

Heresy and authority in Bede's *Letter to Plegwine*

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Scholarly perceptions of the Northumbrian monk and scholar Bede underwent seismic changes at the turn of the twenty-first century as a variety of previously commonplace assumptions concerning the individual and his writings were dismantled one by one. Rarely is Bede now seen as a passive and uncritical transmitter of earlier texts, or as isolated from others and withdrawn from the world beyond Wearmouth-Jarrow. An important essay by this volume's honouree in 1983, 'Bede's Ideal of Reform', was a critically important stage in the realisation of these transitions. That essay explains that Bede's later writings were charged by a desire to influence the society in which he lived, and it does this by bringing a range of exegetical texts into dialogue with better-known parts of Bede's canon such as the prose *Life of St Cuthbert*, *Ecclesiastical History* and *Letter to Ecgberht*. The reforming impulse highlighted in that essay of 1983 is now established as a cornerstone of modern interpretations of Bede's writings.¹ Many scholars would agree with the view expressed in Alan Thacker's subsequent contribution to an influential collection published in 2006, (which

* This essay is offered in gratitude to Alan Thacker for the considerable effort that he has put into the mentoring of young scholars throughout his career. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer, Máirín MacCarron and Faith Wallis for commenting on draft versions of this essay, and I wish to acknowledge the support of the British Academy for funding the period of postdoctoral research from which it has arisen.

¹ E.g. Thacker, 'Bede and the Irish', pp. 34–38 and 'Bede and history', pp. 183–85; DeGregorio, 'Reforming impulse', 'Bede's *In Ezram et Neemiam* and the reform of the Northumbrian Church', 'Monasticism and reform in Book IV of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*', 'Bede's *In Ezram et Neemiam*: a document in Church reform?', and 'Visions of reform: Bede's later writings in context'; O'Brien, *Bede's Temple*, pp. 112–17.

cemented many of the historiographical shifts described above), that Bede aspired to greatness within the Patristic tradition.²

This essay takes as its subject an extremely important but underappreciated letter of Bede's which documents his reaction to an accusation of heresy. Much of the letter concerns chronology, eschatology, and the six ages of the world, and it is an important source for the history of medieval apocalyptic thought because it describes Bede's interactions with contemporaries who wished to discuss the timing of the Last Judgement with him.³ In the course of the *Letter to Plegwine* Bede recounts and dismisses several positions which he considered erroneous, revealing that two different apocalyptic target years and the concept of the thousand-year world age were current in early eighth-century Northumbria.⁴ It is clear that the episode documented in the letter was a pivotal turning point in Bede's understanding of time and its end, but its full importance with regards to other aspects of Bede's intellectual development is yet to be fully realised. A close reading of the *Letter to Plegwine* will allow us to engage several themes pertinent to Alan Thacker's research. We will ask what the letter can tell us about Bede's understanding of heresy, a topic which Thacker has considered in one of his recent essays on Bede.⁵ We will follow in the footsteps of his Jarrow Lecture by investigating aspects of the relationship between Bede and Augustine of Hippo.⁶ The *Letter to Plegwine* is also important because it sheds light on Bede's relationship with a neighbouring monastic community led by Wilfrid, bishop of Hexham, a figure who has long interested Thacker and who has featured prominently in his recent publications.⁷ Most

² Thacker, 'Ordering of understanding', pp. 54–63.

³ Analysis of the letter's eschatological content is offered by: Jones, *Beda's opera de temporibus*, pp. 132–35; Wallis, *Reckoning of time*, pp. xxx–xxxi and 353–62; Darby, *Bede and the end of time*, pp. 35–64; Palmer, *Apocalypse in the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 95–105; Chazelle, 'Debating the end times', pp. 219–27.

⁴ Bede, *Epistola ad Pleguinam*, 14–15, ed. by Jones, pp. 313–14.

⁵ Thacker, 'Why did heresy matter to Bede?'.
⁶ Thacker, *Bede and Augustine of Hippo*.

⁷ Thacker, 'Wilfrid, his cult and his biographer'; Thacker and Ó Carragáin, 'Wilfrid in Rome'; Thacker, 'Gallic or Greek? Archbishops in England from Theodore to Ecgbert', pp. 55–64.

importantly of all, by studying a text written in the midst of a significant controversy, we will encounter its author presenting himself as an authoritative figure, a side of Bede that Thacker has been encouraging us to see since 1983.

Bede's Letter to Plegwine

The *Letter to Plegwine* records the earliest accusation of heresy to have been directed towards an individual Anglo-Saxon for which significant written evidence is extant. The letter was written in the year 708, five years or so after Bede's ordination to the priesthood by John of Beverley, Wilfrid's predecessor in the see of Hexham.⁸ Nothing is known of the addressee beyond what can be discovered from the letter itself. The letter explains that the allegation of heresy had been made against Bede two days before it was written. The fact that we have a clear timeframe for its composition (of around 48 hours from conception to execution) indicates that the patristic excerpts presented in the *Letter to Plegwine* (including lengthy citations from Augustine's *City of God* and Jerome's commentary on Isaiah) must have been available to Bede at very short notice.

The accusation of heresy concerned the chronological framework presented in the world chronicle of the time-reckoning manual *On times*.⁹ Bede had extracted much of the data for the chronicle from the Vulgate Bible, a decision which led to the year of Christ's Incarnation being dated to *annus mundi* 3952.¹⁰ According to the *Letter to Plegwine* Bede stood accused of denying that the Incarnation had taken place in the sixth age of the world.¹¹ However, in *On times* the Incarnation is twice located at the beginning of Age Six.¹² Bede's

⁸ *Historia ecclesiastica*, V.24, ed. and trans. by Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 566–67.

⁹ Bede, *De temporibus*, 16–22, ed. by Jones, pp. 600–611.

¹⁰ Bede, *De temporibus*, 22, ed. by Jones, p. 607, ll. 3–4. The background to Bede's *annus mundi* chronology is explored by MacCarron, 'Bede, Irish computistica and Annus Mundi'.

¹¹ Bede, *Epistola ad Pleguinam*, 1, ed. by Jones, p. 307, ll. 6–8.

¹² Bede, *De temporibus*, 16 and 22, ed. by Jones, p. 601, ll. 16–22 and p. 607, ll. 3–4.

accuser appears to have subscribed to the view that world ages and millennia were in some way linked (this position was afforded superficial credence in the early Middle Ages by chronologies that followed the Septuagint Bible in which the year of the Incarnation was calculated to c. 5199).¹³ Bede's chronology severed any implicit link between millennia and the six *aetates saeculi* by locating Christ in the fourth millennium of historical time. In the eyes of the accuser (according to Bede's version of events) it seems that this somehow amounted to a denial of the Incarnation, an allegation which Bede dismisses in the second paragraph of the *Letter to Plegwine* by employing the following rhetorical question to point out that such a position would have led him towards an existential crisis: '*Quomodo enim christum uenisse negans christi in ecclesia potuissem esse sacerdos* (For if I had denied that Christ had come, how could I be priest in Christ's Church?').¹⁴ Such caricaturing of opponents' positions as absurd was a tactic which was commonly employed in arguments about heresy in Late Antiquity.¹⁵

Bede believed that the defamatory remarks spoken against him had been made in the presence of Bishop Wilfrid.¹⁶ By 708 Wilfrid was living out the last years of his eventful life in his home kingdom of Northumbria, the monasteries of Ripon and Hexham having been returned to him at the reconciliatory Synod of Nidd in 706.¹⁷ The letter was sent to Plegwine to be passed on to a mutual acquaintance known as David, so that David could read it aloud in the presence of Wilfrid.¹⁸ The fact that Bede felt the need to go through these channels to reach the incumbent bishop of Hexham in 708 is very interesting, especially in light of the

¹³ E.g. the chronologies of Isidore and Eusebius-Jerome. See: Landes, 'Lest the millennium be fulfilled'.

¹⁴ Bede, *Epistola ad Pleguinam*, 2, ed. by Jones, p. 307, ll. 1–2. Translation: Wallis, *Reckoning of time*, p. 405.

¹⁵ Cameron, 'How to read heresiology', pp. 473–77.

¹⁶ Bede, *Epistola ad Pleguinam*, 17, ed. by Jones, p. 315, ll. 1–6.

¹⁷ Stephen of Ripon, *Vita Wilfridi*, 60, ed. and trans. by Colgrave, pp. 128–33; Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, V.19, ed. and trans. by Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 528–29.

¹⁸ David is a *cognomen* for a member of the bishop's inner circle who was known personally to Bede in some capacity. See further: Wallis, 'Why did Bede write a commentary on Revelation?', pp. 28–29.

direct access he would subsequently have to Acca when Acca succeeded Wilfrid as bishop upon the latter's death in 710.¹⁹ The *Letter to Plegwine* mentions that *On times* had been written 5 years previously, and the date of *On times* can be securely assigned to the year 703 on account of internal evidence preserved within that text.²⁰ In terms of the chronology of Bede's writings, the *Letter to Plegwine* was therefore written after *On times* and its companion pieces *On the nature of things* and the commentary on Revelation,²¹ but before the completion of major commentaries on Acts, Luke, Mark and 1 Samuel, the trilogy of works concerning the Jewish sanctuaries (*On the Tabernacle*, *On the Temple*, and *On Ezra-Nehemiah*), the longer treatise on computus *On the Reckoning of Time*, the prose *Life of St Cuthbert*, the *Ecclesiastical History*, and several other significant works.²² At the time of the letter's composition, it is fair to say that the majority of the texts that would establish Bede's reputation as a prominent figure within the Western Patristic tradition were yet to be written.²³

The *Letter to Plegwine* captures a significant moment in its author's career because it was one of the first works to have been written by Bede for an audience outside Wearmouth-Jarrow. *On times* and *On the nature of things* were compiled for students within the monastery,²⁴ and the commentary on Revelation was dedicated to Hwætberht, a member of

¹⁹ For 710 as the date of Wilfrid's death see Stancliffe, 'Dating Wilfrid's death and Stephen's *Life*'.

²⁰ Bede, *Epistola ad Pleguinam*, 3, ed. by Jones, p. 307, ll. 1–4. *De temporibus*, 14, ed. by Jones, pp. 598–99, ll. 1–10; 22, p. 611, ll. 79–80.

²¹ For the view that these texts should be regarded as a coherent trilogy see Darby, 'Time shift of 703'. On the dates of the individual works see: Wallis, *Commentary on Revelation*, pp. 39–57; Kendall and Wallis, *On the nature of things and On times*, pp. 1–3.

²² An overview of the development of Bede's career is offered by Darby and Wallis, 'Many futures of Bede'. Attempts to present Bede's writings in chronological order of composition have been made by Plummer, *Venerabilis Baedae opera historica*, I, pp. cxliii–clv; Brown, *Companion to Bede*, pp. 13–15, and O'Brien, *Bede's Temple*, pp. xix–xx. Many of the issues surrounding the dates of individual works are set out by Lapidge, *Storia degli inglesi*, I, pp. xlvi–lvi.

²³ On the circulation and dissemination of Bede's writings after his death see: Whitelock, *After Bede*; Bonner, 'Bede and his legacy'; Pfaff, 'Bede among the Fathers?'; Rollason, *Bede and Germany*; Hill, 'Carolingian perspectives on the authority of Bede'; Brown, *Companion to Bede*, pp. 117–34; Westgard, 'Bede and the Continent'.

²⁴ Bede, *De temporum ratione*, preface, ed. by Jones, p. 263, ll. 1–3.

the community who would later serve as its abbot.²⁵ Two other works with claims to a date before 708 – the paired tracts *On the art of metre* and *On schemes and tropes* – were dedicated to a ‘beloved son and fellow deacon Cuthbert (*dulcissime fili et conleuita cuthberte*)’, a form of address which seems to hint at somebody in Bede’s immediate circle.²⁶ I know of no evidence to suggest that the metrical *Life of St Cuthbert* and *On the Holy Places*, two further works which are sometimes assigned to the period before 708, were originally written with wide circulation in mind.²⁷ There is, admittedly, some uncertainty regarding the circumstances of composition for several of Bede’s other writings, but the evidence so far as we have it identifies the *Letter to Plegwine* as the first text that Bede overtly addressed to the world beyond Wearmouth-Jarrow.²⁸

There are contextual factors relating to format and delivery which undermine any attempts to treat the *Letter to Plegwine* in a straightforward and uncomplicated fashion. First of all, we must not forget that we only have Bede’s account of what happened in 708. The letter is very clear about what Bede intended: he expected the letter to be read aloud in Wilfrid’s presence by ‘David’, and also asked that Plegwine petition David to speak to the perpetrator of the accusation on a one-to-one basis.²⁹ Bede therefore presented his case before Wilfrid through a speech delivered by proxy; there would be (so far as we know) no trial,

²⁵ Bede, *Expositio Apocalypseos*, preface, ed. by Gryson, p. 221, ll. 1–3 (addressing ‘Eusebius’). Hwætberht is identified as Eusebius in *In primam partem Samuhelis*, IV, ed. by Hurst, p. 212, ll. 12–20.

²⁶ Bede, *De arte metrica*, 25, ed. by Kendall, p. 141, ll. 26–36. For the view that the two grammatical treatises were early compositions of Bede’s see: Plummer, *Venerabilis Baedae opera historica*, I, p. cxlv; Laistner and King, *Hand-list of Bede manuscripts*, pp. 131–32; Blair, *World of Bede*, pp. 249–50. The early dating rests upon how one interprets the form of words used by Bede to address Cuthbert. Several recent commentators have cast doubt upon the assumption that *De arte metrica* and *De schematibus et tropis* were early-career compositions, e.g.: Irvine, ‘Bede the grammarian’, pp. 41–43; Holder, ‘(Un)Dating Bede’s *De arte metrica*’; Franklin, ‘The date of composition of Bede’s *De schematibus et tropis* and *De arte metrica*’; Kendall, *The art of poetry and rhetoric*, pp. 28–29; Thacker, ‘Ordering of understanding’, pp. 50–51. A recent study by Neil Wright does not preclude an early date for *De arte metrica*: ‘The metrical art(s) of Bede’.

²⁷ The circumstances surrounding the composition of the metrical *Vita S. Cuthberti* are discussed in some detail by Lapidge, ‘Bede’s metrical *Vita S. Cuthberti*’, pp. 77–85. On *De locis sanctis*, four chapters of which were later excerpted in *Historia ecclesiastica* v.16–17, see: O’Loughlin, *Adomnán and the holy places*, pp. 188–97; Darby and Reynolds, ‘Reassessing the ‘Jerusalem pilgrims’’, pp. 28–31.

²⁸ Darby and Wallis, ‘Many futures of Bede’, pp. 9–11.

²⁹ Bede, *Epistola ad Pleguinam*, 17, ed. by Jones, p. 315, ll. 1–6.

personal interrogation, or formal submission to a church council. In assessing the content of the letter we must keep the occasion of its public reading in mind and be duly sensitive to the performative aspect of Bede's prose. But, as the following analysis will show, the *Letter to Plegwine* is rich in allusions to biblical and extra-biblical material which one could not realistically expect any listener to be fully attuned to in the course of a single reading. It is significant that the letter is included in the autobiographical list of writings offered in the *Ecclesiastical History's* final chapter because this suggests that posterity was also an important consideration for Bede.³⁰ We are therefore dealing with a document intended to serve two different purposes at once: it addresses the immediate problem of clearing Bede's name before the bishop, and it presents a version of record to be read by a wider audience after the controversy had been resolved. The historical circumstances and literary qualities of the *Letter to Plegwine* are closely entwined, and both of these aspects of the source must be considered in tandem.³¹

The aforementioned observation that the *Letter to Plegwine* was considered worthy of inclusion in Bede's autobiographical list of writings is additionally important because it suggests that he thought of the letter as part of his official canon. That list, which appears to present the various letters of Bede in their chronological order of composition, refers to 'a book of letters to different people (*librum epistularum ad diuersos*)', and records that the first of these concerned the six ages of the world – an unambiguous reference to the *Letter to Plegwine*. The entry for the *liber epistularum* describes four other letters but that group does not represent the sum total of Bede's correspondence.³² Several epistolary prefaces to various

³⁰ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, V.24, ed. and trans. by Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 568–69.

³¹ Cf. Constable, *Letters and letter collections*, pp. 11–12.

³² Two of the letters were addressed to Acca and written c. 716: the first (*De mansionibus filiorum Israel*) discusses locations visited by the Israelites during the Exodus and the second (*De eo quod ait Isaias*) concerns Isaiah 24.22. The remaining letters discuss technical aspects of time-reckoning: one to Helmwald on the leap year; the other to Wicthed on the equinox.

exegetical and non-exegetical works have been preserved, and two further letters postdate the completion of the *Ecclesiastical History* and the compiling of Bede's list: one to Albinus of Canterbury and another to Ecgberht of York.³³ From his extensive knowledge of the Patristic tradition Bede knew that letters were an important part of a Christian writer's legacy, and he had access to epistolary writings by Gregory the Great, Leo the Great and other popes, plus Augustine, Jerome, Dionysius Exiguus, and others.³⁴ Bede's understanding of the world was of course anchored by his thorough knowledge of the Bible, a self-contained library of sacred texts which includes a great deal of epistolary material, some of which, it will become clear, inspired certain features of the *Letter to Plegwine*.³⁵

The discourse of heresy

It has long been recognised that heresy was a serious concern for Bede.³⁶ Indeed, his homily on Matthew 1.18–25 makes it clear that he felt a responsibility to educate others on the subject.³⁷ Heresy was a pit into which one must not fall.³⁸ It involved a wilful separation from the unity of the Church, and it sprang from the dangerous impulses of obstinate individuals who compromised the collective faith of the Christian community through their foolish stubbornness.³⁹ Heretics were often highly intelligent and skilled in the art of rhetoric, qualities which made them all the more dangerous.⁴⁰ It is notable that Bede considered the

³³ On the *Epistula ad Ecgbertum* see: Grocock and Wood, *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, pp. 1–lix. For the *Epistula ad Albinum*: Westgard, 'New manuscripts of Bede's Letter to Albinus'.

³⁴ Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon library*, pp. 191–228.

³⁵ On the Bible as library see O'Reilly, 'Views from Vivarium and Wearmouth-Jarrow'.

³⁶ Plummer, *Venerabilis Baedae opera historica*, I, pp. lii–liii.

³⁷ Bede, *Homiliarum euangelii libri II*, 1.5, ed. by Hurst, p. 35, ll. 103–25. See further the comments of Thacker, 'Why did heresy matter to Bede?', p. 66: 'His [Bede's] very identity as a teacher and a scholar was bound up with keeping watch for heresy and bad practice'.

³⁸ Bede, *De mansionibus filiorum Israel*, ed. by Migne, col. 699.

³⁹ See Bede, *In epistulas septem catholicas, In epistolam II Petri*, ed. by Hurst, pp. 268–69, ll. 1–25 and the comments of Holder 'Bede as Heresiologist', p. 109.

⁴⁰ Bede, *In Cantica Canticorum*, preface, ed. by Hurst, p. 167, ll. 1–33. See: Ray, 'Bede and Cicero', pp. 6–8.

accusation directed towards him to be serious enough to warrant a public letter of defence.⁴¹

Allusions made to the episode in the preface to Bede's *On the Reckoning of time*, written for the benefit of his brethren some seventeen years after the *Letter to Plegwine*, suggest that he continued to regard it as a significant matter long after Wilfrid's death.⁴²

Bede was acutely aware that the faintest whiff of heresy had the potential to taint his reputation for many years to come. In his commentary on the Seven Catholic Epistles, when tackling James 3.5 ('the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts; consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark'), Bede wrote:

Sicut enim a modica scintilla ignis excrescens magnam saepe siluam incendit, ita incontinentia linguae suis nutrita leuitatibus magnam bonorum operum materiam, multos uitae spiritalis fructus, ubi adtaminauerit perdit sed et innumera plerumque optima quae uidebantur locutionis folia consumit.

Just as from a small spark a spreading fire often ignites a great forest, so an unrestrained tongue, feeding on its own trivialities, destroys the great substance of good works, the many fruits of a spiritual life, after it has spoiled them; but it also devours innumerable and countless folios of speech which appeared most excellent.⁴³

⁴¹ Jones (*Beda's opera de temporibus*, p. 132) thought that the charge was 'serious, and represented not a few *rustici* but a distinguished party of whom Bishop Wilfrid was one'. Thacker asserts that the controversy of 708 'rankled very deeply' for Bede and draws attention to the fact that the *Letter to Plegwine* was written for public dissemination: 'Why did heresy matter to Bede?', p. 55. For Wallis 'the speed at which these events unfolded ... bespeaks the urgency of the situation': 'Why did Bede write a commentary on Revelation', p. 28.

⁴² Jones, *Beda's opera de temporibus*, pp. 132–35 (cf. Wallis, *Reckoning of time*, p. xxxi).

⁴³ Bede, *In epistulas septem catholicas, In epistolam Iacobi*, ed. by Hurst, p. 204, ll. 99–103; trans. by Hurst, *Seven Catholic Epistles*, pp. 38–9 (with modifications).

That the danger posed by the words of others was one of the things on Bede's mind here is suggested by his response to the subsequent pericope: 'no one, however, is able to tame the tongue' (James 3.8). This invites the comment that 'no learned good man can tame the tongue of those who neglect to restrain themselves from foolish outbursts (*stulta uerbositate*)'.⁴⁴ It is tempting to relate these comments, and indeed certain other statements from Bede's collection of commentaries on the Catholic Epistles, to the events of 708 (not least a passage from the tract on 3 John which explains how to deal with slanderous babbling, and a discourse on false teachers from the commentary on 1 Peter which advocates patience in the face of insulting words from adversaries and recommends the reading of John Chrysostom to protect against the threat of heresy).⁴⁵ The adjective *stultus* ('foolish, stupid') and the associated noun *stultitia* ('foolishness, folly') are often used by Bede in connection with the subject of heresy. Indeed 'foolish stubbornness (*stulta obstinatione*)' is described as a defining characteristic of heretics in Bede's commentary on 2 Peter.⁴⁶ *Stultitia* is also used in Paragraph 11 of the *Letter to Plegwine*, where Bede rejects any suggestion that a shorter reckoning of years was followed in the Old Testament era by rounding off a citation from Augustine's *City of God* with a rhetorical question which is designed to draw attention to the supposed absurdity of the position he disagreed with.⁴⁷

A great deal of recent research on the subject of Bede and heresy has focussed upon Bede's engagement with the subject on an intellectual level. That is not to say that the scholarship implies that Bede's statements about heresy are in any way abstract or detached

⁴⁴ Bede, *In epistulas septem catholicas, In epistolam Iacobi*, ed. by Hurst, p. 206, ll. 157–61: 'nullus doctorum bonorum potest domare linguam eorum qui se ipsos a stulta uerbositate cohibere neglegunt'; trans. by Hurst, *Seven Catholic Epistles*, p. 41.

⁴⁵ Bede, *In epistulas septem catholicas, In epistolam III Iohannis*, ed. by Hurst, p. 333, ll. 67–74; *In epistolam I Petri*, ed. by Hurst, p. 245, ll. 69–93. The evidence for Bede's knowledge of the works of Chrysostom is examined by Love, 'Bede and John Chrysostom'.

⁴⁶ Bede, *In epistulas septem catholicas, In epistolam II Petri*, ed. by Hurst, p. 268, ll. 1–4.

⁴⁷ Bede, *Epistola ad Pleguinam*, 11, ed. by Jones, p. 312, ll. 13–16.

from late-seventh- and early-eighth-century issues; indeed, quite the opposite is often true, especially in the biblical commentaries where statements about heresy connect to a wide range of important concerns. Alan Thacker has shown that Bede was very concerned about Pelagian writings circulating in Anglo-Saxon England under Jerome's name, and he has also demonstrated that the issue of what to do with penitent heretics, which is addressed at considerable length in the commentary *On 1 Samuel*, had acute contemporary relevance for Bede.⁴⁸ Faith Wallis's contribution to this volume shows that many of the comments in Bede's exegesis of the Book of Proverbs regarding the pressing need for erudite teachers were written against a backdrop of concerns about heresy.⁴⁹ Several scholars have drawn attention to fact that the language of heresy was sometimes invoked during the Insular Paschal controversy,⁵⁰ and Arthur Holder has suggested that Bede's understanding of heresy was connected to concerns about the observance of Easter.⁵¹ Jennifer O'Reilly and Éamonn Ó Carragáin have shown that the Anglo-Saxons were closely entwined in the debates over Monotheletism which took place in the late seventh century, and that those debates were an important backdrop to the intellectual programme established at the monastery of Wearmouth and Jarrow.⁵² Nevertheless, the *Letter to Plegwine* offers us something slightly different from the material which is currently at the heart of the scholarship concerning Bede and heresy; it affords a unique opportunity to see how Bede interacted with the subject of heresy when an immediate attack upon his personal integrity had been made.

The *Letter to Plegwine* reveals a great deal about Bede's understanding of heresy and its operation, and it describes the events of 708 in very interesting terms. Bede does not say

⁴⁸ Thacker, 'Why did heresy matter to Bede?', pp. 53–54 and 56–61. On the matter of penitent heretics cf. Cubitt, *Anglo-Saxon church councils*, p. 63; Charles-Edwards, 'Penitential of Theodore', pp. 164–67.

⁴⁹ Wallis, 'Rectores at risk'.

⁵⁰ E.g. Ó Cróinín, 'New Heresy for Old'; Stancliffe, *Bede, Wilfrid and the Irish*.

⁵¹ Holder, 'Bede as Heresiologist', pp. 113–14.

⁵² O'Reilly, 'Know Who and What He Is', pp. 301–03, and 'Bede and Monotheletism'; Ó Carragáin, *City of Rome*, pp. 15–18; *Ritual and the rood*, pp. 81–83 and 223–28.

that he stood accused of subscribing to an existing heresy; instead the second sentence of the letter's first paragraph expresses the belief that his accusers had placed him '*inter hereticos* (among the heretics)'.⁵³ The idea that heretics existed as a group of shady individuals who stood together in opposition to the Church is a common trope in Bede's writings. The letter's next sentence describes Bede's reaction to learning that his accusers considered him worthy of membership of this group, which was to ask of which heresy he stood accused. This question demonstrates an awareness of what Averil Cameron has described as a 'family tree' approach to heresy in which divergent beliefs are categorised using pre-existing labels.⁵⁴ The categorising of opponents' beliefs as recurrences of existing heresies was commonly employed in the heresiological literature produced in Late Antiquity.⁵⁵ Also instructive is the statement which opens Paragraph 4 of Bede's letter:

Ne autem me putes, dilectissime, post notam hereseos ad inficiandi malle subterfugere praesidium quam decorem recipere ueritatis, audi quae in libello memorato de aetatibus scripsi.

Lest you think, beloved, that now my heresy has been discovered, I prefer to make my escape under the protection of denial rather than receive the grace of truth, listen to what I wrote concerning the Ages in that little book I mentioned [i.e. *On times*].⁵⁶

⁵³ Bede, *Epistola ad Pleguinam*, 1, ed. by Jones, p. 307, ll. 4–6. Cf. Bede, *De tabernaculo*, II, ed. by Hurst, p. 69, ll. 1071–85; *In primam partem Samuhelis*, IV, ed. by Hurst, p. 264, ll. 2220–28; *In Ezram et Neemiam*, III, ed. by Hurst, p. 356, ll. 683–5. Also pertinent are the occurrences of the phrase in: Augustine, *De haeresibus*, 57 and 81, ed. by Plaetse and Beukers, p. 326, ll. 4–8 and p. 336, ll. 1–3; and Cassiodorus, *Expositio Psalmorum*, 22, ed. by Adriaen, p. 211, ll. 92–93.

⁵⁴ Cameron, 'How to read heresiology', pp. 476–77; also Flower, 'Genealogies of unbelief'. The way that Bede describes Monotheletism is a good example of this practice, on which see: Thacker, 'Why did heresy matter to Bede?', pp. 51–52; and now O'Reilly, 'Bede and Monotheletism'.

⁵⁵ Lyman, 'Heresiology'.

⁵⁶ Bede, *Epistola ad Pleguinam*, 4, ed. by Jones, p. 308, ll. 1–3; trans. by Wallis, *Reckoning of Time*, pp. 406–07.

This passage, which employs a verb in the imperative mood to convey a sense of urgency (*audi*), describes the devious tactics that the perpetrator of a heresy would be expected to resort to upon the discovery of their error. Rather than hide behind a denial, as a duplicitous scheming heretic would, Bede assumes the mantle of a catholic *doctor* and tackles the accusation by proceeding to restate the words that he had written five years before. A further point of interest is the letter's use of the term 'heresiarch' to describe the author of a chronographical text which Bede had encountered in his youth.⁵⁷ This figure had devised a simplistic reckoning which was loosely based upon the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20.1–16).⁵⁸ The problem, in Bede's view, was that the text promoted *annus mundi* 6000 as a target year for the apocalypse in contravention of the Scriptural assertions that the hour of the Lord's coming is known to God alone.⁵⁹ The unusual categorisation of the proponent of this chronology as an arch-heretic adds further weight to the notion that Bede considered the matters at stake in the *Letter to Plegwine* to be serious. Bede used the term 'heresiarch' just eight times in his writings, and five of those are in the plural.⁶⁰ One of the two remaining singular usages is assigned to Arius of Alexandria, and the other to Diotrophes, a figure mentioned in 3 John, verse 9.⁶¹

Nearly three decades ago Roger Ray invoked the *Letter to Plegwine* in support of his view that Bede was familiar with the classical tradition of rhetoric, proposing that the letter was constructed according to guidelines for the construction of public speeches which

⁵⁷ Bede, *Epistola ad Pleguinam*, 14, ed. by Jones, p. 313, ll. 9–12.

⁵⁸ For discussion: Darby, *Bede and the end of time*, pp. 47–51.

⁵⁹ E.g. Mark 13.32 and Matthew 24.36. Both of these verses are cited in paragraph 14 of the *Epistola ad Pleguinam*.

⁶⁰ Bede, *In prouerbia Salomonis*, II, ed. by Hurst, p. 123, ll. 88–91; *In Lucae euangelium expositio*, VI, ed. by Hurst, pp. 364–65, ll. 73–7; *In Marci euangelium expositio*, IV, ed. by Hurst, p. 596, ll. 47–50; *In primam partem Samuhelis*, IV, ed. by Hurst, p. 260, ll. 2053–59; *In Ezram et Neemiam*, III, ed. by Hurst, p. 356, ll. 695–702.

⁶¹ Bede, *Expositio actuum apostolorum*, ed. by Laistner, p. 13, ll. 206–09 (Arius); *In epistulas septem catholicas*, *In epistolam III Iohannis*, ed. by Hurst, p. 333, ll. 58–62 (Diotrophes).

(whether directly or indirectly) ultimately derive from Cicero.⁶² The manuscript evidence for direct knowledge of Cicero's writings in early Anglo-Saxon England is problematic, as Ray himself acknowledges.⁶³ Nevertheless, Ray asserts that the *Letter to Plegwine* adheres to certain well-established rhetorical structures and devices. For example, he points out that the argument made by Bede towards the end of the letter – that the person who slandered him is in fact the one guilty of heresy and not himself – is a deployment of a rhetorical strategy known as '*remotio criminis*', the act of turning the tables on one's accuser by accusing them of a crime to set aside the original charge.⁶⁴ Bede could have learnt about this tactic from reading the section on legal arguments in Book Two of Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*, an important reference point for several of his pre-708 writings.⁶⁵ Ray suggests that Bede's attitude towards classical rhetoric owes a considerable debt to a position expounded by Augustine that it is acceptable to deploy pre-Christian eloquence in the service of the Church. Interestingly, Ray points out that Bede's views on this matter often intersect with his comments on the struggle against heresy. An example of this is a statement of Bede's regarding the council of Nicaea, which explains that Athanasius needed knowledge of classical eloquence to defeat Arius, an opponent who was himself a highly accomplished rhetorician.⁶⁶

The salutation

⁶² Ray, 'Bede and Cicero', pp. 9–12. Cf. Knappe, 'Classical rhetoric in Anglo-Saxon England', and the response to Knappe by Ray in his 'Who did Bede think he was?', pp. 28–29.

⁶³ 'The internal evidence of Bede's writings compels me even though I cannot now claim that the surviving manuscripts of Cicero's works tell for my case'. Ray, 'Bede and Cicero', p. 14.

⁶⁴ Ray, 'Bede and Cicero', pp. 10–11. See further: Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages*, pp. 10–15.

⁶⁵ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, II.5.6, ed. by Lindsay. On Bede's use of Isidore see Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon library*, pp. 212–15, and the comments of: Wallis, *Reckoning of time*, pp. lxxx–lxxxii; McCready, 'Bede, Isidore and the *Epistola Cuthberti*'; Ray, 'Bede's *Vera lex historiae*', pp. 14–17; Kendall and Wallis, *On the nature of things and On times* pp. 13–20.

⁶⁶ Ray, 'Bede and Cicero', p. 6, discussing *In primam partem Samuhelis*, IV, ed. by Hurst, pp. 262–63, ll. 2125–69. On the relationship between heresy and eloquence see further: Holder, 'Bede as heresiologist', p. 110 and Wallis, '*Rectores* at risk'.

If rhetorical strategies help to ensure that the case for Bede's defence is suitably amplified, the case itself is ultimately grounded in the authority of Scripture and the world of patristic exegesis. Close study of the protocol and opening paragraph of the *Letter to Plegwine* reveals several interesting allusions to biblical and patristic themes and phrases which serve to establish Bede's credentials as an orthodox and knowledgeable authority figure. It is here, at the very beginning of his interaction with the letter's oral and textual audiences, that Bede establishes the pillars upon which his defence will be built. We begin with the curious salutation in which Bede addresses Plegwine by borrowing a phrase from Paul's epistle to the Philippians (identified in the citation that follows by italic type): 'Fratri dilectissimo et *in christi uisceribus* honorando Pleguinae, Beda in domino salutem (To his brother Plegwine, beloved and deserving of honour *in the bowels of Christ*, Bede sends greeting in the Lord').⁶⁷ The Pauline expression complements the superlative adjective (*dilectissimo*) to communicate warmth and respect for the recipient. The suggestion is that Plegwine deserves to be recognised as embodying Christian values in a manner which is completely beyond reproach. It is unequivocally a warm greeting.

In his biblical commentaries Bede frequently aligned verses from different parts of the Bible to cast light on one another, a method which has been described as 'exegesis by concordance'.⁶⁸ A close examination of the wording of these citations occasionally reveals that Bede's phrasing does not correspond exactly with any of the versions of the Bible that he had at his disposal, which gives the impression that Bede sometimes cited verses from memory in the course of his scriptural work.⁶⁹ The implication is that Bede and, one presumes, many of the men and women who read or listened to his works, had an extensive

⁶⁷ Bede, *Epistola ad Pleguinam*, ed. by Jones, p. 307, ll. 1–2.

⁶⁸ Martin, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, pp. xxix–xxx (citing Leclercq, *Love of Learning*, pp. 82–83).

⁶⁹ Marsden, *Text of the Old Testament*, pp. 202–19. For an example of this practice from the *Epistola ad Pleguinam* see note 99, below.

catalogue of memorised biblical verses at their disposal and were able to cross-refer across Scripture at will. Bishop Wilfrid committed the entire Psalter and several of the Bible's other books to memory, if the account of his biographer can be believed.⁷⁰ An echo of a verse, such as the one seen in Bede's greeting to Plegwine, would have steered an informed medieval reader through a series of connected scriptural verses and themes, bringing in patristic interpretations of those verses along the way. Close studies of Bede's writings reveal that a great deal of implied meaning often stands behind his carefully chosen citations.⁷¹ Reading Bede's exegesis with an eye to the myriad allusions that lie beneath the surface is not unlike working one's way through a succession of faith-related riddles. This process ultimately serves to underscore the unity of the Holy Scriptures because it repeatedly brings ideas, themes and symbols from different parts of the Bible into dialogue with each other. Bede's allusion to the 'bowels of Christ' should be approached in this way. Within the Bible the arresting phrase '*viscera Christi*' is used uniquely in Chapter 1 of Paul's Letter to the Philippians so there can be little doubt that Bede wanted to lead his audience to that particular passage. Paul regarded the Christian community at Philippi in Macedonia as faithful and supportive, and the tone of his letter to the Philippians is overwhelmingly positive even though it was written during a period of imprisonment.⁷² The following citation displays the *viscera Christi* passage within the context of the verses either side of it (Philippians 1.7–1.11):

Sicut est mihi iustum hoc sentire pro omnibus vobis eo quod habeam in corde vos et
in vinculis meis et in defensione et confirmatione evangelii socios gaudii mei omnes

⁷⁰ Stephen of Ripon, *Vita Wilfridi*, 2–3, ed. and trans. by Colgrave, pp. 4–9. Stephen's claims are repeated by Bede in *Historia ecclesiastica*, V.19, ed. and trans. by Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 518–19.

⁷¹ For example: O'Reilly, 'God of Gods in Zion'.

⁷² Browning, *Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 294.

vos esse. Testis enim mihi est Deus quomodo cupiam omnes vos in visceribus Christi Iesu. Et hoc oro ut caritas vestra magis ac magis abundet in scientia et omni sensu; ut probetis potiora ut sitis sinceres et sine offensa in diem Christi; repleti fructu iustitiae per Christum Iesum in gloriam et laudem Dei.

It is right for me to think this for you all, since I have you in my heart; and that, in my chains and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of my joy. For God is my witness how I long after you all in the bowels of Christ Jesus. And this I pray: that your love may more and more abound in knowledge and in all understanding; that you may approve the better things; that you may be sincere and without offence unto the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of justice, through Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.⁷³

Paul here speaks of justice and expresses hope that the recipient community's love, knowledge and understanding might grow after the letter is read. There are obvious resonances here with the *Letter to Plegwine*.

Bede's echoing of a distinctive Pauline phrase draws attention to some surface-level similarities between the compositional contexts of Paul's letter to the Philippians and his own letter to the Wilfridians. Both letters attempt to persuade their recipients to align their views with the author's own, both authors were connected to the communities that they were addressing via personal messengers passing back and forth between them, and both were experiencing a degree of tribulation at the time of writing (although Paul's situation was

⁷³ The Latin is supplied from folio 976r of the Codex Amiatinus (Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, MS Amiatino 1); translation: Douay-Rheims Bible (with minor modifications).

admittedly more perilous than Bede's).⁷⁴ Although we must be cautious about taking the superlatives employed in epistolary salutations at face value because they are routinely formulaic and highly stylised,⁷⁵ a reading of the Pauline citation in its scriptural context confirms beyond any doubt that the greeting should be regarded as an expression of spiritual fraternity towards Plegwine. Bede's letter proceeds to cite work by a succession of individuals in support of the contested chronology, including Origen, Jerome, Augustine and Josephus as well as (revealingly) Bede himself, but these authorities are all brought in behind an eye-catching allusion to the writings of Paul, a figure revered amongst the Anglo-Saxons as apostle to the Gentiles.⁷⁶

Two further explanations as to why Bede chose to allude to this specific Pauline epistle in his greeting to Plegwine can be advanced. First, there are several occasions elsewhere in his corpus where the epistle to the Philippians is connected to the struggle against heresy. Two examples from the commentary *On Ezra-Nehemiah* will suffice: in an exposition of Ezra 4.4, Bede draws upon Philippians 2.21 when considering a series of figures from ecclesiastical history who suffered at the hands of heretics; in his exegesis of Nehemiah 4.1–2 Bede echoes Philippians 3.19 to castigate heretics and false Christians who block attempts to reform the church because it could threaten their unholy lifestyles.⁷⁷ So it may be that Bede saw the epistle to the Philippians as providing useful ammunition in the fight against heresy, making its use as a framing device for the *Letter to Plegwine* entirely appropriate for the situation that had arisen in 708. Second, Bede would certainly have

⁷⁴ A messenger named Epaphroditus is mentioned in Philippians 2.25 and 4.18. The beginning of Bede's letter makes it clear that he had heard of the accusation made against him from a messenger sent by Plegwine: *Epistola ad Pleguinam* 1, ed. by Jones, p. 307, ll. 3–6.

⁷⁵ Lanham, 'Salutatio' formulas in Latin letters to 1200.

⁷⁶ E.g.: Bede, *Homiliarum euangelii libri II*, 2.22, ed. by Hurst, p. 347, ll. 178–204; *Expositio Actuum Apostolorum*, IV, ed. by Hurst, p. 28, ll. 80–82; *In Ezram et Neemiam*, I, ed. by Hurst, p. 283, ll. 1673–74; *De templo*, II, ed. by Hurst, p. 218, ll. 1035–41. See further the comments of O'Reilly, 'Introduction', pp. xxxiv–xxxv, and Heuchan, 'Apostle Paul', especially pp. 427–28.

⁷⁷ Bede, *In Ezram et Neemiam*, I, ed. by Hurst, p. 283, ll. 1670–86; 3, p. 355–6, ll. 664–83.

connected this particular Pauline epistle with important doctrinal issues on account of the famous Christological discourse at the beginning of its second chapter in which Paul reflects upon the relationship between Christ and God the Father (Philippians 2.5–11).⁷⁸ At some point before 731 Bede assembled a volume of excerpts of interpretations of the Pauline epistles from Augustine's writings; in that collection Paul's Christological discourse is addressed with citations from *On the Trinity* and *On 84 Questions* which ruminate on Christ's human and divine natures.⁷⁹ This dimension to the letter to the Philippians is relevant because Bede characterised the allegation made against him in Christological terms. His understanding of the situation, as described in the *Letter to Plegwine*'s opening paragraph, was that he stood accused of denying Christ's coming *in carne* in the sixth age of the world.⁸⁰ It is probably no coincidence that Bede framed the *Letter to Plegwine* with an allusion to the *viscera Christi*, a phrase drawn from an epistle renowned for its Christological content, and one which itself asserts a belief in the miracle of the Incarnation.

Additional layers of meaning are recoverable with reference to Patristic tradition. The salutation employed in the *Letter to Plegwine* reaches back to Paul but it does so through the letters of Augustine, a figure whose writings had a profound impact upon Bede.⁸¹ Bede's exegetical works and writings on time and nature demonstrate that he was familiar with a substantial body of Augustinian epistolary material.⁸² It is notable, therefore, that Bede's salutation mirrors a formula used by Augustine:

⁷⁸ This part of Paul's letter to the Philippians was invoked against Monotheletism in the *acta* of the Lateran Synod of 649; a copy of the acts was made at Wearmouth and known to Bede: O'Reilly, 'Know who and what He is', pp. 313–14. See also MacCarron, 'Christology and the future', p. 168.

⁷⁹ *Collectio Bedae presbyteri ex opusculis sancti Augustini in epistulas Pauli Apostoli*, 344–45. On this work, which is yet to receive a critical edition, see: Wilmart, 'La collection de Bède le Vénérable sur l'Apôtre', and Fransen, 'Description de la collection de Bède le Vénérable sur l'Apôtre'.

⁸⁰ Bede, *Epistola ad Pleguinam*, 1, ed. by Jones, p. 307, ll. 6–8.

⁸¹ Thacker, *Bede and Augustine of Hippo*.

⁸² The following analysis draws upon the consolidated list of citations of Augustine's letters provided by Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon library*, p. 201.

Fratri dilectissimo et in christi uisceribus honorando Pleguinae Beda in domino salutem (Bede, *Letter to Plegwine*).

Fratri dilectissimo et in christi uisceribus honorando Consentio Augustinus in domino salutem (Augustine, *Letter 120*).

The two salutations are identical apart from the switching of the sender and recipient names: Bede for Augustine, and Plegwine in place of Consentius, the lay addressee of Augustine's *Letter 120*. The evidence for Bede's knowledge of the letter to Consentius is decisive. It is excerpted in his collection of Augustinian material on the Pauline epistles, and in his commentary on Luke Bede advises the reader to 'read the letter of St Augustine to Consentius concerning the body of the Lord after the resurrection (*lege epistolam sancti augustini ad consentium de corpore domini post resurrectionem*)'.⁸³

The phrase *in Christi visceribus* is additionally used in the salutations of a handful of other Augustinian letters, including the following two examples which were certainly known to Bede:

Domino beatissimo et in christi uisceribus germanitus amplexendo, plus quam dici potest desiderabili fratri et coepiscopo paulino alypius et Augustinus (Augustine, *Letter 186*).

Domino dilectissimo et in christi uisceribus honorando sancto fratri et compresbytero hieronymo augustinus in domino salutem (Augustine, *Letter 82*).

⁸³ Bede, *In Lucae evangelium expositio*, VI, ed. by Hurst, p. 419, ll. 2244–45; *Collectio Bedae presbyteri ex opusculis sancti Augustini in epistulas Pauli Apostoli*, 136, trans. by Hurst, p. 113.

The first example belongs to a letter from Augustine and his friend Alypius of Thagaste to Paulinus of Nola; this text, which outlines the dangers of the Pelagian heresy, makes two appearances in Bede's *Excerpts from the works of St Augustine on the Letters of the Blessed Apostle Paul*.⁸⁴ The second is a letter from Augustine to Jerome which is drawn upon in Bede's commentary on Acts and excerpted several times in the Pauline epistles compendium.⁸⁵ There can be little doubt that Bede's greeting to Plegwine was deliberately chosen; not only does its use of a distinctive Pauline phrase conjure up thoughts of the apostle in prison writing to the Philippians, it also serves to align Bede with Augustine through its use of a salutation formula which is recognisably Augustinian. Cumulatively these connections serve to situate the *Letter to Plegwine* within a Christian epistolary tradition which reaches all the way back to the New Testament.

Further echoes of Augustine

It is worth citing in full the opening two sentences of the first paragraph of the *Letter to Plegwine* in which Bede describes his reaction to learning of the accusation made against him:

Venit ad me ante biduum, frater amantissime, nuntius tuae sanctitatis, qui pacificae quidem salutationis a te laetissima uerba detulit. Sed haec tristi mox admixtione confudit, addendo uidelicet quod me audires a lasciuientibus rusticis inter hereticos

⁸⁴ *Collectio Bedae presbyteri ex opusculis sancti Augustini in epistulas Pauli Apostoli*, 205 and 267, trans. by Hurst, pp. 157 and 204. On Alypius and Augustine's letter to Paulinus see Lienhard, 'Paulinus of Nola', p. 628.

⁸⁵ Bede, *Expositio Actuum Apostolorum*, ed. by Laistner, pp. 85–6, ll. 30–57 (cf. 18, p. 75, ll. 33–5); *Collectio Bedae presbyteri ex opusculis sancti Augustini in epistulas Pauli Apostoli*, 177, 263, 266, 292–3 and 299, trans. by Hurst, pp. 138–39, 201–2, 203, 218–19 and 222–23.

per pocula decantari. Exhorruui, fateor, et pallens percunctabar, cuius hereseos arguerer.

Two days ago, beloved brother, a messenger from your Sanctity came to me bearing gladsome words of peaceful salutation from you. But thereafter he threw these into disorder by adding something very unfortunate, namely that you had heard it babbled out by lewd rustics in their cups that I was among the heretics. I confess I was terrified; blanching, I asked of what heresy I was accused.⁸⁶

The statement ‘I was terrified’ (*exhorruui*) communicates the horror that Bede felt upon receiving the messenger’s news. The verb *exhorreo* is a comparatively rare word in Bede’s writings, and the statement in the *Letter to Plegwine* is the only instance in which Bede uses it in its first person singular form. It is used just four further times throughout his corpus, typically in connection with acts that Bede considered especially shocking: in a passage from the commentary on Luke (which is redeployed verbatim in the commentary on Mark) Bede employs this word in his discussion of the betrayal of Jesus by Judas;⁸⁷ it is also used in the *Ecclesiastical History*’s account of Adamnán, the Irishman at the monastery of Coldingham who was so horrified by a sin he had committed that he devoted himself to a life of extreme penance;⁸⁸ the fourth instance is found within a citation from Josephus which features in Bede’s commentary on Acts.⁸⁹ Over two hundred and fifty uses of the various forms of this verb by Christian writers in the period up to and including Bede are recorded in the Brepolis

⁸⁶ Bede, *Epistola ad Pleguinam*, 1, ed. by Jones, p. 307, ll. 3–7; translation Wallis, *Reckoning of time*, p. 405, with minor modifications.

⁸⁷ Bede, *In Lucae evangelium expositio*, VI, ed. by Hurst, p. 374, ll. 457–60; *In Marci euangelium expositio*, 4, ed. by Hurst, p. 608, ll. 523–26.

⁸⁸ Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, IV.25, ed. and trans. by Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 420–27.

⁸⁹ Bede, *Expositio Actuum Apostolorum*, ed. by Laistner, p. 60, ll. 73–79.

Library of Latin Texts database, and more than half of these are found in the writings of St Augustine, a remarkably large proportion even allowing for the sizable nature of Augustine's output.⁹⁰ By way of contrast, Gregory the Great, the next most prolific user of this verb from the period in question, employed *exhorreo* just nine times. Bede's use of a word with distinct Augustinian resonances in the *Letter to Plegwine* is worth investigating further, especially in light of the observations made above concerning the letter's salutation formula and Alan Thacker's suggestion that the bishop of Hippo was the most important reference point for Bede's understanding of heresy.⁹¹

Two specific examples where Augustine also uses the verb *exhorreo* are instructive. The first of these is in *On heresies*, a text produced shortly before Augustine's death at the behest of Quodvultdeus of Carthage. Significantly, the excerpt in question is also featured in the anthology of excerpts from Augustine's writings compiled by Eugippius.⁹² Bede knew the Eugippian collection and used it in a variety of different contexts, including for the assembling of his own collection of excerpts from Augustine on the Pauline epistles.⁹³ The passage concerns Augustine's response to the view ascribed to Origen that all Christians, including even the devil and the damned, would ultimately be restored to the kingdom of God through a lengthy process of purification after death. Augustine asks his reader: '*quis enim catholicus christianus uel doctus uel indoctus non uehementer exhorreat eam quam dicit purgationem malorum* (what catholic Christian, whether educated or not, would not be exceedingly terrified at what he [Origen] calls the purgation of the wicked?)'.⁹⁴ The rhetorical question asked by Augustine in *On heresies* connects the verb *exhorreo* to the discourse of

⁹⁰ The search term 'exhorr*' yields 145 hits from Augustine's writings using the Brepolis cross-database search tool (this total includes instances of the verb *exhorresco*, a synonym of *exhorreo*).

⁹¹ Thacker, 'Why did heresy matter to Bede?', pp. 49–50.

⁹² Eugippius, *Excerpta ex operibus S. Augustini*, 19, ed. by Knöll, pp. 166–67.

⁹³ Thacker, *Bede and Augustine of Hippo*, pp. 4 and 7–8.

⁹⁴ Augustine, *De haeresibus*, 43, ed. by Plaetse and Beukers, pp. 310–11, ll. 14–16.

heresy: the *catholicus christianus* is expected to react to Origen's teachings on the fate of the damned with shock and terror. A letter of Bede's written in response to a request from Acca concerning the interpretation of Isaiah 24.22 offers a carefully-prepared consideration of this subject.⁹⁵

A second Augustinian use of the term is worth considering because several pervasive connections between the source in question and the *Letter to Plegwine* are apparent. The text in question is a letter of Augustine's which was written after the year 395 to Deuterius, bishop of Caesarea. The letter reports the actions taken by Augustine against a member of the clergy who had been teaching Manichean doctrines in Hippo. Augustine writes:

Has cum illis intolerabiles blasphemias subdiaconus iste quasi catholicus non solum credebat, sed, quibus uiribus poterat, et docebat. nam docens patefactus est, cum se quasi discentibus credidit. rogauit me quidem, posteaquam se manichaeorum auditorem esse confessus est, ut eum in uiam ueritatis doctrinae catholicae reuocarem, sed, fateor, eius finctionem sub clerici specie uehementer exhorruui eum que coercitum pellendum de ciuitate curaui.

This subdeacon, posing as a Catholic, not only believed but also taught, with all the energy he could, these intolerable blasphemies. For he was exposed as teaching them when he entrusted himself to people who posed as his students. After he confessed that he was a hearer in the Manichees, he in fact asked me to bring him back to the path of truth, which is Catholic doctrine. But, I admit, I was aghast at his pretense in

⁹⁵ Bede, *De eo quod ait Isaias* (see also: *In primam partem Samuhelis*, III, ed. by Hurst, pp. 160–61, ll. 998–1013; *Retractatio in Actus Apostolorum*, ed. by Laistner, p. 120, ll. 46–61; *In proueria Salomonis*, II, ed. by Hurst, p. 70, ll. 19–28). For discussion of *De eo quod ait Isaias* see: Holder, 'Bede as heresiologist', p. 112; Foley and Holder, *Biblical miscellany*, p. 35–38; Darby, *Bede and the end of time*, pp. 140–43.

the guise of a cleric, and I took measures to expel him from the city after chastising him.⁹⁶

This excerpt shares much in common with the opening paragraph of Bede's *Letter to Plegwine*. First, Bede and Augustine both pair the deponent verb *fateor* (meaning 'I confess, I admit') with the first person singular, perfect tense form *exhorruui* ('I shuddered, I was terrified').⁹⁷ Secondly, the two passages are preserved in letters, and thirdly, both of those letters concern the subject of heresy. As with the citation from Philippians in the salutation, Bede is channelling authority into his prose by using language carefully chosen to resonate with earlier epistolary material. When Bede came to express the extreme terror that he felt upon learning of the allegation made against him he chose to do so by drawing on a verb from Augustine's register which has specific connotations with the fight against heresy. This allowed Bede to place himself on the side of the righteous by casting his reaction to the controversy of 708 in a distinctly Augustinian mould.

Conclusions

The *Letter to Plegwine* reveals that Bede was a fluent and knowledgeable participant in the Christian discourse over heresy. The letter's prose is evidently rich and complex. It is clear that Bede wove biblical and patristic linguistic touchstones into the letter in order to align himself with major figures from the Christian tradition and add weight to the case for his defence. Additional investigation would no doubt reveal a great many further examples of

⁹⁶ Augustine, *Epistulae*, 236, ed. by Goldbacher, vol. 4, p. 525, ll. 12–19; translation Teske, *Augustine: Letters*, II, p. 135.

⁹⁷ Compare: 'Exhorruui, fateor, et pallens percunctabar, cuius hereseos arguerer' (Bede, *Epistola ad Pleguinam*, 1, ed. by Jones, p. 307, ll. 6–7) and 'sed, fateor, eius finctionem sub clerici specie uehementer exhorruui eum que coercitum pellendum de ciuitate curauui' (Augustine, *Epistulae*, 236, ed. by Goldbacher, vol. 4, p. 525, ll. 17–19).

this beyond those considered at length here. For example, Paragraph 3 invokes an interesting combination of Petrine authorities by alluding to Gregory the Great's repertoire of teachings on the active and contemplative lives whilst steering the reader's mind towards a statement concerning 'brotherly love' from the first epistle of Peter.⁹⁸ Likewise, Bede's letter ends with a pointed remark about snakes and charmers which echoes Ecclesiastes 10.11, but the specific wording of the *Letter to Plegwine* appears to combine an uncommon usage twice found in the *Conferences* of Cassian with the Vulgate reading which had formerly been used by Augustine and Jerome.⁹⁹

To conclude, it is worth reflecting once again on the two-day timeframe for the composition of the *Letter to Plegwine*. Bede emerges from a microscopic investigation of the beginning of his letter as an extremely impressive figure: he seems to have been able to draw out multiple scriptural allusions and exegetical inferences at will, and he was able to execute those techniques in haste in the midst of a significant personal crisis. The *Letter to Plegwine* offers us a rare glimpse of an embattled Bede fighting to preserve his reputation. The intellectually sophisticated nature of the prose employed in the *Letter to Plegwine* underscores the extent of its author's learning, but the deft manner in which Bede self-consciously aligns himself with authority figures from the Christian tradition is also revealing. It is appropriate to finish this essay with an ending borrowed directly from Alan Thacker. Reflecting on Bede's career as a whole, Thacker remarked: 'Bede, I suspect, was

⁹⁸ Bede, *Epistola ad Pleguinam*, 3, ed. by Jones, p. 308, ll. 12–16. The mention of 'the office of brotherly love (*fraterni amoris officium*)', which Bede felt had been compromised by the accusation of heresy, silently recalls 1 Peter 1.22. The subsequent reference to the 'darkness of blind error (*Tenebras ... caecae falsitatis*)' echoes the phrase 'darkness of blindness (*caecitatis tenebras*)' used a number of times by Gregory the Great (e.g. *Homiliae in Hiezechielem prophetam*, II.ii.12 ed. by Adriaen, p. 232, ll. 273–74).

⁹⁹ Bede, *Epistola ad Pleguinam*, 17, ed. by Jones, p. 315, ll. 12–13: 'Vere enim dictum est quia si momorderit serpens in silentio, non est habundantia incantatori'. The Vulgate reading (as presented in Codex Amiatinus folio 422v) is: 'si mordeat serpens in silentio nihil e[o] minus habet qui occulte detrahit' (cf. Augustine, *Speculum*, 8, ed. Wehrich, p. 73, ll. 19–20; Jerome, *Commentarii in Isaiam*, 18, prologue, ed. by Adriaen, p. 742, ll. 69–71). Bede's wording more closely echoes Cassian's 'si momorderit serpens non in sibilo, non est abundantia incantatori' (*Conlationes*, II.11 and XVIII.16, ed. by Petschenig, p. 51, ll. 10–11 and p. 529, ll. 19–20), although with the Vulgate's 'in silentio' in place of Cassian's 'in sibilo'.

aware of his eminence. He thought of himself as the Augustine of his age. And who is to say that he was not right?’¹⁰⁰ In 708 all but one of Bede’s major works of biblical exegesis were yet to be issued, but in the *Letter to Plegwine* we encounter him as an assured figure who had no qualms about presenting himself as a commanding authority: not yet, perhaps, the Augustine of his age, but already showing many of the characteristics that in due course would establish him as such.

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¹⁰⁰ Thacker, ‘Ordering of understanding’, p. 63.

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