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Alcuin and Vikings:  
A Theology of Carolingian Election, Chastisement, and Exaltation

Taylor Ferda

P.O. 735

Presented to Professor Kevin Cragg

11/13/09

*“I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you;  
I will make your name great and you will be a blessing.  
I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse;  
And all people on earth will be blessed through you.”  
Genesis 12:2-3*

Throughout the long history of the Church's struggle to take seriously the biblical precepts for peacemaking, the changing context has always brought with it a difficulty in being a witness to peace in a world gripped by violence. The Viking raids of the ninth and tenth centuries are no exception. In this paper, I will attempt to reveal how Alcuin of York, Charlemagne's finest theologian and clergyman, grapples with this question of violence by looking specifically at the Viking raids of two English monasteries in the last decade of the eighth century. I will show that Alcuin employs an Old Testament covenant model for explaining the two attacks: regarding those within Charlemagne's Empire (including the English) as the elect people of God, and those outside the empire (the Viking raiders) as agents of God's wrath. Alcuin situates the elect of Christendom within a strict two-kingdom framework and thus makes two varying ethical demands on the recipients of his letters. In these theological convictions Alcuin is very much in line with traditional theological orthodoxy of the Early Middle Ages in that his ideas conform to both the Augustinian framework of Just War as well as the royal theocracy of the Carolingian Empire.

I will demonstrate these by first examining *how* Alcuin explained these attacks within his theological and ecclesiastical convictions. Following this, we will consider *what* Alcuin encouraged his recipients to practice in order to stave off further invasion. And finally, I will attempt to postulate *why* Alcuin responded in the particular theological fashion that he did. But first a concise historical sketch is needed to explain the situation he addressed.

## **I. Historical Overview**

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle writes that in the year A.D. 793, "the ravages of heathen men miserably destroyed God's church on Lindisfarne, with plunder and slaughter."<sup>1</sup> Despite

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Whitelock, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1961), 36. G.F. Browne in *Alcuin of York* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1908) argues that since the

the ambiguous description of “heathen” used in this entry, scholars tend to agree that these early Viking attacks were by Norwegians, since no record of the Danes exists until the attack of Dorestad in A.D. 834.<sup>2</sup> The presence of these raiders comes as a surprise to Alcuin when, in his letter to King Ethelred of Northumbria, he writes “Lo, it is nearly 350 years that we and our fathers have inhabited this most lovely land, and never before has such terror appeared in Britain as we have now suffered from a pagan race, nor was it thought that such an inroad from the sea could be made.”<sup>3</sup> The reasons for such an attack are obvious: Lindisfarne’s geographic proximity to Viking seafaring routes, its relatively unprotected premises, and the treasure that was most likely within it.

In response to this attack Alcuin writes a series of six letters: three to King Ethelred, two to the Bishop Higbald, and one to Cudrad, the priest of Lindisfarne.<sup>4</sup> Alcuin writes vividly that “the pagans desecrated the sanctuaries of God, and poured out the blood of the saints around the altar” leaving the bodies of the saints “trampled...like dung on streets.”<sup>5</sup> There is no cause to doubt the accuracy of Alcuin’s fateful attempts to record the startling effects; for the attacks, while possibly exaggerated by ecclesiastics in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, were real and fear-provoking to their immediate witnesses.<sup>6</sup>

Only a year later the second attack at the twin monasteries of Wearmouth and Jarrow were recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as “...heathens ravaged in Northumbria, and

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Lindisfarne events took place late in A.D. 793, and calendars during the Early Middle Ages regarded the year to end in March, the attacks most likely occurred in January rather than June (127).

<sup>2</sup> Peter Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1971), 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Dorothy Whitelock, ed., *English Historical Documents: 500-1042* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), EHD 194. From this point on, the acronym EHD will be used to cite Whitelock’s *English Historical Documents*. Alcuin’s consternation is justified, though, as Sawyer has argued, the technological advances needed to authorize such a seafaring expedition were possible only by the eighth century (Sawyer, *Age of the Vikings*, 79).

<sup>4</sup> Out of the six written, I will focus on four specifically and omit two written to Ethelred due to translation difficulties.

<sup>5</sup> EHD, 194.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings* (London & New York: Methuen, 1982), 94. Also see Donald F. Logan, *The Vikings in History* 2d ed. (London & New York: Hutchinson & Co., 1991), 40.

plundered Ecgfrith's monastery at Donemuthan..."<sup>7</sup> Similar to the vulnerability of the monastery at Lindisfarne, the location of Wearmouth-Jarrow along the Tyne River rendered it very liable to a devastating raid.<sup>8</sup> In fact, devastating may be an understatement: modern archeologists have revealed that both Wearmouth and Jarrow were most likely burned during this period, with the former being abandoned until the eleventh century.<sup>9</sup> We possess one letter from Alcuin to the monastery of Wearmouth-Jarrow that was probably written in A.D. 794 *after* the Lindisfarne attack but *before* the Wearmouth-Jarrow raid. The conclusion can be drawn, then, that the Wearmouth-Jarrow letter is primarily *prescriptive* because it was written after the attack of Lindisfarne, evidenced by Alcuin's reference to the siege in the A.D. 794 letter.<sup>10</sup>

## **II. Theology of the Covenant: Alcuin's Response**

The crucial underpinning to all of Alcuin's theological claims concerning these two monastic raids (or impending raids) must be viewed within his understanding of a covenantal relationship between God and Christendom. For Alcuin, Christendom is Charlemagne's geopolitical kingdom, including the conquered lands of England, and he [Alcuin] is the prophet of God and the Viking raiders serve as agents of God's wrath for unfaithful activity. Though this conviction takes various forms in his letters, the accepted model is one in which a distinction is made between the people of God, on the one hand, and the pagan forces, on the other, through whom God is using to chastise his people for their unfaithfulness to the covenantal precepts in

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<sup>7</sup> Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 36-37. The editors make note that *Donemuthan* refers to "the mouth of the Don" which Simeon, in his *History of the Church of Durham*, identified as Jarrow.

<sup>8</sup> Browne, 135.

<sup>9</sup> Robin Fleming, "Monastic Lands and England's Defence in the Viking Age," *The English Historical Review* 100 (1985): 248.

<sup>10</sup> A note on the scope of this paper: My intent here is not to provide an analysis of Alcuin's entire theological method, nor is it to study all of Alcuin's letters written to England or having to do with theological controversy. Both would be too broad and inevitably lure us away from the essence of this exposition. Rather, I chose to undertake a study with five *occasional* documents that were prompted by one *specific* raid at Lindisfarne and the impending attack at Wearmouth-Jarrow. Therefore, because of the chronological and geographical proximity of these two monasteries, as well as the letters that go with them, this study will narrowly direct its task to Alcuin's theological reaction to the Lindisfarne and Wearmouth-Jarrow attacks using only five of the seven letters that Alcuin would write from A.D. 793-794.

the New Testament. For Alcuin, nothing is random; everything is the result of God's exhaustive, providential direction of all human events.<sup>11</sup>

Explicit in Alcuin's letters are his covenantal claims specific to those who are within Charlemagne's Kingdom, which necessarily includes the English people. Writing to Ethelred of Northumbria, Alcuin sees the English land as a symbol for God's covenant blessing: "O men my brothers and fathers, also esteemed in Christ the Lord; desiring the divine mercy to conserve for us in long-lasting prosperity our land, which it once with its grace conferred on us with free generosity..."<sup>12</sup> In the letter to Cudrad, Alcuin writes, "Let them turn to God unreservedly, and if anything in their conduct needs amending let them put it right whole-heartedly, that their conversion may please God..."<sup>13</sup> And in his letter to the monasteries of Wearmouth-Jarrow, Alcuin pleads, "So mend your ways, lest the righteous perish for the sins of the wicked, lest the vineyard of the Lord be given up to be devoured by foxes, lest the feet of pagans tread upon the sanctuary of God."<sup>14</sup> One can note how Alcuin implicitly forges a connection between the providential action of God in relationship with biblical Israel and his relationship to the English monasteries.

This Israel-English connection is further developed in Alcuin's belief that specific covenant prophecies are actually being fulfilled by the English monasteries. In his letter to the monks of Wearmouth and Jarrow, he claims, "You live near a sea from which this danger first came. *In us* is fulfilled what once the prophet foretold: 'From the North evil breaks forth, and a

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<sup>11</sup> Simon Coupland, "The rod of God's wrath or the people of God's wrath? The Carolingian's theology of the Viking invasions," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 42 (1991): 553.

<sup>12</sup> EHD, 193.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Allot, *Alcuin of York, his life and letters* (York, England: William Sessions Limited, 1974), 38-39.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

terrible glory will come from the Lord.”<sup>15</sup> Given these claims, Coupland’s conclusion is justified: “At the heart of Carolingian theology was a divinely determined universe, where God’s sovereignty was paramount, and where he had chosen the Franks as his elect people, with all of the privileges and responsibilities that this entailed.”<sup>16</sup>

This covenant motif present in all of his letters is grounded in the conviction that the Church of Christ is not a transcultural community, but rather one that is strictly tied to Christendom’s geopolitical territory and its divinely elected people. Moreover, the human value of these raiders was, at the very least, inferior to the English Christians in Alcuin’s mind. Referring to them as ‘heathens’ and ‘pagans’, Alcuin never sees them as worthy of the same dignity that Christians had as image-bearers of Christ. This meant that, in matters of warfare, Frankish soldiers could kill these invaders in battle without the requirement of penance afterwards.<sup>17</sup>

Alcuin makes it explicitly clear that despite the fact the raid came from non-Christian heathens—and that killing them in battle was justified on almost every ground possible—they were nevertheless still used by God as a means for his just retribution on the sinful behavior of God’s elect. In his letter to Higbald, Alcuin attempts to answer why the attack came upon the community and writes “Truly it has not happened by chance, but is a sign that it was well

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<sup>15</sup> Allot, 40. My italics. Alcuin applies Scripture from two OT passages: Jeremiah 1:14-15: “The LORD said to me, ““From the north disaster will be poured out on all who live in the land.””; Job 37:22: “Out of the north he comes in golden splendor; God comes in awesome majesty.”

<sup>16</sup> Coupland, 554.

<sup>17</sup> Coupland, 547. The author does, however, note that if the killing of a pagan was done without motive or for the purposes of profit, then penance was deemed necessary for the forgiveness of sins. Also see Sarah Foot, “Violence against Christians? The Vikings and the Church in 9<sup>th</sup> Century England,” *Medieval History* 1 (1991): 8. She maintains that “There is thus a clear sense in the contemporary narrative sources, and in those written between the First and Second Viking Ages, that the Vikings represented a notably differed kind of threat to Christian property from that posed by the native population.” From this perspective, there was something unique about Viking paganism that made their attacks even more abhorrent than those of other attackers.

merited by someone.”<sup>18</sup> Later in the letter he goes further to cite Hebrews 12:6 to offer condolences to those still in fear: “Yet be not dismayed in mind by this calamity. God chastiseth every son whom he receiveth, and thus he perhaps chastised you more harshly, because he loved you more.”<sup>19</sup> Alcuin reconciles these violent acts toward the monastic community by appealing to the prevailing Augustinian understanding of God’s providential control: one that emphasized human fallibility and the retributive will of God.<sup>20</sup>

While Alcuin emphasizes the sinfulness of the elect and God’s just punishment, he still will not disregard the notion that God will fight for the English and save them from their pagan enemies. In sorting through this seemingly troublesome paradox, Alcuin draws on two historical examples: Rome and Jerusalem. He writes:

Jerusalem, the city loved by God, perished with the temple of God in the flames of the Chaldeans. Rome, encircled by a crown of holy apostles and innumerable martyrs, was shattered by the ravages of pagans, but by the pity of God soon recovered. Almost the whole of Europe was laid desolate by the fire and sword of the Goths and Huns; but now, by God’s mercy, it shines adorned with churches, as the sky with stars, and in them the offices of the Christian religion flourish and increase.<sup>21</sup>

Alcuin thus draws a parallel with the biblical account in Jeremiah 52 when Jerusalem is sacked by the Chaldeans. As mentioned before, for Alcuin there is no difference between God’s relationship to ancient Israel and God’s relationship to the Carolingian Kingdom. As evident in

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<sup>18</sup> EHD, 194.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 194. Hebrews 12:6: “...because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.”

<sup>20</sup> Coupland, 539. The author writes, “From this brief survey it emerges how strongly the Frankish clergy emphasized the sinfulness of the people and the retributive power of God. This stress on human fallibility and impotence can in part be linked to the prevalence of Augustinian theology, with its particular sense of the dark shadows of sin and judgment looming over all” (539). For this reason, he argues, the bitter quarrel over double-predestination provoked such a large amount of writing within theological circles during the time of Alcuin.

<sup>21</sup> EHD, 194.



this quotation, both experience the same divine providence that uses pagan enemies for chastisement, and also delivers them from harm if their faithfulness is rekindled.<sup>22</sup>

Of final importance is Alcuin's recognition that these English monastic communities, as well as the Carolingian Empire on a larger scale, are experiencing the impending evil from the North as prophesied in the Holy Scriptures. Writing to Ethelred, Alcuin asserts this by asking a rhetorical question: "Can it not be expected that from the north there will come upon our nation retribution of blood, which can be seen to have started with this attack which has lately befallen the house of God?"<sup>23</sup> In his letter written to the monks at Wearmouth and Jarrow, he cites Jeremiah 1:14 and Job 37:22, and using the geographic direction of the raiders' assault, once again places England at the center of his exegetical literalism as participants in Old Testament covenantal promises.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, the overarching purpose of these letters runs parallel to the role of the Old Testament prophets. They too issued warnings that the wrath of God will soon be manifest, and prodded their audiences toward deeper covenant faithfulness. While Alcuin also models the apostle Paul in his use of Paul's formal letter opener, it is clear that the purpose behind the letters is thoroughly prophetic, with an underlying hope that the English continent will return to its prior

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<sup>22</sup> Foot, *Violence against Christians*, 8. The author submits that Alcuin uses these historical examples for the pastoral purpose of comforting the recipients of his letters. The purpose is to assure them that they are not alone in their struggle and that they fit within a long-standing historical tradition of God's people being ravaged by the unredeemed souls of pagan enemies.

<sup>23</sup> EHD, 193.

<sup>24</sup> Jeremiah 1:14: "The LORD said to me, 'From the north disaster will be poured out on all who live in the land.'" Job 37:22: "Out of the north he comes in golden splendor; God comes in awesome majesty. Also see Foot (Violence Against Christians), who submits that Alcuin's motive is to place the monasteries within the story of biblical Israel. She writes, "This reference to the arrival of the vikings from the north refers to the Old Testament sentiment, particularly expressed in the book of the prophet of Jeremiah, that the north is the place from which attackers will descend from God's land, notably to punish those who have transgressed against God's law... Alcuin set the viking raid in the perspective of the reversals and hardships which has been people's lot ever since the Fall" (8).

state of covenant faithfulness.<sup>25</sup> Following this line of reasoning, Alcuin's exegetical approach to scripture, emphasizing the literal and immediate application to Christendom, presupposes that its inhabitants were God's new chosen people and the true descendents of Old Testament Israel.<sup>26</sup>

We see Alcuin writing to a people that he believes are descendents of God's covenant, and due to their disobedience to the law of God, have duly merited the wrath of God through the raids of the Vikings. But in true prophetic fashion, Alcuin does not reference the left hand of God without also calling attention to the right. Thus, to answer the question of *what* the recipients of his letters are to do in order to turn from their sin, we must look at Alcuin's exhortations toward a more righteous behavior. He firmly believes, as did Jeremiah, that if the people are obedient, God will demonstrate his mercy.

### **III. Ethics of the Kingdom: What is to be done?**

Alcuin's theological explanations for the Lindisfarne raid, as well as the impending attack on Wearmouth-Jarrow, are predicated upon a distinctive two-kingdom model that differentiates between the *milites Christi* and *milites saeculares* within the English ecclesiastical

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<sup>25</sup> Sarah Foot, *Monastic Life in Anglo-Saxon England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 345. The author describes this confidence in a prior golden age when "the religious orders in England were eager in teaching and in learning as well as in all the holy services which it was their duty to perform for God was a hortatory tool." Alcuin seems to have a similar faith, writing to Ethelred he contends "But from the days of King Elfwold fornications, adulteries and incest have poured over the land, so that these sins have been committed without any shame and even against the handmaids dedicated to God. What may I say about avarice, robbery, violent judgments?—when it is clearer than day how much these crimes have increased everywhere, and a despoiled people testify to it" (EHD, 193).

<sup>26</sup> Coupland, 554. Rolph Barlow Page in *The Letters of Alcuin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1909) extends this principle to Alcuin's fitting of Charlemagne within the model proposed by Coupland. The author writes, "He [Alcuin] and his contemporaries view Charles as king and emperor from the standpoint of the Old Testament ideal. To them he is a prophet-priest, a warrior-king. Chosen of God to lead His faithful people, he is their weapon of defense, their lawgiver and judge...He is a second David, a mighty prince and ruler, decreeing laws for his people, defending the oppressed, cherishing the foreigner, doing justice to one and all, and enlightening his people with the light and knowledge and of truth" (54).

and political structure.<sup>27</sup> Alcuin's two-kingdom distinction is made with the overall purpose of providing one, nationally unified security of the Carolingian Kingdom. Thus, in attempting to involve people of both church and state function, the distinction fundamentally necessitates that he provide two different ethical demands to these two groups of Christians. Writing to Ethelred, Alcuin espouses this duality: "Nothing defends a country better than the equity and godliness of princes and the intercessions of the servants of God."<sup>28</sup> Soon after this Alcuin further expounds on his distinction: "Obey the priests of God; for they have an account to make to God, how they admonish you; and you, how you obey them. Let one peace and love be between you; they as interceders for you, you as defenders of them."<sup>29</sup>

In another part of the letter, he issues a "two-fold relationship" between these two citizen groups. There is to be unity among them insofar as they are "sons of one city in Christ, that is, of Mother Church, and natives of one country."<sup>30</sup> By arguing that each Christian is a citizen who belongs both to an "earthly kingdom and to the beatitude of an eternal kingdom,"<sup>31</sup> Alcuin reconciles the *milites Christi* and *milites saeculares* with the physical camaraderie of the geopolitical territory of Christendom, as well as the spiritual fellowship found in the Church. In this sense, Alcuin very much fits the Carolingian idea of church and state relationship where, as one scholar put it, "The safety of the realm depended upon the intercession of holy men. The

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<sup>27</sup> The distinctions made between the *milites Christi* and *milites saeculares* are not explicitly stated in Alcuin's letters. Rather, in using the model proposed by Coupland in which the terms are found, we see Alcuin's exhortations easily applicable to such a model. The former refers to monks, nuns, bishops, priests, abbots and all clergy that are a part of the activity of the Church. The latter refers to those in service to the state, such as kings, nobles, and knights. This model will be used throughout the rest of this study.

<sup>28</sup> EHD, 193.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 193.

monks were the spiritual counterpart of the secular armies which defended the realm against its enemies, especially against incursions by the heathen.”<sup>32</sup>

The two-kingdom model presupposed by Alcuin is utterly inseparable from his admonitions that are discussed next. For only through this model has Alcuin the ability to make such a distinction between these two: justifying the use of force for the soldier, while at the same time reserving a strict spiritual piety for the churchmen. Both of these citizens fulfill the ethics determined by Alcuin to be essential for defense against the raiders: the soldier exercises force and therefore fulfills the Old Testament motif of a God who fights—sanctioning violent activity for the advancement of his chosen nation—and the churchmen fulfills the uncompromising pacifism laid out in the New Testament and Beatitudes. In sum, it is this model, and only through this model, that makes it possible for Alcuin to issue ethical exhortations in such a dualistic fashion.

Beginning with the advice to the *milites Christi*, Alcuin firmly excludes any activity that resembles fighting in military combat. Furthermore, they are to embrace strict pacifism. This conviction is found in one of his letters to Bishop Higbald, where he writes, “You have a stronger defense in the mending of your conduct and the intercession of the saints who rest among you than in the massing of arrows and the gatherings of arms.”<sup>33</sup> Citing Isaiah 37:36, a passage in which the angel of the LORD, through a single prayer of King Hezekiah, put to death one hundred and eighty-five thousand Assyrians, Alcuin reveals that the weapons of the *milites*

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<sup>32</sup> C.H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism 3d ed.* (Great Britain: Longman Group, 2001), 69. A slightly different argument is proposed by Page, claiming that after his coronation in 800 C.E. by Pope Leo, Charlemagne believed it to be his holy task to be the guardian of the ecclesiastical peace and saw fit that the Church should naturally second all of his warlike plans. Also see Page, who cites a letter written by Charles to Leo stating, “It is your duty, O Holy Father, to support our warlike service with hands uplifted to God, so that the Christian people, led of God and aided by your prayers, may triumph everywhere” (40). Thus, as Page submits, “There was little left to the Papacy save the exercise of the purely spiritual functions” (40).

<sup>33</sup> Allot, 38. Browne argues that the mere reference of Alcuin to the option of fortification by force indicates that Lindisfarne was actually being fortified at the time the letter was written after the attack of A.D. 793.

*Christi* are not physical swords, shields, and arrows, but rather the spiritual weapons of prayer and fasting. Writing to Cudrad, Alcuin admonishes him to “keep scrupulously to the solitary way of life and private prayer and regular fasting” in order that “the protection of God and the intercession of our father St. Cuthbert”<sup>34</sup> may be granted. Alcuin also urges the recipients of his letters to keep the Rule of the monastic tradition in which they live.<sup>35</sup> For him, the churchmen *are* warriors, it is just that their battle-line is in the heart not on the field.

To be sure, education and intellectual stimulation also seem to be points of urgency for Alcuin. In Higbald’s letter, Alcuin presses his recipients to “keep up the practice of reading,”<sup>36</sup> while to the monks at Wearmouth and Jarrow, “boys should learn the Scriptures, so that when they grow up they can teach others.”<sup>37</sup> As one scholar has pointed out, Alcuin like others of his time, “made learning the handmaid of theology,” evidenced by the fact that curriculum began and ended with the study of Scripture.<sup>38</sup>

All of these exhortations toward better behavior and increased discipline find their meaning via Alcuin’s belief in the reality of a spiritual enemy present in the resistance against the monasteries, as well as the power of the founding saints who offer protection to faithful communities. Impelling Higbald and the Lindisfarne community toward strict adherence to the monastic rule, Alcuin writes “Let all goodness, all practice of piety, all beauty of religion, joy of peace and faithfulness to the monastic rule be seen in you, that the divine protection may save

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<sup>34</sup> Allott, 39.

<sup>35</sup> Writing to Bishop Higbald, Alcuin pleads for the devout life by stating “I urge you to keep most carefully the rule of the holy fathers established for your community, in all obedience, chastity and love...” (Allott, 38). In his letter to the monks of Wearmouth and Jarrow, Alcuin urges them to “carefully keep the rule of the monastic life which the most holy fathers Benedict and Ceolfrid laid down for you...” (Allot, 39).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>38</sup> Page, 71. It seems more likely than simple coincidence that Alcuin’s high view of educational development within these monastic communities is a direct result of his official position in Charlemagne’s Palace School as the head schoolmaster. To this end, his advice is not only motivated by spiritual reasons, but also out of a sense of political duty to Charlemagne and his wishes for a Carolingian rebirth of classical education.

you from enemies, visible and invisible.”<sup>39</sup> Writing to those at Wearmouth and Jarrow, Alcuin suggests that a spiritual element is assisting the raiders in their pillaging of Lindisfarne: “...The outward enemy has power because of the enemy within.”<sup>40</sup> In light of this spiritual battle, clergy and monks were to call upon the saints of their monastery for protection and deliverance. Alcuin stresses the importance of abstaining from vain luxuries in a letter to Higbald, hoping that “the most holy fathers, who begot you, may not cease to be your protectors. Treading in their footsteps, you may remain secure by their prayers.”<sup>41</sup> Again writing to Cudrad, he challenges the priest to urge his congregation to “trust in the protection of God and the intercession of our father St. Cuthbert.”<sup>42</sup> To be sure, the belief that saints protected monasteries and churches from external threats was a common theme since the Early Middle Ages, but with these invasions from the pagan Vikings, the idea gained special prominence as an impetus for discipline and moral support.<sup>43</sup>

The evidence for Alcuin’s exhortations regarding the *milites saeculares* is minimal in comparison to that of the *milites Christi*.<sup>44</sup> Concluding his letter to Higbald, Alcuin encourages military combat for knights: “When our lord King Charles returns home, having by the mercy of

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<sup>39</sup> Allott, 38.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 40. Lawrence points out that monasteries were often regarded as combat units “in which the recruit was trained and equipped for his spiritual warfare under an experienced commander—the abbot” (29). In arguing for this point, the author cites the Latin word *scola* which, during the Early Medieval period, brought forth both military and academic imagery to mind. In this sense, the monastery was created as a *scola*, or a regiment for the spiritual battle for God.

<sup>41</sup> EHD, 194.

<sup>42</sup> Allott, 39.

<sup>43</sup> Carl Erdmann, *The Origin of the Idea of Crusade* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1935), 27. Page further illustrates Alcuin’s point of view regarding the role of the saints: “These same saints, who with self-sacrificing devotion bare their heads to the assassin’s sword, upon occasion rise in righteous indignation, and, with the courage of Berserkers, rush into the midst of the heathen, firing their temples or putting them to flight while reveling in some ungodly orgy” (36).

<sup>44</sup> The reasons for this may include the use of only one letter to the king used in this paper, opposed to the four used that were written to priests, monks, and bishops. Alcuin’s own interest in English monasticism, as well as his long-standing relationship with the monastic communities may also explain the few references to the ethical conduct of the *milites saeculares*.

God subdued his enemies, we plan, God helping us, to go with him...”<sup>45</sup> Alcuin assumes the military function of Charlemagne and his forces in subduing the raiders while also contending God’s providential guidance over their victory. This is not to say, however, that Alcuin cared nothing for the piety of the *milites saeculares*. He focuses more on the religiosity of these statesmen than detailed military obligations. Rather than challenging the thesis of this study that two distinctive ethical demands were made on these groups, this evidence highlights that Alcuin wanted a *Christian* military force to subdue the raiders, not simply a *secular* one. After all, the god of the Christians is the only one who can grant providential deliverance to the faithful.

It seems that Carolingian clergy did not see any contradiction in God using the Vikings as a means of punishment while they still encouraged practical defensive measures to protect endowed monastic land.<sup>46</sup> In fact, there is evidence that peace treaties made with Viking raiders were often looked down upon as disloyal to God and his people.<sup>47</sup> The logic seems to be that God only protects Christian soldiers when they faithfully carry out *their own* duties. Peace treaties and submission to foreign enemies seem to exist only within the pacifist realm of the *milites Christi* and therefore should be avoided by the *milites saeculares* at all costs. From a more practical angle, part of the reason is that monastic lands were often endowed by kings or lords hoping that they would be used to channel God’s favor on the surrounding geopolitical kingdom.<sup>48</sup>

In light of this evidence, we can now turn to consider the *why* question: can we understand why Alcuin responded in the theological manner in which he did?

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<sup>45</sup> EHD, 193.

<sup>46</sup> Coupland, 540. Foot describes the defense of the English against the Vikings as a noble religious obligation that Christian’s of all positions were expected to fulfill (15). This idea sheds light on Alcuin’s urgency for kings and knights to practice religiosity in their defense of the Christian homeland.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 548.

<sup>48</sup> Lawrence, 68.

#### **IV. Alcuin: A Specimen of Medieval Theology**

In attempting to answer this question, it is important to discover Alcuin within the theological culture of his time. We cannot understand Alcuin and his theological beliefs about war and violence without first recognizing a much broader Medieval worldview that gave birth to those ideas. Moreover, we grasp Alcuin's theology only insofar as we understand theological orthodoxy during the Middle Ages. For as we shall see, Alcuin's theological voice is one of *repetition* not *innovation*.

Throughout his career as a theologian, Alcuin's theological approach reveled in the tradition of the church, predicated on the defense of Catholic orthodoxy and the mirroring of conclusions reached by the great Latin fathers: Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome. A prominent Alcuin scholar put it this way: "Respect for the authority was a predominant feature in his moral and intellectual composition, and its influence was perhaps most of all to be seen in his theological work."<sup>49</sup> At the heart of Alcuin's method is a theology that distrusts innovation, seeks after the traditions of the past, and strives to echo the conclusions of preceding Christian writers in a new context.<sup>50</sup> To judge Alcuin's theology as inferior because it lacks "creativity" is a conclusion drawn from modern values shaped by the Enlightenment, rather than sound historiography.

In any case, Alcuin was not only a transmitter of the great traditions of the church, but more specifically he was a theologian existing within the reality produced by Augustine's preeminent shadow. The theological premise laid out in his letters concerning the Viking raiders is a microcosm of Augustine's *The City of God* and its understanding of church and state—one where government was divinely enabled to restrain evil and was both a punishment and a remedy

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<sup>49</sup> C.J.B. Gaskoin, *Alcuin: His Life and His Work* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1904), 164.

<sup>50</sup> Page, 19-20.



for the sins of humanity. The stark contrasts that Augustine made between the city of God and the city of man seem to take form in Alcuin's strong convictions regarding Charlemagne's Empire as God's elect people and the utter rejection of anything pagan.<sup>51</sup> In essence, the ethic of Augustine's *City of God* is recapitulated by Alcuin in his dealing with the elect of God and the pagan Vikings.<sup>52</sup>

In addition to the distinctive Augustinian precepts embedded within his theological premises, Alcuin conforms quite well to the Carolingian church-state relationship engineered by Charlemagne. Christendom to Alcuin—including the proper sanction of military protection afforded by Charlemagne—was the geopolitical inheritor of God's covenant. Therefore, Charlemagne was not only the head of the Frankish Kingdom but also the righteous defender of the Catholic Church in Rome.<sup>53</sup> And to this end, Alcuin's theological response to the raid of Lindisfarne and impending raids facing Wearmouth-Jarrow *must* necessarily be supportive of this relationship between Charles and the Church. Some suggest that Alcuin's relationship to

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<sup>51</sup> Erdmann, 97. The importance here is not if Alcuin *correctly* applied Augustine's church-state model to the situation caused by the Viking raiders. A correct application would have more likely compelled Alcuin to judge the *milites Christi* as the City of God and the *milites saeculares* as the City of Man, instead of England as the City of God and the Vikings as the City of Man. However, the emphasis lies not in correct application, but in Augustine's intense theological polarization of the distinct 'Christian' city from the 'pagan' city. Erdmann expounds on this prominent distinction that most likely influenced Alcuin's conclusions: "Augustine's contrast of the city of God and the city of the devil lived on in men's minds and was occasionally used summarily to characterize the combats of Christians against heathens" (97). For an expanded study on Augustine's influence on Just War in the Middle Ages, see Frederick Russell, *Just War in the Middle Ages* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 16-40. The author elaborates on Augustine's use of the Old Testament and the idea of Just War, both of which Alcuin implicitly claims in his letters. Russell writes, "Inspired by the OT Augustine argued that by divine judgment wars punished peoples for sins and crimes, even those unrelated to the war. Even wicked men could serve God's providence by punishing the sins of other peoples. Every war had peace as its goal, hence war was an instrument of peace and should be waged to secure peace of some sort" (16).

<sup>52</sup> Page distinguishes between the "temporal powers" of kingship and government and the "spiritual powers" of the churches and monasteries. He illustrates Augustine's substantial influence on Alcuin's understanding of church and state: "From these expressions, it is evident that Alcuin is a firm upholder of the Petrine tradition; in matters of doctrine the authority of Rome is paramount. Further than this, however, he does not go; he makes no claim for the Papacy save that of precedence. On the contrary, recognizing its dangers and needs, he seeks rather to draw it and the temporal powers together as necessary to each other and to the Church" (41).

<sup>53</sup> Eleanor Shipley Duckett, *Alcuin: Friend of Charlemagne* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1951), 86.

Charlemagne, as well as his convictions regarding his status as defender of the Church and conqueror for Christ, helped generate the theological responses given by Alcuin.<sup>54</sup>

The separation between church and state was quite blurred with the Christianization of the state in the person of Charlemagne and a generation before with the rule of his father Pepin. And as for Alcuin, he seems to fit easily within this framework, accepting the defense of the Church by Charlemagne, as well as his ecclesiastical reforms, as all justified tactics under the banner of his priest-kingship authority.<sup>55</sup> This position gave way to a new conception of Carolingian society, in which the wars on behalf of Charlemagne's ecclesiastical purposes allowed no separation between the church and the state.<sup>56</sup> Despite Alcuin's dualistic advice to the *milites Christi* and *milites saeculares*, his entire two-kingdom model is predicated upon his belief in one, unified, national defense headed by the divinely elected Charlemagne. This defense leaves room for monks to be pacifists and for knights to kill.

The Viking raid of Lindisfarne and the exhortations given to those of Wearmouth-Jarrow ultimately bring to the surface Alcuin's theological convictions regarding warfare and violence. Very much indebted to the theological culture of his time, Alcuin's ideas concerning warfare are informed by his belief in a covenantal relationship between Christendom and God. Through this model, Alcuin has a basis to theologially evaluate the Viking's assault; and through this model, he gives dualistic advice to clergy and statesmen that coheres with the Carolingian church-state relationship. For Alcuin, this underlying narrative shades contemporary events in biblical colors

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<sup>54</sup> Page, 11.

<sup>55</sup> Erdmann, 23. The author extrapolates on this idea of priest-kingship: "Since almost all of Charles's opponents were either pagans or persecutors so of the papacy, the state church did not hesitate to bless its wars. The situation closely resembled that of the Ancient Near East, where religion coincided with the state for nation. We encounter phenomena altogether comparable to ancient Israel: as Yahweh did then, so now did St. Peter, the special patron of the Frankish king, regularly decided battles in his favor; as the Israelite priests and prophets, so now did the Frankish bishops and priests pray to heaven for victory; and as once the Ark of the Covenant, so now were relics borne in combat as a pledge of victory" (24).

<sup>56</sup> Russell, 29.

and justifies the royal-kinship authority through which Charlemagne defends the elect of God against pagan attackers.

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