⁴³ [M]unera pueri tui iusti Abel, et sacrificium Patriarchae nostri Abrahae, et quod tibi obtulit summus sacerdos tuus Melchisedech’: *Missale Romanum*, Editio typica (Vatican City, 1970), 453.

⁴⁴ For example, Bede, *On Genesis* 4.1521–1761 (CChr.SL 118: 236–42).

⁴⁵ Such as *Ordo Romanus* 12 or the numerous baptismal tracts from the Carolingian period: see Whittaker, *Documents*, 244–51; Susan Keefe, *Water and the Word: Baptism and the Education of the Clergy in the Carolingian Empire*, 2 vols (Notre Dame, IN, 2002), 2: 211, 235. These suggest avenues for future research.

⁴⁶ Bede, *On Luke* 4.2123–5 (CChr.SL 120: 283–4), with Gregory’s words italicized: see Gregory, *Homilies on the Gospels* 36.289–90 (CChr.SL 141: 342).

⁴⁷ Bede, *On the Song of Songs* 2.4.113–16 (CChr.SL 119B: 246). We should not be confused by Bede’s choice of words; by ‘renounce’ he clearly means ‘relinquish’, as the preceding lines make clear: *ibid.* 2.4.110–13.

and it will be carried into the future judgment: some took care to give alms to the poor, and Christ will let them enter life; others abandoned all and followed Jesus in strict obedience; they, 'the perfect', will join him in judging the Church and the world.⁴⁸

The 'perfect' or 'mature' have an exalted place in Bede's economy of knowledge and salvation.⁴⁹ He has many names for them, such as 'the truly poor' or 'the rulers' of the church. He finds symbols of them hidden everywhere in Scripture: the eyes of the Beloved in the Song of Songs, the golden crown on the altar of Moses, the soaring angels of Revelation. The 'perfect' have many tasks, not least to teach and preach. At the most fundamental level, however, they are those who have heard Jesus's dialogue with the rich young ruler and obeyed: 'If you would be perfect: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor. And, come, follow me.'⁵⁰ Bede's mind gravitates to this passage of Scripture regularly, citing it explicitly in at least ten commentaries and in his homilies.⁵¹ It also serves as a model of holiness in his historical and hagiographical writing.⁵²

In Bede's comments on the story of the rich young ruler in Luke 18: 18–30, he quotes a long and revealing section of Jerome's *Commentary on Matthew*:

Whoever wants to be perfect ought to sell what he has and not a part of it, as Ananias and Sapphira did, but everything. And when he has sold it, he must give everything to the poor, and thus prepare for himself treasure in the kingdom of heaven. Nor is this sufficient for perfection, unless after wealth has been despised, one follows the Saviour, . . . For a wallet is more easily despised than the will. Many who abandon wealth

⁴⁸ Bede, *Homily* 1.13.42 (CChr.SL 122: 89).

⁴⁹ See Zachary Guiliano, 'Hierarchies of Knowledge in the Writings of the Venerable Bede', in Michael Champion, ed., *The Intellectual World of Late Antique Christianity* (Cambridge, forthcoming).

⁵⁰ For the history of interpretation of this passage, see Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 94–9; Fink, 'Unreading Renunciation'.

⁵¹ For example, Bede, *On Genesis* 2.1151–64, 4.284–307 (CChr.SL 118: 105, 202); *On Samuel* 1.521–51, 2.701–10 (CChr.SL 119: 25, 85); *On the Tabernacle* 1.748–70 (CChr.SL 119A: 24); *On the Temple* 2.1330–45 (CChr.SL 119A: 225–6); *On Ezra* 1.703–39 (CChr.SL 119A: 258–9); *On Proverbs* 1.3.175–81 (CChr.SL 119B: 43); *On the Song of Songs* 3.4.379–404, 5.7.465–87 (CChr.SL 119B: 254, 329); *Retraction on Acts* 4.130–41 (CChr.SL 121: 127); *Homily* 1.13, 2.2.56–79 (CChr.SL 122: 88–94, 194–5). References in *On Samuel*, *On Luke* and *On Mark* are too abundant to cite here.

⁵² For example, Bede, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.5, 19, 26, 27, 4.3, 5.12, 5.19; *History of the Abbots* 1.1.

do not follow the Lord. But he follows the Lord who imitates him, and walks in his footsteps. For 'whoever says he believes in Christ ought to walk just as he walked'.⁵³

Bede repeats the same quotation in his later commentary on Mark.⁵⁴ Like renunciation, Bede regards the abandonment of wealth as ideally a singular event, a rite accomplished before one follows Christ in acts of great obedience, before becoming a teacher or preacher. This is the only way of life that is 'safe', he says, in which one may rejoice to be crucified to the world, neither 'having nor loving' possessions.⁵⁵ The tax collector Zacchaeus entered this way, an improbable 'camel' threading the eye of a needle 'after dropping the burden of his hump That is, a rich tax collector, having left behind the burden of riches, scorned the value of fraud.'⁵⁶ He thus entered the company of 'the perfect':⁵⁷

This is wise, that foolishness, which the tax collector gathered from the sycamore tree like the fruit of life: to return what was stolen, to give up one's possessions, to despise visible things for invisible, also for him to desire to die, to deny himself, and for him who was not yet seen to follow the footsteps of the Lord, to long to do so.⁵⁸

Wealth must be abandoned all at once.⁵⁹ The seriousness and rigidity with which Bede held this view is demonstrated well in his interpretation of both the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, with regard to the example of St Barnabas. He argues that some, like Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Ecclesiastical History*, thought Barnabas was among the seventy-two disciples commissioned by Jesus to preach (Luke 10: 1–23). This could not be, Bede says, because they must have renounced all they had in order to preach, while

⁵³ Bede, *On Luke* 5.1251–63, quoting Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew* 3.868–77 (CChr.SL 72: 170–1).

⁵⁴ Bede, *On Mark* 3.740–50 (CChr.SL 120: 562–3).

⁵⁵ Bede, *On Luke* 5.1274 (CChr.SL 120: 327).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 1501–4 (CChr.SL 120: 333).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 1585 (CChr.SL 120: 335).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 1592–6 (CChr.SL 120: 335).

⁵⁹ Cf. Bede, *Exposition of Acts* 20.103–5 (CChr.SL 121: 84). Bede enjoins constant manual labour in implicit appeal to the lifestyle of St Paul (2 Thess. 3), explicitly citing his instruction to thieves (Eph. 4: 28).

Barnabas clearly possessed a field at a later point (Acts 4: 36–7).⁶⁰ For Bede, the requirement for ‘the perfect’ to abandon wealth screened out other ways of resolving this question. Ritual abandonment must precede preaching.

It may be helpful to pause and note how unusual Bede’s view was in his time. In the early eighth century, giving up wealth (or abandoning kin) was not a preliminary to ordination, nor was it necessarily a preliminary to entering self-described ascetic or monastic life. Late antique and early medieval clerics routinely retained their property after ordination, even as they came to manage ecclesiastical holdings.⁶¹ In time, kings and nobles might grant land and other wealth to monasteries and churches precisely for their own use or that of their kin, or even to ‘acquire the privileges associated with ecclesiastical land’.⁶² Such churches were often founded near lordly dwellings or within their bounds. Bede himself mentions these problems in his *Letter to Ecgbert*, even as he deplors them: clerics accumulating wealth and secular lords or ‘thegns’ retreating to their estates, well served by a monastic retinue to chant and pray for them as they enjoyed food, drink and company in a sort of Christianized and Northumbrian version of late Roman *otium*.⁶³ Bede complained that his attitudes were not more common:

After all, God’s command is ‘sell what you own and give alms’, and ‘unless a man renounces everything he owns he cannot be my disciple’. But the modern custom of some who proclaim themselves as the servants of God is not only not to sell what they own but even to acquire what they did not have! What a cheek it is for a man who is about to enter the service of the Lord to dare to keep back what he had in his worldly life, or, in the guise of a holier life, to heap up riches he never possessed? And this despite the well-known condemnation of the apostles, which did not restore Ananias and Sapphira.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Bede, *Retraction on Acts* 4.130–41 (CChr.SL 121: 127); compare *On Luke* 3.1114–69, 1921–44 (CChr.SL 120: 194–6, 215).

⁶¹ See the extensive discussions in Julia Barrow, *The Clergy in the Medieval World: Secular Clerics, their Families, and Careers in North-Western Europe, c.800–c.1200* (Cambridge, 2015); Ian Wood, *The Christian Economy in the Early Medieval West: Towards a Temple Society* (Binghamton, NY, 2022), 79–105.

⁶² Sarah Foot, *Monastic Life in Anglo-Saxon England, c.600–900* (Cambridge, 2006), 80–7.

⁶³ Bede, *Letter to Ecgbert* 1.6, 10–12 (Grocock and Wood, eds, *Abbots*, 134–5, 144–9).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 1.16 (Grocock and Wood, eds, *Abbots*, 156–7), referring to Luke 12: 33, 14: 33.

Churches and monasteries could control vast estates, collect revenue and serve as centres of economic exchange and transformation, an expression of the ‘Temple society’ of the early medieval West.⁶⁵ Such trends in early England regarding ‘proprietary churches’ matched those elsewhere in Europe and their link to local revenues.⁶⁶ It is even possible that Bede’s own monastery began as a family monastery, or was at least ‘seen [by others] as a family monastery in the decades after its foundation’.⁶⁷ Its independence from family bonds may have been achieved only after some struggle.

Bede would have known differing examples of ascetic life and ministry through personal contact with other clerics and religious, and through the sources he read from Late Antiquity, which mentioned varied models: from praise and blame assigned to married clergy and to rich, holy laypeople in Jerome’s *Against Jovinian* and *Letters*, to quite different assessments in Julian of Eclanum’s commentary on the Song of Songs; from the simple abandonment of the world by early Egyptian hermits (at least in the accounts of Jerome and Athanasius), to the more complex descriptions of renunciation and the management of episcopal households in Possidius’s *Life of St Augustine* and Venantius Fortunatus’s *Life of St Martin*.⁶⁸ Even the patterns praised by Bede’s sources were broad, let alone those they denigrated. It is clear, then, that Bede was arguing for a new rigorous position, based on a particular reading of biblical and Christian traditions. His position was refracted primarily through selections of patristic exegesis and through monastic literature like John Cassian’s *Collations* or the Rule of Benedict, rather than reflecting clear practices inherited from the past or exemplified in his milieu.

Bede’s own historical works could, however, be seen to mask both this fact and the diversity of practice in his time. The outstanding clerics and monks of the *Ecclesiastical History* are most often praised for particular attitudes to wealth: the early monastic missionaries with

⁶⁵ See, for example, Ian Wood, ‘Creating a “Temple Society” in the Early Medieval West’, *Early Medieval Europe* 29 (2021), 462–86; idem, ‘Entrusting Western Europe to the Church, 400–750’, *TRHS* 6th series 23 (2013), 37–73.

⁶⁶ See Sarah Wood, *The Proprietary Church in the Medieval West* (Oxford, 2006), especially 92–108.

⁶⁷ Ian Wood, ‘The Gifts of Wearmouth and Jarrow’, in Wendy Davies and Paul J. Fouracre, eds, *The Languages of Gift in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2010), 89–115, at 96.

⁶⁸ Michael Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford, 2006), Appendix E, 191–228.

Augustine of Canterbury, imitating ‘the way of life of the apostles’ by living moderately (*HE* 1.26); Gregory the Great, urging Augustine to institute a common life among the English clergy (*HE* 1.27); Aidan of Lindisfarne, who had no possessions and gave away any gift he received, while exhorting King Oswald and others to great moderation, and eventually dying in a tent (*HE* 3.5, 6, 17); Sigebert, who saw ‘the love of riches’ as one of the fires consuming the world, and so left behind all (*HE* 3.19). Beside these, Bede ranks his own abbots and their lives: Benedict Biscop renounced high rank, Eosterwine was willing to get his hands dirty at any kind of manual labour, and Ceolfrith ate lightly and exhibited a moderation in dress ‘rarely found’ among rulers (*History of the Abbots* 1.1, 8, 16). The glow of such virtues cast others in a dimmer light.

We should see Bede’s comments – in his exegesis, his historiography and his *Letter to Egbert* – as an intervention in his society, part of a larger attempt at reforming the church’s structures to conform them more closely with what he saw as the commands of Jesus, the example of the early church and the nature of Christian maturity. This explains his consistent return to the story of the rich ruler and the call of Jesus (‘If you would be perfect’). He saw faults in contemporary practices and rites, and he had seen an example of living holiness in his own community, in the willingness to abandon all for the sake of the kingdom. Bede’s attempt to amend the church of his day probably took many forms, but among them was his attempt to insist on two preliminary rites to baptism, ordination and monastic profession: giving up wealth, spiritually and practically.

A final note: Bede discusses the renunciation of wealth and its material abandonment as dramatic one-time actions that potentially brought a person into the kingdom of God or the company of the spiritually mature. However, other comments suggest that he recognized that managing one’s attitude and practices toward wealth was far more complicated. For example, the everyday Christian’s life after baptism might include freedom to ‘enjoy the world’ (*fruuntur hoc mundo*), although that life was meant to be marked by continual patterns of merciful giving to the needy and to the church.⁶⁹ If one’s desires and practices were not perpetually oriented toward reaching heaven, a single promise, intention or rite made little difference.

⁶⁹ See Bede, *On the Song of Songs* 4.6.103–10 (CChr.SL 119B: 302).

Similarly, abandonment of wealth had to be accompanied by continual work, what Bede affirmed as ‘work with one’s hands’ to provide for those in need. One had to attend to the state of one’s soul if it had been lacerated by riches, and to one’s mind, suffocated by the privileges and ease of wealth. ‘It is the greatest labour for those having money or trusting in money to enter the court of the heavenly kingdom, casting off the bonds of greed’ (*flargiria*).⁷⁰ Passage into the class of ‘the perfect’ committed each teacher or preacher to a state of continual progress and moral purification. And this progress was marked practically: did they continue to give away to the needy and poor anything they acquired? To renounce or relinquish wealth could be both a ‘rite of passage’, then, and a perpetual state of being, requiring varied ‘rites of maintenance’.⁷¹ For ‘the poor’ or ‘the perfect’, renouncing wealth and abandoning it were acts to be done once and always.

CONCLUSION

It would be tempting to conclude that Bede’s views were idiosyncratic, limited to his time and place. That may be partly true. However, the popularity of his work ensured that his understanding of poverty and perfection became embedded within Western exegesis. When Bede first expressed these ideas, they may have been strange or extreme; they became widespread. His commentaries, including *On Luke*, were among the standard patristic texts from the Carolingian period onwards, attested in library catalogues, extant manuscripts and many citations.⁷² Like Bede’s other works, *On Luke* was a major source for liturgical and homiletic collections like the Homiliary of Paul the Deacon, Ælfric’s *Catholic Homilies* and

⁷⁰ Bede, *On Luke* 5.1280–2 (CChr.SL 120: 327).

⁷¹ See, in this volume, Benjamin Hansen, ‘Making Christians in the Umayyad Levant: Anastasius of Sinai and Christian Rites of Maintenance’, 98–118.

⁷² Rosamond McKitterick, ‘Kulturelle Verbindungen zwischen England und den fränkischen Reichen in der Zeit der Karolinger. Kontext und Implikationen’, in Joachim Ehlers, ed., *Deutschland und der Westen Europas im Mittelalter* (Stuttgart, 2002), 121–48; Joshua Westgard, ‘Bede and the Continent in the Carolingian Age and Beyond’, in Scott DeGregorio, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Bede* (Cambridge, 2010), 201–15; Hannah Matis, *The Song of Songs in the Early Middle Ages*, Studies in the History of Christian Traditions 191 (Leiden, 2019), 22–3, 219–21. This conclusion draws on material from my forthcoming *Bede’s Economy*.

many other compilations or translations of patristic and early medieval material.⁷³ Each year, Charlemagne would listen to Bede's comments on the renunciations of Zacchaeus, likely at the annual dedication feast of St Mary's, Aachen.⁷⁴ A commentator like Rabanus Maurus would import nearly all of Bede's commentary on the rich young ruler and other passages into his own *Exposition of Matthew*,⁷⁵ while others, like Paschasius Radbertus or Sedulius Scottus, were more selective.⁷⁶ Other writers of homilies and gospel commentaries, such as Haimo and Heiric of Auxerre, Abbo of Saint-Germain and many anonymous authors, would find *On Luke* an invaluable resource, including for their comments on poverty and renunciation.⁷⁷ Such works helped direct and shape numerous later 'glosses' and related works, including the *Ordinary Gloss*, the *Golden*

⁷³ Guiliano, *Homiliary*, 107–13, 163–97.

⁷⁴ It is among the texts assigned in Charlemagne's homiliary *On the Dedication of a Church*: see Réginald Grégoire, *Homélieaires liturgiques médiévaux* (Spoleto, 1980), 477 (entry for Paul the Deacon, 2: 129; renumbered to 2: 128 in Guiliano, *Homiliary*, 65).

⁷⁵ Rabanus included material from Bede's works on Mark and Luke and *Homily* 1.13: *Exposition of Matthew* 5 (on 19: 16–30; CChr.CM 174A: 513–22).

⁷⁶ Sedulius Scottus, *On the Gospel of Matthew* 2.3 (*Sedulius Scottus. Kommentar zum Evangelium nach Matthäus*, ed. Bengt Löfstedt, 2 vols [Freiburg, 1989–91], 2: 445–6); 'Index auctorum', in Paschasius Radbertus, *Expositio in Mattheo*, vol. 3 (CChr.CM 56B), 1543–4.

⁷⁷ For example, Haimo, *Homilia* 2.18 (PL 118: 589D, 592C–D, 596B–C, 597A–D), drawing on Bede, *On Luke* 5.242–460 (CChr.SL 120: 302–7); *ibid.* 2.51 (PL 118: 776C–777C, 778D, 779B–D), drawing on Bede, *On Luke* 2.1415–31, 1478–9, 5.1218–63, 1542–8 (CChr.SL 120: 136, 138, 326–7, 334). There are 227 Bedan quotations in 'Index auctorum', *Heirici Autissiodorensis Homiliae*, vol. 3 (CChr.CM 116B), 529–33. For Abbo, compare Bede, *On Luke* 2.1865–70, 4.448–51 (CChr.SL 120: 157, 242) with *Estote misericordes*, in *Abbo von Saint-Germain-des-Prés. 22 Predigten, kritische Ausgabe und Kommentar*, ed. Ute Ötnerfors (Frankfurt am Main and New York, 1985), 194, 196–7. Compare also *Sermonary of Beaune* 2 with Bede, *On Luke* 2.2087–8, 2091–3, 2060–3, 2098–2104, 2126–38 respectively, and *On Luke* 2.25–161 (CChr.SL 120: 71–3, 100–4). See also Michael T. Martin, 'The Italian Homiliary: Texts and Contexts' (PhD thesis, Western Michigan University, 2005), especially *Homilies* 53, 56, 62, 65, 70, 78, 99, 113; Raymond Étaix, 'Le Sermonnaire carolingien de Beaune', *Revue des études augustiniennes* 25 (1979), 105–49; Henri Barré, 'L'Homeliare carolingien de Mondsee', *Revue bénédictine* 71 (1961), 71–107, at 83–90. Also compare Paul Mercier, *Quatorze homélies du IXe siècle d'un auteur inconnu de l'Italie du Nord*, Sources Chrétiennes 161 (Paris, 1970), 155 (Homily 2.1), with Bede, *On Luke* 1.1026–36, 1049–55, 1166–9 (CChr.SL 120: 45, 48). Another unedited Bavarian homiliary used Bede: for example, compare Bamberg, Staatsbibliothek, Msc. Patr. 156 (s. ix), fols 9^r, 10^r with Bede, *On Luke* 1.1064–1120, 1240–1, 1281–4, 1296–1328 (CChr.SL 120: 46, 50, 51, 52).

*Chain of Thomas Aquinas, and the Wycliffite Glossed Gospels.*⁷⁸ These ensured that Bede's rigorist positions were put before varied eyes and into many ears, due to the central place of such glosses in late medieval exegesis and scholarship. To provide a few examples: Bede's comments on Luke 14: 33, about the necessity of renunciation by all the faithful and relinquishment by the perfect, were regularly quoted or adapted.⁷⁹ Other comments on Luke 18: 24 – on the distinction between 'having wealth and loving wealth' and the 'safe' status of abandoning all – were also commonly referred to until the Reformation.⁸⁰ It would be easy to show other examples of Bede's exegetical influence.

Were there any direct consequences? A consideration of monastic profession may be the simplest, since (by and large) the abandonment of personal wealth gradually became a *sine qua non* of the monastic or religious life, though it took hundreds of years of development and no small amount of royal and imperial intervention to make it so. Diverse ascetic experiments existed before Bede's day; later they came to centre on a particular model. Whilst we can hardly argue that Bede alone brought about such a change, his exegesis permeated the places where these discussions were held.

The consequences for the preliminaries to ordination or baptism were not the same. Clerical wealth was a source of uneasiness right

⁷⁸ On the latter, see Andrew Kraebel, *Biblical Commentary and Translation in Later Medieval England: Experiments in Interpretation* (Cambridge, 2020), especially 133–75.

⁷⁹ See Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of St Luke* 14.33; idem, *Questiones disputatae de perfectione euangelica* 2.1.6; Henry of Ghent, *Quodlibet VII*, Q.29; Thomas Aquinas, *Golden Chain on Luke* 14.33; idem, *Contra impugnantes Dei cultum et religionem* 5.1; Zacharias Chrysopolitanus, *In unum ex quattuor* 2.67. Condensed version: *Ordinary Gloss on Luke* 14.33; Denys the Carthusian, *Enarratio in euangelium secundum Lucam* 14.33; Petrus Iohannis Olivi, *Lecture on Luke* 2.14.33. Paraphrased: John Wycliff, *Tractatus de ciuili domino* 3.14.

⁸⁰ Quoted in full by Rabanus Maurus, *Exposition of Matthew* 6 (on 19: 23); Sedulius Scottus, *On the Gospel of Matthew* 2.3.20 (on 19: 23); Claudius of Turin, *Exposition of Matthew* 19.23; Aquinas, *Contra impugnantes Dei cultum et religionem* 6.207–8. Quoted in part: *Ordinary Gloss on Matthew* 19.23; Zacharias Chrysopolitanus, *In unum ex quattuor* 3.106; Aquinas, *Golden Chain* 19.23; Bonaventure, *Luke* 18.24. Also Iohannes Pecham, *Quaestio de perfectione euangelica*; Petrus Cantor, *Summa quae dicitur Verbum abbreviatum*, Franciscus de Marchia sive Franciscus de Esculo, *Improbatio contra libellum domni Iohannis qui incipit 'Quia uir reprobus'*; Marsilius de Padua, *Defensor Pacis* 2.13.20. Condensed: *Ordinary Gloss on Luke* 18.24. Paraphrased: Christian of Stavelot, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* 19.23; perhaps also Alcuin, *Letter* 182: 'It is one thing to hold the world, and another to be held by it'.

through the Middle Ages; and Bede's comments became part of the war over gospel poverty waged in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries between the mendicant orders and secular clerics. Bede's comments also became part of the critique of church wealth and of the papacy, not least by John Wycliff and Marsilius of Padua. Still, Bede and others failed to make the abandonment of wealth a universal characteristic of preachers and a preliminary to ordination. The rites of Christian initiation also remained without any formal or explicit renunciation of wealth. Candidates for baptism might be exorcized, anointed with oil, rubbed with saliva or given the salt of wisdom; they would renounce the devil, his works and his pomps; they would be catechized. But if there was a baptismal rite that explicitly included renouncing wealth, it has yet to emerge.

Perhaps this tells us something about rites of passage in relation to this framework of Christian exegesis. Within the religious culture of the Latin West, no single attitude toward the renunciation or management of wealth was dominant. Bede's views were specific and stringent, and he was among the authors most likely to be studied, quoted and followed. His views no doubt inspired some to renounce or abandon possessions, but they did not and could not attain universal observance. There were formal preliminaries to baptism, ordination and monastic profession. Learned exegetes like Bede hoped for more, and found existing rites wanting; they thought this precisely because of their participation in the centuries-long tradition of scriptural commentary. Their heightened literacy brought an intense sense of the demands of Christian obedience and its ideal expression in ritual form. For that reason, what they regarded as the true form and requirements of a rite or ceremony were not always shared with their contemporaries.

Baptism, ordination and monastic profession may have been designed to mark or effect the passage from sin to salvation, from youth to maturity, from one state of consecration to another; yet they did not always grant what they promised. In this way, to Bede and many others, they might serve *merely* as rituals: the ceremonies of a particular culture, marking an individual's stages in life, rather than providing the doorway to the heavenly kingdom or a necessary step along the path to perfection. This was not because the medieval Latin West lacked a commitment to rites and ceremonies or a pervading sense of the holy. Nor did it lack literacy or the systematization of rites. But its members had not, in the eyes of some contemporaries,

undergone the transformations expected. We have an echo here of Buc's contention regarding ineffectual solemnities: the moral and social status of practitioners could result in the loss of *mysteria*.⁸¹

For historians looking back on the Middle Ages or considering the validity or usefulness of van Gennep's model, this has no little significance. The model of the sacred and profane presented in *Les Rites de passage* was highly eurocentric and bound to the early twentieth century. Its mode of analysis relied in part on a hierarchical view of cultures and religions that many today would find distasteful. It possessed hidden debts to Christian theology. Nonetheless, some of its observations provide fruitful sites for interaction. The observation of a culture's major rituals, undertaken without explicit commitment regarding their ability to achieve what they promise, is not necessarily a position requiring the eyes of a twentieth-century anthropologist or a commitment to secular modernity. One need not be a van Gennep making observations about a culture deemed foreign or primitive. A Bede or a Bonaventure could observe Christian rites and subject them to analysis, regard them with a critical eye and question their purpose. So can we. For historians of our day, on the other side of the development of anthropology and other social studies, this is an important point, whatever our confessional position. Anthropologists and folklorists like van Gennep often chose to focus on the local and the specific, the strange and idiosyncratic, and this has opened up greater possibilities and interest for historical work ever since. What we may wish to remedy or fill in, however, is the gaps they left: to reconsider, say, Savoyan baptismal or marriage customs alongside formal church rites; to place the apparently unique in its broader setting.

For the topic explored here, the renunciation of wealth, this remains a task of significance and interest. Clearly, the Church has long been imbricated in the economic transformations of broader European society. It produced a vast array of positions regarding wealth, some justifying and some undercutting many economic orders. These positions filled the highest and most common products of Christian literary culture: biblical commentaries and sermons. The stances taken in such works were not abstract or merely theoretical but arose in particular institutional settings and had material manifestations. How many thousands, if not millions, of people sought gospel perfection through renunciation? How many Christian

⁸¹ Buc, *Dangers of Ritual*, 175–6.

foundations were richly endowed or maintained as a result? In positioning preliminaries to the Church's rites of passage, Bede helped fashion a self-critical and often tumultuous ecclesiastical culture, ready to castigate the wealthy and powerful and seek economic purity. These may not be qualities we associate with him, with biblical exegesis or with church rites, but that is only because we have yet to attend closely to the turnings of this history.