

The Role of the Bible in Celtic Christianity:¹

The Bible was the heart and heartbeat of Christian living for Celtic Christians. Their thinking, conduct, teaching, art, and worship were directly influenced by the Scriptures. New monks were taught to read primarily to use the bible in meditation and to form their monastic lives. Biblical texts, images, and wisdom appear in the teaching of all the saints, poets, and song writers. The written lives of the saints are filled with biblical images and link the lives, miracles, and conduct of the saints to biblical characters, especially Jesus.

Some examples of the primacy of Scripture in Celtic saints:

- **Patrick**, (whose life overlapped with Nonn and Dewi) in his short *Confession* and the shorter *Letter to Coroticus* used 340 quotations from 46 books of the Bible. He was known as “the man of the lasting language”, i.e. the bible. The *Hymn of Secundus* eulogizes the fundamental role of Scriptures in Patrick’s life:
“He finds in the sacred volume the sacred treasure...
Whose words are seasoned with divine oracles...
Whose seeds are seen to be the Gospel of Christ...
He sings hymns with the Apocalypse, and the Psalms of God,
On which also he discourses, for the edification of the people of God;
Which Scripture he believes, in the Trinity of the sacred name,
And teaches the One substance in Three Persons.” (30)
- **Gildas**, a contemporary of Nonn, uses extensive quotations from the Bible in his history of Britain, *De Excidio*.
- **The Venerable Bede**, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, admires Celtic missionaries because they “diligently followed whatever pure and devout customs that they learned in the prophets, the Gospels, and the writings of the Apostles”. (30)
- **Finnian**;, who was a contemporary of Nonn received part of his training at Ty Gwyn where Nonn and Dewi were also trained. He advised Patrick to return to Ireland so that Dewi could be established in Dyfed. When Finnian returned to Ireland he founded Clonnard, a large monastery that

¹ For more details see: Leslie Hardinge, *The Celtic Church in Britain*, London: SPCK, 1973.)

emphasized the Bible and was a teaching center for many missionary monks who went to Europe.

- **The Lives of the Saints** refers to the central role of Scripture:
 - Samson:** was "...very often immersed in search and in learning the Holy Scriptures".
 - Dewi:** not only studied Scriptures, but searched for the *inner, spiritual meaning* of what he read and reflected on.

Versions of the Bible: early in the Celtic use of the bible the Old Latin version was used, called the Itala, similar to version used in Africa and Gall (31). By the time of Nonn, Jerome's translation, the Vulgate, was becoming more common.

Importance and Centrality of the Bible among Celtic Christians came from the influence of the Desert Fathers:

In the same way that desert monasticism became foundation for the spread of monasticism in Gall and Britain, the centrality of Scripture in the spirituality of the desert became the primary influence for Celtic spirituality and life. The Word in the desert was two-fold: Holy Scripture and the words of the fathers and mothers. The direct influence of the Bible for monastic life came from John Cassian, through his *Institutes* and *Conferences*. The example of Dewi Sant in "seeking in inner meaning of the Scriptures", which he must have learned first from Nonn, displays the methods of the desert elders: rather than rely primarily on commentators or teachers Cassian learned from the abbas to spend time in prayer (openness to God), fasting, and meditation to understanding Scripture and the experience God's presence. Study of Scripture was, for Cassian, a dialogue, not a linear academic or rational activity. The purpose of Scripture was transformation, but education. Scripture was taught to change one's life, to become manifest, tangible, in the way a person lived.

Therefore, Celtic monks, and laity, were taught to embed study and reflection on Scripture with a pattern of prayer, study, active work, and love of neighbor, in the same way as the desert fathers and mothers.

There was always the challenge to discover truth in "pagan" or secular literature as well as the Bible. Cassian's friend and companion in the desert asked Abba Nestorus how one could clear the mind of secular learning. The abba replied: "Read the sacred books with the same zeal that you read the heathen authors and your thoughts will be pure". (33) Note that Nestorus does not advise eliminating the learning of secular authors, but place priority on the Bible. The Bible will lead one to wisdom and truth and help a person to interpret all sources of knowledge.

The Celtic saints and preachers placed their theology and life totally within the authority and richness of the Bible. Here are two examples from Nonn's period:

From Pelagius in a letter to Demetrius:

“at one time, therefore, let the sequence of heavenly history instruct, at another a holy song of David delight, at another the Wisdom of Solomon inform, at another the rebukes of the prophets arouse; at another the perfection of the evangelists and apostles unite you with Christ in a life of complete sanctity”. (B.R. Rees, *The Letters of Pelagius and His Followers*, Woodbridge: 1991, XXIII.2) (Notice that Pelagius believes that the hearing and reading of Scripture is an experience that UNITES a person with Christ and that the purpose is a transformation that result in A LIFE OF SANCTITY.)

The seventh century Anglo-Saxon monk and bishop Aldhelm, abbot of Malmesbury, received his early education in an Irish monastery. He reflects the earlier Irish/Brithonic emphasis on immersing one's life in the Bible. He exhorts the nuns at Barking to be:

“roaming widely through the flowering fields of scriptures, traverse (the Bible) with thirsty curiosity, now energetically plumbing the divine oracles of the ancient prophets foretelling long in advance the advent of the Savior with certain affirmations; now scrutinizing with careful application the hidden mysteries of the ancient laws miraculously drawn up by (Moses)...now exploring wisely the evangelical story (the Gospels), expounded through the mystical commentaries of the catholic fathers (patristic writers)...”

(Aldhelm, *On Virginity*, M. Lapidge and M.W. Herren, trans., Cambridge: 1985, 61-62, quoted in Herren and Brown, 116.)

Early Celtic Christian teachers and preachers tended to regard the biblical texts in a literal fashion, rather than use allegory or commentaries:

Early Celtic monks had fewer sources from Europe and the Patristics and used the bible in a more literal way than later Celtic monks and teachers. It was not until the eighth century that the wandering Celtic monks brought back a greater supply of the manuscripts of the Patristic Fathers, along with their allegorical interpretations and scholarly commentaries. As mentioned above, the Celtic monks found meaning for their lives from meditating on the texts of the Bible directly.

Methods of Celtic biblical interpretation:

The primary concern of the Celtic exegete and homilist was the **practical meaning for daily life**. In the fifth and sixth centuries biblical interpretation was not as sophisticated as in later centuries. Yet there is a glimpse of how they approached Scripture in the biography of Columba:

- ...a passage would be read and compared to the teaching in other texts
- ...passages from the OT would be compared to the teaching of the NT
- ...there would be an historical approach
- ...followed by thought or sense, understanding or meaning
- ...followed by a moral or practical interpretation
- ...followed by a mystical interpretation

i.e.: the story, the meaning, the morality, the inner meaning.

All these aspects led to the most important purpose: transformed living in daily life. In Nonn's day this process would have been less sophisticated than in the 8th century or later. Even though it was less "academic" or rational, it was no less substantive, relying on the biblical text, itself, and the Spirit as the teacher in prayer. There is a clear influence from the desert elders.

The bottom line is expressed by Airbhertach in the 11th century in a poem reflecting on this Celtic manner of learning Scripture. He outlines the fourth aspects and the poem ends with: "The morality after that (the preceding three steps) severally to every just one." (39) In the end, the process is to affect the moral behavior of every person.