

Bede's the Poet Caedmon and the Influence of Islam *

Dr. Abdul-Jabbar Jassim Mohammad

Asst. Prof., College of Arts, University of Mosul

Abstract

Bede is one of the English literary writers whose works show Oriental and Islamic elements. This aspect in Bede's writings has been completely ignored by Western scholars who intentionally deny any Islamic influence not only on Bede but on other Western writers though there is possibility that his writings reveal many Oriental and Islamic thematic analogies.

After reading Bede's works we find many irrefutable evidence of his unacknowledged interest in the Islamic and Oriental scientific heritage. The impact of the Orient on Bede's works is apparent and clearly reflected in his poem *The Poet Caedmon* which is an imitation to the story of Prophet Mohammad (peace upon him) and the descend of Al- Wahi.

A brief comparison between the two stories provides us with evidence that the latter story probably was based on the former. This fact is undeniable since the analogies between the two are striking. One of these analogies is that both stories are religious and their main subjects are the revelation of religions: Caedmon's main idea is the appearance of Christianity and its development, while the story of Al-Wahi is also a religious one and deals with the appearance of Islam and its development.

Another obvious analogy is both Prophet Mohammad's (peace be upon him) and Caedmon's religious missions are conveyed through an ordinary person in *Caedmon* and Al-Wahi in story of Mohammed.

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أثر الإسلام على قصيدة (الشاعر "كيدمون") للشاعر بيد*

د. عبد الجبار جاسم محمد

استاذ مساعد، كلية الآداب، جامعة الموصل

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المستخلص

يعدّ الشاعر الإنكليزي "بيد" واحداً من الأدباء الذين أبدوا اهتماماً لديانات الشرق وآدابه، وقد انعكس هذا الاهتمام في العديد من أعماله الأدبية. وقد أنكر الكثير من المستشرقين والباحثين الغربيين أي أثر للشرق والدين الإسلامي في أعماله الأدبية على الرغم من وجود الكثير من أوجه الشبه بين أعماله وأعمال شرقية.

وبعد قراءتنا للعمل الأدبي "الشاعر كيدمون" وجدنا أن هناك شبهاً كبيراً مع قصة نزول الوحي على النبي محمد صلى الله عليه وسلم عام ٦١٠م. وبعد إجراء المقارنة بين قصة نزول الوحي وقصة "الشاعر كيدمون" وجدنا العديد من أوجه الشبه والاختلاف بين العمليين. إذ إنهما يتناولان ظهور الديانة الإسلامية والمسيحية بالتتابع. وهناك تشابه بين تفاصيل الحوار الذي جرى بين الوحي والنبي محمد صلى الله عليه وسلم من جهة وبين الشاعر والشخص الذي يحاور الشاعر في الحلم من جهة أخرى. فضلاً عن أن هناك تشابهاً كبيراً بين ورقة بن نوفل والفارس إذ يحكما أن ما رآه النبي والشاعر هو من علامات النبوة.

إن نقاط التشابه هذه وغيرها لا تدع مجالاً للشك في أن الشاعر بيد قد اعتمد على قصة نزول الوحي مع إجراء العديد من التغيرات لتلائم أذواق قرائه من جهة وإخفاء فضل قصة نزول الوحي عليه.

(*) تم استلام البحث في ٢٠١٣/٦/١، قُدمَ البحث في الندوة الأولى لقسم اللغة الانكليزية المنعقدة تحت عنوان (قضايا معاصرة في اللغة والأدب)، وحصل على قبول النشر في ٢٠١٣/٧/٢.

For many centuries, the Orient, its culture, beliefs and religions have constituted a stimulating source of curiosity and inspiration for Western imagination and creativity. The Orient has always a unique fascination for the Western imaginative mind including literary figures. This fact has been confirmed by many literary critics and writers as well. In a letter to his friend Warren Hasting (1732 -1818), Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) confirms his admiration and respect to the role of the Orient in human civilization. So he openly expresses his desire to visit this fantastic region:

I shall hope, that he who once intended to increase his learning of his country...will examine nicely the traditions and histories of the East; that he will survey the wonders of its ancient edifices, and trace the vestiges of its ruined cities; and that, at his return, we shall know the arts and the opinions of a race of men ... from whom very little has been hitherto derived. There are arts of manufacture practiced in the countries in which you preside, which are yet very imperfectly known here, either to artificers or philosopher ... many of these things my first wish is to see (Chapman, 1968, 1717-1718).

Moreover, some literary figures describe the Orient in a metaphorical manner. George Eliot, (1819-1890), for instance, believes that the East is not only the direction of sun rise and thus immediate source of life, but it is:

The place where beautiful flowers, strange animals, precious fabrics, and valuable species originated, besides the great religions ... and the world's internationally renowned collections of tales (ex oriente fabula). (Zipes, 2000, 370)

On the same subject, George Eliot comments on the established significance of the Orient on English literature, she says:

No act of religious symbolism has a deeper root in nature than that of turning with reverence to the East. For almost all our good things ... our arts, our religious and philosophical ideas, our very nursery tales and romances have traveled to us from the East. In an historical as well as a physical sense, the East is the land of morning. (De Mester, 1915, 2)

Martha Conant, on the other hand, emphasizes the irrefutable impact of the Orient and Oriental literature, namely *The Arabian Nights* on the English literature when she says:

The Oriental tales must have supplied the clue for which popular writers were searching, and if The Arabian Nights had not been translated into English, there would have been no Robinson Crusoe and Gulliver's Travels. (Conant, 1966, 242)

Finally, T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), who devoted his career to a defense of the English and European traditions, made an expressive remark on the significance of the Orient. He wrote that the great philosophers of India "make most of the great European philosophers look like schoolboys" (Perl and Tuck: 1985, 116). These points of view and others are irrefutable testimonies from prominent Western literary figures for the impact of the Orient and Oriental literature on English literary tradition.

A careful reading of the English literature will demonstrate an obvious interest of Occidental writers in the Orient and Islam as well.

This interest becomes quite noticeable in its extensiveness and vigor. To make an accurate study of the influence of the Orient on the West, it is too appropriate to divide the Oriental contact with the West into three phases: the first is antiquity, the middle Ages during the late Thirteenth and early Fourteenth Centuries. Concentration on the most effective means (channels) of communication between the East and the West will be of great significance. In addition to this, more attention will be devoted to the most important Oriental books which penetrated and were absorbed into Western literature.

It is worth to mention that Oriental lands were the first places where man first organized into a settled form of society, cultivating grain and raising livestock, establishing cities and promoting diverse skills and occupations. In such places, rich and complex cultures were nourished, namely, ancient Egypt, summer, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia and India. It is in the Orient that three great religions Judaism, Christianity and Islam appeared. Indeed, while Europe was living in Dark Ages, the Orientals were at their apogee and the Oriental civilization at its zenith. It was the Orientals, specially the Muslims and Arabs, who contributed to science and humanities that paved the way for the rise of the West through the ages.

One of the literary figures whose works might show Oriental elements is the Venerable Bede (673-735). He is the earliest important prose writer and the first historian in England. He was a contemporary to the first English poet of note, the unknown author of *Beowulf*. Bede lived in the late Eighth and early Ninth Centuries. He was a man of great learning, a scholar of Latin, Greek and Hebrew, besides theological, historical and scientific fields. His writings are classified as scientific, historical and theological, reflecting the range of his writings from music, and metrics to exegetical scripture commentaries.

Only little attention has been paid to Bede's interest in the Orient though there is possibility that his writings reveal some

Oriental thematic analogies. A careful reading of Bede's works may give irrefutable evidence of his unacknowledged interest in the Orient and Oriental scientific heritage. The impact of all the Orient on Bede's works is apparent and clearly reflected in two ways: First, in his detailed description of Jerusalem and the holy places there. These details are evident in his topographical work *Delnas Sandis* ([htt: /en.Wikipedia-org](http://en.Wikipedia-org)).

Oriental influence on Bede can also be traced in the field of Oriental music. His writing, Musical Treatises: *De Musica Theorica* is said to be of Oriental origin (Farmer, 1978, 163).

Many critics agree with this assumption and say that the treatises may have been written by Bede himself; while others, to mention Camille Les Sonne, think that Bede's *Historia Eccles*, gives hints of Bede's musicianship and emphasize on the theoretical side (Farmer, 1978, 163).

There is another supposition that *De Musican quadrate* was attributed to Bede. This contains, as Farmer asserts, many passages from Arabic works by Al-Farabi which had been translated into Latin under the title " *De Scient us De Ortu Scientiarum* (Farmer, 1978, 163).

What is more amazing is that we can trace Islamic elements in Bede's famous book *The Ecclesiastical History of English People*. The book speaks about the appearance and growth of Christianity. Islamic influence on Bede's work is profound and irrefutable. There is a great probability that Bede adapted the story of Prophet Mohammed (peace upon him) and the story of spread of Islamic without acknowledging his borrowing of the story of Mohammad and the descend of Al-Wahi (The Revelation) (610 A.D.). To show Bede's indebtedness to the

story of Prophet Muhammad, which is reflected in his poem ***The Poet Caedmon***, it is appropriate to give a summary of each: here is the summary of Prophet Mohammad and descend of Al-Wahi as it appears in Asad's translated version of the ***Holy Qu r'an***:

Mohammad (peace upon him) used to retire to a cave named. One night the first revelation came to him ... He heard a voice saying: "Read in the name of thy Sustainer, who has created ... created man out of a germ – cell. "Mohammad said, "I can't Read." The voice again said, "Read. For thy sustainer is the most Beautiful. One who has taught you the use of pen...taught man what he did not know. He said, " I can't read". A third time the voice Said, "Read!" he said"

"What can I read?" the voice said, "Read",: And it is thy lord the most Beautiful "who teaheth by pen." taught man that which he knew not "he was took him to her cousin Waraqa Ibn-Naufal and they told him what happened. She realizes that he will be a prophet.

(Asad, 2008, 1099)

There is great possibility that this religious event was exploited by Bede in his work ***The Ecclesiastical History of English People***. In *The Poet Caedmon*, Bede tells the early growth of Christianity. For convenience sake, here is a summary of Bede's religious work:

There was a certain brother who lived in a monastery His name was Caedmon remarkable for the grace of God... One day he went home and retired to a stable and laid there ... A person appeared to him

in his sleep and said to him, "Caedmon, sing some songs to me". He answered him, "I can't sing". The other replied. "However, you shall sing to me," What shall I sing "rejoined he," Sing the beginning of the created beings "Said the other". Having received this answer, he began to sing the praise of God, the Creator. Awakening from his sleep, he remembered all that he had sung in his dream. In the morning he recounted all he had sung to his steward. And acquainted him with gift which he received.. All who heard him concluded that heavenly grace had granted on him by our Lord. (McCormick et al, 1979, 20-21)

A brief comparison of the story of Prophet Mohammad (peace upon him) and the descend of Al- Wahi with Caedmon's story may provide us with evidence that the latter story probably was based on the former. This fact is undeniable since the analogies between the two are striking. One of these analogies is that both stories are religious as they deal with the revelation of religions: Caedmon's main topic is the appearance of Christianity and its development. Similarly the source story of Al-Wahi is also a religious one and deals with the appearance of Islam and its development. Another essential analogy is both Prophet Mohammad's (peace be upon him) and Caedmon's religious missions are conveyed through an ordinary person in **Caedmon** and Al-Wahi in story of Mohammed. This, in fact, is the first modification made by Bede. Another close analogy is that the person who appears to Caedmon in a vision and orders him repeatedly to "sing the beginning of the created beings", which echoes Al-Wahi's order to Prophet Mohammad "to read a verse from the **Holy Qur'an**". Furthermore, Caedmon was introduced to his steward who tells him that he is gifted with heavenly grace. This also echoes what happened to Prophet Mohammad who was

introduced to Waraqa ibn-Nawfal who tells him that he will be a prophet. Bede, who does not acknowledge his independent to the Islamic source, namely the *Holy Qur'an*, makes some changes and modifications to suit his culture and people. Such changes are: he use "stable" as a place to retire instead of a cave in the original story. He also changes "Waraqa Ibn Nawfal into his steward. However, all the internal evidence proves that Bede's poem is based on the *Holy Qur'an*.

Finally, Bede is one of the literary figures whose works show Oriental and Islamic elements. This aspect in Bede's writing has been completely ignored by Western scholars who deny any Islamic influence not only on Bede but on other Western writers though there is possibility that his writings reveal many Oriental and Islamic thematic analogies. After reading Bede's works we found many irrefutable evidence of his unacknowledged interest in the Islamic and Oriental scientific heritage. The impact of all the Orient on Bede's works is apparent and clearly reflected in two ways: First, in his detailed description of Jerusalem and the holy places there. Oriental influence on Bede can also be traced in the field of Oriental music. There is a supposition that Bede was influenced by the Arabic works by Al-Farabi which had been translated into Latin.

From the comparison between the story of Prophet Mohammad (peace upon him) and the descent of Al- Wahi with Caedmon's story we have reached the conclusion that the latter story undoubtedly was based on the former. This fact is undeniable since the above mentioned analogies between the two are striking. These analogies are thematic with slight modification made by Bede to suite the taste of his readers. Since Bede did not acknowledge his indebtedness to the *Holy Qur'an*, it is possible to accuse him of plagiarism.

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