Wisdom’s Missionary:
Alfred the Great and the Pursuit of Wisdom in Anglo-Saxon Spirituality

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Wisdom’s Missionary:  
Alfred the Great and the Pursuit of Wisdom in Anglo-Saxon Spirituality

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Abstract

Alfred, King of Wessex (r. 871-899), is commonly studied as a military, political, and educational leader and reformer in Anglo-Saxon England, but not as a religious leader, and his cultural reform program’s translation of Latin works into Old English receives little attention in scholarship on Christian spirituality or medieval English vernacular theology. Such inattention is a symptom of the larger problem that Anglo-Saxon Christianity, particularly with regard to its vernacular literature, is often overlooked in the study of medieval Christian spirituality. This dissertation repositions Alfred as an Anglo-Saxon spiritual authority dedicated to teaching and learning for the purpose of Christian spiritual formation. It interprets two texts from Alfred’s reign: the *Vita Ælfredi* by Asser, and Alfred’s Old English translation of Gregory the Great’s *Cura pastoralis*. These works are treated as primary theological sources for examining Alfred’s role as a wisdom seeker and spiritual authority. The *Vita Ælfredi* intentionally depicts Alfred as a kingly wisdom figure with a lifelong devotion to the study of religious literature. As a hagiobiography, the *Vita* demonstrates how teaching and wisdom are fundamental to Alfred’s religious experience. Alfred’s orientation to wisdom becomes a central tenet of his personal and vocational life, and the text positions Alfred as a new Solomon for Anglo-Saxon England. Alfred’s prologue to the *Cura pastoralis* serves as Alfred’s meditation on English Christianity’s sapiential decline, and his Old English translation of the *Cura* promotes teaching and the practice.
of wisdom for the restoration of Christian glory. Further, Alfred’s writing and his deployment of Gregory’s ascetical handbook establishes Alfred in the lineage of spiritual leaders responsible for the religious oversight and continued spiritual formation of the Anglo-Saxons. These texts demonstrate that Alfred’s cultural and educational reform functions as a program in spiritual reformation aimed at the restoration of the Anglo-Saxons as a wise Christian people. Furthermore, both Alfred’s Old English translation and original text for the *Cura pastoralis* serve as primary sources for the study of Anglo-Saxon Christian spirituality and Old English vernacular theology.
This dissertation by James Andrew Estes fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in Theology and Religious Studies approved by Joshua Benson, PhD, as Director, Lilla Kopár, PhD, as Co-Director, and Raymond Studzinski, OSB, PhD, as Reader.

_____________________________________________
Joshua Benson, PhD, Director

_____________________________________________
Lilla Kopár, PhD, Co-Director

_____________________________________________
Raymond Studzinski, OSB, PhD, Reader
To my parents, George and Evelina Estes
& forðon ic dé bebiode dáet dú do swǽ ic geliefe dáet dú wille, dáet dú dé dóissa worulddīnga to dóem geæmetige swǽ dú oftost mæge, dáet dú dóne wisdom dé dé God sealde dáer dóer dú hiene befæstan mæge, befæste.

(And therefore, I bid that you do as I believe you are willing to do, that you detach yourself from these worldly things as often as you can, so that you would commit to the wisdom which God gave you, wherever you can.)

— Alfred the Great
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ASC</td>
<td>Anglo-Saxon Chronicle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASE</td>
<td>Anglo-Saxon England</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BL</td>
<td>British Library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEB</td>
<td>Common English Bible [Bible translation]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CP</td>
<td><em>Cura pastoralis</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEB</td>
<td><em>De excidio Britonum</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EETS</td>
<td>Early English Text Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESV</td>
<td>English Standard Version [Bible translation]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRA</td>
<td><em>Gesta regum Anglorum</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HE</td>
<td><em>Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JEGP</td>
<td><em>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JPS</td>
<td>Jewish Publishing Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KJV</td>
<td>King James Version [Bible translation]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MGH</td>
<td><em>Monumenta Germaniae Historica</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MS</td>
<td>Manuscript</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NABRE</td>
<td>New American Bible, Revised Edition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NJB</td>
<td>New Jerusalem Bible [Bible translation]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version [Bible translation]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIV</td>
<td>New International Version [Bible translation]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OE</td>
<td>Old English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OED</td>
<td><em>Oxford English Dictionary</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL</td>
<td><em>Patrologia Latina</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<td>--------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>PMLA</td>
<td><em>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSV</td>
<td>Revised Standard Version [Bible translation]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBL</td>
<td>Society of Biblical Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TNIV</td>
<td>Today’s New International Version [Bible translation]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TDNT</td>
<td><em>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VA</td>
<td><em>Vita Ælfredi [De rebus gestis Ælfredi]</em></td>
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<td>Vulg.</td>
<td>Vulgate</td>
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A commonly repeated dictum is that the scholarly vocation is one of isolation and loneliness. While there is some merit to this, my own experience leads me to a different conclusion. Naturally, much of the study, research, and writing that were vital to this dissertation demanded late night or early morning solitude when sensible people were asleep in their beds, but I was never truly alone. I have been nurtured and supported throughout my studies by those who provided encouragement, critique, and counsel at various stages throughout my academic career, and maintained the steadfast conviction that I would finish this work when I was least confident of that prospect.

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seminolons and colons. Quite seriously, this dissertation could not have happened without her leadership and support. My writing and scholarship have grown considerably under her aegis, and I am truly thankful.

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For all those I have named, and for those whose names are unmentioned but remain close to my heart, I remain grateful. It takes a proverbial village to raise a child, and it takes a community to deliver a dissertation.
CHAPTER ONE

THE SPIRITUALITY OF AN ANGLO-SAXON KING

1.1 Introduction

In fourteenth-century England, a woman whose birth name has been lost to posterity and whose life story is almost entirely unknown wrote and reflected on a sequence of shewings, or revelations, which she believed she had received regarding the nature of divine love. We know that at some point she had taken on the anchoritic life, an eremitical vocation, and she is known by her adopted name, Julian, from the site of her anchorhold, the cathedral of St. Julian in Norwich, England. Her writings (commonly known today as the Revelations of Divine Love) reveal little autobiographical information about her. Her text offered no explicit mention of formal theological education, and she wrote not in Latin, but in Middle English. Aware of the fragility of her social location as a woman daring to articulate revelatory claims and theological authority, Julian acknowledged:

This revelation was shewed to a simple creature unletterde, living in deadly flesh, the yer of our lord 1373, the thirteenth day of May.

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2. For a discussion of the problems entailed in reconstructing biographical data from Julian’s text, see Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, introduction to The Writings of Julian of Norwich, 1-10 (“On Julian and her Writings”); see also Edumund Colledge and James Walsh, introduction to Julian of Norwich: Showings (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1976), especially 18-20.

The word *unletterde* (unlettered) signifies more than simple illiteracy, but a lack of learning, and more importantly for medieval theological production, the inability to read and write Latin. Her writings are nonetheless marvelous in their simplicity and their subtlety. She and her text have been the beneficiaries of increased attention from both literary scholars and theologians, especially since the 1980s. New levels of theological sophistication continue to be discerned in a text that, even after its modern revival, was admired but relegated to personal piety more than theological speculation. A woman writing on theology, Julian and her work would be considered groundbreaking, as she is the “earliest known woman writer of English.”

Her voice was unusual, but it was not singular. She is part of a group of late medieval English writers often called “the Middle English mystics”—all vernacular authors writing in the area of spirituality and spiritual formation. Even more broadly, these Middle English authors are part of a broader movement of religious writing in the vernacular in thirteenth and fourteenth century England and the Continent called *vernacular theology*, a mode of theological writing that has received increased attention due to the work of Bernard McGinn and Nicholas Watson.

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4. I treat the association of learning, Latin, and literacy in Chapter 4.

5. For a history of her reception history, see Watson and Jenkins, introduction, 10-24.

6. For an example of recent scholarship that takes Julian’s work seriously as theology, see Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

7. Watson and Jenkins, preface to *The Writings of Julian of Norwich*, xi.

8. The canon traditionally includes Julian of Norwich (1342-ca. 1416), Margery Kempe (ca. 1373-ca. 1440), Richard Rolle (1300-1349), Walter Hilton (ca. 1340-1396) and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Nicholas Watson argues against the narrowness of restricting the canon of Middle English vernacular theologians to an exclusive focus on mysticism, however. Nicholas Watson, “The Middle English Mystics,” in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 539-65.

Often less concerned with matters of doctrine but rather with reflection and exploration on the life of faith, or what I will call without elaboration for the moment, *Christian spirituality*, vernacular theology was strikingly egalitarian and democratic. Bernard McGinn writes:

> Vernacular theology is a mode of “understanding faith” (*intellectus fidei*) that aims for an intellectual and lived appropriation of the tenets of Christian belief open to all believers, and not just one filtered down through an intellectual elite, either of monastics or scholastically trained clerics.  

Whether authors were *unletterde*, as Julian describes it, or whether they preferred the vernacular for their medium of expression, whether they were clergy or laity, vernacular theologians emerged as the creative development of new ways of writing about their religion, unconfined by the dominant forms of writing that characterized formal theological production out of established ecclesiastical centers. Because of its unmooring from ecclesiastical authority, to some degree it is arguably writing “in the margins,” although those margins were the general populace.

Vernacular theology thus emerged as a scholarly classification of religious literature in the latter part of the twentieth century, and scholarship has continued to highlight the development of this provocative form of religious writing, and to understand its role in cultural, intellectual, and ecclesiastical history.

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11. I treat this in more detail, below.
While this may be interesting to some readers, the relationship between a fourteenth-century Middle English anchorite and the subject of this dissertation, a ninth-century Anglo-Saxon king, may not be immediately evident. I introduce Julian’s story in order to provide an avenue for approaching that king’s life and work. This dissertation concerns the literary production of Ælfred, or Alfred (r. 871-99), the West Saxon king who united the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms against the Vikings and whose multidimensional cultural reform was responsible for the translation of a series of Latin theological writings into the English vernacular. He is a figure whose work and legacy is almost entirely treated in terms of literary, educational, and cultural history, but rarely religious history. Neither Julian nor Alfred carried an ecclesiastical pedigree (although the social location of a king and an anchorite are obviously worlds apart from both each other as well as from the common man or woman), and both mediated religious meaning in the vernacular. Where Julian described and interpreted religious visions, Alfred translated and transformed religious texts. Like Julian, Alfred’s work was in English, and his was intentionally so: both recognized that where Latinity ended, so did theological authority, and Alfred’s writing intentionally crossed a cultural and educational boundary. He wrote in the vernacular in order to reach a wider audience. But where vernacular theology is a meaningful scholarly rubric that helps shape our approach to Julian’s work, our ninth-century king is left out of the conversation: vernacular theology treats the emergence of theological writing in Middle English, and overlooks earlier Anglo-Saxon texts. Unfortunately, vernacular theology’s neglect of the Anglo-Saxon period reveals an even broader hermeneutical problem: as a relatively new construct, vernacular theology is treated as a stream of medieval spirituality that is characterized by sociocultural and

12. I address scholarship on this matter further, below.
sociolinguistic factors (i.e., era and language). Its neglect of the Anglo-Saxon era is a symptom of the broader approach to medieval English spirituality that is focused almost exclusively on later medieval works. Very little, if anything, is considered about the spirituality of the Anglo-Saxons, and Old English is relegated to the purview of Anglo-Saxonists. In discussing Anglo-Saxon spirituality or vernacular theology, scholars may well be left wondering if “Anglo-Saxon spirituality” is even something to be discussed. If there is a Christian spirituality in Old English literature, one is hard pressed to find ecclesiastical historians, theologians, or literary scholars treating it at length.13

As a study in the history of Christian spirituality, this dissertation’s goal is to establish King Alfred as a lay spiritual authority and to interpret his cultural reform program as a demonstration of Alfred’s leadership as a religious leader who conceptualizes Christian spiritual formation through the pursuit and practice of wisdom. In this light, I will reframe his educational reform program and his translation of Latin theological texts into the English vernacular as a program in spiritual reformation at the restoration of the Anglo-Saxons as a wise Christian people. His program demonstrates Alfred’s personal and royal commitment to the spiritual oversight of his people, and was made religiously and culturally meaningful to an Anglo-Saxon audience by associations with the Gregorian mission and the history of England’s conversion. Treatment of the Alfredian reform in this light has implications not merely for how we understand Alfred’s thought in terms of Christian spiritual formation, but provides new insight into sapiential dimensions of Anglo-Saxon spirituality and religious culture. Finally, although the purpose of this dissertation is not to formally challenge the boundaries of vernacular theology,

13. I treat this at length in chapter 2 of this dissertation.
the construction of Alfred’s work as Old English vernacular theology serves to critique the chronological and linguistic restrictions of the idea of medieval English vernacular theology to Middle English authors and texts.

I shall do this through the examination of two works which were produced during Alfred’s reign and which are essential for the study of Alfred and his reform. First is De rebus gestis Ælfredi, commonly called the Vita Ælfredi (Life of Alfred) by Asser, constructed ca. 893 (Cotton MS Otho, BL, A.xii), a biography of King Alfred written during his lifetime; and second, Alfred’s translation of Gregory the Great’s Cura pastoralis (Pastoral Care), also commonly known as the Liber regulae pastoralis (Book of Pastoral Rule), or Regula, which also includes framing material written by Alfred. Alfred’s translation (also occasionally referred to as the Hierdeboc, or Shepherd-Book) is found in seven manuscripts: (1) MS Tib, London, BL, Cotton Tiberius B.xi; (2) MS K, Kassel, Gesamthochshulbibliothek 4° MS theol. 131; olim: Landesbibliothek, Anhang 19; (3) MS H, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Hatton 20; (4) MS C, Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 12; (5) MS T, Cambridge, Trinity College R.5.22 (1717), fols. 72-158; (6) MS O, London, BL, Cotton Otho B.ii and Otho B.x, fols. 61, 63, 64; and (7) MS U, Cambridge, University Library, Ii.2.4. In addition, London, BL, Cotton Tiberius B.xi was copied by Francis Junius (1589-1677) before it was destroyed in a fire in 1731, and is preserved as Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 53 (MS J).14 Although commonly read intertextually in

scholarship in studying Alfred’s educational reform, neither text references the other. I shall consider the two texts as primary source documents for understanding Alfred’s role as a spiritual authority and more broadly for studying Anglo-Saxon Christian spirituality. I will demonstrate how Alfred’s biography explicitly positions him as a leader of his people whose role straddles sacred and secular vocations and who was personally drawn to the pursuit of wisdom in both his private and public lives. I will also interpret Alfred’s prose Prologue to the *Cura pastoralis*, often read merely as an educational document, as a sapiential meditation which reveals the mind of a highly reflective author concerned with the restoration of Christian wisdom.

1.2 King Alfred and his Reform Program

1.2.1 Alfred: The Great

Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge note that readers and scholars are “unusually fortunate in the extent and range of the primary source material available for the study of Alfred and his reign.”\(^{15}\) These sources include: the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, annals begun in the ninth century under Alfred’s reign and were continued into the twelfth century, which are particularly useful for understanding Alfred’s military activity against the Viking invasion; Asser’s *Vita Ælfredi*, which makes some use of the material in the *ASC*, and which will receive more attention in Chapter 4 of this dissertation; a variety of documentary records (wills, correspondence, and legal documents); and King Alfred’s own works. Although this project is a

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Alfred was born in 849, the son of King Æthelwulf of Wessex and his first wife, Osburh. Ninth-century Anglo-Saxon England was in a state of significant political flux in the power struggles between Northumbria, Wessex, East Anglia, and Mercia (the separate kingdoms which had arisen after the fifth-century arrival of Germanic tribes from the Continent) as well as the Viking armies that repeatedly plagued the island. Although Viking raiders were present in England as early as the late eighth century, it is with the early ninth century that their incursions were the focus of English attention. By the time of Alfred’s birth, Wessex had come to political and military prominence through the activities of Alfred’s grandfather, King Egbert (802-39), but the ongoing Viking invasion and settlement caused growing political instability. Alfred was the youngest of five brothers (Æthelstan, Æthełbald, Æthelberht, and Æthelred) and it is highly unlikely he was intended for the throne. Alfred’s eventual rise to the throne, through both shifting political allegiances and the deaths of his brothers before him, will not be recounted here; suffice it to say that Alfred came to the crown in 871, king to a kingdom that was already struggling with Viking invaders. He led the West Saxons in their struggle with the Vikings: first, he achieved a truce through bargaining, and then (through decisive military victory in 878), Alfred established an era of relative freedom from further Viking activity through the 880s. During this period, Alfred’s activities as king were prodigious; in addition to establishing a sequence of burghal defenses and garrisons as a means of defending his kingdom, he initiated a program of legal, educational, and religious reform. The Vikings returned but were largely unsuccessful, thanks to Alfred’s endeavors (892-896), and he spent the remaining three years of
his life continuing his reform. He died on October 26, 899, but it was through his work that his successors could expand their territory into regions that had previously been controlled by the Vikings.

Alfred’s military, legal, cultural, educational, and other endeavors ultimately earned him the sobriquet “the Great,” starting in the sixteenth century.  

16 Keynes and Lapidge observe, “When judged in purely military and political terms, Alfred’s achievement was impressive; when judged also in cultural terms, it was truly exceptional.”  

17 Although Keynes and Lapidge note that the greatness of his esteem may well be a development in hindsight, Alfred was highly regarded by certain of his contemporaries and is lauded in subsequent works. The historian William of Malmesbury (d. ca. 1143) writes appreciatively of Alfred’s many accomplishments, particularly his commitment to learning, in the Gesta regum Anglorum (The History of the English Kings). Alfred also appears in the work of Aelred of Rievaulx (ca. 1110-1167), a Cistercian historian better known today for his works on spirituality, De spirituali amicitia (Spiritual Friendship) and De anima (“On the Soul”). Aelred lauds Alfred as the “ornament of the English, that jewel among kings, that model of virtues” (Anglorum decus, regum gemma, virtutum exemplar) in the incomplete Genealogia regum Anglorum (Genealogy of the English Kings).  

18 Unfortunately for historians, the retellings of Alfred’s life grew through accretion and the apocryphal addition of miracles and legends. Alfred did not receive the sobriquet “the Great” until the sixteenth century, and his reputation continued to increase, particularly with its adoption (some might contend

16. Keynes and Lapidge, 44.
17. Ibid., 10.
misappropriation) by strongly pro-English and pro-Germanic Victorian nationalists. Ultimately, this dissertation is a study in the theological and spiritual dimensions of his cultural reform, and is not concerned with either defending or critiquing attributions of his place in English history. It is Alfred’s production and translation of Latin texts into English which concerns this study. From 885 to 890, Alfred began to recruit learned advisors to assist him in the revitalization of teaching and learning in England: Plegmund, Wærferth, Æthelstan, and Werwulf from the neighboring kingdom of Mercia; John and Grimbald from the Continent; and the previously mentioned Asser from Wales, whose work would be fundamental to the chronicling of Alfred’s life and the promotion of his reputation as a wise king. This circle of advisors worked with Alfred in translating certain theological and historiographical texts from Latin into English, which Alfred intended as part of a broader pedagogical program.

1.2.2 Charlemagne’s Long Shadow

To be clear from the outset, Alfred’s ninth-century pedagogical reform must be contextualized and interpreted vis-à-vis the broader cultural and intellectual reform movement that emerged from the court of Charlemagne (ca. 748-814), who envisioned his reign as the *renovatio Romani imperii*, or renewal of the Roman Empire. Charlemagne’s *renovatio* became a renaissance, reshaping the face of western European law, literature, and education. The Carolingian renaissance outlasted Charlemagne’s reign, further developing through the efforts of

his descendants. Education was key to this cultural transformation, and the liberal arts of antiquity (the *trivium* or “three ways” of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic or logic, and the *quadrivium* or “four ways” of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy) found new life in Carolingian classrooms: revitalized and Christianized, the liberal arts were deployed as tools for the study of sacred scripture. To this end, literacy and the study of Latin rose to the top as pedagogical priorities. *De litteris colendis* (ca. 784-85), the royal encyclical which offered the fundamental articulation of Carolingian educational reform, states:

> Unde factum est, ut timere inciperemus, ne forte, sicut minor erat in scribendo prudentia, ita quoque et multo minor esset quam recte esse debuisset in sanctarum scripturarum ad intelligendum sapientia. Et bene novimus omnes, quia, quamvis periculosi sint errores verborum, multo periculosiores sunt errores sensuum. Quamobrem hortamur vos litterarum studia non solum non negligere, verum etiam humillima et Deo placita intentione ad hoc certatim discere, ut facilius et rectius divinarum scripturarum mysteria valeatis penetrale.\(^{20}\)

(And so it came about that we began to fear that their lack of knowledge of writing might be matched by a more serious lack of wisdom in the understanding of holy scripture. We all know well that, dangerous as are the errors of words, yet much more dangerous are the errors of doctrine. Wherefore we urge you, not merely to avoid the neglect of the study of literature, but with a devotion that is humble and pleasing to God to strive to learn it, so that you may be able more easily and more rightly to penetrate the mysteries of the holy scriptures.)\(^{21}\)

The reform’s impact on learning was momentous, its results seen in the proliferation of both schools (palace, monastic, and episcopal) that dotted the landscape, and texts, particularly philosophical, legal, liturgical, theological, and historical, that populated the many scriptoria and

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libraries of the empire. Books were a valuable commodity, a treasure both metaphorical and literal, and some estimates suggest that up to 50,000 volumes were produced in the ninth century. Further, although the primary stated goal of education was the education of clergy, an educated nobility benefited from this pedagogical renewal. Alfred’s literary, cultural, and intellectual endeavors, no matter how important in their own right, cannot be disentangled from the long shadow of the Carolingian renaissance that loomed over them and whose roots ran deep and wide throughout western Europe. Indeed, multiple aspects of Alfred’s reign have immediate precedent in the Carolingian educational reform, and I shall indicate where scholarship has already established correspondences further along in this dissertation. While it is important to contextualize Alfred’s achievements, however, they should not be diminished either, and I shall also draw attention to where his reforms stand apart from Carolingian renaissance or have particular meaning for the Anglo-Saxon Christian.

1.2.3 The Works That All Men Should Know

Any study of Alfred’s program quickly encounters the dual problems of canon and chronology. As I shall discuss shortly, there is no firm canon of texts that can be attributed without doubt to Alfred’s authority, and of the texts that are held to show Alfred’s involvement,

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there is no firm chronology for their production. The issue of the Alfredian canon continues to attract scholarly inquiry, not simply regarding the authenticity of the texts, but also the relationship of the texts to each other. Malcolm Godden observed:

Scholarly discussions of these adaptations and appropriations has been marked in recent years by two main concerns: a literary historical issue, about who wrote what; and a historical and biographical one about what the text, and especially their apparent differences from their originals, can tell us about the thinking and ideology of Alfred and his circle. Somewhere between the two is a literary or textual issue, about the construction of textual authority within these discourses.25

Although the purpose of this dissertation is not to address issues of canon, it is nonetheless important to highlight the broad contours of the Alfredian canon as it is currently considered in scholarship.

It is commonly accepted that Alfred’s program was inaugurated circa 890 with the text he called the Hierdeboc (Shepherd-book), his translation of Gregory the Great’s Cura pastoralis. What we can discern of Alfred’s rationale and motivation for his program we learn primarily through his Prologue to the Cura pastoralis and through Asser’s biography of Alfred. We will look at both texts in more depth later in this study, but it is helpful here to introduce Alfred’s own statement of intent. After reflecting on English history and what he interpreted as a decline from an early golden age of teaching and learning, Alfred states his intentions for a program for the revival of teaching and learning:

Forðy me ðyncð betre, gif iow swæ ðyncð, ðæt we eac sumæ bec, ða ðe niedbedearfosta sien eallum monnum to wiotonne, ðæt we ða on ðæt géðiode wenden ðe we ealle gecnawan mægen & ge don, swæ we swiðe eaðe magon mid Godes fultume, gif we ða stilnesse habbað, ðæt[te] eall sio gioguð ðe nu is on Angeleynne friora monna, ðara ðe ða speda hæbben ðæt hie ðæm befeolan mægen, sien to liornunga ðofæste, ða hwile ðe hie

wel cunnen Englisc gewrit arædan: lære mon siððan furður on Lædengedœiode ða ðe mon furðor læran wille & to hieran hade don wille.  

(Therefore it seems better to me—if it seems so to you—that we should turn into the language that we can all understand certain books which are the most necessary for all men to know, and accomplish this, as with God’s help we may very easily do provided we have peace enough, so that all the free-born young men now in England who have the means to apply themselves to it, may be set to learning [as long as they are not useful for some other employment] until the time that they can read English writings properly. Thereafter one may instruct in Latin those whom one wishes to teach further and wishes to advance to holy orders.)

The canon that can be identified as the authentic product of Alfred’s hand is the subject of ongoing scholarly debate. Asser writes of Alfred’s love of wisdom and his interest in sacred learning, but Asser does not name any of the texts which Alfred produced. In Alfred’s Prologue, he articulates his desire to render into English those books “which are the most necessary for all men to know” (ða ðe niedbedearfosta sien eallum monnum to wiotonne) but he neglects to identify them, only barely even mentioning the Cura pastoralis itself. William of Malmesbury (d. ca. 1143) was the first to specify the Alfredian texts, writing in his Gesta regum anglorum:

Denique plurimam partem Romaniae bibliothecae Anglorum auribus dedit, opimam predam peregrinarum mertium ciium usibus conuectans; cuius precipui sunt libri Orosius, Pastoralis Gregorii, Gesta Anglorum Bedae, Boetius De Consolatione Philosophiae, liber proprius quem patria lingua Enchiridion, id est Manualem librum appellanti….Psalterium transferre aggressus, uix prima parte explicata uiuendi finem fecit.

(He made a great part of Latin literature accessible to English ears, bringing together a rich cargo of foreign merchandise for the benefit of his countrymen. The chief titles are Orosius, Gregory’s Pastoral Care, Bede’s History of the English, Boethius On the Consolation of Philosophy, and a book of his own which he called in his native tongue

27. Alfred the Great, “Prose Preface,” in Keynes and Lapidge, 126.
Enchiridion, that is Hand-book…He began to translate the Psalter, but reached the end of his life when he had barely completed the first part.\textsuperscript{29}

The Alfredian canon has gone through considerable revision since William listed it, growing and shrinking—the former through erroneous or apocryphal attribution, and the latter through stylistic and linguistic analysis of the individual texts.\textsuperscript{30} Challenging the boundaries of this canon is not a part of my study, so the arguments involved in establishing texts that are to a reliable degree deemed authentically Alfredian will not be rehearsed here. However, it may be helpful to briefly examine the state of the canon today. Alfred Smyth differentiates the texts of the Alfredian translation program into four categories: (1) works written by Alfred, i.e., framing material (prologues and epilogues); (2) works translated by Alfred; (3) works authorized by him; and (4) works likely encouraged by him.\textsuperscript{31} This is a useful schema for suggesting the degrees of involvement which Alfred may have played in textual production. However, for the purpose of this brief discussion, I will use a simpler categorization and classify books based on scholarly

\textsuperscript{29} Trans. Mynors, Thomson, and Winterbottom, 193.


\textsuperscript{31} Smyth, 528-29.
consensus as either (1) works which reveal Alfredian involvement; and (2) “Alfredian apocrypha”—that is, works once more seriously considered part of the Alfredian inventory, but no longer treated as such. To speak of Alfredian involvement in this regard does not mean to suggest that he held sole responsibility for the translation of a particular work, however, and would allow for the collaboration and assistance of his learned advisors in assisting him with comprehending the meaning of various texts and rendering them into the vernacular. I will address (and dispense with) the “Alfredian apocrypha” first, in order to establish the broader literary landscape of what had once been considered part of the canon, and then I will focus on the texts which are considered (not without dispute) part of the Alfredian canon.

The “Alfredian apocrypha” includes those works which are considered to be contemporaneous with Alfred’s program, and which may have once been attributed to Alfred, but are not believed to reveal direct Alfredian involvement. Although these texts are not part of the Alfredian canon proper, they still hold value for both the history of English literary production, and can still raise questions regarding Alfred’s influence on the production of vernacular texts and his participation in a broader cultural movement. Thus, they have been dismissed from the canon, but they still bear impact on the study of Old English literary culture. First to be considered is the *Enchiridion* or *Handbook* which is important for the Alfredian narrative, and which I shall return to in Chapter 4. William mentions the *Handbook* (as does Asser in the *Vita*), but no such text has been recovered. There is thus no *Enchiridion* to speak of.

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in the Alfredian literary program. It had at one time been associated with Alfred’s translation of St. Augustine’s *Soliloquia* (which does not appear on William’s list), about which I will say more below. Secondly, a text which sits uncomfortably on the scholarly margins of the Alfredian texts is the Old English translation of Gregory the Great’s *Dialogi* (*Dialogues*), saints’ lives and other matters written in the form of a dialogue between Gregory and a deacon. The *Dialogues* are not included in William’s previously quoted list of works which Alfred produced, but William (earlier in his *History*) asserts that Wærferth translated the *Dialogi* per Alfred’s request. (Asser makes a similar claim.) Neither Wærferth nor Asser suggest that Alfred was involved in the translation, and with few exceptions modern scholarship sees no reason to suggest otherwise. The prose preface in one of the two surviving copies is ostensibly by Alfred himself, although the scholarly consensus argues against its authenticity as an Alfredian text. In general, there appears to be minimal attention to the *Dialogues* among Anglo-Saxonists, a curious fact which David Johnson considers. Certainly, the content of the *Dialogues* makes the work worthy of consideration as a text in support of either Alfred’s own spiritual formation, or even as a text that Alfred authorized for broader use. However, this is a matter that will have to be settled elsewhere, and I will say little more about the text.

33. *GRA*, 2.122.4.

34. Asser, *VA* ch. 77.

35. In fact, Smyth goes so far as to question whether Wærferth was even involved in the translation. See Smyth, 544-548.


Also now treated as “Alfredian apocrypha” are examples of Christian historiography, the Old English translations of the Historiarum adversum paganos libri septem (Seven Books of History Against the Pagans), by Paulus Orosius (active ca. 414-417), composed ca 416-417, and Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum (Ecclesiastical History of the English People) by the Venerable Bede (ca. 673/4-735), completed in 731. Both are historical works with a distinctly theological function: to relate the history of the world through Christian salvation history. The former text shows God’s hand at work in the world, while the other hones attention to God’s work in England, and while they are appealing candidates for the Alfredian canon, scholarship has removed them from consideration. The Old English Orosius is a late ninth or early tenth-century vernacular rending of Orosius’s Christian history of the world, to the beginning of the fifth century.\(^{38}\) The Old English Orosius is found in two manuscripts: (1) MS L, BL, Add. MS 47,967 (Lauderdale), and (2) MS C, BL, Cotton Tiberius B.1. The reasons for William of Malmsebury’s attribution of the translation to Alfred are unclear. Janet Bately suggests it may have been because of a reference to Alfred within the text, in a geographic excursus regarding the voyages of the traveler Othere which was apparently a later insertion into the text.\(^{39}\) The Old English Orosius has dropped from the Alfredian canon, although its translation may have come

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about as the result of Alfred’s influence.\textsuperscript{40} The Old English translation of Bede’s \textit{Historia} is no longer considered part of the Alfredian canon, but Bede’s original text is vital to understanding early medieval English spirituality, and I will return to his text in chapter 2. The Old English Bede dates to the late ninth or early tenth century.\textsuperscript{41} There are seven manuscripts with the Old English Bede: (1) MS Zu, BL, Cotton Domitian A.ix; (2) MS T, Bodleian Library, Tanner 10; (3) MS C, BL, Cotton Otho B.xi; (4) MS O, Oxford, Corpus Christi College, 279B; (5) MS B, Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 41; (6) MS Ca, Cambridge, University Library, Kk.3.18; (7) MS N, BL, Add. 43,703. Despite William’s attribution of the Old English Bede’s translation to Alfred, there is no evidence to connect the Old English text to Alfred’s literary production. Modern scholars often associate it with the Alfredian circle, but this is also vigorously argued against by paleographical and documentary evidence, which suggests that the Old English Bede may have been written prior to or subsequent to Alfred’s reign.\textsuperscript{42} At best, we can say that it is contemporaneous with Alfred’s work, and may have been complementary, but is not part of the program.\textsuperscript{43}

Moving past the issue of Alfredian apocrypha, we can now consider those texts that scholarly consensus still tends to favor as authentically Alfredian, starting with the prose

\textsuperscript{40} Bately, “Old English Orosius,” 314-315; Malcolm Godden, introduction to \textit{Old English History}, xi-xii.


\textsuperscript{42} For a summary of the arguments, see Sharon M. Rowley, \textit{The Old English Version of Bede’s Historia Ecclesiastica} (Suffolk, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2011), 37-46.

\textsuperscript{43} The Old English Bede’s translator’s “work may have simply been in dialogue with, rather than part of, the work of Alfred’s circle.” Rowley, 46.
translation of the first fifty psalms.\textsuperscript{44} One extant manuscript contains the prose psalter: MS Fonds Latin 8824, or, the Paris Psalter. William’s text was the first to name Alfred as the translator of the beginning of the Psalter. The entire Psalter was translated into Old English, but the first fifty psalms are in prose while the remaining are metrical.\textsuperscript{45} Patrick P. O’Neill remarks on the “ill-defined status” of the prose psalms, which are “more conducive to benign neglect than critical study.”\textsuperscript{46} They lack the framing material (prologues or epilogues) that accompany some of the other texts, hew quite literally to the Latin Psalter, and give little obvious evidence of an authorial voice. While Alfred’s translation of the psalms is not central to this study, I do not mean to dismiss their value, either. Asser’s biography remarks on the importance of the Psalter to Alfred’s own devotion, and, as O’Neil observes, “The psalter was the book of the Old Testament most widely used in the Middle Ages: it was the school book from which the beginner learned to read and write Latin, a concern that Alfred specifically addressed in his preface to [the \textit{Cura pastoralis}], and it provided the basic text for both private devotions and the liturgical observance of the Divine Office.”\textsuperscript{47} That the Psalter was important to Alfred or to Anglo-Saxon Christians at large is not in question, and certainly a vernacular rending of biblical texts is an important endeavor. However, their contribution to understanding Alfredian constructions of wisdom is minimal.

\textsuperscript{44} Patrick P. O’Neil, \textit{King Alfred’s Old English Prose Translation of the First Fifty Psalms} (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 2001).

\textsuperscript{45} I address biblical translations and paraphrases into the English vernacular in more detail in Chapter 2.


\textsuperscript{47} O’Neill, \textit{First Fifty Psalms}, 95.
This leaves us with the three texts which are most frequently discussed with regard to the Alfredian program: Alfred’s translations of Gregory’s *Cura pastoralis*, Augustine’s *Soliloquia*, and Boethius’s *De consolatione philosophiae*, each of which will be introduced in turn.

Gregory’s *Cura pastoralis* was composed around 590, early in Gregory’s pontificate, and reflects his experience as a monastic leader tasked with the spiritual oversight of others, and addresses the skills and qualities necessary for spiritual leadership, including a comprehensive consideration of the various temperaments and weaknesses that are encountered in pastoral care. Alfred’s translation includes two prefaces or prologues (one prose, one metrical), and a metrical prologue, which together offer insight on Alfred’s rationale for his reform program. Because of this study’s attention to the *Cura pastoralis* (and especially to Alfred’s prose prologue), that text is addressed more thoroughly in Chapter 5. I will thus conclude this survey of the Alfredian texts with the texts of Augustine and Boethius.

The Old English *Boethius* is the translation of *De consolatione philosophiae* (*Consolation of Philosophy*) of Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (ca. 480-525). Although a layman, Boethius was an aristocratic scholar, translator, and philosopher who sought to serve as a bridge between classical antiquity and early Christianity by applying insights and methods from Greek and Latin philosophy to the teachings of the Christian faith, writing a series of theological treatises on Christian doctrine. The *Consolatio*, written during Boethius’s imprisonment for treason (ca. 523), is commonly regarded as his most important work. Boethius adapts multiple genres in his work, including the *consolatio*, an extant Roman literary genre, which he transforms into a philosophical text on the nature of human destiny. Constructed as a philosophical dialogue between the imprisoned author and Lady Philosophy, the allegorical
personification of philosophical wisdom itself, the *Consolatio* is a reflection on the problems of evil and suffering, and the vicissitudes of life, fortune, and injustice. Seth Lerer identifies the *Consolatio* as “one of the most influential and most widely copied, translated, and commented upon works of literature in Western culture.”\(^{48}\) The Old English *Boethius* exists in two manuscripts: (1) MS C (London, BL, Cotton Otho A.vi), with a tenth-century version of the text alternating between prose and poetry; and the later (2) MS B (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley 180), which alternates prose and verse. One change in Alfred’s adaptation is particularly noteworthy: the allegorical interlocutor who visits and consoles the imprisoned author is rendered in the Old English *Boethius* not as *Philosophia*, but as *Wisdom*. The Alfredian translation adapts and amends the Latin original by making it a more explicitly Christian work. Alfred glosses Boethius’s references to classical mythology, declaring them fables so that his Christian readers will not take them literally, and alters the Roman consul Fabricius to the legendary Germanic smith Weland. In addition, the translation integrates material from Latin commentaries into the text itself.\(^{49}\) More significantly, Alfred renders the Boethian dialogue between the narrator and the allegorical interlocutor Lady Philosophy as a dialogue between the Mind (*mod*) and Wisdom (*wisdom*).\(^{50}\)

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The Old English *Soliloquia* is a translation of one of the earlier works of St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430). Augustine composed the text a year after his conversion to Christianity (in 386) in Milan, and long before his days as mature theologian and bishop (396-430). Written as part of a series of philosophical dialogues during his post-conversion stay at Cassiciacum, the *Soliloquia* represents a newly-Christian philosopher’s engagement with philosophical problems, and consists entirely of an internal dialogue between Augustine and Reason (*Ratio*), the first of its kind in Christian literature. Two extant manuscripts contain the Old English *Soliloquia*: (1) London BL, Cotton Tiberius A.iii. Fols. 50v-51v, XImed, Canterbury, Christ Church; and (2) London, BL, Cotton Vitellius A.xv, fols., 4f-59v, XImed. Of the translations in the Alfredian corpus, the *Soliloquia* is among the most freely rendered; Keynes and Lapidge refer to Alfred’s version as “a translation only in a loose sense of the word.” Scholars tend to consider the *Soliloquia* to have been the last completed text of the program; the freeform nature of its translation has been characterized in scholarship as evidence of the translator’s boldness and willingness to play with the original material, less bound to concepts of fidelity to the text that might constrain a less experienced translator. Unfortunately, both the Latin original and the Old English translation were largely ignored in scholarship, although Augustine’s text has recently


begun to receive more attention.⁵⁵ Alfred’s *Soliloquia* begins with an original prose prologue, ostensibly by Alfred himself, although the abruptness which characterizes its opening has led scholars to question whether text has been lost at the beginning.⁵⁶ Alfred’s *Soliloquia*, like its source text, is a conversation on God and the soul; however, it also becomes a reflection on the immortality of the soul, ultimately allowing the Alfredian translation to become a springboard for theological reflection on the source text. If the *Soliloquia* is Augustine’s dialogue with Reason, then Alfred’s translation can arguably be understood as his dialogue with Augustine. The dialogic nature of the text links the *Soliloquia* to the *Consolatio*, as both rely on a philosophical discourse between the narrator and an allegorical interlocutor. These texts, both philosophical dialogues, further serve as fascinating dialogue partners with each other.

Finally, it is important to note that while the scholarly consensus argues for the inclusion of these two texts in the authentic Alfredian canon, there continues to be debate on the matter. The debate ultimately centers on the authorship of the Old English *Boethius*, with Malcolm Godden and Susan Irvine leading the charge and asserting that the text “was the work of an unknown writer of substantial learning, not necessarily connected with King Alfred or his court, but working sometime in the period 890 to about 930, probably in southern England.”⁵⁷ Although the Old English *Soliloquia* has not received similar attention, philological analysis has

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⁵⁶. Carnicelli, 1. See also Szarmach, “Augustine’s *Soliloquia* in Old English,” 233.

established a close relationship between the authorship of the Old English *Boethius* and the *Soliloquia*, and a challenge to Alfred’s authorship on the former challenges his work on the latter.\(^{58}\) This provides further rationale for my focus on the *Cura pastoralis*: not only do I intend to focus on the text which launched the Alfredian program and which contains framing material by Alfred himself—thus, the “core text” of the program—I hesitate to offer a synthesis of Alfredian wisdom that could involve material not by Alfred himself. This is not to say that the pairing of the Old English *Soliloquia* and the Old English *Boethius* do not merit examination, but they should be studied on their own as texts in the Alfredian era, not through a synthesis which demands Alfredian authorship of all three texts.

To be sure, Alfred’s motivation was the restoration of learning. His deep interest in teaching and learning are clear in Asser’s biography and in Alfred’s Prologue to the *Cura pastoralis*. If read as a straightforward expression of intent, then Alfred’s interest does appear primarily educational, and his legacy as an educational reformer is sensible. This is certainly how Alfred’s work has been understood in modern scholarship. Since at least 1948 when Francis Magoun described Alfred’s Prologue as a “circular letter on educational policy,” to contemporary scholars like Alfred Smyth who calls the Prologue “essentially a policy document,”\(^{59}\) Alfred’s interests in the restoration of teaching and learning seem to be interpreted almost exclusively as a revival of the liberal arts for the promotion of a well-rounded Anglo-Saxon citizenry and an act in secular civil administration. In my examination of Alfred and his work, I will consider it from the perspective of spiritual formation: how does Alfred’s pursuit of

\(^{58}\) Szarmach, “Augustine’s *Soliloquia* in Old English,” 232-33.

wisdom reveal a distinctly theological orientation, placing his educational reform at the service of spiritual formation and religious reform? Thus, it is not the intention of this project to challenge previous work on Alfred’s legacy, but to add a more distinctly religious perspective to his role, and suggest the ways in which he functions as a spiritual authority and a producer of early English vernacular theology.

1.3 Excursa and Assumptions

The remainder of this chapter serves to elaborate upon specific ideas or concepts which have shaped my reading of the Alfredian project, specifically my use of the term vernacular theology and my understanding of wisdom themes in Jewish and Christian scriptures. First, this dissertation treats Alfred’s work as Old English vernacular theology but does not engage in a formal dialogue on the boundaries and characteristics of that rubric. Delineation of its contours is necessary for understanding this study’s application of the term. Second, wisdom is a recurring theme in the dissertation. Given wisdom’s multivalence, its use in a theological discussion requires focus on wisdom as a religious concept, with attention specifically to biblical wisdom literature and its reception in medieval Christian theology. Similarly, the figure of the Old Testament king Solomon occurs throughout the Alfredian program and is mentioned repeatedly in this dissertation. Although basic awareness of Solomon as a wise king is likely common knowledge, some additional discussion of Solomon’s relationship to biblical wisdom texts may be helpful in understanding his role as a sapiential exemplar. While these concepts provide scholarly rationale and perspectives that are fundamental to this dissertation’s arguments, the concepts do not require chapter-length investigation, so will be treated with some brevity.
1.3.1 Vernacular Theology

I have previously indicated that Alfred’s work of translating a sequence of Latin texts into the English vernacular as part of a program of religious reform will be treated as a project in vernacular theology, and I have further introduced the chronological limitations which have been affixed to discussions of English vernacular theology. This dissertation understands the Alfredian project—and Old English religious literature broadly speaking—not simply as texts which mediate Anglo-Saxon spirituality, but similarly, as legitimate expressions of English vernacular theology. And while I intentionally refer to Alfred’s work in terms of vernacular theology, I do not intend in this dissertation to engage in an extended debate regarding the conceptual or chronological boundaries of the area. Nor is my acceptance of Old English religious texts as legitimate examples of English vernacular theology a point upon which my other arguments hang. However, it may be helpful to briefly survey the discussion regarding vernacular theology (particularly in English literature) to better understand the broader theoretical framework which I bring to this dissertation.

To briefly recap, vernacular theology refers to the emergence of Christian religious literature written in European vernacular languages (rather than Latin) and which operated at the periphery of formal ecclesiastical settings. The focus of such texts was often on personal religious experience or spiritual formation, polemics, and religious instruction, not biblical exegesis or doctrinal formulation. As such, vernacular theology was theology on the margins: the language, the authors, the audience, and even the literary genres used functioned outside the linguistic and intellectual hegemony of Latin. Scholarship typically addresses pan-European
vernacular theology as a late medieval (post-1200s) literary phenomenon. Specific to English literature, English vernacular theology is commonly identified with the rise of Middle English and the writings of the so-called canon of Middle English mystics. The concept of *vernacular theology* developed in the middle of the twentieth-century as an innovation, however. Ian Doyle coined the phrase in an unpublished dissertation (1953), defining vernacular theology in terms of its language, its authorship, and its audience: “writing in English which may be called, broadly, theological was not, like that in Latin, made by clerics for clerics but immediately or ultimately for other sections of the community.” Although recognizing its role in social and cultural history, Doyle also characterizes it as subsidiary to traditional Latin theological discourse: “There was little or no original thought in the vernacular.” The idea of vernacular theology was then largely overlooked until the 1990s, when it was recovered and developed as an academic construct almost simultaneously in both English and religious studies scholarship—specifically by Nicholas Watson (addressing Middle English religious literature) and Bernard McGinn (regarding Christian mysticism). Each author’s emphasis and concern is different, but there is significant complementarity in their treatment of the material.

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60. Ian Doyle, “A survey of the origins and circulation of theological writings in English in the 14th, 15th and early 16th centuries with special consideration of the part of the clergy” (PhD diss., Downing College, Cambridge, 1953), vol. 1: 5-7.

61. Ibid., 7.

62. See note 9, above, for a discussion of resources.

63. McGinn observes this as well: “Nicholas Watson began to use the term about the same time [as I did] …. Although Watson’s understanding of vernacular theology as its own nuances, I consider our usages complementary.” Bernard McGinn, *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, 609n11.
1.3.1.1 Vernacular Theology in Middle English Literature

Nicholas Watson, addressing literary studies, identifies vernacular theology as a comprehensive category inclusive of a variety of texts, “from the catechetical to the speculative,” that range broadly from the staunchly orthodox to the unquestionably heterodox, and which “communicates theological information to an audience.” However, his stated preference is for more intellectually complex material, so he excludes from his consideration a number of materials, including certain narrative works (e.g., vita), anonymous didactic works, and public or performed material like sermons and plays. This exclusion helps focus Watson’s attention on the development of a theologically complex body of vernacular writing which he views as original and creative, and (unlike Doyle) not simply derivative of Latin source material.

Watson’s use of “vernacular,” as opposed to “devotional” or “mystical” theology or other alternatives, is strategic:

[It] focuses our attention on the specifically intellectual content of vernacular religious texts that are often treated with condescension (especially in relation to Latin texts), encouraging reflection on the kinds of religious information available to vernacular readers without obliging us to insist on the simplicity or crudity of that information: that is, the term is an attempt to distance scholarship from its habitual adherence to a clerical, Latinate perspective in its dealings with these texts.

Watson’s interest was in repositioning English theological writing, which scholarship at that time viewed narrowly as conservative, pragmatic, and predominantly affective. Looking at the works of Richard Rolle, Julian of Norwich, and others, however, Watson argues that vernacular theology allowed for the development of an “impressively innovative tradition” which included a

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64. Watson, “Censorship and Cultural Change,” 823-24n4. Watson further discusses the mixed composition of vernacular theology’s audience, but it is often an aristocratic lay audience as the beneficiary of the texts.

diverse range of pastoral, devotional, and speculative writing.\textsuperscript{66} Particularly significant is Watson’s disavowal of the term “spirituality” as a descriptor for this literature, which he argues provides an unhelpful “aura of otherworldliness” to vernacular theology.\textsuperscript{67} However, Watson’s use of “vernacular” is not simply dodging the ambiguities of the term “spirituality”—his concern as a scholar of English literature is the role of the English vernacular in the formation of a new body of literature and the sociocultural roles this literature plays. Situated at the intersection of a new audience and new authorities, vernacular theology served to create new authorities and new audiences, as vernacular writers mediated between Latinity (and assumptions of knowledge and learning) and the vernacular (and assumptions of ignorance and illiteracy) for a largely lay audience.\textsuperscript{68} Emerging out of a perceived need for the spiritual formation of an uneducated laity that was illiterate in Latin, vernacular theology reaches out to this ignored audience while creating the opportunity for new religious \textit{auctoritas}. This didactic move did not simply serve to provide an Englishing of theology for a lay audience, but created a new body of authors—one that boldly used the previously-derided mother tongue to establish themselves as theological authors and authorities.\textsuperscript{69} Watson refers to this dynamic as vernacular theology’s “‘democratizing’ tendencies … [and] its attempts to break down oppositions between \textit{literatus} and \textit{illiteratus}.”\textsuperscript{70}

\textsuperscript{66} Watson, “Censorship and Cultural Change,” 823.
\textsuperscript{67} I shall treat the problem of how spirituality’s reception in Chapter 3.
\textsuperscript{68} Watson, “Middle English Mystics,” 553.
\textsuperscript{69} Watson, “Middle English Mystics,” 550-51.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 553.
However, Watson also situates vernacular theology in the context of specific social, cultural, and political tensions of England after the Norman Conquest and the struggles for linguistic prestige in a nation dominated by a trifecta of English, Latin, and Anglo-Norman, each of which played different formal role.\textsuperscript{71} The democratizing aspect of vernacular theology was provocative and unsettling, and not a socially neutral phenomenon; rather, “writing about religion in the vernacular [was] a political act.”\textsuperscript{72} In particular, the canon of Middle English mystics engaged in vernacular writing as a social experiment: the vernacular was a contested cultural space as Latin texts, traditions, and thought were translated into English, a tongue deemed unsuitable for sophisticated theology. Watson further established a strong tension between vernacularity and Latinity in medieval England located within specific historical events, in particular the social and theological challenges posed by the Lollards. Watson thus does not simply discuss vernacular theology as the development of theology in a local tongue; his concern is the emergence of vernacular religious writing as a mediatory and socio-political act in the context of a discreet, historical “cultural-linguistic environment.”\textsuperscript{73}

Watson’s work is valuable, even groundbreaking, but subsequent scholarship has nuanced his claims. Linda Georgianna cautions against religious writing in the vernacular always necessarily signifying “subversion and contestation,” a tension which she says is not consistently


\textsuperscript{72} Nicholas Watson, “Cultural Changes,” \textit{English Language Notes} 44, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 130.

\textsuperscript{73} Watson, “Censorship and Cultural Change,” 823n4.
Similarly, Daniel Donoghue observes that the basic notion of vernacular theology, which “communicates theological information to an audience” (per Watson) is as meaningful a claim for Old English writing, even if Watson’s specific exclusions (e.g., sermons) and the historical-cultural tensions which concern him do not have relevance for Anglo-Saxon texts. Further, in his study of vernacular theology, Vincent Gillespie looks at the work of Donoghue, Georgianna, and others who have pushed at the boundaries established by Watson, and suggests that there is sufficient evidence to consider broadening this context. Gillespie suggests that “each subperiod in medieval England produced multiple, interlocking, and overlapping vernacular theologies, each with complex intertextual and interlingual obligations and affiliations.”

Certainly, the particular characteristics of Middle English religious writing that have been identified by Watson cannot be discounted: English vernacular theology in the fourteenth century is characterized by both a profound creativity and a profound anxiety. At the same time, these specific characteristics need not be defining characters of vernacular theology at large: mediating between sociocultural and linguistic particularities may be part of a larger process of mediating between a local vernacular experience and formal institutional Latinity—a situation that may well include Anglo-Saxon England.

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76. Gillespie, 406.
1.3.1.2 Vernacular Theology in Mystical Literature

Writing roughly contemporaneously as Nicholas Watson, Bernard McGinn focuses less on linguistic politics and looks instead at vernacular theology’s role alongside the medieval theological production of monastic and scholastic theology as articulated in the work of Jean Leclercq.\(^77\) A key characteristic of both scholastic and monastic theologies within this scheme is that they are identified by place of production as the locus of author and audience. Scholastic writers are appropriately named because the “school-men” worked out of a school, and monastic theology was written for the cloister; and each had different purposes and forms. This is a theology of place: the setting in which the type of theology is produced, its origin and its audience, help shape the resulting product, and the places in question are specific ecclesiastical and social institutions.\(^78\) At the same time, Leclercq does not argue that this is an impermeable

\(^{77}\) Leclercq perceived an uneven scholarly focus on scholastic theology as the dominant, if not the singular, representative of the medieval theological enterprise. Writing in response to this concern, Leclercq’s stated goal was to highlight theological diversity and promote the recognition and recovery of an additional voice in medieval theology, the monastic voice, and “to awaken a desire for the reading of the monastic authors.” Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961), 7.

\(^{78}\) The literatures produced by these different institutions take on certain characteristics, which Leclercq addresses in terms of genres (e.g., summa or biblical commentaries) and themes, sources (specifically, the use of pagan texts in addition to sacred scripture), and theological method (for example, the reliance on logic or dialectic). Ultimately, however, for Leclercq the ultimate distinction between monastic and scholastic theologies was the goal of the theological endeavor. Both ways of doing theology were concerned with “the intelligence of faith,” but the methods and the goals were distinguishable from each other. Monastics were not anti-intellectual, but learning was tempered by humility and simplicity. Where scholastics investigated theological mystery and sought to explicate it, abstract it, and speculate upon it, monastic theologians advocated a learning which supported their contemplative life. Instead of an orientation toward learning for its own sake, the monastic educational program was focused on the reformation of self and the reorientation of life toward God. Monastics were not anti-intellectual, but learning was tempered by humility and simplicity. Where scholastics investigated theological mystery and sought to explicate it, abstract it, and speculate upon it, monastic theologians advocated a learning which supported their contemplative life. Instead of an orientation toward learning for its own sake, the monastic educational program was focused on the reformation of self and the reorientation of life toward God. Leclercq, *Love of Learning*, 204-7.
dichotomy: the categories of monastic and scholastic theology are fluid and complementary and are more useful if applied to specific works of theology (identifying the nature and purpose of individual texts), rather than wholesale categorization of authors. Bernard McGinn positions vernacular theology alongside scholastic and monastic theologies, seeing these as the “Three Forms of Medieval Theology.” He proposes:

We can no longer think of medieval theology just in terms of these two main intellectual and theological strands—the monastic and the scholastic—but … we must also recognize a third dimension or tradition of theology beginning in the thirteenth century, one that I think can be best described as the vernacular theological tradition.

Although these are three different intellectual trajectories, McGinn does not present them as hermetically distinct; rather, he sees them as mutually interactive means of understanding the Christian faith and deepening Christian charity to bring about a more profound love. Where scholastic and monastic theology were distinguishable from each other by means of specific genre, according to McGinn, the genres of vernacular theology are less “technically precise and identifiable.” Rather, monastic and scholastic theologies together were distinguishable from vernacular theology by other features, primarily in terms of language, author, and audience.

The most obvious feature is clearly linguistic, as new theological literature developed in the emerging vernacular languages of medieval Europe while late medieval Latin continued a decline. The Latin language—and the culture of Latinity which carried it—was still a force to be

79. Leclercq observes that there are writers or texts which cannot be cleanly placed into the tradition of cloister or school; for example, the writings of Anselm of Canterbury, commonly considered the “Father of Scholasticism,” also contain what Leclercq calls “an authentic monastic doctrine.” Leclercq, Love of Learning, 214.


81. Ibid., 6.

reckoned with in medieval intellectual discourse, but it was bound by distinct social and linguistic limitations: as McGinn observed, Latin “was never the language of first acquisition, always bound to a male-dominated cultural elite, and regulated by inherited models of linguistic propriety that made innovation difficult, though never impossible.”

In his construction of vernacular theology, McGinn differentiates strongly between original thinking in the vernacular versus translation into the vernacular language, stating that “the explosion of religious writing in the vernacular was not just a case of simple translation, but was a complex and still inadequately studied creation of new theological and linguistic possibilities.” Gillespie, takes issue with this claim, arguing that McGinn “overlooks the fact that very few acts of translation into medieval vernaculars are what could be called ‘simple.’” Translation efforts often reveal editorial decisions in terms of reordering the original text and semantic preferences and word choices: the author’s concern for the original text’s audience may well be mirrored by the translator’s concern for the vernacular text’s new audience.

Particularly important for McGinn are the issues of author and audience. Those who participated in writing theology in the vernacular, and those who benefited the most from it, were those outside the standard intellectual and ecclesiastical power centers of the medieval Church. Looking broadly at vernacular theology beyond England, the majority of later vernacular theologians were women: by writing outside the cloister or outside the burgeoning universities and by writing outside the genres and conventions of formal theological discourse, a new

85. Gillespie, 402.
authorship could flourish and a new religious authority could develop. Thus, like Watson, McGinn observes that vernacular theology contributes to the development of a new religious auctoritas, although in McGinn’s case, the discussion is almost entirely concerned with the auctoritas of women who could claim for themselves a measure of religious authority. Like Watson, then, McGinn positions vernacular theology as a democratizing process, through which Christian teaching and reflection could be transmitted broadly, not just for an elite audience.86 Like Watson, McGinn is concerned with the development of theological writing after 1200: he notes that after 1200 we see the emergence of many women named as writers and asserts, “it is fair to say that the great age of women’s theology begins in 1200.”87 Where McGinn differs most strongly from Watson is in terms of genre and content: where Watson dismisses hagiographies as lacking in complexity, McGinn argues otherwise, stating that vitae, with their didactic function, provide significant sources of vernacular theology.88 Particularly important for McGinn is the development of the vision as a new and important genre, but one that is pluriform in its manifestation: visionary literature can take the shape of poetry, dialogues, or autobiographies, or can be included within vitae.89

1.3.1.3 “Vernacular Theology” in this Dissertation

Alfred’s use of English is quite intentional and meaningful, and the use of the vernacular is a fundamental element to Alfred’s reform. This dissertation’s use of vernacular theology as a

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86. McGinn, The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism, 334.
88. Ibid., 20.
89. Ibid.
means of articulating Alfred’s work must be understood through my argument that Alfred is a lay writer of theology working intentionally with the language of his people, not the language of the Church, and that his reform program constitutes a project in Christian spiritual formation. Whether this can be treated as vernacular theology depends largely upon whether one relies exclusively on the articulation of the rubric as found in the writings of McGinn and Watson. For the purposes of this dissertation, I follow the reconsiderations and nuances raised by later advocates of this still burgeoning field, and treat as a given the functioning of Old English religious texts as an early medieval vernacular theology. My goal is ultimately to treat Alfred as a spiritual authority, and while this project can arguably contribute to the reconsideration of the limits of vernacular theology, a more thoroughly argued response to the conceptual, linguistic, and chronological boundaries of vernacular theology as established by Watson or McGinn is a discussion for a later date.

1.3.2 Where shall Wisdom be found?

1.3.2.1 What is Wisdom?

The present study is an examination of Anglo-Saxon Christian spirituality, but in treating the texts of both Asser and Alfred, the word which hovers over the entire project is *wisdom*. In the chapters that follow, I shall explore the pursuit of wisdom as a recurring theme through Alfred’s life and career, seen in how Asser develops Alfred as a wisdom figure, how Alfred deploys Gregory the Great’s *Cura pastoralis* as a wisdom text, and how biblical wisdom literature and language permeate Alfred’s cultural and religious reform. In articulating wisdom’s centrality to Alfred’s spiritual reform, wisdom also becomes central to this study. Unfortunately,
the word *wisdom* is as ambiguous, meaning-laden, and elusive as *spirituality*. As a study in spirituality, the latter term receives further attention in Chapter 3. However, given wisdom’s role in the Alfredian religious reform, it is necessary to address wisdom as a religious and existential construct. However, this is neither a general study of wisdom nor an exegesis of biblical wisdom literature, but a study in medieval Christian religious life and thought. Therefore, after a general introduction to wisdom in a scriptural context, I will consider medieval treatment of biblical wisdom literature. In particular, we shall turn to the role of the Old Testament King Solomon, whose name and legacy are rarely far from discussions of wisdom in medieval religious texts, and have a discernible impact on the Alfredian project.

Considered broadly, wisdom is a construct that invites inquiry from multiple dialogue partners from the humanities and the social sciences. While a dictionary definition of wisdom is easily obtained, wisdom research generates diverse perspectives and concerns, and ultimately reveals a host of diverse definitions.⁹⁰ Engagement with literature about wisdom reveals multiple kinds of wisdom, or even multiple “wisdoms” which cohabit similar space, as James Kellenberger’s discussion on the nature of wisdom articulates:

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Folk wisdom, typically anonymous or unattributed, is so thoroughly grounded in general human experience that it is often readily recognized and agreed to. Arcane wisdom is the opposite, with a seed of meaning that is hidden. In different traditions it is revealed in different ways. Practical wisdom overlaps folk wisdom but may go beyond it, sometimes having a source in special experience and reflection and, in the tradition of the Jewish and Christian “wisdom books,” in a correct religious attitude. Religious wisdom resides in the teachings of various religious traditions. It is wisdom about both the deepest reality and how to live in relation to it. Wisdom in its several forms addresses various subjects, and one of these subjects is wisdom itself. Philosophical wisdom is wisdom about wisdom from a philosophical perspective. Mystical or anagogical wisdom is arcane, but in the form we will consider it is not arcane in the way a secret is. The form of mystical wisdom to be addressed is in a distinct category in that it, unlike other forms of wisdom, transcends language and expression.91

Kellenberger’s distinction between different wisdoms is not wholly satisfactory, but it is useful because it highlights the problem at hand: wisdom cuts across multiple domains of human existence, and any assay into essentialist definitions of wisdom is a prospect with limited viability or even utility. Ultimately, wisdom’s multivalence—or definitional slipperiness—is endemic to its study. While asking “what is wisdom?” may be a necessary propaedeutic, attempts to define wisdom may well be an exercise in folly. One might be tempted to conclude that wisdom is more easily recognized—or its absence noted—than it is described or explained.92 Rather, the study of wisdom needs to be defined and contextualized for different settings. Thus, while the study of wisdom is a burgeoning area of study worthy of deeper reflection, this project’s concern is wisdom as a late Christian and early medieval religious construct, and this focuses our discussion considerably.

91. Kellenberger, xii.

1.3.2.2 Wisdom in Scripture

Attempting to understand wisdom as a Christian theological construct, whether modern or medieval, must start with Scripture. Although our focus is ultimately on the medieval reception of biblical wisdom texts, establishing the basic contours of biblical wisdom requires engaging with modern biblical scholarship as it offers insights on the distinctive characteristics of biblical sapiential texts. Unfortunately, this discussion can only address specific themes within biblical wisdom literature, and must step aside from a more in-depth examination of the matter, including authorship and social location of wisdom writings, or a detailed introduction to the various biblical books that are treated as wisdom writings. While modern scholarship has

93. This discussion on biblical wisdom texts focus on material from the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint, as the biblical wisdom corpus is invariably restricted to the texts that emerged from Jewish texts, and not the New Testament or other early Christian literature. This is not to suggest that the issues and questions raised in wisdom literature scholarship ignore or discount early Christian texts; considerable scholarship has examined Christian use of Jewish wisdom motifs. Although New Testament texts are not counted among the canon of Biblical wisdom texts, biblical and theological scholarship continues to address wisdom expressions within the New Testament and the early Church’s engagement with Jewish wisdom texts. Many of the questions around this issue address specifically Jesus and Paul as wisdom teachers and the issue of Christ as a manifestation of wisdom. See, for example, Jeffrey S. Lamp, First Corinthians 1-4 in Light of Jewish Wisdom Traditions: Christ, Wisdom and Spirituality (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000); Sharon Ringe, Wisdom's Friends: Community and Christology in the Fourth Gospel (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999); Ben Witherington, Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). See also Stephen C. Barton, ed., Where Shall Wisdom be Found? Wisdom in the Bible, the Church and the Contemporary World (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999).

articulated a collection of biblical texts that are placed together and treated as a genre and a corpus called wisdom literature, this is arguably artificial: there has not been a single consistent wisdom canon throughout time, but an assortment of writings that have been configured together different ways by different authorities for different audiences. These sapiential texts include a variety of writings located in the Old Testament that articulate a way of life not fully dependent on standard Old Testament expressions of religiosity, righteousness, or the revelation at Sinai. Nonetheless, they seek to make sense of the world and make life meaningful within the experience and religious worldview of the people of Israel. This corpus of texts has included different texts through Jewish and Christian history. The core wisdom texts of the Hebrew Bible include Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth). The Septuagint added the deuterocanonical Greek texts Ben Sira (Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus) and the Book of Wisdom (Wisdom of Solomon).

The core unit of biblical wisdom texts is the proverb or maxim. Such forms can be characterized either as a saying (often expressed in one line or two parallel lines) or an admonition, and the latter is either positive (“do this”) or negative (“do not do this”).


97. See Murphy, The Tree of Life, 7-13; and von Rad, 24-34.
proverb as a literary unit is hardly isolated to biblical texts, and is found throughout ancient Near Eastern texts. Furthermore, the proverbial saying plays out in a variety of literary forms in biblical texts beyond just collections of maxims, however; wisdom literature, uniformly poetic in composition, consists of dialogues, instruction, and protreptic. These proverbial collections and instructions, passed down through generations from the wise to the unwise, reveal wisdom as both common sense and the search for meaning, which reflects upon suffering, righteousness, and the cosmic order. However, biblical sapiental texts are difficult to synthesize. (As Roland Murphy observes, “There are many faces to Wisdom in the Old Testament.”) Nonetheless, a few shared core attributes and characteristics have been suggested: Stuart Weeks notes that the Hebrew word for wisdom (hokmah) has a wide range of meaning in biblical texts, from the narrow, practical knowledge of how to perform a distinct skill, to the broader, existential understanding of how to live: “a person may possess not merely ‘know-how’ in construction, say, but the ‘know-how’ of living their life.” When the biblical texts discuss wisdom, however, attention tends to focus on the broader, existential understanding of wisdom as a way of life.

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98. Biblical wisdom writings are not wholly unique literary specimens, and wisdom sayings are almost universal in character. In his influential study of biblical wisdom literature, Gerhard von Rad notes that “[e]very nation with a culture has devoted itself to the care and the literary cultivation of this experiential knowledge and has carefully gathered its statements, especially in the form of sentence proverbs.” Von Rad, 4. Scholarship on biblical wisdom texts thus cohabits the scholarship of paremiology (the study of proverbs) and the examination of cognate texts from Egypt, Canaan, and Mesopotamia. See Richard J. Clifford, Wisdom Literature, 23-41 (ch. 2, “Wisdom Literature in the Ancient Near East”); Weeks, 9-22 (ch. 1, “Wisdom Literature and its Foreign Counterparts”).

99. Richard Clifford identifies the following literary forms as characteristics of wisdom texts from Israel and the ancient Near East: (1) instruction, via proverb and exhortation, delivered from father to son; (2) proverb collections or anthologies; (3) dialogues on theodicy, suffering, and righteousness; (4) philosophical exhortations or protreptic; (5) pseudo-autobiography (sometimes royal). Clifford, “Introduction to the Wisdom Literature,” 7-8.

100. Murphy, The Tree of Life, 145.
rather than just the practical application of a skill.\textsuperscript{101} It is, especially, a way of understanding life in response to adversity, an attempt to make meaning out of the turmoil of life.\textsuperscript{102} Robert Alter further compares biblical wisdom writings to Greek philosophy, suggesting that they function as “an inquiry into values and a disposition to reflect on the human condition,” although absent of the “purely theoretical and the systematic impulses of the Greek thinkers.”\textsuperscript{103}

Biblical wisdom both \textit{instructs} and \textit{constructs}; it teaches how to live, and it builds a system through which life is made meaningful. Biblical texts reflect both major typologies of wisdom. The first has been called “experiential,” “didactic,” “pretheoretical or practical,” or “recipe” wisdom.\textsuperscript{104} This type of wisdom consists largely of sayings, advice, and instructions on the proper way of life; it distilled “what was accessible to the naked eye and crystallized insights about human beings or nature in brief aphorisms, riddles, and popular sayings.”\textsuperscript{105} The collections of maxims that occupy wisdom texts provide copious examples of moral conduct and basic life counsel.\textsuperscript{106} Sapiential writing, however, also takes wisdom beyond mere observations

\textsuperscript{101} Weeks, 2.

\textsuperscript{102} James Crenshaw treats wisdom as the “reasoned search for specific ways to ensure personal well-being in everyday life, to make sense of extreme adversity and vexing anomalies, and [the way] to transmit this hard-earned knowledge so that successive generations will embody it.” Crenshaw, \textit{Old Testament Wisdom}, 4.

\textsuperscript{103} He writes further, “Ethical issues are raised, but there is no real ontology, epistemology, anthropology, or metaphysics, and much of the thrust of Near Eastern Wisdom is pragmatic and even explicitly didactic.” Alter, xvi.


\textsuperscript{105} James L. Crenshaw, “The Contemplative Life;,” 51-52.

\textsuperscript{106} Examples abound: “A wise heart accepts commands, but a babbling fool will be overthrown” (Prv 10:8); “Better a dry crust with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife” (Prv 17:1); “Be not hasty in your utterance and let not your heart be quick to utter a promise in God’s presence” (Eccl 5:1). These kinds of wisdom utterances are solidly pragmatic (particularly in Proverbs), exhorting virtue,
on the natural world or proclamations about conduct: wisdom literature becomes critical reflection and meaning-making. This mode of wisdom construction is called alternatively “theoretical,” “existential,” and “critical” or “didactic” wisdom. These texts are often encountered in the form of “extensive dialogue in which opposing viewpoints found expression and vied for acceptance” and function “either as philosophical probing of life’s inequities or a personal reflection on life’s meaning in the light of death’s inevitability.” Where the former category of wisdom literature instructs the audience on the nature and rhythm of life, the latter category struggles with issues of suffering, righteousness, and the problem of theodicy: if, as wisdom literature seems to suggest, the wise prosper and the foolish languish, then why do good people suffer?

Thus far, I have only addressed the existential dimension of wisdom texts and not addressed specifically theological characteristics. Rendering wisdom literature as simply the search for meaning or the delivery of life counsel is overly broad, and can apply to a wide swathe of literature. Wisdom writings do often contain an implicitly theological dimension to their admonishing vice, and instilling a life of discipline, “that people may know wisdom and discipline, may understand intelligent sayings” and “may receive instruction in wise conduct, in what is right, just and fair” (Prv 1:2-3). If a critical voice may be sounded, however, not all biblical maxims are profound or altogether interesting. Robert Alter observes, “The least interesting of the proverbs … amount to poetic formulations of truisms. It seems scarcely necessary, for example, to be reminded, as we are by several different proverbs, that warfare needs to be conducted with considered strategy and expert military advisors, or that a person too lazy to provide for himself will end up in want.” Alter, 187.

107. Crenshaw, Old Testament Wisdom, 6; Di Lella, 33; and Fox, Proverbs 1-9, 17.
109. Although Ecclesiastes (Eccl 3:16-17; 4:1-3; 6:1-9; 7:15-18; 8:10-9:12); Ben Sira (Sir 15:11-12; 16:17), and the Wisdom of Solomon (Ws 1:1-6:21) touch on these topics, nowhere is it more prominent than in the poetic dialogues and debates of Job, wherein the beleaguered Job and his companions struggle to address these matters. Finally, even God enters the fray: “Who is this who darkens counsel with words of ignorance? … Where were you when I founded the earth?” (Job 38.2, 4)
worldview, however. Richard Clifford proposes the following theological contours for biblical wisdom texts:

The central assumption of all the books is that God made the world, an order within which the human race must learn to live. That order was given privileged expression on the day of creation. Through wisdom, human beings can cope with the world and live happy and successful lives. Of great concern to the sages was the consequences of human choices (“retribution”) upon individuals and society. Wisdom authors saw human beings as active agents, often dramatizing the moral life as involving two ways: the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked…. The sages recognized wisdom to be more than human ability to master life; it was hidden with God and had to be given to human beings.110

The moral dimension to biblical wisdom demonstrates that there are repercussions for an unwise life: often, there is an act-consequence dimension to these sayings, and a moral compass that demands choice between the way of wisdom and the way of folly. Those who choose well prosper, and those who choose poorly will suffer and languish.111 Annette Schellenberg argues that although biblical wisdom does not require a revelatory mediator, it nonetheless functions theologically: in spite of its absence of supernatural narrative, wisdom literature expresses an encounter with God that is natural and found in such aspects of life as longevity, prosperity, and family.”112 Moreover, while wisdom literature posits a form of natural theology that does not require special revelation, the biblical text nonetheless offers a uniquely revelatory dimension to wisdom itself. The wisdom poem of Job 28 (“As for wisdom—where can she be found?”, Jb 28:12) describes a search for wisdom within and beneath the deepest parts of creation, a wisdom

111. Ibid., 12.
which cannot be found by beast or bird and cannot be purchased by precious metals or gems: “Mortals do not know her path” (Jb 28:13), and only God “understands the way to her” (Jb 28:23).

Wisdom is ultimately a hidden mystery, sought after but unattainable solely by human endeavor. Yet however hidden and elusive, wisdom is also offered to humanity; no longer pure abstraction, wisdom is given human form (Woman Wisdom or Lady Wisdom\textsuperscript{113}) and dwells in our midst. The wisdom which could not be found solely by humanity’s effort has been made plain to us, eager to be found, and calls to us at the crossroads and the city gates, imploring us to seek her guidance: “To you, O people, I call; my appeal is to you mortals” (Prv 8:4; see also Ws 6:12-13). And to those who find her, Woman Wisdom is a comforting presence, as close to us as a suitor or a lover (Ws 8:). Of all the prizes to be gained, Wisdom is the greatest of all riches, gifts, and glory (Ws 9:6; Prv 2:12-15; Prv 8:10-11), “a tree of life to those who grasp her.” (Prv 3:18). Wisdom’s proclamations almost function as theophanies, as Woman Wisdom reveals herself to be divine in origin, God’s partner in creation\textsuperscript{114} The Book of Wisdom goes so far as to equate wisdom with the Torah (Ws 24:23), the Law as revealed to Moses at Sinai. Through

\textsuperscript{113} Wisdom’s gender has been attributed to multiple factors including the feminine gender for terms used for wisdom (Heb., hokmah; Gk., sophia [σοφία]), Woman Wisdom’s potential identification with the Maat, the Egyptian goddess of truth and justice, and the roles of women as counselors or teachers in ancient Near Eastern cultures. See Fox, Proverbs 1-9, 333-41, and Schroer, 15-68.

\textsuperscript{114} “The Lord begot me, the beginning of his works, the forerunner of his deeds of long ago … When he fixed the foundations of the earth, then was I beside him as artisan; I was his delight day by day” (Prv 8:22, 30). The deuterocanonical texts proclaim wisdom as a “breath of the might of God and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty” (Ws 7:25).
Woman Wisdom, the transcendent has become immanent, dwelling in our midst, and wisdom becomes what Roland Murphy calls a “a theology of presence.”

Biblical wisdom literature encompasses both religious and existential domains, then, as the search for well-being and what constitutes “the good life,” and the struggle to make meaning out of adversity. Walter Brueggemann observes:

As presented in the Old Testament and as understood by critical scholarship, wisdom is an elusive yet many-splendored phenomenon. We may, as a beginning point, characterize wisdom as sustained critical reflection on lived experience in order to discern the hidden shape of reality that lives in, with, and under the specificities of daily life.

Biblical wisdom literature is a means of engaging with the world and lived experience that tries to guide and order human existence and natural phenomena and to make them more meaningful. Wisdom does wear many faces, as the saying reminds us, and that which has been treated as scriptural wisdom can range from mere truisms to an encounter with the divine. More than simply a collection of folk maxims, however, Scripture describes the way of wisdom as a path of meaning-making that may appear to lack the formal markers of revelation and ritual but is no less religious in its character. Through the pursuit of wisdom, humanity and divinity may commingle in the warp and woof of daily life, and does not require mountaintop epiphanies or sacred texts. Becoming wise, for the biblical authors, is more than a matter of maturity, but the pursuit of heaven.

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117. Compare “Wine is arrogant, strong drink is riotous” (Prv 20:1) to “For [Wisdom] is a breath of the might of God and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty” (Ws 7:25).
1.3.2.3 The Wisdom of Solomon

Chief among the biblical figures most associated with wisdom is Solomon, who appears in the Old Testament as the third king of Israel (succeeding after his father David’s reign), builder of the Temple of Jerusalem, and ultimately, exemplar of wisdom. It is the Solomon of the biblical text that delivered to Christian antiquity and the Middle Ages the image of Solomon as a model of wisdom and discernment: “Thus King Solomon surpassed all the kings of the earth in riches and wisdom” (1 Kgs 10:23). A key text to understanding Solomon’s tradition is the story of his dream at Gibeon. I present the dream in full:

Although Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of David his father, he offered sacrifice and burned incense on the high places. The king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there, because that was the great high place. Upon its altar Solomon sacrificed a thousand burnt offerings. In Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream at night. God said: Whatever you ask I shall give you. Solomon answered: “You have shown great kindness to your servant, David my father, because he walked before you with fidelity, justice, and an upright heart; and you have continued this great kindness toward him today, giving him a son to sit upon his throne. Now, LORD, my God, you have made me, your servant, king to succeed David my father; but I am a mere youth, not knowing at all how to act — I, your servant, among the people you have chosen, a people so vast that it cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant, therefore, a listening heart to judge your people and to distinguish between good and evil. For who is able to give judgment for this vast people of yours?” The Lord was pleased by Solomon’s request. So God said to him: Because you asked for this—you did not ask for a long life for yourself, nor for riches, nor for the life of your enemies—but you asked for discernment to know what is right—I now do as you request. I give you a heart so wise and discerning that there has never been anyone like you until now, nor after you will there be anyone to equal you. In addition, I

118. Solomon’s story is narrated in parts of the books of Kings and Chronicles in the Old Testament histories (specifically: 1 Kgs 1-11, 1 Chr 22-29, and 2 Chr 1-9); however, his performance as a wisdom figure is highlighted in First Kings. André Lemaire treats this narrative as a revealing a distinct “wisdom influence”. Lemaire writes that given Solomon’s role as the “patron of wisdom” in biblical literature, “it is surprising, to say the least, that the Solomonic history of 1 Kings iii-xi does not usually feature among the list of historical texts in which exegetes have uncovered wisdom influence.” André Lemaire, “Wisdom in Solomonic Historiography,” in Wisdom in Ancient Israel: Essays in Honour of J.A. Emerton, ed. John Day, Robert P. Gordon, and H.G.M. Williamson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 107.
give you what you have not asked for: I give you such riches and glory that among kings there will be no one like you all your days (1 Kgs 3:3-13).

Much of Solomon’s narrative in First Kings—beyond the description of the building of the Temple (1 Kgs 5:15 to 1 Kgs 8:66) and various matters of his kingly administration—is a further unfolding of Solomon’s sapiential legacy. His wisdom is articulated particularly in terms of discernment, as demonstrated in the well-known story of the two women who claimed to be the mother of the same baby (1 Kgs 3:16-28). Moreover, the biblical text relates that Solomon also possessed vast knowledge and was renowned beyond his own borders for his tremendous insight and life-wisdom:

God gave Solomon wisdom, exceptional understanding, and knowledge, as vast as the sand on the seashore. Solomon’s wisdom surpassed that of all the peoples of the East and all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than anyone else, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, or Heman, Chalcol, and Darda, the musicians—and his fame spread throughout the neighboring peoples. Solomon also uttered three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He spoke of plants … and he spoke about beasts, birds, reptiles, and fishes. People from all nations came to hear Solomon’s wisdom, sent by all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom (1 Kgs 5:9-14).

Solomon was the wisest of the wise, and his legacy as a speaker of proverbs is further demonstrated by his attributed authorship of numerous biblical texts. In the Hebrew Bible, Song of Songs, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth) are attributed to Solomon. Additionally, the Septuagint names Solomon the author of the Book of Wisdom (or the Wisdom of Solomon), and

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some early Christian authorities attributed the deutorocanonical Ben Sira (Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus) to Solomon.\textsuperscript{120} Such attribution for both texts was refuted by Jerome (d. 420).\textsuperscript{121}

1.3.2.4 Biblical Wisdom in Christian Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages

Solomon and wisdom are thoroughly conjoined in the medieval Christian tradition, although Christian exegetes took the sapiential texts in a radically new direction. While Solomon’s authorship was still affixed to the deutorocanonical Wisdom of Solomon, and less securely, Ben Sira, the Solomonic biblical wisdom triumvirate for Christian antiquity and the Middle Ages was Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs, which were deployed for use in spiritual formation and mystical theology.\textsuperscript{122} This was largely through the influence of the patristic exegete Origen (ca. 185-ca. 254), whose commentary on the Song of Songs asserted a threefold scheme for learning: the moral, which attended to virtue; the natural, which attended to physical origins and purposes of things, and the inspective or contemplative, which addressed the contemplation of heavenly things beyond earthly sight. Origen accorded to the three Solomonic books an allegorical meaning which transcended their apparent surface meaning: Solomon wrote Proverbs for moral instruction, Ecclesiastes, to teach the transience of things, and the Song of Solomon for instruction in contemplative matters.\textsuperscript{123} The latter book, in particular, was

\textsuperscript{120} Rufinus (d. ca. 410) declared Solomon the author of Ben Sira in his translation of Origen’s \textit{Homily on Numbers}. See Origen: \textit{Homilies on Numbers}, trans. Thomas P. Scheck, ed. Christopher A. Hall (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 112.


\textsuperscript{122} For a thorough treatment of this subject, see E. Ann Matter, \textit{The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990).

transformed into a biblical source text for mystical theology, and what appears in Scripture ostensibly as an erotically-charged love poem allegorically signified the relationship between the divine and the human, whether expressed as Christ and the Church or God and the individual soul. Thus Origen’s work, transmitted through Latin translations by Rufinus and Jerome, established a patristic tradition of interpretation which treated the biblical wisdom texts as an allegorical handbook for spiritual formation, which would continue throughout medieval Europe at the hands of various writers. Among these was Gregory the Great, who developed a (now-fragmentary) *Expositio in Canticorum*. Origen’s work features prominently in Gregory’s text from the onset, when Gregory repeats Origen’s three-fold scheme of learning that unfolds through the three wisdom books. E. Ann Matter observes that Gregory introduced a new dimension to the Song of Songs, rending it as a text for monastic contemplation and a critique of temporal power. Gregory’s exposition became one of the most significant treatments of the biblical text for later authors, which Matter attributes to either Gregory’s “role as a promulgator

124. This is part of a broader interpretive tradition regarding the text. In some Jewish exegesis, the text allegorically represented the covenant between God and Israel. See Sweeney, 425-29. However, some Jewish authorities also had some difficulties wrestling with such an obviously erotic text. Responding to challenges of the text’s biblical canonicity, Rabbi Akiva (d. ca. 137), a leading rabbinic authority, is said to have proclaimed, “all the Writings [Ketubim] are holy, but the Song of Songs is the holiest!”]. Marc Hirshman, *A Rivalry of Genius: Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation in Late Antiquity*, trans. Batya Stein (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 83. Hirshman explores the relationship between Origen’s exegesis and rabbinic teachings regarding the Song of Songs; see *Rivalry of Genius*, 83-94. Certainly, in the Prologue to his Commentary on the Song of Songs, Origen himself mentions the reverence accorded to the text in Jewish tradition. See Origen, *Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, 23.


of Latin Christianity throughout Europe, [or] perhaps most of all because of the imagination and charm of the work." One of those authors whose works show a clear relationship to Gregory’s work is Bede. Certainly, Bede’s dominant use of the Solomonic tradition has more to do with Solomon’s role in the building of the Temple (1 Kgs 5:15 to 1 Kgs 8:66), which becomes an allegory for the establishment of the Body of Christ and the Church. However, Solomon is nonetheless recognized as a wisdom teacher, and Alan Moss argues that Bede allegorically interpreted Solomon’s role so that the wise king is not simply a wisdom teacher but specifically a teacher of Christian wisdom.

Although important to both Gregory and Bede, the allegorical interpretation of the Solomonic books does not feature prominently in either the Vita Ælfredi or the Cura pastoralis. Of more importance to this study is the legacy of Solomon’s dream and his divinely-granted acquisition of wisdom, particularly as the narrative was utilized in Carolingian reform. Solomon’s acquisition of wisdom is mentioned in De rectoribus Christianis (On Christian

128. Ibid., 94.


The text is a Carolingian specula, or mirror for princes, a didactic work intended for moral formation. Sedulus writes:

Ecce rex Salomon non aurum, non argentum, non alias opes terrenas, sed sapientiae gazas poposcit a Domino. At qui simplum recte postulaverat, duplum accepit; nam non solum ditatus est sapientia, sed et sublimatus est incylata regni gloria.

(Behold, King Solomon asked of the Lord neither gold nor silver nor any earthly riches, but the treasures of wisdom. What is more, he who righteously sought a single gift received a twofold one, for not only was he enriched with wisdom; he was also raised up to the illustrious glory of a kingdom.)

Moreover, David Pratt traces the impact of Solomon on political thought throughout the Carolingian reform, particularly through references to Solomon’s dream, and finds that references to the dream are at their strongest under Charles the Bald (823-877), and Pratt establishes a direct connection from the Carolingian court to Alfred’s circle of advisors. Further, the dream is mentioned in Asser’s Vita (see below, Chapter 4). Whether Alfred knew of Solomon’s dream through his own study of Scripture, or through the influence of Carolingian literary precedents, it is unarguable that he was familiar with the Old Testament king’s sapiential importance.

I will return to Solomon and biblical wisdom texts repeatedly throughout this study, as they play an important function in the development of Alfred as a wisdom figure and spiritual

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133. On medieval specula, see Cristian Bratu, “Mirrors for Princes (Western),” in Handbook of Medieval Studies: Terms, Methods, Trends, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 1921-49.


135. Trans. R.W. Dyson, in De Rectoribus Christianis (On Christian Rulers), 73.

authority. Solomon, the Old Testament king, sapiential authority, and author of biblical wisdom, clearly serves as an important figure within medieval theological literature, and he reappears throughout the *Vita Ælfredi* and the *Cura pastoralis* as an exemplar for Alfred, the West Saxon king and mediator of wisdom.

### 1.4 Outline of this Dissertation

In the following chapters, I will continue to explore the construction of Alfred as a spiritual authority and wisdom figure in light of Anglo-Saxon spirituality and Old English religious literature. Chapter 2 (“What has Bede to do with Beowulf? Surveying the Landscape of Anglo-Saxon Spirituality”) is an introduction to the characteristics, texts, and academic study of Anglo-Saxon spirituality. I argue in this chapter that the *Adventus Saxonum*, the arrival of the Germanic tribes to England in the fifth century and their subsequent conversion to Christianity through the ecclesiastical leadership of Augustine of Canterbury (under the spiritual oversight of Gregory the Great) are fundamental moments in English salvation history and key elements in understanding Anglo-Saxon Christianity. I then look at the textual sources of Anglo-Saxon spirituality; while Anglo-Saxon culture produced both Latin and English writings, because of this project’s emphasis on vernacular theology I focus on Old English texts, a diverse corpus of poetry and prose that reveals Anglo-Saxon religious culture’s struggle to orient itself toward a Christian identity. While this chapter serves to contextualize Alfred in terms of Anglo-Saxon vernacular religion and spirituality, it ends by introducing the deficit of attention to Anglo-Saxon spirituality in modern scholarship, which I argue is enmeshed with the restricted and prescriptive
considerations of spirituality that had previously dominated religious scholarship, as discussed in
the present chapter.

Chapter 3 ("Life in the Spirit: Approaches and Issues in the Study of Spirituality")
examines the modern study of spirituality as a means for orienting this dissertation’s study of
Alfredian spirituality. I contend that a significant element of the scholarly gap in studying Anglo-
Saxon spirituality rests in changing understandings of spirituality both as a concept within
Christian spirituality and as a scholarly abstraction. I thus treat the object and method of studying
spirituality, first by addressing the development of spirituality vis-à-vis Christian historical
theology, and then turning to scholarly issues, specifically matters of definition and
methodology. I will show how the modern study of Christian spirituality is an interdisciplinary
project that treats both historic context and how the expression of spirituality is pluriform in
nature. Rather than focusing on the kind of texts which dominated earlier understandings of
spirituality (e.g., visions, prayer manuals, or devotional texts), the modern study of spirituality
treats a variety of texts as artifacts as sources for understanding spirituality, and draws on the
approaches and tools of multiple fields beyond theology, including literary study, linguistics, and
history. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how these methods will be brought to bear
on the study of Alfred and his reform program.

Chapter 4 ("The Vita Ælfredi: Repositioning Alfred as Spiritual Authority") is an
intentional departure from vernacular texts to examine the Vita Ælfredi, Asser’s biography of
King Alfred. Although Asser’s depiction of Alfred is often dismissed as political propaganda and
scrutinized for its inattention to historical accuracy, I treat the Vita as a “sacred biography,” a
blending of history and hagiography. As such, it is a valuable source for studying the spirituality
of Alfred’s court and provides valuable insights for the study of lay spirituality. The Vita reveals Alfred’s orientation toward the acquisition of knowledge and wisdom as a religious practice and a spiritually formative act. I will examine how the Vita depicts Alfred’s commitment to sacred learning through key points in Alfred’s youth and reign, his pursuit of learning, literacy, and holy writings locked away in Latin texts, and demonstrates how Asser depicts Alfred’s transformation from a learner to a teacher. (Although this is not a vernacular text, we shall also see how Alfred’s engagement with vernacular writings is a prominent theme in the Vita.) This chapter ends with a discussion of the Vita’s discussion of an incident on November 11, 897, the feast of Martinmas, which is often treated (incredulously) in modern scholarship as a miracle story about the acquisition of Latin. I reposition this event in Alfred’s life to signify his reorientation to and deepened commitment to teaching and learning—a repositioning which does not diminish the spiritual dynamics and dimensions of Asser’s Vita as a sacred biography.

Chapter 5 (“That there Would be Greater Wisdom in the Land”) takes us directly to vernacular writing, and Alfred’s translation project. This dissertation looks to Alfred’s translation of Cura pastoralis as the first text of the reform program, and the Alfredian work which helps chart the course for our understanding of Alfred and his pursuit of wisdom. I focus on Alfred’s Prologue, the most extensive example of writing we have in his own words, as it reveals the mind of the reform program’s author, and use a close reading of the Prologue to direct my discussion of the text: I examine Alfred’s theological reflection on English history and his interpretation of its current state as one of sapiential and spiritual decline and his proposal to render into the vernacular what he considers essential theological texts as a means of reorienting England to the pursuit of wisdom as a Christian virtue. This discussion raises the question of
what Alfred means by wisdom, an idea which he does not explicitly develop in his prologue, and thus turns to a consideration of how Gregory’s *Cura pastoralis* itself as a kind of sapiential performance: rooted in the ascetical psychology which informed Gregory the Great’s own monastic formation, it demonstrates discernment as a model for wise living and treats wisdom as an applied, practical dimension of the religious life. I will show how Alfred’s use of the *Cura pastoralis* not only reveals his understanding of wisdom but positions him as a layperson who serves as Gregory’s spiritual descendent in shepherding the Christians of England. Just as Alfred himself is called to the study of wisdom, so does he in turn call to his own people not simply as a king, but a religious leader whose personal pursuit of wisdom ultimately leads him to be the spiritual guide of his own people.
CHAPTER TWO

WHAT HAS BEDE TO DO WITH BEOWULF?
SURVEYING THE LANDSCAPE OF ANGLO-SAXON SPIRITUALITY

2.1 Anglo-Saxon Christians: A Converted and Converting People

This study seeks to reposition Alfred the Great’s translation project not as a program in educational reform, but spiritual formation: the program’s purpose was to cultivate the spiritual growth of the Anglo-Saxon people, and to renew their commitment to the Christian faith. This repositioning relies on two major premises, however: that conversion is fundamental to Anglo-Saxon spirituality, and that the very notion of “Anglo-Saxon spirituality” is a legitimate theological construct for organizing certain aspects of Anglo-Saxon religious experience. Thus, before turning directly to the Alfredian texts and interpreting them as sourcebooks for conversion or evidence for an Anglo-Saxon interest in spiritual formation, this study must first consider the role of conversion in Anglo-Saxon spirituality and critically evaluate the notion of Anglo-Saxon spirituality itself.

This dissertation is built on the premise that the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons was an axial point in their salvation history and even fundamental to the Anglo-Saxon spiritual identity. It was not simply that conversion to the Christian faith was, as historic fact, the necessary prelude to formation of a Christian spiritual identity; rather, it is that the Anglo-Saxon Christian spiritual identity was based on the belief that the English people had a Christian vocation and were called to be members of the faith. Thus, while the Anglo-Saxon conversion was the subject
of both ecclesiastical and ethnic historiography, Nicholas Howe and other scholars have persuasively argued that the conversion is also a matter of mythography, as the story of the Anglo-Saxon conversion was interpreted in the English imagination and served in the construction of a new social, religious, and cultural identity for the Anglo-Saxons.\(^1\) The conversion is rooted in history, traditionally dated to 597; but the conversion narrative starts earlier, with the fifth century *Adventus Saxonum*, and the arrival of the earliest Germanic settlers in Britain, a migratory movement also given new meaning through this conversion narrative.\(^2\) The precise details of the migration and conversion are less important for this discussion than the conversion narrative itself, as the remembered history through which the Anglo-Saxons interpreted and gave Christian meaning to their past. This conversion undergirds Anglo-Saxon spirituality, and the notion of the Anglo-Saxons as a people called to Christian conversion is


fundamental to understanding Alfred’s project as spiritual formation. Examining the Alfredian translation program in light of Anglo-Saxon spirituality thus starts with a consideration of the conversion narrative and its role in early English salvation history.

The primary lens for the religious interpretation of the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons is the Northumbrian monk Bede, the theologian and historiographer whose *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (*Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, completed 731) serves as the foundational text for understanding the story of England’s journey to the Christian faith. The *Historia* tells the story of England from the arrival of the Britons until Bede’s own day, but it is not intended as an objective history. The sources for his chronicle were largely historical but the guiding force for his narrative was theological, as he interpreted England’s history through an explicitly theological hermeneutic. The narrative reveals history with a purpose, and offers a chronicle of events organized around a central theme: the religious unification of England by the Christian faith. Samantha Zacher offers an important caveat in observing that such a notion of unification (whether political or ecclesiastical) prior to the ninth and tenth centuries was “a rhetorical fantasy.” However, Bede’s vision was not simple religious rhetoric; he was crafting a teleological meaning out of historic events, fashioning a Christian future out of the pagan past.

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3. Although Bede does not dwell at length on the arrival of the Britons, he nonetheless establishes the major ethnic and cultural players of England’s geopolitical drama in the first chapter of the *HE*, addressing the arrival of the Britons (*Brettones*) and the Picts (*Picti*) as well as the presence of the Irish (*Scotti*).


2.1.1 The *Adventus Saxonum*

The story of pre-conversion (i.e., Roman and post-Roman) England occupies most of book 1 of Bede’s *Historia* (the first 24 of 34 chapters), while the remainder of book 1 and the entirety of books 2 through 5 relate the story of England from its conversion onward. Pre-conversion England is important to the narrative: it provides the political and cultural crises which set the stage for the Germanic migration and made it theologically meaningful. The collapse of Rome early in the fifth century and the subsequent withdrawal of Roman authority from the Roman provinces of Britannia left the island vulnerable to the Picts and the Irish (described by Bede as a passionately savage peoples), two long-term foes of the Romano-British.\(^7\) These invaders laid siege repeatedly to the unprotected denizens of Britain, who were initially able to receive Roman help. This aid was eventually cut off, and conflict with the Irish and Pict invaders worsened. After some successes, the Romano-British gained a new-found affluence, but this affluence lead to depredation, and an increase in “cruelty … and hatred of the truth and love of lying” (crudelitas…et odium ueritatis amorque mendacii).\(^8\) This was followed by a plague, which took the lives of many; the horror of the illness, however, was eclipsed by the spiritual torpor which plagued the survivors. When aggression from the Picts in the north resumed, Bede interpreted the aggression as an act of providential retribution:

\[ Quod Domini nutu dispositum esse constat, ut ueniret contra inprobos malum, sicut evidentius rerum exitus probauit.\(^9\) \]

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8. Ibid., 1.14.
9. Ibid.
(As events plainly showed, this was ordained by the will of God so that evil might fall upon these miscreants.\textsuperscript{10}

Enter the Germanic tribes, recruited and hired by the beleaguered Britons to fight their invaders, but who ultimately became conquerors themselves. Much of Bede’s source material regarding the arrival of the tribes comes from the work of Gildas (d. ca. 570), a Welshman whose \textit{De Excidio Britonum} (ca. 560) was a fundamental source for Bede’s understanding of the Germanic settlement and its impact on Britain.\textsuperscript{11} Bede pinpointed the momentous \textit{Adventus Saxonum}\textsuperscript{12} with the coming of the Germanic tribes—the Saxons,Angles, and Jutes\textsuperscript{13}—on three warships in 449, describing their settlement as neatly occupying different parts of the island. Although these tribes came under the guise of allies or mercenaries hired to fight the Irish and Pict invaders, their real goal, according to Bede, was conquest:

\begin{quote}
Non mora ergo, confluentibus certatim in insulam gentium memoratarum cateruis, grandescere populus coeptit aduenarum, ita ut ipsis quoque qui eos aduocauerant indigenis essent terori.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

(It was not long before the hordes of these peoples eagerly crowded into the island and the number of foreigners began to increase to such an extent that they became a source of terror to the natives who had called them in.)\textsuperscript{15}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[10.] Trans. Colgrave and Mynors, 49.
\item[11.] Little is known of Gildas’s life. \textit{DEB} is a blending of history and homiletic, a screed through which the moral failings of his contemporary Britons are denounced. See N. J. Higham, \textit{The English Conquest: Gildas and Britain in the Fifth Century} (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1994), and Michael Winterbottom, ed., \textit{Gildas: The Ruin of Britain and Other Works} (London: Phillimore, 1978).
\item[12.] Per Higham, the term \textit{Adventus Saxonum} originates in Bede’s text. Higham, 3.
\item[13.] “Advenerant autem de tribus Germaniae populis fortioribus, id est Saxonibus, Anglis, Iutis.” Bede, \textit{HE} 1.15.
\item[14.] Bede, \textit{HE} 1.15.
\item[15.] Trans. Colgrave and Mynors, 53.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
This was not merely an invasion. Just as the Picts were tools of divine retribution for the iniquity of the Britons, the Germanic settlers played a parallel retributive role in this sacred drama:

Siquidem, ut breuiter dicam, accensus manibus paganorum ignis iustas de sceleribus populi Dei ultiones expetit, non illius inpar qui quondam a Chaldaeis succensus Hierosolymorum moenia, immo aedificia cuncta consumsit. Sic enim et hic agente impio uictore, immo disponente iusto Iudice, proximas quasque ciuitates agrosque depopulans, ab orientali mari usque ad occidentale nullo prohibente suum continuauit incendium, totamque prope insulae pereuntis superficiem obtexit.\(^{16}\)

(To put it briefly, the fire kindled by the hands of the heathen executed the just vengeance of God on the nation for its crimes. It was not unlike that fire once kindled by the Chaldeans which consumed the walls and all the buildings of Jerusalem. So here in Britain the just Judge ordained that the fire of their brutal conquerors should ravage all the neighbouring cities and countryside from the east to the western sea, and burn on, with no one to hinder it, until it covered almost the whole face of the doomed island.)\(^{17}\)

Nicholas Howe argues that this “Old Testament quality of righteous violence seems uncharacteristic of Bede,” and identifies the passage as derivative of \textit{DEB}.\(^{18}\) The Germanic newcomers in this narrative are more than merely immigrants-turned-invaders; they are transformed into instruments of righteousness and vengeance, invoking the Old Testament story of the fall of Judah and the invasion of Jerusalem, during which the Temple and king’s house were torched, and with them the entire city of Jerusalem, and both the riches and the people of Jerusalem were taken to Babylon at the start of the Exile (2 Kgs 25, especially 9-10). A parallel is thus established: the Britons were like the people of Judah, whose kingdom started proudly with the reign of David but ended in flame and destruction, and the Germanic tribes were like the Babylonian forces: not simply conquerors, they were divinely appointed to bring justice to the

\(^{16}\) Bede, \textit{HE} 1.15.  
\(^{17}\) Trans. Colgrave and Mynors, 53.  
\(^{18}\) Specifically, \textit{DEB} 24.1-2. Howe, 64.
land. This is a curious parallel, however: as Bede later relates, the tribes were not only an instrument of righteousness, but became substitutes for the people they came to cleanse. The *Adventus Saxonum* is meaningful not because it brought violence, but because it brought the new chosen people. For them to accept this role, however, they had to convert.  

2.1.2 The Gregorian Mission

In reality, the Gregorian mission in 597 served as the re-introduction of Christianity to Britain; the Christian faith was already present before the *Adventus*. The growth and struggles of the Romano-British church are also chronicled in the *Historia*, woven throughout political and military encounters. Christianity in early Britain was not lacking in exemplars: there was Alban, the Roman-British pagan whose conversion and martyrdom inspired miracles, and caused the conversion of those who would persecute him; and Germanus of Auxerre, who came twice to Britain to combat the Pelagian heresy through proclamation and miracles. However, the British Church was clearly diminished in significance. After relating a series of conflicts in which Briton Christians struggled with both heresy and foreign invaders, Bede mentions a period of relative peace and stability in Britain, the first since the departure of Rome. While those who remembered earlier battles still lived and kept a tentative peace, it was transient. The death of this generation left a population that only knew a fragile peace; “truth and justice” (veritatis ac iustitiae) were forgotten by all but a few.  

19. I return to consider theological interpretations of the *Adventus Saxonum* in Chapter 5.  
fallen, but refers the reader back to Gildas. More importantly, he adds another dimension to their moral failure:

Qui inter alia inenarrabilium scelerum facta, quae historicus eorum Gildas flebili sermone describit, et hoc addebit, ut numquam genti Saxonum siue Anglorum, secum Brittaniam incolenti, uerbum fidei praedicando committerent.  

(To other unspeakable crimes, which Gildas their own historian describes in doleful words, was added this crime, that they never preached the faith to the Saxons or Angles who inhabited Britain with them.)  

The theological significance of the Britons’ failure to evangelize the Germanic tribes was a distinctly Bedan innovation. Living after the Gregorian mission of 597, he could envision Anglo-Saxons not merely as instruments of divine justice, but as the Christians they were to become. Howe observes that the “conversion completes the migration myth by making the transition from pagan to Christian among the Anglo-Saxons seem inevitable.” Bede derived from the history of their conversion a teleological purpose to their arrival: more than simply conquerors, the Anglo-Saxons were a people meant to be converted. They served as the hammer of righteousness in England’s salvation history, but they were also the metal to be shaped.

The agents for this conversion were also outsiders: the mission initiated by Pope Gregory the Great and carried out by Augustine of Canterbury and forty companion monks who arrived in 597. Gregory’s significance to Bede cannot be neglected. Bede identifies Gregory as “our apostle” (nostrum…apostolum) and positions him as the reason for England’s transformation from a pagan people to a Christian nation. Although geographically distant, Gregory still

provided important leadership and pastoral oversight throughout his mission’s early years through his epistolary writings to Augustine and others. Gregory suggests strategies for negotiating the religious and cultural transformation of the Anglo-Saxons, offers strategies for conversion, and exhorts and cautions his correspondents. Furthermore, Gregory’s writings helped Bede connect the Anglo-Saxons to the people of Israel. For example, in writing to the Abbott Mellitus, Gregory offered counsel on how to ease the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons: maintain their temples and shrines and sacrifices, but re-consecrate them for Christian purposes. Only through such gradual transformation can the true God be known, particularly in the minds of those who have not yet been fully converted:

Nam duris mentibus simul omnia abscidere impossibile esse non dubium est, quia et is, qui summum locum ascendere nititur, gradibus uel passibus, non autem saltibus eleuatur. Sic Israhelitico populo in Aegypto Dominus se quidem innotuit …

(It is doubtless impossible to cut out everything at once from their stubborn minds: just as the man who is attempting to climb to the highest place, rises by steps and degrees and not by leaps. Thus the Lord made Himself known to the Israelites in Egypt …)

Gregory’s counsel to transform the outer forms so that the inner reality can convert in time is given a scriptural sanction; more than merely legitimizing his guidance, however, this sanction places the Anglo-Saxons in the footsteps of the Israelites as a people coming to know God. In Gildas’s biblical vision, the Germanic invaders were connected to the forces of Babylon and divine justice, but Gregory helped Bede relocate the Anglo-Saxons as a people with a destiny and a place in salvation history. The Historia creates a distinct parallel between the Anglo-Saxons in the early days of their Christianity and the early Israelites, transforming the Germanic tribes into

a new chosen people, and Anglo-Saxon England into a new Israel. Gregory was not Bede’s only influence; Andrew Scheil draws a clear line from Bede’s use of this trope to the work of Eusebius (263-340) in his *Ecclesiastical History*, long regarded as an exemplar for Bede’s *Historia*. Eusebius legitimized the early Christian movement by linking it to the people of Israel (*populus Israhel*), and Bede took it a step further by using the Old Testament and the history of Israel to link the *populus Israhel* to the English people. The meaning of the *populus Israhel* is clearly more than an ethnic category in Eusebius’s work; Scheil describes the trope as signifying “the simple *authenticity* of the chosen, upright and righteous before God.” This is not to suggest that ethnicity is irrelevant in the construction of the English as a new Israel; Bede’s *Historia* is the salvation history of an island and its many inhabitants, but the locus of his theological hermeneutic is the Anglo-Saxon people—more specifically, the *gens Anglorum*. This attention

27. Invocation of the phrase “a new Israel” demands a preliminary caveat as far as it relates to the Anglo-Saxons and their understanding of their role in salvation history. The recent scholarship of George Molyneaux demands clarification about the language of chosenness and special election when discussing Anglo-Saxon self-identity. He argues against any suggestion that the English saw themselves as a special people during the Anglo-Saxon era, or that they interpreted their history as having any distinct political significance: the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons is not a sign of special election, but is part of the broader spread of the Gospel to all the nations. See George Molyneaux, “Did the English Really Think They Were God’s Elect in the Anglo-Saxon Period?” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 65, no. 4 (October 2014): 721-37; and “The Old English Bede: English Ideology or Christian Instruction?” *English Historical Review* 124, no. 511 (December 2009): 1289-1323. In fact, Molyneaux points out that the phrase “new Israel” (*novus Israel*) cannot be found in contemporary documents, and asserts that such language is “imprecise but evocative,” and if used, “should be carefully defined” (Molyneux, “Old English Bede”, 1319). In light of this caution, when I refer to a new Israel, it is not intended to suggest an ethnic supercessionism, a politico-religious triumphalism, or the culmination of salvation history, but the creation of correspondences between sacred scripture and secular history, as the Anglo-Saxons interpreted their history through Old Testament events. Thus I refer to England as a new Israel, not the New Israel: Anglo-Saxon texts provide not a politico-religious mandate, but a religious interpretation of Anglo-Saxon history and an attempt to make it meaningful in light of the Gospel.


29. The notion of *gens Anglorum* requires some clarification as it applies to Bede’s text. Technically, *Anglorum* (genitive plural of *Angli*) would refer to the Angles (as a distinct tribe), *gens Anglorum* is commonly understood in scholarship to translate as “the English nation” or “people,” and the conventional scholarly view is that “Angles” is a comprehensive term that includes the Saxons and Jutes.
is not limited to Bede’s *Historia*: this theological exegesis of English history weaves throughout Bede’s other writings, particularly his biblical commentaries. As a medieval exegete, he read Scripture as a text with both literal truth and allegorical implication. Through his exegesis, he saw lessons and patterns in sacred history that provided allegorical fodder for his interpretation of England’s conversion story: from the judgeship of Samuel, to Israel’s first king Saul, to the establishment of David and Solomon’s royal house and the building of the Temple, the Old Testament offered much for Bede to understand the sacred character and sacred charter of England’s conversion history.

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30. The multiple senses of Scripture vary for different authors often following a threefold division of literal, allegorical, and moral. This study references a simple two-fold reading, literal and spiritual with the awareness that Bede used a more complex (and not always consistent) scheme. Scott DeGregorio observes: “[Bede] could speak just as contentedly of three or two senses, and indeed it is the basic twofold distinction between a literal/historical meaning on the one hand some kind of spiritual meaning on the other—variously termed ‘allegorical’, ‘figurative’, ‘mystical’ or ‘hidden’—that most often followed in his Old Testament commentaries. Scott DeGregorio, “Bede and the Old Testament,” 133.

31. Bede’s understanding of the English as the elect is not limited to the *Historia*; it is supported elsewhere, in his Biblical commentaries. Bede’s commentaries make up a significant body of his writing, and scholars are increasingly more outspoken in their argument that understanding Bede’s *Historia* is best done in light of his exegesis. This is particularly true for the Old Testament, which recounts the struggles of the fledgling nation of Israel. Bede’s understanding of England’s place in salvation history owed a debt to his exegetical work on the Old Testament. See Scott DeGregorio, “Bede and the Old Testament,” 133; and Judith McClure, “Bede’s Old Testament Kings,” in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies Presented to J.M. Wallace-Hadrill*, ed. Patrick Wormald, Donald Bullough and Roger Collins (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 76-98.
Although the Gregorian mission was not the sole source of the Christian faith in England, for Bede this mission signified the birth of Christian England.\textsuperscript{32} The mission arrived and took root in Kent, and through the monks’ preaching, teaching, and embodying of the evangelical life, the pagan king Æthelberht “believed and was baptized” (credens baptizatus est).\textsuperscript{33} Bede reports that others were baptized as well, and though Æthelberht compelled no one to accept the Christian faith, he favored new believers as “fellow citizens in the kingdom of heaven” (concives sibi regni caelestis).\textsuperscript{34} This established a pattern that would repeat itself in other kingdoms, starting with Essex and East Anglia. The conversion of Anglo-Saxon kings became vital to the English mission—as the king converted, his people would follow.\textsuperscript{35} Much of Bede’s subsequent

\textsuperscript{32} It is important to remember that Christianity had not disappeared in Britain, and was present among the Britons and the Irish. The post-Roman British church played little role in Bede’s narrative after the Roman-British failure to convert the Germanic tribes, but the church persisted past the sixth century, albeit weaker in areas dominated by Anglo-Saxons. Celtic Christianity, on the other hand, had a stronger role in the conversion of England. This tradition, strongly dominated by a monastic influence, was present among Irish missionaries in northwestern Britain, particularly around the centers of Iona and Lindisfarne. Figures such as Aiden, Columba, and Columbanus played a stronger role in the conversion of Northumbria later in the Historia, when Bede both praised the Irish Christians for their evangelical and ascetical zeal but censured them for specific practices, particularly around their Easter observance. This tension would climax at the Synod of Whitby (664), which signified the triumph of Roman Christianity and the unity of the English Church; for Bede, there was no room for competing orthopraxies. In Bede’s narrative, these two groups acted as local variants of Christianity that were either incapable of religiously taming the pagan Anglo-Saxons, or were not in conformity with the Roman Church—and the Gregorian mission served as the vessel for the more vital, true Christianity that would transform the Anglo-Saxons and signify the birth of a Christian England. See Caitlin Corning, \textit{The Celtic and Roman Traditions: Conflict and Consensus in the Early Medieval Church} (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Henry Mayr-Harting, \textit{The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England} (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1972); and Claire Stancliffe, “British and Irish Contexts,” in \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Bede}, ed. Scott DeGregorio (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 69-83.

\textsuperscript{33} Bede, \textit{HE} 1.26; trans. Colgrave and Mynors, 76-77.

\textsuperscript{34} Bede, \textit{HE} 1.26; trans. Colgrave and Mynors, 78-79.

narrative addresses the continued evangelism throughout England, and suggests that this dissemination of Christianity was not always stable or enduring, as kings or their successors might return to paganism. This raises two points about the English conversion: first, about the nature of Anglo-Saxon religion prior to the conversion, and second, about the protracted process by which the Anglo-Saxons moved away from their traditional religion to the new import. In reality, the nature of Anglo-Saxon paganism prior to the conversion is only partially understood.  

36 Even the concept “Anglo-Saxon paganism” (or “heathenism”) as it is often treated in modern scholarship is a fictitious construct, described by John Niles as a “blend of Bedan and modern historiography.”  

37 No written texts exist from within the pre-Christian communities themselves, which leaves us with texts from partisan outsiders.  

38 What Bede describes in terms of Anglo-Saxon religious practices or beliefs may be more fancy than fact, used to contribute to the picture he paints of England’s movement to Christianity.  

39 Other elements traditionally considered characteristic of Anglo-Saxon paganism (such as the virtue of valor, the sacral nature of oaths and fidelity, or the acceptance of fate) were cultural values which not only persisted through the Anglo-Saxon conversion, they were negotiated and accommodated within the Anglo-

36. Broadly considered, contemporary knowledge of pre-Christian practices of the Anglo-Saxons was often scholarly reconstruction based on texts external to those religious groups. On the difficulties in identifying pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon religious beliefs or practices, see John D. Niles, “Pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon Religion,” in The Handbook of Religions in Ancient Europe, ed. Lisbeth Bredholt Christensen, Olav Hammer and David A. Warburton (Durham, UK: Acumen, 2013), 305-23.


38. Ibid., 307.

39. What can be discerned through textual study and other methods is the likelihood that Anglo-Saxon religious practices were largely intended to “help people maintain a propitious relationship with the unseen powers of the universe,” powers which were not rendered in moral absolutes of good and evil but rather helpful or harmful. Their values and practices, Niles argues, “are sometimes erroneously called ‘pagan,’ [but] are more properly ascribed to the realm of ethos rather than religion,” and as such, were not summarily supplanted by Christianity. Niles, 320-21.
Saxon Christian worldview. As far as the English conversion itself, this religious transformation was not based on a discrete transfer of religious adherence from one tradition to another. The *Historia* records a movement both to and from the Christian faith, as kings and people fell back into paganism. For every apostasy, however, there was a dramatic reconversion, and Bede’s *Historia* narrates the evangelization of the Christian faith as an age of wonders: miracles, convert-kings, and preachers brought the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity, kingdom by kingdom. Ultimately, the myth of conversion only hints at the reality of Christianization as a social process: Ian Wood describes the Anglo-Saxon conversion as “a classic example of Christianisation from the top down.”  

Yet this narrative, taken at face value, is more rhetorical polish than anthropological fact. The reality is considerably more nuanced and conflicted. Marilyn Dunn observes that stories of royal baptisms and mass conversions do not sufficiently paint a picture of the faith of a people, and a king’s conversion did not mean that the Christianization of their people was swift or immediate. Thus, while English salvation history depicted a people’s movement toward the Christian faith, the story of the Christianity in early England was nonetheless one of ascent and descent. Prior to the Anglo-Saxons, Christian Britons could count among their ranks Alban, whose own conversion and Christian witness inspired those who oppressed him; but they also counted the many depraved Britons whose lives bore no witness to the faith. Similarly, the Anglo-Saxons were a people who possessed both a pagan past

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and a Christian destiny. While their pre-Christian traditions would be overcome with the arrival
of the Gregorian mission, the Christian faith would nonetheless wax and wane.

Earlier, Bede’s work at creating a teleological meaning out of Anglo-Saxon history was
mentioned: he saw a Christian future out of the pagan past. More than merely Gildas’s
instruments of divine justice, the Germanic tribes become a chosen people, called to Britain first
to cleanse, then to be converted. Conversion is thus at the core of early medieval English
spirituality. The Anglo-Saxons were not merely a group of people who became Christian; they
were a people brought to a new land first to cleanse it of its own depredation, and then to be
converted: conversion was the English vocation. But this vocation was not one without struggle.
Bede’s Historia narrated the tensions and turmoil surrounding the formation of the Anglo-Saxons
as a Christian people, a movement characterized as much by bloodshed and violence as it was by
miracles and proclamation. The conclusion to Bede’s Historia depicted an England that, because
of the Gregorian mission and its subsequent successes, was in a state of relative peace; and (with
some exception) a sense of true Christianity ruled the land, through the proliferation of religious
orders, episcopal leaders, and Christian kings. While Bede offered a vision of a Christian
England that seemed to suggest that England’s conversion was complete, Bede knew otherwise:
England’s faith was not fixed or firm. Bede knew full well that England’s religious history was
one of conviction, apostasy, and reconversion. In Bede’s “Epistola Bede ad Ecgbertum
Episcopum” (734), a letter written to the prelate Egbert of York after the conclusion of the
Historia, Bede lamented the current state of the faith in England. Bede urged Egbert to “rescue
our people from former errors and bring them back to a surer and more direct way of life” (ut
gentem nostram a uetustis abstrahere cures erroribus, et ad certiorem et directiorem uitae callem
reducere satagas). To Bede, the Anglo-Saxons were a Christian people, but they were still struggling to discern what that religious and cultural identity signified. They were a converted people, but they were still converting, in need of spiritual oversight and leadership so that they would be oriented toward their Christian destiny. While this study characterizes Anglo-Saxon spirituality as deeply permeated by a sense of conversion, of having been called to the Christian faith, conversion was not merely a past event. It was still a present and future reality, a process of growth and movement, however difficult, toward a Christian destiny.

### 2.2 Sources for the Study of Anglo-Saxon Spirituality: Old English Literature

The conversion of the English to Christianity provided for the development and construction of a profoundly creative body of religious literature. While I have stated throughout that conversion is an essential element of Anglo-Saxon spirituality, this does not suggest that Anglo-Saxon religious literature was overtly concerned with the dynamics of religious conversion. Rather, the movement from an inherited ancestral religious tradition to a foreign religious import, and the subsequent religious transformation promoted creative opportunities to develop Anglo-Saxon spirituality and answer the question, *What did it mean to be an Anglo-Saxon Christian?* I consider Alfred’s textual corpus as one way of responding to this question, but his translated works were part of a larger literary and textual heritage. This section of the

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study examines this broader context, specifically the robust body of vernacular texts which developed out of this exploration of Anglo-Saxon Christian spiritual identity.

2.2.1 Language(s) and Anglo-Saxon England

As Alfred’s textual program is founded on the act of translation into the vernacular, this discussion will start by considering language. The role of language is not incidental to Anglo-Saxon religious culture, nor is language merely scaffolding for religious ideation. As shall be discussed shortly, language plays multiple roles in the expression and transmission of Anglo-Saxon spirituality; even the mosaic of languages present in England carries symbolic importance for Bede in his Historia. Writing in the early eighth century, Bede writes of the multilingualism still present in his day:

Haec in presenti iuxta numerum librorum quibus lex diuina scripta est, quinque gentium linguis unam eandemque summae ueritatis et uerae sublimitatis scientiam scrutatur et confitetur, Anglorum uidelicet Brettonum Scottorum Pictorum et Latinorum, quae meditacione scripturarum ceteris omnibus est fact communis.\(^{43}\)

(At the present time there are five languages in Britain, just as the divine law is written in five books, all devoted to seeking out and setting forth one and the same kind of wisdom, namely the knowledge of sublime truth and of true sublimity. These are the English, British, Irish, and Pictish, as well as the Latin languages; through the study of the scriptures, Latin is in general use among them all.)\(^{44}\)

The languages are more than simply evidence of linguistic diversity; their number takes on figural significance as the five languages turn England into a linguistic representation of the five books of the Pentateuch. Just as Bede’s interpretation of Scripture was predicated on giving spiritual significance to a literal reading of text, Bede read ethnographic information and offered

\(^{43}\) Bede, HE 1.1.

\(^{44}\) Trans. Colgrave and Mynors, 15-16.
it allegorical meaning. In this case, the five languages of Britain point to sacred Scripture (however obliquely for modern readers), providing an additional correspondence between the Anglo-Saxons and the people of Israel. While Bede mentions five languages, two of them dominate the discussion of Anglo-Saxon religious culture: Latin and English. As the formal language of the Church’s rituals, ecclesiastical oversight, and intellectual thought, the importance of Latin to Anglo-Saxon England cannot be overstated. Like the Christian faith, the Latin language and culture existed in Britain before the Germanic settlement. However, it developed greater cultural weight with the arrival of the Gregorian mission, which established a closer relationship between the Roman church and English ecclesiastical leadership. The converted Anglo-Saxons embraced Latinity, in Michael Lapidge’s view: he states that the “large body of surviving Anglo-Latin compositions proves that schools flourished in Anglo-Saxon England.”

Some of the most respected names in Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastical history are part of the Anglo-Latin tradition, including such figures as Aldhelm (d. 709), Bede, and Alcuin of York (d. 804). The importance of Latin to Anglo-Saxon religious and intellectual thought is clear. However, as this study is concerned with the Alfredian corpus and its role in English vernacular religious expression, so our attention will turn to the role of English.

45. As Michael Lapidge states succinctly, “In Anglo-Saxon times, the language of Christianity was Latin. The word of God per se was transmitted in a Latin Bible. The sacraments of baptism, marriage, and burial were conducted in Latin, as were the Mass and other church ceremonies, such as the consecration of a king. In monasteries, all parts of the Divine office (that is, the daily cycle of prayers and hymns) were in Latin; moreover, monks were obliged to speak the language among themselves.” Michael Lapidge, “The Anglo-Latin Background,” in A New Critical History of Old English Literature, ed. Stanley B. Greenfield and Daniel G. Calder (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 5.


The English language was an import of the migrating Anglo-Saxons. Their culture was largely oral, and its traditional knowledge and wisdom “would have been transmuted pervasively but irrecoverably among families and communities as an oral act.” Writing in Old English (Englise) was not a widespread development in a country where literacy favored Latinity. In fact, the Alfredian translation program is considered an important catalyst of the development of English vernacular writing: while some vernacular writing was present before Alfred’s time, it was only from the ninth century onward that English becomes a language of significant textual production in writing, and most of our knowledge of Old English depends on manuscripts produced between the ninth and eleventh centuries, almost exclusively in the West Saxon dialect. Not including Old English runic inscriptions and manuscript glosses, “over two hundred manuscripts in which substantial amounts of Old English appear” have been identified; the majority (90%) of the extant texts are prose, with the remaining (roughly 30,000 lines of text, 


49. Old English (also called Anglo-Saxon until the early twentieth century) is the phase of the English language from the Germanic settlement (fifth century) until the late eleventh century. More precisely, the language spoken by Germanic newcomers was a collection of related dialects of West Germanic, which would coalesce over time into English, although dialectical differences persisted. The Norman Conquest, which delivered Norman French as the language of the new aristocracy, along with English’s own natural language development, led to the formation of Middle English as the successor to Old English. For more, see: Helmut Gneuss, “The Old English Language,” in The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature, ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 23-54; and Patrizia Lendinara, “The Germanic Background,” in A Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature, ed. Phillip Pulsiano and Elaine Treharne (Malden: Blackwell, 2001), especially 125-27.

in four manuscripts) verse.\(^{51}\) (This is only the identifiable figure of written texts, and does not
even consider the possibility of oral texts.\(^{52}\) Old English literature is often regarded as the most
important literary accomplishment in early medieval Europe. Stanley Greenfield and Daniel
Calder observe:

In no other medieval vernacular language does such a hoard of verbal treasures exist for
such an extended period (ca. 700-1100). While some of the Germanic and Celtic nations
produced works of high art, they cannot match the encyclopedic breadth of the Anglo-
Saxons, who triumphed in almost every genre. They inherited a rich oral tradition from
their Germanic ancestors; they absorbed the theological doctrine and rhetoric of their
Christian Roman teachers. Yet they experimented and created new forms, while
remaining true to this dual heritage. The result is a corpus of astonishing variety.\(^{53}\)

This “astonishing variety” of texts includes works that demonstrate the creativity of Anglo-Saxon
vernacular culture. If Anglo-Saxon spirituality is in part a spirituality of conversion and the
product of diverse religious and cultural forces, Old English literature is one means of exploring
that spirituality. Describing Anglo-Saxon spirituality as a spirituality of conversion signifies the
creative struggle of the Anglo-Saxons to create a new identity for themselves as Christians—one
which was unique and authentic to their own experiences and perspectives. Old English literature

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\(^{51}\) Elaine Treharne and Phillip Pulsiano, “An Introduction to the Corpus of Anglo-Saxon
Vernacular Literature,” in *A Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano and Elaine

\(^{52}\) “An oral text is an oral utterance that has internal formal features differentiating it from
ordinary language, generic features understood and recognized by both speaker and hearers, and markers
at beginning and ending that separate it from the aural flow around it. The paramount difference between
the oral text and the written text is that the former cannot, so long as it is entirely oral, be glimpsed as a
fixed object. Not that in their ‘natural’ condition primary oral texts fail to be preserved—indeed,
preservation is of the essence of oral texts—but they are preserved only by means of ‘oral memory’ and
consequent reperformances.” A. N. Doane, “Oral Texts, Intertexts, and Intratexts,” in *Influence and
Intertextuality in Literary History*, ed. Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein (Madison: University of Wisconsin
Press, 1991), 78.

\(^{53}\) Greenfield and Calder, 1.
provides an insight into this spirituality as it negotiated the inheritance of the “Germanic ancestors” as well as their “Christian Roman teachers.”

2.2.2 The Old English Corpus

The body of Old English texts requires some introduction, as a means of exploring Anglo-Saxon spirituality and as the broader literary context for Alfred’s translation program. While this can only be a limited discussion of Old English religious literature rather than a full catalog and analysis, it will provide some insight into the provocative and elusive nature of Old English literature as a window to Anglo-Saxon spirituality.

Although this is a theological examination of Old English literature, the largest share of scholarship on the corpus naturally comes from literary scholars and critics. These linguistic and literary concerns are of less immediate relevance to the current study, but it is impossible to approach Old English literature bereft of those insights. Thus this discussion will introduce and consider Old English religious texts in terms of specific defining characteristics that have developed as a result of literary study of the Old English corpus—particularly, genre, form, and what this study refers to as mode. Discussion of genre can be complicated, as it can raise arguments about genre’s defining qualities, the legitimacy of certain genres or sub-genres, and other concerns from genre criticism. This study understands genre in the broadest sense, as “categories of literary texts based on similarities of form, content, or function.”

study will use genre as far as it can help in understanding commonalities between texts, and not as an attempt to create hermeneutically airtight categories for literature. The issue of form in Old English writing addresses whether individual texts are verse or prose, and is concerned with matters of style, vocabulary, and syntax. Although discussions of form raise important questions for literary study, they are largely irrelevant to this study’s theological emphasis. One point is important, however: the compositional elements of Old English poetry (such as its rhythm and structure) emerged out of that poetry’s history of oral composition and shared legacy with Old Norse, Old Saxon, and other Germanic poetries.\textsuperscript{55} Old English poetry demonstrates the vitality of a distinctly Germanic linguistic and cultural practice that endured beyond the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons, and is found in a variety of both religious and secular Old English texts. As the creative response of the Anglo-Saxon struggle to negotiate a Christian calling with a Germanic past, Old English poetry can be suggested as the most vernacular of all the expressions of vernacular spirituality. For the most part, however, because the Alfredian translation program is almost exclusively prose, little more will be said about this matter. Finally, however important genre and form are, the issue of mode is of greater concern to the current discussion, specifically whether individual texts are considered religious or secular. I have thematically grouped these texts in terms of the religious function they serve: scriptural texts (whether direct translation or paraphrase) serve as vernacular renderings of Christian scriptural narrative; devotional works attend to private and communal prayer; and didactic works teach, clarify, or explore the Christian faith life. However, because the distinction between the religious and the secular is not always a

clear or even helpful demarcation, and some texts can elude this distinction, this discussion also provides a fourth category: liminal-existential (my term) works, which sit on the borders of the religious-secular distinction—unarguably secular in subject matter, they are still steeped in Anglo-Saxon religious culture and made more meaningful by participation in that worldview. Like genre, these categories are artificial and not intrinsic, and are the retrospective products of modern scholarship. There is overlap between categories, and individual texts can serve multiple functions. However, these categories still serve as a useful schematization for understanding the breadth and range of Old English religious texts as sources for the study of Anglo-Saxon spirituality.

2.2.2.1 Scriptural Texts

Old English scriptural texts, as renderings of the Bible into English vernacular, sit on a continuum from direct translations to creative paraphrastic re-imaginings of the Biblical narrative. While Anglo-Saxon England produced a few vernacular bible translations, they were only select texts, not the entire biblical canon. The Psalter was important in Anglo-Saxon England not just as a central feature of the monastic Divine Office, but as a primary educational text; fourteen of the twenty-nine complete Latin psalters in England prior to the Norman Conquest were glossed in Old English.56 As Stephen Harris observes, “If any poetry could be said to have saturated the Anglo-Saxon literate classes, it was the poetry of King David and his

Among the most famous of these manuscripts is the Paris Psalter, which contains a prose version of the first fifty psalms in a translation attributed to Alfred, and an anonymous verse translation of psalms 51-150. Other portions of the Old Testament were translated, as were the Gospels. In all likelihood, the more direct vernacular translations of the Bible were for didactic purposes; in spite of vernacular translation, the Bible in circulation in Anglo-Saxon England was Jerome’s Vulgate or the Old Latin Bible. More important for this discussion are the Old English paraphrastic works (e.g., the Old English Genesis, Exodus, Judith, and Daniel), which retold Old Testament narratives in Old English verse, using Germanic poetic conventions


58. O’Neill, First Fifty Psalms, 1.

59. Particularly important is the work of Ælfric in translating Scripture. Ælfric worked (with another translator) to produce the Old English Hexateuch, with six books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Numbers 1-12, and portions of Joshua. The Heptateuch (a single manuscript) adds a seventh book, Judges. See Thomas Hall, “Biblical and Patristic Learning,” in A Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature, ed. Phillip Pulsiano and Elaine Treharne (Malden: Blackwell, 2001), 330. See also Rebecca Barnhouse and Benjamin Withers, The Old English Hexateuch: Aspects and Approaches (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Western Michigan University, 2000); and Josef Fraith, “Ælfric’s share in the Old English Pentateuch,” Review of English Studies 3, no. 12 (October 1952): 305-14. For translations of the New Testament, Bede reportedly began translating the Gospel of John, but there are no extant copies; see Bede’s “Letter to Cuthbert,” in Colgrave and Mynors, 582-583. A complete version of the Gospels (the Old English Gospels or West Saxon Gospels) was produced in the tenth century, but it did not appear to have significant impact: Roy Liuzza argues that the Old English Gospels’ “influence on the better-known works of Old English prose is negligible” and that Gospel quotations in Old English from later homilies “differed in important ways” from this translation. Roy Liuzza, “Who Read the Gospels in Old English?,” in Words and Works: Studies in Medieval English Language and Literature in Honour of Fred C. Robinson, ed. Fred C. Robinson, Nicholas Howe, and Peter S. Baker (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 6.

60. “There were many different ways in which the Bible was offered to the lay public—prose translation was only one of them, and in many respects the most unusual. The prohibitive cost of books and widespread non-literacy necessarily compelled, of course, a close relation between reading and teaching; the sermon rather than the text was the main source of knowledge of the Bible for most of society, and the words of Scripture reached the broader public in the Middle Ages in glosses, commentaries, and quotations, not texts.” Roy Liuzza, “Who Reads the Gospels in Old English?,” 15.

and reshaping the stories that would resonate in an Anglo-Saxon context. The Old English Exodus is particularly important in this regard. Howe argued that this text further built upon the Anglo-Saxon origin myth: both the biblical text and early English history invoked a dramatic movement to their promised land in a people’s crossing of water, a journey that was as much spiritual as it was spatial. The Old English poem ignores the sweep of the Old Testament book, focusing entirely on the flight of the Israelites from Egypt and their crossing of the Red Sea as a heroic epic, layering the scriptural narrative with martial embellishment: Moses is transformed into a battle-ready commander in all his glory. This depiction of the sojourning Israelites presents a people with whom the Old English Exodus’s audience could readily identify: where Bede’s exegesis of the Biblical Exodus allegorized the sojourning Israelites as a figural model for the Germanic settlement, the Old English Exodus fully recreates the Israelite captives as a valorous war-band. Howe observes, “Exodus allowed the Anglo-Saxons to align their history with the Old Testament, through the model of migration” and “presents the entry of a folc [OE, ‘people,’ ‘nation,’ ‘tribe’] into Christian history and thus the possibility of salvation.” While the Old English Exodus is the most obvious example of this recontextualizing of salvation history,

62. Martial language and imagery permeate the texts: for example, in the Old English poem Andreas, St. Andrew is rendered as a seafaring hero, while the apocryphal Old English Judith dispatches the monstrous Holofernæs with far more sword-wielding gusto than was depicted in the Biblical text. Similarly, in the Flood narrative of Genesis, the rising waters are rendered as an army, and then the angry Creator wields the waters like a terrifying weapon upon the earth. Scheil remarks “It is a commonplace in the criticism of the Old English scriptural poetry—especially on those poems based in the main on Old Testament sources, Genesis, Judith, Exodus, Daniel—that the Old English compositions tend to present the biblical past in a distinctly Germanic light. Scheil, 151.


64. Howe, Migration and Mythmaking, 106.
much of Old English biblical verse allows for a similar blending of past and present, Germanic and Israelite.\textsuperscript{65} This creative Anglo-Saxon recasting of the Israelites in a Germanic mold had a twofold implication: it familiarized Scripture at the same time that it sanctified English experience.

2.2.2.1 Devotional Works

Devotional works are those texts intended for personal prayer or meditation, or communal liturgical use, and bring the believer closer to an affective experience of the faith. Among the Old English devotional texts are the vernacular renderings of traditional Christian prayers, including \textit{The Lord’s Prayer} (in three extant variants), \textit{The Apostles’ Creed}, and the \textit{Gloria Patri}. According to Christopher Jones, while prose translations of these core Christian works are to be expected, the verse nature of these poetic renderings are more peculiar to modern readers because of their “sometimes exuberant literary embellishment.”\textsuperscript{66} In this respect they are similar to contemporary readings of Old English biblical paraphrases; however, the reason for this modern dissonance is their cultural congruence as they were reshaped into something with an Anglo-Saxon flavor. Jones observes that such poems reveal that these Christian texts were likely “adapted to any number of purposes” and point to “a blending of influences, from the classroom and library as much as from the choir.”\textsuperscript{67} While these specific texts are found in eleventh-century manuscripts, certainly the tradition of vernacular prayer goes back much

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{65} Scheil, 152.
  \item \textsuperscript{67} Jones, xviii-xix.
\end{itemize}
earlier: for example, Bede, in his letter to Ecgbert of York, counsels vernacular instruction of the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostles’ Creed for those who are ignorant of Latin. Not only does he recommend this for the laity, but for clergy as well.68

Two texts are particularly important for this category of religious writing: Cædmon’s Hymn and the Dream of the Rood. Although neither have explicit liturgical purposes, both display meditative, devotional dimensions that embody Anglo-Saxon spirituality’s negotiation of Germanic ancestral values and Latin Christian teachings. Cædmon’s Hymn offers testimony to a long tradition of English vernacular expression; however, our only extant versions of it are glosses to its Latin translation in Bede’s Historia, which offers a context for the composition of the poem, the miracle of a cowherd divinely inspired to create profound religious verse in his native English. Cædmon, unskilled in song, would depart from communal gatherings before it was his turn to sing with the harp. One night, however, he dreamt of an angel instructing him to sing “about the beginning of created things” (principium creaturarum).69 What followed was a brief poem in Old English verse which praised God and told of the creation of heaven and earth. When Cædmon’s abbess Hild learned of his gift, he was read sacred texts which he later repeated in verse. Afterwards, Cædmon took up the religious life and learned the entirety of salvation history, transforming it into verse. Cædmon’s Latin illiteracy is emphasized: Bede points out that Cædmon needed Scripture interpreted to him. Furthermore, this ability to compose English verse was only applied to religious verse, Bede observed, and was not gained by trained skill, but by grace. Cædmon developed many more religious songs and poems, about salvation history,

Christian doctrine, and apostolic teaching, all to inspire in his hearers a recommitment to the Christian life. Bede says that Cædmon’s verse led his audience “to despise the world and to long of the heavenly life” (ad contemtum saeculi et appetitum sunt uitae caelestis accensi). Of these many poems, unfortunately; there are none extant, except for the Cædmon’s first hymn as presented in Bede.

The final devotional text to be addressed is The Dream of the Rood. It has little relationship to the Alfredian texts, but it requires inclusion in any discussion of Ango-Saxon spirituality, both by virtue of its fame and merit and how it provocatively expresses Ango-Saxon vernacular religious desire. The poem translated Christ’s Passion through the lens of a Germanic warrior ethos, one which would appeal to an Anglo-Saxon audience: in the middle of night, the poem’s narrator is confronted with “the best of dreams [visions]” (swefna cyst): a magnificent, gold-embossed and gem-encrusted cross appears, encircled in light. This “victory


71. The surviving hymn could be categorized as a scriptural paraphrase (of Creation, in Genesis); similarly, Cædmon’s poetic legacy could be considered didactic in its function of teaching its hearers multiple aspects of the Christian faith. However, his poetry’s meditative and affective dimensions lead to my consideration of it as devotional text, despite its lack of connection to liturgical practice. Christopher Jones sees “Cædmon’s Hymn” as one of the “vernacular poems that complicate our distinctions between liturgy and private devotion.” Jones, introduction to OE Shorter Poems, Vol. I, xxi.

72. The “Dream of the Rood” is part of a poetic tradition with three representatives. The first is a runic inscription is carved onto the eighth-century Ruthwell Cross. The second is a longer manuscript poem, found in Old English the late tenth-century Vercelli Book (Cathedral Library MS 117). It is this text which I consider above. Finally, a short epigraph is engraved on the Brussels Cross, an eleventh-century cross reliquary. For more information on the Vercelli and Ruthwell poems, see Michael Swanton, Dream of the Rood (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1970), 39. See also Éamonn Ó Carragáin, Ritual and the Rood: Liturgical Images and the Old English Poems of the Dream of the Rood Tradition. (London: British Library, 2005).

73. It has been hailed as “the finest Old English religious poem.” Greenfield and Calder, 194.

tree” (sigebeam⁷⁵), the Cross of the Crucifixion, was sanctified in glory, and it recounts to the
dreamer the story of the Passion from its own experience. The poem rendered Christ not as
sacrificial lamb but as a strong, youthful hero, fully capable of defeating his foes yet nonetheless
willing to be sacrificed. Similarly, the cross was depicted as Christ’s loyal retainer, a relationship
invoking a social dynamic (dryhten to thegn, lord to retainer) intimate and meaningful to an
Anglo-Saxon audience. The rood yearns to serve as its lord’s weapon against his foes, but
accepts its own hardship and sufferings. It is glorified for its sacrifice, set above the heavens. The
poem is complex and multifaceted, and has been studied not simply in terms of its structure and
language, but also in terms of its doctrinal implications and liturgical resonance.⁷⁶ The text’s
power is in the distinctly devotional and meditative atmosphere which the poem cultivates,
inviting both affective and discursive engagement in the Passion narrative. The dream-vision
ends with the Cross’s admonition that its tale be shared so that others might follow the model of
the Cross’s own devotion, as the poem’s narrator joyfully recommits himself to a life of
discipleship. In short, the poem is a call to conversion and Christian discipleship. Beyond its
literary qualities, the Dream of the Rood provides a profound revelation of the Anglo-Saxon
creative accommodation and negotiation of multiple socio-cultural and religious values, both
heroic and Christian.


⁷⁶. See Swanton, Dream of the Rood; also Judith N. Garde, Old English Poetry in Medieval
thorough treatment of the doctrinal implications of The Dream of the Rood, see Dennis J. Obermeyer,
“The Relationship of Theology and Literary Form in the Dream of the Rood.” (PhD diss., The Catholic
University of America, 2007). ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
2.2.2.3 Didactic Texts

Didactic texts instruct, exhort, and proclaim the Christian faith life, not merely as an exercise in philosophy or intellectual abstraction, but for the purpose of faith formation. Patristic and early medieval theology was often contextual and occasional, written out of precise doctrinal, pastoral, or contextual needs and not as the formulation of systematic theology. Exegesis, didacticism, and speculation served the purpose of religious formation and the shaping of the Christian *habitus* or disposition. As Ellen Charry observes, the “central theological task” of theology from the Patristic era to the Reformation was “to assist people to come to God.”

Among the Old English didactic texts are works from the Alfredian program, which I introduced in chapter 1 and which I will return to in chapter 5. Among the numerous didactic texts are those poems that provided guidance and direction for Christian living (e.g., *Almsgiving*, *The Rewards of Piety*, or *Instructions for Christians*), and eschatological poems that addressed the Last Judgment (e.g., *Christ III: Judgment*) or the disposition of the soul (e.g., *Soul and Body* or *Judgement Day*).

The largest collection of Old English religious texts is in prose, and consists of sermons and saints’ lives. The Old English prose hagiographies (whether *martyrologies*, *passiones*, or *vitae*) which commemorated the lives, miraculous deeds, and suffering of holy men and women, emerged out of the celebration of the sanctoral calendar and the liturgical year, and provided

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saintly models for Anglo-Saxons to follow in pursuit of Christian virtue.\textsuperscript{78} To be a Christian meant to grow in the faith.

Homiletic texts include works intended for public delivery, personal devotions, and monastic recitation as part of the Daily Office. We have the name of only two homilists: the previously mentioned Ælfric, Bishop of Eynsham (ca. 950 - ca. 1010), with over a hundred homilies to his name, and Wulfstan, Archbishop of York (d. 1023), with over twenty homilies attributed to him. Where Ælfric’s sermons were tied to the observation of the liturgical year, Wulfstan’s works were occasional, intended for specific needs or demands. Wulfstan’s rhetoric demanded an audience; his sermons were not intended for public proclamation, not private devotion. Writing with the Latin pen-name \textit{Lupus} (‘wolf’), his “Sermo lupi ad Anglos” (ca. 1014) is among the most well-known Old English homilies. Wulfstan’s text excoriated the English for their sinfulness with a provocative litany of wrongdoings: “manslayers and kinslayers and priest-slayers and monastery-haters” (mannslagan and mægslagan and mæsserbanan and mynsterhatan).\textsuperscript{79} The list continues. More important here, however, is Wulfstan’s attribution of ongoing Viking incursions—which he proclaimed were permitted by God because of England’s sinfulness. Wulfstan did not merely evoke Gildas in his homily; Wulfstan invoked him, uniting his jeremiad with Gildas’s screed and reminding his own audience of the perfidy of the Britons, who perished because of their “many sins” (mængifealde synna).\textsuperscript{80} This is not simply another oratorical invective interpreting social events with

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{80} Wulfstan, “Sermo lupi,” line 185.
\end{itemize}
heavy-handed language of sin and retribution. As Nicholas Howe observed, “Sermo lupi” further perpetuates the notion of English chosenness. This election signifies a special calling, but this calling is not without its own particular vulnerability. England’s chosenness demanded a constant reorientation toward the Christian faith, and falling away from that orientation was a perilous choice. To be a Christian people was not simply a special calling, but an obligation to live a life of virtue, and Wulfstan used a reminder from history to serve as warning that what has happened before can happen again.

2.2.2.4 Liminal-Existential Works

Thus far we have considered texts with an unambiguously religious subject matter and intention. The final category of works in the religious mode is one I have identified as liminal-existential, a grouping of texts that sit at the borderlands of spirituality and the secular world. While some texts are clearly religious and others exclusively secular in subject matter, a clean demarcation between religious and secular domains is not always possible. Some texts were oriented toward secular concerns and interests, but made meaningful through the Christian worldview that inform the text’s construction and reception. In her study of the influence of Christian theology on Anglo-Saxon intellectual and cultural life, including such disparate products as secular poetry and legal codes, Helen Forbes Foxhall observes that “theology was not detached from society or from the experiences of people who were not theologians, but

81. Nicholas Howe writes, “Wulfstan’s allusion to Gildas and the British is a challenge to the English that they exercise their historical imagination; they must abandon the comforting and self-serving image of themselves as victorious occupants of the island and instead conceive of themselves as natives vanquished for their sins.” Howe, Migration and Mythmaking, 15-16.
formed an essential constituent part.”\textsuperscript{82} The Old English literary works particularly relevant to this discussion are commonly identified as elegies, heroic literature, and wisdom literature, all of which establish a sense of existential meaning through use of traditional Germanic literary conventions.

Elegies include a collection of meditative poems (e.g., \textit{The Seafarer} and \textit{The Wanderer}) that evoke loss, exile, and transience, and can serve both as lamentation and consolation.\textsuperscript{83} Although wisdom literature and elegies are commonly treated as separate genres, there is some overlap in their orientation: Robert Bjork observes that in these “lists of common wisdom and common fates, we get a strong sense of the need for a past to establish a current order and a wish that that past … could live again.”\textsuperscript{84} Old English heroic literature includes a body of texts characterized by a shared warrior ethos, common to Germanic heroic verse. Stanley Greenfield and Daniel Calder describe this ethos as “the desire for fame and glory, now and after death,” and “reciprocal obligations of lords and thegns: protection and generosity on the part of the form, loyalty and service on the part of the latter.”\textsuperscript{85} Although specific texts are included in the canon

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{82} Helen Forbes Foxhall, \textit{Heaven and Earth in Anglo-Saxon England: Theology and Society in an Age of Faith} (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013), 61.
\item \textsuperscript{83} The poems classified as elegies are all found in one manuscript, the Exeter Book (late 10th c.), but certain other poems have elegiac elements ascribed to them. For more information about the elegies and their characteristics, see Anne Klinck, \textit{The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study} (Montreal: McGill University Press, 2001). See also Christine Fell, “Perceptions of Transience,” in \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature}, ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 172-89; and Greenfield and Calder, 280-302.
\item \textsuperscript{85} Greenfield and Calder, 134.
\end{itemize}
of heroic verse, the heroic ethos permeates other texts, both sacred and secular—as already seen in the image of the martial hero Moses in the Old English *Exodus*, along with the heroic Christ and his loyal retainer, the Cross, in *Dream of the Rood*. Robert Fulk and Christopher Cain observe that “heroic vocabulary permeates all Old English poetic genres, including such unheroic compositions as riddles, prayers, allegories, and homiletic pieces,” seeing the diffusion of this style as evidence of the heroic verse’s significance prior to the conversion. I introduced wisdom literature as a cross-cultural literary phenomenon in chapter 1, and I will return to Old English wisdom literature further in chapter 5. For now, I will simply offer that like biblical wisdom texts, Old English wisdom writings are concerned with the ordering of society and the universe, and possess a distinctly theological dimension that transcends social or existential truisms. Old English wisdom literature is treated in scholarship as a distinctly secular endeavor, although its ancient Near Eastern counterpart is part of the scriptural canon.

Each of these three literary traditions (wisdom literature, elegies, and heroic verse) demonstrates the persistence and vitality of Germanic cultural values that endured both geographic migration and the conversion to Christianity, and continued to inform and inspire the Anglo-Saxons. However, these traditions are typically dominated by texts identified in scholarship as “secular,” which suggests that they have little value in the study of Anglo-Saxon spirituality; after all, what does heroic poetry have to do with the English people in pursuit of a Christian calling? Patrick Conner’s insightful analysis of Old English religious verse provides a


useful approach in examining secular genres. Through his anthropological approach to religion, which emphasizes the significance of symbols, systems, and world views in cultivating and conveying ultimate meaning, Conner asserts that “the major function of the religious dimension in Old English poetry is to reference the ceremonial and ineffable from the position of the temporal and the commonplace.”

He establishes four modes in which Old English religious texts can function: doctrinal, ceremonial, personal, and social. The first three modes, doctrinal, personal, and ceremonial, address texts that are more easily assigned the label of “religious.” His doctrinal mode roughly parallels this dissertation’s articulation of didactic works, while his ceremonial and this study’s devotional overlap. The personal mode addresses the use of saints and heroes as personal exemplars, and is subsumed under this work’s didactic texts. It is Conner’s treatment of the social mode that can guide a reading of liminal-existential texts. The social mode is certainly more ambiguous as religious literature; Conner freely admits that “Old English religious poetry in the social mode does not necessarily even look like religious poetry.” These texts attend to secular values, ethics, or concerns, but are not divorced from the symbols and meaning system of a Christian world-view. They do not explicate Christian teaching, but they nonetheless reveal additional nuances of Anglo-Saxon religious culture and its engagement with Christian thought. Texts categorized according to Conner’s “social mode” incorporate the life experiences of “people who had lives beyond the cloister wall” but were nonetheless “influenced by dogma and liturgy.”

89. Ibid., 266.
90. Ibid.
text is difficult, as Conner rightly observes, in part because of the lack of sources that render these texts more meaningful as religious texts. Furthermore, there should be hermeneutical caution in the search for implicit theological meaning. The possibility of religious influence or intertextuality does not signify a text’s religious intention, and modern scholars excavating an Old English text for its exegetical value should be careful not to commit eisegesis. While Fred Robinson observed that twentieth-century Anglo-Saxon scholarship saw an increased awareness of the “undeniably profound Christian character of Anglo-Saxon culture,” he also warned against its excesses, as zealous over-application of Patristic theology to Old English poems led to a rampant allegorical interpretation of texts. Even with these caveats and warnings, however, these liminal-existential texts can provide rich sources for interpreting what was meaningful for an Anglo-Saxon audience and how religious dimensions can amplify understanding nuances in an otherwise secular writing.

Bede saw the Anglo-Saxons as a people called to the Christian faith. Conversion was not simply incidental to their history: it was integral part of their spirituality and gave meaning to their coming to Britain. Thus far, I have used the term “spirituality” without clarification or definition, and this is intentional: the goal has been simply to point to the Anglo-Saxons as a Christian people profoundly aware of their calling to the Christian faith. Invoking language of spirituality in academic discourse can be troublesome, as we shall see shortly. A vast majority of academic literature on Anglo-Saxon religious literature comes through the lens of historians and literary critics rather than theologians or religious scholars, and the concept of Anglo-Saxon

91. Ibid.
spirituality is almost entirely absent from such discourse, while scholars of religion rarely touch on Anglo-Saxon contributions to spirituality or theological thought. This lacuna raises an important critical concern for reframing Alfred’s program vis-a-vis Anglo-Saxon spirituality: one can study Anglo-Saxon religious culture, and one can read Old English literature as an expression of the Christian faith, but does this constitute an Anglo-Saxon spirituality? In short, what is the scholarly consensus on the characteristics, or even existence, of Anglo-Saxon spirituality?

2.3 The Reception and Critical Interpretation of Anglo-Saxon Spirituality

In 1986, Anglo-Saxonist and church historian Milton McC. Gatch critically assessed the academic study of Anglo-Saxon spirituality and found it wanting. His brief essay, “The Anglo-Saxon Tradition” appeared as part of The Study of Spirituality, a thematic and historical survey published when religious scholarship was opening its hermeneutical gates regarding spirituality as an academic field of studies. In addition to different historical and cultural expressions of Christian spirituality, the text also explored interdisciplinary approaches to spirituality as well as interfaith and contemporary spiritualities. In his essay, Gatch observes:

The history of spirituality among the Christians of Anglo-Saxon England has not been the subject of separate studies; the ground has not been carefully or systematically charted, and there are no comprehensive anthologies of the materials that should be reviewed by students of the period.93

While there have been improvements in this scholarly landscape, the situation remains mostly unchanged. Inevitably, academic discussions of medieval English spirituality overlook Anglo-

Saxon contributions and turn their focus to later, Middle English authors. This creates a significant hermeneutical problem for a theological interpretation of Alfred’s work in the context of Anglo-Saxon spirituality: not only has Alfred been overlooked in terms of contributions to Christian spirituality, the broader context of Anglo-Saxon spirituality has been an uncharted domain. Neither Anglo-Saxonists nor scholars of Christian spirituality have contributed much to the subject. Anglo-Saxonist scholarship has been more forthright in its examination of the religious meaning of Old English texts in light of their mixed religious, linguistic, and cultural heritage— and much of this scholarship would seem to lend itself to the study of Anglo-Saxon spirituality—yet spirituality itself is rarely named as a distinct intellectual construct. The deficit in attention is even more apparent in theological scholarship, particularly that devoted to the

study of spirituality. Where many Anglo-Saxonists were reluctant to mention spirituality, scholars in Christian spirituality appeared disinterested in considering the Anglo-Saxons, except for occasional attention to Bede or the other Anglo-Latin authors. Thus, Anglo-Saxon vernacular texts were ignored as a vehicle for important theological discourse. Having already presented Old English literature as the primary textual source for exploring Anglo-Saxon spirituality, attention now turns to the scholarly neglect of Anglo-Saxon vernacular literature as an important source for understanding Christian spirituality within a historic and cultural context.

2.3.1 A Barren Landscape

This discussion begins by considering what role the Anglo-Saxons played in twentieth-century studies of Christian spirituality, which were part of a groundswell in writing about the spiritual life. Among the most significant works that emerged as part of this movement was the three-volume series, *Histoire de la spiritualité chrétienne* by Louis Bouyer (published 1960-1965), which Lawrence Cunningham identified as the "starting point for the study of modern spirituality." While this historical survey did address the Anglo-Saxon period, it did so only in part: the Anglo-Saxons were blended in with their Germanic cousins as little more than a backdrop. The second volume of the series (*La spiritualité du Moyen Age*, 1961), by Jean Leclercq, Francois Vandenbroucke, and Louis Bouyer, traced a chronology of medieval

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95. The academic study of spirituality was transformed in the middle of the twentieth century. The insights and new perspectives which emerged as a result of this movement will be addressed further in the next chapter, when we turn to a discussion of methods in the study of spirituality.

spirituality from Gregory the Great to Irish Christianity to the Carolingian church. A single chapter was dedicated to “Spirituality in the Barbarian Kingdoms.” The authors grouped together the Anglo-Saxons along with the Franks of France and Germany, the Spanish Visigoths, and the Italian Lombards—the barbarian tribes who had settled into the lands of the fractured Roman Empire. In spite of this cultural diversity, the authors saw Christian spirituality as characterized by a particular unity: “There survived a legacy of ancient Christianity strongly marked by two influences, the Roman Church and monasticism,” while “everywhere young nations with no traditional culture” which “accepted the Gospel with fervour and simplicity.” 97 The religious texts important to this discussion were either hagiographical or ascetical (e.g., *The Life of St Martin* by Sulpicius Severus, or the *Dialogues* and *Pastoral Rule* of Gregory the Great). The emphasis of the chapter was how prayer, asceticism, and monasticism continued to preserve a contemplative tradition during “barbarous times.” 98 Bede makes occasional appearances, but Old English literature is absent from the discussion. After discussing other movements in spirituality and historical theology, the text returns to England and the development of new schools of spirituality in the fourteenth century: specifically, as mentioned above Chapter 1, the work of Middle English mystics Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Walter Hilton (whose major works were in Latin), Richard Rolle, and the anonymous author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*—works dominated by language of contemplation and ecstatic experience, in which prayer was prelude to the mystical union with Christ. From this volume, a landmark in the study of Christian spirituality, readers learned that the Anglo-Saxons were the cultural context for Bede and other

98. Ibid., 67.
Anglo-Latin authors, and the study of spirituality is the study of visions, prayer, and ascetical practices. The subtext is obvious: the Anglo-Saxons were prelude to more interesting authors, and true medieval English spirituality started with the Middle English mystics. This brings to light an important hermeneutical insight: the identification of spirituality in terms of ascetical practices and the contemplative life leads to discounting other forms of religious experience. Given the paucity of Old English ascetical or visionary texts and the apparent absence of Anglo-Saxon mysticism or contemplative writing, the Anglo-Saxon era was summarily dismissed. The central issue, then, revolves around how one interprets spirituality. We shall return to this shortly.

Martin Thornton’s *English Spirituality* (1963) had different perspectives on the development of spirituality in medieval England, but he shared the same historical bias. Thornton’s goal was the articulation of an English School of spirituality, which he traced to St. Anselm of Canterbury (ca. 1033–1109), whom he lauded as “our own father-founder, in whom English spirituality is first plainly embodied, the first of the pure breed as it were.”99 In Thornton’s view, the true character of English Christianity emerged in the fourteenth century, which he identifies as “the consummation of a long development”—a development that is highlighted by the work of St. Augustine of Hippo, the twelfth-century Victorine canons, and the Benedictines.100 Thornton does not neglect the importance of vernacular development in spiritual texts. “It has often been pointed out that it is impossible to study early English literature without absorbing a good deal of early English religion,” he observed, “That the two developed together is not without significance, for vernacular devotion and liturgy imply much more than

100. Ibid., 172-73.
convenience or edification.” Unfortunately, he was not referring to Old English: “Middle English became the proper and necessary vehicle for the promulgation of specifically English spirituality.” Given Thornton’s perspective, this oversight is understandable if lamentable: in his emphasis on ascetical pursuits, the Middle English mystical literature of visions, contemplative prayer, and stages of ascent became exemplars of English spirituality. However, his assertion that the Middle English mystics are an example of the “specifically English”—with no reference to Old English—utterly neglects the achievement of the Anglo-Saxons in support of his particular agenda: the promulgation of a distinctly Anglican vision. English Christianity for Thornton was characterized by a “speculative-affective synthesis,” a harmony of “doctrine and devotion,” and epitomized by two “golden ages” of English spirituality—the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries. Even Bede received only a single, if lukewarm-to-positive affirmation in Thornton’s text, which was more concerned with the Caroline Divines (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) and with the Celtic church.

2.3.2 Signs of Life

The 1970s and 1980s were kinder to Anglo-Saxon spirituality. A far more sympathetic approach than Thornton’s occurred in Gerald Bonner’s “Anglo-Saxon Culture and Spirituality” (1973). Bonner’s work was bold in its attempts to highlight specific characteristics shared by Anglo-Saxon religious authors, although he cautioned against the worrisome tendency “in dealing with far-away epics like that of Anglo-Saxon England to attribute to them a uniformity

101. Thornton, 173.
and a homogeneity which we would not ascribe to more recent periods.” 102 The overarching religious culture of Anglo-Saxon England, for Bonner, was monastic, and thus produced a monastic spirituality—“and within that spirituality there will inevitably be considerable emphasis laid upon contemplation.” 103 Bonner’s work highlighted monastic exemplars in Bede’s Historia as well as other hagiographical works, devotion to the cross (which gave The Dream of the Rood a distinctly contemplative dimension), and the pastoral/missionary motivations found in the Historia’s evangelists as well as in Ælfric. Bonner, like Bouyer and Thornton before him, related spirituality to distinctly contemplative (and implicitly monastic) pursuits. Where Bonner parted ways from Bouyer and Thornton was his willingness to regard the Anglo-Saxons not merely as a prelude to later mystics, or a stop-gap between Bede and later monastic authors, but as having their own distinct spirituality. Bonner clearly understood the cultural dimensions of Anglo-Saxon Christianity, when he observed that “the English conversion to faith was also accompanied by a conversion of culture,” specifically to Latin Christian culture. 104 Where his approach to studying Anglo-Saxon spirituality fell short—as bold as it is—was his persistent reorientation to Anglo-Saxon Latinity.

Gatch delivered his critical assessment in 1986, and while he was clearly concerned with articulating the religious culture and beliefs of the Anglo-Saxons specifically in terms of spirituality, over half of his essay addressed two Anglo-Latin authors (Bede and Aldhelm); the rest of the extremely concise essay gave a wide, sweeping coverage of later authors and

103. Ibid., 542.
104. Bonner, 536.
traditions. As a scholar of Anglo-Saxon homilies, it is unsurprising that his work was especially attentive to Ælfric, Wulfstan, and the Blickling Homilies. While Gatch touched on certain contemplative aspects of Alfred’s work, otherwise the vernacular tradition was overlooked. Gatch’s treatment was generous, however, in comparison to that of his contemporary, Pierre Riché. Riché’s essay, “Spirituality in Celtic and Germanic Society” (1986) treated both the Celts and all the “Germanic pagans—Anglo-Saxons, Franks, other peoples of Germania, then Scandinavians” in a single brief text, with a clear preference for the Celts. They received eight pages, while the assembled Germanic peoples were treated in four pages.105 Thus, while the 1970s and 1980s demonstrated a growing awareness of the very concept of “Anglo-Saxon spirituality,” scholarship still preferred the work of ascetics and contemplatives, and the problem of hermeneutical bias identified in Leclercq’s treatment of medieval spirituality, although softer here, persisted: when the spiritual life is rendered almost exclusively as contemplative practice, the multidimensionality of spirituality is over-looked. Eyes were turning toward the Anglo-Saxons and their spirituality, but it was only dimly considered.

It was with the last decade or two that we find a broader interest in Anglo-Saxon spirituality. This is evident through a number of works, as various surveys and introductions to English spirituality started to take seriously the contributions of the Anglo-Saxons to Christian spirituality. Scott DeGregorio’s doctoral dissertation, “Explorations of Spirituality in the Writings of the Venerable Bede, King Alfred and Abbot Ælfric of Eynsham,” identified “the resistance of past scholarship to consider the spirituality of the Anglo-Saxon period,” noting that between

Gatch’s assessment and his own study, there had been little progress. In studying the works of Bede, Alfred, and Ælfric, DeGregorio sought to establish the “diversity of themes and concerns” that were woven throughout specific Anglo-Saxon texts, and he attempted to legitimize these three authors as authoritative spiritual writers in the Anglo-Saxon period. Roughly contemporary with his dissertation were general surveys that introduced and discussed early English spirituality as something worthy of study. Benedicta Ward’s slim volume, *High King of Heaven: Aspects of Early English Spirituality*, took a comprehensive look at the prayer life and religious practices of the Anglo-Saxons, attempting to create a vision of “English piety” as an intermingling of Latin, Anglo-Saxon, and Celtic influences. Unfortunately, given the introductory nature of the text, the distinctiveness of these traditions was erased. It is nonetheless noteworthy for having treated the Anglo-Saxon era as possessing its own spiritual legacy worthy of study. Gordon Mursell’s discussion of Anglo-Saxon spirituality, however, is more expansive. *English Spirituality: From Earliest Times to 1700* (2001), the first volume of a two-volume series on the history of English spirituality to the present day, examined English spirituality from the Anglo-Saxon period through the Reformation and Restoration. Mursell allowed one chapter for Anglo-Saxon spirituality, and in that chapter provides a chronology from Bede to the eleventh century, both highlighting specific authors (e.g., Alcuin and Ælfric) and identifying key themes. His choice of themes is particularly interesting; he appears more interested in drawing on Old English literature and its contents in their own terms rather than trying to pigeonhole texts in standard


spiritual or ascetical themes. Thus, in addition to fairly conventional concepts like “Cross and Judgement” or “Penance and Spiritual Guidance,” Mursell also highlights “Exile and Home,” “Longing and Desire,” or “Nostalgia for a Heroic Past.” Given the nature of the volume as a survey, and the limited space afforded the Anglo-Saxons, Mursell’s work did a remarkable job of discussing Anglo-Saxon spirituality as a distinct and important theological construct, finally concluding that the “essential genius of Anglo-Saxon spirituality is … its vigorous eclecticism.” While its surface-level treatment may lend it to being dismissed by more rigorous academic readers, the attention he paid to Anglo-Saxon spirituality and his willingness to uplift themes beyond the pale of typical “spiritual writing” are commendable. Perhaps the most important recent advancement in the study of Anglo-Saxon spirituality, however, is Robert Boenig’s anthology of primary texts in the highly-lauded Paulist Press series, “The Classics of Western Spirituality.” Anglo-Saxon Spirituality: Selected Writings (2001) contains a variety of texts, both prose (homilies) and poetry, including Biblical paraphrase. The anthology is sound, and commendable; through his selection of primary texts, Boenig allows the Anglo-Saxons to speak for themselves, and includes works such as Cædmon’s Hymn and The Dream of the Rood—commonplace reading for English literary scholars, but less frequently encountered by theologians. As a sampling of texts, the offerings are limited and relatively conservative. In

111. Understandably, the point of the anthology is to introduce readers to the scope of Anglo-Saxon spirituality. It is not intended as a compendium, or the comprehensive collection recommended by Gatch. While some volumes in the Paulist Press Classics of Western Spirituality series contain the entire works of an author, many volumes typically contain limited excerpts, and decisions must be made.
addition, Boenig’s introduction stresses the relationship of Christian eschatology to Germanic concern for fate, and considers how these two notions are blended in certain Old English texts; this annotation is matched by Boenig’s emphasis in selecting eschatological homilies and poems for his anthology. While this highlights an important dimension of Anglo-Saxon religious culture, it also skews the collection of texts. This anthology provides an opportunity (and room) for additional texts—such as an elegy and material from the Alfredian project. Thus, the volume is a landmark in the study of Anglo-Saxon spirituality, but it is not without problems.

Irrespective of their individual approaches and different perspectives, the more recent attention of scholars to Anglo-Saxon spirituality (as seen in the works of DeGregorio, Ward, Mursell, and Boenig) demonstrates the development of a new perspective. Earlier authors—such as Bouyer or Thornton—overlooked the distinctive contributions of the Anglo-Saxons and were silent about their spirituality. As I discussed in chapter 1, where vernacular theology is mentioned, attention turns to the canon of the Middle English mystics, and the possibility of construing Old English theological writing in kind has only barely received attention. The more recent approaches, however, treat Anglo-Saxon spirituality as a valid theological construct, and are willing to legitimize Old English texts as sources for the understanding of that construct. Writing over a decade after Gatch’s assessment of the state of scholarship on Anglo-Saxon spirituality, DeGregorio found the situation little changed; in “comparison with the vast body of scholarship on the spirituality of the later Middle Ages, the history of Anglo-Saxon spirituality

Nonetheless, there was room and opportunity for more texts. For example, Anglo-Saxon Spirituality is 352 pages, compared to the Celtic Spirituality volume, which weighs in at 576 pages. See Oliver Davies, ed., Celtic Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1999).
remains to be written.”\textsuperscript{112} The current situation is not much different. True, there have been marked improvements since DeGregorio’s work. Boenig’s anthology, despite its limitations, introduces readers to the contributions of the Anglo-Saxons. The syntheses of Mursell and Ward offer important perspectives, but these are still introductory surveys. Ultimately, Gatch’s observation that Anglo-Saxon spirituality “has not been systematically charted” remains true. Does the earlier dearth of scholarship in this area of study suggest that Anglo-Saxon spirituality is either (at worst) a fraudulent scholarly concept or (at best) a concept with insufficient source material to excavate? The current study is predicated on the twofold belief that Anglo-Saxon spirituality is a legitimate concept worthy of exploration and that Alfred’s project played an important role in this broader corpus, but recognizes that there are historic, hermeneutical barriers to the study of Anglo-Saxon spirituality which must be addressed.

2.3.3 Reasons for Neglect

Although this is not a study in the history of Anglo-Saxon scholarship, in suggesting that modern scholarship has neglected Anglo-Saxon spirituality, it is valuable to consider possible reasons for this neglect. The relative disinterest in Anglo-Saxon spirituality may signify that there is little to study, or it may raise questions regarding the the validity of the metric which is being applied to Anglo-Saxon religious culture. The question in short is whether what has traditionally been construed (or constructed) as spirituality, particularly medieval spirituality, has been dominated by analysis of primary texts from the twelfth century onward through a scholarly lens dominated by eighteenth-century theological hermeneutics. Regarding the matter of source

\textsuperscript{112} DeGregorio, “Explorations of Spirituality,” ii.
materials, DeGregorio attributes the scholarly neglect of Anglo-Saxon spirituality to modern scholarly concern with twelfth-century (and later) theological developments. This is not without cause, as the so-called High Middle Ages did produce an enormous quantity of texts dealing with mystical theology. The twelfth century has been regarded as an era of profound theological transformation and has been called the “contemplative age of gold.” Bernard McGinn says further that while the twelfth century marks the “fulfillment” of monastic mysticism, the year 1200 marked “a more decisive shift” in the production of mystical literature, and the changes wrought in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries would have an impact on Christianity throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. Such pristinization of one epoch of medieval spirituality, however, created a hermeneutical bias. As DeGregorio observed, “Whether intentionally or not, such formulations have the adverse effect of making spirituality seem like a twelfth-century phenomenon.” As the heights of twelfth- to fourteenth-century contemplative theology became the standard by which all medieval Christian spirituality was measured, it unintentionally became a normative measure against which other spiritualities were judged and found lacking. DeGregorio argued that “If Anglo-Saxonists have been hesitant to apply the critical discourse associated with medieval spirituality to their texts, one reason may be that


discourse has been defined in such a way that its relevance to Anglo-Saxon material seems marginal at best."

Furthermore, while DeGregorio’s observation about modern scholarly focus on high medieval texts is insightful, the hermeneutical problem runs even deeper. Medieval mystical texts established the norm for what constituted the spiritual experience, and shaped the scholarly approach to studying these texts. If the twelfth to fourteenth centuries produced what would be considered landmark texts in spirituality and mysticism, it was with the eighteenth century and its articulation of spirituality “as the science of perfection” that dictated our scrutiny toward those landmarks. This “science of perfection” mapped and routinized Christian spirituality through an orderly two-fold schematization that established ascetical theology as the predicate to mystical theology: it was a spirituality of advancement to perfection that began with devotion and culminated with mysticism, and a system which regulated the spiritual life through formal stages of ascent. Such clinical rendering of a science of perfection informed and directed


118. The single-most influential proponent of this approach was the Italian Jesuit, Giovanni Battista (John Baptist) Scaramelli, who discussed ascetical theology in his Direttorio ascetico (1752), a four-volume work addressed to spiritual directors and those concerned with the care of the soul. Scaramelli’s Direttorio mistico (1754) addressed the topic of mysticism in a separate, single volume. Scaramelli writes, “… I saw in practice, as I had before recognised in theory, how very useful it would have been if I had prepared for use a clear and methodical exposition of the ways of Christian perfection; explaining, in the first place, one after another, its commencement, progress, advanced stages, and final state; continually and systematically joining with speculative teaching rules drawn from experience, which, more than anything else, contribute to the safe accomplishment of the soul’s journey…” John Baptist Scaramelli, The Directorium Asceticum: or, Guide to the Spiritual Life: Volume I, trans. St Bruno’s College, North Wales (London: R&T Washbourne, 1902), 4-5.
religious scholarship for the following two centuries, serving as the predecessor to the academic study of spirituality.\textsuperscript{119} Even when the ascetical-mystical binary was replaced by a more unified “spiritual theology” which became the standard for seminary instruction in the early twentieth century, the highly ordered and prescriptive model of spirituality endured.\textsuperscript{120} This would have a deleterious effect on the critical study of Christian spirituality, as diverse spiritualities, the expression of Christian spirituality in different eras and cultures, were assessed in light of an eighteenth-century interpretive model.

It is unsurprising, then that Anglo-Saxon spirituality has remained at the margins of scholarship.\textsuperscript{121} The primacy of high medieval mystical texts and the hermeneutical orientation dominated by the science of perfection created an imprecise interpretive metric. While the twelfth and thirteenth century marked the development of a specific manifestation of Christian spirituality, it would be anachronistic to measure earlier texts by golden age exemplars. It is inarguable that Old English literature does not contain writings that parallel the mystical texts of the High Middle Ages. Furthermore, the modern study of spirituality has moved considerably past the “science of perfection” which was a guiding factor in its earlier study, and has come to


\textsuperscript{120} See, for example, Pierre Pourrat, \textit{Christian Spirituality, Volume I: From the Time of Our Lord till the Dawn of the Middle Ages} (Westminster, Newman Press, 1953), v.

\textsuperscript{121} This does not even address how or to what degree religion itself has been approached in medieval studies. Giles Constable offers an intriguing argument that through the middle of the twentieth century, medieval studies focused only with some exception on institutional, economic, intellectual, or legislative history. The study of medieval religion was largely ignored by secular academics and the province of religious scholars, often deemed to have partisan interests. With the second half of the twentieth century, medieval religion received more attention, largely (Constable argues) because of enhanced attention to religion in global politics. Giles Constable, “From Church History to Religious Culture: The Study of Medieval Religious Life and Spirituality,” in \textit{European Religious Cultures: Essays Offered to Christopher Brooke on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday}, ed. Miri Rubin (London: Institute of Historical Research, 2008), 3-16.
embrace a historical and contextual study of spirituality as lived religious experience. Ultimately, if spirituality is interpreted almost exclusively in language of prayer practices, contemplation, visions, and stages of spiritual ascent, of course there is little left to account for Anglo-Saxon spirituality. I will discuss this (along with modern methods in the study of spirituality) in further detail in chapter 3, when I show how the spirituality and its etymological shifts reveals a diverse array of meanings, and is only one of many neologisms developed to address the spiritual life.

2.4 Conclusion

Repositioning Alfred’s translation project in terms of spiritual formation and Anglo-Saxon vernacular theology necessitates understanding the importance of conversion in Anglo-Saxon spirituality. Influenced largely by Bede’s ecclesiastical historiography and theological exegesis, the Anglo-Saxon conversion became a pivotal event in Anglo-Saxon religious imagination; after their adoption of a new faith, the Anglo-Saxons saw themselves as called to Britain for the purpose of religious transformation and chosen for a Christian identity. The call to the Christian faith, however, was as much of a warning as it was a blessing: being a Christian required a lifelong reorientation to that faith. The Britons learned that fate was not kind to those who lacked Christian zeal, too late, and were replaced by Germanic invaders as England’s new Christian people. Bede knew that conversion was not simply a thing of the past, but an ongoing need. Old English literature revealed the creative vernacular response of the Anglo-Saxons to the call to the Christian faith: Biblical stories were recast in a Germanic mold and heroic saints provided exemplars for Christian living, while homilies, elegies, and poems explored different dimensions of the Christian faith. Unfortunately, this rich body of literature has only marginally
been considered through the lens of Christian spirituality, due largely to hermeneutical shifts in how spirituality was conceived or studied at different times.

Bereft of significant discussion about Anglo-Saxon spirituality, however, this repositioning of Alfred’s literary corpus is a repositioning in the dark. In order to engage with the Alfredian tradition and its texts as expressions of Christian spirituality, interpretive guidance is needed: what do we mean when we say spirituality, and how do we study it? The groundwork has been laid for a general understanding of Anglo-Saxon spirituality, but excavation of Alfredian texts will require a more refined approach. The next step in this study is a consideration of that approach, which demands framing spirituality in a manner relevant to Anglo-Saxon religious experience—not as expressed by twelfth-century mystics or articulated in early modern discourse on a science of perfection, but as a theological construct that attends to spirituality as a lived religious experience.
CHAPTER THREE

LIFE IN THE SPIRIT:
APPROACHES AND ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF SPIRITUALITY

Any attempt to study spirituality—whether that of a specific text, an individual, a culture, or an era—must set forth an understanding of the object of study and the method with which that object will be examined. Thus far, this dissertation’s use of the term spirituality has been relatively ambiguous and undefined; although intentional, it mirrors the word’s use in common conversation. However, attempting to characterize Alfred’s cultural reform program in terms of Anglo-Saxon spirituality requires that I establish my approach to the texts: what am I looking for, and how will I read these texts? This is not mere academic speculation, but vital to this study given the relative neglect of Anglo-Saxon spirituality in scholarly literature. In the previous chapter, I suggested that this neglect is not because of an absence of that object of study, but largely because of the prescriptive application of a narrow, anachronistic hermeneutic to Anglo-Saxon spiritualit, one which is particularly unhelpful in examining ninth-century literature. Thus, this chapter turns to the issue of object and method. I will first provide theological and historical considerations in the study of spirituality, and then turn to methodological issues, including the problem of definition, and conclude with how this study will examine the Alfredian program in terms of Anglo-Saxon spirituality.
3.1 Theological and Historical Considerations

Defining spirituality is a complex and complicated proposition. First, any definition of spirituality would largely be a modern scholarly abstraction. Although such definitions are valuable, it is also valuable to realize that spirituality’s elusive character has a long history of shifting meanings, and I am reluctant to provide an answer that predicates spirituality as a universal given. As we shall examine, the word *spirituality*’s origins are intrinsically rooted in the Christian tradition, so this study begins by considering that source and discussing how the concept of spirituality has developed throughout Christian history. Thus, borrowing language from historical linguistics, rather than providing a *synchronic*, or fixed-in-time approach to spirituality as a static theological construct applicable across all Christian history, this chapter utilizes a *diachronic*, or developed-over-time understanding of how spirituality emerged and changed through the Christian tradition in response to theological currents of the time. In the following section I shall consider spirituality’s conceptual origins in the New Testament, and highlight its development through Christian antiquity and the Middle Ages, particularly where that historical development served to problematize our modern understanding. Finally, I shall consider where contemporary scholarship on spirituality has served to broaden our horizons regarding this elusive construct.

3.1.1 Paul’s Letters: *Spiritus*, *Spiritualis*, and Life in the Spirit

Searching Christian scripture for a neatly synthesized exposition of spirituality would be difficult, artificial, and likely fruitless.¹ Nonetheless, modern scholarship (led by the work of

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¹ This is neither to suggest that one cannot articulate a Christian spirituality developed from Scripture, nor to suggest that spirituality is intrinsically unscriptural. Where spirituality as a distinct


framed a unique way of living as “spiritual” which will serve as this work’s foundation for articulating Christian spirituality.

*Pneuma* is not a uniquely Christian concept; it predated Christian usage and appeared throughout Greek and Hellenistic Jewish texts. Literally signifying “breath” or “wind,” *pneuma* was also used to connote the animating force within humanity, a life force, even the soul itself. Metaphorically, *pneuma* suggested a movement, like a wind, from the divine world—a movement which animated or exalted the human person, or carried messages from the divine to the human world. It is with Paul’s letters that language of the “spirit” referred not just to the Spirit of God but as a qualifier for what it meant to be a “spiritual” (Gk., *πνευματικός*, pneumatikos; Lat., *spiritualis*) person. Paul’s understanding of the work of the Spirit in Christian life, like much of his theology, was not a systematic body of thought, but emerged out of the context of conversations with different early Christian communities in turmoil. Thus, Paul did not offer an explicit synthesis of his pneumatology or spirituality, any more than he synthesizes his soteriology or moral theology; they are strands interwoven throughout his writings. Even a modest synthesis of Paul’s teaching on the work of the Spirit requires weaving together thoughts


5. Reading Paul is as much an exercise in sociology and anthropology as it is theology and treating his letters in light of their occasion and their context rather than as speculative, universal tracts. Calvin Roetzel observes, “Once we realize how the ferment in the churches prescribed the scope if not the content of Paul’s writings, then it may become obvious why Paul’s theologizing was inextricably linked to real life situations in the churches.” Calvin J. Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul: Conversations in Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 85.
and ideas from disparate letters, and any attempt at articulating an explicitly Pauline spirituality runs the risk of constructing an artificial abstraction that disavows the intrinsically contextual nature of Paul’s theology. Still, as Paul was the first early Christian theologian to articulate this notion of life in the Spirit, his writings invite attention on the burgeoning Christian idea of a transformative religious life.

The work of the Spirit in the transformation of the Christian’s life is a critical element in Pauline literature. Although the work of the Spirit is an idea woven throughout Paul’s writings, his first Letter to the Corinthians is particularly significant in developing the construct of the “spiritual” person. This correspondence, directed to a community in turmoil, addressed a variety of ethical, liturgical, and theological conflicts that had beset and divided the community, particularly over the authority of different spiritual leaders, the nature of divine wisdom, and who possessed it. Paul was concerned with Corinthian Christians who had set themselves apart from


9. First-century Corinth was a Roman colony established over the ruins of an earlier Greek city. Intended to be cosmopolitan in nature, it was commercially important, economically stratified, and religiously and culturally diverse. Paul established the church in Corinth (Acts 18) and engaged in an ongoing correspondence with the congregation, including a now-lost earlier letter. Further, see: Elisabeth Schüsler Fiorenza, “1 Corinthians,” in *Harper Collins Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. James L. Mays (San
others by virtue of what they perceived as their advanced spiritual nature. One pericope contains numerous elements important for understanding Paul’s conception of the “spiritual” person, specifically those who are authentically spiritual, as opposed to Corinth’s self-styled spiritualists:

Yet we do speak a wisdom to those who are mature, but not a wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age who are passing away. Rather, we speak God’s wisdom, mysterious, hidden, which God predetermined before the ages for our glory, and which none of the rulers of this age knew; for if they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as it is written:

“What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love him,”

this God has revealed to us through the Spirit.

For the Spirit scrutinizes everything, even the depths of God. Among human beings, who knows what pertains to a person except the spirit of the person that is within? Similarly, no one knows what pertains to God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the things freely given us by God. And we speak about them not with words taught by human wisdom, but with words taught by the Spirit, describing spiritual realities in spiritual terms. Now the natural [psychikos] person does not accept what pertains to the Spirit of God, for to him it is foolishness, and he cannot understand it, because it is judged spiritually. The spiritual [pneumatikos] person, however, can judge everything but is not subject to judgment by anyone. For “who has known the mind of the Lord, so as to counsel him?” But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Cor 2:6-16, NABRE; emphasis added.)

Paul’s discussion is complex: he referred to the truly spiritual person as pneumatikos (πνευματικός), while the pseudo-spiritualist was psychikos (ψυχικός), a term which normally dealt with the level of human mental properties.10 (This latter designation is often rendered in


English translations as “unspiritual” or “natural.” Considered more broadly, the spiritual (pneumatikos/spiritualis) person is transformed by the Spirit of God. Paul’s use of pneuma thus transcended the animating or communicative force of Hellenistic philosophy, and pneuma both transforms and empowers the life of the faithful. This transformation demanded a reorientation of priorities and life choices, the previously mentioned “spiritual” versus the “unspiritual,” or the more comprehensive life in the spirit versus life in the flesh (Rom 8). Paul exhorts (Gal 5:16-17; Rom 8:1-11) that to choose pneuma/spiritus is to reject σάρξ (sarx) as that which opposes the Spirit. Sarx, like pneuma, inherited its own linguistic and philosophical legacy. Its conventional translation in English as “flesh” unfortunately limits the understanding of the term. For Paul, sarx did not simply mean “flesh” as corporeality, but human creatureliness, the whole living body, including the human will and mental faculties, any of which can be corrupted. This aspect of humanity, enslaved to sin (Rom 7:15-20), can only lead to death (Rom 8:13); but the Spirit has freed humanity from this bondage through the saving work of Christ (Rom 8:10-11). Sarx is perishable and finite; pneuma transcends death. The choice between sarx and pneuma is a matter

11. Of the major English versions, the word has been translated “natural” (KJV, ESV, NJB, and NABRE); “unspiritual” (RSV, NRSV, and CEB); and “without the spirit” (NIV, TNIV). The Vulgate renders psychikos as animalis, which becomes “sensual” in Douay-Rheims.


14. σάρξ is rendered as “flesh” in the KJV, RSV, NRSV, NABRE, and ESV. Other translations try for more broad circumlocutions: NJB uses “human nature,” the CEB uses “selfishness,” and The Message (more a paraphrase than a translation) uses “human condition.” The Message rather creatively renders “sinful flesh” as “the disordered mess of struggling humanity.” J. Louis Martyn describes Paul’s articulation of the battle between pneuma and sarx not simply as spirit versus flesh, but as the Spirit versus “the Impulsive Desire of the Flesh”; in this regard, the Flesh “is not mere part of the human being, less noble than other parts, ‘our lower nature’.” J. Louis Martyn, Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 256.
of orientation and mindset: “And human nature has nothing to look forward to but death, while the Spirit looks forward to life and peace” (Rom 8:6). But “flesh” as human creatureliness should not be confused with mere physicality, which appears as *soma* (σῶμα), “the body.”¹⁵ This is the human earthly body, the vessel for the soul, and “the temple of the holy Spirit” (1 Cor 6:19). The language of “the Spirit versus the flesh” is not a simplistic spirit-versus-body dynamic. Walter Principe observed that the “flesh” which opposes the Spirit can also be “the person’s mind or will or heart even more than the physical flesh or the body.”¹⁶ The “spiritual” person is made spiritual not by disdain for the human body, but by virtue of whether one’s choices are Spirit-driven and lead toward the Divine; as James Dunn puts it, “body’ denotes a *being in the world*, whereas ‘flesh’ denotes a *belonging to the world*.”¹⁷ Certainly, this reorientation is not simply existential, as a philosophical contemplation on what matters most; it comes with moral obligations. To be freed from the bondage of sin does not mean the Christian is exempt from it, but has been given the power and obligation to reject it (Rom. 6:12). Thus the spiritual life is also a moral life characterized by the choice of virtue over vice.

Modern scholarship that returns to spirituality as a concept whose foundations are in Pauline literature has focused on Paul’s description of the spiritual (*pneumatikos/spiritualis*) person’s existential reorientation and reformation guided by the Spirit of God. However, there are important nuances to this reorientation that have not been addressed. Life in the Spirit is a reorientation, a reframing of intention and choices, but life for the Spirit-filled Christian is not

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simply a new status quo: it is a life of transformation. A key aspect of this spiritual transformation, according to Paul, is the reception of divine wisdom (Greek, οὐφία, σοφία; Latin, sapientia) through the work of the Spirit (1 Cor 2:13). For Paul, a spiritual people were also a wise people: the genuinely spiritual pneumatikoi were those who knew divine wisdom through the Spirit, while the unspiritual psychikoi were ignorant of this wisdom. Paul is eager to contrast two forms of wisdom, one divine and the other human, and the psychikoi are adherents of the latter. Against this human wisdom, characterized by contemporary sages, sophisticated philosophical systems, and eloquent language, Paul uplifts the proclamation of the Gospel: “I did not come with sublimity of words or of wisdom … and my message and my proclamation were not with persuasive [words of] wisdom, but with a demonstration of spirit and power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.” (1 Cor 2:1, 4). It is only after Paul’s indictment of contemporary wisdom as a fraudulent human construct that he can introduce true wisdom: hidden and unknown, but knowable through the Spirit (1 Cor 2:10) and present in Jesus, “the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:24; see also 1:30). Paul’s desire is thus not to

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18. Paul speaks both to the individual Christian and to the Christian community; solitary Christians are not his concern as much as how the community functions within the Body of Christ.


20. This touches on the idea of wisdom Christology and the relationship of Jesus to a pre-existent wisdom. James Dunn sees the First Corinthians letter as a critical text in the construction of the idea: “For in Corinth [Paul] was confronted by a group whose views were marked both by talk of wisdom and by a too casual attitude to creation. To respond to this situation Paul took up the language of wisdom and drawing on the wisdom tradition of Hellenistic Judaism and on Stoic terminology he framed a Christology which met the needs of the Corinthian situation. In this he presented Christ as the whose death and resurrection fulfilled God’s original purpose for creation and for men and so served to characterize and define the wisdom of God in a normative way—Christ crucified is the wisdom of God.” James Dunn, Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 21. For a comprehensive discussion, read Dunn, 163-215.
persuade through rhetoric and smooth speech, the vessels of earthly wisdom, nor to uplift himself as a source of wisdom; his meaning is to proclaim the wisdom of the Gospel so that the pneumatikoi, the authentically spiritual members of the Christian community, can follow true sophia which is revealed in and through Christ.\(^{21}\)

Paul contrasts the pneumatikoi with the psychikoi, the self-styled elect of Corinth, not simply in language of spiritual versus unspiritual; he speaks of maturity and infancy. Paul proclaims his message “to those who are mature” (ἐν τοῖς τελείοις, 1 Cor 2:6). His use of τέλειος (teleios) is multivalent and complex: the term is commonly rendered in English as “mature,” but also signifies a sense of perfection, fruition, and the fulfillment of human potential.\(^{22}\) (As one translator offers, “We utter wisdom among those who are all that they can be.”\(^{23}\)) It is important to consider that the language which Paul uses in the Corinthians correspondence is nuanced by the letter’s social context—particularly, Paul’s response to division and factionalism within the community, where the previously mentioned psychikoi had set themselves apart as spiritually superior. This vocabulary of maturity and completion was intentional, as the language of teleological perfection would resonate with an audience under the

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22. Modern English translations render it as “mature” (CEB, NRSV, NIV, TNIV, ESV, and NABRE), and “those who have reached maturity” (NJB). It is rendered as “perfect” in older translations (e.g., KJV). W. W. Klein borrows a term from contemporary psychology for this concept: “actualized.” W. W. Klein, “Perfect, Mature” in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 699.

23. Raymond F. Collins, *First Corinthians*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 1999), 121. Collins points out, “The adjective teleios has more the connotation of fulfillment than of perfection. In the context of the mystery religions the term was used to describe those who had completed the cycle of ritual initiation. In philosophical circles it was applied to those who are truly wise. Otherwise the term can be used of those who are accomplished in rhetoric or some other skill.” Collins, 128-29.
influence of competing Hellenistic and Jewish philosophies. For Paul, broadly considered, this teleios (perfection-completion-maturity) is the goal of the Christian way of life, and is at odds with the way of the world: “Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect” (Rom 12:2). This renewal of the mind which characterizes human teleios is made possible through the saving work of Christ, and this teleological renewal brings about in the perfected Christian the “mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16)—a distinctive Pauline expression indicating the restoration of the divine-human relationship and the renewal of the human condition. The purpose of the spiritual life is not simply to “be spiritual”—it is formation with an end-goal. Paul’s teleological expression of the human destiny as “transformed into the same image from glory to glory” (2 Cor 3:18) will be foundational for the later articulation of theological anthropology identified as the Imago Dei, the understanding that the human condition is created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:27), crippled by sin, but redeemed by the saving work of Christ, and finally, intended for restoration to that original image.

Paul’s expression of the Christian life as life in the Spirit was intended toward the Corinthians, in response to their specific context and the crisis that had divided their community. The later concerns of First Corinthians—such as, the worship of idols, the purpose and character


of various charisms, or spiritual gifts, ritual purity, concerns regarding marriage and sexuality, etc.—are illuminating in that perspective and can be used to tease out more general principles, but provide less substantial material for this discussion of the early construction of Christian spirituality. What is important is the major theological and formational framework which these other ideas are dependent upon, and which Paul touches on in his other correspondence: that the Christian life is a comprehensive way of life. The spiritual person, for Paul, is undergoing a whole-life transformation, even a re-creation of life, which guides one’s thoughts, emotion, and actions, and a lived preference for things which led to God rather than those which lead away from God—a preferential stance which is guided by the divine Spirit. As Barbara Rowe succinctly put it, “In Pauline terms, therefore, Christian life is life in the Spirit.”

At its most basic basic expression, a Christian articulation of spirituality is founded in Paul’s discussion of life reoriented by the divine Spirit in a process of maturation, perfection, and completion. This broad process of maturation and perfection as the work of the Spirit is what later developed into systems of Christian spiritual formation. In Paul’s texts, however, it had not yet become abstracted as a distinct substantive called “spirituality.” It was the work of subsequent authors and ages to shape spirituality into an abstraction, developing in the process a


28. Kees Waaijiman observes, “For centuries the basic word ‘perfection’ denoted the area of spirituality. People spoke about ‘the way of perfection,’ distinguished ‘stages of perfection, and called spiritual persons ‘the perfected’… The basic word ‘perfection’ evokes the area of spirituality as an all-embracing process: from the original soundness characteristic of human beings up to and including its ultimate completion.” Kees Waaijiman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 328, 332.
wide arsenal of terms and interlocking concepts to describe this process of perfection, including conversion, holiness, and theosis.\textsuperscript{29} For some aspects of the Christian tradition, this end-goal of the spiritual life will be rendered in terms of contemplation and mystical union with the divine, and this language would ultimately drive much of the scholarship on spirituality, as I mentioned in the previous chapter and will return to shortly.\textsuperscript{30} These terms represent different ways of articulating the essential trajectory of Christian transformation envisioned by Paul: humanity, created in in the image and likeness of God, enslaved to sin and then liberated in Christ, is

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empowered by the Spirit to renew the human calling through rejection of the ways of the world and a reorientation to life in the Spirit. This life is a teleological process of formation: the spiritual person is maturing, being perfected, and seeking completion.

3.1.2 Christian Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Spiritualitas as Abstraction

While spiritus and spiritualis appear in Latin translations of Paul’s writings to Corinth, the abstraction of that spiritual life into “spirituality” (spiritualitas or spiritualitas) does not appear until Christian Antiquity, and it does not receive significant exposition. Jean Leclercq identifies the earliest attestation of the term spirituality as a substantive in De divina lege (“On the Divine Law,” Pseudo-Jerome, ca. 5th c.\(^{31}\)), an epistle addressing those baptized as Christians, which urges them to struggle against temptation and to live righteously as revealed by Scripture and the teachings of Jesus.\(^{32}\) The epistle’s author exhorts:

Verum, quia tibi, honorabilis et dilectissime parens, per novam gratiam omnis lacrymarum causa detersa est, age, cave, curre, festina. Age, ut in spiritualitate proficias.\(^{33}\)

(But because in your case, respected and most beloved parent, all cause for tears has been wiped away by a fresh act of grace, come, beware, run, hurry! Come, that you may advance in spirituality.)\(^{34}\)

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32. Jean Leclercq, “Spiritualitas,” 280. B. R. Rees observes that the epistle that had been attributed to Jerome “contains too many Pelagian features for that to be conceivable.” Rees, Pelagius: Life and Letters, trans. by B. R. Rees (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1988). At first glance this letter should not seem problematic, but the Pelagian reliance on human freedom, willpower, and the emphasis of human work (rather than divine grace) in salvation was deemed heretical. There is no small irony here: “spirituality,” historically considered by its theological critics as overly reliant on the role of human work in salvation, is revealed to have been coined in what is, in fact, a Pelagian text.


As Leclercq observes, *spiritualitas* (in the ablative here, “spiritualitate”) emphasizes spirituality as human activity in response to the divine initiative—specifically, that the grace received at baptism demands fidelity to divine law. After this occurrence, however, the new word only appears sporadically in late Antique and early medieval Christian literature. These limited mentions of *spiritualitas* treat it as a neologism for the Christian life essentially as described by Paul, which Leclercq summarizes as the practice of “detachment from sin and attachment to God” (le détachement du péché et l’attachement à Dieu). Spirituality is thus an abstraction of the spiritual (or Christian) life, but it receives no further elaboration.

The word *spiritualitas* was only rarely used in the early Middle Ages and it took on multiple meanings. It continued to maintain its moral-existential dimension as a Pauline neologism for a Spirit-oriented life. In the ninth century, however, it started to function as a technical or philosophical term for incorporeality. Further, *spiritualitas* takes on a juridical connotation, contrasted against *temporalitas* in discussions of ecclesiastical and secular authority, and the governance or administration of church property and religious orders. *Spiritualitas* thus started to take on considerations that had less to do with a Spirit-orientation and the work of the Spirit of God within humanity, but a blunt, simply rendered dichotomization of the spiritual and the material. This does not mean there was no vocabulary to address the spiritual life, as Lucy

35. It also appears (between 480 and 518) in a letter from St. Avit to his brother and in a sixth-century translation of Gregory of Nyssa’s *On the Creation of Man*. See Leclercq, “Spiritualitas,” 281-82, and Solignac, “‘Spiritualitas’ au Moyen Age,” 188-89.


37. Aimé Solignac characterizes three distinct applications of *spiritualitas* in medieval literature: religious, philosophical, and juridical. In addition to the religious and philosophical-technical distinctions, it also took on a juridical meaning, used in opposition to *temporalitas*, to distinguish between ecclesiastical and secular authorities, and the governance or administration of church property and religious orders. See Solignac, 186-201. Further, see Leclercq, “Spiritualitas,” 282-92.
Tinsley argues that the level of abstraction surrounding the term *spiritualitas* led to the development of a diverse technical vocabulary for cataloguing the spiritual life from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries. This is a vocabulary based on words with a higher occurrence in Scripture than the limited incidence of *spiritualis*—terms like *fervor*, *perfectio*, *devotio*, and *pietas*. Vernacular cognates of these terms proliferated, while the French and English cognates for *spiritualitas* maintained the earlier philosophical or juridical senses of the word.\(^\text{38}\)

Although spirituality as an abstract concept was still congealing, literature about the experience of the Christian life would proliferate. The Middle Ages mark the development of a massive number and variety of texts that would later be identified as spiritual, but we find something of a paradox: as Paul Szarmach observes, “The lack of spirituality in a period that the twentieth-century reader casually assumes to be the height of spirituality may come as a surprise to some.”\(^\text{39}\) While texts demonstrate the development of a robust but specialized literature on the Christian spiritual life, it was also described with a lexical bricolage that that only rarely was referred to as “spirituality.” However, as I indicated, the period was an era of innovation in writing on the spiritual life: Ulrike Wiethaus identifies the Middle Ages as “decisive for the formation of Christian spirituality today,” and a survey of the abundance of medieval theological texts that serve as profound expressions of Christian spirituality would defend that claim.\(^\text{40}\)

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38. Tinsley, 9-30.


Particularly prominent in this development are medieval monastic, mystical, and visionary literatures, which address particular aspects and contexts of the Christian life, usually intended for a specific ecclesiastical audience who are often part of a monastic community. This medieval monastic literature addressed the needs and concerns of an audience concerned the practice of Christian perfection, with particular focus on the role of contemplative practice in the spiritual life.

As literature about contemplation and mysticism continued to proliferate, so did visionary writings. Although Christian contemplative, mystical theology, and visionary texts originated in late Antiquity, it was in the Middle Ages (particularly from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries) that discussion about the spiritual life would become more narrowly expressed in terms of contemplative practice, stages of mystical ascent, and ecstatic experiences. While medieval

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41. Wiethouse, 108.


43. Bernard McGinn notes that 1200 to 1350 were a particularly fecund era in Christian mystical theology, as medieval mystical theology elaborated on “the role of experience and the importance of erotic love-language among the Cistercians, and the attempt to introduce scholastic modes of ordering the doctrine of contemplation among the Victorines,” as well provided as an increase in visionary literature which sought to authenticate mystical teachings through the expression of visions and revelations. Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, vol. 3, *The Flowering
texts have greatly enriched the literature of Christian spirituality, they have also problematized it: the specialized interests of this literature can skew discussions of Christian spirituality towards an exclusive language of mystical ascent and visions rather than Paul’s articulation of life in the Spirit as the transformative journey of every Christian.\textsuperscript{44} As indicated in Chapter 1, this became particularly problematic when medieval mystical literature was interpreted as the standard for Christian spirituality through the post-medieval development of spirituality as Scaramelli’s “science of perfection” and the development of ascetical and mystical theologies. The study of Christian spirituality in the early Middle Ages is thus cautioned to neither focus on a more rare type of religious experience that was later interpreted as the norm for spirituality, nor to dwell overly long in the search for the word \textit{spiritualitas} itself.

3.1.3 Post-Medieval Developments

Before continuing with this brief overview, it is necessary to address a concern which may be raised regarding the value of examining post-medieval constructions of spirituality within a dissertation that addresses Anglo-Saxon medieval religious culture? The answer rests in a matter of changing viewpoints in scholarship: I am attempting to trace a path from the twelfth


\textsuperscript{44} McGinn contends that too often the study or interest of mystical experiences dilute and distract from an essential notion of mystical theology. He characterizes Christian mysticism as ultimately more than just the experience of mystical union, broadening the discussion so that “the mystical element in Christianity is that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God.” Furthermore, while mysticism is often characterized as “some form of union with God, particularly a union of absorption or identity in which the individual personality is lost,” McGinn further argues for a reconsideration of this notion of “union” as the “presence of God” as “more central and more useful category for grasping the unifying note in the varieties of Christian mysticism.” Bernard McGinn, \textit{Foundations of Mysticism}, xvii.
and thirteenth century expressions of mystical theology to the more comprehensive modern study of spirituality as lived religious experience, and establish the concomitant shift in scholarly perspectives on how spirituality has been understood and studied. While it will be clear that the modern study of spirituality involves some hermeneutical innovations, it also represents a recovery of the Pauline perspective. An already abbreviated survey of Christian spirituality must become even more compressed, however, in order to arrive at modern considerations, which have more bearing on this study.

Following the Protestant and Catholic Reformations, numerous circumlocutions for the spiritual life were in use, typically suggesting the interior life or affective piety. The word *spirituality* found a new vitality in seventeenth-century French theological writing, where *spiritualité* emphasized devotion or affective piety and was more clearly linked to spiritual practices seen to advance Christian holiness (e.g., prayer or meditation). Unfortunately, *spiritualité* quickly became a pejorative label thanks to its association with seventeenth-century French Quietism. For Catholic writers, spirituality was rendered as a structured sequence of spiritual stages (as described in Chapter 2), and Scaramelli’s *ascetical theology* and mystical theology became the preferred terminology. Among Protestants, *spirituality* did not yet immediately enter the theological lexicon in a popular or favorable sense. Although the word


46. Although the word was almost foreign to Protestant authors, the concept was not: discussion of how one practiced one’s faith and lived according to one’s faith commitments was intrinsic to Protestant theological literature. For a brief discussion, see Scott H. Hendrix, ed., *Early Protestant Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 2009), 1-6.
was not absent from this literature, terms like *devotion*, *piety*, and *Christian perfection* were preferred. However, Protestant writers were not free from the forensic rendering of the spiritual life as a carefully mapped sequence, as seen in the development of Protestantism’s *ordo salutis*, or order of salvation. The impulse to order and arrange religious experience and spiritual advancement was strong and did not remain within confessional boundaries.

The twentieth century was marked by a groundswell of scholarly interest in the spiritual life and significant transformations in how spirituality is studied and considered. Catholic theological thought moved away from articulating the spiritual life as an artificial division between ascetical and mystical theology, and emphasized instead the organic unity of the two.

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48. Unlike Scaramelli’s model, the Protestant *ordo* did not concern itself with mysticism or rarified experiences. Furthermore, the *ordo salutis* examined the broad trajectory of salvation, and did not dwell on the particulars involved. This map is sometimes staged as justification, sanctification, and glorification. See Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 84-101.

49. Waaijiman points to the establishment of university chairs of spirituality in Rome (1919) as well as a series of scholarly publications which heralded the resurgence of spirituality, including Auguste Saudreau’s *Manuel de spiritualité* (1917), Pierre Pourrat’s four-volume history of spirituality, *La spiritualité chrétienne* (begun in 1918), and the appearance of *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique* (1928). Waaijiman, 363.

50. For example, Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange’s critique: “Hence it may be wondered whether the new division, as propounded for example by Scaramelli, does not diminish but the unity and the sublimity of the perfect spiritual life. When Ascetics are separated from Mystics in this way, do we sufficiently preserve the unity of the whole which is divided? … And the whole which is in question is the life of grace….” Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Three Ways of the Spiritual Life* (Rockford: Tan Books and Publishers, 1977), 69-70. Originally published London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1938. Even more significant was the shift in Pierre Pourrat’s four-volume history of spirituality, *La spiritualité chrétienne*,
With this departure from ascetical-mystical language and the adoption of a more unified articulation of the spiritual life came a semantic shift, first to “spiritual theology” and then simply, “spirituality.” This shift was matched by an ecclesial departure: the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which was characterized by institutional and theological renewal of the Roman Catholic Church, emphasized the Christian life as the universal call to holiness: spirituality was no longer the concern exclusively of an ascetical minority or the professed religious. Discussions of spirituality had clearly moved away from a rarified practice of asceticism or interiority intended for those in religious vocations, and toward a holistic

begun in 1918, which used the term “spiritual theology” while still employing the distinctions between asceticism and mysticism. Pierre Pourrat, Christian Spirituality, Volume I: From the Time of Our Lord till the Dawn of the Middle Ages (Westminster, Newman Press, 1953), v. However, this continued systematization into ascetical and mystical categories is critiqued in the groundbreaking three-volume Histoire de la spiritualité chrétienne by Louis Bouyer (published 1960-1965): “In fact, when we study Pourrat’s extremely rich work, we have difficulty in finding anything in it corresponding to the categories he has named. From one end to the other of the four volumes, we are plunged into a medley of dogmatic or moral considerations and psychological analyses, a medley in which the boundaries laid down at the outset are constantly transgressed.” Louis Bouyer, Jean Leclercq, François Vanderbroucke, and Louis Cognet, History of Christian Spirituality I: The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers, trans. Mary P. Ryan (Minneapolis, MI: Winston Press, Inc., 1982), vii. Originally published as La spiritualité du Nouveau Testament et des Pères ([Paris]: Aubiers, 1960).

51. Philip Sheldrake identified four characteristics that distinguish between “spirituality” from its predecessor “spiritual theology”: (1) the latter was too sectarian, identified with Catholic systematic theology, while the former is more ecumenical and interfaith, not limited to the Christian faith; (2) “spirituality” is more than simply an application of moral or systematic theology to life; (3) it is less concerned with Christian perfection than “the complex mystery of human growth in the context of a living relationship with the Absolute”; and (4) “spirituality” is not narrowly concerned with interiority, but addresses a whole-life integration of religious value. Sheldrake, “What is Spirituality?” 37. Sandra Schneiders argues that those who favored the term “spiritual theology” over “spirituality” did so to emphasize the intrinsically theological nature of spirituality. Because this is often an academic argument rooted in methodology—clearly the content of Christian spirituality will be theological in orientation, so the issue must be one of approach—Schneiders recommends use of the term “theological spirituality” to distinguish such an approach. Sandra L. Schneiders, “Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality,” in The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality, 24.

52. “Therefore in the Church, everyone whether belonging to the hierarchy, or being cared for by it, is called to holiness, according to the saying of the Apostle: ‘For this is the will of God, your sanctification.’” Vatican II, Lumen Gentium (issued 21 November 1964), in Austin Flannery, ed. Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, Inc.), 396.
understanding of life of the Spirit as intended for all Christians. Furthermore, this embrace of spirituality was ecumenical in scope: Protestant scholars and theologians also developed interest in Christian spirituality explicitly named as such.\textsuperscript{53}

The movement away from perceiving spirituality as a pursuit restricted to a religious few or as a systematization of mystical progress signaled a broad shift into the multidimensional study of spirituality. The concept started to take on entirely new meanings. In his 1980 survey of then-contemporary usage of “spirituality,” Jon Alexander identified a clear shift in how spirituality was understood through the twentieth century, starting with spirituality as a subset of Christian theology and moving toward spirituality as “generic and experiential.”\textsuperscript{54} Bernard McGinn subsequently observed that these attempts at defining spirituality attempts fell into one of three basic categories: theological, historical (or contextual), and anthropological. By governing how spirituality was interpreted, these three approaches also bring to the study different methods and other related interests.\textsuperscript{55} The theological approach is evident in the history of spirituality through its articulation as ascetical theology or spiritual theology, which attended to the matters of human orientation to the holy, particularly as it relates to the Christian revelation. The anthropological approach, however, divorces spirituality from a singularly Christian experience, and articulates spirituality as an intrinsic part of the human experience. This approach opened the study of spirituality to the human sciences, allowing for a broader

\textsuperscript{53} It is unclear when exactly Protestantism reclaimed the explicit language of spirituality, although clearly it was in the latter part of the twentieth century. Frank Senn suggests that it was due to the mainstream popularizing of spirituality by Thomas Merton and other Catholic writers. Frank C. Senn, “Introduction,” Protestant Spiritual Traditions (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1986, 1.

\textsuperscript{54} Alexander, 251.

academic approach from beyond the religious or ecclesiastical community. Finally, the historical/contextual approach emphasized the role of spirituality within the locus of a specific community, and the attempt of that community to make faith relevant in light of its own experience.56

This conceptual un linking of spirituality from Christian theology had serious implications, as the question was raised whether spirituality was restricted to the Christian tradition or was a universal experience. By understanding spirituality as the lived experience and expression of one’s faith life, an experience not bound by distinctly doctrinal notions, the notion of faith life (broadly construed) allowed for exploration of the faith lives of Jews, Buddhists, and adherents of other traditions using the language of spirituality without assumption that the term was bound by its historic origin to Christian theology. Furthermore, by envisioning spirituality in terms of “ultimate concerns” rather than “faith life,” one could examine phenomena that were not even religious in nature, including poetry, politics, and various ideological movements.57 Thus one could discuss spiritualities for which the ultimate frame of reference was not religious experience, but psychology, feminism, environmentalism, etc.58 Similarly, the unmooring of spirituality from exclusively theological texts and contexts helped diversify the sources for the

57. Alexander, 254.
58. For an extended treatment of such an approach to spirituality, see Peter H. Van Ness, ed., Spirituality and the Secular Quest (New York: Crossroad Herder, 1996). Although this conceptual linking of theology and spirituality has proven useful in terms of alternate explorations of spirituality as both an experience and an expression of that experience, some have questioned whether the divergence between the two domains is legitimate. See Andrew Louth, Theology and Spirituality (Oxford: SLG Press, 1978); Mark A. McIntosh, Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology (Malden: Blackwell, 1998); Philip Sheldrake, Spirituality and Theology: Christian Living and the Doctrine of God (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998).
study of spirituality: spirituality, even if conceived as a predominantly religious construct, could be studied through texts not traditionally identified as theological in character to explore different dimensions of faith and religiosity. The study of a person’s or a people’s religious experience need not be limited to a spiritual autobiography or an exposition on prayer, but the expression of that person’s life of faith in any textual production or artistic expression.

3.2 Scholarly Considerations: Spirituality as Lived Religious Experience

3.2.1 Defining Spirituality

The multivalence, if not outright ambiguity, of the word spirituality—whether in popular usage, scholarly writing, or even in this study—is apparent. At the same time, discussions regarding spirituality evoke or reference something of substance that cannot be easily dismissed. As medievalist Gustavo Vinay observed, spirituality is “a necessary pseudoconcept we don’t know how to replace.”59 While I dispute Vinay’s assertion that spirituality is a “pseudoconcept,” his major observation is valid: spirituality is an elusive construct which we have to deal with. The etymological and conceptual history provided earlier serves to underscore the difficulty of studying a concept whose meaning has developed and changed over two thousand years of Christian history, to say nothing of its applicability to other religions, philosophies, or ideologies. To a large degree, it illustrates why asking the question “What is spirituality” simply cannot be answered satisfactorily without understanding its history. As modern scholarship has engaged in the study of spirituality, much of its work has been the struggle to develop a working definition

of the term in light of its shifts in usage.\textsuperscript{60} This is an important project, but for the purpose of this discussion I will focus on those specific elements which have bearing on the study of Anglo-Saxon religious culture.

Of the many scholars to have attempted a definition of spirituality, Sandra Schneiders has provided the most provocative and enduring rendition. She writes, “Spirituality as lived experience can be defined as conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.”\textsuperscript{61} This is a concise articulation and a helpful entry into her three-decades long writing on the matter.\textsuperscript{62} Schneiders’s definition requires some explanation, however, and two preliminary notes are necessary. First, Schneiders sees the need to differentiate between spirituality as experience and spirituality as discourse about that experience. This will be discussed shortly. Second, Schneiders has made it clear that her intention was not to construct a definition of spirituality for a specifically Christian context; rather, she placed “Christian spirituality as existential phenomenon within a more nuanced definition in general.”\textsuperscript{63} Her articulation of spirituality as a broadly existential construct that requires contextualization and concretization raises multiple points that we shall address.

\textsuperscript{60} See the work previously cited (ch 3, note 2) by Jon Alexander, Jean Leclercq, Aimé Solignac, Bernard McGinn, Walter Principe, and Sandra Schneiders.


\textsuperscript{62} Schneiders has been discussing spirituality as both object of study and as academic discipline since the 1980s, and variants of her definition have appeared throughout her writing. Her work in this field is considered seminal. See Bruce H. Lescher and Elizabeth Liebert, introduction to Exploring Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM (New York: Paulist Press, 2006), 1-11.

\textsuperscript{63} Schneiders, “Approaches,” 16.
First, Schneiders stresses spirituality as a whole-life endeavor characterized by intentional participation. Spirituality is an active dimension of human religiosity, not merely passive experience: spirituality should not be treated as “simply spontaneous experience, however elevating or illuminating.” It is “a conscious and deliberate way of living.” The mere presence of ecstatic visions, then, does not signify spirituality: these simply signify an altered state. The impact and theological meaning of the visions requires discourse and reflection on the meaning of these visions, to be made meaningful. The converse is equally valid, however: the absence of altered states does not signify an absence of spirituality. Furthermore, as this intentional way of living is a lifelong project, Schneiders insists that spirituality is “not merely a collection of experiences or episodes.” For spirituality to be meaningful, it must be a way of life, and must have some meaning beyond the moment. Second, Schneiders posits that spirituality is ultimately not “self-enclosed,” but reorients an individual or a community toward a horizon of ultimate value. This is a horizon which can be treated as “sacred” through its importance but need not technically be a religious construct. This highest value “may be God,” but can also be an ideal. This demonstrates the clear impact of twentieth-century inquiry regarding whether spirituality, a notion which historically emerged out of Christian theological discourse, need be exclusively oriented toward a Christian conception of the divine—or any concept of the divine at all. Finally, Schneiders observes that spirituality, as a project of self-transcendence, is “intrinsically dynamic,” as the ultimate value “functions as a horizon luring the

64. Schneiders, “Approaches,” 16.
65. Ibid.
66. Schneiders writes, “… for example, the full personhood of all humans, world peace, enlightenment, or the good of the cosmos.” Ibid.
person toward growth.” Although this is a generic description of spirituality, the similarity between Schneiders’s definition and Paul’s articulation of the Christian life described earlier in this chapter is clear. Christian spirituality (Paul’s “life in the Spirit”) is a conscious reorientation of life towards God. As a life transformed by the Holy Spirit, it is governed by the affirmation of choices that deepen life in the Spirit and the rejection of choices that will deaden or limit such life. Christian spirituality is thus intrinsically formational. More than a collection of spiritual disciplines practiced for their own sake or an attempt to cultivate a peak experience, spirituality’s teleological dimension is oriented toward actualization, the fruition of the human story, and the recovery of the human condition as created in the image of God. The Christian spiritual life may be explored in terms of ascetical disciplines, contemplative practices, and ecstatic or visionary experiences, but these do not limit its expression. It is this matter of expression that leads us to the next consideration, as we return to Schneiders’s observation that spirituality is both lived religious experience and the expression of that experience.

3.2.2 Three Levels of Spirituality

Schneiders’s identification of spirituality as both lived experience and discourse on that experience is characteristic of late twentieth-century scholarly articulation of theology as either “first order” or “second order levels” of discourse. Accordingly, spirituality was either an experience (first order), or the study of that experience (second order). Walter Principe,


68. Bernard McGinn observed that the roughly 35 definitions of spirituality he surveyed (1992) were either “first-order” or “second-order” in character, although numerous “second-order” definitions often added little to first-order definitions beyond “the qualification of ‘the study of.’” McGinn, “Letter and the Spirit,” 29.
however, refines this model and offers a third level, characterizing spirituality in terms of experience, articulation, and formal discourse. Although a sequenced framework, it is distinct from the leveled categorization of spirituality performed by spirituality as the “science of perfection.” It is a means of understanding spirituality’s multivalence as it occurs in human experience at both the individual and communal levels and through history.

### 3.2.2.1 Experience

Principe posits the first level of spirituality as that of experience: the “real or existential level of lived experience,” typically lived in reference to some religious or transcendent ideal. (Evan Howard describes this as the “actual cultivation and experience of relationship with God.”) This is the way in which an individual grasps and conforms to a religious ideal, and practices one’s faith. “Experience” is a broad notion, however, and Schneiders’s earlier observation that spirituality is a project, not an incident, is important to consider. Similarly, Michael Downey writes that discussion of religious experience “does not refer solely or even primarily to esoteric phenomena or extraordinary occurrences in the relationship between God and the soul.” This is spirituality as a way of life, or in Paul’s language, “life in the Spirit.” It is important to clarify that the matter at hand is experience as lived participation in life, not

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71. Howard, 24.

experience as incident or event. The study of spirituality, earlier rendered as inquiry into distinct religious practices or phenomena now becomes the study of lived religious experience, how an individual orients themselves toward a sacred horizon through their daily life.

Although this is rendered as an abstraction, the first level of spirituality always exists within the locus of an individual’s context: the religious ideal is encountered and mediated through a distinct historical and religious setting. It is one thing to assert as the Christian that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb 13:8); however, the Christian experience is not the same across time and location. The experience of a second-century Roman Christian, a tenth-century Anglo-Saxon Christian, and a nineteenth-century American Christian may have a common ultimate horizon, but how that horizon is understood, interpreted, and pursued varies based on the social, cultural, and historical circumstances (further influenced by economics, language, gender, and numerous other factors). Thus the study of Anglo-Saxon Christian spirituality begins with the awareness that the lived religious experience of the Anglo-Saxon Christian is contextually mediated. Even if one assumes that all Christians share the same transcendent ideal (e.g., the Triune God as revealed through the Old Testament and the New Testament), that ideal is still culturally mediated. The Anglo-Saxon Christians’ horizon of ultimate value was shaped by their social location and unique historical-contextual factors.

### 3.2.2.2 Articulation

However, experience is ultimately subjective and individual, even if part of a shared communal encounter, and it is arguably ineffable. Schneiders cautioned that discussions of

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spirituality-as-experience must acknowledge that experience is a remarkably difficult thing to grasp: “experience is always ‘experience of,’” and as a subjective phenomenon it is “incommunicable.” Thus, Schneiders’s second level is a move from experience to discourse.\(^{74}\) Principe’s second level is narrower in focus, however: it is specifically the articulation of faith through the formulation of teachings, rituals, and symbols.\(^ {75}\) Principe observes that this process is often reliant upon an important person, whose counsel or life experience serves as a witness to the lived reality. However, this process is open to multiple interpretations and disparate influences, thus giving rise to the emergence of varying schools of spirituality. Principe offers the Christian gospel as an example: the Good News is the existential reality that is encountered, but it is embodied in multiple texts—the four Gospels articulate that reality for four different audiences with their own discrete needs, as do the Pauline and the pastoral epistles—all of which can promote or emphasize different aspects of the Christian gospel and become the fodder for reflection and further articulation. While significant figures in religious traditions are easy to identify as figureheads responsible for various formulations (e.g., Augustine of Hippo, or Paul) it can be provocative to drill down more deeply into Christian history and examine those who played a role in either constructing or mediating other teachings or traditions within a narrower context. In Anglo-Saxon England, one can point to Bede and his legacy, although there is no distinctly Bedan school of spirituality, and Ælfric looms large as a spiritual authority in later tradition; however, there are a few named authors and teachers with enough of a body of literature to address a significantly distinct message.


Two particularly important components emerge in this discussion of the second level of spirituality: the meaning of text and the significance of context, which are interrelated.

Schneiders contended that spirituality “can only be communicated by articulation in ‘text’: verbal, literary, artistic, behavioral, and so on.” She operates with a broad interpretation of text, and by including behavior in her list, text becomes the means of expressing the religious experience. Schneiders elaborated on her perspective, drawing on an analogy from psychology:

The psychologist is not studying anxiety as such or in general but the particular experience of anxiety of this individual or group. Verbalization, texts, drawings, dreams, behaviors, and other such articulations of the anxiety are the psychologist’s access to the particular experience of anxiety.

In referencing such a broadly inclusive meaning of text, Schneiders drew on a hermeneutical tradition that asserts “meaningful actions” themselves become a kind of text. The meaning of a written or oral text is not limited to the discourse itself, but the performance of that text, as well as the occasion for that performance. Principe similarly stresses the “hermeneutical principle” that it is important “in all writings to go beyond the text” itself. While an author’s text may reveal much about the person’s lived religious experience, the text cannot reveal the person’s faith life in its entirety. A close reading of the text must be accompanied by an understanding of the religious culture, movements, and environment in which that text is produced. This contextual

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77. Ibid., 18.
78. Paul Ricoeur writes, “My claim is that action itself, action as meaningful, may become an object of science, without losing its character of meaningfulness, through a kind of objectification similar to the fixation which occurs in writing.” Paul Ricoeur, “The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as Text,” Social Research, 38, no. 3 (Autumn 1971): 538.
broadening continues beyond narrowly religious interests; Principe stressed examining the “whole secular context of the person—political, economic, sociological, sociopsychological, philosophical, artistic, scientific.” Just as modern explorations of spirituality have begun to recognize that the experience of spirituality is not confined to prayer or contemplation, focusing only on texts that address these topics is unnecessarily limiting. The search for an author’s spiritual doctrine must consider the entirety of an author’s writing, and go beyond it to psychology, literary criticism, and textual concerns. It is only by broadening the focus of one’s reading, from text to context, that can engender a deeper and more meaningful response to the text—one that is more authentic to the lived religious, social, cultural, and historical experience which gave birth to that text.

The importance of context to spirituality cannot be understated. Principe observed that “the many strands of reflection on Jesus and his gospel in the Bible called forth different emphases and responses as the gospel was preached, received, and inculturated in various regions in the early Church.” The concern with context, particularly as Principe addressed it, overlaps significantly with the notion of *inculturation* as articulated in missional theology: in short, when the Christian faith enters a new culture, a new form of that faith emerges. The Christian faith which emerged out of the Jewish tradition within Roman-occupied Palestine and was communicated to Greeks, Romans, and others was intrinsically a cross-cultural faith that had to be inculturated, or “rethought, reformulated and lived anew in each human culture.”

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80. Principe, “Broadening the Focus,” 44.
81. Ibid., 47.
83. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 463. The dynamism of inculturation emerged out of missional theologians as a new counterpoint to the then-prevalent missionary models through which the Church
missiologist David Bosch claimed, “The Christian faith never exists except as ‘translated’ into a culture.” Paul’s Corinthian correspondence provides an example of this principle; Paul’s instruction on wisdom and spiritual formation is not universal: his language and his presentation of the Gospel in Corinthians are tailored to a community concerned with wisdom, spirituality, and worldly philosophies. While not constructing a unique “Corinthian theology,” Paul’s letter demonstrates the application of Christian teachings to a specific culture and context. This is a pattern writ large to varying degrees throughout Christian history. Similarly, Christian spirituality, or *spiritualities*, develops out of a religious experience that is authentic to different social, cultural, and historical locations. Christian spirituality itself is translated anew for different cultures and contexts. As Principe observed:

> The most striking variations [in contextual spiritualities in the early Church] were those between the West and the East, e.g., Eastern stress on liturgy and the resurrection of Christ, and Western stress on moral doctrine, original sin, and the passion of Christ. Further differences have grown within these larger traditions, e.g., Syrian versus Byzantine spirituality in the East, and Celtic or Germanic versus Latin spirituality in the West.

Christian spirituality, like the Christian faith, only exists as translated in context. This is profoundly relevant for Anglo-Saxon England which, having developed at the intersection of a Germanic culture and language and the Latin faith and theological tradition, would have

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85. Principe, “Spirituality, Christian” 933. Both Bosch and Principe address the Protestant Reformation as major historical examples of inculturation, or, according to Bosch, “a case of the (overdue?) inculturation of the faith among Germanic and related peoples.” Bosch, 464.
produced its own contextual Christian spirituality. The task in studying Anglo-Saxon spirituality is both to understand the historical-cultural context of Anglo-Saxon Christianity, and to examine the extant textual evidence, in order to analyze and understand the spirituality that emerged from that context. This returns us to the discussion in the first chapter: that Old English poetry serves as “specimens” for the study of that spirituality, and the texts open for study are not those limited to explicitly (or solely) theological concerns.

3.2.2.3 Study

Finally, Principe further iterated Schneider’s second-level order of spirituality into a third domain: the formal academic study of spiritual traditions. According to Evan Howard, the academic study of spirituality has included views that tend to be either more normative or descriptive. The former views are represented by “theological, philosophical, and application-oriented approaches,” while the latter views are more “historical, psychological, and phenomenological.”\(^{86}\) This raises the question of discrete methods used in the academic study of spirituality. Since spirituality, whether as “lived reality” itself or subsequent interpretation of that reality, is subject to multiple influences and emerges through the intersection of linguistic, social, psychology, aesthetic, cultural, geographic, and other factors, the formal object of study has become inherently interdisciplinary. As mentioned earlier, Bernard McGinn concluded that academic approaches to spirituality are historical, theological, or anthropological in approach. However, he does not distinguish between them as wholly inseparable approaches, arguing for

\(^{86}\) Howard, 25.
their complementarity and insistence that “all three options remain in the conversation.”\textsuperscript{87} (McGinn places his own scholarly perspective in line with the historical-contextual approach, stating that it requires a relationship between a faith community’s theological norms while also attending to the human dimension of that spirituality’s expression.\textsuperscript{88}) Similarly, Schneiders affirms that the three approaches “be kept alive and in conversation with each other.”\textsuperscript{89} So deeply do these various approaches converge in the study of spirituality as an academic field that Schneiders has argued that spirituality is a “field-encompassing field.”\textsuperscript{90} As an integrated area of inquiry, spirituality is not solely concerned with “explorations of the explicitly religious,” but rather all elements that relate to the experience of spirituality: historical, social, psychological, etc.\textsuperscript{91} The broadening of context has thus led to a broadening of approaches: the critical study of spirituality demands a vast array of tools, resources, and methods from multiple disciplines in the struggle to make meaning of a text, both within its context and for readers today.

Although I have spoken of the academic discipline of spirituality in terms of McGinn’s tripartite approach, a fourth approach has also lurked on the periphery of contemporary scholarship: the hermeneutical approach. (Depending upon the author in question, hermeneutical is sometimes subsumed under the anthropological approach, or becomes its own distinct method

\textsuperscript{87} McGinn, “The Letter and the Spirit,” 35.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 29.
\textsuperscript{90} Schneiders, “Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners?,” 274.
\textsuperscript{91} Schneiders, “Spirituality in the Academy,” 692-93.
of studying spirituality. Schneiders outlines a three-step method of description, analysis, and interpretation as a process for interpreting texts (again, as broadly construed) of the spiritual life in its various contexts. According to Schneiders, “the primary aim of the discipline of spirituality … is to understand the phenomena of the Christian spiritual life as experience. And since understanding of such phenomena is a function of interpretation, the presiding intellectual instrumentality is hermeneutics understood as an articulated and explicit interpretational strategy.” In the first step (description), the phenomenon (the specific object) is described in terms of all the available data that can be brought to bear on understanding the object of study: the text itself, the social and historical context which was the occasion of its performance, and other various factors which may shed light on the object. In the second step (analysis), the data is brought together, often in light of theological and/or psychological considerations, to make sense of the object as spirituality. The final step (interpretation) seeks a deeper level of understanding of the object, particularly in light of a modern audience, or its “contribution to the understanding of the spiritual life today.” As Schneiders put it, “not simply to describe or explain the spiritual

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92. For example, Sandra Schneiders provided a hermeneutical corrective to the historical and theological approaches, while referring to the anthropological approach as anthropological-hermeneutical. See Schneiders, “Hermeneutical Approach to Christian Spirituality,” and “Christian Spirituality: Definition, Methods, Types.” However, Michael Downey described a fourth method which he identifies as “Appropriative,” and describes using similar language as Schneiders’s anthropological-hermeneutical. See Michael Downey, Understanding Christian Spirituality, 129-31. Similarly (and more recently), David Perrin described a fourth, hermeneutical method, which he describes according to the same sequence as elaborated upon by Schneiders. See David Perrin, Studying Christian Spirituality (New York: Routledge, 2007), 41-44.

93. Schneiders’s three steps are remarkably similar to Erwin Panofsky’s three stages of interpretation in the visual arts: “pre-iconographical description, iconographical analysis, and iconological interpretation.” Erwin Panofsky, Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance (1939; repr., Boulder: Westview Press, 1972), 9. See Panofsky, 3-17, for discussion.

experience but to understand it in the fullest sense of that word … not only intellectual
deciphering of a phenomenon but appropriation that is transformative of the subject.”

95 The point of this sequence, according to Schneiders, is “that studies in spirituality are, ideally, neither
purely descriptive nor merely critical but also constructive,” although she also acknowledges that
individual studies might choose to focus on particular dimensions of this sequence.

96 I would offer caution here, that any formal study of spirituality that moves too freely or too swiftly past
description or analysis to interpretation does the text a disservice. This is meant as a caveat, not a
repudiation; Schneiders has also written compellingly of the “self-implicating” dimensions
inherent in the study of spirituality.

97 While a reading might offer valuable insight in terms of the
meaning of a text for today (as appears prevalent in popular treatments of medieval spirituality),
but the text needs to first be appreciated and understood in its own historic and cultural context.
This may well be another contributing factor to the reason that so few Old English texts have
been treated as sources for Christian spirituality: their description and analysis has tended to lay
in the realm of literary critics, whose interpretive work does not involve explicitly theological
hermeneutics, while scholars whose practice is to read theologically have found that an
inadequate descriptive or critical knowledge of Old English texts creates a barrier to theological
reading.

96. Ibid., 57.
97. “Spirituality, like psychology and art and some other fields, is self-implicating. As the student
deepens his or her investigation of the spiritual life, she or he is bound to experience the influence of what
is being studied on his or her personal spiritual life. In other words, genuine understanding is
3.3 Summary and Implications

The story of Christian spirituality reveals the development and changing interpretations of a diverse body of teachings and writings concerned with lived religious experience and transformation: what does the Christian life mean? Reading Paul’s exposition of the Christian spiritual life through Sandra Schneiders’s formulation of spirituality, we can describe Christian spirituality, or life “in the spirit,” as a formative and intentional life of Spirit-oriented existential and moral choices (Sandra Schneiders’s project of life-integration). Further, the Christian spiritual life seeks completion and is a process of being perfected: Paul’s journey “from glory to glory” (2 Cor 3:18), or Schneiders’s self-transcendence toward the horizon of ultimate value. Of course, the purpose of this chapter was not to construct a Pauline spirituality, but to establish contours for the formal study of Christian spirituality, which I argue begins by understanding how the Christian spiritual life is articulated by Paul. Previously, the literature of spirituality restricted attention to such matters as visions, piety, and religious disciplines, or characterized spirituality exclusively as asceticism or mysticism. However, the academic study of spirituality has become a comprehensive interdisciplinary field concerned with the study of lived religious experience and the reorientation of life toward a sacred horizon. The long history of Christian spirituality offers modern readers cautions about an overly-narrow hermeneutic and attempts to prescriptively force the language and characteristics of late medieval mystical texts on works originating in different eras or social locations.

Particularly relevant for the study of Anglo-Saxon religious culture, the multidisciplinary approaches to the modern study of spirituality have much to offer in a reconsideration of Old English religious texts and vernacular theology. Clearly, the examination of ninth-century Old
English writings to understand Anglo-Saxon religious life should not be confined to a search for the sorts of texts which have commonly typified spirituality, and which are found in abundance in medieval spirituality, particularly in Middle English mystical texts. The liberation of spirituality from exclusively and explicitly theological texts and genres has also served to diversify our sources for the study of spirituality. We can listen to the voices of Anglo-Saxons for their own unique expressions of Christian spirituality in a multitude of texts. If the modern study of spirituality has taught us anything, it is that spirituality is not confined to narrow textual boundaries. Recall the *existential-liminal* category of Old English works which I introduced in the previous chapter—texts which were not explicitly religious in their subject matter, yet still communicated Anglo-Saxon religious culture, values, and meaning. A person’s or a people’s spirituality is not found only in a vision or a breviary.

Further, this is not intended as an essay on Anglo-Saxon spirituality writ large; it is a study of the Alfredian cultural reform as a project in spiritual formation. We are now left with the issue of how this dissertation will approach such a task. Scholarship has suggested three major approaches to the study of spirituality: theological, historical/contextual, and anthropological-hermeneutical. (Four, if one separates anthropological and hermeneutical.) The counsel of senior scholars like Bernard McGinn and Sandra Schneiders bears repeating: these methods are approaches that blend and overlap, and work best in concert. Scholarly inquiry into spirituality is open to use of appropriate tools that illumine multiple dimensions of a text. I am thus not concerned about distinguishing this dissertation’s approach as distinctly historical, theological, or anthropological/hermeneutical, as these work in tandem. Making claims about a text’s place in
the study of Christian spirituality cannot depend on assertions which divorce the text from its historical or cultural context.

Furthermore, scholarship has helped clarify different levels at which spirituality is expressed, as developed in Principe’s three levels of interpreting spirituality (experience, articulation, and study). It is a scheme which can be applied to this study. Clearly, this dissertation functions at the third level, as critical inquiry into the Alfredian reform as Christian spirituality. The question to consider is how the *Vita Ælfredi* and the *Cura pastoralis* perform at first and second orders of spirituality, or experience and articulation. It is important to remember that experience in this study does not refer to peak moments in religiosity, but to lived Christian experience which is religiously meaningful and personally transformative. In what way do the *Vita Ælfredi* and the *Cura pastoralis* reveal or articulate Anglo-Saxon lived religious experience? Even more relevant, what do they reveal about Alfred’s own religious life, and his understanding of what it means to be a Christian?

Similarly, Sandra Schneiders’s three stages of hermeneutical inquiry (description, analysis, and interpretation) offer additional guidance for this study. As I am treating the Alfredian cultural reform in terms of Anglo-Saxon spirituality, this study must adequately describe and interpret Alfred and his commitment to Christian wisdom vis-à-vis Anglo-Saxon England’s historical, literary, religious, and cultural contexts. This is not an abstract study in Alfredian spirituality. However, the third step of the hermeneutical sequence (making the text meaningful for the current reader) will not be an explicit focus of this dissertation. Although any study suggests interpretive decisions and hermeneutical biases, and this study demands constructive interpretation of Alfred’s life and work as a religious leader, this dissertation’s
purpose is to meaningfully reframe scholarly understanding of Alfred as a spiritual authority and wisdom figure, especially as seen in the *Vita Ælfredi* and the *Cura pastoralis*. The uncovering of timeless spiritual truths is not this dissertation’s goal, nor will I propose a reading of Alfredian spirituality for today. This is not to say that there is nothing enduring about Alfred’s writings; however, personal spiritual excavation or engaging in the self-implicating dimensions of studying spirituality is left up to individual readers and their own engagement with Alfred and his texts.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE *VITA ÆLFREDI*:

REPOSITIONING ALFRED AS SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY

4.1 Introduction

One of the strongest, most pervasive images that emerges out of Alfred’s rule is that of a deeply religious king whose cultural reform reveals his commitment to teaching and learning. In this chapter I will reframe our perspective on Alfred’s work and legacy so that he is not simply rendered as a pedagogically-minded pious Christian king. Rather, I will treat Alfred as a spiritual authority and wisdom figure with an explicit calling to the leadership and reformation of his people. My first source for this treatment, and the focus of this chapter, is *De rebus gestis Ælfredi*, or *Vita Ælfredi* (*Life of Alfred*), considered “the starting point for understanding Alfred.”¹ Composed in 893 (during Alfred’s lifetime²) by Asser, a Welsh monk in Alfred’s court, the *Vita Ælfredi* weaves together biographical details of Alfred’s life from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* with other information possibly gleaned from Alfred’s court, and provides readers a narrative of Alfred’s childhood and his rule and his lifelong devotion to wisdom and learning. It relates a curious event (on November 11, or Martinmas, in 897) that has received significant attention in modern historiography. Commonly read as Alfred’s miraculous acquisition of Latin, I will show how it serves to further develop Alfred’s vocational commitment to the study of

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² Keynes and Lapidge, 55-57. Even though Asser outlived Alfred, the *VA* does not cover the end of Alfred’s life, and ends “abruptly.” Keynes and Lapidge, 56.
religious texts. It is Asser’s work which most strongly develops the portrait of Alfred as a
wisdom figure and spiritual authority, so it is in the pages of the *Vita* that our examination begins.

4.2 A Holy Biography: Reading the *Vita Ælfredi*

As a *Vita*, or *Life*, Asser’s text is typically treated as biography, but this has opened the
*Vita Ælfredi* to scrutiny shaped by modern standards of life-writing in terms of historicity and
truth-telling, but as we shall consider, some episodes within the *Vita* appear implausible.

Acknowledgement of this concern is important in any study of Asser’s work, even if I have no
desire to either deface or defend Asser’s reputation as a chronicler or historian. While
historiographic concerns about what actually occurred are important in a full study of the text,
my intention is to treat how the text serves to position Alfred as a spiritual leader of his people
and study the text in terms of intentional religious meaning-making.

The *Vita*’s author, Asser, was a Welsh cleric, who Alfred himself calls “my bishop”
(minum biscepe). They most likely met in 885, possibly after Asser had already been
consecrated to the bishopric of St. David’s (in the kingdom of Dyfed, Wales). He became a close
companion to Alfred starting around 886, when Asser would read aloud books of the king’s
choosing, and was present in 887, when Alfred learned Latin in a seemingly miraculous fashion.
In between returns to Wales, Asser was an active participant in court life, was appointed the
bishop of Sherbourne between 892 and 900, wrote the *Vita Ælfredi* in 893 (while Alfred was still
alive), and outlived the king, dying in either 908 or 909. The *Vita*’s audience is problematic; it is

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4. See Keynes and Lapidge, 48-53 for the complexities in establishing a chronology for Asser’s
   relationship with Alfred.
not entirely known who the text was intended for, although some theories have been attempted.\(^5\) Any argument about audience is muted, however, by the fact that the text appears to be left unfinished. The *Vita Ælfredi* was written during Alfred's lifetime, yet does not address his achievements in the 890s or his death in 899, even though Asser lived another decade. This has led scholars to treat the *Vita* as “an incomplete draft rather than a polished work in its finished state.”\(^6\) Either the text was never completed, or a completed version has not survived, and the incomplete nature of the text complicates the task of understanding Asser’s message, rendering numerous assumptions tentative. With these caveats in mind, we shall turn to the text.

We start with the author himself: what does Asser claim as the intention of his work? He offers what appears to be a straightforward historical approach to the *VA*, although he foregoes a preface and waits until chapter 73 to declare his purpose. He writes:

\begin{quote}
Igitur, ut ad id, unde digressus sum, redeam, ne diuturna enavigatione portum optatae quietis omittere cogar, aliquantulum, quantum notitiae meae innotuerit, de vita et moribus et aqua conversatione, atque, ex parte non modica, res gestas domini mei Ælfredi, Angulsaxonum regis, postquam praefatam ac venerabilem de Merciorum nobilium genere coniugem duxerit, Deo annuente, succinctim ac breviter, ne qua prolixitate narrandi nova quaeque fastidientium animos offendam, ut promisi, expedire procurabo.
\end{quote}

(Accordingly, in order that I may return to that point from which I digressed—and so that I shall not be compelled to sail past the haven of my desired rest as a result of my protracted voyage—I shall, as I promised, undertake, with God’s guidance, to say something [albeit succinctly and briefly, as far as my knowledge permits] about the life,

\(^5\) Keynes and Lapidge (56) accept the theory that the *VA* was intended for a Welsh audience, in part to legitimate Alfred’s rule to the Welsh. James Campbell does not refute elements in the text that would speak to a Welsh audience, but is not persuaded that the Welsh were the text’s primary recipients; rather, given the text’s encomiastic nature, Campbell sees the primary audience as none other than Alfred himself. James Campbell, “Asser’s Life of Alfred,” in *The Inheritance of Historiography*, ed. Christopher Holdsworth and T.P. Wiseman, Exeter Studies in History (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1986), 127.

\(^6\) Keynes and Lapidge, 56.

behaviour, equitable character and, without exaggeration, the accomplishments of my lord Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, after the time when he married his excellent wife from the stock of noble Mercians—briefly, I say, so that I do not offend with my protracted narrative the minds of those who are scornful of information of any sort.\textsuperscript{8}

William Stevenson was willing to endorse this statement at face value, and said simply that that the \textit{Vita Ælfredi} “was [not] written with any other purpose than that of celebrating the doings and recording the life of a truly great man.”\textsuperscript{9} A more critical assessment is in order, however. Asser’s claim is better understood in light of the medieval modesty topos wherein authors who would conventionally assert the “mereness” of their work: either these humble authors were simply working at a patron’s behest, or as writers their words paled in comparison to the virtue and ability of earlier writers, or they were barely capable of conveying the sublime glory of their subject. Asser assumes an almost self-deprecating tone in asserting that he is merely going to narrate a couple of facts about his lord.\textsuperscript{10} This hardly uncommon veneer of authorial modesty is insufficient evidence that the \textit{Vita Ælfredi} should be treated as nothing more than a simple chronicle of a great man’s life and deeds.

In fact, Asser’s claim of avoiding exaggeration is at war with the heavily embellished character of some of his narrative. From a strictly objective perspective, some events appear as fabrication and can obfuscate attempts at studying the historical truth. The worst condemnation of Asser’s text in this perspective comes from Alfred Smyth, who asserted that “there is little for

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{8} Trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 88.
\item \textsuperscript{9} William Henry Stevenson, introduction to \textit{Asser’s Life of Alfred}, cix. Stevenson provided the critical edition of Asser’s text which Keynes & Lapidge identify as “a remarkable editorial achievement,” which “laid firm foundations for the modern study of Asser’s text.” Keynes and Lapidge, 226.
\end{itemize}
the historian to salvage, even with caution, from the *Life of Alfred.*”  

These challenges to the narrative’s authenticity have led some scholars (including Smyth) to cast doubt on the very author’s authenticity—an argument beyond the scope of this discussion, and one which has been settled largely in favor of Asser’s authorship.  

The broader concern with truth-telling is important, however, as critical readers of the text are forced to wonder at times how closely Asser hews to the reality of Alfred’s life. Certainly, Alfredian scholars are not ignorant of Asser’s perspectives or priorities as a medieval biographer and historian. As Richard Abels observes, while “historical accuracy is of paramount concern to modern historians, it was less critical to Asser and his audience. […] For Asser, truth was moral rather than empirical.”  

Nor is Asser alone in this; considered broadly, medieval biography is understood to comport to different standards of objective truth-telling, and are deserving of literary study as well as historical. According to Ruth Morse, medieval biography makes use of “events and anecdotes [which] are often intended to be read symbolically,” and as such allows the author to “embellish” a text with

11. Smyth, 228.

12. The issue of Asser’s authorial legitimacy cannot be ignored in any scholarly treatment of the text. For an early 20th-century summary and responses, Stevenson, xcii-ccxxi; see also Dorothy Whitelock, “The Genuine Asser” (The Stenton Lecture 1967), in Whitelock, *From Bede to Alfred: Studies in Early Anglo-Saxon Literature and History* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1980), 3-21. Keynes and Lapidge (1983) considered this skeptical hypothesis a “horse not yet but nearly dead” (50), but the inquiry was renewed (1995) by Alfred P. Smyth in his scholarship, particularly his biography of Alfred (*King Alfred the Great*). Although Smyth’s scholarship is not without its merits, the book’s central attestation that the *Vita Ælfredi* was the product of a tenth-century forger (“Pseudo-Asser”) has not been well-received by the scholarly community. For the strongest rebuttal of Smyth’s work, see Simon Keynes, “On the Authenticity of Asser’s Life of King Alfred,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 47, no. 9 (July 1996): 529-551. Further, see Richard Abels’s “Appendix on the Authenticity of Asser’s Life of King Alfred,” in *Alfred the Great*, 318-326.

more freedom than might occur in “a large-scale historical work.” And yet, often Alfredian scholarship has focused on the historical truth beneath the VA, and whether Asser’s words serve to reveal or conceal that truth. Some of the sticking points in Asser’s text are those elements which position Alfred as a larger-than-life Christian king, a man possessed of a special destiny and sanctity, a seeker and dispenser of wisdom, and a man supernally gifted with the miraculous ability to read Latin in order that he might teach and lead others—the very elements which are crucial to this project’s reframing of Alfred as a religious figure, and elements which make the *Vita Ælfredi* almost hagiographical in nature.

This leads us to briefly consider that subset of the genre of biography. Hagiographical texts are typically classified according to one of two models: the *passio*, or life and martyrdom of a Christian who was executed for their faith, and the *vita*, or life (and death) of a confessor, that is, a saint who was not martyred but died a natural death. The confessor’s *vita* commonly demonstrates the paradigmatic life of a Christian who is often noble, is marked by signs of sanctity or a special calling early in life, rejects the secular, worldly life for an ascetic life, and is seen as the agent or source of posthumous miracles. Irrespective of whether a hagiography was a *passio* or a *vita*, hagiography’s function was mimetic: the goal of a saint’s life was to encourage and compel its audience toward personal holiness through *imitatio Christi*. The lived story of

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16. Gregory of Tours (d. ca. 594) gives us a primary lens for understanding this purpose of hagiography in the prologue to his *Liber vitae Patrum* (*Life of the Fathers*): “Quia sanctorum vita not modo eorum pandit propositum, verum etiam auditorum animos incitat ad profectum.” (For the life of the saints not only reveals their aims, but also stimulates the hearts of listeners to attempt to improve their
the saint was itself a teaching text, as both the lived text and the written text served as witnesses to Christ, and a model of life to be copied. This was accomplished through demonstrating the holiness of an individual’s life, a sanctity often revealed through miracles and the use of common literary tropes or actions that were established correspondences between the individual saint’s story and broader salvation history. Actions become symbols, and the authors of saints’ lives had “a veritable thesaurus of established approved actions which they could employ in their texts.”

However, hagiographies also had an important documentary function: in demonstrating the holy and miraculous deeds of individual saints by incorporating acts from Scripture or from other written saints’ lives, these texts legitimized the saint’s place within the liturgical and devotional life of a local community that was devoted to that saintly figure, and ultimately, within the broader church. Hagiographies thus served more important religious, moral, and social functions than merely the repetition of sacred fables. While we may speak of hagiography narrowly in terms of a passio or vita, ultimately the term has come to allow “a broader range of literature concerning saints, including biographies, legends, miracle tales, canonization inquests, visions, relic translations, saints’ cults, and so forth.”

19. Heffernan, 6. Thus, Heffernan argues an “interpretive circularity in the composition and reception” of sacred biographies. He asserts, “First, such the text extends the idea that its subject is holy and worthy of veneration by the faithful, and second, the text as the documentary source of the saint’s life receives approbation from the community as a source of great wisdom.” Heffernan, 16.
scholarship, hagiographies appear to have been the illicit stepchildren of historical biographies, often treated as little more than “pious fiction or an exercise in panegyric.”

Certainly, Alfred’s Vita does not fulfill the communal or liturgical functions of a hagiography; nor does it appear designed to legitimate him as a saint who surrenders fully to the life of holiness, sacrifices his life in defense of the faith, or becomes the source of posthumous wonder-working. However, between history and hagiography is the Christian royal vita, a literary middle ground which encompasses both historiographic and religious concerns and which positions the biography’s subject within a specific light. I previously addressed the impact of the Carolingian renaissance on Alfred’s court, and much has been written regarding literary influences of Carolingian biographies of pious lay people on Asser and his work; particularly important in this regard is the Vita Karoli Magni (Life of Charlemagne) by the Frankish historian Einhard (d. 840). The relationship between Einhard’s and Asser’s works has been well-argued.

However, both Asser’s and Einhard’s writings were Christian royal vitae, a literary tradition begun with the Vita Constantini (Life of Constantine) by the commonly acclaimed “Father of

21. Heffernan, 16. Thus his use of the term sacred biography as a seemingly less baggage-laden term than hagiography.


Church History,” Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 339). To date, remarkably little has been said about the *Vita Ælfredi’s* place in this literary tradition.\(^{24}\) The Christian royal *vita* brings together historical narrative and religious meaning-making, and establishes life-writing as a biographical narrative which is didactic and oriented toward explicitly Christian ends. Consideration of the variety of life-writings in classical and Christian antiquity suggests ideological goals that are not concerned with merely a historic chronicle of an individual’s life or an attention to strict historiography in the modern sense. Although space prohibits a thorough discussion of the biographical genre in antiquity and in the Middle Ages, I will sketch the contours of the subgenre of the royal sacred biography in order to explain my approach to the VA.  

Despite the different contexts in which Eusebius’s and Asser’s *vitae* were written, they are both characterized by religious and didactic interests which demonstrate that Christian royal life-writings are intended to document the distinctly spiritual and religious dimensions of a ruler’s life alongside their accomplishments in warfare or governance. Like the *Vita Ælfredi*, the *Vita Constantini* is commonly treated as biography, yet this classification has been the topic of academic contention.\(^ {25}\) Issues of authenticity and historicity have been raised because a number of the events reported by the text only appear within it.\(^ {26}\) Scholars have described the *Vita*

\(^{24}\) For example, Paul Kershaw makes mention of the *Vita Constantini*, but is more interested in addressing Asser’s more immediate Carolingian influences: “Asser’s *Life of King Alfred* belongs to a lineage of Christian royal biography that begins with Eusebius’ *Life of Constantine*, but has a closer affinity with the more immediate family of Carolingian and sub-Carolingian biographies of pious laymen.” Paul Kershaw, “Illness, Power and Prayer in Asser’s *Life of King Alfred*.” *Early Medieval Europe* 10, no. 2 (July 2001): 201.


\(^{26}\) “Many of the details which [the *Vita Constantini*] records are to be found only here, and since the [*Vita Constantini*] presents a view of Constantine that is not only extremely pro-Christian but also, as we can see from comparison with some of his other works, particular to the interests of Eusebius himself,
Constantini as an innovation in Christian life-writing: Cameron and Hall describe the text as “a literary hybrid,” and identify Eusebius as a literary genius who reshapes earlier models of life-writing in the development of a new type of Christian biography.27 As Anna Wilson observed, with Constantine’s conversion and the establishment of imperial favor toward the church, the era of martyrs was passing, and religious literature had a new aim: “Ideal lives rather than ideal deaths were called for.”28 As Christianity spread into new lands and new frontiers, martyrdom would remain a distinct possibility, but the good life was now as valid a topic of religious instruction as the good death. Thus the Vita Constantini draws on features from established, traditional biographical genres, bringing together “the encomium of the dead, the panegyric of the ruler, the philosophical bios of the intellectual, the history of a nation, and the praxeis [deeds] of great political and military men” for the construction of a new kind of life-writing.29 The bios, in particular, was an ancient biographical genre, a moralizing documentary which served to depict its subject as a model of the philosophical life and encouraged the moral formation of its audience.30 Cameron and Hall note that Eusebius invokes the idea of the bios in his text but never

it is not surprising that it has proved extremely controversial. Some scholars are disposed to accept its evidence at face value while others have been and are highly skeptical… Indeed, the integrity of Eusebius as a writer has often been attacked and his authorship of the [Vita Constantini] denied by scholars eager to discredit the value of the evidence it provides.” Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, introduction to Eusebius, Life of Constantine, trans. and ed. Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, Clarendon Ancient History Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1, accessed November 4, 2015, EBSCO eBooks.


29. Urbano, 172.

30. Urbano, 17. Cameron and Hall (29) note that Eusebius invokes the idea of the bios in his text but never refers to his own work as such. Eusebius describes his work to his readers as a “verbal portrait” (ἡν δὲ τὰ λόγων εἰκόνα) which would depict his subject as an exemplar of Christian rule. Eusebius, Vita Constantini, 1.10.1.1.A. Trans. Cameron and Hall, 71.
refers to his own work as such; rather, he describes his work to his readers as a “verbal portrait” (τὴν δία λόγων εἰκόνα) which would depict his subject as an exemplar of Christian rule.\(^\text{31}\)

Furthermore, as a panegyric, the *Vita Constantini* shares characteristics with hagiography, describing Constantine “as a divine man or hero…marked as such by divine signs.”\(^\text{32}\) In retelling Constantine’s life, Eusebius’s goal was to uplift Constantine as a person of virtue and glory, and to articulate the sacred character of Constantine and his rule. The text’s didactic purpose is clear: in Eusebius’s hands, Constantine becomes the “philosopher-ruler with a Christian twist,” and the *Vita Constantini* depicts its subject as both “a wise ruler” and “a paradigmatic Christian.”\(^\text{33}\)

Because of this blending of historic deeds and religious ideology, scholars have sought to identify a satisfactory label for this type of narrative. Anna Wilson suggested that the *Vita Constantini* was the first step in the development of Christian biographical panegyric that would be called a *hagiobiography*, an eclectic hybrid of different life-writing genres which does more than attempt to chronicle deeds, but to portray their subject as an exemplar within the Christian universe.\(^\text{34}\)

It is this blending together of hagiography and history within life-writing which characterizes Asser’s text: more than simply biography, but not quite hagiography, the *Vita Ælfredi* functions much as the *Vita Constantini*, a hagiobiography which records Alfred’s many deeds as a king and establishes his role as an exemplary Christian. I stated in Chapter 3 that the modern methodological approach to the study of spirituality asserts that we are not limited to the

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31. Cameron and Hall, 29.
32. Ibid., 31.
33. Urbano, 172-73.
34. Wilson, 107.
conventionally-identified religious texts; thus, a biographical text need not be solely hagiographic for us to study it as a source in understanding medieval religious meaning-making. Nor do we stretch the boundaries of biography when we utilize the *Vita Ælfredi* for this task, when we consider its place within the hagiobiographical tradition. By positioning the *Vita Ælfredi* as this form of holy biography, we are acknowledging biography’s long-standing literary versatility and multivalence. Although the *Vita Ælfredi* is not exclusively concerned with treating Alfred as a religious figure and a spiritual authority for his people, we shall see that this is an unmistakable dynamic within Asser’s narrative. To dismiss it as merely pious gloss mutes Asser’s portrait of Alfred.

### 4.3 Alfred the Wise: His Youth and Reign

#### 4.3.1 Alfred’s Childhood Consecration

Alfred’s story is not a conversion narrative, and he is not a sinner redeemed. Nor is Alfred’s tale that of the worldly man who abandons this world in pursuit of the religious life. Alfred was clearly, in Asser’s view, a man intended to be a great king—a destiny apparent from Alfred’s youth. Although Einhard’s *Vita Karoli Magni* is considered an important influence on the writing of the *Vita Ælfredi*, Asser’s attention to Alfred’s childhood is a distinct departure from Einhard’s work. Citing inadequate source material, Einhard expresses little interest in discussing Charlemagne’s early years.\(^{35}\) Asser, on the other hand, is intent on constructing a narrative that includes important elements from Alfred’s past that heralded his future as a wise king.

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35. Einhard, *Vita Karoli Magni*, ch. 4. For discussion, see Matthias Becher, *Charlemagne* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), especially 41-58 (ch. 3, “Charlemagne’s Youth and the First Years of his Reign”)
The son of Æthelwulf, Alfred was the youngest of five brothers (Æthelstan, Æthelbald, Æthelberht, and Æthelred), and as such, was the least likely to succeed to the throne, or even likely to be foreseen as a future king. Given such a remote chance, it is possible that he was intended by his family for the priesthood. However, there is no hint of this intention in Asser’s text. Rather, Asser asserts that Æthelwulf sent four-year old Alfred with an entourage to Rome, where Alfred was received by Pope Leo IV (847-55) and anointed as king. The veracity of the event is highly suspect. The event is first reported in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the year 853, and this likely served as the source for Asser’s recounting of it. The ASC reports:

7 þy ilcan geare sende Æelwulf cyning Elfred his sunu to Rome. Pa was domne Leo papa on Rome 7 he hine to cyninge gehalgode 7 hiene him to biscepsuna nam.37

(And the same year King Æthelwulf sent his son Alfred to Rome. Dom Leo was pope in Rome then, and he consecrated him as king, and took him as son at confirmation.)38

Asser’s text, however, offers a slight variant:

Eodem anno Æthelwulfus rex praefatum filium suum Ælfredum, magno nobilium et etiam ignobilium numero constipatum, honorifice Romam transmisit. Quo tempore dominus Leo Papa [quartus] apostolicae sedi praeerat, qui praefatum infantem Ælfredum oppido ordinans unxit in regem, et in filium adoptionis sibimet accipiens confirmavit.39

(In the same year King Æthelwulf sent his son Alfred to Rome in state, accompanied by a great number of both nobles and commoners. At this time the lord Pope Leo was ruling the apostolic see; he anointed the child Alfred as king, ordaining him properly, received him as an adoptive son and confirmed him.)40

36. Alfred’s eventual rise to the throne, through both shifting political allegiances and the deaths of his brothers before him, will not be recounted here.


The differences appear minor. Of least significance here is Asser’s report of the presence of a retinue not mentioned in the ASC. More interesting is the ASC’s use of the generic term *gehalgode* (‘made holy’ or ‘hallowed’ or simply ‘consecrated’), while Asser relates what transpired using a specific liturgical term *unxit*, (‘anointed’). (We shall return to this shortly.)

What the two reports share is the common conviction that Alfred’s visit included a spiritual sponsorship by the pontiff and a royal consecration of the child as a future king. Unfortunately, a childhood coronation sounds suspect. It is not impossible, and there was Frankish precedent in the consecration of Pepin’s sons, including Charlemagne. However, Alfred was the youngest son with still-living older brothers; while he may have met the pontiff, it is unlikely that this youngest son would have been consecrated as a future leader.

There is, in addition, a third narration of the event, from the *Collectio Britannia* (BL Add. MS 8873), a compilation of various materials including papal correspondence. Among these is a letter from Pope Leo to Æthelwulf, which describes the event in slightly more detail:

Filium vestrum Erfred, quem hoc in tempore ad Sanctorum Apostolorum limina destinare curastis, benigne suscepimus, et, quasi spiritalem filium consulatus cingulo honore vestimentisque, ut mos est Romanis consulibus, decoravimus, eo quod in nostris se tradidit manibus.

(We have now graciously received your son Alfred, whom you were anxious to send at this time to the threshold of the Holy Apostles, and we have decorated him, as a spiritual son, with the dignity of the belt [*cingulum*; also, ‘sword’] and the vestments of the

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44. Stevenson, 183.
consulate, as is customary with Roman consuls, because he gave himself into our hands.)45

The Roman consulate was by Alfred’s time merely an honorary title bereft of civic authority, and a mere shadow of its earlier status—a position which Stevenson described as “little more than a brevet of Roman nobility,” held by “notaries and even merchants.”46 Asser’s account, building on that within the ASC, might not have been a complete fabrication, but a fanciful reconstruction or embellishment of the conferral of the consulate. Conferring a consul and consecrating a king could not have been confused for the same thing. While the honor of receiving the consulate have been accompanied by pomp and pageantry, as Richard Abels explains, it “was hardly a hallowing to kingship.”47 Scholars have suggested possible reasons for why both the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and the Vita Ælfredi might have rendered a conferring of the consulate as a coronation, ranging from simple misremembering to full misrepresentation.48 This returns us to questions of authorial intention and the purpose of the Vita Ælfredi. Some measure of political propaganda is possible—establishing a papal recognition of one’s kingship carries an important imprimatur, and a childhood coronation would send a strong signal to any skeptics or critics. I do not deny the possibility of this text’s political ideology, but suggest a religious significance to this incident that stands on its own, without having to serve as regime propaganda. Recall that a

46. Stevenson, 184.
47. Abels, Alfred the Great, 61.
48. Stevenson (181) argues that the pageantry that attends the consular ceremony was near in pomp to that of a coronation, thus leading to a possible confusion between the two; in his mind, the claim of coronation is mere “misapprehension.” Representing a more skeptical approach, Smyth (12-16) unsurprisingly interprets this as pure propaganda, and alleges fraud, though he blames Alfred for the deception.
common characteristic of the hagiographic vitae was the presence of signs that pointed to the future saint’s holiness and virtue. Alfred’s pontifical crowning points to a holy purpose for the future king, and a destiny manifest since youth. Typically, such signs and portents are more wondrous; for example, in the eighth-century *Vita Sancti Guthlacii* (*Life of Saint Guthlac*) by the monk Felix, the birth of the saint-to-be is heralded by the clouds breaking open as a hand gestures toward the home of his birth (ch. 5), and witnesses discern that the child is destined to a life of sanctity (ch. 8). While a childhood coronation by a pope is a far less wondrous marker with supernatural significance, it nonetheless serves to identify a holy and extraordinary recognition of Alfred’s destiny. Furthermore, the event is rooted in history (as seen in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*), even if mythologized to support the portrait of Alfred’s holiness. Furthermore, the reporting of Alfred’s consecration occurs within a broader liturgical, social, and cultural context as secular and ecclesiastical powers engaged with each other in the construction of new understandings of kingship from a Christian tradition. The Old Testament was particularly influential in this construction, as the first kings of Israel served as exemplars and models of holy

49. Keynes and Lapidge come to a similar conclusion, drawing a connection between such portents and Alfred’s regal consecration when they suggest that “the chronicler probably intended merely to convey that Alfred had been marked out for kingship when still a young boy, in much the same way as heavenly signs attended the birth of those who were to become saints.” Keynes and Lapidge, 232n18.


51. The Christian consecration of Anglo-Saxon kings was not an ancient act, having only been introduced to England in 787 when Offa’s son Ecgfrith was anointed to the throne while a child and his father still alive. It was probably influenced by the earlier-mentioned Carolingian precedent: scholarship has addressed at length the relationship between the Anglo-Saxon liturgical rites for the consecration of kings (which appear codified in text after the tenth century) and the Carolingian ordines, as well as with earlier Visigothic or Celtic traditions which may have proved influential. See also Michael J. Enright, *Iona, Tara, and Soissons: The Origin of the Royal Anointing Ritual* (Berlin: Walter DeGruyter, 1985), 79-106.
kingship. Recall that in Asser’s account, Alfred was not simply consecrated: he was anointed. According to Janet Nelson, anointing was at this time a Frankish model of legitimating kingship, and its presence in Asser’s narrative may point to Carolingian influence, as the incident rests “under the shadow of Charlemagne.”52 However, in Asser’s text it also creates a scriptural resonance among its readers, who would be familiar with Old Testament stories and the anointing of Israel’s kings, particularly its first three kings, Saul (1 Sam. 9:1-10:16), David (2 Sam 2:1-4), and Solomon (1 Kgs 1:38-50), who were anointed by prophets as a sign of God’s election.53

The consecration did more than just signify Alfred’s kingly future; by being conjoined with a papal adoption, it brought together a Roman and an Anglo-Saxon past. More importantly, however, the account of Alfred’s childhood consecration brings something unique to the consecration of Anglo-Saxon Christian kings. The extant liturgical customs suggest that they were dependent upon the episcopal see at Canterbury.54 Alfred, however, is sent to Rome, where the pontiff himself confirms and consecrates the future king in the heart of the Christian West. All three of the accounts (Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Vita Ælfredi, and Leo’s letter) agree that the pontiff received Alfred as a “spiritual son.” Assuming the veracity of Alfred’s visit, if not his consecration as king, then in all likelihood this act was a political maneuver in which young


53. The first king of Israel, Saul, anointed by the prophet Samuel, is commonly seen as the exemplar of kingly anointing, but later Anglo-Saxon coronation rituals invoked the language of Solomon’s anointing. See Pratt, Political Thought, 75-76. Further, see Janet Nelson, “Earliest Surviving Royal Ordo: Some Liturgical and Historical Aspects,” in Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe (London: Hambledon Press, 1986), 355.

54. Pratt, Political Thought, 76.
Alfred himself was merely a political pawn: the papal sponsorship of Alfred would have ritually and socially united Æthelwulf and Leo as co-fathers, creating a social (if not outright political) link between the two leaders.\textsuperscript{55} However, by the time of Asser’s writing, any potential political allegiances may have been forgotten; either way, there is no hint of this sponsorship having any further social or political capital in Alfred’s life or reign. Rather, we have the narrative of a future king who is the son of two fathers. As the physical son of a secular leader and the spiritual son of a sacred leader, Alfred unites the worldly and the spiritual in his person and his office. The royal consecration does not stand alone in the text, but occurs alongside Leo’s spiritual adoption of Alfred, and the two actions functioned together to construct a symbolic authorization of Alfred’s future as both secular and spiritual leader of his people.\textsuperscript{56} It is not enough to say that Alfred was recognized as a future king: in Asser’s narrative, Alfred becomes the son of kings and a spiritual heir to Rome.

\textbf{4.3.2 A Noble Mind}

While this fanciful reconstruction of a childhood coronation may have helped to legitimate Alfred’s rule and position him as a person with a manifest destiny, it does little to really tell us who Alfred was or what mattered to him. This emerges slowly as the \textit{Vita Ælfredi} starts to construct an image of the king oriented toward learning and wisdom. Just as Alfred’s


royal future was evident since his childhood, so is his pursuit of wisdom. It first appears in a standard panegyric description of the young Alfred’s personal qualities:

Nam, cum communi et ingenti patris sui et matris amore supra omnes fratres suos, immo ab omnibus, nimium diligetur, et in regio semper curto inseparabiliter nutrietur, accrescente infantili et puerili aetate, forma ceteris suis fratribus decentior videbatur, vultuque et verbis atque moribus gratiosior. Cui ab incunabulis ante omnia et cum omnibus praesentis vitae studiis, sapientiae desiderium cum nobilitate generis, nobilis mentis ingenium supplevit.57

(Now, he was greatly loved, more than all his brothers, by his father and mother—indeed, by everybody—with a universal and profound love, and he was always brought up in the royal court and nowhere else. As he passed through infancy and boyhood he was seen to be more comely in appearance than his other brothers, and more pleasing in manner, speech and behavior. From the cradle onwards, in spite of all the demands of the present life, it has been the desire for wisdom, more than anything else, together with the nobility of his birth, which have characterized the nature of his noble mind.)58

This passage is largely ignored in Alfredian scholarship. Keynes and Lapidge say nothing, and Smyth says little, preferring to excoriate other elements of the Vita Ælfredi. Abels, generally more sympathetic to reading the Vita Ælfredi, simply says that Asser “fawningly” describes Alfred.59 There is no further interpretation of Asser’s attention to Alfred’s physical characteristics. However, by making use of a standard panegyric “virtue made visible” topos, the text continues to develop the idea that Alfred was a moral and spiritual exemplar. Looking earlier within the tradition of Christian royal biography, Eusebius performs a similar action in the Vita Constantini. He lauds the youthful Constantine’s physique, his height, and his physical strength, describing them as incomparable to those around him. However, Constantine was not merely

57. Asser, VA ch. 22.
58. Trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 74-75.
59. Abels, Alfred the Great, 96.
physically gifted; Eusebius similarly praises his education and wisdom.\textsuperscript{60} Both \textit{vitae} extol the outward form of the future Christian leader. This is not simply intended as pandering verbiage, however. Eusebius’s praise of Constantine’s strength and beauty signifies that the emperor’s “inner virtue would be reflected in his outward appearance.”\textsuperscript{61} Both Asser and Eusebius are taking part in a longstanding panegyric tradition which correlates appearance with virtue: the physical functions as a signifier of the spiritual, and the outward appearance of a noble individual is demonstrable sign of an inner moral quality.\textsuperscript{62} This “virtue made visible” topos is standard fare in classical panegyric, and persisted throughout the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{63} Such biographical writing says little about the subject’s actual appearance; rather it conveys what the biographer intends: their subject’s inner qualities. Read in this light, Asser’s description signifies more than simple flattery of his king. Alfred’s virtue was already evident in his youth, made plain through his comely form, and was easily recognized by all around him.

The \textit{Vita Constantini}’s praise of Constantine also serves to highlight an important distinction between Alfred and Constantine, a distinction which will prove vital to Alfred’s devotion to pedagogy: where Constantine enjoyed the benefit of a formal classical education, Alfred was not so privileged. Asser says that Alfred was “ignorant of letters” (illiteratus) until he was twelve years old.\textsuperscript{64} (The topic of illiteracy initiates a much broader discussion regarding

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\item[\textsuperscript{60}]{Eusebius, \textit{Vita Constantini}, 19.1; in Cameron and Hall, 77.}
\item[\textsuperscript{61}]{Cameron and Hall, 197.}
\item[\textsuperscript{64}]{Asser, VA ch. 22. Trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 75.}
\end{itemize}
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language, Latinity, and literacy, which we shall turn to shortly.) However, Alfred’s natural
giftedness, particularly his keen memory, overcomes this deficit, as is revealed in an anecdote
about a book of vernacular poetry. In chapter 22 of the Vita Ælfredi, Asser reports that Alfred
“was a careful listener, by day and night, to English poems, most frequently hearing them recited
by others, and he readily retained them in his memory.” (Sed Saxonica poemata die noctuque
solers auditor, relatu aliorum saepissime audiens, docibilis memoriter retinebat.) He was so
skilled in this practice that he easily won a reading challenge set forth by his mother in chapter
23. She showed Alfred and his brothers a book of English poems and offered it to whichever
son would be the first to learn it. Alfred was driven to compete, but not by the challenge of
competition itself: he was drawn to the “beauty of the initial letter in the book” (pulchritudine
principalis litterae illius libri), and driven by “divine inspiration” (divina inspiratione). Asser
relates that Alfred took the book from his mother to his teacher, and “learned it” (legit).
This episode has opened the floodgates of historical scrutiny: when in Alfred’s life did this actually
occur? (Smyth, characteristically, challenges the veracity of the event as another fabrication of
“pseudo-Asser.”) Earlier in the chapter, the text said Alfred could not read until his twelfth


66. Seth Lerer examines Asser’s description of the illuminated text and argues that it may have
more value in terms of symbolism than in terms of information about Anglo-Saxon book production; the
probability of a vernacular manuscript with ornate initial letters is more characteristic of Latin religious
texts than vernacular poetry. Rather, Alfred’s book is symbolic of a type of reading, one which the young
illiterate Alfred is drawn to but cannot truly read yet later becomes a literate mediator of texts himself.
Seth Lerer, Literacy and Power in Anglo-Saxon Literature (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991),
65-69.

67. Asser, VA ch. 23.


69. Smyth, 180-83.
year: was this episode meant to describe when Alfred learned to read at age twelve, or did it simply signify an important event before he could read? Does the verb customarily translated as “read” (legit) actually signify reading, or learning the contents of the text? Much ink has been spilled on whether Asser is actually suggesting in this episode that Alfred’s teacher actually instructed him in how to read, or whether the instructor recited it aloud for Alfred to memorize. Modern scholars suggest the latter. This does receive support from the incident’s broader context; recall that Asser begins by asserting Alfred’s skill at memorizing poetry that was recited to him, which would indicate that this episode is an important example of that skill. Godden, however, takes issue with this interpretation, and observes how early readers of the Vita Ælfredi understood the story to mean that Alfred learned to read the book with the instruction of his teacher; he further notes that if this is not the episode in which Alfred actually learns to read the vernacular, that event is never described elsewhere in the Vita Ælfredi.

The struggle to understand the historical sequence beneath the text is important. However, there is a certain historical angst in trying to read this sequence too precisely. As Godden counsels, these interpretive struggles are because of “[taking] the story too seriously, or at least too historically… Whatever base the story may or may not have in reality, what Asser was trying to convey with the story was how Alfred came to learn to read English late in his

70. Abels, Alfred the Great, 55-57; Godden, “Stories from the Court of King Alfred,” in Saints and Scholars: New Perspectives on Anglo-Saxon Literature and Culture in Honour of Hugh Magennis, ed. Stuart McWilliams (Cambridge, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2012), 126-29; and Stevenson, 221-25;
71. Abels, Alfred the Great, 55; Stevenson, 221
72. See Abels, Alfred the Great, 55-57, and Godden, “Stories from the Court,” 126-29.
73. For example, Byrhtferth of Ramsey (d. ca. 1020) “expands Asser’s ‘legit’ into ‘legit preceptore ostendente’ (‘read it with his tutor show him’) and inserts a reference to the passage of time … before Alfred returns with the book to his mother, presumably to allow for the time it took the prince to learn to read.” Godden, “Stories from the Court,” 128.
What Asser is describing is Alfred’s interest in learning and his fascination with the written word since his childhood, the perceived deficit in his education, and his own personal endeavor to overcome this challenge. The childhood incident becomes representative for the larger drama which will occur later during Alfred’s kingship and signify a major theme of his rule. It foreshadows the adult Alfred as a king with a deep, lifelong yearning to learn but who finds himself in a setting in which teaching and learning are lacking.

While the *Vita Ælfredi* introduces Alfred’s desire for learning by way of his mother’s poetry contest, neither his yearning to learn nor his keen memory were confined to secular texts. His memorization skill is also turned to memorizing the “cursum diurnum,” that is, the daily liturgical hours, along with prayers and psalms. These prayers were also kept in a book which was always with Alfred. The *Vita Ælfredi* later reports (ch. 89) that the adult (and by now, literate) Alfred continued to rely upon it for prayer, and Asser claims that after reading a passage from an unnamed book to Alfred, the king showed Asser a “libellus,” or little book, which contained prayers and psalms, and Asser was instructed to add the newly read passage to the book. The book, however, had already been filled and there was no space left within. What had begun in Alfred’s youth as a simple prayer book grew over time and became something more—a

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76. “As [Alfred] was listening intently to this with both ears and was carefully mulling it over in the depths of his mind, he suddenly showed me a little book which he constantly carried on his person, and in which were written the day-time offices and some psalms and certain prayers which he had learned in his youth. He told me to copy the passage in question into the little book.” (Quod cum intentus utrisque auribus audisset et intima mente sollicito perscrutaretur, subito ostendens libellum, quem in sinum suum sedulo portabat, in quo diurnus cursus et psalmi quidam atque orationes quaedam, quas ille in iuventute sua legerat, scripti habebantur, imperavit, quod illud testimonium in eodem libello literis mandare.) Asser, VA ch. 88. Trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 99.
repository for whatever textual gleanings Alfred found inspirational or provocative. Wanting to encourage Alfred’s thoughtful reflection, Asser prepared a quire to supplement Alfred’s book, and added not only the passage which sparked Alfred’s request, but at least three others.

According to Asser (ch. 89) their daily discussions continued and he added additional material to Alfred’s little book, which would in time become not so little, growing to nearly the size of a psalter. Alfred began to call it his “enchiridion” (handbook) and kept it always at his side.

Reflecting on the additions to this book, Asser considers the book’s continued expansion fitting:

* sicut scriptum est “super modicum fundamentum aedificat iustus et paulatim ad maiora defluit,” velut apis fertilissima longe lateque gronnios interrogando discurrens, multimodos divinae scripturae flosculos inhaianter et incessabiler congragavit, quis praecordii sui cellulas densatim replevit.*

(just as it is written, “The just man builds on a modest foundation and gradually proceeds to greater things,” or like the busy bee, wandering far and wide over the marshes in his quest, eagerly and relentlessly assembles many various flowers of Holy Scripture, with which he crams full the cells of his heart.)

Stevenson identifies the comparison of accumulating knowledge to the gathering of honey as “common among classical and later writers,” particularly in the Carolingian reform. The source for the metaphor, however, is likely the West Saxon abbot Aldhelm (d. ca. 709). The provenance of the “just man” (iustus) quotation has not been identified. It is clearly proverbial in its form, however. More than simply a generic maxim, or a form of life counsel, the utterance

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77. Asser, VA ch. 88.
78. Transl. Keynes and Lapidge, 100. This is actually the second such comparison in the VA: in chapter 76, Alfred’s search for knowledge takes him far afield before returning home, like a bee in flight.
79. Stevenson, 302-303.
80. According to Keynes and Lapidge, “The *locus classicus* for the image of the clever bee in the early Middle Ages was Aldhelm’s prose *De Virginitate*, chapters V-VI.” Keynes and Lapidge, 259n161. Further, see Stevenson, 302-303.
81. Keynes and Lapidge, 212n269.
evokes the language and concerns of the biblical book of Proverbs, with its repeated contrast of the ways of the iustus, the just and righteous, with the ways of the wicked.\textsuperscript{82} Alfred is more learner than teacher at this stage in his formation, and in Asser’s text he has not yet grown into the wisdom authority he will become; but here Alfred demonstrates the deeds of the righteous man on the road to becoming a sage—and it is through the encounter with the written word that Alfred’s growth begins.

4.3.3 Alfred’s Lament: Learning and Wisdom

Where the Vita Ælfredi portrayed the younger Alfred as a man deeply concerned with the acquisition of knowledge, Alfred the king was a man dedicated to its dissemination. Chapter 23 related the poetry challenge established by his mother, but this was the symptom of a more important concern: according to Asser, “by the shameful negligence of his parents and tutors [Alfred] remained ignorant of letters until his twelfth year, or even longer” (Indigna suorum parentum et nutritorum incuria usque ad duodecimum aetatis annum, aut eo amplius, illiteratus permansit).\textsuperscript{83} This concern is repeated shortly after, when Asser reports that Alfred applied his prodigious memory to the memorization of psalms and prayers, then lamented “But alas, he could not satisfy his craving for what he desired the most, namely the liberal arts; for, as he used to say, there were no good scholars in the entire kingdom of the West Saxons at that time” (Sed, proh dolor! Quod maxime desiderabat, liberalem scilicet artem, desiderio suo non suppettebat, eo

\textsuperscript{82} For example, “But the path of the just is like shining light, that grows in brilliance till perfect day” (Prv 4:18). Rendered in the Vulgate as “Iustorum autem semita quasi lux splendens procedit et crescit usque ad perfectam diem.”

\textsuperscript{83} Asser, VA ch. 22. Trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 75.
quod, ut loquebatur, illo tempore lectores boni in toto regno Occidentalium Saxonum non errant.) And this, Asser observes, was the cause for great yearning and regret: when Alfred was of the right time in his life when he could dedicate his life to study, he did not have the opportunity for education. Although this learning is expressed in terms of the liberal arts, this is not a yearning for comprehensive education, but the study of religious texts. Alfred could memorize psalms and prayers, but he was unable to read texts dominated by religious and philosophical concerns. And though he was a layperson, Alfred was part of a tradition of educated Anglo-Saxon laymen, typically nobles, who were interested in religious topics and who became learned enough to engage in study of religious texts: Pierre Riché refers to a very select group of Anglo-Saxon lay people who “learned enough Latin to read hagiographical and historical works and to exchange letters with abbots and bishops.” Where Alfred differs is that his personal concern became programmatic. He did not merely learn the grammatical arts; as we


85. While the liberal arts emerged out of an educational philosophy originating in ancient Greece and had been established as seven comprehensive areas of study (the trivium or “three ways” of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic or logic, and the quadrivium or “four ways” of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy), by Alfred’s time they had a more distinctly religious cast. Pierre Riché argues that they were modified in Anglo-Saxon England: the study of arithmetic was largely confined to computus, and Aldhelm modified the quadrivium through the addition of astrology, medicine, and mechanics while establishing the trivium as grammaticorum studia, with rhetoric and dialectic slipping to the wayside. As the foundation of language (specifically, Latin), grammar was essential to the study of sacred scripture and other important religious works. The liberal arts, in spite of their origin in classical pedagogy, had not been metaphorically baptized; they were reduced to an almost exclusively religious domain. Riché asserts, “What Gregory the Great called the exterior studia, that is, the program of the liberal arts, had no meaning for [the Anglo-Saxons]. As Boniface said in the preface to his grammatical treatise, no knowledge can exist outside the circle of the faith. The only culture worthy of existence was religious culture.” Pierre Riché, Education and Culture in the Barbarian West: From the Sixth through the Eighth Century (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1978), 384-93. For discussion on the development of grammatica in Carolingian Europe and in Anglo-Saxon England, see Martin Irvine, The Making of Textual Culture: ‘Grammatica’ and Literary Theory, 350-1100 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), especially 272-333 and 405-60.

86. Riché, Education and Culture, 395-96.
shall see, with his translation program he began an initiative to unlock the contents of these texts for those under his charge.

Alfred’s lament for learning recurs as part of a broader arc in the *Vita Ælfredi*. Alfred’s concern with education is discussed in light of the multiple and diverse responsibilities of kingship that Alfred attends to, beyond the standard fare of “wars and the numerous interruptions of this present life” (inter bella et praesentis vitae frequentia impedimenta).\(^8^7\) Asser’s list is a catalog of noble hobbies and virtuous habits: the king was busy governing and commanding, hunting, guiding his craftsmen in the design of wondrous new creations, dispensing alms and displaying charity to those in need, praying (often apart from his household), and welcoming diverse peoples: “Franks, Frisians, Gauls, Vikings, Welshmen, Irishmen and Bretons… nobles and commoners alike” (Franci autem multi, Frisones, Galli, pagani, Britones, et Scotti, Armorici… nobiles scilicet et ignobiles).\(^8^8\) Woven throughout this listing of duties and deeds is Alfred’s dedication to teaching and learning. His interest in English poetry is repeated, as Alfred spends time reading and reciting it; at the same time, he took delight in attending Scripture lessons, and teaching literacy and virtue to the sons of other nobles. But despite Alfred’s many marvelous and charitable deeds, Asser reports, the king was greatly troubled, and subject to ceaseless lamentation because of his lack of learning and wisdom. This longing is cast providentially and prayerfully in Asser’s text. Alfred’s desire for learning emerges not merely out of his own human curiosity, but from divine initiative, as Asser cites Sacred Scripture: “I will hear what the Lord

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88. Ibid.
God speaks in me” (Audiam, quid loquatur in me dominus Deus). Alfred’s desire to learn is not simply a mark of curiosity or human intelligence, but is part of a divine-human encounter, almost prayerful in its origin. Asser connects Alfred’s yearning for wisdom to the Old Testament story of Solomon and his dream at Gibeon (mentioned above, in Chapter 1), in which Solomon prays not for wealth but wisdom:

In hoc pium et opinatissimum atque opulentissimum Salomonem Hebraeorum regem aequalis, qui primitus, despecta omni praesenti gloria et divinitiis, sapientiam a Deo deposcit, et etiam utramque invenit, sapientiam scilicet et praesentem gloriam.

(In this respect he resembled the holy, highly esteemed and exceedingly wealthy Solomon, king of the Hebrews, who, once upon a time, having come to despise all renown and wealth of the world, sought wisdom from God, and thereby achieved both [namely, wisdom and renown in this world].)

This is one of a series of attempts at constructing Alfred as an Anglo-Saxon Solomon within the Vita Ælfredi. Although mentioned in the context of tithing, Solomon is addressed again (ch. 99), clearly as a wisdom-figure, declaiming one of the biblical proverbs: “As Solomon says: ‘The heart of the king’ (that is, his wisdom) ‘is in the hand of the Lord’” (Ut dixit Salomon, “Cor regis in manu Domini,” id est consilium).

89. Trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 92. The text is Ps 85.9/84.9 Vulg.

90. The solution to the problem is similarly driven by divine authority, as Alfred was inspired to look beyond the confines of his own kingdom, and divine providence brought to his court the group of scholars who would prove instrumental to Alfred’s pedagogical and translation program. First came Bishop Wærferth of Worcester, and the Mercians Plegmund, Æthelstan, and Werwulf. In chapters 76 through 79, Asser relates that this enclave of scholars was instrumental in Alfred’s formation, and would they would later be joined by other men from Gaul, and finally Asser himself from Wales. Although there is no firm date for their arrival, it is traditionally accepted as the early 880s. See Keynes and Lapidge, 26.

91. Asser, VA ch. 76.

92. Trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 92.

of the *Vita Ælfredi* (ch. 106). Alfred is now depicted as a wise law-giver and arbiter of justice. He no longer yearns for learning, but dispenses it as a prescription. The depiction of Alfred as a giver of justice carries another strong link to the Solomon tradition, even if the Old Testament king is not named. In Alfred’s investigation of the decisions of corrupt or unjust judges, Asser reports, Alfred would press for a reason for such decision-making. If the answer revealed that the judges knew no better, Alfred would declaim,

\[
\text{Nimium admiror vestram hanc insolentiam, eo quod, Dei dono et meo, sapientium ministerium et gradus usurpastis, sapientiae autem studium et operam neglexistis.}
\]

(I am astonished at this arrogance of yours, since through God’s authority and my own you have enjoyed the office and status of wise men, yet you have neglected the study and application of wisdom.)

The result, according to Asser, was that Alfred’s subordinates applied themselves to the study of justice; because many of them were illiterate, they often had to learn to read as well. Those who could not read would, like Alfred before them, have had English books read aloud to them. These men, Asser says, would regret the ignorance of their youth and envy the opportunities of those younger men who benefited from a liberal arts education. On its own, this anecdote is merely an image of Alfred as a lawgiver but it further serves to enhance the portrait of Alfred as a wisdom figure. He is no longer merely a learner who wishes for access to more learning and bemoans his lack of learning: he is now the wise king who embodies a Solomonic idea, who rules from wisdom and also mediates it, intent on cultivating the formation of wisdom among the people.

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94. Contemporary records attest to Alfred’s attention to justice and truth-telling; furthermore, the *Domboc*, or justice-book, a new law code was produced under his leadership, although it is not referenced in the *VA*. See Keynes and Lapidge, 39.

95. Asser, *VA* ch. 106.

96. Trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 110.
under his charge. Further, it is a demonstration of wisdom with a distinctly practical application—a notion we will return to in Chapter 5. First, we must examine how Asser treats Alfred’s transformation from seeking wisdom to mediating it.

4.4 Wisdom’s Call

One of the most perplexing episodes for modern readers of the *Vita Ælfredi* is the account in which Alfred begins to read Latin in what appears to be a miraculous manner (ch. 87-89). Keynes and Lapidge see this episode as the turning point between two uneven sections of the *Vita Ælfredi* which describe Alfred’s youth and the development of his kingship (ch. 1-86) and a general assessment of Alfred as the wise king and lawgiver (ch. 90-106). I have already considered material from these two sections, treating Alfred’s orientation toward the pursuit of wisdom. It is this brief intermediary portion that depicts Alfred’s transformation from the young king hungry for wisdom to the adult king who dispenses it, and as such this is an important passage in understanding the text’s development of Alfred as a wisdom authority. Although the *Vita Ælfredi* itself does not identify Alfred’s translation program, in the eyes of many readers this episode is intimately linked to those texts produced as part of that program. In the following section I will demonstrate how the *Vita Ælfredi* positions this episode as central to Alfred’s formation as a spiritual leader whose life is transformed from learner to learned, and from wisdom seeker to wisdom mediator. In order to appreciate the text from this perspective, we have

97. Keynes and Lapidge, 55.

to first address two major concerns regarding the narrative. First, Alfred’s development of literacy (both English and Latin) is convoluted in the *Vita Ælfredi*. We need to unravel the role of language and how Alfred’s development of literacy is portrayed in the text. We will then turn to the actual event in which Alfred appears to be described as learning to read Latin through divine inspiration and treat the seemingly miraculous nature of the episode. More importantly, I will show how this event functions as a milestone in Alfred’s growth as a wisdom authority and a king whose spiritual oversight of his people would be expressed through the translation and mediation of religious writings.

4.4.1 Alfred the Unlearned

Careful readers of the *Vita Ælfredi* face an important challenge in Asser’s chronology: the text seems to alternate between descriptions of Alfred as both illiterate and literate. This is a twofold problem. First, Asser’s narrative is unclear or even contradictory; second, what Asser means by references to “illiteracy” are complicated by different medieval understandings of the term. To recap the basic narrative in the *Vita Ælfredi*: Early in the text (ch. 22), Asser reports that Alfred could not read until he was at least twelve years old. Although illiterate, he was able to win his mother’s poetry challenge by memorizing the contents of a book of poetry (ch. 23).99 As discussed earlier, scholars have argued over whether Alfred’s childhood challenge suggested that Alfred learned how to read, or learned the contents of the book through memorization. Either way, Alfred is shortly afterwards (ch. 24) described as learning prayers and psalms and collecting

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99. That chapter says that Alfred went to his teacher before learning the book’s poems, so the teacher quite likely read the book aloud to him. See Keynes and Lapidge, 239n48.
them in his own *libellus*. Does this mean he was now able to read? If not, why did he collect these texts? Was he collecting them as he continued to learn them, in which case his *libellus* served as an aid to both his developing literacy and his devotions? Furthermore, this raises the problem of which language these texts were in. Prior to the mention of his prayer book, Alfred’s story had been concerned with his inability to read English, and according to the *Vita Ælfredi*, he began to collect prayers and psalms well before he learned Latin. However, Latin was the language of Sacred Scripture and the liturgy, so were these Latin texts or translations into English?\(^{100}\)

The adult Alfred is later described as reading aloud from vernacular texts, and showing special interest in memorizing English verse (ch. 76). In the same chapter, Asser reports that despite Alfred’s many kingly duties and tasks, he personally offered “tutelage in literacy.”\(^ {101}\) However, upon the arrival of the foreign scholars at his court, the *Vita Ælfredi* asserts, these learned men had to read aloud to Alfred because “he had not yet begun to read anything” (ch. 77). Recall also that Asser wrote that he himself added new material to Alfred’s enchiridion, his one-time “little book,” after reading passages aloud to him, so that the handbook grew to the size of a psalter (ch. 89). This is the same material which Alfred ultimately desired to read immediately “and translate it into English” (ch. 88). The text clearly suggests that these materials

\(^{100}\) While vernacular devotional materials are not impossible, they are unlikely. At least, we have no evidence of such materials. There are no surviving English prayer books from that period, and the earliest private devotional texts we have are in Latin. Thomas H. Bestul, “Continental Sources of Anglo-Saxon Devotional Writing,” in *Sources of Anglo-Saxon Culture*, ed. Paul Szarmach (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1986), 103-26.

\(^{101}\) Keynes and Lapidge, 91.
are in Latin, and Alfred’s book becomes the locus for learning Latin and the beginning of his translation project.

Making sense of Alfred’s struggles with illiteracy is complicated by modern understanding of literacy. Although literacy in the modern sense signifies the facility in reading and writing, Rosamond McKitterick suggests that in early medieval constructions of literacy, “it is impossibly narrow to define literacy strictly in terms of the ability to read and write.” Subsequently, considered broadly, literacy in early medieval Europe was understood as knowledge of Latin. As I addressed in Chapter 2, Latin was well-established as the privileged tongue of the intellectual life in Anglo-Saxon England, particularly for religious and theological discourse. Writing almost two centuries before Asser, Bede understood the need for vernacular religious writing while privileging Latin as the language of the learned. In a letter to the bishop Ecgbert (in 734), Bede advised on the necessity of laity who do not know Latin to learn the fundamentals of the faith in their own language, contrasting “those who have learned to read

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103. Franz H. Bäuml, “Varieties and Consequences of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy,” Speculum 55, no. 2 (April 1980): 237-265. This distinction was not necessarily ironclad, however; in his study of literacy in eleventh and twelfth century Europe, Brian Stock observes that the meaning of “literacy” was shifting: “‘Litteratus,’ the word most closely corresponding to ‘literate,’ indicated a familiarity, if not always a deep understanding, of Latin grammar and syntax. There was also vernacular literacy, or rather literacies, although their early record is fragmentary when compared to Latin. The literate, in short, was defined as someone who could read and write a language for which in theory at least there was a set of articulated rules, applicable to a written, and, by implication, to a spoken language.” Brian Stock, The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Century (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 6.
Latin” with the “unlearned (idiotas\textsuperscript{105}), that is to say those who only know their own language” (Et quidem omnes, qui Latinam linguam lectionis usu didicerunt, etiam haec optime didicisse certissimum est; sed idiotas, hoc est, eos qui propriae tantum linguae notitiam habent).\textsuperscript{106} Asser’s usage of the word is not consistent, unfortunately. In his first report of Alfred’s illiteracy (ch. 23), Asser describes Alfred as “illiteratus” but the context of Alfred’s childhood reading challenge references vernacular poetry. Later (in ch. 78), after Alfred is described as instructing others in literacy, Asser says that Alfred needed the help of court tutors, because he was unable to understand (intelligere) anything on his own, and he had not yet learned to read (legere). Clearly, attempts to read the \textit{Vita Ælfredi} as a straightforward narrative are complicated by issues of chronology and the very question of whether Alfred could read, and in which languages. In short, as Malcolm Godden summarizes the issue, “Asser’s account of Alfred’s progress toward literacy and Latinity is bewilderingly contradictory.”\textsuperscript{107}

My goal is not to untangle that Gordian knot as much as to try to make sense of Asser’s basic narrative, which describes multiple literacies within the text. Nonetheless, we can assay a basic arc for Alfred’s educational growth: One of the young Alfred’s earliest exposures to literacy and language learning involved a reading challenge established by his mother. Having demonstrated skill in memorization, he learned the contents of a particular book by having a

\textsuperscript{105}Idiotae and illiterati were “synonyms denoting those unable to read or write.” Bäuml, 242.


\textsuperscript{107}Malcolm Godden, “Stories from the Court of King Alfred,” 126.
tutor recite the text aloud to him, a practice he likely applied to religious texts later in life. By the year 860 (his twelfth year), he had learned the rudiments of reading the vernacular, so that the adult Alfred could enjoy reciting English poetry from books and instructing others in literacy. However, as a person of deep devotion and intellectual curiosity in a land where learning was conjoined with Latin, the formal language of religious discourse, Alfred’s ability to learn from religious texts and deepen his study of divine wisdom was stymied by his inability to read Latin. Under the tutelage of those scholars he recruited, and particularly through the work of Asser, Alfred was exposed to religious and theological texts, and desired that he should be able to read them himself. The inconsistencies and ambiguities in Asser’s text certainly make it difficult to follow, but we can still salvage from the narrative the picture of an Anglo-Saxon prince who sought to deepen his education, particularly his learning of sacred texts, and was finally driven to learn Latin in order to facilitate his learning and his formation in wisdom. The more perplexing question involves how and when Alfred learned to read Latin, which we turn to next.

4.4.2 Martinmas: Alfred’s Transformation

As stated previously, the key episode in understanding Alfred’s transition from unlearned student to mediator of texts is depicted in chapters 87 to 90 of the *Vita Ælfredi*, which describe Alfred’s transformation from hungry learner to dedicated reader and interpreter. Depending upon how the story is approached, the transformation may involve a miraculous occasion in which Alfred suddenly learns to translate Latin. Asser introduces the event in chapter 87:

108. For a similar outline, see Keynes and Lapidge, 239n46.
Eodem quoque anno saepe memoratus Ælfred, Angulsaxonum rex, divino instictu legere et interpretari simul uno eodemque die primitus inchoavit.  

(It was also in this year [887] that Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, first began through divine inspiration to read [Latin] and to translate at the same time, all on one and the same day.)

As we shall examine, this one statement has opened the floodgates of scholarly inquiry: Is Asser actually attempting to describe an early medieval account of xenoglossia, the miraculous ability to understand a different language? This would be a fairly straightforward reading of the text; as Smyth observes, individuals “who have studied Latin from infancy appreciate that for an illiterate adult to suddenly graduate to reading and translating the Scriptures in one day is nothing short of a miracle indeed.” For some readers, this episode is nothing more than fable, and another nail in the coffin of a pseudo-Asser’s historical veracity or authorial integrity. For

109. Asser, VA ch. 87.

110. “Latin” is not in the original manuscript and is supplied in the translation by Keynes and Lapidge, 99. It is a reasonable amendment, however. Godden notes that Asser “does not specify the language of what Alfred began to read, but the verb interpretari has been used four times earlier in Asser’s Life, all in the sense of rendering English place-names in Latin or Latin text in English, so presumably is being used in a similar sense here.” Godden, “Stories from the Court,” 129.


112. As of this date I have been unable to identify any writers using terminology of xenoglossia in discussion of this story, however, this is a standard term for the miraculous acquisition of a language as used in theological scholarship. Terminology regarding this phenomenon can be complicated, but to clarify my usage, I follow the practice of Christine F. Cooper-Rompato. She writes, “Although the term glossolalia has been used in a number of studies to indicate any kind of speaking in tongues, it usually has a more specific usage meaning speaking in tongues incomprehensible to humans… I use the term xenoglossia (variantly xenoglossy, xenoglossa, xenolalia, zenolalia, and xenoglossolalia) to refer to both speaking and being understood in a human language previously unknown to the recipient, as well as reading and writing in that language.” Christine F. Cooper Rompato, *The Gift of Tongues: Women’s Xenoglossia in the Later Middle Ages* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 1n1.

113. Smyth, 220.

114. Smyth, 220. Recall that Smyth is the latest to challenge Asser’s authenticity, but his work does not stand alone in Alfredian scholarship. For an earlier similar critique, see Arthur Francis Leach, *Educational Charters and Documents: 598 to 1909* (Cambridge, UK: The University Press, 1911), xv-xvi.
Smyth, the episode is yet another manifestation of the folklore topos of miraculous language acquisition, not dissimilar to the episode in which Alfred masters the contents of a poetry book. Modern readers of the *Vita Ælfredi* have demonstrated some discomfort in treating this event as a miracle story, and are often content to characterize it simply as another example of Asser’s hyperbole, thus minimizing implications for supernatural agency; for example, David Horspool writes that the “miracle is actually just Asser’s characteristically over-enthusiastic exaggeration.”\(^{115}\) Similarly, scholarly writing has sought to find the history beneath the hagiography, and understand what “really” happened, constructing a more sensible path towards Latin literacy. According to Richard Abels, “This is not to say that [Alfred] was ‘illiterate’ before this. Alfred may well have been able to read the vernacular, and was perhaps sufficiently versed in Latin to be able to grasp the basic meaning of what was read to him.”\(^{116}\) Likewise, some scholars merely glide past reading the complexity of the event and merely state that “Alfred came to know Latin late in life.”\(^{117}\)

However, there is also good reason for reading this text ambiguously. Irrespective of whether more historically minded scholars prefer to not dwell on miracle accounts of xenoglossia, Asser’s narrative continues in chapters 88 and 89, and the author himself further nuances the occasion. After Asser has added a new quire to Alfred’s book (as discussed above), the text describes Alfred as “eager (studuit) to read it at once and to translate (interpretari) into

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117. Greenfield and Calder, 41.
English, and thereupon to instruct many others (perplures instituere).”  
Then, on that day—which Asser identifies as Martinmas (venerabili Martini solemnitate), or November 11—Alfred determines to study sacred scripture and passages from different “masters” (magistris). Where previously (ch. 87) Asser introduces what can arguably be conceived as Latin xenoglossia, we now simply have a king zealous to read, learn, and translate. Certainly, Keynes and Lapidge find the extended description offers a more fruitful text in understanding what happened that day:

[Although the Vita Ælfredi] appears to refer to a miraculous occasion when the king suddenly learned how to read Latin and to translate it into English, … to judge from Asser’s further elaboration of the point (chapters 88-89) the reference is rather to an occasion when he resolved to perfect these skills for himself as a means of instructing others. If so, it may have been at about this time that Alfred decided to involve himself personally in a general scheme to produce translations of selected Latin works, for the instruction of all.”

Godden adds further clarification on this option, helping to demythologize the event to a certain degree, specifically in terms of how readers have understood Asser’s use of interpretari in both chapters (87 and 89). A reading of the event as miraculous relies in large part on Asser’s attribution of divine agency (which I shall turn to next), but also to readers’ understanding of interpretari (“interpret” in Keynes and Lapidge) as literary translation. Godden, however, suggests that it has a less robust meaning in Asser’s text:

The point is presumably that [Alfred] had either never read Latin before or that he had read Latin text aloud without understanding it (a conceivable practice with liturgical texts, such as those copied into the booklet which is described in chapter 24 and is about to be mentioned again). But if we render interpretari as “translate” we should not assume

119. Ibid.
120. Keynes and Lapidge, 28.
that this means “compose and write out translations for others”; it may simply mean “work out the sense of the passage.”

The tendency is thus to accept interpretari at its full force, which leads modern readers either to decry pious fiction or even fraud. However, the Latin interpretari (as with its English derivative) has a wider range of meaning than solely to translate from one language to another. Godden brings further scrutiny to the traditional translation of the text, focusing on the translation of “perplures instituere” which Keynes and Lapidge render as “instruct many others.” In Godden’s translation, this phrase makes more sense as “insert many more passages.” (Asser does, in fact, then add more quires, as noted earlier.) Godden writes, “The literal sense of the sentence would then be: ‘For when that first attestation had been written down, he immediately endeavoured to read [it] and interpret [it] in the Saxon language and then to set down many more [passages].’” If Godden’s approach to the text is correct, we have less of an issue of medieval hyperbole than we do modern misreading about a king eager to read a text and continue learning more. Rather than trying to tone down or rationalize what could be perceived as miraculous.

121. Godden, “Stories from the Court,” 129.
122. Keynes and Lapidge, 100.
123. It is helpful here to repeat Godden’s entire argument. He writes, “the phrase could indeed in principle mean ‘to instruct many more (people)’ but that is not the only possible sense or, I would argue, the likeliest. The verb instituere is used in the sense of ‘train’ once earlier in the Life, but it has many other senses, including ‘begin, prepare, insert, appoint, procure, arrange’. The form of ‘perplures’ (‘many more’), is masculine or feminine plural and could be construed as ‘many more people,’ with ‘men’ implied, but there is nothing in what precedes or follows the passage to suggest a reference to other people. The passage as a whole is about Alfred’s education, not his educating others, and there is no logic in the jump to an enthusiasm for teaching other people. If instead one looks back for a preceding plural noun as antecedent for ‘perplures’, the form clearly does not agree with the neuter of ‘testimonia’ in the same sentence but does agree with ‘flosculos’ (‘little flowers’) in the previous sentence, referring to the passages of Scripture that were copied into the new booklet (‘multimodos divinae scripturae flosculos’). The phrase can therefore mean ‘to insert many more passages’. ’” Godden, “Stories from the Court,” 130.
hyperbole on Asser’s part, Godden seeks to construct a legitimate interpretation of the text, one which does not result in an account of xenoglossia.

Certainly, we should be mindful that the extant text may be nothing more than an incomplete draft, there is little evidence elsewhere in the Vita Ælfredi to support a miraculous interpretation of the event at hand.\(^\text{125}\) If Asser indeed wrote a miracle account, he ignored it elsewhere. Robert Stanton astutely observes that had Alfred miraculously developed “perfect knowledge of Latin in one day… Asser would surely have made more of it.”\(^\text{126}\) It is risky business to conjecture why an author did not say more about an event, but certainly a miracle would receive more attention in Asser’s narrative. However, the event is neither heralded earlier in the text, nor recalled later. Similarly, if Asser was suggesting that Alfred’s acquisition of Latin was truly miraculous, it was not a notion that survived outside the Vita Ælfredi; William of Malmesbury’s history includes Alfred’s childhood reading challenge (GRA 2.123.3) but there is no reference to the adult Alfred miraculously learning to read Latin. William’s history was not one to shy away from the miraculous: worked into his retelling of Alfred’s life and reign we also find the body of St. Martin of Tours miraculously curing leprosy and other ailments (GRA 2.121.8) and an Alfredian legend I have otherwise ignored in this study, the apocryphal tale of Saint Cuthbert’s visitation to Alfred (GRA 2.121.3-4).\(^\text{127}\) Concerns that Asser is either describing what he believes to be a miracle, or merely falling into pious hyperbole, may well say more

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125. Keynes and Lapidge, 56.
about what has been read into the text by modern scholarship rather than what the text itself proclaims. Godden’s translation of the text comports with how the event is treated (or rather, not treated) elsewhere in the Vita Ælfredi: on Martinmas, Alfred began to make connections between the Latin he had no doubt already been exposed to, the religious texts he was encountering, and the meaning within those text, and was committing himself to further study of these texts in his relentless pursuit of divine wisdom.

A less miraculous reading of the passage would not diminish its significance within the Vita Ælfredi or erode its value as a source text in studying Alfredian spirituality. We are examining the text not to search for mystical epiphenomena but to understand Asser’s construction of Alfred’s motivating forces and his religious orientation, and this episode helps paint the portrait of a Christian layperson deeply committed to the study of sacred texts. According to Asser, the events at Martinmas were divinely inspired. While a miracle story is a helpful literary marker for authenticating (so to speak) a saint’s life, by itself it is mere phenomenon, and has little critical value in the study of spirituality. Godden’s recasting of this event as Alfred’s conversion to learning has more import as far as understanding Alfred’s orientation and commitment to a project of self-transcendence, or the dedicated study of sacred texts. And, as we have seen, it is not a singular moment in Alfred’s life; his conversion and reorientation to religious study runs throughout his life. Alfred is more than just a Christian

128. There is a medieval tradition of understanding any act of Scriptural interpretation as a spiritual gift and the work of the Holy Spirit. While this may be implicit within Asser’s words, I do not want to overstate this case, as it is not explicit in the Vita. Further, see Francis X. Gumerlock, “The Interpretation of Tongues in the Middle Ages,” Antiphon 10, no. 2 (2006): 160-68.

129. Recall that earlier in the Vita, Asser declares that from Alfred’s birth, “in spite of all the demands of the present life, it has been the desire for wisdom, more than anything else, together with the nobility of his birth, which have characterized the nature of his noble mind.” (Cui ab incunabulis ante
king imbued with great intelligence, as the standard panegyrlic fare might allow; his story concerns a man called to deeper learning and reflection throughout his life, whether it be the study of vernacular poetry, Sacred Scripture, or the work of theological masters.¹³⁰

Further, this episode builds upon a recurring theme within the *Vita Ælfredi*, wherein Asser describes Alfred’s orientation toward sacred learning as the response of divine initiative. Martinmas is the third occasion in which we see Alfred’s formation as a student and a reader given divine agency, and the role of divine inspiration (instinctu, ‘impulse’ or ‘prompting’) has received scarce attention in scholarly writing. The first time, we encountered it in his childhood reading contest (ch. 23), when Alfred is motivated by his mother’s challenge, “or rather by divine inspiration” (immo divina inspiratione), as well as by the aesthetics of the book itself, Alfred mastered the contents of a book of English poetry.¹³¹ Then, recall how Asser relates that Alfred yearns for divine wisdom in an almost Solomonic fashion, and God “stimulated King Alfred’s intelligence from within” (instigavit mentem eius interius).¹³² While the language varies, the concept is the same: Alfred’s pursuit of wisdom was a response to divine agency. This is a theme which has received scarce attention in scholarship.¹³³ However, it is an important aspect of Asser’s text, as the *Vita Ælfredi* continuously reminds the reader that throughout Alfred’s life he was reoriented toward the pursuit of wisdom through the inspiration of heaven. Godden

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¹³⁰ The vernacular poetry may have been religious in nature, such as the biblical paraphrases I discussed in Chapter 2. However, we have no way of knowing this.

¹³¹ Asser, VA ch. 29. Trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 75.

¹³² Asser, VA ch. 76. Trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 92.

¹³³ Smyth notices that Alfred’s two reading stories (the incident at Martinmas, and the childhood reading challenge) involve divine inspiration. Smyth, *King Alfred the Great*, 220.
described the Martinmas episode as Alfred’s “conversion to learning.”

Although his life was characterized by a desire to learn and know more, on Martinmas something happened that opened his understanding of the texts that he struggled over. His Martinmas conversion did more than simply render him a more advanced student: it marked his transition to a mediator of sacred learning.

There is a final element of the Martinmas incident which invites further consideration. To date, little has been said about the significance of the fact that St. Martin’s Day is named within the *Vita Ælfredi*. It is possible that the date itself has no importance, and is simply being used to record an event of momentous import to Asser. This explanation has the virtue of simplicity, but it neglects two important facts. First, Asser pays little attention to dates elsewhere in the *Vita Ælfredi*. As indicated previously, reading Asser in hopes of a clean timeline is notoriously difficult. While Asser provides some years, he is not consistent. We do not even know from Asser’s text the day of Alfred’s birth. However, it was important enough to Asser to indicate the very day upon which Alfred was able to grasp the meaning of Latin texts and commit himself to further study. Second, this date is identified by the saint whose feast day is celebrated, and we cannot dismiss the importance of saints in Anglo-Saxon England: Michael Lapidge estimates that in Anglo-Saxon England, the cult of saints contained over 300 sainted figures whose lives were tracked and ordered throughout the liturgical year by way of roughly 25 calendars of saints.

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135. Smyth notes similarly: “The provision of an exact date for an event is quite out of keeping with other anecdotal and hagiographical vignettes in the Life of Alfred, which are conspicuously vague on exact chronology.” Smyth, *King Alfred the Great*, 227. Further, Smyth notes that the only other named occasion involves Alfred’s grant of two monasteries to Asser on Christmas Eve (*VA*, chapter 87). See Smyth, 641-642n65.
dating from the eighth to the eleventh centuries.\textsuperscript{136} The liturgical year, with its “cumbersome apparatus” of “calendars, martyrlogies and saints’ lives,” is vital to understanding Anglo-Saxon Christian spirituality.\textsuperscript{137} The fact that St. Martin’s feast day is mentioned must have special significance in this context.

St. Martin of Tours (d. 397) was a prominent figure in the history of medieval sanctity.\textsuperscript{138} Known as the Apostle of Gaul, he was considered the founder of monasticism in Gaul and Western Europe, and became a popular saint in Anglo-Saxon England. Born to a pagan family, the young Martin sought to become a Christian catechumen and longed for the eremitical life, but was forced into military service by his father, a veteran. Martin was later released from service and he turned toward a life of prayer and contemplation, becoming an ascetic, a miracle worker, a spiritual leader, and ultimately the bishop of Tours.\textsuperscript{139} Although he played no role in the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons, Martin was nonetheless prominent in the English church, and

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\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 261.
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\textsuperscript{139} Martin was a confessor, not a martyr, and as such proved the model for an emerging type of hagiography. As Clare Stancliffe remarks, Martin was “one of the first Christians to be honoured as a saint because of his way of life rather than the manner of his dying.” Clare Stancliffe, \textit{St. Martin and his Hagiographer: History and Miracle in Sulpicius Severus} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 1.
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Martinmas was a “major landmark in the Old English calendar.” A church to St. Martin predated the Gregorian mission of 497: Bede tells us that Augustine and his companions used “a church built in ancient times in honour of St. Martin, while the Romans were still in Britain” (ecclesia in honorem sancti Martini antiquitus facta, dum adhuc Romani Brittaniam incolerent). Martin remained prominent in the Anglo-Saxon religious mind through and beyond the conversion into later Anglo-Saxon England; Alcuin and Aldhelm both penned works on him, and Marcia Dalbey observes that Martin “is one of the few saints whose life appears in five major manuscripts of Old English religious prose,” including two works by Ælfric. As an exemplar of the spiritual life, Martin’s deeds are comprehensive and multivalent: wonder-worker, contemplative, spiritual director, ecclesiastical leader, and former soldier, he served the faithful as a leader against pagans and demons as well as a pastoral leader, and his life story as a soldier turned monk embodied the tension between the secular and the sacred.

Admittedly, any symbolic relationship between St. Martin and King Alfred remains conjecture. Thus far two explanations have been offered for a possible rationale for linking Alfred to Martinmas, but they seem only tangentially connected to Alfred’s story. Smyth,

140. Smyth, 227.
141. Bede, HE 1.26; trans. Colgrave and Mynors, 77. Æthelberht’s wife, a Frank, used to pray at that church and was likely connected to the cult of Martin. See Nicholas Brooks, Anglo-Saxon Myths: State and Church, 400-1066 (London: The Hambledon Press, 2000), 93-94.
stressing correspondences between the *Vita Ælfredi* and the anonymous ninth-century *Vita Alcuini* (*Life of Alcuin*), suggests this relationship as the reason for mentioning Martin’s feast day:

The life of Alcuin, in following the saint’s Frankish career, concentrates not on the itinerant Carolingian court, but on the monastery of St Martin at Tours. Was it this strong association with St Martin in the anonymous *Life of Alcuin* that prompted the compiler of the *Life of Alfred* to provide Martinmas as an exact date for the occasion when Alfred miraculously learnt to read and to translate his Scriptures from Latin into English?\textsuperscript{143}

Smyth follows with other historic events which have been associated with St. Martin’s feast day, but makes no further connection between Martinmas and Alfred’s story. The date simply appears important because important things have happened. Abels repeats the work of Smyth, and further suggests that “it is fitting that Alfred should have resolved to undertake this resolution on Martinmas, the traditional day for the collection of the church-scot [that is, a tribute to clergy] and other ecclesiastical dues.”\textsuperscript{144} Both explanations appear to be offered as practical attempts to establish a connection between a significant episode in Alfred’s life and the feast of Saint Martin. However, I suggest that the connection between Alfred and Martin, or specifically the occasion of Alfred’s dedication to learning and the feast of Saint Martin, can be found in St. Martin’s story as the soldier turned contemplative, the Christian whose life inhabited both the sacred and the secular. Certainly this would have been a fitting saintly exemplar for Alfred, the king whose rule was recognized by Rome in a (likely apocryphal) consecration, whose life was turned toward royal responsibility by virtue of circumstance, and whose pursuit of divine wisdom led him to eventually becoming its mediator. Both soldiers had different callings: Martin abandoned the

\textsuperscript{143} Smyth, 227.

\textsuperscript{144} Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 225.
world for the sake of a religious vocation, while Alfred’s vocation remained in the secular world. No doubt, Alfred the warrior and wisdom-seeker would have found in Martin a model of the Christian soldier-contemplative. Asser portrays a king who had heard wisdom’s call throughout his life, but Martinmas represents a significant turning point in his story, the moment in which he transforms from wisdom seeker to wisdom mediator. On St. Martin’s feast day in 897, the *Vita Ælfredi* tells us, Alfred could make sense of sacred texts which he had previously had to have communicated to him; on this day, he was able to commit himself to the meaning within the words. St. Martin, the contemplative soldier who became an ecclesiastical leader, would serve as an exemplar for Alfred’s own vocational transformation. He did not abandon the throne in pursuit of a life of holiness, but his leadership expanded to include interpretation and mediation of religious texts into the vernacular.

Patrick Wormald writes, “I submit that the event of St Martin's Day 887, when Alfred *legere et interpretari ... inchoavit* was perceptibly the thematic fulcrum of the *Life*.”¹⁴⁵ The *Vita Ælfredi* portrays Alfred’s religious devotion and his desire for sacred wisdom amidst a host of other worldly matters (including governance, politics, law, and other matters beyond the scope of this study). It was a search for wisdom and learning that took him through the rituals of piety that were open to all laity, including prayer and participation in the liturgy; however, the wisdom which Alfred sought was located in learned texts and uncovered through reading. Following Godden’s identification of Martinmas event as Alfred’s “conversion to learning,” I would add that Alfred’s life story represents a lifelong conversion to learning punctuated by milestones in his journey as a learner and ultimately a wisdom figure, including his childhood reading

challenge, his collection of prayers, psalms, and other texts, his recruiting of scholars from abroad, and finally, his eager commitment to the study of Latin texts whose meaning he was starting to understand. The pursuit of this wisdom, which had called to him since childhood, shaped Alfred first as a consumer of texts and then as a mediator and creator of them. Although this episode is often relegated to pious fiction, the text does not emphasize the miraculous acquisition of Latin, but Alfred’s continued response to a divine initiative that led him to deeper study. Alfred would no longer require the work of intermediaries in studying Sacred Scripture and divine wisdom. Now he would be able to share his pursuit of that wisdom with those who were his flock—not a parish, congregation, or monastic community, but the Anglo-Saxons who were united under his rule. Although the Vita Ælfredi never discusses Alfred’s translation program or the texts within it, Martinmas is traditionally seen as the genesis of Alfred’s translation program, and from his experience at Martinmas came a religious and cultural revival centered around the translation and dissemination of religious texts so that others could pursue the same wisdom which had called to Alfred.¹⁴⁶ Thus we turn to the program itself, specifically the text which launched it: Alfred’s translation of Gregory the Great’s Cura pastoralis.

¹⁴⁶ Keynes and Lapidge, 28.
CHAPTER FIVE

THAT THERE WOULD BE GREATER WISDOM IN THE LAND

5.1 Introduction

The central text of Alfredian wisdom literature is Alfred’s Old English translation of the Gregory the Great’s *Cura pastoralis (Pastoral Care)*, also known as the *Liber regulae pastoralis (Book of Pastoral Rule)*, or *Regula*.¹ The text includes Alfred’s translation of the *Cura pastoralis*, along with framing material composed by Alfred, which consists of two prologues (one prose, one in verse) and a verse epilogue.² Modern scholarship has been at times uncharitable toward Alfred’s translation, and read his framing material solely in terms of educational reform and its implications for vernacular literacy. (For further discussion, see below.) I intend to take a different approach and will read the *Cura pastoralis*—particularly Alfred’s prose preface within it—as a project in vernacular theology. I will demonstrate that the text is an extended meditation on wisdom, which reveals Alfred’s orientation toward a sapiential spirituality, and communicates his commitment to a wisdom-oriented spiritual formation of his people. In short, Alfred’s prose prologue can legitimately read as a theological reflection on wisdom rather than merely a secular manifesto on vernacular literacy, and demonstrates Alfred’s


kingly interest in spiritual reformation rather than simply educational reform. Prior to our reading of the *Cura pastoralis*, however, some introductory information about Gregory’s original text, Alfred’s work with it, and his supplementary material may be useful for framing this discussion.

5.1.1 Gregory the Great and the *Regula*

This discussion of the *Cura pastoralis* must begin by briefly revisiting the role of Gregory the Great in English Christianity, which I previously considered in Chapter One of this project. Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* attends to Gregory’s oversight in the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons, as well as eulogizing and commemorating Gregory’s life and legacy. According to tradition, it was through Gregory’s initiative that Augustine was sent to Kent. Even from afar, however, Gregory was deeply involved in the English mission, offering counsel and conversion strategies. Although Bede’s short biography of Gregory comprehensively lauds his many deeds, the focus of Bede’s lens is unquestionably on Gregory as a figurehead in England’s salvation history. The *Historia* (2.1) relates that through Gregory the Anglo-Saxons were transformed from pagans to Christians, names Gregory the apostle to the English, and asserts that while other papal rules could be characterized by lavish construction programs, Gregory’s pontificate was dominated by the need to save souls. Although this rings of both simplification and hyperbole, it is also a fair interpretation of Gregory’s pastoral interest in the barbarian North. His attention and activities were not limited to the Anglo-Saxons. His

pastoral oversight also extended to the Lombards, Franks, and Visigoths, among whom he sought to expand and strengthen the Christian faith.⁴

Among Gregory’s many accomplishments, he was a prolific writer. His literary achievements were renowned in his day and throughout the Middle Ages, and continue to resonate today. Constant Mews and Claire Renkin observe:

Gregory the Great, the first monk to become pope, was such an admired figure in the Latin West that it is not easy to delineate the extent of his influence. Revered as the last of the great Latin fathers of the Church, there was scarcely a library, whether monastic or non-monastic, that did not have a reasonable collection of his writings. His popularity undoubtedly had much to do with the accessibility of his writing. He was not a philologist like Jerome or an argumentative theologian like Augustine, and never composed polemical treatises against any specific individual. Some might find inspiration in the serious tone of his *Moralia* on Job, a virtuous gentile unfamiliar with the *Law of Moses*, a work in which he reflects on the trials of life. Others might prefer the more conversational character of his four books of *Dialogues* with Peter the Deacon about the miraculous lives and visions of charismatic monks in Italy, Book 2 of which is totally devoted to St. Benedict, or his *Homilies on the Gospels* in which he explored exemplary figures in the gospels. Popes and ecclesiastical administrators might focus on his correspondence on his *Pastoral Care* [i.e., the *Cura pastoralis*] as providing guidance on how a bishop should attend to the needs of his flock.⁵

Medieval vernacular translations and paraphrases of Gregory’s works can be found in the *Cura pastoralis* and the *Dialogi* in Old English, and miscellaneous texts in Old German, Old French, Old Norse, and Middle Dutch.⁶ Bede himself commented on the breadth and depth of Gregory’s writings in the *Historia* (2.1), discussing Gregory’s *Cura pastoralis, Moralia*, and *Dialogues*, as well as his correspondence and his biblical commentaries.

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⁶ Ibid., 316.
Gregory’s *Cura pastoralis* was written around 590, early in Gregory’s pontificate, and reflects his experience as a monastic leader tasked with the spiritual oversight of others. It is far more than a handbook for ecclesiastical administration. The text is in four sections, summarized by Bede in the *Historia*:

Alium quoque librum componuit egregium, qui uocatur *Pastoralis*, in quo manifesta luce patefecit, quales ad ecclesiae regimen adsumi, qualiter ipse rectores uivre, qua discretione singulas quasque audientium instruere personas, et quanta consideratione propriam cotidie debeant fragilitatem pensare.  

(He [Gregory] composed another book called the *Pastoral Care*, in which he set forth in the clearest manner what sort of persons should be chosen to rule the church and how these rulers ought to live; with how much discrimination they should instruct different types of listeners and how earnestly they ought each day to reflect on their own frailty.)

The text is framed by a brief introduction addressed to John, archbishop of Ravenna, and a brief conclusion, presumably to the same individual. The *Cura pastoralis* was popular and influential in Christian antiquity and the early Middle Ages, as over 500 manuscripts attest to its reception. The text was widely disseminated, and Alfred’s verse preface to the *Cura pastoralis* states that the text accompanied Augustine’s mission to the Anglo-Saxons. There are excerpts from the *Cura pastoralis* in Anglo-Latin works of the seventh and eighth centuries, and Bede not only discusses the text in his *Historia*, he commends its reading for spiritual formation to Ecgbert, Bishop of York. Further, the *Cura pastoralis*’s reception history also demonstrates both its

8. Trans. Colgrave and Mynors, 127.  
versatility and its prominence during the Carolingian educational reform, which looms persistently over Alfred’s reform efforts. A favored text of Alcuin (735-804), it was through his efforts that the *Cura pastoralis* was firmly established as a foundational text during the Carolingian reform, serving a guidebook for both religious and secular leaders. Similar, the text became an important model and source for the writing of *specula*, or “mirrors” for princes.

Alfred’s translation of the text (ca. 890) was the first translation of the *Cura pastoralis* into a vernacular and is commonly considered the first work in the Alfredian translation program. Of the texts treated as part of Alfred’s translation program, the *Cura pastoralis* displays the least immediately obvious innovation in its handling of source material: the translation hews more closely to the source text, its variance more subtle. In some cases, alterations either simplify or expand the original text; Carolin Schreiber writes that this translation strategy was “pragmatic” in function, serving “not only to turn the meaning of the Latin text faithfully into idiomatic vernacular prose, but to make his translation as explicit and as


14. Any statements about the sequence of translation is still considered conjecture; even if there is some scholarly consensus on the matter, hard evidence is lacking. See Janet Bately, “Alfred as Author and Translator,” in *A Companion to Alfred the Great*, ed. Nicole Guenther Discenza and Paul Szarmach (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 141.

15. Alfred’s translation dispenses with the four-part divisions, but maintains the internal chapters of the text. However, where each new *Pars* (Part) of the Latin text starts to renumber the chapters, Alfred simply maintains one consecutive sequence of chapters, from 1 to 65. Alfred follows the chapter division with great fidelity except for one chapter of the Latin text which becomes three chapters in the translation (23-25).
useful to his audience as possible.”\(^{16}\) In other cases, however, amendments and revisions to the text help nudge the translation into a position that authenticates the teacher as a form of spiritual leader.\(^{17}\) (For further discussion, see below.) Multiple theories have been put forth explaining why the Old English translation is so close to the Latin source. As an early text in the program, there may have been more reluctance in departing from the source; by the time of the later texts, such reluctance is abandoned and a translated text serves as the vehicle for theological reflection. Alternately, the *Cura pastoralis* was so symbolically important to the Alfredian project that Gregory’s work may have been inviolate: Gregory was more than simply a Doctor of the Church, but the Apostle to the English, which may have granted him some immunity to tinkering. Either way, the text serves multiple agendas, and we have to search the translation carefully to find a voice that is not clearly Gregory’s—until we reach the framing material, of course, which I will turn to momentarily.

Carolin Schreiber notes that while Alfred’s framing material has received significant scholarly attention, relatively little work has been done with the Latin text or the Old English translation. Unfortunately, earlier scholarly assessment of the *Cura pastoralis* was less kind, its content considered as dull and its translation treated as uninspired. Allen Frantzen points to the observation of Henry Sweet, who, in his 1871 edition of the text, declared it “of exclusively philological interest.”\(^{18}\) William Brown’s more recent critique is equally damning: he concludes that Alfred “chooses the pedestrian task of rendering intact a handbook for priests,” and the

\(^{16}\) Schreiber, “Searoðonca Hord,” 183.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 186-90.

result is “a dreary tract in Latin turned into a dreary tract in English.” This is a charmingly dry but short-sighted assessment, as Gregory’s words have continued to have a lively reception amongst ecclesiastical readers and theological students, and continue to demonstrate relevance to the study of pastoral psychology, theology, and spiritual formation. Further work has been done on identifying and understanding the nuances of Alfred’s translation strategies, which has helped demonstrate Alfred’s novelty as a translator even in this early text. For the most part, such matters will not occupy our attention. More important for our discussion is the content of the Cura pastoralis, that dreary priestly tome, and why it commanded Alfred’s attention. Recent scholarly attention has been largely oriented to the translation’s function as political performance, with the focus of the text being its implications for political theory and the legitimization of Alfred’s kingship. There are distinctly political ramifications to Gregory’s work that cannot be avoided or dismissed, and the secular leader who disseminates religious material


on the oversight and instruction of those in his care engages in a form of governance which crosses boundaries of sacred and secular authority. The implications for the Alfredian translation program are unavoidable. Alfred Smyth argues that the *Cura pastoralis*, “as well as being a handbook for bishops, also acted from Alfred’s point of view, as a kind of holy writ to bolster his authority as king.”22 Likewise, David Pratt’s comprehensive study of Alfredian literature is attuned to “the force and status of Alfred’s texts in relation to contemporary structures of kingship and political authority.”23 Naturally, Pratt highlights the sociopolitical implications of Alfred’s use of Gregorian literature, drawing forth the connection between Gregory’s political thought and comprehensive exercise of authority that was eminently suitable for Alfred.24 This is a rich area of thought, but is beyond the scope of this project. More importantly, it is not my intention to refute the political dimensions of the Alfredian translation and cultural reform, but to bring attention to its intrinsically theological characteristics. Unfortunately, the narrow focus of scholarship on secular authority can overlook the very real theological dimension of the *Cura pastoralis*. I will show how Alfred’s translation, as an example of early English vernacular theology, expresses Alfred’s commitment to a wisdom-oriented spirituality and demonstrates his role as the spiritual director of his people.

24. Ibid., 193-213.
5.1.2 Alfred’s Prologue

Ultimately, it is Alfred’s verse Prologue to the *Cura pastoralis* which is the real locus of this study. Alfred’s Prologue is one of the best-known texts among students and scholars of Old English, and is frequently encountered early in their study of the language. Given the ubiquity with which the Prologue is encountered and learned, it is not surprising that it has been so frequently studied or has invited such a range of scholarly interpretations. It is fair to say that the Prologue is most commonly described in terms of educational reform and understood in light of Alfred’s interest in increasing vernacular literacy. At times, such characterization of the Prologue verges on the anemic, such as Francis Magoun’s often-quoted assignation of the Prologue as a “circular letter on educational policy” or Smyth’s parallel description of it as “essentially a policy document.” My interest is not in dismantling previous scholarship in this

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27. For example, Jennifer Morrish states that the Prologue’s two functions were to “explain the educational policy which Alfred wishes to adopt and also to encourage approval for that plan from the bishops to whom the letter is addressed.” Jennifer Morrish, “King Alfred’s Letter as a Source of Learning in England in the Ninth Century,” in *Studies in Earlier Old English Prose: Sixteen Original Contributions*, ed. Paul Szarmach (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 87-107.

regard, but broadening the field of vision with which we interpret Alfred’s works. Nor am I suggesting a dearth of close readings of the Prologue which attend to the text’s relationship to biblical and theological writings: the works of Discenza, Shippey, and Szarmach are most prominent among these studies. This is the tradition in which my approach to the Prologue rests. Although previous scholarship has shed light on Alfred’s text vis-a-vis biblical, classical, patristic, and Carolingian influences and intersections, the full religious character of the Prologue has not been adequately considered. In my interpretation of the text, I will examine it as more than merely a literary prologue or a policy directive, but a meditation on wisdom.29

However, the text is a preface, and this raises some issues that must be addressed, particularly regarding the Prologue’s relationship to the *Cura pastoralis* itself. Although prefaces or epilogues may appear ancillary to the main text, such material is both historically and hermeneutically important. Alfred’s use of such framing material is equally part of a larger literary tradition and an innovation inherited from Latin texts.30 While the Alfredian translations are unique among Old English texts for having explicitly marked prologues and epilogues, the

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general phenomenon of literary framing is not unique to English vernacular compositions. For the Alfredian works, this framing material is particularly important. The Alfredian translations exhibit different degrees of fidelity to their original text, and are studied in relation to their original text, with analysis turned toward the degree of departure from the text and what such changes signify. With framing material, we have access to the voice of the author-translator, unrestricted by the boundaries of the source text. The author-translator is not hidden behind the name, fame, or words of the original author of the source text, and has the freedom and authority to claim their own voice. With the *Cura pastoralis* in particular, the Alfredian translation which hews the most closely to its Latin source, we have to search more carefully for the voice or intent of Alfred. With the prologues and epilogue, however, Alfred’s voice is front and center.

Part of a sequence of introductory and concluding texts which accompany and frame the *Cura pastoralis*, the Prologue is considered to have been an early part of the translation project. This framing material includes a total of five texts: three by Alfred, and the two previously mentioned pieces native to the Latin text. The first introductory text is Alfred’s prose Prologue, followed by a shorter verse preface, also by Alfred. After these two pieces, the *Cura pastoralis* has a listing of chapters, then followed by Gregory’s brief prologue. At the end of the text is

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31. Godden observes that the Alfredian framing pieces are unique and without precedent among Old English texts, beyond possibly (depending upon date of construction) the contemporary Old English *Dialogi* and the Old English translation of Bede’s *Historia*. Malcolm Godden, “Prologues and Epilogues in the Old English Pastoral Care, and Their Carolingian Models,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 110, no. 4 (October 2011): 443. However, Susan Irvine considers material comparable to prefaces or conclusions among certain Old English poetical works, although these pieces are more closely integrated into the texts. She includes “the first fifty-two lines of Beowulf, the epilogues to the Cynewulf poems, the narrator’s words at the beginning and end of The Dream of the Rood, and perhaps the five lines bordered by ‘swa cwæð’ at each end of the Wanderer,” arguing that the “vernacular poetic and Latin literate” poetic traditions “are far from distinct.” Irving, “The Alfredian Prefaces and Epilogues,” 144-45.

32. It is present in two ninth-century manuscripts that include the *Cura pastoralis*, MS Tib and MS H. Susan Irvine, “Alfredian Prefaces and Epilogues,” 153.
Gregory’s concluding remarks. Finally, the translation is followed by a brief verse epilogue by Alfred.33 (I shall return to verse prologue and epilogue later in our discussion.) At first read, the Prologue appears as a fairly simple text written as a letter from the king to his bishops. (By virtue of this epistolary form, the Prologue is commonly referred to as a letter, although Malcolm Godden has cautioned, “A preface does not become a letter simply by being addressed to someone.”34) Broadly considered, the Prologue follows a straightforward line of thought: Following the epistolary introduction, Alfred (1) considers England’s distant past, an illustrious time of wisdom and learning; (2) assesses England’s recent past and present problem, a decline of wisdom and virtue accompanied by unnamed misfortunes; (3) analyzes the specific source of the problem, which he sees in terms of language and literacy; (4) proposes a solution for the return to wisdom, the translation of (unnamed) Christian Classics; and (5) states that he has begun to apply the solution (via the translation and dissemination of the *Cura pastoralis*) and his directive that his bishops do likewise.

However, those readers who go beyond their first (or only) encounter with Alfred’s Prologue and engage with his translation of Gregory’s text soon encounter a dilemma: the relationship between the Prologue and the main body of the *Cura pastoralis* is complicated. (We shall consider later how the verse preface functions as sort of bridging mechanism between the Prologue and the *Cura pastoralis.*) Allen Frantzen has raised important hermeneutical considerations for the study of Alfred’s framing material, noting that with the addition of such material, “an author implies the need for a supplement to the text. Any supplement, no matter

33. Sweet treats Alfred’s verse contributions as “curious doggrel” [sic], “little more than dislocated prose,” and roughly comparable to “modern blank verse.” Sweet, 473.

34. Godden, “Prologues and Epilogues,” 449.
how conventional, simultaneously strengthens and weakens the work to which it is attached. It explains the text but also calls attention to the need for an explanation.”35 This raises the question of what, then, Alfred’s Prologue serves to highlight Gregory’s text, or in what way it draws attention to it, and the text’s critics clearly have had different perspectives on the matter. On the one hand, we have Francis Magoun, who states unequivocally that the Prologue (or preface) to Gregory’s *Cura pastoralis* is misnamed because it lacks the features that characterize a preface: “As an introduction to a book, a preface contains an explanation of the subject with some indication of its purpose, scope, and method of treatment.” Rather, Magoun sees it as the preface to the entire translation project.36 On the other hand, we have the concerns of scholars like Malcolm Godden and Susan Irving, who argue against separating out the Prologue from the translation and treating it as an independent text with broader applicability.37 Treating Alfred’s Prologue as an introduction to the entire translation program is appealing, despite the counsels of Godden and Irving, for reasons I shall address later. However, this chapter’s focus is ultimately on the *Cura pastoralis*. Where there is the possibility of intertextual readings between Alfred’s Prologue and other texts of the program, these comments will be predominantly marginal. My reading of the *Cura pastoralis* will in fact draw on other texts (such as Bede or the Bible) to

35. Frantzen, “Form and Function,” 123.

36. Magoun, “Some Thoughts,” 93. (Magoun takes general issue with the common title, “Preface to the Pastoral Care,” pointing out that “Pastoral Care” is not the formal title of the *Regula*.)

37. Malcolm Godden notes that there is no evidence that the prologue was ever distributed apart from the text which it precedes, nor is there justification for treating it as correspondence or royal writs, as twentieth-century scholarship had tended to do. Godden, “Prologues and Epilogues,” 448-449. Similarly, Susan Irvine is concerned with “the appropriateness of reading and interpreting [any of the framing materials] away from the context of the works which they frame,” and their treatment “as independent entities rather than elements of a larger work.” Susan Irvine, “The Alfredian Prefaces and Epilogues,” in *A Companion to Alfred the Great*, ed. Nicole Guenther Discenza and Paul Szarmach (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 146.
illuminé or reframe Alfred’s work in terms of a wisdom-oriented spiritual formation—but I will not assume that any ambiguities regarding the nature of wisdom in the Cura pastoralis are made clear in other Alfredian works, or conversely that the Prologue sheds light on other Alfredian texts. This is a matter for further research.

Returning to the issue of the very relationship of the Prologue to the Cura pastoralis, we need to investigate in what way the introduction and the main text function together. Frantzen observes that the relationship of a preface to the main body of a text can be understood through parallels in musicology: in literary studies, preface and prologue are largely synonymous terms for texts which serve as introductory material to a literary work, and in practice there is little to distinguish between these two terms. In music, however, a prelude is the piece played before another work, while an overture is that which establishes the themes or character of the composition that follows.\(^{38}\) Interpreted in this light, does Alfred’s Prologue serve as a prelude to Gregory’s text, or an overture? Does it merely sit before the Cura pastoralis, only loosely connected, or does it in some way articulate themes or set the stage for the rest of the text?

Certainly, for Magoun, the mis-named Prologue is prefatory at best. Frantzen sees more communication between the texts, but treats Alfred’s prefatory material (both verse and prose) as “complementary notes” to Gregory’s text: neither work “refers to the structure or even the specific pastoral content of the text itself.” (“The overture,” he concludes, “comes in Gregory’s own preface.”)\(^{39}\) This is a provocative analogy, but it suggests a disconnect between the prelude and the main piece. While Alfred’s Prologue does not set up the “major composition” of the

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\(^{38}\) His argument is more drawn out. See Frantzen, “Form and Function,” 124.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 131.
Cura pastoralis, neither are they disconnected. The Prologue functions as a vehicle for Alfred’s meditation on the topic, and an introduction to the reason for his reform project, and both represent expressions of Alfred’s oversight of the spiritual state of his people.

Fundamental to my treatment of the Prologue is my assertion that it is a meditation on wisdom rather than simply a policy or educational document that is freighted with religious language. When I refer to it as a reflection or a meditation, I am writing about the character of the mental processes invoked in the construction of the Prologue, and not attempting to classify it as a specific kind of technical meditatio. The Prologue is a multimodal construction: a text that is prefatory to a translated work, written in the form of a letter, which includes an educational mandate, can simultaneously be treated as an act of religious meaning-making. Reading the Prologue as a source for understanding Alfredian spirituality does not demand reclassifying the Prologue or insisting upon a distinct genre for its form. The Cura pastoralis is far more than simply a manual on how to be a good priest, but as we shall see, an encomium on practical wisdom and an exhortation to the pursuit of wisdom as a Christian virtue. In addition, it functions as the charter for Alfred’s role as the mediator of wisdom, and the inheritor to Gregory the Great’s legacy as the spiritual overseer of the Anglo-Saxons.

40. Similarly, an epistle written from a religious teacher to a community to address specific norms and practices can become a book in religious scripture that is treated as the exposition of sacred doctrine, as we have in the Pauline epistles.
5.2 Reflecting on Wisdom

The Prologue, as written, is assumed to be personalized for each bishop who would receive the *Cura pastoralis*.\(^{41}\) It opens with a formal royal salutation: \(^{42}\) “Ælfred cyning hateð gretan” (King Alfred sends greetings).\(^{43}\) After the formality of the salutation, however, the text becomes more personal, and the voice shifts to first person as Alfred begins to describe his perceptions of England’s sapiential golden age, its decline in teaching and learning, and his proposal to address this situation. Alfred’s Prologue is not a recitation of history, however, but a reflection on it. From the onset, the text is characterized by mental activity: immediately after the formal salutation, Alfred begins, “ðæt me com swiðe oft on gemynd” (It has often come to my mind).\(^{44}\) Although Old English (*ge*)mynd became the modern English *mind*, a fairly comprehensive term for a variety of mental functioning, in earlier usage it tended to signify memory.\(^{45}\) A verbal form of the word, *gemunan*, almost exclusively signifies the act of

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\(^{41}\) MS Tib is believed to be the master copy, as there is no name listed, while a note indicates that bishops Plegmund, Wærferth, and Swithulf have received their copies. MS H was clearly marked to go to Worcester. See Irvine, “Alfredian Prefaces and Epilogues,” 155.

\(^{42}\) Magoun identifies “hateð gretan” as a “conventional” salutation, part of a “stock formula” of greetings which “answer to, and presumably look back to, Lat. *salutem (dicit), salutat*, used in the superscriptions of letters.” Magoun, “Some Notes on King Alfred’s Circular Letter,” 94-95.

\(^{43}\) Alfred, *Cura pastoralis (CP)* 3.1. Unless otherwise specified, translations from the Prologue are my own.

\(^{44}\) Alfred, *CP* 3.2. Trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 124.

\(^{45}\) In modern English translations, *gemynd* is commonly translated as “mind,” but *gemynd* signifies a range of cognitive meanings. Bosworth-Toller gives “Mind, memory, memorial, memento, remembrance, commemoration.” Joseph Bosworth, “ge-mynd,” in *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary: Based on the Manuscript Collections of the Late Joseph Bosworth*, ed. Thomas Northcote Toller. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898), 419. Old English has a rich vocabulary for the realm of mental activity, in addition to (*ge*)mynd: *mōd* (which can also signify a range of related concepts, including mood, pride, or courage); *hyge* (also soul, heart, or spirit), *sawl* (soul), *sefa* (heart), and the derivative compound, *mōðsefa* (mind-heart). Allen Frantzen, “Mind,” in *Anglo-Saxon Keywords* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 182-85. See further discussion on the interplay of mind, reason, the soul, and memory in Old English literature, see Hilary E. Fox, “Mind, Body, Soul, and Self in the Alfredian Translations” (PhD diss.,
remembering or recollecting. Alfred makes repeated use of *gemunan* in his prologue: repeatedly he writes, “Da gemunde” (then I reflected), each time signaling some new insight about England’s history. Memory is more than simply a storehouse in medieval psychology: arguably more important than the creative imagination, memory serves as the locus for the cognitive enterprise. As Mary Carruthers has noted, in the medieval mind, recalling and remembering were fundamental prerequisites to being an author (that is, “one whose writings are full of ‘authorities’”): “The commonest way for a medieval author to depict himself is as a reader of an old book or a listener to an old story, which he is recalling by retelling.” This was more than mere memorization, however: for memorization to be made meaningful, it had to be followed by composition. Alfred’s recurring refrain of *gemunde* is thus a signal to readers that the Prologue is more than a retelling of past deeds; it is a reconstruction of them, an interpretation of their significance, and a repurposing of them to serve the present, and in the


47. Alfred, *CP* 5.8 (twice); 5.18; 5.25; 7.15.


49. Ibid., 191-92.
retelling and reconfiguring of the past, Alfred is establishing himself as an authority. Alfred is not merely reciting history, but reflecting on it, and the Prologue is an exercise in interiority. This is reinforced and expanded toward the end of the Prologue, when Alfred considers the wise men of England and their mastery of other languages:

\[
\text{Da ic } \text{ða } \text{ðis eall gemunde, } \text{ða wundrade ic swiðe swiðe } \text{ðara godena wiotena } \text{ðe giu wæron giond Angelcynn, ond } \text{ða bec eallæ be fullæ geliornod hæfdon, } \text{ðæt hie hiora } \text{ða næne dæl noldon on hiora agen geðiode wendan.}^{50}
\]

(When I reflected on all this, I wondered exceedingly why the good, wise men who were formerly found throughout England and had thoroughly studied all those books, did not wish to translate any part of them into their own language.)^{51}

It is a puzzle to Alfred, and his cogitation shifts into semi-dialogic form in which he becomes his own conversation partner:

\[
\text{Ac ic } \text{ða sona eft me selfum andwyrde ond cwæð: Hie ne wendon } \text{ðætt[e] æfre menn sceolden swæ rec[e]lease weordan } \text{& sio lar swæ oðfeallan...}^{52}
\]

(But I immediately answered myself, and said, “They did not think that men would ever become so careless and that learning would decay like this...”)^{53}

It is a rhetorical method not unlike that which occurs in the Old English *Boethius* or the *Soliloquy*, although this is a brief statement lacks an allegorical interlocutor. Alfred’s Prologue provides only a tentative venture into the dialogue genre, but it foreshadows the two more explicitly philosophical texts that would emerge out of Alfred’s translation program.

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51. Trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 125.
52. Alfred, *CP* 5.21-23.
53. Trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 125.
5.2.1 England’s Golden Age

Alfred’s reflection on England’s past takes him to a golden age in English history, when England prospered and the land was dominated by the love of religious learning:

& hu gesæligica tida da wæron giond Angelcynn; & hu ða kyningas ðe ðone onwald hæfdon ðæs folces [on ðam dagum] Gode & his ðerendwrecum hersumedon; & hie ægðer ge hiora sibbe ge hiora siodo ge hiora onweald innanbordes gehioldon, & eac ut hiora eðel gerymdon; & hu him ða speow ægðer ge mid wige ge mid wisdome; & eac ða godcundan hadas hu giorne hie wæron ægðer ge ymb lare ge ymb liornunga, ge ymb ealle ða ðiowotdomas ðe hie Gode [don] scoldon; & hu man utanbordes wisdom & lare hieder on lond sohte…

(... and how there were happy times then throughout England; and how the kings, who had authority over this people, obeyed God and his messengers; and how they not only maintained their peace, morality and authority at home but also extended their territory outside; and how they succeeded both in warfare and in wisdom; and also how eager were the religious orders both in teaching and in learning as well as in all the holy services which it was their duty to perform for God; and how people from abroad sought wisdom and instruction in this country…)

It is not immediately clear when this golden age was situated. Alfred neither gives evidence of when this era occurred, nor suggests another literary source for his interpretation of English history. Still, some guess can be ventured. Magoun identifies it as the “great days of cultural supremacy,” and suggests the seventh or eighth centuries. More precisely, Alfred’s laudatory description of this era has parallels with Bede’s praise of the prosperous archbishopric of Theodore of Taurus (602-609). Consider Bede’s description of the golden age of Theodore in the *Historia*:

Neque umquam prorsus, ex quo Brittaniam petierunt Angli, feliciora fuere tempora, dum et fortissimos Christianosque habentes reges cunctis barbaris nationibus essent terrori, et

54. Alfred, *CP* 3.4-12.
omnium uota ad nuper audita caelestis regni gaudia penderent, et quicumque lectionibus
sacris cuperent erudiri, haberent in promtu magistros qui docerent.⁵⁷

(Never had there been such happy times as these since the English first came to Britain;
for having such brave Christian kings, they were a terror to all the barbarian nations, and
the desires of all men were set on the joys of the heavenly kingdom of which they had
only lately heard; while all who wished for instruction in sacred studies had teachers
ready to hand.)⁵⁸

Compare further the description as it appears in the Old English Bede:

Ne wæron her æfre, seolðan Ongoleyn Breetone gesohte, gesæligan tide ne fægeran.
Wæron her stronge cyningas ⁷ wel cristne ond eallum ellreordum cynnnum ut in miclum
ege; ond ealra willa hleonade to geheranne þa gefean þæs heofonlecan rices; ond swa
hwelce men swa swa wilnadon þæs heo in halgum leorningum tyde wæron, heo hæfdon
gearwe magistras, þa ðe heo lærdon ⁷ tydon.⁵⁹

(There never were, since the English race came to Britain, times more prosperous
[gesæligan⁶⁰] or brilliant. There were in the land powerful kings, thoroughly Christian,
and a terror to all barbarous tribes without; and the will of all was inclined to listen to the
joys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever men desired to be instructed in sacred
learning, they had masters at hand to teach and instruct them.)⁶¹

For both Alfred and Bede, England had been a place of wisdom, when learning and religiosity
flourished and both king and people prospered. Certain items are common to both Alfred and
Bede’s description of England’s illustrious past, although there are variances between the two
narratives: (1) Both Alfred and Bede describe the past using language of “happy times.” Alfred
uses “gesæligica tida,” while Bede’s “feliciora fuere tempora,” is rendered in the Old English

⁵⁷. Bede, HE 4.2.
⁵⁸. Trans. Colgrave and Mynors, 335.
⁵⁹. Old English Bede, 4.2. Thomas Miller, ed. and trans., The Old English Version of Bede’s
⁶⁰. For gesælig, Bosworth-Toller gives “Happy, prosperous, blessed, fortunate.” Joseph
Bosworth, “ge-sælig,” in An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary: Based on the Manuscript Collections of the Late
⁶¹. Thomas Miller, ed. and trans., The Old English Version of Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the
Bede as “gesæliegran tide.” (2) Both authors refer to the presence of strong kings, who exercised power beyond their home. (3) Both texts describe a zeal for religious practice. Alfred locates this motivation in the religious orders while Bede is not specific. (4) Both authors measure the spiritual strength of the Anglo-Saxon Christians in terms of their desire for sacred learning and access to teachers who could guide them in their learning. Bede names Scripture as the object of study, while Alfred identifies it as “wisdom and instruction” (wisdom & lare). Further, Bede merely references an abundant supply of teachers within England, while Alfred goes so far as to say that people from abroad came to England for such instruction. The parallels between the two texts are evident, and any differences between the descriptions merely serve as nuance. Bede’s Historia is not named, but in all likelihood did serve as the source for Alfred’s reflection on English history.

5.2.2 Paradise Lost

After describing these happy times, however, Alfred turns to his present day, which was in stark contrast with England’s past. He lamented,

Swæ clæne hio was oðfeallenu on Angelcynne ðæt swiðe feawa wæron behionan Humbre ðe hiora ðeninga cuðen understandan on Englisc.  

(Learning had declined so thoroughly in England that there were very few men on this side of the Humber who could understand their divine services in English, or even translate a single letter from Latin into English.)

62. George Molyneaux also suggests that Bede’s use of “happy times” was the inspiration for Alfred’s language. Molyneaux, “Old English Bede,” 1294.


64. Trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 125.
Alfred’s depiction of England’s perilous state has received scrutiny from historians who were skeptical whether Alfred served as a reliable observer of his day. However, this shifts our attention away from the mood of the Prologue as meditation, and conflates Alfred’s rhetoric with objective description. Modern historiography is justifiably concerned with differentiating fact from fabrication, and unraveling the true state of learning and the intellectual life in Alfred’s day; Alfred’s Prologue, on the other hand, is a spiritual “state of the nation,” his attention more attuned to interpreting meaning from the world around him, and is situated uneasily in the liminal space between fact and fabrication. We read the Prologue to understand Alfred more than to understand his world. In Alfred’s mind, furthermore, England’s sapiential decline is deeply connected to divine consequence, which he also reads in the events of his age. Alfred exhorts his reader to “remember what punishments befell us in this world” (geðenc hwelc witu us ða becomon for ðisse worulde). Alfred associates the social crises and exigencies of his day to England’s spiritual well-being, or rather, its ill health: “We were Christians in name alone, and very few of us possessed Christian virtues” (ðone naman anne we lufodon ðæt[te] we Cristne wæren, & swiðe ðæt ða ðæwas). England had become a place of nominal faith, and its internal spiritual disease was matched by social and political distress.


66. Paul Szarmach observed similarly: “Whatever the relation of the Preface to realia, it is clear that Alfred is giving expression to the concerns of his own mind and conscience. The Preface is primarily a record of Alfred’s perceptions of his milieu; its meaning is tonal or attitudinal, not factual.” Szarmach, “Meaning of Alfred’s Preface,” 59.

67. Alfred, CP 5.5. Trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 125.

68. Alfred, CP 5.6-8. Trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 125. This lament is likely inspired by Augustine’s “Quomodo te gloriaris esse Christianium, qui nomen habet, et facta non habet?” (How would
The matter of these afflictions and punishments bears further thought. Once more, Alfred eludes specifics, and modern readers are left guessing at his meaning, but we can assume that Alfred’s audience would have understood the rhetorical context. Modern scholarship tends to presume that the national afflictions which Alfred mentions are the Viking incursions of the ninth century, and Alfred’s assignation of divine consequence to Viking raids is freighted with theological import. Alfred’s interpretation of history vis-à-vis the religious plight of his people is a topos with scriptural roots, yet it also has a strong resonance for the Anglo-Saxon Christian view of their own history. His more proximal precedents are Gildas and Bede and their interpretations of the Adventus Saxonum and the moral excesses of the British Church. As I discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 1, both the fifth-century Gildas and the eight-century Bede deplored the deeds of Romano-British Christians who, amidst the turmoil of both plague and Pictish invaders, abandoned truth and righteousness in favor of falsehood, drunkenness, cruelty and violence. In return, the Germanic barbarians (who, for Bede, were an opportunity for evangelization), became a tool for divine justice. Thomas O’Laughlin describes Gildas’s hermeneutic for interpreting history as a theological means of “historical construction whereby it builds up a world from out of its own meta-historical beliefs. Studying these historical constructions is, consequently, an important part of the history of theology.” O’Laughlin you boast of being a Christian? You have the name and not the deeds!) Augustine, Tractatus 5 in epistolam Joannis ad Parthos, 12.3. Translation from Augustine, Epistles on the First Letter of John, trans. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2008), 86. See J. E. Cross, “The Name and not the Deeds,” in The Modern Language Review 54, no. 1 (January, 1959): 66.


classifies such interpretations as either *apocalyptic* (i.e., “the sufferings of the elect are preparatory to the end of history, and their deliverance, justification takes place beyond history”) or *retributive* (i.e., “the elect suffer in this world … but they can be sure that the time of suffering will pass and the happier times of yore will return”). However, Gildas’s theological method for interpreting history is better characterized as *prophetic*: rooted in the Old Testament’s prophetic books, the prophetic tradition interpreted the history of Israel through a theological lens and assigning divine meaning to the hostile actions of neighboring nations in response for human wrongdoing. This tradition fostered an interpretive lens that guided both Jewish and Christian religious leaders, and is the dominant motif in Gildas’s interpretation of history: he clearly and intentionally positioned himself in this theological lineage, leveling the pronouncements of Samuel, Elijah, Isaiah, and other prophets against his own people. This prophetic interpretation

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71. O’Laughlin links these two modes to specific scriptural texts, and considers the apocalyptic model present in the book of Daniel and in the Revelation to John, while the retributive model is largely in Kings and Chronicles. He then discusses where Gildas follows or departs from this tradition. O’Laughlin, 22-23.

72. Or, as Abraham Joshua Heschel characterized the prophetic hermeneutic, “The prophets of Israel proclaim that the enemy may be God’s instrument in history.” Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper Collins, 1962/2001), 14. By reference to a prophetic tradition, I do not refer to the common usage of prophecy that signifies fortune-telling, but to the theological understanding of prophecy as an ancient phenomenon shared across religious cultures—a work performed by prophets, oracles, shamans, diviners, and similar religious functionaries whose religious function was to serve as intermediaries between the sacred and the profane, and “to interpret signs or deliver messages from the gods in order to supply information useful in the conduct of human affairs.” (Gerald T. Sheppard and William E. Herbrechtsmeier, “Prophecy: an Overview” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd edition, vol. 11, ed. Lindsay Jones. [Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005], 7424.) See the entire article (7423-7429) for an introduction and overview of prophecy across cultures and religious traditions. Broadly considered, the prophetic mode is not isolated to a specific religious office or ancient religious culture; Marvin Sweeney argues: “such a role tends to be expressed in contemporary Western culture by other types of figures, such as religious or political leaders, educators, journalists, artists, writers, musicians, attorneys, and others who are concerned with charting the directions of our society and the actions and viewpoints of people who live within it.” Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Prophetic Literature*, Interpreting Biblical Texts (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 24.

of the *Adventus Saxonum* shaped Bede’s interpretation of English history, and was further remembered with great homiletic vigor a full two centuries after Alfred, by the cleric Wulfstan in his “Sermo Lupi ad Anglos” (which I introduced in Chapter 1). Wulfstan both invoked Gildas’s and explicitly named the Vikings as the agents of God’s retribution for English sinfulness. We have a prophetic interpretation of English history anchored on either end of the Anglo-Saxon Christian era by Gildas and Wulfstan: When the Christians of England are spiritually weak, this English tradition preached, invaders from over the sea served as God’s agents.\(^7^4\) It is this same tradition which gives insight to Alfred’s reflection on the calumnies of his day. However, what Wulfstan pointed to, Alfred simply alluded to. He names neither Gildas nor Danes, yet his Prologue’s pronouncement of Christian wrongdoing and his identification of retributive calamity resonates with prophetic vigor. Disorder in the sacred world had dramatic repercussions in the secular.

At the same time, while Alfred’s Prologue clearly emerges out of this prophetic tradition, it is also clear that Alfred writes with a different perspective. Gildas and Bede were quite clear that Romano-British Christians in England had been guilty of full-scale moral profligacy, while Wulfstan addresses the immoral excess of Anglo-Saxon Christians. Gildas wrote against corrupt clergy, tyrant kings, and a wretched populace, while Wulfstan, preaching to his contemporaries, bemoans their perfidy and wickedness. Such was not Alfred’s lament, however. There is no

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74. It is important to distinguish between two different dimensions at work in this trope, one theological, the other ethnic/cultural. The theological dimension pits tension between the Christians in England against the pagan outsiders. This theme is consistently maintained by Gildas, Bede, Alfred, and Wulfstan. However, for Gildas and Bede, the besieged Christians of England were Britons, while the pagan outsiders were the Germanic tribes who came to England and would eventually become the Anglo-Saxons. With Alfred, and then Wulfstan, the beleaguered inhabitants of the island became the Anglo-Saxon Christians, and other Germanic invaders (i.e., the Vikings) the hostile outsiders.
language of moral vice in his prologue; neither drunkenness nor licentiousness nor cruelty were the culprits. Rather, Alfred distinguished England’s glorious past from its tarnished, anxious present by his people’s ignorance and their decline in wisdom. According to Alfred, “We ourselves did not cherish learning nor transmit it to other men” (we hit nohwæðer ne selfe ne lufodon ne eac oðrum monnum ne lefdon). The biblical prophets and those who followed in their footsteps wrote with a moral urgency: they were deeply pained by the injustice and inequity that surrounded them, their proclamation “a scream in the night,” and their message “designed to shock rather than to edify.” Gildas and Wulfstan were compelled by a prophetic fire in their condemnation of the world they saw. Bede wrote as a historian, and history served as a moral lesson; where his writing lacked anger, it was no less anxious. Alfred’s approach was different. He was hortatory, not damning, and he encouraged rather than excoriated: Alfred did write to

75. This is a depiction of English history whose accuracy has received scholarly scrutiny. However, my interest in Alfred’s writing is religious rhetoric, not historical objectivity. Similarly, Heschel asserts, “In terms of statistics the prophets’ statements are grossly inaccurate. Yet their concern is not with facts, but with the meaning of facts.” Heschel, The Prophets, 16.

76. Alfred, CP 5.5-6. Trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 125. Sweet renders it more literally, and supplies “wisdom,” rather than “learning,” for the “it” of Alfred’s text: “we neither loved it (wisdom) ourselves nor suffered other men to obtain it.” Trans. Sweet, 4.

77. Heschel, 19.

78. Ibid., 8.

79. Bede wrote as a historian, and his text is muted in terms of homiletic fire; however, his concerns for England’s present and future informed his writing, and as a good historian, he saw past as prologue—or warning. In his preface to the Historia, which he dedicates to King Ceolwulf, Bede counsels of the moral lessons in history: “Siue enim historia de bonis bona referat, ad imitandum bonum auditor sollicitus instigatur; seu mala commemoret de prauis, nihilominus religiosus ac pius auditor siue lector deuitando quod noxium est ac peruersum, pise sollertius ad exsequenda ea quae bona ac Deo digna esse cognouerit, accenditur.” (Should history tell of good men and their good estate, the thoughtful listener is spurred on to imitate the good; should it record the evil ends of wicked men, no less effectually the devout and earnest listener or reader is kindled to eschew what is harmful and perverse, and himself with greater care pursue those things which he has learned to be good and pleasing to the sight of God.) Bede, HE Praefatio. Trans. Colgrave and Mynors, 3.
edify rather than to shock. To state that Alfred wrote without prophetic urgency is not to suggest that he lacked an imperative, however; English Christians had fallen away from wisdom, and Alfred exhorted a reorientation toward it:

& forðon ic ᵀᵉ bebiode ðæt ðu do swæ ic geliefe ðæt ðu wille, ðæt ðu ðe ðíssæ woruldþinga to ðæm geæmietige swæ ðu oftost mæge, ðæt ðu ðone wisdom ðe ðe God sealde ðær ðær ðu hiene befæstan mæge, befæste.⁸⁰

(And therefore, I bid that you do as I believe you are willing to do, that you detach yourself from these worldly things as often as you can, so that you would commit to the wisdom which God gave you, wherever you can.)

While Alfred’s plea was directed toward the bishops who are the audience of his prologue, his critique is aimed at the nation at large. Nor was his proposed remedy—the translation of texts deemed important, which I will turn to shortly—enjoined solely to a clerical audience. Rather, Alfred wrote to and for the Anglo-Saxons as a Christian people. Further, his call for a spiritual reformation of the English nation was not a reformation founded on moral prescription or religious observance. He did not deny their value: the Prologue made it clear that the English golden age was a time of morality and religious observance, but these were evidence of English religiosity, not the cause for it. The English golden age of Alfred’s reflection was an era of teaching and learning and was dominated by the love of wisdom. When England turned away from wisdom, its people were Christians in name only; a spiritual reformation was needed to restore England’s ill health, and Alfred was positioning wisdom as the remedy for this illness.

⁸⁰ Alfred, CP 5.1-4.
5.3 Discerning Wisdom

The Prologue leaves its readers with a rather striking problem: Alfred’s lament on the decline of wisdom and his call for its recovery offers little insight about how he understood wisdom. Before we continue examining his Prologue, it is important to consider what Alfred means by the very word *wisdom*. Semantically, we have only a few clues: as in modern English, *wisdom* is multivalent in Old English: Bosworth-Toller gives a range of possibilities and Latin equivalents for *wisdom*, including ‘wisdom’ or ‘discretion’ (Lat. *sapientia, prudentia*); ‘cognizance’; ‘philosophy’ (Lat. *philosophia*); and ‘knowledge’ or ‘learning’ (Lat. *scientia*).  

Wisdom may be meaningful, but it is ambiguous. Certainly Alfred does not stand alone among the Anglo-Saxon Christians in his expressed interest in wisdom, and the Old English poetic corpus contains a large number of texts that, according to Morton Bloomfield, were much like biblical wisdom writings, and “were employed to teach men about the nature of the world, society and their own selves.”  


interest in vernacular verse: as discussed in Chapter 4, Alfred’s childhood reading challenge was
over a book of English poetry, and the adult Alfred had a fondness for memorizing vernacular
verse. Thus, given wisdom’s vitality in the very poetry which Alfred loved, one might consider
an intertextual reading with the corpus of Old English wisdom poetry—or at the very least seek
some elaboration on the concept of wisdom in that corpus. While poetry may illumine, however,
it does not explain, and Old English poetic wisdom is equally elusive for the poets who reveled
in its slipperiness. Thus, constructions of wisdom vary within the corpus of Old English wisdom
poetry, as Nicole Guenther Discenza’s examination of the corpus reveals:

The Anglo-Saxon tradition of wisdom poetry includes a wide range of concerns, from
practical advice for understanding and living daily life (Maxims 1) through how to
reconcile present suffering with a belief in an omnipotent and merciful God (The
Wanderer, The Seafarer) to the salvation of the soul (Judgment Day 1); different poems
emphasize different aspects.

Further, the proverbial dimension to Old English wisdom poetry is inviting, and draws
immediate comparisons to Biblical proverbs. In Chapter 1 of this study, I addressed the
transcultural appeal of proverbs and wisdom sayings, and both Old English and Old Norse texts
evince a distinct fondness for maxims and gnomic literature. How much of this literature
legitimately demonstrates existential reflection on the meaning of life, however, is arguable:
Thomas Hill muses that readers are often left wondering “how these apparently self-evident

83. Nicole Guenther Discenza, “Wealth and Wisdom: Symbolic Capital and the Ruler in the
Translational Program of Alfred the Great,” Exemplaria, 13, no. 2 (2000): 443, accessed September 13,

84. For a comparative survey of the treatment of maxims and other wisdom utterances in Old
English texts (e.g., the Maxims and Solomon and Saturn) and Old Norse works (e.g., the Hávamál), see
Carolyne Larrington, Store of Common Sense: Gnomic Theme and Style in Old Icelandic and Old English
Wisdom Poetry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). Further, see Paul Cavill, Maxims in Old English
Languages”).
truisms can be ‘read’ as anything other than manifest evidence of an apparent Anglo-Saxon taste for banalities.” Finally, we encounter a scholarly distinction which may simply be academic but still requires attention: as mentioned, Old English wisdom literature is historically treated as a subset of the Old English poetic corpus, and discussions of Old English wisdom writings have not to date considered them alongside the predominantly prose Alfredian texts. The sufficiency of this classification and the limitation of Old English wisdom texts to poetry is a conversation for another occasion, and not something this project is prepared to overturn. Looking broadly at Old English literature, then, we see that Old English vernacular poetry provide further demonstrations of wisdom’s meaningful ambiguity, but do not offer clarity.

In order to better understand Alfred’s treatment of wisdom, then, I will turn my attention to the text which he offers as the very remedy for England’s fall from wisdom. This raises another salient problem, however: to modern readers, the *Cura pastoralis* can seem more like a dreary artifact on church leadership than a meaningful discourse on wisdom. Indeed, the *Cura pastoralis* can be read as a straightforward, practical manual on religious leadership or a primer on human psychology, and to historians it can lend itself to interpretation as a bland priestly manual. Gregory’s text appears distant from the literature commonly perceived as spirituality, given its dearth of extensive detail on spiritual disciplines or visions or the *unio mystica* that so often is the gold star of spirituality texts. Although my purpose here is not to defend the *Cura pastoralis* as a “spiritual classic,” it would be unfair to the text to dwell on its less appreciative reception without also noting that it is still highly regarded amongst scholars of Christian

spirituality, pastoral theologians, and ecclesiastical readers. The issue at stake, however, is Alfred’s perception of the text, and what in the Cura pastoralis would lend itself to Alfred’s esteem that it is a source of much-needed wisdom. Thus we shall look more closely at the Cura pastoralis and its representations of wisdom, both explicit and implicit, paying attention to three different elements of the text: (1) the explicit naming of wisdom within the Cura pastoralis; (2) the influence of ascetical traditions in the Cura pastoralis’s articulation of an applied, reflective wisdom; and (3) the text’s deployment of biblical wisdom literature. While this analysis does not suggest the Cura pastoralis as a systematic theology of wisdom, it will show that the text is thoroughly infused with sapiential concerns and language.

5.3.1 Words of Wisdom

The first dimension of wisdom which I will attend to is semantic: how does the Cura pastoralis deploy the word wisdom? Alfred’s usage of the word serves multiple functions in the text: (1) as a direct translation for equivalent concepts in the Cura pastoralis; (2) to clarify or expand upon Gregory’s thoughts in the text; and (3) as a slight deviation from Gregory’s text. These three general functions require further examination. In terms of wisdom’s use as a direct

translation for equivalent concepts in the *Cura pastoralis*, Nicole Guenther Discenza has observed that Alfred uses wisdom in multiple capacities in translating the *Cura pastoralis*:

“Alfred uses *wisdom* primarily to translate Latin *sapientia* (or wisdom), *scientia* (knowledge), and *prudentia* (prudence), and occasionally other words or phrases, especially ones related to *consilium* (counsel) or other intellectual functions.”  

This does not mean that the word wisdom in the context of the *Cura pastoralis* is consistent or even representative of a higher form of mental functioning, as Discenza also notes wisdom’s infrequent use to represent knowledge of worldly or even infernal things; however, this deployment of wisdom is done in conversation that contrasts true from false wisdom, and will not receive further attention here. Ultimately, wisdom’s range of meanings in the *Cura pastoralis* is hardly surprising, given its polyvalence in both in Old and Modern English. I want to pay further attention, however, to how Alfred deploys the word *wisdom* to expand upon Gregory’s text.

As a means of expanding or clarifying upon the *Cura pastoralis*, there are occasions when Alfred either adds short phrases or simply substitutes phrases entirely, and uses *wisdom* to make plain his understanding of Gregory’s writing. Frequently, as Moye observes, “Alfred tends to insert the word *wisdom* whenever the context of the Latin passage will allow it.” As an illustration of this practice, in Gregory’s discussion of men whose desire for the inner life and contemplation leads them to neglect or avoid the active life, he counsels against those interested solely in “contemplationis studii inardescunt” (the pursuit of contemplation). For a

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88. Ibid., 444.
89. Moye, 120. See the example below, regarding the contemplation of God’s wisdom.
theologically trained audience, *contemplationis* is sufficient to mark the author’s meaning.

Alfred, however, in vernacularizing the *Cura pastoralis* has to contend both with an audience that may not have an adequate theological education as well as a vernacular that does not have Latin’s robust theological language: he renders Lat. *contemplationis* as *smeaunga*, a broad term that can signify discussion, cogitation or inquiry.\(^91\) However, the *Cura pastoralis* further amends the text to signify what, precisely, is being contemplated: “*smeaunga Godes wisdomes*” (contemplation of God’s wisdom).\(^92\) Alfred adds *wisdom* to clarify and specify; while he does not change the text, he provides a context more clear to a non-ecclesiastical audience.\(^93\) The wisdom that is contemplated is divine wisdom, not the wisdom of the world.

Alfred does not merely add *wisdom* to clarify; he also substitutes *wisdom* for more complex language or notions. For example, Gregory’s discussion of living as one has learned includes a quotation from the prophetic writings (Ezek 34.18-19) which uses a draught of clear water as a metaphor for sacred learning. Beginning his explanation, Gregory writes:

> Aquam quippe limpidissimam pastores bibunt, cum fluenta ueritatis recte intellegentes hauriunt.\(^94\)

>(Evidently, the pastors drink water that is most clear, when with a right understanding they imbibe the streams of truth…\(^95\))

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92. Alfred, *CP* 45.17.

93. This example is also treated in Moye, 120.


In Alfred’s translation, this reads:

Sua ða lareowas hi drincað suiðe hluter wæter, ðonne hi ðone godcundan wisdom leorniað …⁹⁶

(Thus the teachers drink very pure water when they learn the divine wisdom…)⁹⁷

Alfred simultaneously simplifies the language while shifting elements within Gregory’s text. Wisdom’s multidimensionality serves Alfred well as a means of compressing Gregory’s “right understanding” (recte intelligentes) and the metaphorically abstract “streams of truth” (fluenta veritatis), and further emphasizes the divine (godcundan) aspect of this wisdom. Note also Alfred’s transformation of pastor to learner, part of the suite of translation strategies which have received examination elsewhere.⁹⁸ Alfred’s word choice shifts Gregory’s text shifting of language and concerns from an exclusively ecclesiastical context to a broader secular audience. These semantic shifts do reveal Alfred’s integration of Gregory’s instructions into the king’s domain, concretizing the operational wisdom of the Cura pastoralis for Alfred’s own concerns.

Similarly, wisdom becomes a general rubric for spiritual capacity or understanding. In the first chapter of the Cura pastoralis, Gregory discusses of the need for experience in the office of leadership, he discusses the inexperience or ignorance (imperitia) of pastors:

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⁹⁶ Alfred, CP 31.3-4.
⁹⁷ Trans. Sweet, 30.
⁹⁸ As summary, Schreiber writes, “The importance attributed to the pursuit of wisdom is stressed in the Old English translations: the neutral rector of the Latin original is most often translated by lareow ‘teacher’; the etymologically related words læran ‘to teach,’ lærowdom ‘office of teacher’ and lær ‘learning’ occur far more frequently than, for example, discere ‘to learn’ or magister ‘teacher’ in the original version.” Schreiber, 189-90. See Moye for a comprehensive treatment of Alfred’s translation techniques. For the shift from pastor to reader, see Moye, 118-30. Pratt considers Alfred’s deployment of secular language in the vernacular as a means of authenticating West Saxon royal power, but this is illustrative of Pratt’s focuses on political rhetoric; see Pratt, King Alfred, 196-204. Schreiber, in contrast, sees it as “testimony to the translator’s self-confidant perception as teacher in the pursuit of divine wisdom.” Schreiber, 190.
Pastorum imperitia uoce Veritatis increpatur, cum per prophetam dicitur: Ipsi pastores ignorauerunt intelligentiam.  

(This unfitness of pastors is rebuked by the voice of the Truth, through the Prophet, when it is said: “The shepherds themselves knew no understanding.”) 

This *imperitia* is framed in the text in terms of those who rule and guide out of the desire for authority but who lack true knowledge of God, and thus are inexperienced and ignorant in divine knowledge. Again, Alfred renders this simply, and the ignorance of pastors becomes the ignorance of teachers. It is through the folly, or literally through the “unwisdom of teachers” (ðæs lareowas unwisdome) that others are led to ruin, and through the “wisdom of teachers” (ðæs lareowas wisdome) that others are saved. 

Our first examination of the *Cura pastoralis*’s wisdom, at a lexical level, reveals the word used for a variety of translation purposes. Its use is not always consistent, but it should not be surprising that a multidimensional word is used to address different domains. However, when Alfred uses wisdom to draw out Gregory’s meaning in the *Cura pastoralis*, it serves as an example of Alfred’s own reflection on the *Cura pastoralis*, his own conversation with Gregory. In such cases, wisdom’s polyvalence compresses: it signifies knowledge of divine things, whether articulated as a teacher’s wisdom, a clarification of the object of contemplation (*smeaunga*), or the *wisdom* that in one word captures a sacred truth received with right understanding. It becomes evident that wisdom serves as more than just counsel for a good life: 

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100. Trans. Davis, 22.  
it is knowledge of God. This helps orient us to Alfredian wisdom as a construct that signifies not just understanding concepts of the divine, but actual knowledge of the divine. However, this does not receive extensive treatment in the *Cura pastoralis*, nor is it central to Gregory’s discussion. Discenza writes:

> Human wisdom participates in divine wisdom, thus bringing the individual closer to God. The *Pastoral Care* explains at length how the ruler is to behave so as to obtain this closeness to God and bring others to it. The entire book is thus an extended lesson in wisdom.

As a lesson in wisdom, however, this requires some nuance. For the *Cura pastoralis*, the wise ruler’s guidance does not as much instruct in wisdom as it does embody and reveal it. Certainly, the *Cura pastoralis* is an “extended lesson in wisdom,” but the text requires additional consideration in terms of such instruction.

**5.3.2 Discernment and Applied Wisdom**

How does the actual text of the *Cura pastoralis* actively construct wisdom? The reader who has been led to the *Cura pastoralis* by Alfred’s Prologue expecting to find a treatise on wisdom may well be disappointed, as Gregory offers no such thing. He does not deliver an extended exegesis of the wisdom books, nor does he engage in a systematic exploration of sapiential theology. At the surface level, Gregory simply talks about the responsibilities and

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102. Although Discenza treats different examples, she comes to a similar conclusion in her study; Discenza, “Wealth and Wisdom,” 445.


104. Although I assert that the *Cura pastoralis* is not a systematic treatise on wisdom, Conrad Leyser does refer to it as “the only systematic treatise from [Gregory’s] pen.” Leyser refers, however, to the text’s treatment of power and moral authority, and how these themes echo in other Gregorian writings but are centralized in a structured argument in the *Cura pastoralis*. This said, I maintain that Gregory avoids a systematic exposition of *sapientia*, even though the practice of wisdom is central to the text’s
qualifications of leadership and the problem of treating diverse human personalities and temperaments. However, examination of the text will reveal how the *Cura pastoralis* is rich in ascetical language and considerations that supply the text its sapiential dimensions, and offers to Alfred and his readers a handbook on the practice of discernment and self-examination.

I previously described the contents of the *Cura pastoralis*, but they require further discussion. In Part 1 of the text, Gregory addresses those called to leadership, raising the necessity of lived experience, a leader’s responsibilities and commitment to holiness, and the qualifications and type of person called to be a leader. In Part 2, Gregory highlights the traits and qualities that are necessary for the right conduct of spiritual leadership. In Part 3, Gregory develops a catalog of behaviors, proclivities and dispositions in the laity, and offers counsel on how they are to be treated. The material is listed in a series of 36 dyads that contrast various physiological, mental, or moral typologies: for example, Gregory differentiates between men and women, the wealthy and the poor, the healthy and the sick, the married and the unmarried, those who boast of past sins and those who confess yet continue to engage in them, those whose sins are many and minor and those whose sins are few but great, and so on. Gregory’s treatment of the subject concludes with a few comprehensive remarks about counsel and spiritual care. In Part 4, Gregory returns to the treatment of pastoral authority itself, delivering a brief exhortation to humility and a warning of the dangers of the pride that inevitably follows success. Throughout the *Cura pastoralis*, Gregory writes with a profound awareness of the spiritual leader’s task and responsibility of wrestling with the realities of human nature—the virtues and vices that

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dominate the spiritual life, the need for self-examination and contemplation, and the struggle to balance the inner and outer lives. Read appreciatively, Gregory’s work is far from a dreary clerical tome; it is a demonstration of Gregory’s psychospiritual acumen and his insights into human nature and the challenges of leadership.

George Demacopoulos emphasizes that Gregory’s insights on human nature must be “filtered through an ascetic register,” and that ascetical psychology underlies much of Gregory’s treatment of leadership.105 We see Gregory’s use of ascetical teachings at various places within the Cura pastoralis, including his emphasis on humility and self-examination, his understanding of human character, and particularly, his use of discernment in addressing the various temperaments and temptations of subordinates. Discernment (Gregory’s discretio) as an ascetical practice requires some background, however. In Christian spirituality, discernment or discretion (Lat. discretio; Gk. διάκρισις, diakrisis) is understood broadly in terms of right judgment and insight. More specifically, discernment or discretion is more than just good insight; it is the charism, or divine gift, of distinguishing between good and evil and seeing the trace of divine activity in life, and responding appropriately in order to grow in holiness or perfection.106

105. Demacopoulos, “Gregory’s Model of Spiritual Direction,” 212; Demacopoulos, Five Models, 134-39. Demacopoulos considers Gregory’s synthesis of ascetical and pastoral practices one of his significant achievements. Written shortly after his election as pope, Gregory drew on his insights as abbot and spiritual director, and the text emerges out of that experience as a monastic leader. Gregory “brought the practices and theory of spiritual direction from the ascetic and monastic world into the broader Christian community.” Gregory’s Cura pastoralis introduced monastic spirituality and ascetical theology to pastoral leaders, transforming “the parish priest or bishop into a formidable spiritual father resembling the ascetic elder, or abba.” George Demacopoulos, Introduction in Gregory the Great, The Book of Pastoral Rule, trans. George E. Demacopoulos (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2007), 17. For extended treatment of the argument, see Demacopoulos, Five Models, 127-64 (Ch. 5, “Pope Gregory I and the Asceticizing of Spiritual Direction”).

that in Chapter 3, I established Paul’s expression of life “in the spirit” as an orientation toward the divine and a rejection of things that are not of heaven; discernment is the very practice of right judgement and decision-making that constitutes such life in the spirit. However, the *Cura pastoralis*’s ascetical orientation created a linguistic problem for Alfred, as his translation required an Old English ascetical vocabulary. I alluded to this earlier, when I introduced Alfred’s use of *smeaunga* for contemplation, and we see in the *Cura pastoralis* further examples of Alfred’s need to vernacularize Gregory’s technical Latin.

For example, Gregory asserts that a primary central task of the leader is to attend to the balance of action and contemplation, a classic theme in Gregorian thought.107 Gregory offers an entire chapter (CP 2.7) to the topic:

\[
\text{Vt sit rector internorum curam in exteriorum occupatione non minuens, exteriorum prouidentiam in internorum sollicitudine non relinquens.108}
\]

(In his preoccupation with external matters the ruler should not relax his care for the inner life, nor should his solicitude for the inner life cause neglect of the external.)109 Alfred must construct an Old English parallel to address the concepts of the inner life and the outer life:

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109. Trans. Davis, 68.
Hu se læræow ne sceal þa inneran giemenne gewanian for ðæ[er]e uterran abisgunge, ne eft ða uterran ne forlæte he for ðære inneran.110

(How the teacher is not to diminish his care [giemenne, ‘oversight’] of inner things for outer occupations [abisgunge, ‘business’], nor neglect outer things for the inner.)111

Similarly, Gregory asserts that the spiritual leader must be able to discriminate between virtues (‘ðeawas’ and ‘gode ðeawas’112) and vices (‘unðeawas’113). Even more broadly, the leader must grasp and respond to the multitude of vices that threaten to topple the faithful in their spiritual lives, as Gregory elaborates throughout the 36 admonishments that occupy Part 3 of the Cura pastoralis—material which Demacopoulos describes as “a sourcebook of spiritual profiles.”114 In order to understand the temperament and temptation in one’s subordinate, however, the spiritual authority must demonstrate discretion, and Alfred’s term of choice for this is geseadwisnes. In a passage in which Gregory delivers an analogy of the nose (which can differentiate between sweet and foul odors) for the ability to discern, he writes:

Recte ergo per nasum discretio exprimitur, per quam uirtuæ eligimus, delicta reprobamus.115

(Rightly, then, the nose symbolizes discernment [discretio], whereby we elect virtue and reject sin.)116

Alfred’s translation follows the analogy, then ends:

110. Alfred, CP 127.8-9.
111. Trans. Sweet, 126.
112. Alfred, CP 149.17 and 149.2.
113. Alfred, CP 149.17.
115. Gregory, CP 1.11.28-29.
(Through sagacity [or, discretion] we distinguish good from evil, and choose the good, and reject the bad.)

This word *gesceadwisnes* typically signifies reason or discretion in Old English. Elsewhere in the Alfredian translations, the term is used for Reason (*Ratio*). In this proclamation, however, its use is simple: Alfred renders Gregory’s *discretio* as *gesceadwisnes*. Although earlier treatments of Alfred’s translation stressed the relative faithfulness of the translation and the seeming straightforwardness of the original text, they did not consider Alfred’s need to vernacularize Gregory’s ascetical vocabulary. To be sure, in spite of its ascetical underpinnings, the *Cura pastoralis* remained eminently readable; its stress on such theological or psychological

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117. Alfred, *CP* 65.22.


119. Bosworth-Toller gives *gesceadwisnes* (n.) “Reason, discretion.” However, the associated *gesceadwis* (adj.) has a range of noetic functions; Bosworth-Toller gives “Reasonable, rational, discriminating, intelligent, prudent, cautious.” Joseph Bosworth, “gescead” and “ge-sceadwis,” in *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary: Based on the Manuscript Collections of the Late Joseph Bosworth*, ed. Thomas Northcote Toller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898), 435.

120. In both the *Soliloquia* and in the OE Boethius, the Latin *Ratio* (reason) is rendered as *Gesceadwis*. In one occasion in the *Cura pastoralis*, the word signifies reason, and is used to translate Gregory’s *ratio*. Gregory writes, “Sic enim conditi mirabiliter sumus, ut ratio animam et anima possideat corpus. (Truly, we are so wonderfully created that reason possesses the soul, and the soul possesses the body.)” Gregory, *CP* 3.9.63-65; trans. Davis, 109. However, Alfred’s translation shifts the structure from reason-soul-body to mind and intellect-reason-body: “Swæ we sint wunderlice gesceapene ðæt ure mod & ure gewitt hæfð ðone anwald urs lichoman, & sio gesceadwisnes hæfð anwald ðæs modes.” (We are so wonderfully created that our mind [mod] and intellect [gewitt] control the body [lichoman], and reason [gesceadwisnes] the mind.) Alfred, *CP* 33. Hatton MS is missing a leaf, and the text is from Cotton MSS, in Sweet, *King Alfred’s West-Saxon Version of Gregory’s Pastoral Care*, 220, trans. Sweet 220.

121. Curiously, Sweet’s translation (provided above) bypasses the obvious choice of “discretion,” and instead chooses “sagacity.”
concerns as discernment, humility, or self-examination did not require the construction of an extensive Old English lexicon.

It is the *Cura pastoralis*’s appearance of being a simple, straightforward treatise that has distracted modern readers from its significance for the Alfredian reform. Alfred’s choice of text is a spiritual classic and a thoughtful reflection on the practice of wisdom. The *Cura pastoralis* was a foundational text of the Carolingian Renaissance, and with good reason: Gregory’s depiction of the struggles of human spiritual growth would have clear appeal to a lay reader like Alfred, perhaps more so than any of Gregory’s biblical exegesis, but its pragmatic nature should not eclipse the text’s spiritual dynamics. Similarly, although the text is not a speculative treatment of *sapientia*, it is no less sapiential. Gregory operationalizes wisdom in the practice of leadership, and the reader of Alfred’s Prologue who turns to the *Cura pastoralis* will not read an exposition on wisdom, but a handbook for its practice.

5.3.3 The Books of Solomon

The final dimension in which wisdom permeates the *Cura pastoralis* is the text’s frequent utilization of biblical wisdom texts. Gregory’s words are suffused with scriptural echoes and invocations, and the *Cura pastoralis* contains some 500 identifiable allusions or references. Gregory draws widely from scriptural literature, and his examination of spiritual leadership is buttressed and shaped by the words of Scripture, from Moses in the Pentateuch (Torah) to John’s Apocalypse at Sardos. The words of Paul, the prophets, the Gospels, and a range of other authors and biblical authorities provide scriptural sanction for Gregory’s thought. However, the prevalence of biblical sapiential writings among these works is striking: Gregory draws on the
full set of wisdom texts traditionally attributed to Solomon (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, and the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon). Further, analysis of Gregory’s use of sacred scripture reveals the importance of biblical wisdom in the _Cura pastoralis_: Solomon is second only to Paul in the number of biblical texts referenced, and the book of Proverbs is the single-most quoted book of the Bible.¹²² (Although it may be mere coincidence, none of the 45 quotations from Proverbs are from chapters 30-31 of the scriptural book, proverbs which are not attributed within the text to be the work of Solomon.)¹²³ Furthermore, although Solomon is already well represented in the _Cura pastoralis_, his visibility increases in its Old English translation, because of one of Alfred’s translation strategies. Not uncommon for medieval monastic authors whose own words mix and mingle with the scriptural text, Gregory did not uniformly identify his source texts.¹²⁴ However, one of Alfred’s translation strategies in his work on the _Cura pastoralis_ was to expand upon many of Gregory’s unspecified biblical texts, either by naming or explaining the scriptural authority.¹²⁵

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¹²² Paul is referenced 119 times, and Solomon 72. The book of Proverbs is referenced 47 times, with the Psalter coming in second at 39. See Appendix.


¹²⁴ Isabelle Cochelin remarks, “All in all, the omnipresence of the Bible in the daily life of monks was such that they generally knew it by heart—if not all, at least the Psalter—and their utterances were suffused with Biblical reminiscences. The Bible was so often voiced by the monks that one cannot help wonder whether the continual correlations made in monastic writings between past, present, and future events and biblical passages were only rhetorical devices, used to give more power to their assertions, or rather the normal consequence of their habit of seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, and understanding the world through the lens of the Book.” Isabell Cochelin, “When Monks were the Book,” in _The Practice of the Bible in the Middle Ages: Production, Reception, and Performance in Western Christianity_, ed. Susan Boynton and Diane J. Reilly (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 69.

¹²⁵ For example, Gregory’s generic “scriptum est” (it is written) is amplified for gospel citations by Alfred’s “hit is awritten on þæm godspelle” (it is written in the gospel). Alfred, _CP_ 33.13-14. Richard Clement identifies three types of such attribution-expansions in the _Cura pastoralis_: “(1) the prophet, apostle, or evangelist is identified; (2) his identity is explained; or (3) the specific book is identified.” He
Solomon’s name thus appears more frequently in Alfred’s translation than it does in Gregory’s original, as a generic Gregorian “which is written” or “certain wise man” is often rendered in Alfred’s text as “what Solomon said” (hwæt Salomon cwæð) or “of which Solomon spoke” (be ðæm cwæð Salomon). Similarly, the biblical wisdom books attributed to Solomon receive additional attribution, and are called on occasion the books of Solomon. Consistent with medieval tradition, Alfred treats the Wisdom of Solomon (with two citations) as a genuinely Solomonic text, as seen through Alfred’s amplification of Gregory’s “Audiant quod sapientis ore dicitur” to “Gehiræ hwæt of ðæs wisan Salomonnes muðe wæs gecueden.” Furthermore, both Gregory and Alfred attribute the authorship of Ben Sira to Solomon. The deuterocanonical text which claims as its own author “Jesus, son of Eleazar, son of Sira” (Sir 50:27), was for some early Christian authorities treated as a Solomonic writing, although Jerome (and later tradition) dismissed this. Ben Sira is quoted 13 times in Gregory’s text and on one occasion is given Solomonic attribution. In Alfred’s translation, however, eight of these scriptural citations are given Solomonic authorship. Solomon’s presence in the *Cura pastoralis* is pervasive.


126. For example, see Alfred, *CP* 299.15; 299.21; 377.6-7.
127. For example, see Alfred, *CP* 3.30.24; 3.33.16-17.
128. See Appendix.
130. I treat this in Chapter 1’s discussion of the Solomonic wisdom corpus.
Ultimately, it is difficult to discern a scheme to Gregory’s selection of wisdom writings. While Solomonic wisdom provides a sapiential authority to the *Cura pastoralis*, as I have already emphasized, the text is not an excursus on divine *sapientia*. The preponderance of material from Proverbs is a suitable illustration. Of the 47 identified citations, 17 are from Proverbs 1-9, which is treated in biblical scholarship as instructional material knowledge passed down from generation to generation, or “a kind of general prologue to the subject of the instruction of wisdom.”133 The remainder are from Proverbs 10-32, which is considered collections of sayings, short proverbial utterances that offer daily life counsel.134 Where biblical wisdom literature in its fullness also struggles with suffering in the life of the righteous, this is absent from Gregory’s discourse. The *Cura pastoralis* is not a *consolatio*. Certainly, the sapiential texts play a prominent role in Gregory’s text and are given even more visibility in Alfred’s translation. While Proverbs are the most cited biblical text in the *Cura pastoralis*, and Solomon is second to Paul among named scriptural authorities, this only highlights their role in the text. Throughout the *Cura pastoralis*, Gregory draws frequently and widely from Biblical waters. In spite of the Solomonic books’ broad appeal, the corpus still receives fewer references than all the Pauline Epistles, the Gospels, or the Prophets. We can assert that the *Cura pastoralis*

133. Alter, 183-84.
resonates with biblical wisdom, both through the preponderance of Gregory’s references to sapiential texts and through Alfred’s explicit naming of Solomon: Solomon’s wisdom looms large in the text. However, these passages are used to provide scriptural support for Gregory’s discussion, and are not the focus of the text.

With this caveat aside, there are two further treatments of biblical wisdom which I suggest create a profound correspondence between Gregory’s text and Alfred’s role as a spiritual authority and wisdom figure. First, the frequent invocations of Solomon within the *Cura pastoralis* are consonant with Gregory’s deployment of ascetical discernment. Two Old Testament pericopes occur that are not referenced in the *Cura pastoralis*, yet whose legacy is unavoidable in a text soaked in the language of *discretio* and liberally punctuated with Solomon’s name. These are Solomon’s dream at Gibeon (1 Kgs 3:5-15) and the text which immediately follows, his judgment on a disputed maternity (1 Kgs 3:16-28). As related previously, Solomon’s dream at Gibeon relates his request of heaven, “Give your servant, therefore, a listening heart [Vulg., *cor docile*] to judge your people and to distinguish [Vulg., *discernere*] between good and evil” (1 Kgs 3.9). God replies, “Because you asked for … discernment to know what is right [Vulg., sapiencia ad discernendum iudicium (i.e., “wisdom to discern judgment”)], I now do as you request. I give you a heart so wise and discerning that there has never been anyone like you until now, nor after you will there be anyone to equal you” (1 Kgs 3:11-12). Following the dream account, the text presents the well-known story of

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135. The phrase rendered here as “listening heart” is complicated. The Hebrew text uses *shama*, which signifies hearing, comprehending, and even obeying, and *leb*, which refers to the heart, but which was seen in Hebrew anthropological as signifying thought, volition, and commitment, not emotion. Thus the range of interpretations in English, including “listening heart” (NABRE), “discerning heart” (NIV), “understanding heart” (KJV), and “understanding mind” (New JPS Tanakh and NRSV). Jerome’s choice for the Vulgate gives *cor docile*, which Douay-Rheims renders as “understanding heart.”
Solomon’s judgment on the case of two women claiming to be the mother of the same child. Although these segments may be encountered as separate episodes (through retelling or liturgical use), they are linked together in the text: In the first episode, Solomon gains wisdom; in the second, he demonstrates it. Similarly, the Solomonic legacy for wisdom would become comprehensive and all-encompassing: his wisdom was the greatest of the great, and included knowledge of the natural world and the production of proverbs and songs; but the biblical text which introduces Solomon’s wisdom does so in the context of wise judgment and of knowing truth from falsehood. This was a tradition and image of wise kingship that was well-known to Alfred and his court, as discussed in the previous chapter’s treatment of Asser’s *Vita*—a text which repeatedly invoked Solomon as the exemplar of the king whose wisdom was a divine gift and which provided for Alfred a biblical model of wise leadership. Although the discerning ruler bears the stamp of Gregorian asceticism, it also powerfully evokes the image of the wise king, the very exemplar of discernment. Gregory’s work was a text by an ecclesiastic for ecclesiastics, but when mediated through an Anglo-Saxon king whose contemporary biography constructs him as a new Solomon, the *Cura pastoralis* becomes an exposition of royal wisdom.

Furthermore, Gregory constructs in the *Cura pastoralis* a wisdom that resonates with biblical sapiential literature—texts which engage, according to Robert Alter, with “questions of value and moral behavior, of the meaning of human life, and especially of the right conduct of life.” However, where biblical wisdom literature also establishes wisdom’s role in creation and

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137. Alter, xiv.
poetically describes the human encounter with the personification of Woman Wisdom, the *Cura pastoralis* falls short. This does not mean Woman Wisdom is fully absent from the text, and her single appearance—fleeting as it is—has special significance for Alfred’s readers.\(^{138}\) Gregory writes, in one of the most wisdom-saturated passages of the text:

\[\text{Forðon wæs gesprecen ðūrhr ðøne wisan Salomonn bi ðæm Wisdome ðæt se Wisdom wille soña fleon ðøne ðe hine fliehd, ðonne hine ful oft ær to him cleo 목적, & he forsæcð ðæt he him to cume. Ac eft, ðonne he ðone Wisdom habban wolde, & his wilnað, ðonne cuið se Wisdom to him: ðe eow cleopode ær to me, ac ge me noldon æt cuman; ic ræhte mine hond to eow, rolde iower nan to locian; ac ge forsawon eall min gedæht, & leton eow to giemelest, ðonne ic eow cidde. Hwæt sceal ic ðonne buton hliefhan ðæs, ðonne ge to lore weorðæð, & habban me ðæt to gamene, ðonne eow ðæt yfel on becymð ðæt ge eow æxæ ondredon? Ond eac cuið Wisdom eft: ðonne hie to me cliupiað, ðonne nyle icie gehieran. On uhton hie arisað, and me secead, ac hie me ne findað.}\(^{139}\)

(Therefore it was said of Wisdom through the wise Solomon, that Wisdom will soon flee him who flees her, when she has often before called him to her, and he has refused to come to her. But afterwards, when he would like to have Wisdom, and desires her, she says to him: “I called you to me before, but ye would not come; I offered you my hand, but not one of you would look; ye despised all my counsel, and neglected my reproofs. What then can I do but laugh at your ruin, and mock, when the evil you formerly dreaded comes on you?” Again, Wisdom spoke: “When they call to me I will not listen to them. They shall arise at dawn and seek me, but they shall not find me.”\(^{140}\))

This passage has received little attention. Alfred’s amendments to the Latin original are minimal.\(^{141}\) Although this wisdom-focused passage receives no further reflection on Alfred’s part, it provides a direct link between the Prologue and the *Cura pastoralis* and legitimizes

\(^{138}\) The personification of Wisdom returns to Old English literature in the philosophical dialogue that occupies the Old English translation of Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, wherein the translator renders the Latin text’s allegorical personification of Lady Philosophy as Wisdom.

\(^{139}\) *Alfred, CP* 247.16-248.4

\(^{140}\) Trans. Sweet, 247-48. Wisdom’s two proclamations are from Prv 1.24-26 and Prv 1:28.

\(^{141}\) He adds the helpful annotation at the beginning, “Forðon wæs gesprecen ðūrhr ðøne wisan Salomonn” (Therefore it was said of Wisdom through the wise Solomon). *Alfred, CP* 247.16-17.
Alfred’s Prologue as a reflection on England’s sapiential decline. Woman Wisdom’s appearance in Gregory’s text is fleeting and seemingly inconsequential to the rest of the *Cura pastoralis*, but in light of Alfred’s assignation of England’s calamities on its abandonment of wisdom, the scorned Wisdom’s utterance in the *Cura pastoralis* acquires immediate and intimate consequence for an Anglo-Saxon audience. Where Alfred beseeches his reader to pursue wisdom, Gregory carries the explicit “or else.”

5.4 Mediating Wisdom

Earlier, I framed Alfred’s lament for England’s lost wisdom in light of the prophetic tradition which saw divine action in human history, specifically in terms of human wrongdoing and divine punishment. While Alfred plainly interprets English history through this hermeneutic, his emphasis on wisdom offers a different perspective. He reads English history through a sapiential lens, and his perspective is ultimately not that of the prophet, but the wise teacher. Ultimately, Alfred could not be both king and prophet, as the biblical prophetic tradition frequently recounts the tension between king and prophet: the biblical prophet points an accusing finger and utters a word of proclamation against the powers of the establishment, calling out

142. To date I have not been able to identify any mention of this correspondence in Alfredian scholarship. Few texts even mention Wisdom personified’s brief mention in the *Cura pastoralis*. Nicole Guenther Discenza mentions Wisdom’s appearance, but does not discuss her proclamations. (Discenza, “Wealth and Wisdom,” 445n28). Frantzen mentions that a number of themes occur in the *Cura pastoralis* that return elsewhere in Alfredian texts, but does not mention Wisdom’s personification. Frantzen, *King Alfred*, 41-42.

143. Nicole Guenther Discenza draws an interesting parallel between Alfred’s Prologue and the prologue to Ben Sira. However, she does not identify Alfred’s lamentation as prophetic, nor she does not significantly address Alfred’s role as a teacher of wisdom. However, the emphasis of her research is on legitimizing Alfred’s role as a translator, rather than a spiritual authority. Nicole Guenther Discenza. “‘Wise wealhstodas’: The Prologue to Sirach as a Model for Alfred’s Preface to the Pastoral Care,” *JEGP* 97, no. 4 (October 1998): 488-99.
God’s disfavor with the world-that-is, and the prophetic word can accuse king as well as country. Similarly, the prophetic interpretation of English salvation history, from the *Adventus Saxonum* to the arrival of the Vikings, was typically mediated by the Christian clerical voice which had adopted the social role of the prophet. Bishops, priests, and monks could call out for moral reform against the entire country. As king, Alfred functioned from an entirely different social location, and his stated concerns said little of immediate moral consequence. Rather, Alfred acted in the sapiential mode. His model was no Gildas or Jeremiah: it was the wise man whose sapiential legacy we have seen woven throughout the *Cura pastoralis*—Solomon, the wise king and exemplar of discernment. Alfred does not mention Solomon in the Prologue, but it is hardly necessary. Asser names Solomon repeatedly in his *Vita*, comparing Alfred to the king of Israel who served as the wisdom mentor to his people, and in the *Cura pastoralis*’s treatment of wise rulership, Solomon’s name and biblical legacy are invoked time and again. Alfred does not mention him, but the wise king of Israel serves as a clear precedent for the wise king of England, who would function in a similar capacity as the teacher, the mentor, and the mediator of wisdom.

Alfred understood the source of England’s downfall, and his scrutiny of England revealed the vision of a spiritual leader. Gregory asserts in the *Cura pastoralis* that the spiritual leader’s task was to promote virtue and root out hidden vice, and Alfred demonstrates that capacity in his critique of England’s nominal Christianity and abandonment of virtue. If England’s illness was the result of rejecting wisdom, then Alfred’s remedy was to reorient his country toward that neglected wisdom. The problem was not that wisdom was nowhere to be found, as the churches of England were a storehouse of books, all sources of wisdom. The problem, however, was that they were inaccessible to English readers:
England’s sapiential recovery faced not the problem of literacy, but language. Alfred understood the importance of language to learning, realizing that the wise men of England’s past desired a proliferation of languages for the advancement of learning. Recall that Alfred briefly engages in an internal dialogue on this matter, wondering why these books were not translated:

Ac ic ða sona eft me selfum andwyrdre ond cwæð: Hie ne wendon ðætt[e] æfre menn sceolden swæ re[c]elease weordan & sio lar swæ oðfeallan; for ðære wilnunga hie hit forleton, & woldon ðæt her ðy mara wisdom on londe waren ðy we ma geðeoda cuðon.¹⁴⁶

(But I immediately answered myself, and said: “They did not think that men would ever become so careless and that learning would decay like this; they refrained from doing it through this resolve, namely that they wished that the more languages we knew, the greater would be the wisdom in this land.”¹⁴⁷)

Unfortunately, the desire that religious learning be maintained in different tongues in order to encourage the proliferation of languages, however laudable, did not itself translate to reality. The wise men of England’s past who refrained from translating sacred wisdom in order to encourage the proliferation of language study, it seems, were not so wise: and as the knowledge of

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¹⁴⁴ Alfred, CP 5.8-13.
¹⁴⁵ Trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 125.
¹⁴⁶ Alfred, CP 5.21-25.
¹⁴⁷ Trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 125.
languages were lost, so was wisdom. This leads Alfred to reflect again, and the object of his reflection is nothing less than the religious vernacularization that occurred as the Bible moved through different cultures:

\[\text{Da gemunde ic hu sio æ was ærest on Ebr[e]isc geðiode funden, & eft, ða hie Creacas geliornodon, ða wendon hie on hiora agen geðiode ealle, & eac ealle oðre bec. & eft Lædenware swæ same, siðdan hie hie geliornodon, hie hie wendon eall[a] ðurh wise wealhstodas on hiora agen geðiode. Ónd eac eall oðra Cristnæ ðioda sumne dæl hiora on hiora agen geðiode wendon.}\]

(Then I recalled how the Law was first composed in the Hebrew language, and thereafter, when the Greeks learned it, they translated it all into their own language, and all other books as well. And so too the Romans, after they had mastered them, translated them all through learned interpreters into their own language. Similarly all the other Christian peoples turned some part of them into their own language.)\(^{148}\)

Magoun considers Alfred’s discussion on the history of Biblical translation “digressive” and “only most incidentally connected with what proceeds and with what follows.”\(^{150}\) He completely disregards the value of this piece of the reflection, however. First, Alfred is not merely establishing the historical transmission of the Bible from the Hebrew scriptures to the Vulgate by way of the Septuagint, but reflecting on the imperative of inculturation, which I introduced in Chapter 2. Context—social, linguistic, historical, and cultural—are vital in the development of a religious tradition and in the transcultural and transhistoric spread of that tradition. Note that Alfred does not stop his history of translation with the privileged Latin text of the Western Church, but includes the rendering of Scripture into other local languages: “Similarly all the other Christian peoples turned some part of them into their own language” (Ond eac eall oðra

\(^{148}\) Alfred, \textit{CP} 5:25-7:5.

\(^{149}\) Trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 125-26.

\(^{150}\) Magoun, “Some Notes,” 100.
Cristna ðioda sumne dæl hiora on hiora agen geðiode wendon.) Ultimately, Alfred is identifying the importance of the vernacular so that Sacred Scripture may have a meaningful impact on different nations in their native tongues, not only for evangelization but for continued spiritual oversight.

Furthermore, the history of biblical translation establishes for Alfred the work of translators as mediators of sacred meaning. In Asser’s biography, the wisdom-seeking king was drawn to learning in order to grow in wisdom; ultimately, this meant learning Latin. The solution that served Alfred was not applied to his people; rather than re-invigorating Latin instruction, Alfred determines a better way to mediate this unreachable wisdom, based on the very example of history: As did the translators of Scripture, Alfred would translate the divine wisdom that was locked in texts that were unintelligible and unreadable by his own people, rendering them into a common tongue so that they could be available to all. In his reflection on biblical translation, Alfred does not name Jerome, the Church’s most famous early translator, but refers to a group of “wise wealhstodas” (wise interpreters/translators). Old English was rife with terms for translation and interpretation, and Allen Frantzen asserts that this “shows that the Anglo-Saxons were very concerned with the process of restating and interpreting texts in Latin, Greek, or other languages for their own use.” Alfred uses two different terms in his Prologue: in addition to

151. Alfred, CP 7.4-5; Trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 126. What translations Alfred was referring to is speculative at best, but for a comprehensive listing of texts that Alfred may have known, see For Magoun, “Some Notes,” 100-101.

152. Alfred, CP 7.4.

153. Allen Frantzen, “Translation,” in Anglo-Saxon Keywords, 266. He includes gepeode, gepeodnes, and foresaga as options for a translation, while a translator could be a becwepere, peoend, wealhstod, weallstado, or wendere. He provides an assortment of verbs for translate: “areccan, awendan, gecierran, gehwierfan, oferlædan, reccan, getrahtnian, gepeodan, and (ge)wendan.” Frantzen, 266.
wealthstod (n., ‘interpreter’ or ‘translator’), he also deploys wendan (v., ‘change’), such as when he discusses the scholars who translated Sacred Scripture into Greek, Latin, and other languages. Where the verb wendan simply suggests change or alteration and is used repeatedly through the preface to reference linguistic transformation, the noun wealthstod is rich with interpretive potential. The word wealthstod appears only one other time in the Cura pastoralis, and there it carries a different shade of meaning, not as translator or interpreter (in the linguistic sense) but as ‘intermediary.’ In translating Gregory’s description of Christ as “Dei hominumque mediator” (the mediator between God and man), Alfred renders Gregory’s mediator as wealthstod:

Forðæm se wealthstod [self] Godes & monna, ðæt is Crist, fleah eorðrice to underfonne.

Therefore the mediator himself between God and man, that is Christ, shunned undertaking earthly rule."

The use of wealthstod for these two shades of meaning is not to suggest a divine attribution to the work of Alfred’s “wise wealthstodas,” but it does signify the importance of the mediatory


156. Stanton notes that wealthstod “frequently glosses the Latin interpres, all of whose medieval meanings it shares.” Stanton, Culture of Translation, 80.

157. Gregory, CP 1.3.9.

158. Alfred, CP 33.11.

159. Trans. Sweet, 33.
function. Just as the supreme *wealhstod* mediated between the divine and the human, translators of Scripture must mediate between the sacred and the profane, or as Stanton describes it, between “holy wisdom and human understanding.” Wealhstod as “mediator” is not totally alien to a modern English understanding of interpretation or translation, which can mean mediating between two different languages, cultures, or thought systems: more than simply re-rendering into another language, an interpreter or translator communicates or conveys meaning between groups, such as when an artist creatively translates a concept in their own preferred medium, or when a scholar interprets the meaning of a specific text for an audience. The “wise wealhstodas” of Alfred’s Prologue did more than simply transfer the text from one language to another; they acted as intermediaries between author and audience, mediating Sacred Scripture across cultural and language differences.

Such is Alfred’s role in England. Certainly, Alfred does not identify himself as a “wise wealhstod” in the Prologue, but by translating the *Cura pastoralis*, he functions as a wealhstod at multiple levels. Gregory’s text, seemingly just a manual for church administrators, is a source text for the spirituality of the ascetical tradition and steeped in the practical application of wisdom. Alfred did more than mediate Gregory’s words; he mediated the sapiential spirituality


161. The *OED* includes among the meanings for *interpret*: (1a) “To expound the meaning of (something abstruse or mysterious); to render (words, writings, an author, etc.) clear or explicit; to elucidate; to explain. Formerly, also, To translate (now only contextually, as included in the general sense).” Also, (2a) “To give a particular explanation of; to expound or take in a specified manner.” “interpret, v.”, *OED*, accessed June 23, 2016, *OED* Online. Similarly, *translate* carries such meanings as: (2a) “To turn from one language into another; ‘to change into another language retaining the sense’ (Johnson); to render; also, to express in other words, to paraphrase. (The chief current sense.)” and (3) “To interpret, explain; to expound the significance of (conduct, gestures, etc.); also, to express (one thing) in terms of another.”. “translate, v.”, *OED*, accessed June 23, 2016, *OED* Online.
which shaped the *Cura pastoralis* and which made the text a classic in Christian spirituality.

Further, Alfred acts a mediator in the Prologue itself; by reflecting on English history, he makes clear to his readers England’s spiritual state and responsibilities, and he mediates the meaning of history.162

### 5.5 Teaching Wisdom

Alfred’s mediation of wisdom requires pragmatic application in order to have impact on the lives of his people. Thus he proposes a program of translation and teaching in order to operationalize the practice of wisdom that will restore England’s wisdom and glory:

> Forðy me ðyncð betre, gif iow swæ ðyncð, ðæt we eac sumæ bec, ða ðe niedbeðearfosta sien eallum monnum to wiotonne, ðæt we ða on ðæt geðiode wenden ðe we ealle gecnawan mægen, & ge don, swæ we swiðe eāde magon mid Godes fultume, gif we ða stilnesse habbað, ðæt[te] eall sio gioguð ðe nu is on Angelcynne friora monna, ðara ðe ða speda hæbben ðæt hie ðæm befeoflan mægen, sien to liornunga oðfæste, ða hwile ðe hie wel cunnen Englisc gewrit areadan: lære mon siððan furður on Lædengeðiode ða ðe mon furðor læran wille & to hierran hade don wille.163

(Therefore it seems better to me—if it seems so to you—that we should turn into the language that we can all understand certain books which are the most necessary for all men to know, and accomplish this, as with God’s help we may very easily do provided we have peace enough, so that all the free-born young men now in England who have the means to apply themselves to it, may be set to learning (as long as they are not useful for some other employment) until the time that they can read English writings properly.

162. There is another precedent to consider in positioning Alfred as a *wise wealthstod*, one which Alfred does not reference but must have known through Bede: the seventh-century Northumbrian translator-king Oswald, saint and martyr of the English church. Oswald serves as an important precedent for Christian kingship in Anglo-Saxon England. Bede describes him as a man of piety and holiness, even a miracle-worker (*HE* 3.3-3.12). Bede states that when Oswald became king, one of his greatest desires was that his people should be Christian; he then requested from the Irish elders a bishop to teach and preach the faith to the English under his rule. Bede stresses Oswald’s role in this evangelization and proclamation. Knowing the Irish language, he interpreted his new Irish bishop’s proclamations to the Anglo-Saxons. This incident also appears in the Old English Bede, which relates that Oswald “heofonlecan lare wæs wallsted geworden” (became a translator of heavenly learning). Miller, *Old English Bede*, 158.22.

Thereafter one may instruct in Latin those whom one wishes to teach further and wishes to advance to holy orders…”\textsuperscript{164}

Unfortunately, while this decision offers Alfred’s rationale for translating the \textit{Cura pastoralis}, it does raise important questions: First, what other texts did Alfred envision as part of his program? Second, how does the \textit{Cura pastoralis} become elevated to an essential text for all men to know? As discussed earlier (Chapter 1), Alfred only names Gregory’s text in his Prologue, and there is no other hint of the works he considers necessary or essential (niedbeðearf), nor even merely useful until we arrive at the twelfth-century list provided by William of Malmesbury in his \textit{Gesta regum Anglorum}. Alfred’s Prologue is often read alongside the story of Alfred’s Martinmas experience relayed in the \textit{Vita Ælfredi} (ch. 89), although the \textit{Vita} does not identify texts either. Further, as Alfred does not provide a list, we also do not have a rationale for what texts he considers essential. Instead, we are left with the disputed texts of a shrinking canon and must discern their significance for Alfred from the texts themselves. Wallace-Hadrill is rather optimistic in his assessment of the matter, asserting that the volumes chosen “were the obvious books for [Alfred’s] purpose of self-instruction and general instruction in the social role of Christianity. All were familiar in the circle of Continental kings and their advisers.”\textsuperscript{165} The texts which continue to receive attention in this regard—namely, the Old English \textit{Boethius} and Augustine’s \textit{Soliloquy}—are appealing candidates for consideration as further wisdom-books, even more explicit in their sapiential orientation than the \textit{Cura pastoralis}, but this is ultimately speculation. For description of Alfred’s educational interest, we are restricted to the Prologue and

\textsuperscript{164} Trans. Keynes and Lapidge, 126.

the *Vita*, and these have limited utility in understanding the actual implementation of Alfred’s educational reform. The Prologue only names Gregory’s text, which Alfred introduces with no elaboration or annotation regarding its appeal to his agenda: “the book which in Latin is called *Pastoralis*, in English ‘Shepherd-book’” (ða boc wendan on Englisc ðe is genemned on Læden Pastoralis, ond on Englisc Hierdeboc). Keynes and Lapidge describe the *Cura pastoralis* as a “curious, even idiosyncratic, choice to have served as the basis for a programme of educational reform.” What makes an ecclesiastical text an essential volume in the education of England’s “free-born young men” (sio gioguð ðe nu is on Angelcynne friora monna)? Or, to make the complexity of the situation even more obvious, what is the educational value of a text written by an ascetically formed pontiff about the nature of spiritual authority, being distributed to Anglo-Saxon bishops, but intended to be read by young men who may or may not be destined for a religious vocation?

I have highlighted the sapiential dimensions of the *Cura pastoralis*, a classic in Christian spirituality, throughout this discussion. Certainly, the text’s value transcends its original stated purpose, and its reception history clearly demonstrates its versatility and its utility. Its ecclesiastical origins are unquestionable, as Gregory makes it plain in his writing that the primary readership is churchly. Arguments persist about whether Gregory also intended a secular audience, and Gregory’s own leadership demonstrated that religious and civil leadership were

167. Keynes and Lapidge, 34.
However, Alfred’s distribution of the text to bishops effected an additional change in its use: where the *Cura pastoralis* had been used by clerics for the formation of clerics, or clerics for the formation of laity (rulers), in Anglo-Saxon England we find the king administering it to clerics and laity alike. Furthermore, I previously addressed the ways in which Alfred translated the text, transforming language about a predominantly religious office to that of the teacher. Alfred’s translation shifts the text even further past Gregory’s stated, explicitly ecclesiastical audience. This does not rob the *Cura pastoralis* of any its theological dimensions or reduce its nature as a text in Christian spirituality—but it distinctly helped to laicize the text’s audience. Additionally, if we return to the earlier treatment of the text’s operationalizing of wisdom and exposition of wisdom as praxis, we can appreciate that its wisdom—rooted in ascetical technologies of self-scrutiny, introspection, and discernment—has a broader applicability than simply the exercise of ecclesiastical authority. Whether Alfred would genuinely have considered the *Cura pastoralis*’s value instrumental in the education of “all men” is to some degree moot: his universalist rhetoric is immediately qualified by his discussion of educating the youth of free men in England. We know from Asser’s *Vita* that Alfred was deeply committed not only to his own learning and formation, but to the quality of his court—especially to the wise administration of justice (ch. 106). Clearly, Alfred is not distributing the *Cura pastoralis* to create a corps of ascetically-minded lay spiritual directors, but to ensure that the

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Anglo-Saxons are governed through the same kind of discerning wisdom that is embodied in Solomon and taught by Gregory.

I conclude with a brief glance at Alfred’s verse preface to the *Cura pastoralis*, which is deserving of more attention in its own right.\(^{170}\) It is written in the voice of the book itself, a not uncommon device in Old English poetry.\(^{171}\) The text is brief, and I present it in full:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Pis ærendgewrit} & \quad \text{Agustinus} \\
\text{ofr sealtne sæ} & \quad \text{suðan brohte} \\
\text{iegbuendum, swa hit ær fore} & \quad \text{adihtode Dryhtnes cempa,} \\
\text{adihtode} & \quad \text{Rome papa. Ryhtspell monig} \\
\text{Gregorius gleawmod gindwod} & \quad \text{ðurh sefan snyttro searoðonca hord.} \\
\text{Forðæm he monncynnes mæst gestriende} & \quad \text{rodra Wearde, Romwara betest,} \\
\text{monna modwelegost, mærðum gefrægost.} & \\
\text{Siððan min on Englisc} & \quad \text{Ælfred kyning} \\
\text{awende worda gehwelc, & me his writerum} & \quad \text{sende suð & norð, heht him swelcra ma} \\
\text{sendan meahte, forðæm hi his sume ðorfton,} & \quad \text{bregan bi ðære bisene, ðæt he his biscepum} \\
\text{ða ðe Lædenspræce læste cuðon.} & \quad \text{sendan meahte, forðæm hi his sume ðorfton,} \\
\end{align*}\]

(Augustine brought this message from the south over the salt sea to the island dwellers, just as the Lord’s champion, the pope at Rome, had previously composed it. The wise Gregory explored many true texts thoroughly through his mind’s

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\(^{170}\) Sweet had no affection for the epilogue’s metrical nature, dismissing it as “little more than a dislocated prose” a “curious doggrel” [sic]. Sweet, 473. For more positive assessment of the passage, see Nicole Guenther Discenza, “Alfred’s Verse Preface to the Pastoral Care and the Chain of Authority,” *Neophilogus* 85 (2001): 625-33; Frantzen, *King Alfred*, 39; William T. Whobrey, “Alfred’s Metrical Epilogue to the ‘Pastoral Care’,” *JEGP* 90, no. 2 (April, 1991): 175-86.


\(^{172}\) Alfred, *CP* 9.9-15. Sweet presents it as prose in his edition of the *Cura pastoralis*, but provides a metrical variant in his notes, as is reproduced here. Sweet, 473-74.
intelligence, his hoard of clever thoughts. Therefore
he, the best of Romans, most wealthy in mind among
men, most renowned for his glorious deeds, won the
greatest number of humankind for the guardian of heaven.
Afterward King Alfred translated every word
of me into English and sent me south and north to
his scribes; he ordered them to produce more such copies
according to the exemplar, so that he could
send them to his bishops, because some of them
who knew very little Latin needed it.)

What draws our attention in this text is the history of religious authorities which Alfred provides:
Gregory wrote the *Cura pastoralis*, Augustine carried it, Alfred translated it, sent it forth, and
ordered its distribution. The verse preface is about more than just the history of the text,
however; it creates a lineage of men tasked with the conversion and religious leadership of the
Anglo-Saxons. In translating and distributing the *Cura pastoralis*, Alfred positions himself
within the tradition of men whose calling was to convert England, to mediate sacred learning and
holy wisdom. Gregory, as the Apostle to the English, mediated the Christian faith to a non-
Christian tribe of barbarians through the work of Augustine the missionary. Alfred, the king of
the Anglo-Saxons, further sought to mediate holy wisdom to an unwise people. The verse preface
establishes a legacy of Christians whose responsibility was to guide the Anglo-Saxons to the
Christian faith: Where Gregory and Augustine sought to make the Anglo-Saxons Christian,
however, Alfred sought to make them authentically Christian. By mediating holy wisdom to an

Prologues and Epilogues Associated with King Alfred*, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library 19

174. Nicole Guenther Discenza notes similarly, “The primary way the Preface appropriates
authority is through the construction of this chain of authority.” Discenza, “Alfred’s Verse Preface,” 626.
Although Discenza is more concerned with Alfred’s construction of authority and I am focusing
specifically on the religious dimensions of his authority, her article is a careful analysis of Alfred’s
rhetorical strategies in the poem.
unwise people, Alfred would transform nominal Christians to a virtuous people who loved learning and wisdom.
CONCLUSION

Throughout this study, I have called King Alfred a wisdom teacher and a religious leader, and discussed his translation program in terms of vernacular theology and spiritual reform. Are these simply rhetorical flourishes, or are they fair claims? Consider that in Alfred, we have a ninth-century figure whose crafted contemporary biography by Asser was incomplete and inconsistent, who did not attempt institutional ecclesiastical reform, whose literary activity was largely focused on translation, and whose own words on the subject only survive in a handful of framing pieces (epistolary prologues and epilogues). Further, given what extant material we have for Alfred, he did not abandon his secular vocation to take up religious orders, as was often expected from the youngest son of aristocratic families; he did not instruct us in how to pray and pursue a deeper, more intimate divine presence in life, as expected from a spiritual leader, or report having received visions from heaven, in the spirit of visionary reformers. The most striking supernal claim that has been made about him is the miraculous acquisition of Latin—an episode that reveals a modern misreading of his Vita Ælfredi by Asser, and is not a claim pursued by other medieval writers. In other words, I appear to have thoroughly discounted every possibility of treating Alfred as a conventional spiritual authority figure. Yet, I argue that these are not adequate markers by which to measure Alfred’s spiritual authority or creativity. While they are the usual targets for religious studies and eminently worthy of study, these are only the high profile indicators of religiosity. The academic study of spirituality has counseled us not to limit our approach in the study of spirituality to vision narratives, biblical exegesis, or other conventional expressions of religiosity. Similarly, we should not restrict our understanding of
spiritual authority to the known ecclesiastical leaders and sanctioned religious figures. These individuals, like visions and prayers, are easy targets for attention, but they alone should not define the field of study. While Alfred stood outside the ecclesiastical hierarchy as a secular leader and had limited formal theological training, we find in his life and in his literary works a demonstration of medieval spirituality outside the hermitage or the cloister. If medieval kingship blurred the lines between the sacred and the secular, it also provided Alfred the opportunity as a layperson to actively engage in the practice of spiritual formation and oversight. Both Asser’s Vita Ælfredi and Alfred’s translation of the Cura pastoralis offer unique windows not just into Alfred’s spiritual life, but the role of learning and wisdom within it.

The Vita Ælfredi portrays a king deeply committed to religious learning, and actively positions Alfred’s role in the promotion of spiritual formation through the study of sacred Scripture and other religious literature. Because of the Vita’s integration of fact and history alongside religious tropes and themes, it has been read as pious propaganda. Instead of reading such tropes as merely panegyric gloss, I argue that they provide a hagio-biographical dimension to the Vita that portrays a king whose many historically recorded deeds sit alongside his role in English salvation history as a kingly shepherd of Anglo-Saxon Christians. The Vita presents Alfred as a man of deep piety, but beyond a few mentions of his attention to religious practice, the text attends in considerably more detail to Alfred’s life as a lover of wisdom. Alfred is shown repeatedly as a man whose desire for learning emerges from a divine impulse within him, and whose quest for wisdom is providentially met through encounters with text and teachers.

Alfred’s spirituality—his project of self-transcendence, his orientation toward an ultimate horizon—is regularly expressed through his yearning for wisdom, and his formation is
characterized by his growth as a student of sacred learning. The momentous event which took place on Martinmas 887 is often read in modern scholarship as a miraculous acquisition of Latin. However, a better interpretation reveals Alfred’s breakthrough in understanding sacred theology locked in a language he had struggled with, and his commitment to further study. While this lacks the fireworks of a miraculous xenoglossia, even more importantly it presents Alfred as a man driven to learn spiritual formation through study, and marks his transformation from wisdom seeker to wisdom mediator. Ultimately, the *Vita Ælfredi* functions as a form of sacred biography, and its religious dimensions do not undercut its historic value. They reveal a portrayal of Alfred as a ruler deeply committed to the spiritual formation of his people through teaching and learning.

Alfred’s religious role as depicted in Asser’s *Vita* is only one part of the picture, however. We must also consider the works and words of Alfred himself. Although we do not have an abundance of texts from Alfred’s hand, and the canon of works he has translated is a source of constant debate, we are fortunate to have Alfred’s translation of Gregory the Great’s *Cura pastoralis* as well as his own prologues and epilogue to the text. Gregory’s text has been under-appreciated in modern scholarship, but was one of the most influential theological works of early medieval history (particularly the Carolingian reform), and continues to function as a classic of western Christian spirituality. Although the *Cura pastoralis* can appear as a dreary manual on church leadership, the text offers a praxis-based wisdom for the Christian—lay and religious alike—to study and emulate. This is the scriptural wisdom consonant with the divine order, the wisdom of discernment articulated by Christian ascetics and found in the biblical example of King Solomon, whose image permeates the *Cura pastoralis*. There are hints within
the text of that wisdom which is a divine emanation, but it is not fully developed; Alfred hews closely to his source, and the biblical personification of Wisdom appears only fleetingly in the *Cura pastoralis*. Further study in this area should turn to other texts attributed to Alfred’s leadership and translation, specifically the Old English versions of Boethius’s *De consolatione philosophiae*, and St. Augustine of Hippo’s *Soliloquia*. Are these consonant with the wisdom we see hinted at in Gregory’s Prologue to the *Cura pastoralis* or expressed through the *Cura pastoralis itself*? Or, does Alfred’s wisdom wear as many faces as the wisdom of scripture?

Alfred’s Prologue to his translation of Gregory’s *Cura pastoralis* reveals a thoughtful meditation on the spiritual state of his country and its place in salvation history: interpreting his world through a prophetic lens, he understood England’s calamities at the hand of the Vikings as divine retribution for the nation’s sapiential decline. To be Christian, for Alfred, meant to pursue wisdom. Alfred’s devotion to wisdom, which had once been personal, became political, and he asserted that the recovery of wisdom was fundamental to the restoration of Anglo-Saxon glory. Alfred’s Prologue is a cogitation on what it meant to be Christian, and Alfred offers the *Cura pastoralis* as a handbook on the performance of wisdom. Alfred’s Prologue and his translation of the *Cura pastoralis* may lack the language of sacrament or revelation, but they reveal a spirituality that can be studied and practiced by laity and religious orders alike. It is easy to label Alfred’s actions in terms of “educational reform,” but we cannot ignore that its pedagogical subtext was spiritual and moral formation and the study of sacred scripture. If to be Christian was to be wise, then to be wise one had to be learned; and to be learned required access to both texts and teachers. They are inexorably and intrinsically related, thus Alfred the educational reformer is by necessity also Alfred the spiritual reformer.
Can Alfred’s works be articulated in terms of vernacular theology? We see in Alfred’s program an endeavor to communicate religious texts to a community through their native tongue. Alfred’s reform was not centered on the improvement of Latin instruction for the clergy, but the vernacularization of Latin texts that he felt were valuable for all to learn. His translation of the *Cura pastoralis* shows his own theological engagement with Gregory’s text, while his translation strategies reveal shifts that accommodate Alfred’s secular setting and, more importantly, make room for a less theologically-educated readership. Through his translation, Alfred inculturated the *Cura pastoralis* for an Anglo-Saxon Christian audience. Furthermore, Alfred’s Prologue is an original theological reflection on English Christian salvation history and on his country’s need for spiritual reformation. Both his translation and his prefatory meditation are profoundly theological activities shaped by vernacular opportunities and needs. Alfred’s vernacular theology was not the exposition of mysticism or contemplative teachings, but it was no less an exercise in interiority.

There is a final dimension to Alfred’s leadership that requires attention. I have repeatedly asserted where Alfred’s work stands in the shadow of Charlemagne and the Carolingian reform. However, Alfred’s role as a spiritual authority in Anglo-Saxon England also stands in the shadow of Gregory the Great as the Apostle of England. Alfred’s place in this lineage is established both by his use of Gregory’s lauded text and by the verse preface that names the text’s history: written by Gregory, brought to England by Augustine of Canterbury, and now shared by Alfred. His spiritual leadership places him squarely in a religious interpretation of history which saw the Christians of England as a nation of converts who had to be shepherded and guided to the Christian faith through the Gregorian mission. It was an interpretation of
history examined by the Venerable Bede in his *Historia ecclesia gentis Anglorum*, with its tales of Christian missionaries, pagan nations, and convert kings. The primary goal of this dissertation has been to reframe Alfred’s kingship so that its religious dimensions do not dispute earlier historical scholarship and attention to Alfred’s literary output, but to recover Alfred’s place among the spiritual authorities called to lead the conversion of Anglo-Saxon England. Alfred’s England was already Christian, but it was not beyond the need for conversion: the Anglo-Saxons were Christians in name only. Alfred’s Anglo-Saxons did not need to accept the Christian faith or to reject a wanton immorality, but to recover their Christian calling—a recovery that would require the pursuit and practice of wisdom, the same wisdom which called to Alfred throughout his life, and which he in turn called others to seek.
APPENDIX

SCRIPTURAL REFERENCES IN THE CURA PASTORALIS

Introduction

In studying the theological dimensions of Alfred’s engagement with Gregory the Great’s Cura pastoralis, it is valuable to consider the role of scripture in that text. Gregory ascetical handbook for spiritual leadership and the practice of wisdom is thoroughly saturated with biblical references, even though the work is not written as scriptural exegesis. Part of understanding how Gregory deployed scripture is accomplished by surveying the broad scriptural landscape of the Cura pastoralis, to consider which texts he used and how often he drew from different parts of the Bible. Of particular interest for this study, of course, is the prevalence of citations from biblical wisdom literature. A consideration of how often Gregory references Solomon or quotes Biblical wisdom literature suggests that Solomonic wisdom plays an important role in Gregory’s theological discourse. However, some accounting of Gregory’s use of scriptural texts is necessary in order to give this assessment meaning.

Method

Biblical citations were identified in the Cura pastoralis using the scholarly apparatus in Bruno Judic’s critical edition for Sources Chrétiennes (1992), and cross-referenced against the apparati in two modern English translations of Henry Davis (1950) and George Demacopoulos (2007).¹ A resulting 506 biblical citations were thus identified. Each citation was then classified

¹. See Grégoire le Grande [Gregory the Great], Règle Pastorale, ed. Judic; Gregory the Great, Pastoral Care, ed. Davis; and Gregory the Great, The Book of Pastoral Rule, ed. Demacopoulos.
with two tags: its *category* (what “kind” of text it is) and its authorial *attribution*. These two classifications rely on the early Christian understandings of Scripture which shaped Gregory’s reception of the biblical text. Thus, the classifications are more specifically identified as *canonical category* and *traditional attribution*. Canonical category signifies how the texts were received as sections within the Bible, or as groupings of related material, according to Jewish and later Christian tradition. For example, although the first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) contain a diverse collection of materials from different genres, and range from history (irrespective of their historicity or lack thereof) to ritual and moral instruction, they are traditionally treated authoritatively as a unit (Torah in Jewish tradition, or Pentateuch in Christian). Thus, references to these five books in the *Cura pastoralis* are categorized as Pentateuch. Similarly, by *attribution*, I do not refer to modern historical-critical scholarship regarding a text’s authorship. Rather, I indicate a text’s attributed authorship as that text was received by Jewish and Christian traditions. Continuing the previous example, although modern scholarship does not consider Moses to be the author of the Pentateuch, I thus treat him as those texts’ traditionally attributed author.

The treatment of wisdom texts is problematic, as I discussed in Chapter 1. The wisdom canon has changed throughout Jewish and Christian history. For the sake of this accounting of texts, in order to comport to Gregory’s own perceived treatment of texts, I treat as wisdom texts those biblical writings attributed to Solomon’s authorship: Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth), Proverbs, Song of Songs, and the deuterocanonical Wisdom of Solomon and Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus). The last text listed is particularly problematic. As I discussed earlier, the Bible does not name Solomon as Ben Sira’s author, but some early Christian authorities perceived otherwise. Jerome
and later Christian scholarship refuted Solomon’s authorship of Ben Sira, but it is clear from the *Cura pastoralis* that Gregory considers Solomon as that text’s author, invoking Solomon’s name before a quotation from Ben Sira. Thus, I include Ben Sira within the category of wisdom texts which are attributed to Solomon himself. Finally, although modern scholarship treats Job as a wisdom text, because this accounting restricts the wisdom category to those texts associated with Solomon, I do not include the handful of citations from Job in the final count of wisdom texts.

**Results**

Although this survey clearly relies on an accounting of texts, the following should not be misconstrued as a quantitative analysis and does not attend to questions of frequency or prevalence. Discussion of significance in these results ultimately has a more qualitative value and should be treated accordingly. With this caveat in mind, surveying the biblical landscape of the *Cura pastoralis* suggests the following:

First, the *Cura pastoralis* reveals a wide range of biblical sources. The 506 identified citations are drawn from 56 different scriptural books. Of these, the book of Proverbs is the single-most cited scriptural text:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scripture</th>
<th>Citations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proverbs</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psalms</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Corinthians</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaiah</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. “Quibus sub auditoris specie recte apud Salomonem dicitur, ‘Fili, sine consilio nihil facias, et post factum non paeniteberis.’” (To these, as if he intended them to be his hearers, it is appositely said by Solomon: “My son, do thou nothing without counsel, and thou shalt not repent when thou hast done.”) Gregory the Great, *CP* 3.15.57-59. Trans. Davis, 136. (The scripture is Ben Sira 32:19.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book</th>
<th>Chapter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exodus</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezekiel</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Corinthians</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeremiah</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Timothy</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romans</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben Sira</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Samuel</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genesis</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galatians</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hebrews</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revelations</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Peter</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ephesians</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Samuel</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Peter</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Song of Songs</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecclesiastes</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deuteronomy</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hosea</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leviticus</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numbers</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Thessalonians</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Timothy</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colossians</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamentations</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philemon</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Titus</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Kings</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Kings</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisdom of Solomon</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 John</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Thessalonians</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Chronicles</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amos</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habakkuk</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haggai</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joel</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Malachi 1  
Tobit 1  
Zechariah 1  
Zephaniah 1  

Second, when citations are grouped by canonical category, wisdom texts rank fourth among such categories, with the Pauline epistles the most commonly cited canonical category of text:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Canonical Category</th>
<th>Citations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pauline epistles</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gospels</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prophetic literature</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisdom</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pentateuch</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psalter</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Histories</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic epistle</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apocalypse</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, even though wisdom texts rank beneath the Gospels and prophetic literature, when considering works by attributed author, Solomon becomes the second-most frequently referenced biblical authority after Paul:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Citations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solomon</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moses</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psalmist</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaiah</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OT History</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezekiel</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeremiah</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hosea</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

It bears repeating that this brief discussion is not intended to have statistical weight, and is a simple consideration of how often different types of biblical texts are used in Gregory’s text. What this does suggest is a particularly high occurrence of references to Solomon and biblical wisdom literature throughout the *Cura pastoralis*. It would thus be accurate to say that Gregory makes use of a diverse array of scriptural texts in the *Cura pastoralis*, and though Paul is the dominant Biblical voice within the text, Solomonic wisdom has a particularly strong presence as well.


Bately, Janet M. “Alfred as Author and Translator.” In Discenza and Szarmach, 113-42.


—. “The Old English Orosius.” In Discenza and Szarmach, 313-43.


Bratu, Cristian. “Mirrors for Princes (Western).” In Classen, 1921-49.

Bremmer, Rolf H., Jr., “Old English Heroic Literature.” In Johnson and Treharne, 75-90.


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