


1-2019

Question 66 - Who were Caedmon, Bede, and King Alfred?

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Recommended Citation

Willmington, Harold, "Question 66 - Who were Caedmon, Bede, and King Alfred?" (2019). *101 Most Asked Questions*. 43.

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101 MOST ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE

66. Who were Caedmon, Bede, and King Alfred?

A. Caedmon

1. Caedmon (680), one of the earliest English Christian poets, perhaps born in Northumbria. Probably was a poor, illiterate herdsman who worked on the Abbey lands at Streanaeshalech (Whitby) in Old Northumbria. Venerable Bede reports Caedmon had a vision and was commanded to sing the creation story of Genesis. Had never done anything like it, but obeyed. Soon, as if divinely inspired, began turning out early Bible stories into simple but vigorous verse; continued to write Old and New Testament stories in Anglo-Saxon verse. The Abbess Hilda and monks admitted him as an honored member of their order. His Bible poetry captured imagination of Anglo-Saxons and circulated among common people.

(Who Was Who In Church History. Elgin Moyer. Keats Publishing. New Canaan, Conn. 1974. p. 70)

2. Caedmon died in 680. He started off as a servant who worked in the stables at a monastery in Whitby, in the north of England. At first sight, it is strange that he should be listed among Bible translators, because he never translated the scriptures! Yet he did make the Bible available to ordinary men and women, and in a striking and memorable way.

It was the practice for everyone in the monastery to meet in the great hall for a meal at the end of the day. They gathered around a roaring fire and entertained each other by singing with the harp, each one taking turns. Every night, just when it was Caedmon's turn, he would get up and leave, muttering something about the needs of the horses, or the cattle. On one of these nights, while he was pottering in the stable, a "heavenly visitor" came to him, and said, "Caedmon, sing to me!"

He said, "I cannot sing, and for that reason I left the feast."

The voice repeated, "Sing to me."

Caedmon asked, "What shall I sing?"

The visitor said, "Sing of the beginning of created things." Caedmon began, and was amazed at the beauty of the song he was singing, and all he suddenly knew. The next day, the visitor had gone, but the gift remained. The abbess Hilda, seeing the powerful poetic gift he now possessed, persuaded him to leave secular employment and enter monastic life. A monk would read to him from the Latin Bible, and translate its meaning.

Then Caedmon would convert it into poetry, holding his audience spellbound as he sang about the truths of the Bible. Caedmon was one of the earliest poets in England and his songs became a Bible for the people.

(*The Indestructible Book*. Ken Connally. Baker Books. Grand Rapids, Michigan. 1996. p. 55)

B. Bede

1. Bede, the Venerable (672-735) English monk, scholar, Church historian, born in or near Yarrow of North England. Early placed in a monastery, spent life as a teacher, preacher, and writer in monasteries near birthplace. An apt and diligent student, well versed in the Scriptures, in the Latin Fathers, and in other branches of current learning, is said to have been the most learned Englishman of his day. At nineteen he was made a deacon and at thirty a priest. He was a successful, and much beloved teacher and a voluminous writer. Best known and most valuable writing: *Ecclesiastical History of the Saxons*, translated from the Latin by King Alfred into the Anglo-Saxon. Wrote a number of commentaries, homilies, hymns, and lives of the saints.

(*Who Was Who In Church History*. Elgin Moyer. Keats Publishing. New Canaan, Conn. 1974. p. 34)

2. He is known as “the Father of English History.” His important work is the translation of the Gospel of John, which he finished just as he was breathing his last. All the day before Ascension Day, 735, the good old monk of Jarrow-on-the-Tyne, North England, had been dictating his translation, for he said, “I do not want my boys to read a lie, or to work to no purpose after I am gone.” The next day he was very weak, and suffered much. His scribe said, “Dear master, there is yet one chapter to do, but it seems very hard for you to speak.” “Nay, it is easy, take up thy pen and write quickly.” In blinding tears the scribe wrote on. “And now, father, there is just one sentence more.” Bede dictated it and said, “Write quickly.” “It is finished, master.” “Ay, it is finished!” echoed the dying saint, and with the Gloria chant upon his lips he passed to the great Master whom he had loved and served so long. His name will live always in the story of the English Bible and the History and Literature of England.

(*General Biblical Introduction*. H. S. Miller. The Word Bearer Press. Houghton, N.Y. 1952. p. 321)

- C. **Alfred** – The next Bible translator is the Saxon King Alfred (849-899). During Alfred’s reign the Danes were invading the north of England, destroying monasteries and libraries. Alfred struggled to protect his kingdom, eventually securing the southern half of England. His mother was a godly woman from whom Alfred gained a love of books, especially the Bible; and he became a

teacher, a writer and a translator of the Scriptures. He translated the Ten Commandments and placed them at the head of his laws for England. He also translated the Psalms, and a portion of the Gospels. His wish was "that all the freeborn youth of his kingdom should employ themselves on nothing till they could first read well the English Scriptures."

(*The Indestructible Book*. Ken Connolly. Baker Books. Grand Rapids, Michigan.1996. p. 56)