Part One
Alcuin's Formation and Reputation

Chapter 1
The Legacy of Bede

Alcuin was a conscious heir to the rich traditions of the English Church, which had been created among the Anglo-Saxons in the century and half before his birth in around 740. The father of this church was Pope Gregory the Great, the 'apostle of the English'; and all that Alcuin set out to accomplish was consistent with the pastoral and evangelistic approach outlined by Bede which had governed the pope's mission, led by Augustine of Canterbury and Paulinus of York, to the Anglo-Saxons in the seventh century. As a Northumbrian, born probably near York and certainly educated there, Alcuin modelled his learning and teaching upon the memory of Bede, who had died in 735 just around the time that he was born. Bede's study of the Bible, and his *History* of how the early Anglo-Saxon church had been created, provided the framework for much of Alcuin's own thinking. Bede and Alcuin were both disciples of Gregory, and their own work in expounding the Bible and Christian theology flowed from his example and legacy and complemented it.

In many ways the life and career of Alcuin can be seen as a continuation of the work of Bede. Bede's significance and influence is therefore essential background not only to understanding Alcuin, but also to the emergence of the school of York in which he was formed. Consideration of how far the writing of Alcuin mirrored that of Bede and developed it also gives a conspectus of his intellectual horizons and resources. Alcuin's example and legacy is one of the reasons why Bede's writings became so widespread in the continental Church.

Bede is generally remembered in England for his *History,*[1] in which he recounted in careful detail the story of how Christianity came to the various Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in the seventh century. On the continent, however, in the century immediately after Bede's death in 735, and for the rest of the Middle Ages, it was his biblical exegesis and mathematical work that was most highly valued.[2] Alcuin was one of those who did as much as anyone to secure and enhance Bede's reputation on the continent, and his own work can be seen in part as a conscious development from where Bede left off. So much so, that for many centuries afterwards some of their work was so

intertwined in the manuscripts that writings by Alcuin were often attributed to Bede, and work by Bede was bound up with texts that took their origin from Alcuin and his circle of disciples. At a much deeper level, Bede was in many ways the key to the person Alcuin became, both as a scholar and as a theologian, even though he never knew him personally, probably being born around the year that he died.[3] Bede and Alcuin saw themselves as disciples of Gregory the Great, continuing and completing his work in moral theology and the study of the Bible. Both men were natural teachers and masters of lucid Latin prose, poetry and prayer.

Bede grew up in the monastery of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow, in the north-east of England by the mouth of the river Tyne.[4] His *Lives of the Abbots*[5] records in loving detail the founding of the monastery, its lavish endowment by its abbot, Benedict Biscop, and its development under his successor, Abbot Ceolfrith. Bede was fortunate to be able to spend the bulk of his life from his childhood within the rich environment of prayer, art and study that Benedict had created. The architecture of the monastery was modelled on buildings in Gaul, and it possessed an extensive library by the standards of the day. Its scriptorium was capable of producing the famous *Codex Amiatinus* of the Bible, which is now in Florence: this is one of the earliest complete editions of the Vulgate text of the Bible. The rule of the monastery was derived from Benedict Biscop's experience of visiting numerous continental monasteries, acknowledging among these the particular significance of the *Rule of St Benedict*. Bede himself devoted his time exclusively to the life of being a monk, which included teaching, reading and writing. In addition to his work on the Bible and his *History*, he composed hagiographies and a martyrology, works on poetry and metre, and studies in chronology and the calculation of time. He was of a scientific turn of mind, but he was also a poet in both Latin and English. Bede was also instrumental in helping to establish the cult of Cuthbert at Lindisfarne, composing *Lives* of the saint in prose and verse. He was at times a frank adviser to his pupil, Egbert, Archbishop of York, under whose patronage Alcuin himself was later educated. Everything Bede did was designed to undergird the intellectual and spiritual life of the English Church.

Bede was a great theologian of the Church and it is essential to grasp his ecclesiology or doctrine of the Church in order to do full justice not only to his *History* but also to his other writings. This ecclesiology is found notably in his treatises *De Tabernaculo*[6] and *De Templo*,[7] concerning the spiritual significance of the descriptions of the tabernacle and the temple in the Old Testament. His competence as a theologian of the Church is also evident in his computistical work, both in his early work *De Temporibus* and especially in his much later and fuller work *De Temporum Ratione*,[8] which remained one of his most influential legacies.[9] This book was a fusion of natural history with the science of computing calendars; and the calculation of Easter in the western Church has rested upon Bede's methods ever since.

Bede believed that the life of a saint, or the development of a national Church, revealed the way in which eternal and divine reality interacted with and fashioned temporal experience, giving it its true and abiding meaning, as evident in the Bible. In his *De Templo*, Bede set out his mature reflection on the nature of the Church, as the framework in which divine transformation can occur in the lives of saints, both known and unknown. This dynamic dimension accounted also for the mission of the Church to England that he described with such care in his *History*: there was an outer meaning for the English people to the events that he records; but there was also an inner one, as in a hagiography: and each dimension of history shed light on the other. This was supremely true of the Bible itself, which was the yardstick by which Bede measured the events and people that he studied. His belief in the divine pattern of salvation, discernible in the recent history of his own Church, led Bede to some forthright moral exhortation and criticism, directed towards the clergy and bishops of his own day, as well as to those aspiring to the monastic life. In many ways his approach to the Bible, reflected also in his *History,* set forth the morally exemplary as spiritually significant, as he indicated in his introduction to his *History* and demonstrated throughout his exegetical writings about the Bible.

In his letter to Archbishop Egbert of York,[10] written at the very end of his life in 734, Bede was quite outspoken in his strictures on the ways in which the Northumbrian church was developing. Unlike Alcuin however, Bede was not so actively involved with political life in either church or state. His sense of moral theology was reinforced by the way in which he portrayed some of the people who were, to his mind, crucial in establishing the life of the English Church, for example Aidan or Cuthbert. Commissioned by the king of Northumbria, and relying on widespread collaboration throughout the English church, his *History* was a mirror for princes as well as for bishops and abbots. It was striking too in the way in which it saw the English people as constituting one Church and therefore one people, transcending their tribal and ancestral traditions: its title makes this important assertion of embryonic national identity.[11] Bede died as he had lived, dictating to a young pupil called Wilbert a translation of the gospel of John into English, while preparing also a selection of Isidore of Seville's *De Natura Rerum*. He passed away on the floor of his cell while at prayer.[12] Within Alcuin's lifetime it was believed that miracles occurred at his tomb, while later some of his relics made their way to York, and others to St Boniface's church at Fulda in Germany.[13]

The inherent intellectual strength of the Northumbrian church owed much, as Alcuin perceived and indicated, to Bede's teaching, and Egbert's primacy and educational programme at York was its immediate memorial. Some letters remain from English missionaries on the continent that reflect how swiftly Bede's legacy empowered their mission, including one from Boniface, who apparently did not initially know Bede's writings; for in 746 or 747 he wrote to Archbishop Egbert in York: 'I beseech you to copy and send to me some treatises from the work of the teacher, Bede, whom lately, as we have heard,

divine grace has endowed with spiritual understanding and allowed to shine in your province, so that we may benefit from that candle which the Lord bestowed upon you.'[14] He wrote around the same time in similar tones to Abbot Hwaetberht of Monkwearmouth.[15] In a later letter Boniface thanked archbishop Egbert for sending him some books, and asked him to send Bede's homilies, 'because it would be a very handy and useful manual for us in our preaching,' along with his commentary on the book of Proverbs.[16]

Some ten years after Boniface's martyrdom in 754, Abbot Cuthbert of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow wrote to Lullus, Archbishop of Mainz, Boniface's close colleague, disciple and successor, thanking him for a silk robe that he had sent for the relics of Bede 'our master of blessed memory'. He wrote:

> for it seems right to me that the whole race of the English in all provinces wherever they are found, should give thanks to God, that He has granted to them so wonderful a man in their nation, endowed with diverse gifts, and so assiduous in the exercise of those gifts, and likewise living such a good life.

Abbot Cuthbert sent with this letter a copy of the two *Lives* of St Cuthbert, written by Bede in prose and verse, and would have sent more copies of works composed by Bede had not the winter been so severe 'that the hand of the scribe was hindered from producing a great number of books.'[17] In a subsequent letter to Abbot Cuthbert, now lost, Lullus requested Bede's book *De Templo* and also his commentary on the Song of Songs. A few years later, Lullus wrote to the new Archbishop of York, Aelberht, who was Alcuin's immediate and beloved master, asking for Bede's commentaries on I Samuel, Ezra and Nehemiah, and on the gospel of Mark. Another letter of Aelberht to Lullus mentions a request received for books, probably written by Bede, on cosmography and natural phenomena like tides: but no suitable scribe was then available who was capable of handling such complicated works with their diagrams.[18]

Nearly a century later, in the midst of the Viking attacks, Lupus Abbot of Ferrières, a pupil of Hrabanus Maur who was himself a pupil of Alcuin's, remembering the reputation of the school at York, wrote to Ealdsige, an abbot in York, requesting books by Jerome, Cassiodorus, Quintilian and the *Questions* of 'your Bede' on both testaments of the Bible.[19] Levison pointed out long ago that Cuthbert's letter on the death of Bede reached the continent at an early date. Furthermore some of the most important texts of early Anglo-Saxon church history only survive today because of their having been copied there before the Viking era: notably the first anonymous *Life* of Cuthbert from Lindisfarne, the first *Life* of Gregory the Great from Whitby, and Bede's *Martyrology;* also some of the earliest Anglo-Saxon calendars, for example that of Willibrord himself, as well as the poem by Alcuin about the church at York, which survives in only two manuscripts from Rheims.[20] This state of affairs is a good measure of the depredations caused by the Viking invasions upon settled monastic life and learning in England in the ninth century, about which King Alfred the Great was later to lament.

Alcuin shared in his contemporaries' veneration for the memory of Bede. He included an extensive encomium of him in his poem about the church at York:'Bede grew up in the monastery and from childhood was a model monk, wise beyond his years. Eager to learn and diligent as a writer and teacher, he wrote many books, plumbing the depths of Scripture, compiling a handbook on the art of metre and writing with great clarity about the calculation of time; . . . he was a lucid writer of history and a prolific poet. He followed closely the steps of the Fathers in his deeds, his spirit and his faith, by treading their narrow path throughout his life.'[21]

Alcuin described Bede in these lines as *presbyter eximius meritis*, *praeclarus doctor,* and elsewhere as *praeclarus sacerdos*.[22] He saw him as the latest in a long line of Church Fathers,[23] and it would seem that the tradition of active scholarship that Bede had nurtured passed from Monkwearmouth-Jarrow to York while Alcuin was being educated there. As Bullough says, 'What above all Bede seems to have done for the young Alcuin was to provide a standard by which he could measure himself, and to have given or confirmed a sense of purpose underlying the most immediately practical parts of a Christian education; and also, by implication, to have drawn attention to some of the areas where his work required supplementation.'[24] The apparent link between Bede and Alcuin must surely be through Egbert, the Archbishop of York himself, although this is never made explicit by Alcuin, who was closer personally to Egbert's successor Aelberht. This likely succession of influence was probably a common perception within the church at York and beyond, and it certainly passed into the memory of Alcuin's disciples as is evident in the *Life* of Alcuin.

Detailed examination of the writings of Alcuin reveals how intimate was the connection between his work and Bede's in range, style, and content. In part it was a case of supplementation and completion; it was certainly not mere imitation. But at a deeper level there was a dialogue going in Alcuin's mind with the thought of his revered predecessor. Like Bede, he was concerned to elucidate and distil the wisdom of Christian Latin theology and to communicate it to a rising and receptive generation. Both men felt a moral urgency in this matter, and for Alcuin in particular as a teacher the duty to communicate and to engage with his readers was always paramount. Both were disciples of Augustine, whose thought was mediated to them in varying ways through the writings of Gregory the Great and others, as well as by direct access to his theology.[25] Overt association with the works of Bede is apparent in a wide range of Alcuin's writings and this gives a good introduction to the variety of his interests and research. There are four main groups: educational; computistical; exegetical, and historical. But there are many other allusions to Bede's poetry and modes of expression embedded throughout Alcuin's writings.[26]

Bede's work was one of the principal sources for Alcuin's *Ars grammatica*, which was an elementary introduction to grammar written at Tours around

the year 798.[27] This presented an entertaining approach comprising a dialogue between two teenage pupils, Frankish and Saxon. Closely related to this is Alcuin's *De orthographia* which for many years was transmitted as a work of Bede's.[28] It is mentioned in the *Vita Alcuini* and it was later used by William of Malmesbury in the twelfth century in his compilation of authorities on orthography. Both Bede and Alcuin were concerned with the correct use of Latin in an environment where standards could easily be lowered by vernacular influences, defective manuscripts or poor education, to say nothing of the vulnerability of written records to destruction by fire, damp, and vermin. In his *De dialectica*, written around 795-7 in the form of a dialogue between himself and Charlemagne, Alcuin alluded in his poetic prologue to the resources that he had been able to bring with him from his native land, prominent among which were evidently the writings of Bede.[29] Fundamental to his *Versus de laude metricae artis* was Bede's *De arte metrica*.[30] Alcuin's short poem was a very neat way of remembering the quantities of Latin syllables, classifying verbs by the length of their vowels. It seems to have been composed by him towards the end of his life at Tours, probably for use by his pupils at the school there.

Both Bede and Alcuin had a mathematical turn of mind and there was a steady demand for computistical clarity at a high level.[31] Charlemagne himself had an active interest in this matter and there remain letters between the king and Alcuin, raising and clarifying questions related to the calculation of time and other astronomical matters. The first of these was written by Alcuin in November 797 to Charlemagne, addressing the correct way of adjusting the calendar to allow for the progression of the lunar months.[32] There is just one letter now remaining by the king, written in March 798, addressing Alcuin affectionately as *dilectissimus magister et abbas*, and questioning some of the points that he had made in an earlier letter[33] about the calculations behind the keeping of Lent and its preceding Sundays, by appealing to the authority of Gregory the Great – 'as our blessed and wonderful Gregory used to teach.'[34] Both letters demonstrate the close connection between computation of time and Christian theology, as is evident at a more elaborate level in Bede's *De Temporum Ratione*. This work stands behind much of what Alcuin wrote on these matters and had a long influence among the Carolingian scholars of the ninth century.

Alcuin's correspondence with the court continued throughout 798, dealing with the proper calculation of the movement of the moon,[35] and also setting forth an elaborate treatise on various astronomical matters for the king, which rested heavily upon chapter sixteen of Bede's work *De Temporum Ratione*.[36] This letter was a significant statement of some of the most important principles governing Alcuin's understanding of the relationship between theology and science, for both disciplines of thought concern reality and truth. There was a further letter, written in July 798, which dealt among other things with the planet Mars, which was highly visible that

year, and again challenged the views of some of his rivals at court.[37] Finally, there was a further response to some questions of astronomy to do with movements within the solar system.[38] This intense correspondence reveals Alcuin's lively interest in astronomy for its own sake, and his reluctance to advance opinions beyond those of established authorities such as Pliny and Bede himself, referring directly to Bede's treatise *De Temporibus*. His reticence was evident again in a letter of 799, replying to one by the king, enquiring into the diminution of the paschal moon, in which Alcuin professed the hope that Athens was being reborn in Francia. [39] After receiving the king's response to this letter, Alcuin wrote yet again on various matters, defending his calculations and summarising his understanding of the solar cycle.[40]

Closely associated with this correspondence was Alcuin's treatise *De saltu lunae*, which addressed the calculation of intercalary days.[41] This work was for a long time associated with a text attributed to Alcuin, *De bissexto,* though this in fact rested upon Irish traditions antecedent to Bede.[42] A glimpse into a possible root of Alcuin's interest and formation may be found in an anonymous treatise called *Calculatio Albini*, attributed to him in a single manuscript copied at Lorsch in the ninth century, now in the Vatican.[43] It may have come from York and been an early essay on the subject by him, derived from antecedent material; it was sometimes attributed to Bede and it exists in two recensions, one of which is dated 776.

The most obvious and potent parallel between the work of Bede and that of Alcuin lay in the field of biblical exegesis. Alcuin set out to supplement or distil the work of Bede and, before him, of Gregory the Great. His *Compendium in Canticum canticorum* was an abbreviation and adaptation of Bede's own work on the subject.[44] An *Explanatio Apocalypsis* attributed to Alcuin took the form of questions and answers derived from Bede's work on this text in the New Testament, and also from Gregory's *Moralia*.[45] It may have sprung from Alcuin's immediate circle. There is also an incomplete commentary on the Apocalypse in five books, *Expositio Apocalypsis*, sometimes attributed to Bede, and possibly by Alcuin himself.[46] Alcuin's commentary on John's gospel, however, was developed rather than simply derivative from the Latin Fathers, Augustine, Gregory, and Bede.[47] It was transmitted in two parts in 800 and 801, to and at the request of two royal nuns, Rotrudis, and Gisele the Abbess of Chelles. Bede's work on Genesis also lay behind the exegetical treatise that Alcuin composed in the form of 281 questions and answers concerning the meaning of the opening chapters of the book of Genesis in the Bible.[48] These manifest examples of his dependency upon Bede's work are just the tip of a close association in method and understanding, to the extent that for many centuries Alcuin's biblical work stood alongside that of Bede's as fundamental for medieval biblical education and spiritual formation. Alcuin's biblical work has also to be seen in close conjunction with his work on the text of the Bible, encouraging its accurate proliferation, which was one of his most abiding and important legacies to the western Church.[49]

Alcuin's letters explicitly reveal his respect for the work of his great predecessor in England.[50] For example, in a letter, written perhaps in 800 to a pupil, probably Hrabanus Maur, Alcuin promised to obtain for him a copy of Bede's treatise *In Epistulas canonicas expositio.*[51] In a letter of similar date he asked Ricbod, Archbishop of Trier, to obtain for him a copy of Bede's work on the apocryphal book of Tobit, *Expositio in Tobiam allegorica.*[52] Writing to his close friend, Arno Archbishop of Salzburg, in 802, Alcuin sent him an abbreviated psalter, attributed to Bede, along with some other books, including his own.[53] Nor was he averse from including lines from Bede's poetry among his poetry, for example in a fine poem in honour of the Cross.[54] His *Life of Willibrord* was modelled in its form upon Bede's double life of St Cuthbert in prose and verse as an *opus geminatum.*[55] This was a very personal tribute because of his kinship with the great missionary saint; but his other works of hagiography reflect his debt to Bede's approach, as well as to the earlier and classic Christian hagiographies that influenced them both. One of Alcuin's most popular and widely copied works was his ethical manual *De virtutibus et vitiis,* intended for lay Christians, written between 800 and 840 for Wido, Count of Nantes, which drew extensively from the whole range of Latin theology, including Bede.[56] More than 150 manuscripts of this manual remain, some in vernacular translations. This work left its mark deeply on the generation that followed Alcuin, notably his pupil Hrabanus Maur, who replicated much of it in his own writings, as did Jonas of Orleans and Halitgar of Cambrai, both of whom wrote moral treatises for the laity in the first half of the ninth century. In many ways Bede and Alcuin were apostles to the laity, as well as encouragers of monks and nuns. As such they were also critics, implicit and sometimes explicit, of certain elements and behaviour among the clergy and bishops; and both wrote with kings in mind.

Alcuin never lost contact with the double monastery in which Bede had lived and worked at Monkwearmouth-Jarrow, and he wrote some important and revealing letters to the community there. The first of these was written to the monks of St Peter's, Wearmouth, probably before the sack of Lindisfarne in 793, as there is no mention of this catastrophe.[57] Alcuin recalled his happy times among them, painting an idyllic picture of regular monastic life unsullied by secular fashions, and urging them to maintain the integrity of their common life of prayer as *viri Deo amabiles*. They were to be sensitive to the visitations of the holy founding fathers at times of prayer in church, recalling the words of Bede himself: 'I know that angels visit the canonical hours and gatherings of the brethren. What if they did not find me among the brethren? Would they not ask, "Where is Bede? Why has he not come to the prescribed acts of worship with his brethren?"' Alcuin emphasised the bond between common prayer and common life as the true strength of a monastery, repudiating the temptation to adopt secular styles of life and dress, which was clearly a perennial hazard in the life of the English church. There remains a very similar letter to the monks at Jarrow,

with whom he also had some personal connection.[58] Alcuin reminded them of their spiritual forebears and laid particular emphasis upon their duty to maintain the life of learning that they had inherited, using the library there properly: 'What is the point of having so many books if there are not those who can read or understand them?'

The sack of Lindisfarne by the Vikings in 793 shocked Alcuin and his English contemporaries to the core, and called forth from him a number of heart-felt letters to friends and contacts in the Northumbrian church. One of these was directed to the monastery at Monkwearmouth-Jarrow and it was one of Alcuin's fullest defences of the monastic life and its meaning.[59] He cited Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* about the fourfold nature of love and recalled to them their founding fathers, Benedict Biscop and Ceolfrith, warning them against secular pursuits. They were to teach the *Rule of St Benedict* in English as well as in Latin and to make it the centre of their common life. God was their true defence against the Vikings and in this they should put their trust, being rooted in religious integrity. The disaster at Lindisfarne was therefore an awful warning: 'it is because of interior enemies that exterior ones have this power.' Their proximity to the sea should also keep them alert to the chastisement of God and deter them from turning their backs and hunting wolves! Once again Alcuin enjoined the pursuit of learning, using the great resources of their library, 'for he who does not learn while young can hardly teach in old age.' He reminded them of the example of Bede in this regard: 'so open the books, master the letters, and understand their sense.' He cited the authority of Gregory the Great who condemned the love of luxurious clothes: instead disaster should warn them of the brevity of this life and the imminence of divine judgement. He commended them to the protection of God and assured them of his own prayers for their safety in this world and the next.

These are significant letters for they reveal the depth of feeling that Alcuin had for the churches of his homeland and the importance of monastic life as central to his vision of how the Church should be. He was far from home when he wrote them, but the memory of his recent visit to England was still vivid and fresh. His first reaction to disaster was to see within it the chastisement of God. He himself felt divine judgement breathing down his neck, and was ever sensitive to the pull of secular life away from the demands of true Christian discipleship. The sack of Lindisfarne was undoubtedly a shaking of the foundations of his own personal life and the understanding of the Northumbrian Christian tradition that he had received. It called forth from Alcuin one of his most memorable and moving poems, lamenting the ravaging of such a holy place, and trying to place the catastrophe within a theodicy that embraced the whole sweep of biblical and ancient history.[60] The political turmoil in Northumbria that accompanied and followed this event made it seem all the more ominous and traumatic. Against such a darkening sky, the memory of Bede shone like the pole star.[61]