Personal Eschatology in the Old English *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great: Text and Translation

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This article considers two monuments from early medieval England—the line drawings in Stowe 944 (the New Minster *Liber vitae*) and chapter 37 from the Old English translation of Gregory the great's *Dialogues*, through the lens of James T. Palmer's recent work on apocalypticism in the Middle Ages. Palmer (2014) argues that texts (and drawings like the ones in Stowe 944) can and should be considered apocalyptic, even though they present as depictions of individual, personal post-mortem events. They moreover serve a definite didactic purpose, and as such provide a clue as to the motivation behind the translation of Gregory's Latin text into Old English.

Keywords: Last Judgement; individual judgement; apocalyptic thought; Gregory the Great; *Dialogues* in Anglo-Saxon England

In the course of this essay, I will consider two monuments from early medieval England. The first is comprised of the line drawings on a two-page spread in British Library MS Stowe 944, also known as the New Minster *Liber vitae*. The second is Chapter 37 from the Old English translation of Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*. There are elements in the iconography of the Stowe drawings that have led scholars to consider them apocalyptic and a representation of the Last Judgement. As readers of Gregory's *Dialogues* will know, Book IV of that work deals with the fate of the soul after death and other eschatological themes. In what follows I will first address the nature of the Stowe drawings, arguing that in many ways they defy conventional Last Judgement iconography. Although the composition as a whole has been considered a Last Judgement scene, I read it as a depiction of post-mortem individual judgement. My assessment of these drawings will then serve as the backdrop to a discussion of Chapter 37 in Gregory's *Dialogues*, as seen through the lens of recent work on early medieval eschatology by James Palmer.

The drawings in question are the very famous set of line drawings from the early eleventh century, the so-called "Last Judgement" scene on ff. 6v–7r of the New Minster *Liber Vitae*, British Library MS Stowe 944. These drawings are not Alfredian in any meaningful sense (they are dated to between 1016 x 1031, so over a hundred years after the great king's death) and has very little, in any direct way, to do with the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great. But nevertheless I think it is a useful illustration of a number of key concepts I will touch on that I do regard as relevant to the Old English *Dialogues*. Moreover, some of its details are ultimately Gregorian in inspiration.

I include here a reproduction of just the righthand folio of this two-folio opening, folio 7r.[1] The image opposite to this, fol. 6v, depicts in the upper third two groups of figures—one consisting presumably of saints and martyrs, the other, the blessed—being led into the celestial city by two angels. Below this group, with their gaze directed at the scene to the right, are two figures who have been identified as St Benedict (with the cross-staff) and Ælgar, first Abbot of New Minster (A.D. 965), whose name appears to the left of them (in red) on the page. They would appear to bear witness, in the fashion of a vision, to the scene unfolding on the opposite page (see Figure 1). The top register on folio 7r depicts St Peter, one of the most prominent patron saints of the New Minster, beckoning to the saints, martyrs and blessed to follow him into the Celestial City, the gates of which he has unlocked with his double-warded keys, and in which Christ is shown sitting in majesty, with four figures—the Evangelists?—worshipping him. Below this, in the second register, the central action of St Peter clouting a devil over the head with his keys is shown, with the soul in the middle looking up imploringly at Peter, and the devil and an angel, presumably the Archangel Michael, each holding up an open book. To the right of this struggle, another demon lays hold of two other figures, presumably damned souls. In the bottom-most register we see the same angel who appeared in the register above, locking the doors of hell and throwing the key over his shoulder. Meanwhile another demon is dragging two damned souls down with him into hellmouth, as two other figures on the right dive, and one on the left tumbles as well into the open jaws of hell. It bears remarking that Michael does not have two keys, as some critics suggest; rather this is better understood as a classic example of Kurt Weitzmann's simultaneous representation of multiple actions in a single miniature (1970, 12 ff.).

Following their first publication in Birch's (1892) edition of the New Minster *Liber Vitae*, the Stowe drawings have appeared in just about every art historical survey or study of Anglo-Saxon art published since (among these, Deshman 1974; Dodwell 1982; Openshaw 1989; Kendrick 1949; Hasenfratz 1990; Ohlgren 1986; Temple 1976; Gameson 1995).[2] In all of these the composition is labeled a "Last Judgment" scene.[3] To the best of my knowledge, only two scholars who have commented on these drawings in print have considered them anything other than a depiction of the Last Judgment: Gameson (1995, 22) and Johnson (2001). To be sure, the composition contains elements that point in that direction, namely the image of Christ in majesty in the celestial city, into which the blessed and the martyrs are being led by angels.

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[1] At the time of writing, the images of this manuscript are not viewable online due to the infamous cyber-attack on the British Library.

[2] The drawings first appeared in Birch (1892). Keynes (1996) provides a full facsimile the manuscript. The trend continues in more recent surveys, for example Webster (2012), where she labels them as "images of the Last Judgement" (116).

[3] A notable exception is Gameson (1995, 22), who rightly described the composition as an image depicting the "fate of the soul."
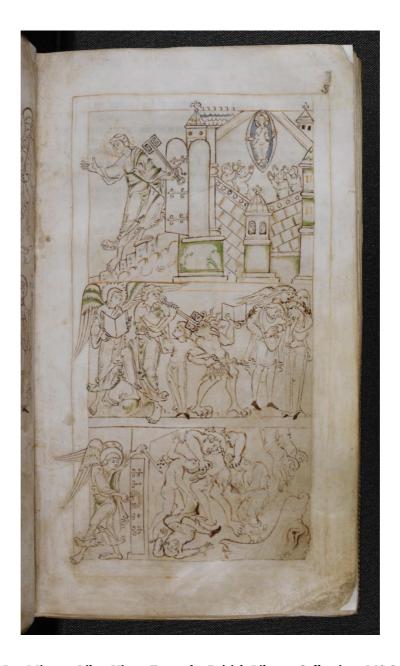
Figure 1. The New Minster Liber Vitae. From the British Library Collection: MS Stowe 944, folio 7r., ca. 1031. By permission of the British Library.

The weighing of souls is a motif often depicted in such Last Judgment tableaux, as is the separation of the damned and the elect, and the books held by the angel to St Peter's right and the Devil respectively here might ultimately owe their presence to *Apocalypse of John* 20.12–13, where the reader is told that they will be judged by what is written in the Book of Life.[4] Similarly, the angel locking the door to hell and throwing the key down

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4 12 Et vidi mortuos, magnos et pusillos, stantes in conspectu throni, et libri aperti sunt : et alius liber apertus est, qui est vitae : et judicati sunt mortui ex his, quae scripta erant in libris, secundum opera ipsorum : 13 et dedit mare mortuos, qui in eo erant : et mors et infernus dederunt mortuos suos, qui in ipsis erant : et judicatum est de singulis secundum opera ipsorum. (*Biblia sacra vulgata*, 20:12–13).

into hell is reminiscent of *Apocalypse of John* 20:1.[5] But prominent elements of the classic Last Judgment scene are missing, as well, such as the resurrection of the dead and their standing before a centrally depicted Christ on his throne awaiting his judgment. Moreover, the middle register in the Stowe drawing is a scene of intervention, as St Peter rather violently contends with the Demon to decide the fate of the figure standing between them is "the iconographic commonplace of the soul—in particular the soul just released from the body—depicted as a child" (Johnson 2001, 27). A very good case can be made that this is not a depiction of the Final Judgment at all, but rather one of post-mortem individual judgment.

Whereas the central action of the composition points emphatically to individual post-mortem judgment, there are elements that appear to be rooted in a Last Judgment context, though their sources are literary, rather than art historical. For example, unique to this composition are the two figures in the top register looking out of (and down from) the windows of the heavenly Jerusalem, as well as the aspect of two of the damned below, whose gaze is conspicuously (and painfully) directed upward. This is another motif associated with the Final Judgment that can be traced at least as far back as Gregory the Great's 40th Homily on the Gospels, and which appears in both Anglo-Latin and Old English poetry and prose (Hurst 1990, 370–87). This is "heavenly *schadenfreude*" as explained by Gregory: the torment of the damned is increased by their sight of the blessed in heaven, and conversely the joy of the righteous is increased by their being able to see the wicked in torment.[6] A tenth-century Old English homily ends its description of the Final Judgment with St Michael locking the gates of hell with St Peter's keys and throwing them down into the infernal pit, a scene explicitly replicated here (Clayton 1985).

Again, the composition as a whole bears little resemblance to classic Last Judgment scenes in medieval manuscript illumination, mural painting, and sculpture, most of which feature prominent depictions of Christ in majesty, the resurrection of the souls, and their division into the ranks of the blessed and the damned. In this case, the composition is dominated by that struggle between St Peter and a devil for the fate of a diminutive figure caught between them: the disembodied soul of a recently deceased

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12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing in the presence of the throne, and the books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged by those things which were written in the books, according to their works. 13 And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and hell gave up their dead that were in them; and they were judged every one according to their works (Douay Version).

[5] "1 Et vidi angelum descendentem de caelo, habentem clavem abyssi, et catenam magnam in manu sua" (*Biblia sacra vulgata*, 20:1).

1 And I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit, and a great chain in his hand (Douay Version).

[6] It is of great interest to note that there is at least one other Alfredian connection to this motif. It features prominently in Book III of King Alfred's translation of Augustine's *Soliloqia*. This book is the most original section of the Old English translation and deals extensively with eschatological themes. In his study of the eschatology of the book, Malcolm Godden underscores the importance of Gregory's 40th homily precisely because it deals explicitly with the idea of the departed's knowledge of each other's fates after death, but before the Final Judgement. According to Godden, this homily "is generally thought to have had an influence on the last book of the *Soliloquies*" (Godden 2003, 199). Here we encounter what we might term the same *hybridic* concerns for immediate post-mortem judgement and the Last Things as are displayed in the Stowe drawings and Gregory's *Dialogues*. I would like to thank Reader A for bringing this link to my attention.

man. Several elements have parallels in Old English and Latin literature from the eighth to the eleventh centuries, e.g. the books held by St Peter and the devil, whereby the single bifolium gripped by the devil contains all his sins, and the large volume with many pages holds the record of his good deeds, a sure sign that Peter will win this struggle. Something very similar appears in both the Latin and Old English versions of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, in the story of a thane of King Ceolred of Mercia (Bede, v. 12, 488–99). This thane is bed-ridden with a serious illness but refuses to confess his sins despite the king's urgings. As his condition worsens, he relates to the king a terrible vision he has had: several handsome white-clad men appear at his bedside with a small but very beautiful book, in which all of his good deeds have been recorded. Next an "army of evil spirits with horrible faces" enter his room, carrying a "volume of enormous size and almost unbearable weight" in which are listed all of his sins. The white-clad men agree that the thane's soul belongs to them, and they take him away "to help make up the number of the damned." As in the case of Ceolred's thane, the ultimate fate of the disembodied soul in the Stowe drawing is clearly indicated by the disparity in size of the books held up by the angel at St Peter's side and the devil.

Recent scholarship suggests that the choice of classification of these drawings need not necessarily be a binary one: it is, in fact, both.[7] The phrase "personal eschatology" I use in the title of this essay is James T. Palmer's, which I have taken from his superb study *The Apocalypse in the Early Middle Ages*. The binary thinking typical of most discussions of the Final Judgment in the Western Christian tradition, then, is reflected in the views of the critics: Art historians call it a Last Judgement scene, a minority of scholars see here a depiction of individual post-mortem judgement. Palmer transcends this binary by giving us a third view of the way in which apocalyptic thinking was woven into the fabric of Anglo-Saxon society at all levels, which could moreover be a force for reform and improvement. More on this below, but first some further definitions are needed. Palmer leans heavily on a distinction made by Bernard McGinn in 1995, where the latter argued that:

> [T]he defining characteristic of early medieval apocalyptic was a persistent sense of "psychological imminence" rather than "chronological imminence." By this, [McGinn] meant that the Augustinian warnings against prediction meant not a de-eschatologising of ways of thinking, but rather a more radical mode of thought in which Judgement might come at any moment, with action (Church reform, invasion, etc.) pursued accordingly. (Palmer 2014, 20)

As Palmer (2014, 9) defines it, *eschatology* is the study of Last Things—a final communal judgement on a final day in salvation history—, whereas *Apocalypticism* is a subsection of eschatology and sometimes indistinguishable from it because it is the belief that that End is imminent. *Millenialism* involves the belief that the end has a fixed and prophesied chronological date, something I am going to leave out of this discussion primarily because as both Palmer and R. A. Markus note, Gregory the Great "neither observed calendrical calculations nor combated vulgar beliefs about the End" (Palmer 2014, 21).

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[7] Most notably O'Reilly and Palmer, discussed here, but also Gameson (1995). There are precedents for this kind of artistic conflation of both types of judgment (personal and universal), one such that comes to mind is the twelfth-century Danish Gunhild Ivory Cross, discussed by O'Reilly (2019, 8–9).

Following Palmer's consideration of these common terms, he provides an important means of distinguishing between the two: "The most useful basic distinction focuses on individual and communal experience, which can be labelled 'moral' or 'individual apocalypse', and 'political' or 'collective apocalypse', respectively" (Palmer 2014, 24).[8]

If we apply these concepts to the Stowe drawings, we can see clearly how they illustrate an individual, moral apocalypse—the poor soul over whom St Peter and the devil contest is being judged by the weight of his good and bad deeds as contained in Peter's large volume and the devil's single bifolium. At the same time, in the upper and lower registers, we see allusions to the "collective apocalypse," and the composition as a whole is an exhortation to the individual to better his ways and ensure a positive outcome at both his individual and the communal apocalypses. A further dimension of apocalyptic purpose is formed by the immediate context of the drawings within the New Minster *Liber vitae*, where the names of the minster's benefactors and members are listed, and the drawings thus become an appeal to the viewer for intercessory prayers on their behalf. Whoever commissioned, designed, and/or composed the Stowe drawings was thus, in Palmer's terms, invoking apocalyptic thought in a specific political and cultural context. What Palmer means by *apocalyptic thought* is made clear here and is worth quoting in full:

> [A]pocalyptic thought in the early Middle Ages was commonplace and mainstream, and an important factor in the way that people conceptualized, stimulated and directed change. It was not solely the marginal and extremist way of thinking nearly all modern scholars imagine. Apocalyptic thought, understood properly, essentially becomes a powerful part of reform discourse about how best to direct people—individually and collectively—towards a better life on Earth. Even when people saw divine punishment, maybe in attacks by Huns or raids by Vikings, they felt compelled to change behaviour, rather than to wallow in fatalistic self-pity. The apocalyptic, then, is a heightened engagement with the problem of the limited chances one has to "get it right" before one is judged. (Palmer 2014, 16)

Personal eschatology, Palmer tells us, "is in many ways the body of thought which connects the individual to the universal, and thus stands apart from millenarianism's collectivity" (2014, 27).

Gregory's *Dialogi* formed part of a proliferation of texts, in both East and West, containing visions of the afterlife or personal reports by individuals on their experiences after death, recorded as a reminder to the listener of what their fates might be as determined by the lives they had led.[9] Gregory's *Dialogi*, especially the somewhat controversial Book IV, stood at the origins of this tradition. I say controversial because

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[8] Palmer (2014, 24) defines these further: "Moral apocalypse" concerns individual mortality, responsibility and accountability for sin, and the fate of the soul on death . . . the most dramatic examples revolve around death-bed visions of the afterlife, which could then be used as moral lessons—guides to what would happen to the good or bad on death, and therefore also an exhortation for people to correct their behaviour. Such things were, of course, also mainstays of preaching, penitentials and church art—and, as we shall see, they could be highly political in tone. "Political apocalypse," by contrast, spoke about the fate of the community as a whole.

[9] For the Eastern tradition, see the bibliographies in Palmer (2014) and especially Foxhall Forbes (2013).

some have doubted its stylistic and thematic affinities with the other three books.[10] Be that as it may, Book IV is well known for its treatment of eschatological topics such as the nature of the soul and its fate after death. It consists of a significant number of stories illustrating these topics and amounts as a whole to an exposition on heaven, hell, and purgatory. While all of Book IV's chapters involve apocalyptic thinking to one degree or another, I will restrict my remarks here to just one chapter in this book.

The stories Gregory narrates in Chapter 37 are linked to one another in interesting ways, but all to the same end: they are part of his call to his listeners—especially strong in Book IV, I would argue—to take greater moral responsibility in their lives. Gregory's interlocutor, Peter the Deacon, kicks things off by asking a rather pointed question: "How is it that some are called to death by mistake, only to return to life, and then claim that the summons had not been meant for them." Gregory's response to Peter is equally frank. Here is that exchange in Old English, followed by my translation of it:

> Petrus cwæð: . . . Ac hwæt is þæt la, ic ðe frine, þæt ful monie men beoð togane of lichoman swylce þurh hwelcne gedwolan 7 ða beoð gewordene swilce orsawle 7 eft hweorfeð to lichoman, 7 heora gehwylc segeð þæt he seolfa gehyrde | (127v) he sume hwile nære 7 eft wære haten þæt he sceolde beon to lichoman gelæded.

> Gregorius him *ond*swarede: Wito[dlice]e, Petrus, þonne þæt geweorðeþ, gif hit bið wel asmead 7 oferðoht, ne bið hit nænige dwola ac bið lar, forðon þe seo uplice arfæstnes swa gestihtað of [þære m]yclan rumgeofulnesse his mildheortnesse, þæt ful m[ani]ge men æfter heora deaþe eft gehweorfað færinga to þam lichoman, to ðan þæt heo huru him ondræden þa ges[ewen]an tintregu þære helle þe hi þonn geseoð, þa heo ær ne gelefdon þeah ðe heo geherdon.[11]

> Petrus said: . . . "But how is it, I ask you, that many men are taken from the body by mistake and then rendered soulless and return again to their body and then claim they were told they should not be there and were again ordered to be led back to their body."

> Gregorius answered him: "Truly, Peter, when that happens, if it is well considered and meditated upon, it is not an error but for instruction, because the Heavenly Mercifulness so disposes through the great abundance of His mercy that many men after their death return quickly once more to their body, in order that they may indeed fear those manifest torments of hell which they have seen there, those (things) which they had previously not believed, even though they had heard about them."

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[10] Francis Clark (1987) is perhaps the biggest skeptic when it comes to Gregory's authorship of the *Dialogues*. For a summary of his argument and convincing refutation of his conclusions, see Meyvaert (1988). Clark followed the publication of his two-volume work in 2003, in which he repeats his claim that Gregory did not in fact write the *Dialogues* at all, but that it was instead the work of a "pseudepigrapher, dissembler and forger" whom he calls the "Dialogist" (2003, 404). Clark was notably preceded in this belief by one Robert Cooke (1550–1615), vicar of Leeds and canon of Durham Cathedral, in a work published in 1614. For more on him and his theories, see Meyvaert (1988).

[11] The Old English is taken from an edition of the text being prepared by Prof. Rolf Bremmer, jr. and myself, and is based on MS British Library Cotton Otho MS C1, vol 2. Hecht 1900 based his edition on MS Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 322. The Latin *Dialogi* have most recently been edited by De Vogüé (1978–80).

The first narrative in the sequence of stories that follow tells of a Spanish monk named Peter who dies, is sent back to the land of the living, and devotes the rest of his life to acts of contrition, fasting, and vigils. "But," continues Gregory rather ominously, "due to the hardness of men's hearts, the sight of hell is not equally beneficial for all."

Next, an acquaintance of Gregory's, a certain man of high rank named Stephen, is taken in death by mistake. He gets an eye-full of hell and its torments as he is led to judgement seeing things there that he had heard about in life but had not believed. The judge of the infernal court at which he appears dismisses his case, saying, "Ne het ic na ðeosne hider gelædan, ac Stephanum þone irensmið." ("I did not order this man to be brought here, but Stephen the blacksmith"). When the wrongly-summonsed Stephen returns to life, Stephen the blacksmith apparently dies within the hour, and this proves that everything that high-ranking Stephen had told Gregory was indeed true.

But in what follows it is revealed that the experience was wasted on him. The continuation of wrongly-summonsed Stephen's story is imbedded in that of a Roman soldier who dies in the plague that also claims our friend Stephen (dead now for the second time). The soldier witnesses a great many things in the afterlife before being brought back to life to tell the tale. He describes a foul stinking river, with a bridge over it leading to pleasant meadows covered in flowers and grass on the other side, where people dressed in white robes are gathered. He also observes yet another Peter (an overseer of a church who died four years previous) bound in purgatorial suffering in the muck on the banks of the foul river running beneath the bridge. The soldier witnesses a just man (a foreign priest) breeze across the bridge, but then it is wrongly-summonsed, now-dead-for-the-second-time Stephen's turn to attempt the crossing. He loses his footing, and hangs half on, half off the bridge. A struggle ensues (not unlike what we see in the Stowe drawings) between fiendish men trying to pull him down, and angelic men attempting to lift him back up on the bridge. We never learn what the outcome is because the Roman soldier is called back to life. Gregory comments on this as follows:

> Þonne hwæðre us is genoh cuð, Petrus, þæt se ylca Stephanus æfter þan þe he geseah helle stowe, swa se ic ær her bufan sæde, 7 eft gehwearf to his lichomon, he ne gerehte no fulfremedlice his lif, 7 he ða forðon ymbe monigu gear þa gyt ut leonde of lichoman to gewinne 7 to wrastlunge lifes 7 deaðes. Be ðære wisan, Petrus, we magon wytan 7 ongitan þæt ða helle witu, þonne heo beoð geeowde, sumum hy weorðað to fultume 7 to helpe, sumum eac to ðon anum heo beoð geeowde, þæt hy syn on gewitnesse 7 cyðon oðrum monnum, þa oðre geseoð þa yfel, to ðan þæt heo him bewarniað, 7 ðas beoð þy ma witnode þe hi noldon him bewarnian þa helle witu ðe heo gesawon 7 ongeaton.

> Nevertheless, it is well known to us, Peter, that the same Stephen, after he saw the place of hell, as I mentioned above, and then returned to his body, he did not correct his life completely. And so, when many years thereafter, he was taken out of his body (he found himself) in a conflict and struggle of life and death. In this way, Peter, we can know and understand that the torments of hell, when they are revealed, become for some a support and help, and for others, they are revealed only for this: that they serve as an example and revelation for other men. The others see the evils, so that they may beware for themselves, and all the greater will be the punishment for those who would not guard themselves against the torments of hell that they saw and understood.

Apart from contributing to the developing concept of purgatory and raising the possibility that penance is possible after death, the narratives in Chapter 37—and notably

Gregory's commentary on events as they unfold— illustrate precisely the kind of apocalyptic thought defined by Palmer (2014, 16): it constitutes a "powerful part of reform discourse about how best to direct people—individually and collectively—towards a better life on Earth."

To bring the discussion back to the Alfredian context: the Latin *Dialogi*—especially Book IV—had already shown itself to be an especially ground-breaking and influential text well before the ninth century. It would prove to have an even greater impact in the centuries that followed. A case can be made that the Latin text had a significant influence on Old English literature and that this influence can be traced in the writings of Ælfric, Wulfstan, and others. One of the problems for us, however, is trying to determine how much influence, if any, the Old English translation had in the ninth and early tenth centuries. How important was it to Alfred's circle? How was it used, if at all, outside that circle?

The Old English *Dialogues* have pretty much always been dogged by questions concerning its authenticity, quality, purpose, and impact. Accusations that the Latin *Dialogues* are monotonous, irksome reading, primitive, naïve and trivial, and that, in addition to these faults, the Old English translation is slavishly translated and moreover would have been of little use to anyone, have in recent years been countered by scholars like Markus (1997), McCready (1989), Dekker (2001), and Thijs (2007).[12] Especially McCready made the case that the multitudinous miracles performed by the saints functioned as examples of virtuous living and were meant to inspire the reader to strive for the same level of virtue, if not the miracles (Dekker 2001, 32). This is perhaps one of the reasons why Book II, which deals exclusively with the life and works of St Benedict, has always leant the text whatever legitimacy the sceptics were willing to grant it.

There is a considerable gap in our knowledge when it comes to actual, tangible evidence pointing to the use of Werferth's translation by any other author writing in Old English. There are no readily discernible influences, explicit quotations dating from the Alfredian period or its immediate aftermath, though we do know that Ælfric knew of it (or one like it) and in the eleventh century it was compiled together with Boniface's letter to Eadburga and excerpts from the *Vitas Patrum* in Cotton Otho C1 as what Helen Foxhall Forbes (2013, 139) terms a "liber visionis." Later readers, most notably the Tremulous Hand of Worcester, mined the text presumably for much the same reasons and purposes as it was originally produced.[13] During the Alfredian period, however, and even into the tenth and eleventh centuries, when the popularity of visions as expressions of apocalyptic thought really takes off, the OE *Dialogues* would seem to be floating adrift in a sea of ideas carried forward in later eras by its Latin progenitor alone.

The Stowe drawings moved their viewers to contemplation and then action by generating or playing upon psychological imminence through motifs that invoke both "individual apocalypse" and "collective apocalypse." It is a silent exhortation to say intercessory prayers on behalf of those listed in the *Liber vitae*, and to look within themselves and, mindful of the inevitable Judgement(s) to come, decide to live a better

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[12] These scholars have pushed back against the notion that Gregory's Latin *Dialogi* were either written by someone other than him or not worthy of the great pope's mind (Markus 1997; McCready 1989), or that the Old English translation of this text was of negligible quality or served no good purpose at all (Dekker 2001; Thijs 2007).

[13] See Johnson (2015, 2019) for more on the Tremulous Hand's use of this and other Old English texts.

life. The lessons to be learned about the fate of the soul, both in the interim and the final judgements, are here made visually apparent.

The same is true of texts like those we have just seen in Gregory's *Dialogues*, their lessons clarified by their narrators. There is nothing particularly new in this. From the very beginning of the Christian tradition such stories have served as salutary *exempla*, exhorting the listener to be mindful of his or her own inevitable end. What *is* different, or new, I think, is how Palmer's insights have the potential to modify our assessment of the *Dialogues*. I would never have thought of this text as an *apocalyptic* one, because I was thinking in terms of "chronological imminence." Such texts, like Chapter 37 in the *Dialogues*, Palmer (2014, 27) tells us,

> are themselves "apocalyptic" in the sense that they are "revelatory," and concern the route from Judgement to the hereafter. The difference between what would happen to a person if they died the very next day, and what would happen to an individual if they died in a non-millenarian scenario, is quite minimal: they would be judged.

As I have noted, the deeds and miracles of the Italian saints illustrate, among other things, the virtues to be emulated by Gregory's audience. In so far the work is certainly didactic and provides a great deal of material that could be useful in preaching and teaching. But Book IV—even as it diverges from Books I-III in style and content—adds something more to the work's message by virtue of the apocalyptic thought discussed here. These visions and stories about the fate of the soul after death are, in Palmer's terms, morally apocalyptic and thus designed to move the listener to action. But at the same time, they are being served up in the vernacular at a time of heightened "psychological imminence," at a time when fear of the end, both individual and collective, has reached its zenith. Alfred himself witnessed how the great Viking army had effectively brought down the long-established kingdoms of Northumbria, East Anglia and Mercia in the 860s. Everyone knew how close Wessex had come to sharing their fate. Here, as elsewhere in Europe, Palmer observes, "it was Scandinavians in particular who stimulated apocalyptic reflection" (Palmer 2014, 191). There is little doubt in my mind that Alfred and his advisors, among them Werferth, were moved by circumstances to such contemplation.

For Palmer, "the interesting question is not whether there was evidence of apocalypticism in the early Middle Ages—there is—but why people invoked apocalyptic thought when they did in the context of a range of political and cultural processes" (2014, 22). So even if the Old English *Dialogues* were not widely disseminated and used in the late ninth and early tenth centuries, but were instead intended for semi-private use, or the training of a relatively small group of half-educated priests, or for the benefit of a similarly limited group of pious lay persons and nobles, the very act of translating the *Dialogi* into English constitutes in itself an invocation of apocalyptic thought on the part of Alfred, or Werferth, or whoever was in fact most closely involved in its composition. This, I would argue, is one of the contributing motivations for the production of the Old English *Dialogues*. It was a clear response to cultural circumstances obtaining at the time: fear of "Apocalyptic outsiders"—as Palmer (2016) calls them—, and, if we take Alfred's words seriously in his prose preface to the *Pastoral Care*, fear of losing the link with literacy and learning, and, as part of Alfred's program of translation and education, born of a clear desire to change the world they found themselves in, and improve it.

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