

COSMIC TIME: HISTORY AND THE SIX AGES OF THE WORLD

Bede gained from St. Augustine an idea of world history in Six Ages, the Age following Christ's coming being the sixth. Existing in parallel with the Sixth Age on earth is the Seventh Age in which the blessed who have lived and died enjoy the presence of God in a perpetual Sabbath. The Eighth Age will begin on the last day. The Six Ages can be said to mirror the six days of creation, with the seventh equating to the day on which God rested.

This symbolic idea then gained a chronological dimension as chronicles of world history (drawn from the narrative of the Bible) came to be written and organised according to a six-part structure. Thus the progress of human history in the world is shown to reflect God's work of creation.

Bede developed these ideas in his study *De Ratione Temporum* of 725 (*DTR* - On the Reckoning of Time) in which he gave a World Chronicle. In this way, one strand of historical writing, the chronicle, coalesces with and gains meaning from theology.

The texts quoted here in italic are from Chapter 66 of *DTR* in the edition and commentary by

- **Faith Wallace - *Bede: The Reckoning of Time*. Liverpool University Press, 1999.**

Thus, when he came to write the *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede, from his study of the Six Ages and his writing of chronicles, had both a conceptual model and a time-based framework which he could use as allegorical reference for the history of his own people. The division of the *Ecclesiastical History* into five books reflects the five ages; the sixth age is Bede's present day, about which he says little in the History; the saints whose work on earth is described in the five books, enjoy the seventh age of the perpetual Sabbath. It is evident from the letter which he wrote to Egbert, Bishop of York, just before his death that Bede saw his own day, the Sixth Age, as one of decay.

The Oxford World Classics edition of the *Ecclesiastical History* gives a translation of the *Letter to Egbert*.

Brief notes after each part of the *DTR* text suggest how each of the five books of the *Ecclesiastical History* reflects its Age. These are taken from:

- **Benedicta Ward – *The Venerable Bede*. Geoffrey Chapman, 1998.**

1: Adam to Noah - Infancy

The First Age of this world is from Adam to Noah containing 1,656 years according to the Hebrew Truth and 2,242 according to the Septuagint, and ten generations according to both versions. This, the First Age, was wiped out in the universal Flood, just as the first age of every individual is usually submerged in oblivion, for how many people can remember their infancy.

E H Book 1: The infancy of Christianity among the Anglo-Saxons. Augustine was sent to bring them to birth through baptism.

2: Noah to Abraham - Childhood

The Second Age from Noah to Abraham comprises ten generations and 292 years according to the Hebrew authority, but according to the Septuagint 272 years and eleven generations. This was, so to speak, the childhood of God's people, and therefore it is discovered in a language, that is, in Hebrew, because from childhood on, when infancy is over - which is so called because an infant cannot speak - a person begins to learn to speak.

E H Book 2: The growth of the English church and the passing of the first generation of converts.

3: Abraham to David - Adolescence

The Third Age from Abraham to David contains fourteen generations and 942 years according to both authorities. This age was like the adolescence of the people of God, because from this age on, a person can reproduce. For this reason, the evangelist Matthew takes the beginning of the generations of Christ from Abraham, who was established as the father of the nation when he received his altered name.

E H Book 3 The fruitful life of the Church in Northumbria

4: David to Exile in Babylon - Youth

The Fourth Age from David up to the Exile to Babylon has 473 years according to Hebrew Truth, twelve more according to the Sepuagint, and seventeen generations according to both texts. However, the evangelist Matthew puts these generations at fourteen, for the sake of a certain symbolism. From this age - youth, so to speak - the era of the kings began among the people of God, for this age in man is normally apt for governing a kingdom.

E H Book 4 Establishment of firm leadership for the Church under its 'princes' Theodore and Hadrian.

5: Exile to the Coming of Christ - Maturity

The Fifth Age - maturity, if you will, from the Exile into Babylon until the coming of our Lord and Saviour in the flesh, extends for fourteen generations and 589 years. In this Age the Hebrew people were weakened by many evils, as if wearied by heavy age.

E H Book 5 Portents of disasters to come are recorded.

6: Current - Senility

The Sixth Age, which is now in progress, is not fixed according to any sequence of generations or times, but like senility, this Age will come to an end in the death of the whole world.

E H: the book in its totality.

7 and 8: The Eternal Sabbath and Resurrection

By a happy death, everyone will overcome these Ages of the world and when they have been received into the Seventh Age of perennial Sabbath, they look forward to the Eighth Age of the blessed resurrection, in which they will reign forever with the Lord.