

“With an impressive mastery of the primary sources, Dr. Olsen offers a detailed yet accessible account of the liturgical contexts that shaped the exegesis of one late tenth-century English monk, Ælfric of Eynsham. By close analysis of four Old English homilies on the gospel of Matthew, Olsen contributes to a growing body of scholarship that takes Ælfric seriously as an original theologian, not just a compiler of patristic authorities. Approaching Ælfric’s writings from the vantage point of a New Testament scholar, moreover, Dr. Olsen is well placed to observe some broader tendencies in Ælfric’s hermeneutics that previous scholars have missed.”

—Christopher A. Jones
Professor, Department of English
Ohio State University

“Derek A. Olsen has broken new ground in the field of biblical studies. For years Christians serious about the foundations of their faith have pleaded for the kind of work Olsen has produced, but theologians and biblical scholars have typically responded either by merely nodding silently or, at most, by quoting a handful of patristic and medieval writers in their explorations and commentaries. Olsen’s thesis, carefully researched and elegantly and clearly written, is nothing less than the one and only substantial sequel to Jean Leclercq’s *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*. Monastic men and women reading the first two chapters will have an experience of self-discovery: ‘So this is what monastic culture is all about.’”

—Mark A. Scott, OCSO, SSL
Abbot
New Melleray Abbey

“*Reading Matthew with Monks* invites contemporary students of the Bible to read Matthew in conversation with Benedictine monks of medieval England. The surprising result of this generative conversation is that, at the same time that contemporary readers learn much *about* the liturgically framed reading practices of the monks, we may actually learn more *from them* about how to expand and deepen our own reading practices.”

—Gail R. O’Day
Dean and Professor of New Testament and Preaching
Wake Forest University School of Divinity

“In *Reading Matthew with Monks*, Derek Olsen invites us into a conversation with the communion of saints, both living and dead. This communal reading across time and space is grounded in careful scholarship—medieval and modern—while bringing alive the faith experiences of those who, then and now, read and perform the Scriptures. In particular, Olsen demonstrates the central but much neglected role that liturgy played in early medieval monastic interpretive communities. In restoring that performative context for reading Scripture, he corrects the misguided modern notion that early medieval Europe lacked a commentary tradition but was merely derivative. Indeed, Olsen succeeds in taking one prolific Anglo-Saxon homiletic writer, Ælfric of Eynsham, and makes him the equal of modern biblical scholars brought into the dialogue on select passages of the Gospel of Matthew, including the paradigmatic Beatitudes from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. The exciting challenge of this book is the invitation to continue the conversation.”

—Karen Louise Jolly

Professor of History, University of Hawai‘i Mānoa

Author of *The Community of St. Cuthbert in the Late Tenth Century*

“Derek Olsen’s study of biblical interpretation at the hands of the medieval monk Ælfric of Eynsham strikes just the right balance. He suggests that today’s serious work with biblical texts is competent to answer certain questions and then shows how alternative approaches enrich how we engage those texts spiritually and theologically. He drills down into the interpretive sensibilities and practices of a single monk yet contextualizes that work so that we are challenged by them. Whether read as an expanded chapter in the history of biblical interpretation or as an exemplar on how theological interpreters might learn from premodern readings of Scripture, this is a welcome contribution.”

—Joel B. Green

Dean of the School of Theology

Fuller Theological Seminary

“*Reading Matthew with Monks* introduces us modern readers into this distinct culture of medieval liturgy and teaches us to catch the voice and the thoughts of those monks who not only read but truly strove to live the Gospel.”

—Wim Verbaal

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Reading Matthew with Monks

*Liturgical Interpretation in
Anglo-Saxon England*

Derek A. Olsen

Foreword by
Luke Timothy Johnson



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Foreword

Luke Timothy Johnson

In this superb study of medieval liturgical interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew, Derek Olsen makes an important contribution to a growing movement among biblical scholars, namely, paying serious attention to the history of interpretation. This movement, I am convinced, is more than a fad driven by boredom and frustration at the meager yield of obsessive historical criticism of Scripture or the hunger for less trampled territory to explore. It is inspired by the simple conviction that the world that shaped the Bible—so sedulously examined by historical critics—is ultimately less interesting and significant than the world that the Bible shapes. Scripture imagines a world that centuries of believers have entered and, through embodied practices, made their own. Biblical scholars are beginning to appreciate that the history of interpretation is of genuine significance even for their traditional task of exegesis: the way in which scriptural texts were used and understood within the tradition not only tells us about the perceptions of interpreters but also reveals the rich polyvalence of the texts themselves. How passages *were* understood helps show how they *can* be understood.

Although the patristic interpretation of Scripture has long been analyzed and applauded, medieval interpretation continues to be widely regarded as derivative and undistinguished. This, despite Henri de Lubac's universally admired study, *Medieval Exegesis*. Indeed, the massive size and apparent comprehensiveness of de Lubac's work may have encouraged the sense that all other investigators would find among medieval

interpreters would be what de Lubac had already discovered. But while de Lubac pointed the way to an appreciation of medieval interpretation, by no means did he exhaust the subject, especially since he paid relatively little attention to the true center of interpretive creativity in the Middle Ages, the liturgy.

Building on the seminal work of Jean Leclercq on monastic culture (*The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*) and on William Flynn's groundbreaking analysis of a single interpretive community (*Medieval Music as Exegesis*), Olsen sets out to re-create in minute detail the liturgical context within which the sermons of Ælfric—a key figure in the Benedictine revival in tenth-century England—were delivered. Thanks to his astonishing reconstruction of the entire monastic *ordo*, we are able to read Ælfric's sermons on Matthew, translated by Olsen from the Old English, not as isolated literary productions, but as moments within a living cycle of reflection on Scripture throughout the monastic day. This historical contextualization is by itself a major accomplishment, all the more impressive because carried out not by a professional medievalist but by a New Testament scholar.

It is as a New Testament scholar, indeed, that Olsen brings something genuinely original to the study of medieval monastic interpretation. First, he provides a careful comparison between the respective reading cultures of contemporary historical critics of the New Testament and monastic interpreters like Ælfric; the present-day world of academic analysis has different premises but shares many of the practices of the monks: both monks and academics, for example, make extensive use of earlier authorities in constructing their own interpretations. Second, he shows in detail how contemporary commentators interpret selected passages in Matthew, comparing them to interpretations of the same passages in Ælfric's sermons. By comparing social settings, interpretive practices, and specific readings, Olsen creates the possibility of conversation between critical and so-called precritical exegesis, a conversation that does not in the least slight the contributions of modern readers but sharpens an appreciation for the monastic interpretive tradition.

Despite the evenhandedness of his approach, readers of Olsen's work will, I think, be impressed by how much more "scriptural" was the world of medieval monks, compared to our own. The contemporary exegetes whom Olsen analyzes are all believers and all dedicated to the church.

But because their discourse is shaped by the conventions of the academic guild more than by the tropes of worship, their engagement with the text seems detached and merely descriptive, whereas the words of Ælfric serve to advance the goal of the entire monastic enterprise, which was (and remains) the transformation of life according to the mind of Christ. One can only hope that this fine study, having shown the way, will encourage similar studies of individual interpreters, especially those who, like Ælfric, are deeply shaped by the liturgy.

Acknowledgments

This work began life as a dissertation for Emory University's graduate division of religion, Department of New Testament. It evolved under the direction of my committee, Gail O'Day, Michael Brown, James Morey, Charles Hackett, and my director, Luke Timothy Johnson. I owe them all a great debt for their assistance.

In the five years since I defended the original dissertation, much valuable work has been published in the many and various fields on which it touches. My attempts to keep myself up to date on this expanding body of literature were made possible through the dedication of the inter-library loan department of Baltimore's Enoch Pratt Free Library, and especially the wonderful folks at the Light Street Branch.

Thanks also are due to Liturgical Press and Hans Christoffersen for taking a chance on this work. Patrick McGowan's editing saved me from countless infelicities of wording and grammar.

There have been, over the years, countless people who have supported this work intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and financially—to all of you I owe my deepest gratitude. Special acknowledgment goes to my long-suffering and beloved wife, Meredith Kefauver Olsen, and our wonderful daughters, Greta and Hannah, who sacrificed the most; to my advisor and mentor, Luke Timothy Johnson, without whom this never would have gotten off the ground, let alone completed; and to the congregations and clergy of St. Mary the Virgin, Times Square, and the Cathedral of St. Philip, Atlanta, who stood by us and gave us strength in the darkest hours.

Abbreviations

- ÆCHom I
(Pref)¹ Preface to the first cycle of *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies* as edited in Peter Clemoes, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series, Text*, Early English Text Society, supplementary series 17 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 174–77.
- ÆCHom I, 1 Homily *De initio creaturae* in the first cycle of *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies* as edited in Peter Clemoes, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series, Text*, Early English Text Society, supplementary series 17 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 178–89.
- ÆCHom I, 8 Homily for the Third Sunday after Epiphany in the first cycle of *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies* as edited in Peter Clemoes, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series, Text*, Early English Text Society, supplementary series 17 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 241–48.
- ÆCHom I, 8
(App) Appendix to the Homily for the Third Sunday after Epiphany in the first cycle of *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies* as edited in Peter Clemoes, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series, Text*, Early English Text Society, supplementary series 17 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 553.

¹ These and all other titles of Old English texts follow the standards established by the *Dictionary of Old English* which can be found online at: <http://www.doe.utoronto.ca/st/index.html>. Accessed November 7, 2014.

- ÆCHom I, 11 Homily for the First Sunday in Lent in the first cycle of Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies* as edited in Peter Clemoes, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series, Text*, Early English Text Society, supplementary series 17 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 266–74.
- ÆCHom I, 13 Homily for the feast of the Annunciation in the first cycle of Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies* as edited in Peter Clemoes, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series, Text*, Early English Text Society, supplementary series 17 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 281–89.
- ÆCHom I, 36 Homily for the feast of All Saints in the first cycle of Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies* as edited in Peter Clemoes, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series, Text*, Early English Text Society, supplementary series 17 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 486–96.
- ÆCHom II, 1 Homily for Christmas in the second cycle of Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies* as edited in Malcolm Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The Second Series, Text*, Early English Text Society, supplementary series 5 (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), 3–11.
- ÆCHom II, 44 Homily for the Common of Virgins in the second cycle of Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies* as edited in Malcolm Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The Second Series, Text*, Early English Text Society, supplementary series 5 (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), 327–34.
- ÆHex *Ælfric's Hexameron* as edited in Samuel J. Crawford, *Exameron Anglice or The Old English Hexameron*, Bib. ags. Prosa 10 (Hamburg: H. Grand, 1921 [repr. Darmstadt, 1968]), 33–74.
- ÆHom 12 *Ælfric's sermon De sancta Trinitate et de festis diebus per annum* as edited in; John C. Pope, *Homilies of Ælfric: A Supplementary Collection*, 2 vols., Early English Text Society 259, 260 (London: Oxford University Press, 1967–1968), 1:463–72.

- ÆLet 4 (SigewardB) *Ælfric's Letter to Sigeward* as edited in Samuel J. Crawford, *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch*, Early English Text Society 160 (London: Oxford University Press, 1922 [repr. with additions by N. R. Ker, 1969]), 18–33, 39–51.
- ÆLet 6 (Wulfgeat) *Ælfric's Letter to Wulfgeat* as edited in Bruno Assmann, *Angelsächsische Homilien und Heiligenleben*, Bib. ags. Prosa 3 (Kassel: G. H. Wigand, 1889 [repr. with intro. by P. Clemons, Darmstadt, 1964]), 1–12.
- ÆLS (Memory of Saints) Sermon on the Memory of the Saints in *Ælfric's Lives of the Saints*, edited in Walter W. Skeat, *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, 4 vols., Early English Text Society 76, 82, 94, 114 (London: Oxford University Press, 1881–1900 [repr. in 2 vols., 1966]), 1:336–62.
- CAO René-Jean Hesbert, *Corpus Antiphonarium Officii*. 6 vols. (Rome: Herder, 1963ff.).
- De Doc. Chr.* Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1958).
- LME *Ælfric's Letter to the Monks at Eynsham* as edited in Christopher A. Jones, *Ælfric's Letter to the Monks at Eynsham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- OR *Ordines Romani* as edited in Michel Andrieu, ed., *Les Ordines romani du haut moyen âge*. 5 Vols., *Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense* 11, 23, 24, 28, 29 (Louvain, 1931–1961).
- PL Jean-Paul Migne, ed., *Patrologia Latina* (Paris 1844–1855), with supplementary volumes.
- RB Rule of St Benedict as edited in Timothy Fry, ed., *RB 1980: The Rule of Saint Benedict in Latin and English with Notes* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981).

RC *Regularis Concordia* as edited in Thomas Symons, *Regularis Concordia Anglicae Nationis Monachorum Sanctimonialiumque. The Monastic Agreement of the Monks and Nuns of the English Nation* (London: Nelson, 1953).



Introduction

Hermeneutics and Reading Cultures

Christians are people who read the Bible as a foundational religious text. The choice of a text, however, raises just as many questions as it solves—if not more. Although this simple assertion answers the question of *what* to read, solving what inevitably leads to the questions of *how* and *why*. The question of how a text is read involves the way in which a reader engages the text, what methods are brought to bear on it, and what assumptions are granted with regard to it. How a text is read has a dramatic effect on what that reader will take away. Why a text is read injects an orientation into the reading process by raising the question of the ultimate goal of reading. Once a goal is on the table, certain kinds of readings or methods of reading can be judged to be helpful, unhelpful, or indifferent to achieving the goal.

All of these questions about reading—what, how, why—fall within the study of hermeneutics, the science of interpreting texts and making meaning from them. Hermeneutics are like theology: everyone has one whether they realize it or not. The more aware readers are about their hermeneutics, the more clearly they can align their reading practices with their reading goals.

One of the great advances in hermeneutical theory in the last few decades is the increasing recognition that these three main questions—what, how, and why we read—are inextricably connected with the

question of *with whom* we read. Readers do not exist in isolation; reading is a communal activity. No matter how alone we may seem to be when we sit down with a text, we read embedded within cultures and micro-cultures that shape our assumptions, methods, and models of reading and interpreting. The communities within which we read bring their own hermeneutics to the table. Our readings, therefore, are done in the context of our reading communities, and our hermeneutics are learned within the communities within which we read.

When Christians sit down to read the Bible, their default hermeneutical system is probably going to be defined by the faith community that formed them. In acts of worship, in hearing sermons, while receiving religious instruction, and in the words, thoughts, and themes of prayers, hermeneutical fundamentals ingrain themselves into a congregation. From these experiences, believers are taught how to regard the Bible, how to understand the Bible, what kind of respect is owed to it, as well as the Bible's central themes as understood by that faith community. Of course, exactly what these are vary quite differently from church to church!

But Christians do not only read in church. They read within their broader culture as well, sometimes within other specialized fields or microcultures. In our school years students are taught to read different texts in different ways: a novel is not read in the same way as a poem, an encyclopedia, or lab instructions. We learn to take certain kinds of texts more seriously than others; we realize that our reading strategies must shift in response to the purpose for which we read. As a result, readers in modern society become members of a variety of overlapping reading cultures. Usually these different cultures reinforce one another. Sometimes, though, the reading strategies of one culture will clash with another.

Divinity students entering seminary will often come with a warning from home ringing in their ears: "Don't let them take away your Jesus!" In a very real way, this admonition relates directly to the negotiation of hermeneutics. To phrase it another way, the students' faith communities recognize that the students will be immersed in a new reading culture—and that the methods of biblical interpretation taught at seminary may be at odds with their own. The concern is that the students will return having absorbed the hermeneutics of the academic study of Scripture and will no longer be able to relate—or participate—with the hermeneutics of the community who brought them to faith in the first place.

Whether they realize it or not, these students are being confronted with a series of options about how they will negotiate the encounter between differing reading communities with differing hermeneutics. Some try to make this encounter an all-or-nothing “either/or” between the new and old ways of reading, either turning their backs on their formative communities or plunging dogged through coursework determined that they will complete the required classes without learning a thing or being changed in any way. Others, though, find a middle ground, a more inclusive “both/and” position that allows them to retain the spiritual richness they received from their nurturing community but also enables them to engage the intellectual rigor of the academic approach. The key to finding the middle ground lays in identifying and understanding the fundamentals of hermeneutics—the why and the how of the different reading communities—and grasping where these fundamentals come into conflict with one another and where they may be of mutual benefit.

Indeed biblical scholarship has, in recent decades, begun this same process of negotiation itself. By listening to readers outside of the modern academic microculture, it is finding new approaches into biblical texts through the eyes of others. It has been enriched by a growing plurality of voices representing interpretive communities from around the globe. While African, African-American, Latino, feminist, womanist, queer, and liberation perspectives have challenged the more traditional academic reading strategies, these challenges and critiques have not always taken the form of condemnations. Strong advocates of the new readings insist that they neither displace nor replace one another. Brian Blount, in the conclusion to his groundbreaking *Cultural Interpretation*, states:

The biblical text harbors a vast potential of meaning. A researcher's questions codetermine his or her final conclusions regarding which segment of that potential meaning to access. It is not necessarily the case that a new meaning is placed in the text, but that meaning may be interpersonally and therefore contextually extracted from it. For this reason we come to the conclusion that the fullest possible meaning can be achieved only by drawing from the variety of interpretations, not understanding them as alternatives, but as providing a complementary range of meanings. Encouraged by Enrique Dussel, we conclude that an analectical engagement that precipitates a recognition and appreciation for the different kinds of sociolinguistically

determined evaluations can push us beyond the boundaries that attempt to place limits on the possibilities for text meaning.¹

The questions that researchers bring to any text inevitably shape what they find in the text. Different motivations for reading the text, different notions of what will be found in the texts, and different methods for interpreting the text inevitably yield different results—but they are not necessarily antithetical to other readings. Instead, different communities can choose to learn from one another; by seeing the text through the eyes of others, their own reading can be improved.

Much of the fruitful work in conversation with other cultures has occurred across ethnic and socioeconomic lines. Primarily, though, the voices heard in such conversations have been contemporary ones. In the present project, I lay the foundations for a conversation that is historical. I make the preliminary introductions in order to begin a conversation between interpreters of the modern American academic microculture and an interpreter from the early medieval monastic microculture.

THE EARLY MEDIEVAL MONASTIC MICROCULTURE

In looking for conversation partners, the early medieval monastic microculture stands out because of its steadfast dedication to Scripture. The goal of monastic life was to conform as perfectly as possible to the life commanded by Scripture. In particular, it attempted to exemplify the New Testament command to be formed into the mind of Christ through obedience to the commands in the gospels and imitation of the Christ found there. For monastics, this quest was not occasional or seasonal but formed the bedrock of their very existence. Monastic life was preeminently the embodiment of the Gospel discipline.

To speak of anything “monastic,” however, is to speak with the broadest of strokes. Christian monasticism as a movement spans some seventeen centuries, is found on all inhabited continents, and takes a wide range of forms under a multitude of rules distributed throughout Protestant,

¹ Brian K. Blount, *Cultural Interpretation: Reorienting New Testament Criticism* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 176.

Catholic, and Orthodox Christianity. Tremendous variation has existed throughout these various times and places. Rather than speak in generalities, I focus here on one particular monastic author from an identifiable time and place with a sizeable and representative corpus of interpretation to draw from: Ælfric of Eynsham, monk, priest, and sometime abbot of Eynsham, who flourished around the end of the first millennium.²

Since postmodernism has raised academic discussions of objectivity and subjectivity, some modern scholars—especially those with faith commitments—have begun discussing the difference between academic reading strategies and ecclesially shaped readings; that is, readings that begin from a premise of faith are often guided by doctrinal commitments and are intended for communities of faith. There is no question that the monastic readers under discussion here are doing ecclesially shaped readings; however, the ecclesial shape alone is not the most significant aspect of these readings. The Benedictine life lived at the end of the early medieval period is a distinctive culture in its own right: a religious culture, a literary culture, that sought to form itself around Scripture, particularly Scripture enacted liturgically in a way not seen within Western Christianity before or after. It is ecclesially shaped, but its significance extends far beyond this single factor.

Within the monastic milieu, Ælfric occupies a unique position. He inhabited this Benedictine culture thoroughly and, more than that, chronicled its methods and hermeneutics to a degree virtually unparalleled. The difference between Ælfric and other authors of his time—the German monk and teacher Hrabanus Maurus comes to mind—is Ælfric's deep drive to communicate his way of life intertwined with his way of reading to the larger world. Hrabanus Maurus's vast corpus is in Latin: written by a monk, for monks. Ælfric's work, with a few exceptions, was in Old English: written by a monk but for the edification of an entire nation.

After centuries of Viking attacks, ecclesial life in tenth-century Anglo-Saxon England received a boost from the Benedictine Revival, a cultural movement spearheaded by three monastic bishops—Dunstan, archbishop

² As a result of my historical focus, verbs relating to monastics will be in the past tense. Let the reader not forget that for thousands of monastics around the world, many of the disciplines and methods described are not historical but part of their everyday lives.

of Canterbury; Æthelwold, bishop of Winchester; and Oswald, bishop of Worcester—who sought to restore national culture through a renewal of English monastic houses. Following the Continental reforms of Benedict of Aniane, an eighth-century Frankish reformer, they championed a strict Benedictine monasticism that emphasized fidelity to the Rule of Benedict. The vast majority of Anglo-Saxon materials extant are the products of the scriptoria from houses founded by these reformers.

The greatest figure of the second generation of the Benedictine Revival is Ælfric of Eynsham. The scarce biographical data that survives is gleaned from his own writings.³ He entered the Old Minster at Winchester under Æthelwold around 970 and was a priest at Cernel in 987. He became abbot of the monastery at Eynsham in 1005 and probably died around 1010.

Ælfric's particular contribution to the Revival was a vast literary production aimed not at the intellectual giants of the day but at the literate nobles⁴ who served as his patrons, the semiliterate monastic and secular clergy of the day, and their parishioners. Eschewing Latin for all but his most learned works, Ælfric wrote in the Old English vernacular in a rhythmic alliterative prose style reminiscent of the vernacular poetic tradition. He is consistently hailed as one of the greatest vernacular stylists of the Anglo-Saxon period by modern scholars. Indeed, the survival of his corpus is due not to the intellectual novelty of his works but rather their stylistic excellence.

When compared to other figures of his age, the scope of his writings is enormous. Angus Cameron, in preparation for the *Dictionary of the Old English Corpus*, identified 203 discrete pieces written by Ælfric in Old English, ranging from brief notes to lengthy treatises. Of these, 166 are homilies, sermons, or substantive additions to sermons. The bulk of these are gathered into two cycles that follow the church year—the *Catholic Homilies*, series 1 (*CH I*) and series 2 (*CH II*)—that contain forty items each. Another identifiable set is the *Lives of the Saints*, which also—according to Ælfric's preface—contains forty items.⁵ These three collections

³ In particular, his preface to his translation of Genesis and the prefaces to the two cycles of *Catholic Homilies* contain limited autobiographical material.

⁴ The ealdorman Æthelweard, for instance, could not only read and write his native tongue but also wrote a Latin chronicle that has survived to the present.

⁵ Displaying a difference between medieval and modern numbering conventions—and the capriciousness of scribes in a manuscript culture—Cameron identifies

were written relatively early in Ælfric's career while he was a simple monk and mass-priest at Cerne Abbey. The rest of the sermons were written throughout Ælfric's career as he reenvisioned his project from a set of cycles to a single complete Temporale cycle.⁶

The thirty-nine nonhomiletic materials in Ælfric's Old English writings and a small number of Latin works not accounted for in Cameron's list consist of a variety of texts, from a grammar, to Old Testament translations, to the earliest introduction to the Scriptures in English, to treatises on doctrinal topics. Ælfric did not simply write or translate at random, though. He was working toward a particular end. If the monastic bishops attempted to restore English culture by promoting rigorous monastic practice, Ælfric sought to restore it by giving the clergy, both monastic and secular,⁷ access to comprehensive catechetical texts in their native language in order for them to more perfectly nurture their congregants. In addition to being the greatest prose stylist, Ælfric was, without a doubt, the greatest Christian educator of his age. He took great pains to present the intellectual and theological treasures of the church to both clergy and laity as clearly and directly as possible. He was constantly attentive to the risk of heresy on one hand and the danger of knowledge without adequate formation on the other.

Because of the ecclesial circumstances of the Benedictine Revival and the survival of Ælfric's corpus, he becomes a useful object for study. Rather than speaking in generalities gleaned from various authors separated by centuries and vast distances, Ælfric's situation allows us to engage him as a discrete author working within an identifiable embodied

thirty-four discrete items in the LS apart from the preface; see Angus Cameron, "A List of Old English Texts," in *A Plan for the Dictionary of Old English*, ed. Roberta Frank and Angus Cameron (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 70–76.

⁶ This term will be explained later when we discuss the monastic liturgical calendar.

⁷ While the reformers would have preferred for all clergy to be monks, this was impractical as well as impossible. Thus, a distinction is made in the writings of the period between the monastic and secular—nonmonastic—clergy. For a useful discussion of the interaction between monastic establishments, minsters, and the secular priesthood, see Karen Jolly's sociological study of clerical dynamics, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

community whose educational and liturgical practices can be accurately described even if they are not entirely recoverable.

CONSIDERING THE SUITABILITY OF MONASTIC READING

Let us consider Ælfric and the early medieval monastic microculture to determine whether they will provide suitable conversation partners. I draw on Ælfric's own works, as well as the main stream of Western monasticism located chiefly in the Rule of Benedict and the writings of John Cassian.

A first criterion would be whether there is serious engagement with the New Testament text. Monastic life was an attempt to embody the commands of Scripture as completely as possible, and this emphasis appears through monastic writings. The alphabetical collection of the *Apothegmata Patrum* records a saying of Antony the Great (†ca. 356)—considered the founder of monasticism:

Someone asked Abba Antony, "What must one do in order to please God?" The old man replied, "Pay attention to what I tell you: whoever you may be, always have God before your eyes; whatever you do, do it according to the testimony of the Holy Scriptures; in whatever place you live, do not easily leave it. Keep these three precepts and you will be saved."⁸

Whether this was spoken by Antony or not is immaterial, for this counsel is reiterated countless times in countless ways through monastic literature: from the *Institutes* and *Conferences* of John Cassian, through the eponymous Rule of Benedict of Nursia, through the *Commentary on the Rule of Benedict* and the *Diadem of Monks* by Smaragdus of Saint-Mihel.

The Rule of Benedict concludes by directing its readers away from itself and toward Scripture and the interpretations of it by the church fathers:

⁸ *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, trans. Benedicta Ward, Cistercian Studies 59, rev. ed. (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1984), 2.

For anyone hastening on to the perfection of monastic life, there are the teachings of the holy Fathers, the observance of which will lead him to the very heights of perfection. What page, what passage of the books of the Old and New Testaments is not the truest of guides for human life? What book of the holy catholic Fathers does not resoundingly summon us along the true way to reach the Creator? (RB 73.3-4)

This general statement is given concrete expression in chapter 4, the longest chapter of the Rule. Entitled “The Tools for Good Works,” it is a dizzying deployment of scriptural and scripturally based commands that begins with Jesus’ summary of the Law and moves through seventy-four commands focusing on behavior and monastic decorum.

The context in which these seventy-four commands are to be lived out, according to Benedict, is balanced between three fundamental activities: liturgical prayer consisting primarily of scriptural materials, especially the psalms; holy reading, which consists of reading, meditating on, and memorizing Scripture and the catholic Fathers; and manual labor. The first two are explicitly focused on the Scriptures; monastic sources indicate that the third is as well. John Cassian defines the goal of sacred reading as gaining the ability for constant meditation on the Scriptures whether reading or not: “Hence the successive books of Holy Scripture must be diligently committed to memory and ceaselessly reviewed.”⁹ For the monastic who has memorized large swathes of Scripture that are recalled during manual labor, the activities of daily work are just as much a potential location for insights into Holy Scripture as reading in the monastic cell.

A second criterion is difference—does the microculture offer a genuinely different way of reading? While Ælfric participates within many of the same categories as the majority of interpreters informing the academy—he is a white European Christian male—his tenth-century Anglo-Saxon macroculture is entirely different. Ælfric lived within a completely different worldview where the incessant Viking raids afflicting

⁹ John Cassian, *Conferences* 14.10.4, trans. Boniface Ramsey, *Ancient Christian Writers* 57 (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997), 514. Unless otherwise indicated, all citations from the *Conferences* will come from this edition.

England are considered as the immediate harbinger of the Antichrist. His microculture was also quite different; his interpretive strategies and purposes are not those of the modern academy and the dominant historical-critical paradigm. Specific differences will be discussed in detail throughout the study.

A third criterion is points of contact. Given differences between the two microcultures, are there enough similarities and points of contact to allow engagement to occur? Despite the many and very real differences between Ælfric and modern interpreters, there are a number of significant parallels between early medieval monastic culture and modern academic culture that will be described in the course of chapter 1. On the most basic level, however, both Ælfric and the modern interpreters choose a reasoned written discourse as the primary means for spreading their insights into the Scriptures, producing texts that can be analyzed and compared with one another. While Ælfric's primary literary form is the sermon, and orality is clearly an important aspect of preaching, Ælfric consciously wrote and maintained a written body of sermons that could be used by the clergy who could not (or possibly should not, in his opinion) produce their own. His Latin prefaces to the *Catholic Homilies* clearly indicate that he hoped his sermons would be copied and circulated to ensure orthodox preaching in England.

A fourth criterion is breadth of scope—do we have enough information on how the microculture engaged the biblical text to make the effort worthwhile? In this respect, Ælfric is ideal. While we do have collections of materials from various authors in the early medieval period, rarely is there such a broad and coherent body of materials as we have from Ælfric. He is the author of the first introduction to the Bible in English and a number of catechetical treatises that give us a clear sense of how he conceptualized the Christian faith and the place of the New Testament within it. Between the *Catholic Homilies* and the supplemental homilies Ælfric wrote later in life, he wrote exegetical works on over 150 distinct New Testament pericopes, the majority being gospel passages, with occasional epistle texts included as well. Furthermore, he produced a Latin customary, a document that describes how a monastic rule will be interpreted and kept within his abbey. It gives important details on how Ælfric expected monastic life to function, and documents the environment he created for himself and his fellow monastics.

A fifth criterion is a cross-cultural approach—how much of the interpretive work “goes without saying” and how much of it is described to allow an outsider to grasp what is going on? Here, Ælfric once again proves ideal. While he certainly did not write in order to engage later academics, Ælfric very much understood his overall catechetical program in cross-cultural terms. He was attempting to transmit the learned knowledge of the early medieval monastic microculture to broader Anglo-Saxon culture, to those who lacked both the leisure and the capacity to access truth from the Latin texts of Scripture and earlier Latin interpretation of Scripture. Indeed, this is the stated purpose of his *Catholic Homilies*:

Then it came to my mind, I believe through God’s gift, that I should turn this book from the Latin tongue into the English language, not through boldness on account of great learning, but because I saw and heard great heresies in many English books that unlearned men through their ignorance thought to be great wisdom. And it saddened me that they did not have the gospel lore in their writing except only the men who knew Latin and except for the books that we have that King Alfred wisely turned from Latin into English.¹⁰

In addition to his homilies, Ælfric’s catechetical letters and biblical paraphrases, prepared for literate nobles, testify to a desire to communicate outside of his microculture and to share his grasp of Christian doctrine and biblical teaching with the wider culture. This very drive to communicate makes Ælfric an ideal ambassador from his culture to ours.

RECONSIDERING EARLY MEDIEVAL READING

In constructing its self-identity, the academy went through a process of rejecting certain forms of dogmatically driven reading that it saw as

¹⁰ Preface to the first cycle of Ælfric’s *Catholic Homilies*, in *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: The First Series, Text*, ed. Peter Clemoes, Early English Text Society, supplementary series 17 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), lines 47–57, pp. 174–77, here 176. The mention of King Alfred (†899) refers to his translation project where Gregory the Great’s *Dialogues* and *Pastoral Care*, the *Consolation of Philosophy* of Boethius, Orosius’s *History of the World*, Augustine’s *Soliloquies*, and Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* were translated into English by the king and his circle.

limiting critical approaches to the New Testament text. Early medieval monastic readings clearly fall into this category; in order for the field to advance, these readings and their limitations had to be left behind. The process of stripping such limitations, however, has left behind prejudices. The thousand years or so of the medieval period between the end of Late Antiquity and the beginning of the Renaissance receive only scant treatment in the histories of interpretation found among critical biblical scholars. Even within treatments that mention so-called “precritical interpretation,” the early medieval monastic milieu is slighted.

Most New Testament surveys of the history of interpretation either begin with the Protestant Reformation or jump fairly quickly from the fourth century over to the Reformation. Those that do not tend to equate “medieval” with “scholastic.” For example, Robert Grant devotes a chapter in his survey to the medieval interpretation of the Bible but focuses entirely on scholastic interpretation. He locates interpretation within the genres of *catena* and glosses. There is no discussion of monastic interpretation as distinct from scholasticism. Grant’s brief survey transmits a surface impression of an unbroken allegorical commentary tradition located in the schools from the patristic period to the Reformation.¹¹

Aside from such broad surveys, two classic works within the field of biblical studies focus specifically on medieval exegesis, Beryl Smalley’s important *Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*¹² and Henri de Lubac’s *Exégèse médiévale*.¹³ Smalley primarily focuses on scholastic interpretation, allotting only a partial chapter to postpatristic, prescholastic interpretation.¹⁴ Her description of the period following the Carolingian Revival is striking: noting a dearth of commentaries for a century and a quarter, she calls this period “a dramatic pause in the history of Bible

¹¹ Robert M. Grant with David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 83–84.

¹² Beryl Smalley, *Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

¹³ Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: Les quatre sens de l’écriture*, 2 vols. (Paris: Abier, 1959–1961). Published in English as *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. Mark Sebanc, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998–2009).

¹⁴ Section 1 (The Carolingian Revival) in chapter 2 (Monastic and Cathedral Schools) addresses the specific period and environment under consideration here.

studies.”¹⁵ Smalley explains it thus: “The real reason was a shift of interest. The Cluniac and other tenth-century religious reformers emphasized the liturgy at the expense of study. As the offices multiplied, *lectio divina* moved out of the cloister into the choir.”¹⁶ Thus, Smalley interprets the lack of commentaries and the increase in liturgies as a sign of a hiatus in “Bible studies” rather than a redirection of exegetical work. Ælfric receives only two brief mentions.¹⁷ Out of the mass of medieval materials, moreover, Smalley has selected one genre—the commentary—as the locus of biblical interpretation. While she accurately notes a shift in interest as a result of the Cluniac reforms of Benedictine practice, she does not consider that the liturgical productions of these monastic houses might be biblical interpretation as well; she labors under the assumption that liturgical materials must not involve biblical interpretation and vice versa. In doing so, she established a prejudice inherited by the next several generations of scholars who equally dismissed material other than commentaries as something other than biblical interpretation.

Henri de Lubac’s work on medieval exegesis is one of the great accomplishments of twentieth-century Roman Catholic scholarship. Encyclopedic in character, his study cites the majority of extant medieval sources and categorizes their treatments of the Scriptures into one of the four dominant senses. His is a massive and erudite work that sketches a grand narrative from Origen through the medieval period. His goal is to provide a foundation for a theological return to spiritual exegesis, historically located as a challenge to a dogmatic Thomism that tended to ignore the very patristic and medieval sources on whom Thomas Aquinas relied. Therefore, de Lubac is interested in establishing the theological validity of the multiple senses of Scripture and is focused on them as theologically interpretive categories. With such a goal, de Lubac necessarily works programmatically. As a result, he does not show how specific readers read within specific contexts; he cannot address the variety of interpretive contexts within which interpretation occurred; and, he ends up glossing over the fundamental distinctions between interpretations located in scholastic debate or monastic homilies.

¹⁵ Smalley, *Study of the Bible*, 44.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 44–45.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 147, 244.

Ælfric is mentioned once in de Lubac's work. He appears as an example of the orators who "scarcely do more than plagiarize [Gregory the Great]."¹⁸ It is only fair to contextualize this remark, however, as part of an encomium to the enduring greatness and influence of Gregory. Immediately before this quotation, de Lubac correctly identifies the often-overlooked debt that Western homiletics owes to Gregory: "Through his *Regula pastoralis*, Gregory, along with Augustine and Rabanus Maurus, is the master of the art of preaching; through his other works he is the principal source of preaching itself, as well as spirituality."¹⁹ Thus, de Lubac's remark (which will be addressed later in this study) casts more glory on Gregory than shame on Ælfric.

Overall, the interpretive practices of the early medieval monastic microculture have been ignored by earlier biblical scholarship. First, they have been rejected on paradigmatic grounds; they represent the "old" way of doing things that prevent an intellectually rigorous study of the New Testament documents. Second, they have been overshadowed by interpretive movements both before and after it: by patristic reading on the one hand and scholastic reading on the other. Third, they have been dismissed on grounds of genre; if biblical interpretation appears exclusively in commentaries and commentaries are lacking from the period, substantive interpretive work must not have occurred. Fourth, on the occasions when they have been considered, they have primarily been dismissed as plagiaristic of patristic readings. As a result, much work remains to be done on what the early medieval monastic interpretive practices actually were and whether the modern charges stand up to examination.

A shift, however, is taking place. In recent years, a number of calls have been put forth to reexamine the promise and potential of exegesis from before the advent of critical study in the eighteenth century. A number of biblical scholars have called for greater attention to premodern methods. Most of the calls, however, have been general and programmatic in nature. In particular, the work of engaging and understanding early medieval interpretations in their specificity still remains to be done. While biblical scholars have not yet conducted this work, valuable contributions to this larger project have been made by scholars in other fields.

¹⁸ De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, 2:120.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

POSITIVE ASSESSMENTS OF EARLY MEDIEVAL MONASTIC READING

An influential study that addresses this topic from a more positive perspective approaches it culturally rather than exegetically. Jean Leclercq's *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* is a masterful work that gathers together a lifetime of reflection and study within a monastic milieu. Leclercq succinctly summarizes the results of his study thus:

The principal literary sources of monastic culture may be reduced to three: The Holy Scripture, the patristic tradition, and classical literature. The liturgy, which will be treated later, is the medium through which the Bible and the patristic tradition are received, and it is the liturgy that gives unity to all the manifestations of monastic culture.²⁰

Leclercq's success in describing monastic exegesis is rooted in the scope of his study; he is not attempting to examine only the methods and literary production of monastic scriptural reading. Instead, he sets it broadly within a study of the overall purpose of monastic existence. Thus, he discusses the study of grammar as the essential background from which exegesis proceeds, he discusses the models for exegesis as represented by the patristic tradition, and he discusses the various literary forms that the monastics preferred and ultimately relates all of these to the liturgy, which is at the heart of monastic practice and experience.

For Leclercq, the monastic culture is characterized by a tension between the two elements found in his title. He writes:

The content of monastic culture has seemed to be symbolized, synthesized, by these two words: grammar and spirituality. On the one hand, learning is necessary if one is to approach God and to express what is perceived of Him; on the other hand, literature must be continually transcended and elevated in the striving to attain eternal life.²¹

²⁰ Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 71.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

Learning gives monastics the keys to begin the search for God in the Scriptures and the liturgy, but learning for its own sake is not the monastic goal. Instead, “the one end of the monastic life is the search for God.”²² Exegesis plays a crucial role because it is therefore “entirely oriented toward life, and not toward abstract knowledge.”²³ Leclercq continually illustrates and delineates this monastic approach in contrast to the scholastics:

The scholastic *lectio* [reading] takes the direction of the *quaestio* [question] and the *disputatio* [disputation]. The reader puts questions to the text and then questions himself on the subject matter: *quaeri solet*. The monastic *lectio* [reading] is oriented toward the *meditatio* [meditation] and the *oratio* [prayer]. The objective of the first is science and knowledge; of the second, wisdom and appreciation. In the monastery, the *lectio divina* [meditative reading of Scripture], which begins with grammar, terminates in compunction, the desire for heaven.²⁴

Reading creates a theology rooted in experience. “Monastic speculation is the outgrowth of the practice of monastic life, the living of the spiritual life which is the meditation on Holy Scripture. It is biblical experience inseparable from liturgical experience.”²⁵ The purpose of monastic reading is to form the community into a lived and experienced scriptural pattern where the desire for God takes pride of place.

While the scope of his work enables Leclercq to appropriately situate monastic reading within monastic life, it also does not allow him the space within this slim volume to demonstrate the processes of which he speaks. He states clearly in his preface that the book is “a series of lectures given to young monks”²⁶ as “an introductory work and therefore not intended for specialists, for already well-informed scholars.”²⁷ Rather: “Its purpose is not to offer a synthesis that would be premature, nor to provide

²² Ibid., 18.

²³ Ibid., 17.

²⁴ Ibid., 72.

²⁵ Ibid., 213.

²⁶ Ibid., vii.

²⁷ Ibid.

a bibliography which can be found elsewhere, but to draw attention to subjects for further investigation and to suggest partial and provisional solutions.”²⁸ He does not, in a word, so much demonstrate as assert. Nevertheless, the vision that he presents has been found compelling and his seminal work is more often considered to be the last word on the subject than a tentative first word.

A few scholars have taken up the call to build on this foundation. As far as exegesis is concerned, one great successor of Leclercq’s work is William T. Flynn’s *Medieval Music as Medieval Exegesis*.²⁹ Beginning with the synthetic vision of Leclercq, Flynn presents a dense and close-knit explication of the study of grammar, rhetoric, and ornamented language, the application of these arts to the teaching and composition of eleventh-century musical forms—especially the emerging chant genres of tropes, prose, and sequences—and Scripture interpretation within the liturgy. Ultimately, he examines a single liturgical manuscript, the Autun Troper, and demonstrates through a careful analysis of the Christmas and Easter Masses how the liturgies of these feasts explicate the biblical texts appointed through juxtaposition and exposition in the texts and music of the interpretive musical genres.

Flynn validates Leclercq’s assertions concerning the liturgy as the ultimate locus of biblical interpretation and demonstrates how liturgy is interpretive. Leclercq’s synthesis follows an educational trajectory moving from the formative sources of monastic culture, Scripture, the patristic inheritance, and grammar, and ends at its products in theology and ultimately liturgy. Flynn takes a similar route and demonstrates how monastic and clerical formation is formation for the liturgy and how the music portions of the liturgy in turn have a formative, mystagogical effect:

All of the [musical] tropes are “tropological” not because they explain what the choir should do about their faith but because they help them actually do it. For the principal participants, the choir, these liturgies could be expected to continue to reveal their riches as the clerics, monks, and nuns probed the mysteries of advanced

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ William T. Flynn, *Medieval Music as Medieval Exegesis* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 1999), 1ff.

latin grammar and applied this knowledge to their daily celebrations. . . . In short, eleventh-century liturgies engaged the participants at their varying levels of expertise, opening the treasury of the sacred page in ways that could be appreciated by all.³⁰

Music and the liturgy was the practice at the heart of the canons' common life. Furthermore, the liturgy was therefore a means of teaching exegesis and an exegetical product in its own right.

Flynn's work, then, examines the liturgy as both the fruit of exegetical process and as a means of formation into the process. His particular area of interest is the new compositional genres that appeared in the liturgy shortly before the end of the first millennium—the prose, trope, and sequence. He demonstrates their development from grammatical study, the study at the heart of monastic biblical exegesis, then demonstrates how these liturgical forms continue and enrich biblical understanding within the liturgies.

Susan Boynton and Diane Reilly's *The Practice of the Bible in the Middle Ages* contains several essays that directly engage early medieval monastic reading practices. Susan Boynton's essay, "The Bible and the Liturgy" does a wonderful job of introducing readers to how the Bible and the liturgy interacted in the early medieval period. In particular, her final paragraph neatly summarizes the situation:

In the Middle Ages, the words of the Bible were most often experienced through the chants and readings of the liturgy. Just as the written Bible was frequently accompanied by glosses and commentary, likewise the performance of Scripture was a form of interpretation: biblical texts were fragmented, altered, and combined with other texts in ways that reflected traditions of biblical hermeneutics. The ensuing juxtapositions in turn provoked new interpretations. The liturgy shaped the understanding of biblical exegesis because it rendered audible, in real time, the relationships between the different parts of the Bible; even those few who used the Bible as a written book frequently heard and uttered its words in the context of worship services. Thus, liturgical performance was the single most important factor influencing the reception of the Bible in the Middle Ages.³¹

³⁰ Flynn, *Medieval Music*, 245.

³¹ Susan Boynton, "The Bible and the Liturgy," in *The Practice of the Bible in the Middle Ages: Production, Reception, and Performance in Western Christianity*, ed. Susan Boynton and Diane Reilly (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

I will examine much of what she identifies here in greater detail in chapter 2.

The chapter that follows, “When the Monks Were the Book,” builds on Boynton’s work and focuses specifically on the monastic reading environment. Isabelle Cochelin describes the place of the Scriptures in early medieval monastic life, discussing the holy reading and the liturgical practices of the monastic communities. Having established the importance of the Scriptures to monastic life, she suggests that the monastic liturgies, particularly those of Holy Week, served as a performative embodiment of the scriptural accounts, bringing the sacred histories to life before the laity who were unable to read the biblical text for themselves.

The work that directly addresses Ælfric as an interpreter of Scripture is a brief eleven-page essay by Paul Szarmach, one of the great contemporary experts on Old English homiletical literature. Szarmach begins by noting the dearth of similar studies:

When there is literary interest in Ælfric, it is in his style. Aside from studies of style and Milton McC. Gatch’s important interpretive study emphasizing Ælfric’s eschatology, the study of Ælfric remains broadly philological, i.e., showing an interest in manuscripts and sources, not at all in hermeneutics. In short, the study of Ælfric’s exegesis is still at a nascent stage and often emerges as an adjunct to studies with other objectives in mind.³²

Szarmach presents this short study as a first word toward a larger appreciation of Ælfric as an exegete.

Szarmach’s study opens by examining Ælfric’s own reflections on the art of biblical interpretation. A central simile appears in Ælfric’s homily on the five loaves and two fishes; Ælfric draws a distinction between a man who sees a fair painting and praises it and a man who reads fair characters and praises their author—having not only appreciated the form of the letters but also having understood the message they sought to convey. So it is with the miracle. It is not enough to look at it and wonder;

³² Paul E. Szarmach, “Ælfric as Exegete: Approaches and Examples in the Study of the *Sermones Catholici*,” in *Hermeneutics and Medieval Culture*, ed. H. Damico and P. Gallacher (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 237–47, here 238.

profitable engagement requires an understanding of its spiritual significance to give God due praise for what has occurred.³³ Szarmach detects here a preference for binary understandings, finding terms or concepts like “words and images, ignorance and understanding, understanding and reaction” in which Ælfric finds a “complementary unity.”³⁴ That is, Ælfric identifies dualities, then embraces the “both/and” rather than the “either/or.” Szarmach continues:

Ælfric’s habit of mind is to find such [binary] pairing. When it comes to the important pair “understanding and reaction,” the grounds change from the text to the audience. This shift of focus or emphasis explains how in other expositions the moral sense of scripture is a natural development; there is a habit of mind that enables Ælfric to move from analysis of text to moral application for the audience.³⁵

The movement from the text to a moral application is a natural mode for Ælfric.

From this point, Szarmach notes three major factors that help him characterize Ælfric’s exegesis. The first is a recognition of a basic fact about interpretation and meaning within Ælfric’s milieu. Modern interpreters often regard interpretation as a movement to a typological or allegorical level. Drawing on the work of Thomas D. Hill,³⁶ Szarmach notes that “all too often Anglo-Saxonists think that exegesis is allegory.”³⁷ Instead, Szarmach demonstrates from both Augustine and Ælfric that “explanation of what is the literal sense is part of a long tradition”; historical and geographical references have to be explained and possible contradictions with other texts must be resolved (typically harmonized) before any deeper levels of the text can be sought. When,

³³ Ibid. Szarmach does not mention the source of Ælfric’s reflection, but Bede is similarly reflective on how readers/hearers should find meaning in Christ’s miracles in his treatment of a similar feeding story in John 6:1-14 (Bede *Hom* 2.2).

³⁴ Szarmach, “Ælfric as Exegete,” 239.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Thomas D. Hill, “Literary History and Old English Poetry: The Case of *Christ I, II, III*,” in *Sources of Anglo-Saxon Culture*, ed. Paul E. Szarmach, *Studies in Medieval Culture* 20 (Kalamazoo, MI: The Medieval Institute, 1986), 3–22.

³⁷ Szarmach, “Ælfric as Exegete,” 240.

how, and why the literal sense has to be clarified is part of the exegetical task as well.

The second factor to consider concerns what Ælfric learned from the early medieval homiliary tradition.³⁸ Szarmach reminds his readers that Ælfric did not just take material from the patristic excerpts he found there; he also learned exegetical method from these texts. The exegetical methods of Bede, Gregory, and Augustine—though sharing broad similarities—are different, and Szarmach suggests that Ælfric’s facility in adapting and assimilating the distinct styles of patristic authors accounts for some of the interest in Ælfric’s style.

The third factor that Szarmach identifies is “the narrative impulse.”³⁹ While Ælfric’s second cycle of *Catholic Homilies* contains a more narrative character than the first, Szarmach points beyond this observation to the notion that Ælfric understands the Bible “primarily as story, secondarily as text for analysis.”⁴⁰ Szarmach notes that the sermon for Palm Sunday illustrates the point; Ælfric deftly weaves a harmony of the gospels to concisely convey an orthodox Passion of his own creation: “The effect of the Palm Sunday homily is the effect of a narrative, shaped and formed to stand as a sequence of events in time. Ælfric has made narrative sense of his varied sources.”⁴¹ When faced with complexities on the literal level, Ælfric’s instinct is to tell the story within the text as clearly as possible.

Szarmach ends his brief study with a cogent appeal to his fellow scholars:

Anglo-Saxonists must unburden themselves from antecedent scholarship that either blatantly or subtly brings with it assumptions that are invalid for the late tenth century. A self-conscious and proper historicism can help establish a context for discussion. With this context, which must take into imaginative account Ælfric’s use of sources, the development of early medieval theology, and the valid meaning of early medieval exegesis, it will be possible to assess more accurately Ælfric’s role as medieval “father” and to move on to related cultural issues such as Ælfric’s audience, the problem of rendering the Christian message

³⁸ I take up the shape and scope of this tradition at the end of chap. 1.

³⁹ Szarmach, “Ælfric as Exegete,” 241.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 243.

to it (a new form of the *translatio* question, it would appear), and even perhaps a new definition of Christian literature. The new view of Ælfric that will thus result will have to account for issues of Christian genres and styles as well.⁴²

Thus, Szarmach's study itself is fundamentally another programmatic essay, but one from a veteran scholar of Anglo-Saxon literature, especially homiletics.

Ælfric is a Benedictine Revival-era preacher. Szarmach insists that Ælfric and his exegesis be read in terms of his late tenth-century setting and the forces that produced it. Leclercq, Flynn, and Boynton signal that the fundamental paradigm for early medieval monastic biblical interpretation is the liturgy. An early medieval monastic sermon, therefore, should not be treated as an independent or acontextual text—a freestanding document in the same way that a biblical commentary can be—but is rightly considered when located securely within the context of early medieval monastic liturgies and their interpretive practices.

Building a Conversation, Selecting Texts

To begin the conversation-building process, I consider first what biblical texts might be used to focus the conversation. Recalling again a fundamental criterion, the texts selected must be engaged by both sets of conversation partners. Since modern commentaries cover every verse of the biblical text, Ælfric's corpus becomes the limiting factor. His sermons follow closely the gospel readings appointed by the early medieval church calendar. Of the seventy-five surviving witnesses to gospel lectionaries from the span of the Anglo-Saxon period in England, 457 readings are from Matthew, 391 from Luke, 234 from John, and 155 from Mark. Looking at Ælfric's sermons in the *Catholic Homilies*, the ratios are similar; of the eighty items, twenty-eight are from Matthew, twenty-four from Luke, twenty-three from John, and five from Mark. Based on lectionary statistics, Matthew emerges as the favorite gospel. More importantly, however, Matthew is the gospel most focused on the notion of constructing a community around the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

⁴² Ibid., 244.

For the early and medieval church, Matthew was the first gospel, both in terms of its canonical position and its importance to the growth and formation of Christian communities. Matthew was the most commented on and most frequently cited of the gospels in the patristic period, and the Sermon on the Mount was the most frequently cited pericope of Scripture. Liturgically, Matthew became the dominant text cited in both liturgies and lectionaries of the West. Two features of the text in particular enabled Matthew to achieve this status: first, the completeness of its account of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus gave Christian communities identity through the birth, deeds, and death of their founder; second, the ecclesial usefulness of its catechetical collections of dominical sayings made it a teaching resource *par excellence*.

In addition, the Western church took the communal references within the text seriously. Under the influence of texts like the Acts of the Apostles, Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, and Jerome's *Chronicon*, the church assumed direct continuity between the community of the apostles and that of their own day. The polity of the Western church was mapped onto the Matthean text so thoroughly that Peter's confession (Matt 16) became a central text undergirding arguments for the primacy of the bishop of Rome. Both the communal and the formational aspects of the gospel were embraced to the fullest. Since the early medieval monastic microculture privileged both community and lifelong formation into the example of Jesus, an examination of how Ælfric read Matthew is a natural choice.

With twenty-eight available sermons on Matthean texts, we have a sizeable sample from which to choose. I have chosen to focus on four texts that represent four major literary forms appearing within Matthew: a mythological narrative (Matt 4:1-11), a dominical teaching (Matt 5:1-12), a set of healing miracles (Matt 8:1-13), and a parable (Matt 25:1-13). Surveying a range of materials will enable us to examine what interpretive strategies are used for the different forms, and whether strategies change with the form under consideration or are uniform throughout.

Selecting Conversation Partners

To represent the modern academic microculture's side of the conversation, I have chosen four recent commentaries on Matthew: Ulrich Luz's

work (translated by James Crouch) for the Hermeneia series,⁴³ W. D. Davies and Dale Allison's work for the International Critical Commentary series,⁴⁴ Douglas Hare's work for the Interpretation series,⁴⁵ and Eugene Boring's portion for the New Interpreter's Bible commentary.⁴⁶ Of the central literary genres produced by the modern academy—commentaries, monographs, and scholarly articles—the commentary best presents the exegetical perspectives and outlooks of representative scholars that will address all four selected pericopes. All of these commentaries have been selected from recognized series that represent the mainstream of modern biblical interpretation.

The first two are recognized scholarly commentaries that are written specifically for the modern academic microculture—these are works by the academy for the academy. Luz's commentary stands squarely within the European commentary tradition. His approach is a combination of literary and historical methods that are characterized by his two major working hypotheses: first, that "the Gospel of Matthew tells the story of Jesus' activity in Israel" which is a story of conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, embedded in which is the story of Jesus' relationship with his disciples;⁴⁷ second, "the experiences of the Matthean church are reflected in the Matthean Jesus story," which is a two-level drama where the conflict-story of Jesus is understood as an allegory for the situation of the Matthean community.⁴⁸ Davies and Allison present a textually focused commentary that discusses lexical and grammatical issues and particularly focuses on textual or thematic parallels in contemporary Jewish and Greco-Roman literature.

⁴³ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Wilhelm C. Linss, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992); Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20: A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001); Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005).

⁴⁴ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols., International Critical Commentary 26 (London/New York: T & T Clark International, 2004).

⁴⁵ Douglas Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995).

⁴⁶ M. Eugene Boring, "Matthew," in *The New Interpreter's Bible: Matthew-Mark*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 8 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995), 87–506.

⁴⁷ Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, 11.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

The last two are, like Ælfric's work, cross-cultural. They are intended to mediate the findings of the modern academic endeavor to confessionally Christian microcultures, particularly for the work of teaching and preaching—these are works by the academy for broader Christian audiences.⁴⁹ Hare's approach is generally literary. He is not explicit about his methods but uses a combination of narrative readings, literary parallels, and clarifications of the historical context as the basis of his exegesis. Boring also uses these tools but is more explicit in his use of a narrative approach as a framing device. He identifies a chiasmic structure that is rooted in conflict—similar to Luz—but Boring emphasizes that the central conflict is apocalyptic in nature. Thus, while drawing on the same kinds of literary, historical, and rhetorical methods as the rest, he gives a prominent place to Matthew's own theological perspective in his work.⁵⁰

The Aim of the Conversation

The purpose of this conversation is twofold: first, to clarify the primary interpretive contexts and methods of the early medieval monastic microculture; second, to assess its usefulness as a foil for modern academic readings. In other words, through the conversation model, I hope to identify interpretive strengths and weaknesses of both conversation partners so as to assess what areas of potential meaning within the biblical text early medieval methods identify more clearly than modern, and to show what early medieval monastic methods and results have to offer modern scholarship. At the same time, I acknowledge the ways that modern methods represent significant insights on their own terms. Furthermore, I explore the fruitfulness of early medieval conversation partners as aids in moving beyond modern critical impasses. As outsiders in modern critical debates, Ælfric and his sources may provide alternative approaches or perspectives that open interpretive possibilities where modern interpreters are locked in disagreement.

⁴⁹ While it could be both possible and interesting to look at sermons on Matthew by modern academics, this would be at cross-purposes with our project. Due to the faith commitments required and the differing context of proclamation, these texts would misrepresent the explicitly nonconfessional character of the modern academy's exegetical project.

⁵⁰ More attention will be given to these modern commentaries in chap. 1.

The point is not to judge between the interpretive projects of the two microcultures and to declare one superior, the other inferior. Rather, I hope to show how these older methods may help us access more complete interpretive possibilities inherent in the Matthean text and how Matthew has served in the past as a catalyst for the formation of intentional Christian communities.

The Shape of the Conversation

Moving forward, chapter 1 will be an examination of the commonalities between the modern academic microculture and the early medieval monastic microculture. This chapter will explore three fundamental characteristics that are central to both cultures: mimesis, literary focus, and critical conversations.

Chapter 2 will examine the fundamental differences between the two cultures. Because the modern context is much better known, I shall focus here on the primary interpretive context of the early medieval monastic microculture, the monastic liturgy, and the interpretive forces this context exerts upon the discursive interpretation found in monastic preaching.

Once the pertinent features of the two microcultures have been investigated, I can address the Matthean texts themselves. Chapter 3 treats Matthew 4:1-11 and Matthew 5:1-12; chapter 4 treats Matthew 8:1-13 and Matthew 25:1-13. For each passage, I examine the interpretations of the four modern interpreters, then consider Ælfric's text and the liturgical context that informs it. Then, I put the modern and medieval into dialogue with one another, assessing the areas of strength for the various interpreters and suggesting how Ælfric's early medieval monastic interpretation may contribute to the modern academic interpretive project. The Conclusion will offer a brief summary of my findings and present a concluding statement of what Ælfric and other early medieval monastic interpreters might have to offer the modern students of the Scriptures.

Chapter 1

How Monastic Living Shaped Reading

INTRODUCTION

In his classic study of monastic culture, Jean Leclercq summarizes his synthesis in a compact paragraph: “The principal literary sources of monastic culture may be reduced to three: Holy Scripture, the patristic tradition, and classical literature. The liturgy . . . is the medium through which the Bible and the patristic tradition are received, and it is the liturgy that gives unity to all the manifestations of monastic culture.”¹ Gathering up these sources and moving beyond the solely literary, monastic culture can be characterized as mimetic, literary, and liturgical. Individually these marks are not unique to monastic culture—indeed, modern biblical scholarship is also characterized by the first two marks—but the ways it embodies these marks and the ends it pursues by this embodiment give this culture its unique character. In order to appreciate both the continuities and the discontinuities between the two profoundly literary cultures of early medieval monasticism and modern New Testament scholarship, it

¹ Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), 71.

is worth examining how the medieval monastic microculture has embodied mimetic and literary qualities, and how such qualities build on and reinforce one another. Both also operate within a critical conversation—a conversation with special rules, resources, and patrons solemnly invoked. The final monastic dimension, the liturgical, serves as a point of entry into the key differences between the early medieval monastic and modern academic cultures.

THE MIMETIC CHARACTER OF MONASTIC LIFE

Mimesis in Early Medieval Monastic Culture

Tucked in the midst of Ælfric's *Lives of the Saints* stands a text for general use. Like the other writings, it bears the marks of a homily—including a brief scriptural passage—but was probably intended more for private reading than for public proclamation. Unlike the others, which focus on particular deeds of particular saints or which address particular liturgical occasions, this work is general enough to serve as an introduction to the whole set. In fact, Godden has suggested that it did originally function in this fashion and that its current placement—sixteenth in the collection—is a dislocation from an original initial position.

This work, titled “Sermon on the Memory of the Saints,” contains a survey of sanctity. The first half presents examples. It begins by touching on various heroes of the Old Testament and identifying the virtues that made them stand out. Turning to the New Testament, Ælfric discusses John the Baptist, Christ himself, then the apostles and disciples. A discussion of the various kinds of postbiblical confessors rounds out this half. An exhortation concerning the evils of the present time and imminence of the Antichrist segues into the second half. This half is a formal explication of the three theological virtues, the eight chief sins and their remedies, and the eight chief virtues. A concluding exhortation encourages the cultivation of the virtues as primary weapons against the devil and sin.

This work communicates the early medieval monastic concept of mimesis—formation through imitation. First, it presents human exemplars for imitation drawn primarily from the Bible and secondarily from the history of the church. Preeminent among these is Christ himself. Second, it draws out—implying induction through juxtaposition—the specific moral lessons that the holy histories teach, the specific virtues cultivated

by the saints, and the corresponding vices they overcame. It identifies who is to be modeled and the specific qualities of what is to be modeled. Furthermore, it also locates the *telos*—why these are to be modeled. Saints are not just examples; they embody the goal.

The “Sermon on the Memory of the Saints” is clearly not an exegetical work. Nevertheless, a passage of Scripture, Revelation 1:8 stands at the head of the work and provides a starting place. Playing off the multiple senses of the words “beginning” and “end,” Ælfric translates the passage from the Vulgate into Old English, then uses it as a point of departure:

Ego sum Alfa et W. Initium et finis dicit Dominus Deus qui est et qui erat et qui venturus est omnipotens. That is in English: I am the beginning and the end says the Lord God who was and who is and who is coming, the Almighty (God). There is one Almighty God, ever existing in three natures, who shaped all things. Now, we have our beginning through him because he shaped us when we were not and afterward redeemed us when we were lost. Now we should take great care that our life may be structured so our end might end in God who came to us at our beginning.²

By using “beginning” both as a temporal marker and as a source, Ælfric can make “end” serve as a final temporal marker and as a *telos*. The anagogical use of these temporal terms sets up an eternal aim for his audience. The next sentence clarifies how his hearers should strive for this goal: “We may take good examples, first from the holy patriarchs who pleased God in their lives and also from the holy ones who followed the Savior.”³ The exhortation that lies at the end of the piece ties the systematic exposition of the virtues into this overarching anagogical scheme as Ælfric notes in a concluding line: “We may, through God’s help, overcome these evil vices through struggle if we fight bravely and [may] have in the end the eternal glory forever with God himself if we toil here and now.”⁴

² “Sermon on the Memory of the Saints,” in *Ælfric’s Lives of the Saints: Being a Set of Sermons on Saints’ Days Formerly Observed by the English Church*, ed. Walter W. Skeat, vol. 1, Early English Text Society 82 (London: Oxford University Press, 1881–1900 [repr. in 2 vols., 1966]), lines 1–8, p. 336. Hereafter ÆLS (Memory of Saints). All Old English translations are mine.

³ ÆLS (Memory of Saints), lines 9–12.

⁴ ÆLS (Memory of Saints), lines 378–81.

Mimesis for Ælfric, then, is a lifelong process through which monastics pattern themselves after Christ, his forbearers and saints, and cultivate the virtues through which they will attain to the eternal joys of God's presence. Imbedded in "Memory of the Saints" are the monastic values that place a premium on personal modeling and which spawned a literature of example that quickly became foundational for the spread of monasticism and the monastic ethos.

Personal Mimesis and the Monastic Community

The core legislative documents of the Western monastic movement construct a community grounded in imitation and mutual correction for the purpose of fulfilling the commands of Scripture and thus embodying the virtues of Christ. Legislative documents like the works of John Cassian, the *Rule of Columban*, and the Rule of Benedict should be understood less as distinct legislative documents but instead vehicles for the transmission of a common body of teaching:

The various rules were merely so many individual expressions of the tradition. All the ancient monks considered their real rule, in the sense of the ultimate determinant of their lives, to be not some product of human effort but the Word of God himself as contained in the Scriptures. Monasticism was simply a form of the Christian life itself, and hence it drew its inspiration from divine revelation.⁵

The Rule of Benedict became normative in early medieval Europe through its adoption at synods in Aachen chaired by St. Benedict of Aniane in 816 and 817 and subsequently achieved authoritative status throughout the Carolingian Empire. Benedict of Aniane's writings clarify that the Rule's normativity comes not from the inherent superiority of its legislation above other competing rules but rather because it most clearly exemplified the common tradition.⁶ Therefore the legislative work of John Cassian, the

⁵ Claude Peifer, "The Rule of St. Benedict," in *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in English and Latin with Notes*, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1980), 65–112, here 85.

⁶ Claude Peifer, "The Rule in History," in *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in English and Latin with Notes*, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1980), 113–51, here 121–22.

Institutes (and the *Conferences* to a lesser degree), and the Rule of Benedict are mutual witnesses of a common way of life handed down by monastic communities and bolstered by documents of legislation and exhortation.

John Cassian was, with Evagrius of Pontus, the main figure responsible for the transmission of the monastic tradition from the East to the West. Probably a native of the Balkans, John and his comrade Germanus journeyed to Bethlehem in the last quarter of the fourth century to join a monastery. Itching to see the roots of monasticism for themselves, they left the monastery and made two successive journeys to the monastic motherland, Egypt. Later ordained a deacon by St. John Chrysostom and exiled from the East for supporting the controversial patriarch, he settled in Gaul around 410, founding monastic communities and writing of his experiences for the benefit of the nascent monastic movement there.

The *Institutes*, composed between 419 and 426, are the closest that Cassian produced to a Rule. A monastic Rule:

normally includes, on the one hand, theoretical spiritual teaching and, on the other, practical regulations to govern the daily life of the monastery by determining the time and measure of food, sleep, and liturgical prayer, relationships with the outside, authority structures, etc. These two elements may be combined in quite different proportions. Some rules contain chiefly spiritual doctrine, some consist almost exclusively of practical regulations; others combine both.⁷

Of the twelve books of the *Institutes*, the first four are chiefly practical, detailing the minutiae of Egyptian monastic practice; the later eight are spiritual instruction on the eight chief vices and their remedies.

In both sections, Cassian constantly appeals to the principle of imitation and describes its practical application. Men seeking admission to a monastery must first serve a year under the elder who oversees the hospitality of guests, learning the basics of humility, obedience, and service, then are turned over to an elder who oversees ten junior monks to be taught the alphabet of virtues, “first syllables in the direction of perfection.”⁸ The

⁷ Peifer, “Rule of St. Benedict,” in *RB 1980*, 85.

⁸ John Cassian, *Institutes*. 4.7-9, trans. Boniface Ramsey, *Ancient Christian Writers* 58 (New York: Newman Press, 2000), 81, 82. Unless otherwise indicated, all citations from the *Institutes* will come from this edition.

junior monks remain under the authority of the elders, ever learning from them the virtues, chiefly discretion, obedience, and humility. These monks are exhorted to observe all their seniors, not just those placed over them, but the community as a whole. Just a few ought to be selected as particular models for imitation while the novice advances:

In order to attain more easily to [virtue], you should seek out, while you live in the community, examples of a perfect life that are worthy of imitation; they will come from a few, and indeed from one or two, but not from the many. For, beyond the fact that a life that has been scrutinized and refined is found in few, there is a question of utility to be considered—that a person is more carefully schooled and formed for the perfection of this chosen orientation (namely, the cenobitic life) by the example of one.⁹

Once monks have reached a more advanced level, Cassian commends advice attributed to St. Antony, the Father of Egyptian—and therefore all—monasticism:

For it is an ancient and admirable saying of the blessed Antony to the effect that when a monk, after having opted for the cenobium, is striving to the heights of a still loftier perfection, has seized upon the consideration of discretion and is already able to rely on his own judgment and to come to the pinnacle of the anchorite life, he must not seek all the kinds of virtue from one person, however outstanding he may be. For there is one adorned with the flowers of knowledge, another who is more strongly fortified by the practice of discretion, another who is solidly founded in patience, one who excels in the virtue of humility and another in that of abstinence, while still another is decked with the grace of simplicity, this one surpasses the others by his zeal for magnanimity, that one by mercy, another one by vigils, yet another by silence, and still another by toil. Therefore the monk who, like a most prudent bee, is desirous of storing up spiritual honey must suck the flower of a particular virtue from those who possess it most intimately, and he must lay it up carefully in the vessel of his heart. He must not begrudge a person for what he has less of, but he must contemplate and eagerly gather

⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

up only the virtuousness that he possesses. For if we want to obtain all of them from a single individual, either examples will be hard to find, or, indeed, there will be none that would be suitable for us to imitate. The reason for this is that, although we see that Christ has not yet been made “all in all” (to cite the words of the Apostle), we can nonetheless in this fashion find him partly in all. For it is said of him that “by God’s doing he was made for us wisdom, righteousness, holiness, and redemption.” Inasmuch, therefore, as there is wisdom in one, righteousness in another, holiness in another, meekness in another, chastity in another, and humility in another, Christ is now divided among each of the holy ones, member by member. But when we are all assembled together in the unity of faith and virtue, he appears as “the perfect man,” completing the fullness of his body in the joining together and in the characteristics of the individual members.¹⁰

For Cassian, then, the practice of virtue is not fundamentally the cultivation of self-improvement. Rather, as monastics grow in virtue, they grow into the fullness of Christ and as constituent members of the Body of Christ—they contribute to the eschatological consummation when Christ will be all in all. The quest for virtue is the quest to more fully and completely participate in the life and redemptive work of the risen Lord.

St. Benedict in his Rule works along the same lines. The three Benedictine vows, obedience, stability, and conversion of life, are designed to construct an environment in which long-term mimesis is made possible. Benedict makes clear in a number of ways that the first two are prerequisites for the third, demonstrating this most eloquently in his opening chapter. Clearly adapting *Conferences* 18.4-8, Benedict describes cenobites by describing what they are not—neither sarabaites nor gyrovagues. The first of these sorts of monks live without an abbot and thus without obedience: “Their law is what they like to do, whatever strikes their fancy. Anything they believe in and choose, they call holy; anything they dislike, they consider forbidden” (RB 1.7-8).¹¹ As a result, “with no experience

¹⁰ Ibid., 118–19.

¹¹ All quotations from the Rule of Benedict are from *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in English and Latin with Notes*, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981).

to guide them, no rule to try them, as gold is tested in a furnace, [they] have a character as soft as lead” (RB 1.6). The second sort have no stability. Rather they “spend their entire lives drifting from region to region, staying as guests for three or four days in different monasteries. Always on the move, they never settle down, and are slaves to their own wills and gross appetites. In every way they are worse than sarabaites” (RB 1.10-11). Without these two vows, conversion of life is impossible. Mimesis is a process that requires time, discipline, and the external controls of a Rule and an abbot to curb the destructive impulses of self-will.

Instead, Benedict constructs the abbot as both the head of the community and the linchpin of the chain of command that stretches from heaven to earth. On the one hand, “He is believed to hold the place of Christ in the monastery since he is addressed by a title of Christ” (RB 2.2). Being in the place of Christ, his word commands obedience no matter how absurd or impossible his orders appear; the monastics are bound to “carry out the superior’s order as promptly as if the command came from God himself” (RB 5.4). This commanded obedience gives no opportunity for tyranny as the abbot himself is also one set under authority:

Therefore the abbot must never teach or decree or command anything that would deviate from the Lord’s instructions. On the contrary, everything he teaches and commands should, like the leaven of divine justice, permeate the minds of his disciples. . . . Furthermore, anyone who receives the name of abbot is to lead his disciples by a twofold teaching: he must point out to them all that is good and holy more by example than by words, but demonstrating God’s instructions to the stubborn and dull by a living example. (RB 2.4-5, 11-12)

Standing in the place of Christ means, therefore, that the abbot must provide the preeminent example of holiness in both words and works for the community. As Christ, he is responsible for the charges put into his trust: “Let the abbot always remember that at the fearful judgment of God, not only his teaching but also his disciples’ obedience will come under scrutiny” (RB 2.6).

Monastic legislation puts a premium on human example. At each step of the journey, monastics have those above them who model the virtues that will lead them into the mind of Christ. Observation of monastic

superiors is constantly exhorted throughout the tradition; it is the experience of living with good guides that forms the cenobites, making them the strongest kind of monk, ultimately giving them the spiritual strength and training in order that some may reach the goal of being strong enough to live alone as anchorites.

Literary Aspects of Mimesis

This monastic emphasis on imitation led to particular attention to texts about people and their deeds. Scripture was mined for its positive and negative examples, extending an interpretive tradition that has its roots in Scripture itself, exemplified by the book of Sirach 44–50 and the letter to the Hebrews 11. An array of scriptural notables fill the pages of Benedict, Cassian, and Ælfric: Abel, Enoch, Judas, Gehazi, Elijah, Josiah, Judith, Ananias and Sapphira, functioning as examples and counterexamples for monastics striving to grow into the stature of the great exemplar, Christ himself.

The search for exemplars, however, was not the only way that early medieval monastics sought to imitate the Scriptures. Benedict is clear that the monastic life is an embodiment of what Scripture enjoins: “What page, what passage of the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments is not the truest of guides for the human life?” The Prologue of the Rule adapts the wisdom form of a father’s exhortation to his son; it is an impressive deployment of Scripture that includes a line-by-line run through a portion of Psalm 34 and another through the beginning of Psalm 15. This scriptural pastiche is placed as a cry in the mouth of Christ calling the prospective monk into his service through the embodiment of the Scriptures. After concluding with the parable of the builders on sand and rock from the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Benedict summarizes his exhortation: “With this conclusion, the Lord waits for us daily to translate into action, as we should, his holy teachings” (RB Prol. 35). These teachings are further enumerated in the fourth chapter, “Tools for Good Works.”¹²

In addition to Scripture, monasticism was nurtured and spread through the developing art form of Christian hagiography. Athanasius’s *Life of St. Antony* had an incalculable effect on the growth of monasticism. In the

¹² This chapter of the Rule was discussed above in the introduction.

West, four other lives quickly grounded both the shape of monasticism and the conventions of the hagiographical genre: Jerome's *Lives* of Malchus, Hilarion, and Paul of Thebes, and—especially central to the growth of Gaulish monasticism—Sulpicius Severus's *Life of St. Martin*. Lives of saints became an enormously popular form of literature. Lapidge reports that “C. W. Jones once estimated that some 600 [saints' lives] survive from the period before 900.”¹³

These lives fulfill two important functions in the monastic milieu. First, they present examples of virtue and saintliness for imitation. Second, they continually remind their readers and hearers of the end result of such imitation—they record the miracles performed by God through the saint before and after death. Through their power of efficacious intercession on behalf of the living, the glorified saints extend divine power into the world of the living, participating in and advancing the eschatological consummation in a manner different but not ultimately dissimilar from Cassian's vision of Christ made complete in his Body.

Some modern readers seeking historical data or the flavor of local medieval life from saints' lives are sorely disappointed to find generic and stereotyped *topoi* repeated throughout the genre. The same kind of miracles keep happening; the same sort of events occur in their lives. They impart little data for historical use. In order to accomplish the mimetic and theological functions, the genre followed certain prescribed conventions, conventions that seem strange to us now. The tradition provides a basic template:

the saint is born of noble stock; his birth is accompanied by miraculous portents; as a youth he excels at learning and reveals that he is destined for saintly activity; he turns from secular to holy life (often forsaking his family) and so proceeds through the various ecclesiastical grades; he reveals his sanctity while still on earth by performing various miracles; eventually he sees his death approaching and, after instructing his disciples or followers, dies calmly; after his death many miracles occur at his tomb. Of course any number of variants

¹³ Michael Lapidge, “The Sainly Life in Anglo-Saxon England,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 243–63, 253.

is possible within these basic frameworks; but the framework itself is invariable.¹⁴

As a body of literature, these lives had a specific use in the community; during Chapter,¹⁵ the head of the community would read from the life of the saint on the day before his or her veneration that the monks might meditate on the virtues of the saint throughout the coming feast. During the Night Office on the feast, the life—or a different version thereof—would be read as the main reading for one of the nocturns. Thus, the presence of a life for any given saint remembered in the community's liturgical kalendar¹⁶ was not optional—they were ecclesially necessary documents. As a result, the framework could be utilized even for saints about whom the hagiographer had only the most scant information: "An anonymous monk of Whitby wished to honor with a vita the pope responsible for the conversion of the English; knowing little about Gregory the Great or miracles associated with him, however, he must ask his readers' indulgence if he simply praises the saint extravagantly, randomly assembling passages from Scripture, references to Gregory's writings, and some absurd fables."¹⁷ Thus, working from the basic framework and resorting to a handful of stock *topoi*, a saint's life could be easily assembled for any one of the some three hundred post-biblical saints venerated in an average Anglo-Saxon institution that

¹⁴ Ibid., 253. The outline for a *passio* or death by martyrdom is equally stereotyped, but by this point in the life of the Western church, few martyrs were being made, Boniface and other northern missionaries being exceptions.

¹⁵ See the section on the daily round in chap. 2.

¹⁶ This is a standard technical term that serves to distinguish a liturgical listing of occasions to be observed from the more standard use of the term. As medieval months were reckoned according to the Roman system of counting down to the kalends, nones, and ides, most kalendars begin with the word "kalends" in a large, brightly colored, distinctive script indicating the first day (the kalends) of the month of January.

¹⁷ Rachel S. Anderson, "Saints' Legends," in *A History of Old English Literature*, ed. R. D. Fulk and Christopher M. Cain (Maldon, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 87–105, 90. The particular life mentioned is found in Betram Colgrave, ed. and trans., *The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1968).

would satisfy the liturgical and mimetic requirements of the genre while frustrating historians of a later age.¹⁸

The mention of Scripture in the above life of Gregory the Great is significant. The construction of sanctity was an important function of these works and that construction had to conform to expectations: “It was the overall intention of any hagiographer to demonstrate that his saintly subject belonged indisputably to the universal community of saints. . . . It is not so much a matter of plagiarism as of ensuring that the local saint is seen clearly to possess the attributes of, and to belong undoubtedly to, the universal community of saints.”¹⁹ The virtues, trials, and especially miracles are very often drawn directly from Scripture. This not only creates a continuity of sanctity but also reinforces that the Christian life in general and the monastic life in particular was understood as an ever-increasing progress in enacting the Scriptures—not only enacting its commandments and precepts but also receiving the same graces that biblical personages enjoyed. The citation and appropriation of Scripture in hagiography melded imitation of the saints with imitation of the Scriptures, all of it ultimately pointing to the imitation of Christ who is the source and pattern of both the saints and the Scriptures.

LITERARY CULTURES

Before discussing the literary habits of the early medieval monastics, the stark technical differences between their culture and the modern day must be addressed. Modern biblical scholars have massive advantages over their medieval counterparts. The printing press was a quantum leap forward; books could now be mass-produced so that individuals could have substantial libraries and even small institutions could own thousands of volumes. All the while, the text in each run of a given book was identical. Mass-produced Bibles of the same version all contain the same text.

¹⁸ Lapidge, “The Sainly Life,” 247. Ursula Lenker’s magisterial study of Anglo-Saxon Gospel lectionaries records lectionary entries for 155 Sanctoral occasions, many of which commemorated multiple saints. See Ursula Lenker, *Die westsächsische Evangelienversion und die Perikopenordnungen im angelsächsischen England* (Munich: Fink, 1997).

¹⁹ Lapidge, “The Sainly Life,” 254.

Furthermore, a common system of chapters and verses ensures identical references to any biblical passage. Such a system highlights and typically even footnotes minor variations where Hebrew or Vulgate verse numberings differ from the standard scheme. With the advent of computer-aided research tools, texts of all kinds can be parsed and searched with ease, placing at the fingertips of scholars amazing capabilities for locating cross-references and accessing primary and secondary sources. In addition to these textually-centered technologies, increases in productivity provided by innovations like electric lighting, central heat, word processing, and the internet further separate the two cultures.

By way of contrast, early medieval monastics had only the texts that could be copied by hand on expensive and laboriously prepared materials. Indeed, notes in the margins or at the end of manuscripts sometimes contain complaints written by the scribes concerning the poor ink, bad lighting, the poor quality of the vellum, and the physical pain caused by hours of writing under such conditions. Too often modern academics dismiss as plagiaristic scribal behaviors that functioned contextually as strategies for preserving and transmitting texts that would otherwise have been lost. Monasteries were supposed to have enough books such that each monk could have one book for edifying reading during Lent and for the daily practice of *lectio*, but this still does not imply a large number.

The primary advantage of monastic readers over their modern counterparts was the practice of *lectio*; due to this method of slow and meditative reading, monastics would have memorized far more of the biblical, patristic, and liturgical texts they read than most modern readers. The sheer volume of biblical references and allusions scattered through monastic writings of all types bear witness to the degree to which the biblical text was assimilated.

New Testament scholarship and early medieval monastic culture are both fundamentally literary ways of life, yet their purpose in reading the same texts is very different. Nowhere is this more plainly seen than in examining the very foundations of their interpretive projects: their hermeneutical frameworks and their basic approaches toward the New Testament compositions as found in introductions to the New Testament. Ælfric serves us in perfect stead as a voluminous author and teacher who has bequeathed both a clearly delineated hermeneutical framework and a text which may be regarded as the first introduction to the Bible ever written in an English language.

The Hermeneutical Framework of Early Monastic Medieval Culture

Reading through Ælfric's corpus, an attentive reader notices that he continually returns to certain themes grounded in an overarching narrative that holds together the Scriptures, world history, and the eschatological fulfillment. The numerous bits and pieces scattered throughout his writings point toward several texts that lay out a narrative of this kind. Virginia Day's 1974 article, "The Influence of the Catechetical *Narratio* on Old English and Some Other Medieval Literature" correctly identified the place of Ælfric's core narrative within its patristic and early medieval trajectory.

Day begins by defining the identifying characteristics of what she refers to as the "catechetical *narratio*":

In medieval literature there are a number of examples of a type of writing which provides an outline of Christian cosmology and Christian history. These works deal, usually briefly, with the following: [1] God and his creative powers, [2] the creation, [3] the fall of the angels, [4] the creation and fall of man, [5] biblical history, [6] the redemption, [7] Christ's life, [8] the crucifixion, [9] the descent into hell, [10] the resurrection, [11] the ascension, [12] the second coming and last judgement. The subjects vary somewhat; the fall of man and his redemption are of central importance, and some outline versions are reduced to these essentials.²⁰

Day identifies the originating source of this outline—particularly taking creation as a starting point and emphasizing redemption—as Augustine's *De Catechizandis Rudibus*. While correct in highlighting the importance of this patristic work, she misses a yet more basic source, indeed, Augustine's own: the Creeds. Of her twelve common elements only three—elements 3, 4, and 5—are not contained within the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds.

Day helpfully identifies a number of works that implement Augustine's catechetical pattern: Avitus of Vienne's *Libelli de Spiritualis Historiae Gestis*,

²⁰ Virginia Day, "The Influence of the Catechetical *Narratio* on Old English and Some Other Medieval Literature," ASE 3 (1974): 51–61, here 51. The numeration of the elements is my own for ease of reference.

Hrabanus Maurus's *De Fide Catholica*—a reorganization of the Hiberno-Latin *Altus Prosator*, Odo of Cluny's *Occupatio*, the Old Irish *Voyage of Snegdus and MacRiagla*, the poem *Saltair na Rann*, the prose version of the same in the *Lebar Bec*, Pseudo-Boethius's *De Fide Catholica*, and a handful of sermons—both freestanding and incorporated into martyrologies. The two most important early medieval adaptations of Augustine's work are Martin of Braga's *De Correctione Rusticorum* and Pirmin's *Scarapsus*.

Turning to the *Narratio*'s effect on Old English literature, Day mentions Cædmon's hymn, the Junius Manuscript's "Genesis," and "Christ and Satan," but focuses on three Old English sermons: the anonymous Vercelli XIX, Ælfric's *De Initio Creaturae*, and Wulfstan's *Bethurum VI*—a reworking of Ælfric's piece. All three bear the imprint of Martin of Braga's work; the first and last show clear signs of Pirmin's as well. Ælfric's, though, is more independent from its sources.²¹ In short, Augustine's catechetical suggestions were widely influential in early medieval Europe and in Anglo-Saxon England; when compared with other catechetical works, Ælfric's contributions are largely typical rather than exceptional.

Ælfric presents his version of the *narratio* in a number of his writings:

Ælfric produced other versions of the Christian cycle. There is one at the beginning of his *Letter to Sigeward* and another at the beginning of his *Letter to Wulfgeat*. His *Hexameron* also contains similar material; although its structure is that of the six days' work [of creation], it closes with a reference to the redemption and eternal life and a passage of exhortation. . . . There is also evidence that the *Letter to Sigeward*, the *Letter to Wulfgeat* and the *Hexameron* all lean on the *De Initio* [CH I.1] in diction and phraseology. The *De Initio* was Ælfric's most complete version; it is as if all the latter accounts presuppose the existence of this basic one.²²

²¹ Both Day and Godden—citing Day—emphasize the freedoms that Ælfric takes with his sources. While they both acknowledge his significant debt to Augustine and Martin of Braga, close verbal parallels are few and tentative. See Day, "Catechetical *Narratio*," 57; Malcolm Godden, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: Introduction, Commentary and Glossary*, Early English Text Society, supplementary series 18 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 8.

²² Day, "Catechetical *Narratio*," 57, 58.

Day also mentions Ælfric's works *De Creatore et Creatura* and *De Sex Etatibus huius Seculi*. Furthermore, verbal and thematic parallels may be found throughout Ælfric's sermons for the Annunciation of Mary, Christmas, and the "Memory of the Saints."²³ Truly grasping this narrative and its contours is essential to apprehending Ælfric's program.

Day touches on the crucial importance of this *narratio*. Since her intention is to place Ælfric's appropriation within a larger trajectory, she does not explore further but states:

The catechetical background explains why he chose the *De Initio* to open his Catholic Homilies: the catechetical sermon is the traditional introduction to Christianity. In the *Letter to Sigeward* the *narratio* serves as an introduction to a discussion of the bible and Ælfric's various translations from it. The Augustinian background makes clear how apt this is. Augustine considered that the catechetical *narratio* should provide the essential narrative and message of the scriptures interpreted for the ignorant: the *narratio* is to lay down the guidelines for the understanding of scripture. Accordingly, before allowing his reader to proceed to what he conceived of as the dangerous terrain of the bible itself, Ælfric took the opportunity to clarify the correct message to be derived from it. In the *Letter to Wulfgeat* also the context of the *narratio* is clearly "catechetical": Ælfric prefaces his advice on how to live the moral life with a brief outline of the Christian cycle, exactly as Augustine had recommended that the *narratio* be followed by exhortation. In general Ælfric's production of several versions of the *narratio*—as well as his use of some similar material in the *Hexameron*—has the aim of providing a framework for the unlettered, of placing each particular point of Christian doctrine in relation to the pattern of the whole.²⁴

²³ These three sermons are, respectively, (1) Homily for the feast of the Annunciation, in *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series, Text*, ed. Peter Clemoes, Early English Text Society, supplementary series 17 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 281–89 (hereafter ÆCHom I, 13); (2) Homily for Christmas in *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The Second Series, Text*, ed. Malcolm Godden, Early English Text Society, supplementary series 5 (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), 3–11 (hereafter ÆCHom II, 1); and (3) ÆLS (Memory of Saints).

²⁴ Day, "Catechetical *Narratio*," 59.

Day rightly identifies the function of this *narratio*: to fix the framework of the Christian story in the minds of its hearers. Her point may be extended—especially given the verbal reminiscences and allusions in Ælfric’s other writings—that it securely embeds itself within the worldview of the preacher and interpreter as well. Indeed, the *Letter to Wulfgeat* states that its summary of the *narratio* is in fact a remembrance of what Ælfric had expounded on his actual visit to Wulfgeat’s hall, Ylmandune. This framework is the hermeneutical lens through which he views the biblical text and thus it deserves sustained attention.

The heart of the narrative is the story suggested by the Creeds. The lead characters are briefly introduced before the opening of the narrative proper: The Holy Trinity, one God in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is eternal and preexistent. The Trinity—primarily through the Father and the Son—created the world, all things seen and unseen. The Holy Spirit holds all things in life and forgives those who truly repent.

In the process of creation, God created ten angel hosts. The tenth host, led by Lucifer, rebelled against God on account of Lucifer’s pride and were cast from heaven. This host exists now as the demonic order. In order to replace this host, God created humanity—first Adam, then Eve—and placed them in the garden, presenting the tree in the center of the garden as a test of obedience and loyalty, the loyalty that Satan and his host lacked. Through the devil’s trickery Eve was deceived and humanity disobeyed God’s command, receiving dismissal from the garden and death as a consequence.

From Adam came Noah who had three sons; after God led them through the flood, the eldest of the sons, Shem, was the ancestor of the Hebrews whom God rescued from Egypt and to whom the Law was given.

From the Hebrew people God chose the Blessed Virgin Mary from whom Jesus was born incarnate by the Holy Spirit. Jesus performed a great many miracles that the people might believe that he was the Son of God. He taught that humanity must believe rightly in God, be baptized, and demonstrate faith with good works. Fundamentally, though, he came for the redemption of humanity. The devil used Judas to incite the Jews to kill Jesus and he was crucified. After the crucifixion he was buried and descended into hell where he conquered the devil and freed Adam, Eve, and their descendants. He arose from the dead on the third day and rejoined his disciples, teaching them that they must go throughout the

earth, teaching and baptizing. On the fortieth day he ascended bodily into heaven and was seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come at the end of time on the clouds with great power and will raise all souls that they may be judged. The wicked will be cast into eternal fire; the righteous he will bring into the heavenly kingdom.

Ælfric's fundamental hermeneutical outlook is that Scripture is the written record of a great eschatological epic that arcs seamlessly from creation to the great consummation. This view presents several exegetical implications. Scripture as a whole is understood with reference to itself—the Old Testament and New Testament are read together and mutually interpret one another. The dominant tools for interpreting Scripture are fundamentally literary and are the same as those used for interpreting other monuments of literate culture: grammar and poetics. To the early medieval mind, Scripture not only utilized grammatical and poetic techniques but also defined them. Scriptural phrases that would ordinarily be judged to be grammatically incorrect were passed over as not only acceptable but beyond critique. Furthermore, the identification of these tools means that the interpretation of Scripture is a learned art form that requires both skills and intelligence beyond the scope of the ordinary believer.²⁵

Second, as a result of this literary character of Scripture, the Scriptures and their contents were subject to literary rules and devices rather than historical inquiry. As a result, literary strategies for meaning-making like prolepsis (foreshadowing), allegory, and typology are not only possible but also quite necessary. Furthermore, these were applied not only to the biblical text but also to the events narrated by the text. Strategies like typology discovered clues and hints in isolated passages and events that point to the larger drama of redemption being played out repeatedly on many levels within the pages of the divine text.

Ælfric deploys this kerygmatic framework within several different contexts. While the same core proclamation appears each time, Ælfric shifts its emphases and the surrounding, contextualizing material to suit his pedagogical, catechetical, or homiletical needs. As a result, the the-

²⁵ Ælfric's preface to Genesis displays his reluctance to translate Scripture into English lest the simple be misled by an overly literal understanding of the Law. Furthermore, his sermons abound with warnings that the depths of the Scriptures are beyond the ken of his listeners.

ology of the kerygma is not rigid or static but adapts itself to different situations.

Through these adaptations, worship, faith, and obedience form an interlocking set of concepts for Ælfric's subsequent reading of the Old Testament. Abraham, of course, exemplifies all three: "he worshipped God with his whole heart and the Heavenly God spoke to him often on account of his great faith. . . . God Himself promised him that through his kin all humanity should be blessed for his great faith and for the obedience that he had towards God."²⁶ Israel's temporal peace was dependent on praise and earnest worship of God. The summarized teachings of Jesus during his earthly ministry gather together ritual action, belief, and obedience as well: "[Jesus] said that no man may be healed unless he rightly believes in God, is baptized, and demonstrates his belief with good works."²⁷

Ælfric's emphasis on obedience, particularly as filtered through exemplary characters of the Old and New Testaments and from the history of the church, locate his work squarely within the mimetic hermeneutic of traditional monasticism and, at the same time, enable it to speak to the Anglo-Saxon lay milieu. He follows in the footsteps of Cassian and Benedict, appealing to the same sainted examples, in his construction of a semi-Pelagian theology of salvation through imitation of Christ and his holy ones in belief and in deed.

Furthermore, this hermeneutic drives his fundamental approach to the biblical texts and to the gospels. The impulses present in this kerygma are made explicit in Ælfric's lengthy *Letter to Sigeward*.²⁸ This letter melds Ælfric's kerygma with a treatise on the Bible and its interpretation that is the earliest surviving English-language introduction to the Bible. Ostensibly, the letter is a two-section work comprising an introduction to the Old Testament (lines 1–838) and an introduction to the New Testament (lines 839–1274). Its unifying vision, though, alternates between

²⁶ Ælfric's *Letter to Sigeward*, in *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch*, ed. Samuel J. Crawford, Early English Text Society 160 (London: Oxford University Press, 1922 [repr. with additions by N. R. Ker, 1969]), lines 249–52, 257–64. Hereafter ÆLet 4 (SigewardB); see also ÆLS (Memory of Saints) lines 25–27.

²⁷ Homily *De initio creaturae*, in *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series, Text*, ed. Peter Clemoes, Early English Text Society, supplementary series 17 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 188, lines 261–63. Hereafter ÆCHom I, 1.

²⁸ ÆLet 4 (SigewardB).

the order of the canon and an explication of the eight ages of history that constitute the period from creation to the blissful existence of the righteous after the Last Judgment. Functionally, this letter accomplishes five tasks: (1) it communicates a sense of the whole canon through a listing of books and facts about them, (2) it serves as an index of Ælfric's English language treatments of Scripture up to the time of the writing, (3) it subsumes the canon within the apocalyptic battle between Christ and Satan, (4) it identifies the Scripture's import as prophesying and foretelling Christ's redemptive acts throughout history, and (5) it offers exemplars for imitation in the ongoing struggle.²⁹

On one hand, the treatise looks like a modern introduction to the Scripture in that it works systematically through the biblical canon, concerning itself with matters of authorship, contents, and basic interpretation. The Old Testament portion covers the Pentateuch, the historical books to the Exile, the Psalms, the Solomonic Wisdom books, the apocryphal Wisdom books, the Prophets, and the later canonical and apocryphal historical books (including Job).³⁰ In the presentation of these books, Ælfric notes the author whenever possible, explains the Latin name of the book where necessary, and then gives a summary of the contents. These may be brief or lengthy.³¹ Lastly, interpretive comments aid the reader in linking these books to Christ either through typological interpretation of narrative, typological etymology, or direct prophecy. In addition, Ælfric does not miss the opportunity to offer contemporary

²⁹ The latest work on the *Letter to Sigeward* dates it toward the end of Ælfric's career, between 1003 and 1009. Larry Swain, "Ælfric of Eynsham's Letter to Sigeward: An Edition, Commentary, and Translation" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2008), 46.

³⁰ Jerome's preface to Job—undoubtedly one of Ælfric's sources either directly or through Isidore's *Ety.* 5—gives no sense of the genre of the work. This rather irascible work prefers to speak of the meter, to excoriate Greek Old Testament translations other than the Septuagint, and to criticize those who would rather purchase or produce deluxe manuscripts than feed the poor. His famous (singular) reference to "*uncialibus*" appears in this preface. Of the books of the Old Testament, Lamentations alone is not mentioned directly though the passage "[Jeremiah] lamented greatly the sins of his people just as his book tells us" (ÆLet 4 [SigewardB], lines 619–20 may be an oblique reference to it).

³¹ The summary for the book of Ruth, for instance, occupies a mere three lines: lines 445–48. The longest summary and interpretation by far is for Genesis—175 lines long (lines 137–312). Exodus, by comparison, occupies almost 60: lines 313–70.

political commentary in his exposition by highlighting Old Testament exempla of kings, leaders, or women who took up arms against pagan armies,³² apparently a jibe at the ineffectual English policies in regard to the Viking invaders.³³

The New Testament introduction treats the evangelists, the apostolic authors and their epistles, the Pauline corpus including not only Hebrews but also the epistle to the Laodicians,³⁴ Acts, and Revelation. This section does not have the extensive exegetical remarks that the Old Testament section had. However, Ælfric does pause after his section on the Pauline epistles to summarize the interpretive center of the gospels, catholic, and Pauline epistles as love of God and obedience through good works.

Lastly, in his concluding matter, Ælfric takes up the topic of the canon as a whole. The two testaments, like the two seraphim in Isaiah 6, speak with a single voice “concerning Christ’s humanity and concerning the

³² See especially his comments on Judges (lines 427–45), Saul (lines 455–63), David (lines 464–71), the good and bad kings of Judah (lines 507–18), Judith (lines 772–80) which contains the very explicit admonition: “[This book] is also translated in English in our fashion to set an example for people that you should defend your own land with weapons against an attacking army,” and a lengthy exposition on the Maccabees (lines 781–838).

³³ Compare the contemporary lament in the Anglo-Saxon chronicle on the martyrdom of Archbishop Ælfheah at the hands of Viking raiders: “All these disasters befell us through bad policy, in that [the Vikings] were never offered tribute in time nor fought against; but when they had done most to our injury, peace and truce were made with them; and for all this peace and tribute they journeyed nonetheless in bands everywhere and harried our wretched people and plundered and killed them” (Dorothy Whitelock, ed., *English Historical Documents: c. 500-1042*, 2nd ed. [London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1979], 244). Moreover, see the famous Sermon of Lupus to the English Nation by Ælfric’s correspondent Archbishop Wulfstan of York, who particularly decries the practice of stripping churches to pay tribute to the Danes.

³⁴ Laodicians is transmitted in a handful of Latin early medieval biblical manuscripts. As Ælfric does not mention the work in any other extant context, it is impossible to say if the letter was included through knowledge of the apocryphal work or through the reference to such a letter in Col 4:16. (The Laodician textual variant in the title of Ephesians was not transmitted in the Latin tradition.) See Thomas N. Hall, “Ælfric and the Epistle to the Laodicians,” in *Apocryphal Texts and Traditions in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Kathryn Powell and Donald Scragg (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), 65–84.

Holy Trinity in true unity.”³⁵ Like the seraphim, the unity of the testaments is further demonstrated in their endless praise of God in both words and works. Ælfric divides the canon into a total of seventy-two books that mirror both the number of nations who scattered from Babel and the number of apostles that Jesus sent out into the world as a further demonstration of the unity of the canon.

Thus, in one sense, the contents of Ælfric’s *Letter to Sigeward* anticipate the expectations that modern scholarship places on the genre of *einleitung* or critical introduction. The foremost questions treated include the identity of the biblical authors, the temporal context within the history of Israel (particularly for the Old Testament sections), the chief contents of the works, basic interpretive strategies, and even attention to the relationships between the parts of the canon and the whole canon. Certainly modern scholarship would disagree with many of Ælfric’s findings in this regard, but the scope is familiar.

Despite these familiar aspects, Ælfric’s framework is his kerygma in general, a periodization of history focused toward the end-times in particular, and a catechetical focus that continually draws him away from a tight focus on the biblical text. The organizing effects of Ælfric’s kerygma on the *Letter to Sigeward* are immediately apparent. He begins not with the Scripture but with the Trinity and immediately diverges from the biblical narrative to present a lengthy extracanonical account of the fall of Satan. As Ælfric continues, he moves in historical order—an order that agrees with the canonical order as far as 2 Chronicles. As he moves through the periods of history, he follows the standard apocalyptic device of dividing time into a set of ages.³⁶ As the ages run in their courses, they draw more inevitably to the time of the Last Judgment. Already we are in the sixth age, which will end with the Second Coming of Christ. The periodization comes, once again, from Augustine’s *De Catechizandis Rudibus*.³⁷ As

³⁵ ÆLet 4 (SigewardB), lines 1155–56.

³⁶ The first six ages are clearly temporal, the last two are somewhat extratemporal. Age 1: from Creation to Noah; Age 2: from Noah to Abraham; Age 3: from Abraham to David; Age 4: from David to Daniel; Age 5: from Daniel to Christ; Age 6: from Christ to the Last Judgment. Age 7 is, essentially, a stasis age wherein all who have died rest until the Last Day. Age 8 is the single eternal day of the Resurrection life.

³⁷ The idea also appears in Augustine’s *Tract. in Ioh.* 9.6 and subsequently in Bede’s *Hom.* 1.14 where he expands on the theme.

a result, his scheme is fundamentally historical in as much as it follows the scope of the ages, rather than following the canon proper.

Despite the historical framework, Ælfric is not working with an understanding of history as an assembly of factual events; history is a subset of moral philosophy. As a result, Ælfric seems just as or more interested in authors than in books. The section on the four main prophets indeed focuses more on the authors than their books. He goes into detail on how each of the prophets died.³⁸ The inclusion of the Sibyls among the prophets is traditional; here Ælfric follows Isidore.³⁹ Again, as Ælfric presents the New Testament, he spends a substantial set of lines discussing the evangelists—but never discusses the gospels or the differences between them. The evangelists themselves absorb his attention. The apostles, like the prophets, are remembered not only for their writings but also for their martyrdom. Finally, in one of the most unusual features of the letter, Ælfric leaves the theme of the Scriptures altogether and recounts a legend concerning John taken from Rufinius's *Chronicon*. Apparently, establishing the character of the writer is just as important as recounting the contents of his work.

The focus on authors brings Ælfric's catechetical intention back into view. Throughout the work, Ælfric has repeatedly referenced the importance of good works. Indeed, obedience to God's commands—interpreted as faith revealed in good works and in the orthodox worship of the Triune God—is Ælfric's touchstone for interpreting Scripture. He makes this especially clear in this writing by inserting two interpretive summaries—one at the beginning serving the Old Testament and one in the midst of the New Testament section. After his initial greeting and before his usual description of the Trinity, Ælfric offers introductory remarks concerning God's will:

God loves good works, and he wishes to have them from us for it is truly written concerning him that he is blessed by his own works. As the psalmist thus sang concerning him: *Sit gloria Domini in seculum seculi, letabitur Dominus in operibus suis*; that is in English: "Let there be glory to our Lord forever and ever; our Lord is blessed in his own

³⁸ Note that all of the prophets die for their faith but one who lives to an exceedingly ripe old age (Daniel). The same pattern holds true for the apostles where the sole peaceful death at an extended age is John.

³⁹ Isidore, *Ety.*8.8. PL 82.309C–10B.

works.” Thus says the prophet. The Almighty Creator manifested himself through the great works which he worked at the beginning, and he willed that creation would see his joys and dwell with him in glory in eternity under his rule [*underþeodnisse*] ever obeying [*gehirsume*] him, because it is very perverse that worked creatures should not obey [*gehirsume*] him who shaped and worked them.⁴⁰

Thus good works are placed in direct connection with the obedience due the overlord who is the creator of all things. The two concepts are inseparable.

The same connection appears in Ælfric’s summary comments on the unity of the New Testament witness. Directly citing John 14:15, 23-24, Ælfric comments: “Here we may hear that the Savior loves the deed more than the smooth word. The word passes away; the deed stands.”⁴¹ Citations of James 1:22-23a; 1 John 3:18; and Titus 1:16 demonstrate for him the consonance of the various sections of the New Testament on this pivotal point. That is, loving Jesus and the God who sent him is demonstrated in obedience to his commands, good works; the apostolic witness agrees that true belief is obedience exemplified by action.

The biblical characters and authors that Ælfric introduces reinforce his point and provide examples of faithful action.⁴² A key concern within this letter is the responsibility of the noble class—the warrior class—to the nation. In addition to consistently drawing attention to the defense of Israel from heathen armies, a concluding section at the end of the letter addresses the responsibilities of the three main classes of society, the working/tilling class, the praying class, and the ruling/fighting class. Without all three classes performing their specific function, society will collapse like a stool with a bad leg. Naturally, the work of the warriors is the protection of the other two classes. The thematic repetition leads a reader to conclude that Ælfric is encouraging Sigeweard not just to general good works but to a quite specific one—taking up arms to defend

⁴⁰ ÆLet 4 (SigewardB), lines 18–28.

⁴¹ ÆLet 4 (SigewardB), lines 956–57.

⁴² In this regard, a further examination of the parallels between the *Letter to Sigeweard* and ÆLS (Memory of Saints) would prove most profitable. ÆLS (Memory of Saints) is a general treatise on the saints but spends a great deal of time on biblical saints in particular.

his people from the Viking raiders. Here Ælfric demonstrates his ability not just as a generic catechist but as a savvy advisor as well, blending religious instruction with political suggestion.

Ælfric's treatment of Matthew within the *Letter to Sigeward* is a treatment of the author more than the text. In doing so, he discusses Matthew twice but each time he is part of a larger group—the first time grouped with the other evangelists, the second time with the apostles. Ælfric's description of the apostles is commonplace and repeats the well-known material from Jerome's commentary on Matthew that served as a preface to the gospels in most early medieval gospel books:

Four gospels were written concerning Christ's life. One was written by Matthew who was with the Savior, his own disciple following him in this life. He saw his wonders and wrote them in this book in the Hebrew tongue after Christ's passion in the land of Judea that they might believe in God. He is the first evangelist in the canon. [He then introduces the other evangelists.] These are the four rivers from a single well-spring which go widely from Paradise over God's people. These four evangelists were formerly signified as Ezekiel saw them: Matthew in a man's form, Mark in a lion's, Luke in a calf's, John in an eagle because they signified these significances. Matthew wrote concerning Christ's humanity.⁴³

There is no discussion here of sources, of editorial work, or of the shaping of traditional material. Ælfric does address the target audience, language of composition, and a central theological theme—the humanity of Christ. He does not, however, produce any evidence for these claims. He presents the traditional wisdom which flowed from Eusebius to Jerome to Isidore. After this introduction, he summarizes the gospel story found in the works of the four evangelists, speaking of Christ's incarnation, the slaughter of the innocents, the selection of the apostles, the miracles, and finally the crucifixion and resurrection; no differentiation between sources is made.

The next discussion of Matthew comes in Ælfric's description of the Acts of the Apostles, but it serves to transmit the historically suspect material more commonly associated with the apocryphal Acts than the canonical Acts. Ælfric writes of Matthew, "Matthew preached in the land of

⁴³ ÆLet 4 (SigewardB), lines 862–67, 880–85.

Ethiopia where there are Ethiopians and the king slew him, not converted but faithless.”⁴⁴ Ælfric’s sermon for the feast of St. Matthew (*CH* II.34) takes this as a jumping-off point and after an initial exegesis of the call of Matthew, includes a *passio* that tells of Matthew’s martyrdom in Ethiopia.

Thus, Ælfric treats Matthew as an individual rather than a text. Ælfric’s Matthew is almost entirely independent of the text that bears his name. No references are made to it or citations used. Ælfric’s interest is not in Matthew as an editor but Matthew as a participant within the eschatological epic described by Scripture. He is a witness—a witness of the human life of Jesus as his disciple, and a witness in that he testified concerning the Christian faith up to and including martyrdom. Matthew transmits knowledge about the events of salvation history and also participates within it, ensuring the spread of the Gospel and therefore the kingship of Christ.

In summary, Ælfric understands the Scriptures to be the record of the great eschatological epic describing the enmity between God and Satan and laying forth the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Within this framework, Matthew is important because he is a participant and a witness. His gospel records both the words and works of Jesus witnessed by Matthew, but Matthew himself is also an *exemplum* of a committed preacher and teacher who is willing to spread the message of Christ’s redemption to distant nations even if it costs him his life.

The Critical Conversation: The Modern Situation

All four of the commentaries with which I am working participate in the critical conversation concerning the scientific study of the New Testament. Two of them—Luz and Davies and Allison—not only stand within it but also participate directly in the continuation of the conversation. The other two—Boring and Hare—stand within it just as surely as the other two but serve a different function. Their primary purpose is to mediate the insights of the critical conversation to those who stand outside of it: they offer insights to clergy and laity who have not been trained and inculturated into the scientific study of the New Testament. As a result, they offer an intermediary position, engaging two worlds: the scholarly and the (broadly construed) pastoral.

⁴⁴ ÆLet 4 (SigewardB), lines 998–1000.

The Critical Commentaries

The work of Luz and that of Davies and Allison operate in a similar fashion. Surveying the scholarly tradition, they identify the major interpretive options for a given passage, discussing which scholars and schools took certain directions. Then, weighing these options, they choose one or another of these paths as the best reading of the text, supporting their choices with evidence that then adds to this critical conversation. An important part of this process, then, is identifying the contours of the conversation—noting who is included and who is not, and which interpretive philosophies are broadly accepted and which are not. The central virtues needed to satisfactorily participate within this endeavor are a broad knowledge of the voluminous secondary literature of the field, the ability to accurately synthesize the work of other scholars, grouping them into meaningful categories, then offering persuasive insights—preferably original insights—as to why one interpretive option or cluster of options are to be preferred over others. In regard to these tasks, both Luz and Davies and Allison are consummate professionals. Their abilities and credentials are validated by their invitation to contribute to two major critical commentary series, a certification of their scholarly worth and a statement of their authority to contribute to the continuing conversation.

One indication of the character of the tradition in which they stand is their use of language. The critical conversation is conducted in a formal and stylized dialect. English diction unfamiliar to outsiders is commonplace: words like “eschatological,” “hermeneutic,” and “chiastic” are used without explanation. Other words have a different meaning than their popular use: terms like “cult” and “miniscule” have different valences and meanings within the critical conversation. And, on occasion, the language itself is not English: the authors expect a basic knowledge of Greek and Hebrew—sometimes Latin and Aramaic too—and a sprinkling of German phrases is not unusual either.

Ulrich Luz begins the preface to the first edition of his commentary with a reference to the “flood of secondary literature that increasingly proves to be more than a hindrance to scholarly communication” and that may keep “one from dealing with the text itself.”⁴⁵ An additional

⁴⁵ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Wilhelm C. Linss, *Hermeneia* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), xv.

reference to the “immensely swollen secondary literature” also conveys the sheer volume of work that the critical conversation produces and that must be integrated to have a mastery of the tradition.⁴⁶

Luz refrains from sketching the contours of the modern critical conversation, but a number of names surface in both the preface to the German edition and the preface to the English edition: Hermann Dörries, Joachim Gnilka, Eduard Schweizer, Hans Weder, Axel Knauf, and Helmut Koester.⁴⁷ For those in the conversation, these names on the whole identify a stream of German scholarship that is both historically grounded and interested in pastoral issues. He also helpfully adds a notice that defines the length of the tradition he will engage: “After the text [of Matthew] itself, I am probably most indebted to the church fathers and to the Protestant and Catholic exegesis of the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries.”⁴⁸ Thus, he consciously includes prescientific considerations of the text into the boundaries of his conversation. The ten-page double-column list of short titles of commentaries, studies, and frequently cited articles reflects the array of predominantly German, English, Latin, and French sources that he has drawn on and provides a comprehensive list of conversation partners;⁴⁹ a list of specific works engaged stands at the start of each passage that he addresses.

Furthermore, on a typical page of his commentary, a line dividing somewhere between a third and half the page denotes space reserved for footnotes, many of which either point to secondary sources or engage discussions held within the secondary literature. Other scholars are not visibly present in the text of his work above the line—but they certainly appear below it.

In terms of his purpose, Luz hopes that his work will not be solely academic:

I have written this commentary primarily for priests, pastors and teachers of religion. One wonders whether it will help them engage in an intensive conversation with the texts in their study or whether its length

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., xv, xvii.

⁴⁸ Ibid., xv.

⁴⁹ Ibid., xxviii–xxxvii.

will actually keep them from such a conversation. I would rather have a response to this question than to read all the critical reviews.⁵⁰

He acknowledges with the nod to critical reviews that his work stands securely in the scholarly tradition, yet he hopes that that it will include those who have only been introduced and not immersed in it: the clergy. The laity are here not in view.

Davies and Allison begin their preface with arguments against the two main objections against new commentaries: the current state of flux in biblical studies and the presence of sufficient commentaries. In overcoming these, they present a sketch of their view of the conversation. In addressing the first they write:

As it is important that each generation translate the Bible for itself, in its own idiom, so each generation should express its own interpretation of it. This will necessarily rest to a large degree on the work of previous generations. Any significant commentary will be an agent in the transmission of exegetical traditions: its wisdom accumulative. But each generation also brings its own peculiar insights to add to those of the past and helps to ensure that the Bible remains a living reality and not a static deposit.⁵¹

This is a succinct statement that holds two virtues in tension—the transmission of knowledge and its increasing growth. The work of a “significant” commentary is to do both.

A list of contemporary commentaries features in their answer to the second objection. In framing their answer, they identify these works as conversation partners—but partners that fall short or at least are in need of further supplementation:

Willoughby C. Allen published his volume in this series in 1907, and A. H. McNeile’s commentary in the Macmillan series appeared in 1915. These were on a large scale and based on a scrupulous scholarship. The recent work of Robert H. Gundry (1982) is

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols, International Critical Commentary 26 (London/New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 1:ix.

massively learned and instructive but not a little idiosyncratic. There have also appeared, among others on a smaller scale, the commentaries by W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, F. W. Beare, Floyd Filson and David Hill. The first of these was much criticized; and most of the others—admirable as they are, especially that of Professor Hill—were limited by the nature of the series in which they appeared, and the same applies to the English translation of Eduard Schweizer’s influential commentary. On all these we have gratefully drawn as upon the countless, often excellent, monographs dedicated to the First Gospel. But in the conviction that the time is ripe for a fresh attempt at a large scale commentary on Matthew we accepted the invitation of the editors of this series.⁵²

Here they have clearly identified the field of the English-language commentary tradition within which their work is located. David Hill is mentioned again as a reader of the manuscript.⁵³ A broader scope of their conversation is given in their exhaustive bibliographical listing of “Commentaries and Other Literature.” This list of bare bibliographical data stretches twenty-seven pages and spans a wide range of writing on Matthew from Augustine and Pseudo-Anselm to Weiss and Wellhausen to Weder and Wink.⁵⁴

In contrast to Luz, Davies and Allison reserve relatively little space for footnotes; only a fifth of the page at most is taken by them. Names of other scholars and references, however, appear throughout the body of the text. Rather than relegating interpretive differences and controversies to the footnotes, they are present within the text proper.

Although they do not go as far as to state it, their implied audience is certainly the scholarly community engaged in the critical conversation. The closest they come to a clear statement of purpose is their concluding remark: “Although we cannot be sufficient for this, our aim has been to be loyal to the tradition of disinterested and objective study in biblical criticism. We hope that this commentary will not prove unworthy of it.”⁵⁵

⁵² *Ibid.*, 1:ix–x.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1:xi.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:xxi–xlvii.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:xi.

The catchphrase “disinterested and objective”⁵⁶ signals that the authors consider their work to be outside of dogmatic constraints imposed by any particular ecclesial body. It also situates them in a branch of the scholarly conversation not beholden to postmodernist philosophies that would call into question the possibility of achieving either objectivity or disinterest.

The Mediating Commentaries

The commentaries of Boring and Hare serve a different purpose. While the commentaries of Luz and Allison-Davies serve to synthesize, summarize, and move the critical conversation forward, the works of Boring and Hare serve to synthesize then mediate the conversation to outsiders not initiated into the conversation. Their commentaries are not primarily designed to speak to the community engaged in the scientific study of Matthew but to offer the fruits of scientific study to readers approaching the text from a position of faith who bring questions about the application of the text to the life of faith.

Both of these authors are scholars. They are trained in and stand within the critical tradition. While the tradition is present throughout their work, it appears more or less silently. That is, while insights from earlier scholars appear, they are not quoted and footnoted as they are—as they must be—in the critical commentary tradition. Furthermore, these authors move beyond the community invested in the critical conversation. Because they speak to believers in their lives of faith, they frequently address issues and interpretations that could be summarily dismissed by the critical conversation because they do not flow from responsible exegesis as defined by the conversation. Also, their language is that of the people. Far fewer foreign words or terms appear, and when they do, they are suitably explained. Thus, these commentaries must mediate between critical and popular conversations and use the former to shed light on the latter in a manner comprehensible to those who live in the latter.

Again, these authors are every bit as indebted to the critical conversation as those who write the critical commentaries—the difference is that the debt is far less apparent due to the audience for whom they are writing.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Eugene Boring offers an introduction that sets up his approach and introduces readers to the Gospel of Matthew and its world. He makes a few brief comments that serve to situate his interpretation but, in a sense, does not make as broad of a statement as the previously surveyed texts because of the nature of his work; rather than being freestanding, it is incorporated within a multivolume work and is bound within one volume with several other essays and a commentary on Mark. He is subscribing to a common form. The remarks that he makes, though, are both helpful and instructive. The bulk of his introductory thoughts appear in one section. Boring writes:

This commentary attempts to help the modern reader interpret the ancient text with a view to its translation into contemporary meaning.

Historical study of the Gospel of Matthew is an ally in this task. Matthew was himself an interpreter, standing in the living streams of tradition, interpreting the meaning of the Old Testament into the new situation by looking back on the advent of the Christ, his ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection. In particular, Matthew stands in a Christian hermeneutical stream interpreting the sacred texts of Christian tradition revered in his church (namely, Q and Mark) and the M traditions unique to the Matthean community. Matthew's own interpretation represented in the Gospel of Matthew then entered into the living stream and has been the object of interpretation in the church for nineteen centuries. The contemporary interpreter stands with Matthew in this continuing stream, heir to Matthew's Bible and his Christian traditions (Q, Mark, M), the Gospel of Matthew itself, and the church's continuing interpretation of them all. Matthew is not the passive object of our interpretive work. He is a fellow interpreter who speaks not only to us, but also with us.⁵⁷

Boring's work is intended for popular consumption—anyone from a scholar to a New Testament neophyte is able to pick up his text, understand it, and find insights there. As a result, he constructs his categories around the issue of interpretation with care.

Christian denominations hold varying views toward the role of critical scholarship; while some embrace it wholeheartedly, others do so with

⁵⁷ Eugene Boring, "Matthew," in *The Interpreter's Bible: Matthew–Mark*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 8 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995), 57.

reserve—some with a wary eye—while others reject it entirely. Some go so far as to suggest that relying on any form of prior interpretation is itself a sin against the Spirit and should be avoided. Negotiating these topics with sensitivity, Boring avoids potentially inflammatory terms like “critical” or “scientific.” While the term “historical” appears, its use is ambiguous; readers do not know whether he is referring to a type of interpretation or to the historical reality of Matthew’s interpretation which he takes up immediately afterward.

Instead, Boring chooses to focus on the role of “interpreter.” He notes that Matthew was himself an interpreter of both the Old Testament traditions and the Jesus traditions that came to him through Mark, Q, and M. Matthew’s own interpretation then became part of the “living/continuing stream” which flows through nineteen centuries to the reader. The only two people specifically placed in this stream are Matthew and the reader; Boring is implicitly present—as are the voices of the nineteen Christian centuries, not to mention those of the Old Testament centuries as well.

Interpreters of the New Testament occasionally appear both in the text and in footnotes, playing larger roles in the introductions to materials and in the excurses that Boring presents on particular topics. Both past and present interpreters appear, and there seems to be no hard and fast dividing line between those engaging in the scientific study of the text and its unscientific study, but the former are mentioned and cited much more frequently.

Douglas Hare signals his intentions in a preface that mirrors his editors; both prefaces that begin this text emphasize that it is not intended as a replacement of scholarly commentaries but is a supplement to them. Hare carves a niche for himself by identifying a gap between the critical commentaries and ecclesial leaders:

One of the deepest frustrations of ministers, seminary students, and lay Bible teachers is that scholarly commentaries so often provide answers for questions they are not asking and fail to address their basic questions concerning the theological meaning of the text. Scholarly commentaries are indispensable. The church has learned the hard lesson that there is no shortcut to meaning; if we are serious about discovering what the biblical authors are trying to say, there is no escape from the careful questioning undertaken by such studies. This commentary is by no means intended as a substitute for these. Its intention is to supplement their work by emphasizing what

each passage means to Matthew and, by extension, to the modern church.⁵⁸

In a slightly different approach from Boring, Hare describes his work less as a direct mediation between the academic microculture and the ecclesial microcultures because he adds something that the scholarly commentaries do not contain—the theological meaning of the text.

In contrast to the other commentaries utilized, Hare uses neither footnotes nor endnotes. Interactions with modern scholars occur silently, with only a handful of exceptions. Even these exceptions (like an exegetical question suggested by a colleague on page 285) refer to other more popular treatments of the biblical text. The conversation is present but remains invisible to those not familiar with its contours.

Tucked in the back of the commentary is a bibliography divided into two sections: “For further study” and “Literature cited.” The first is a half-page in length and refers to the main recent English-language treatments of Matthew (Davies and Allison appears here). The second is a page or so long and contains a smattering of articles, continental commentaries (Luz’s work is listed here), monographs, and popular works. Again, the breadth and depth of the conversation is consciously limited.

The Early Medieval Situation

Ælfric’s compositional technique and its relation to the tradition has been the focus of much study. The identification of his sources has continued over the course of a century. Förster’s groundbreaking work laid a firm foundation for the study of the sources of the *Catholic Homilies*.⁵⁹ Smetana’s recognition of the importance of the early medieval homiliary tradition and the place of Paul the Deacon’s homiliary in reference to Ælfric added much-needed nuance to these studies.⁶⁰ Smetana’s follow-up

⁵⁸ Douglas Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), vii.

⁵⁹ Max Förster, “Über die Quellen von Ælfric’s exegetischen Homiliae Catholicae,” *Anglia* 16 (1894): 1–61.

⁶⁰ Cyril Smetana, “Ælfric and the Early Medieval Homiliary,” *Traditio* 15 (1959): 163–204.

work on the homiliary of Haymo,⁶¹ the works of Barré⁶² and Grégoire⁶³ on Carolingian homiliaries, Gatch's first major synthesis of the homiletic environment,⁶⁴ Clayton's survey of the homiliary tradition with particular attention to the late Anglo-Saxon milieu,⁶⁵ and Joyce Hill's work on Smaragdus⁶⁶ have all led to a much better understanding of how Ælfric interacted with his source material and the means by which he accessed it. Godden's magisterial commentary painstakingly documents Ælfric's sources for the *Catholic Homilies*, often offering cogent suggestions from the homiliary tradition concerning how various pieces of patristic material came to Ælfric's attention. While, as Hill notes, more work remains to be done on the early medieval mediators of the tradition, it is now possible to speak intelligently concerning Ælfric's stated aims, implicit aims, and achievements in the *Catholic Homilies* with specific reference to the critical and popular conversations and the main lines of transmission.

Early medieval monastic homilies also come forth from and in continuity with a critical conversation, albeit one with different rules and purposes than the modern scientific study of Scripture. In order to fully appreciate their contents, we must understand that this conversation took place within a very different context and for a very different purpose than the modern one. The context is the liturgy and the purpose is the consistent handing down of an authoritative tradition of interpretation.

Homilies were transmitted primarily in homiliaries. These books were collections of sermons where the order and textual context were

⁶¹ Cyril Smetana, "Ælfric and the Homiliary of Haymo of Halberstadt," *Traditio* 17 (1961): 457–69. Shortly after the publication of this article, Barré properly identified this homiliary as the work of Haymo of Auxerre.

⁶² H. Barré, *Les homéiaires carolingiens de l'école d'Auxerre*, Studi e Testi 225 (Rome: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1962).

⁶³ Reginald Grégoire, *Les homéiaires du moyen âge*, Rerum Ecclesiasticarum Documenta, Series Maior, Fontes 6 (Rome, 1966); and Reginald Grégoire, *Homéiaires liturgiques médiévaux: analyse des manuscrits*, Bibl degli studi medievali 12 (Spoleto, 1980).

⁶⁴ Milton McC. Gatch, *Preaching and Theology in Anglo-Saxon England: Ælfric and Wulfstan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 27–59.

⁶⁵ Mary Clayton, "Homiliaries and Preaching in Anglo-Saxon England," *Peritia* 4 (1985): 207–42.

⁶⁶ Joyce Hill, "Ælfric and Smaragdus," *Anglo-Saxon England* 21 (1992): 203–37.

determined by the rhythms of the liturgical year. Preeminently, they were books for use in liturgy. They could be used at Masses, in the Night Office, in Chapter, or in other liturgical functions outside of these three. Only after these purposes did they serve other functions, particularly as sources for holy reading in the monastic practice of *lectio divina* or as resources for study of the Scriptures, theology, and the church fathers. Clayton, in dialogue with McKitterick and Gatch, identifies three types of homiliaries based on function: those for use in the Night Office, those for private devotional reading, and those for preaching to the laity.⁶⁷ She notes that these categories were quite flexible, however, and certainly Ælfric himself shows little discrimination between them when looking for source material, drawing from all three without regard.

Where the goal of the modern critical conversation is to move the conversation forward, the purpose of this critical conversation was not motion but stasis—handing on the authoritative teachings of the officially sanctioned tradition with as little deviation as possible. The complication of the situation, though, is that the teachings of the tradition do not apply to something static but to life itself. As a result, change was inevitable; the tradition and those who handed it on had the responsibility of making sure the fundamentals of the tradition were handed on in ways that engaged the emerging circumstances that impacted the often tumultuous lives of early medieval Christians.

Because of the nature of this conversation, an ongoing problem was identifying the proper participants. One important arbitrating mechanism was the council, gatherings of clerics that ranged anywhere from local synods attended by clergy of a certain region to the grand ecumenical councils attended by metropolitans, patriarchs, archbishops, and bishops from across the known world. Often the business of these councils included consensus declarations on whether an author or the opinions of an author were in continuity with the apostolic faith as understood and interpreted by the gathered assembly.⁶⁸ Lists of teachers and authors both

⁶⁷ Clayton, “Homiliaries and Preaching,” 216.

⁶⁸ Note the untextual nature of the criteria and the acclamations of Pope Leo’s *Tome* as recorded in the Acts of the Council of Chalcedon: “This is the faith of the fathers, this is the faith of the Apostles. So we all believe, thus the orthodox believe. Anathema to him who does not thus believe. Peter has spoken thus through Leo. So

approved and condemned were drawn up and circulated. Inevitably these lists were compared with one another and a general consensus formed in areas defining who was and was not part of the conversation.

In addition, certain writers certified as trustworthy produced their own lists of trusted authors based on who they read and cited with approval in their works. Often these lists were implicit, but sometimes they became explicit lists, detailing the lineages of students and teachers, their various writings, and the fate of them and their various writings. The *Ecclesiastical Histories* of Eusebius, Sozomen, Orosius, and others performed this function. The polemical works against heretics by Eusebius, Pantaneus, and others identified positions to be specifically rejected, while Jerome's work, *On Illustrious Men*, continued by Gennadius upon Jerome's death, focused on authors and the texts they produced, approving and rejecting as needed.

While the church attempted to maintain control over the boundaries of the conversation by regulating the content of texts, one factor made true control impossible: the technology of textual transmission. Texts were transmitted by handmade copies. However much the organizational levels of the church attempted to centralize and control the conversation, it was unable to control the scribes.

This lack of control manifested itself in a variety of ways. One had to do with the problem of authenticity. A key document that now serves as a main primary source for our knowledge of received and condemned works, the Gelasian Decretal, is itself considered a forgery. While probably an authentic list produced by some synod or council, it is currently dated in the sixth century and therefore half a century after Pope Gelasius I, its purported author. Furthermore, identifications of authors sometimes depended on whatever heading a scribe wrote down. In one of the great ironies of the tradition, the extant texts believed to be by Pelagius survived destruction because of their ascriptions to his adversary Jerome.

taught the Apostles. Piously and truly did Leo teach, so taught Cyril. Everlasting be the memory of Cyril. Leo and Cyril taught the same thing, anathema to him who does not so believe. This is the true faith. Those of us who are orthodox thus believe. This is the faith of the fathers" (NPNE, 2.14). The criteria were not whether the consensus was most biblical but whether the teaching matched the faith of the apostles, of which biblical fidelity was one component.

Pseudonymous works, whether falsely or simply incorrectly attributed, are common throughout the medieval period, the intent sometimes benign and accidental—but sometimes quite deliberate and deceptive. Codex construction played its part as well; packets of pages, individual leaves, and even whole sections called quires could also be inserted into codices, further complicating issues of authorship and authenticity.

Thus, despite efforts to the contrary, the borders of the critical conversation were sometimes more porous than the church preferred, requiring constant vigilance against the introduction of distortions or heresies. Some times and places, of course, were more vigilant than others; for the most part, throughout the early medieval north, vigilance seems to have been the exception rather than the rule.

Gregory the Great (†604)

The main stream of the homiliary tradition can be said to begin with the chief patron of Benedictine life in the West, Pope Gregory the Great. A member of his congregation—most likely a member of his staff—recorded a number of homilies he preached in the years 591–592.⁶⁹ These were edited into a collection of forty gospel homilies that received wide circulation in the medieval period. Based on contextual clues, these all seem to have been preached at public Masses.

Although he may stand at the head of the Western homiliary tradition, Gregory would resist any suggestion that his writings are original. Rather, they draw broadly on patristic sources and are sometimes completely or partly adaptations of the writings of predecessors, particularly Augustine, Leo the Great, John Cassian, and others; his homily for the First Sunday in Lent stands as a suitable example: his teaching on the temptation of Jesus contains traditional material found in Irenaeus, Origen, and others. Gregory's treatment, in fact, is most likely an adaptation of John Cassian's *Conferences* 5.6. Similarly, the trope that the one who turned water to wine could surely make bread of rocks had he chosen is likely indebted to Leo the Great's *Homily* 40.3. His numerological discussion of the timing of Lent corresponds with widespread ancient tradition. Thus, even here at the start of the chain, Gregory is passing along a self-consciously traditional reading of the text.

⁶⁹ The standard English edition is Gregory I, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, trans. David Hurst, CS 123 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990). Note that Hurst renumbers Gregory's homilies from the usual scheme found in Migne and elsewhere.

The Venerable Bede (†735)

The homiliary of Bede represents a second step in the movement of the homiliary tradition. Bede composed fifty sermons on the gospels arranged according to the liturgical year. He does not always appoint his homilies for particular occasions but leaves some for general use in certain liturgical seasons. Comparing the series carefully with Gregory's, a distinctive trend emerges; although Gregory was one of Bede's favorite authors, there is no overlap between the biblical texts treated by Bede and Gregory. Martin suggests plausibly that Bede produced his homilies intentionally to supplement and flesh out Gregory's cycle.⁷⁰ Indeed, such a service would be in keeping with the rest of Bede's corpus: with regard to the gospels he wrote commentaries only on Luke and Mark—the two that lacked earlier authoritative patristic treatment.

Bede's style was fully patristic, and he seamlessly interwove patristic material and his own interpretations derived by patristic exegetical techniques. An admirer of Augustine, Bede similarly produces thickly textured homilies that pull in a multitude of biblical references from across the canon and focus on details of grammar and vocabulary. Unlike Augustine, whose style is rambling and often hard to follow, Bede's writing is tight and concise. While he was constantly in dialogue with and drew freely from Augustine, Gregory, and the other fathers, Bede does not cite them directly in his homilies. (His commentaries are a different story; with a set of marginal references, Bede seems to have invented and pioneered the use of the source footnote.)

Bede's homilies were clearly intended for the monastic Night Office and also as material for holy reading. Unlike Gregory, Bede includes no stories to provide local color, preferring to save those for his historical writings. Bede's audience, without a doubt, consisted of other monastics and the clergy. His homilies both participated in the critical conversation and were intended to remain within it. His choice of languages, his use of language, and his choice of styles ensured that they would remain accessible to and for the benefit of those within the conversation.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Bede the Venerable, *Homilies on the Gospels: Book One: Advent to Lent*, trans. Lawrence T. Martin and David Hurst, CS 110 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1991), xvi.

⁷¹ The style of the *Ecclesiastical History* is quite different from that of his homilies, inviting wider circulation. It is no surprise, then, that King Alfred the Great selected

Paul the Deacon (†799)

The next point in the tradition is the great homiliary of Paul the Deacon. Appointed by Charlemagne to pluck flowers from amongst the Catholic fathers, Paul collected 244 items representing 125 liturgical occasions for the Night Office. Following the needs of the Night Office, Paul supplied most Sunday and festal occasions with two texts: a “*sermo*” for the second nocturn and an “*omelia*” for the third.⁷² For his texts, Paul used homilies of the fathers whenever possible, preferring works from Bede, Gregory the Great, Chrysostom, Jerome, and Augustine and using passages from commentaries or other works when an appropriate homily was not available. For instance, of the fifty-six works attributed to Bede in the original collection, thirty-six are homilies and twenty are sections drawn from Bede’s commentaries on the two less popular gospels, Luke and Mark.

In each case, the source was identified so that those hearing would know from whom the teaching came and that it stood within the tradition. Inevitably, though, some of these attributions were incorrect. In fact, of the fifty texts attributed to Maximus, modern scholarship believes that only fourteen of them are actually his; of the nineteen attributed to John Chrysostom, only one is certifiably the work of Chrysostom. In addition, other material was added as the centuries passed—and included more dubious material: many of the so-called Augustinian sermons added later were not written by Augustine. (Migne’s edition in PL 95 is representative of the expansion of the collection—it contains 298 texts, up fifty-four from the original scope.)

In one sense, Paul only transmits materials previously written by others and introduces no changes to their texts. In another, he exercises important editorial power by shaping the transmission of the tradition. Paul provided all of these texts with a new and uniform context—the Night

Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* for translation in his project to make key Latin texts available to those literate in English.

⁷² Smetana notes that there are 151 texts identified with the title *sermo*, ninety-three identified as *omelia*, and that the distinction in the texts closest to Paul’s original work seems to have accurately reflected the difference between the two. See Cyril Smetana, “Paul the Deacon’s Patristic Anthology,” in *The Old English Homily & Its Backgrounds*, ed. Paul E. Szarmach and Bernard F. Huppé (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1978), 75–97, at 78. See the discussion of the difference between the two terms in the discussion of the Night Office in chap. 2.

Office. Each homily or commentary pericope selected by Paul was newly contextualized by the sermon paired with it and the responsories that would interrupt it two or three times in the course of its reading. Furthermore, he was, for all practical purposes, drawing the bounds of the critical conversation by what he included and excluded. For many monasteries with limited libraries, Paul's homiliary served as the primary repository of patristic wisdom. While more texts were added as the centuries passed, Paul the Deacon's homiliary passed into the heart of the tradition and became the source for the readings in the Roman Breviary. Like Bede, Paul the Deacon's work was intended to remain within the critical conversation as well as establishing its foundation. It is directed specifically to the clergy and monastics participating in the Night Office.

Neither the works of Gregory nor Bede were in any way "official." They were widely read and eagerly sought out but had no official standing.⁷³ Paul the Deacon's work was different. The prefatory letter originally accompanying it documents Charlemagne's commission to Paul and authorizes the homiliary as the official text for the Frankish kingdom. Charlemagne demanded the establishment of a purified core tradition, and Paul's homiliary was an important aspect of that program of reform. The texts were to be strictly orthodox, coming from the recognized fathers, and compiled by one whose orthodoxy and commitment to the tradition was known to the authorizing powers.

Smaragdus (†840)

The next logical step in the homiliary tradition is the "homiliary" of Smaragdus. While often described as a homiliary in the literature, it is something less than a homiliary: it is an exegetical help for the construction of homilies. Smaragdus treats 109 occasions of the liturgical year, providing each with three kinds of material: a catena of patristic material on the appointed epistle, a patristic catena on the gospel, and a brief statement on the harmony between the two. Like Paul the Deacon, Smaragdus draws entirely from patristic material. He offers original material only in the third section that describes the relationship between the

⁷³ The letters of the English missionary bishop Boniface working in the territory that would become Germany and the Low Countries constantly request copies of Bede's works from his English patrons and relatives.

readings. He also cites his sources, enabling those using the work to know from whom the interpretations were coming. Unlike Paul, he makes selections from patristic works and places them in silent conversation with one another, placing them side by side without further comment. He moves through the biblical texts in a line by line fashion, deploying patristic material as he goes—usually providing between one and three patristic excerpts per line or phrase. Also unlike Paul, Smaragdus’s incorporation of the epistle shows that he intended his work to assist with the biblical readings for Mass, since the epistle is particular to the Mass and does not appear within the Night Office.

Applying the term “homiliary” to this work is not completely accurate, because it utilizes the literary form of the catena rather than the homily. Nevertheless, its shape raises questions about how it was used and what it may teach us about preaching in early medieval contexts. How much did the written text determine the content of the act of proclamation? Did a preacher simply read off what was on the page before him, or does the text of Smaragdus represent starting points and options for the exposition of each verse, allowing the preacher with Smaragdus’s text before him to pick and choose as he went, perhaps even translating or paraphrasing on the fly for non-Latinate congregations? Furthermore, what does this format suggest about how early medieval preachers understood the literary form of “homily” itself? The approach taken by Smaragdus dovetails with the notion of a homily as a set of verbal glosses that clarify the meaning of the biblical text rather than a methodical treatment of each line of the text or the exposition of a general theme extracted from the whole of the biblical passage.

Clearly, this work is intended to remain within the critical conversation. Like Paul’s homiliary, it provides a foundation for the conversation by identifying the authors to be read and, moving beyond Paul, focuses patristic material on each line of the liturgically selected biblical texts.

Haymo of Auxerre (†855)

The homiliaries produced by the school of Auxerre, and especially Haymo of Auxerre, represent the next logical step beyond Smaragdus. In a telling footnote, Smetana refers to the work of Smaragdus as “brief excerpts from the Fathers,” then to the homiliary of Haymo as “little more than judicious excerpts of the Fathers welded together into a continuous

discourse.⁷⁴ Like Smaragdus, Haymo uses multiple selections from the fathers, but he chooses between various options, adds connecting material rather than presenting bare citations, and presents a new homily composed of patristic interpretations and insights cast into a new form. In short, Haymo's homilies may well be examples of what contemporary preachers did when they had a work like Smaragdus before them in the pulpit.

Ælfric of Eynsham (†c. 1010)

The only complete manuscript of both cycles of the *Catholic Homilies* is Cambridge Gg.3.28.⁷⁵ It contains more than just the homilies. It begins with a dedicatory letter to Sigeric, archbishop of Canterbury, in Latin and English, contains the first cycle of the *Catholic Homilies*, another letter prefacing the second cycle, and the second cycle itself, as well as some additional brief catechetical materials. Ælfric's prefaces to his cycles of *Catholic Homilies* are important for understanding what Ælfric wanted to achieve and how he saw himself as a participant within the critical conversation of his day and a mediator of it. Both cycles have, in fact, two prefaces (for a grand total of four); each cycle received a Latin preface and an English preface. Broadly speaking, the content of Ælfric's prefaces was fairly uniform: "Each preface generally includes Ælfric's self-identification, his explanation for the creation of the work (often relating it to a request from an ecclesiastical or secular superior), an account of the work's sources and style, and remarks about its transmission."⁷⁶

Wilcox's studies of Ælfric's prefaces confirm that Ælfric utilized his prefaces to establish his authority by identifying his place within the conversation and its transmission and his reliability to mediate the tradition to those who only understand English. Wilcox states:

Ælfric's self-identification in the prefaces is a reflection of his attitude towards authority and his concern with maintaining a rigorous standard of orthodoxy. The opening of Preface 1b [the Old English Preface to *CH I*] is characteristic in the way that Ælfric uses his identity

⁷⁴ Smetana, "Ælfric and the Early Medieval Homiliary," 181n6.

⁷⁵ Designated by Clemons as "K." Godden and Pope both retain Clemons's manuscript sigla.

⁷⁶ Jonathan Wilcox, *Ælfric's Prefaces*, Durham Medieval Texts 9 (Durham: University of Durham, 1995), 67.

to validate the following work. He begins by identifying himself in terms of his ecclesiastical credentials and position: he is a monk and mass-priest (1b.1) and his current position is validated with respect to both ecclesiastical and civil authority through reference to Bishop Ælfheah and Æthelmær the thane (1b.2-5). The ecclesiastically-reliable persona defined in this first sentence is the identity which is opposed to error in the second sentence. Here further theological validation is provided (the decision to translate was “I trust through God’s gift” 1b.5-6) and the reason for translating is emphasized: “because I saw and heard much error in many English books, which unlearned men through their ignorance reckoned as great wisdom” (1b.7-9). Ælfric has economically created a persona which can be relied upon to provide orthodoxy in opposition to the “much error” usual “in many English books.”

Ælfric sometimes establishes his authority in other ways. In Preface 1a [the Latin Preface to *CH I*] the epistolary opening formula equates “I, Ælfric” with “a student of . . . Æthelwold” (1a.1), a commonly recurring validation through association with the important Benedictine reformer. Further validation is provided in Preface 1a by the naming of a range of sources, patristic and Carolingian (1a.4 and 12-15). A final guarantee of authority is provided by the appeal to Archbishop Sigeric to correct “any blemishes of malign heresy or dark fallacy” (1a.36-40): the work which survives such correction must be reliably orthodox.⁷⁷

Thus the English preface warns against heresies in other English books, suggesting—accurately⁷⁸—that many theologically suspect writings exist among English materials and stand outside of the proper lines of tradition and transmission. As a monk, mass-priest, and client of both Bishop Ælfheah and Æthelmære, Ælfric is a reliable source of orthodox material in English. The Latin preface provides more detail and is intended for those familiar with the critical conversation. Only those who understand the language will understand the proofs that Ælfric offers there—he is the student of Æthelwold and cites the proper patristic sources.

⁷⁷ Wilcox, *Ælfric’s Prefaces*, 68–69.

⁷⁸ The Blicking and Vercelli books, the only two major surviving collections of homilies before Ælfric, contain Old English translations of condemned works including the *Visio Pauli* and the Apocalypse of Thomas, about which more will be said in chap. 4.

Citing the patristic sources explicitly places Ælfric within the critical conversation. He writes to Sigeric that he has translated materials from “Gregory, Augustine, Jerome, Smaragdus and also Haymo.” Thus Ælfric identifies both the major patristic sources he used and the early medieval homiliaries in which he found them. Hill has argued convincingly that the absence of Paul the Deacon from this list is due to Paul’s homiliary circulating without the prefatory documents that identify its editor, not an uncommon state of affairs among English manuscripts of Paul’s work.

This list matches what Ælfric puts forth in the homilies themselves. Typically right after the translation of the scriptural text, he identifies a patristic author who has guided his interpretation. Within the *Catholic Homilies*, Augustine, Gregory, Bede, and Haymo are most often identified as his sources.

Ælfric also invokes patristic authors whenever he needs to bolster a decision made in favor of orthodoxy. For instance, in his second homily for the Assumption of the BVM, he specifically warns against untoward speculation with a patristic appeal:

If we tell more concerning this feast-day than we read in holy books which were set down by God’s direction then we will be like those *dwolmen* [foolish men, heretics] who write many false narratives according to their own direction or through dreams; but the faithful teachers, Augustine, Jerome, Gregory, and whatever others, cast them down through their wisdom. There are, nevertheless, *dwollic* [foolish, erroneous, heretical] books both in Latin and in English, and ignorant people read them. . . . Let everyone cast away the *dwollic* falsehoods which lead the incautious to destruction, and may everyone read or listen to the holy teachers who will guide us to the kingdom of heaven, if we are prepared to hear it.⁷⁹

The three fathers from the preface return here as well as the central arbiters of orthodox teaching.

Ælfric’s prefaces speak of his work as translations from Latin sources. These statements are intended as further guarantees that the material is

⁷⁹ ÆCH 2.29, lines 119–33. Translation from Wilcox, *Ælfric’s Prefaces*, 28.

reliable. However, Ælfric's use of the term "translate" (*interpretatio/awendan*) turns out to be different from its normal contemporary meaning:

The modern term "translation," however, is inadequate for conveying the range of medieval practice, since it suggests rendering content as closely as possible from one language to another. Ælfric's practice is often closer to the modern sense of "adaptation" or "interpretation" entailing the transmission of Latin learning into English. . . . "I know it is possible to translate words in many ways," Ælfric observes at Preface 3a.10. He explicitly points out that his practice is not confined to the narrowest sense of transferal from one language to the other; rather he repeatedly describes his translations as not word for word but sense for sense (Prefaces 1a.9-10, 29-30, 5a.21-22, 8e.5-8). Such a formulation has a long tradition: he is probably drawing on Jerome's statement about biblical translation, which was, in turn, derived from classical tradition.

Other aspects of Ælfric's description of his translation technique make clear that the process is far from literal. He describes his translations as both abbreviating and rearranging his sources (Prefaces 1a.28-33, 5a.21-26), and he attaches comments on the plainness of his style and the orthodoxy of his content to his process of translation (Prefaces 2a.8-12, 3a.10-11, 5a.21-26, 1a.33-35, 36-38, 2a.22-24). He makes it clear that a literal transfer from one language to another would be counter-productive: "He who translates (*awent*) or he who teaches from Latin into English must always arrange it so that English may have its own way, otherwise it is very misleading to read for those who do not know the way of Latin." (Preface 4.96-99)⁸⁰

Thus his own statements about his work demonstrate a consciousness of the importance of the translating process and a concern to present material in such a way that the orthodox meaning is clear. In practice, this includes not only translation but also a significant amount of editorial work.

Thanks to Godden's magisterial commentary that meticulously identifies the patristic material that Ælfric wove together into his homilies, we now have a much better idea of Ælfric's range as an interpreter, editor, and author. While he derives much of his authority from his self-presentation as a patristic translator, Godden reveals that the degree to which Ælfric is

⁸⁰ Wilcox, *Ælfric's Prefaces*, 63-64.

a faithful interpreter of his patristic sources depends entirely on the homily under consideration. Ælfric most often departs from the patristic text when he moves to engage the popular conversation. He does this both to explain something either in the text or source that would not be clear to an Anglo-Saxon audience and to engage mistaken readings or opinions in his environment. Even when he departs from his sources, he remains within a patristic and orthodox framework. That is, he tends to be just as orthodox when he goes off-book as when he remains close to his sources.

Thus Ælfric participates fully within the critical conversation of the early medieval world in that he works with the Latin texts of the orthodox fathers of the Western church and the early medieval editors who collected and arranged their exegetical insights in accordance with the liturgical year. However, his intention was to serve as a mediator between the monastic microculture and the larger English-speaking macroculture. Distressed at the heresies found in the materials offered to those outside of the monastic microcultural conversation, Ælfric's lifework—of which the *Catholic Homilies* represent a central pillar—is to transmit the Christian orthodox of the Latin books into a language and style accessible to all.

SUMMARY

Conventional wisdom suggests that early medieval exegesis is derivative at best and plagiaristic at worst. I suggest that this criticism is overly harsh for two reasons: first, it judges early medieval exegesis on a set of criteria alien to the culture. If the purpose of the early medieval conversation had been the generation of new insights on the biblical text, then it would indeed be guilty as charged. But the conversation itself existed for a different purpose. It sought not to create new data but to preserve insights from being lost through neglect, heresy, losing touch with Christian experience, or destruction—a danger made all the more real by the technological limits of manuscript production. No doubt early medieval monastics, like some current Christian microcultures, would accuse the modern academic microculture of an insatiable lust for exegetical novelties and a disconnect between exegetical possibilities and their application to the Christian moral and spiritual life.

Second, the judgment seems blind to the fundamental character of critical conversations. That is, a modern critical commentary like that of

Luz or Davies and Allison could stray close to the line of being called “derivative” quite easily. We recognize, however, that the charge of being derivative is directly related to the degree to which a work is rooted in the critical conversation and indebted to its predecessors; “derivative” is the shadow side of being “informed” and “engaged” in the ongoing conversation.

In summary, the modern American academic microculture of biblical studies and the early medieval English monastic microculture have more in common than might at first be immediately obvious. They are both communities that take engagement with the New Testament text seriously; both use mimesis as central formative practices; and both participate in critical conversations. The purposes and goals of the two cultures are, however, quite different. Indeed, the difference between the goals has required modern distinction from and, ultimately, modern misunderstandings of the medieval monastic project. My study now moves from similarities and takes up the practice that most clearly defines the early medieval monastic project and sets it apart in its intention and rigor from the modern academic project and from most other communities that shape themselves around the New Testament text: the early medieval monastic liturgy.