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Fig. 1. Western Europe at the Time of Rabanus Maurus (780-856)



Fig. 2. Rabanus, flanked by Alcuin, presenting his book of poems in honour of the Holy Cross to Saint Martin of Tours (Reg. lat. 124, 2v), c. A.D. 850

Introduction

1- Rabanus Maurus' Life

Hraban nempe mihi nomen, et lectio dulcis
Divinae legis semper ubique fuit.

*Truly, my name was Rabanus, and I delighted
In reading the Divine Law always and everywhere.*¹

These verses composed by Rabanus Maurus for his own epitaph humbly understate the significance of his scholarly career. As a Benedictine monk, abbot, and then archbishop, Rabanus not only read the Divine Law, that is, the sacred Scriptures, but expounded it, producing numerous commentaries on the Old and New Testaments alike. Although this biblical exegesis constitutes the majority of his literary output, Rabanus covered a range of other genres and subjects in his writing.² For example, his treatise on reckoning, entitled *De computo* (*On Computation*), discusses astronomy and the calculation of the date of Easter, while *De procinctu romanae militiae* (*Making Roman Soldiers Ready for Combat*) summarizes the tactics of the late-Roman writer Vegetius for 9th-century military officials.³ The recipients of these works

¹ Rabanus, *Carmina*, no. 97, vv. 21-22 (Ernst Dümmler, *Poetae latini aevi Carolini* vol. 2 [Berlin: 1884], pp. 243-44 [our trans.]).

² Owen Phelan, *On the Formation of Clergy* (The Catholic University of America Press: 2023), p. 7.

³ Raymund Kottje, "Raban Maur" (*Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 13 [Beauchesne: 1988]), col. 4; Hans-Henning Kortüm, "Hrabanus Maurus" (*The Oxford Encyclopedia of Medieval Warfare and Military Technology* [2010]). For detailed surveys of Rabanus' *oeuvre*, see Phelan's introduction in the work cited above and Kottje, "Raban Maur," cols. 2-8.

included the foremost rulers and prelates of the West, and their surviving correspondence with Rabanus reveals the extent to which they respected him as an authority.⁴ Among Rabanus' correspondents, we find such celebrated names as Bishop Hilduin of Paris, the first to translate the writings of Saint Dionysius the Areopagite into Latin, as well as Paschasius Radbertus, known for his classic defence of the doctrine of transubstantiation.

While Rabanus composed many works of his own accord, he was also sought out with specific requests. We find one such example in the dedicatory letter of his Ruth commentary, translated below, wherein he mentions that bishop Frechulf of Lisieux (fl. 820-850) had asked him for an exposition of the first five books of the Old Testament. Rabanus would continue to draw the admiration of influential figures beyond the ninth century: his writings served as one of the main sources for the *Glossa Ordinaria*, the medieval West's canonical commentary on the Scriptures; theologians like Peter Lombard (1100-1160) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) made use of his work, and later scholars like the Renaissance polymath Johannes Trithemius (1462-1516) praised his erudition and acts of charity.⁵ For the fifteenth-century

⁴ Mayke De Jong, "Old Law and New-found Power: Hrabanus Maurus and the Old Testament" (In *Centres of Learning* [Brill: 1995]), p. 164.

⁵ Trithemius' research on early church writers laid the foundations for future scholars in the field, such as the Bollandists (editors of the *Acta Sanctorum*) and Jacques Paul Migne (editor of the *Patrologia Graeca* and *Latina*). See Robert Nixon's introduction to his translation of *De viris illustribus ordinis S. Benedicti* (*Illustrious Authors of the Order of Saint Benedict* [Wipf and Stock: 2023]) for more on Trithemius' legacy. Trithemius produced at least three accounts of Rabanus' Life: two short entries in the aforementioned *De viris illustribus* and *De Scriptoribus Ecclesiasticis* and a longer *Vita* written at the request of Archbishop Albert of Mainz

English hagiographer John Capgrave, Rabanus was “a great poet, and in divinity full well learned.”⁶

Rabanus Maurus was born in 780 in or around Mainz in the eastern Carolingian Empire, in what is today southwestern Germany. Christianity in Mainz dated back to the Roman era,⁷ but its immediate countryside had until recently been largely pagan.⁸ Rabanus’ age was one of intense evangelism and bold missionary work: in his own lifetime, he would see the faith spread as far as Denmark and Scandinavia, while the celebrated mission of Saints Cyril and Methodius to the Slavs would begin only a few years after his death. Understanding this context helps explain the apostolic vitality that characterizes Rabanus’ writings.

In the early eighth century, Mainz became the seat from which Saint Boniface of England preached the Gospel to the peoples of central Germany. Wishing the new faith to take deep roots, Boniface entrusted his disciple Sturm with the important task of founding a monastery in the region. The site chosen was on the banks of the Fulda river, by the virgin Buchonia Forest, right at the border of the newly-converted provinces of Hessia

(Patrologia Latina 107, cols. 67-106). As Kottje points out, Trithemius’ praises of Rabanus played a significant role in cementing his reputation as “Praeceptor Germaniae” (Teacher of Germany). See “Hrabanus Maurus – ‘Praeceptor Germaniae?’” *Deutsches Archiv* 31: 1975, p. 536, n. 15. Therefore, we have seen fit to give the reader a sample of Trithemius’ work below.

⁶ *The Chronicle of England*, ed. Francis Charles Hingeston (London: 1858), p. 107.

⁷ Michael Aaj and Shannon Godlove, *A Companion to Boniface* (Brill: 2020), p. 254.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 277, 280, 290-293.

and Thuringia.⁹ Boniface sent Sturm to the most renowned monasteries of Italy, particularly to the Benedictine abbey of Monte Cassino,¹⁰ to study their monastic rule, lifestyle, and observances, and to model his new brotherhood after them.¹¹ In the decades that followed, the monastery of Fulda would prove to be one of the jewels of the Christian North, radiating its civilizing influence to the furthest corners of Germany. By the mid-820s, the size of the community had exceeded six hundred monks.¹²

When Rabanus was about eight years old, he was presented as a child oblate to Fulda by his father and mother, the local aristocrats Waluram and Waltrata. Interestingly, the identity of Rabanus' parents and the time of his oblation emerges neither from narrative accounts nor from Rabanus' own testimony, but from the abbey of Fulda's land charters.¹³ These documents, preserved by the community's monks, recorded wealthy patrons' donations of property to the abbey.¹⁴ According to charters dated May 25th, 788, Waluram

⁹ Ibid., pp. 287-288.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 390.

¹¹ Eigil, *Vita Sancti Sturmi*, section 14. In *Monumenta Germaniae Historica (MGH)*, *Scriptores*, vol. 2, pp. 371-372.

¹² Janneke Raaijmakers, *The Making of the Monastic Community of Fulda, c. 744-c. 900* (Cambridge: 2012), p. 3.

¹³ Hans Hummer, *Visions of Kinship in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: 2018), pp. 255-61; Matthew Innes, *State and Society in the Early Middle Ages: The Middle Rhine Valley, 400-1000* (Cambridge: 2000), pp. 65-68; De Jong, *In Samuel's Image: Child Oblation in the Early Medieval West* (Brill: 1995), p. 75. For a review of the primary sources on Rabanus' life, see Franz Felten, "Rabanus Maurus (um 780-856): Diener seiner Zeit – Vermittler zwischen den Zeiten" (In *Mainzer (Erz-)Bischöfe in ihrer Zeit* [Franz Steiner Verlag: 2008], pp. 11-34).

¹⁴ The compilation of these individual charters, known as the cartulary of Fulda, was produced between 824 and 830, when Rabanus was abbot of

and Waltrata gave two gifts to Fulda, the first of which consisted of a piece of land in Mainz proper with its accompanying house and buildings.¹⁵ They specified, however, that the abbey would gain full control of that property only once “Waluram, [his] wife Waltrata, and [their] son Rabanus”¹⁶ had died. Rabanus’ name also appears third among the witnesses of the donations, preceded only by his parents. Although the exact year of Rabanus’ entry into Fulda is a matter of debate, there is good reason to suppose that Waluram and Waltrata offered their son to the abbey at the same time as these donations. Not only does the year 788 coalesce with the known trajectory of Rabanus’ life, but the emphasis given to him in the charters suggests he was uniquely connected to the transactions.¹⁷ In any case, Rabanus

the community (Hummer, *Visions of Kinship*, p. 255). For a modern edition of the cartulary, see E.E. Stengel’s *Urkundenbuch des Kloster Fulda* (1958), accessible online through the University of Hamburg.

¹⁵ Charter nos. 177 and 178 respectively in Stengel’s edition.

¹⁶ No. 177.

¹⁷ The main proponent of a 788 dating is Franz Staab. See “Wann würde Hrabanus Maurus Mönch in Fulda?” In *Hrabanus Maurus: Lehrer, Abt und Bischof* (Franz Steiner Verlag: 1982), pp. 75-101. See also De Jong, *In Samuel’s Image*, pp. 73-77; De Jong, “Old Law and New-found Power,” p. 161; and Hummer, *Visions of Kinship*, p. 26. 788 is the year given in several summaries of Rabanus’ life, including Kottje, “Raban Maur,” col. 1 and Phelan, *On the Formation of Clergy*, p. 3. Opponents of this view maintain that Rabanus could not have been offered at the time of the 788 donations because charter no. 177 grants him rights to the land until his death yet the Rule of Saint Benedict stipulates that child oblates should not have any possessions. In response, De Jong argues, among other things, that Fulda likely was not following the Rule perfectly in the eighth century (*In Samuel’s Image*, p. 76). For his part, Hummer argues that in practice, oblates might simply have maintained a stronger connection to their birth families and their property than the Rule suggests (*Visions of Kinship*, p. 261).

Rabanus' dark complexion.²¹ Rabanus took to the name, marking its initial "M" in the margins of his commentaries to let readers know when he was presenting original insights.²² He even calls himself "Maurus" in the prefatory poem to his first major work, the masterful series of *carmina figurata*—that is, poems arranged in different shapes—titled *In honorem sanctae crucis* (*In Honour of the Holy Cross*), completed in 810.²³ It was Alcuin who taught Rabanus how to compose these figured poems and who encouraged him to complete the project.²⁴

²¹ Rabanus states that he received the name from Alcuin in the preface to his *Commentary on Kings*. See PL 109, col. 10; Kottje, "Raban Maur," col. 1; Raaijmakers, *The Making of the Monastic Community of Fulda*, pp. 177-78. A letter addressed by Alcuin to "Maurus" also bears this out. See *MGH, Epistolae* vol. 4 (ed. Dümmler), no. 142. "Maurus" was the Latin term for a Moor, i.e. a person originating from North Africa. Contemporary drawings of Rabanus depict him as having black hair (see fig. 2). As for Saint Benedict's pupil Maurus, he appears in Gregory the Great's *Dialogues* as an exemplar of obedience (*Dialogues* 2.7). See also Mershman, "St. Maurus" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Rabanus' given name means "raven" in Frankish.

²² PL 109, col. 10; Perrin, *L'iconographie de la Gloire à la sainte croix*, p. 15.

²³ Perrin, *L'iconographie de la Gloire à la sainte croix*, p. 15; Kottje, "Raban Maur," col. 3. For the poem, titled *Intercessio Albini Pro Mauro* ("Alcuin's Intercession for Maurus"), see PL 107, col. 138.

²⁴ Alcuin is known to have worked in this style before tutoring Rabanus, and Rabanus emphasizes in his own text that his abbot sent him to Alcuin that he might learn "the art of metre" (*artem metri*). See verse 11 of the poem just cited. See also Perrin, "La poésie de cour carolingienne" (*Annales de Bretagne et des pays de l'Ouest* 2004/3, no.111-3), pp. 336-342 and *Ibid.*, *L'iconographie de la Gloire à la sainte croix*, p. 17 for Alcuin's experience with the genre of *carmina figurata*. To show Alcuin's role in introducing Rabanus to figured poetry, we might also point to a visual representation at the start of *In Honorem* (fig. 2): Alcuin has his arm around Rabanus' shoulder, and the two men present the work to St. Martin of Tours. As Perrin has argued, by including this image, Rabanus is underscoring his

Before Alcuin's death in 804, Rabanus was back in Fulda using his newly-acquired knowledge in a teaching role. Alcuin's letter proves once more a valuable resource, for he ends by exhorting Rabanus to "live with [his] boys," namely, his students, "happily and with the cup of charity."²⁵ In 814, he was ordained priest by Archbishop Haistulf of Mainz before being placed at the head of Fulda's school in 818.²⁶ Rabanus' works dated to this early period already reflect themes and interests that would endure throughout his career. In addition to the *In honorem sanctae crucis*, two other major projects completed by Rabanus before his abbacy were his *De institutione clericorum* (*On the Formation of Clergy*) and his *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*. Importantly, both texts address the need for educational and moral renewal which inspired his teacher Alcuin and other Carolingian leaders and scholars since the reign of Charlemagne himself.²⁷ In the circular letter *De litteris colendis* (*On the Cultivation of Letters*), Charlemagne had called for both monasteries and episcopal sees to work to improve literacy so that people,

intellectual debt to his teacher (Perrin, "La poésie du cour carolingienne," p. 335). In light of the preceding, when Alcuin writes to Rabanus urging him to complete "the book he promised him," he seems to be referring to Rabanus' poetry. See Perrin, "La poésie de cour carolingienne," p. 335; *Ibid.*, *L'iconographie de la Gloire à la sainte croix*, p. 15.

²⁵ See note 1 in Dümmler's edition; Kottje, "Raban Maur," col. 1; Raaijmakers, *The Making of the Monastic Community*, p. 178.

²⁶ Johann Friedrich Böhmer and Cornelius Will, *Regesta archiepiscoporum Maguntinensium* vol. 1 (Innsbruck: Wagner, 1886), p. 52; Kottje, "Raban Maur," col. 1; Raaijmakers, *The Making of the Monastic Community*, p. 178.

²⁷ Phelan, *On the Formation of Clergy*, p. 10; *Ibid.*, "The Carolingian Renewal in Early Medieval Europe through Hrabanus Maurus's *Commentary on Matthew*" (*Traditio* vol. 75: 2020), pp. 144-45; See also John Contreni's article, "Carolingian Biblical Culture" (In *Learning and Culture in Carolingian Europe* [Routledge: 2011], Part VII, pp. 1-23).

including clergymen, might properly understand the Scriptures.²⁸ Rabanus' *De institutio clericorum* and his *Commentary on Matthew*, addressed to Haistulf of Mainz in 819 and 820 respectively, also seek to produce a more knowledgeable clergy and laity.

The first work offers a revitalized, comprehensive program for training priests, providing, among other things, explanations of key doctrines and the tools necessary for studying and preaching the Bible, such as a method for distinguishing between literal and metaphorical statements.²⁹ Similarly, the second work filled a gap in the available exegetical writings on Matthew. Seeing that accessible material on the Gospel was lacking in the West, Rabanus brought together and organized existing patristic insight to suit real needs.³⁰ As such, he aimed to make the reading of his text convenient: for instance, as mentioned above, he indicated which authors he was using in the margins. Furthermore, in these and later writings, Rabanus employed a clear and accessible Latin, not because he lacked skill but because his work served a practical end.³¹ In short, Rabanus and other proponents of renewal understood that the proper

²⁸ Phelan, *On the Formation of Clergy*, p. 10.

²⁹ Phelan, *On the Formation of Clergy*, pp. 12-14; The information on literal versus metaphorical statements can be found in Chapter 13 of Book 3 of the work.

³⁰ Rabanus tells Haistulf in the dedicatory letter that his brothers at Fulda have complained that they do not have a complete exposition of Matthew's Gospel (PL 107, col. 728; Phelan, "The Carolingian Renewal," p. 146). The same problem was recognized across the Carolingian realm, being addressed at the Synod of Aachen (816), among other places (Phelan, "The Carolingian Renewal," p. 147).

³¹ Phelan, "The Carolingian Renewal," p. 147 ff; Böhmer and Will, *Regesta archiepiscoporum Maguntinensium*, p. xxi.

education of priests would translate to sound pastoral care for the citizenry.³²

In 822, Rabanus was elected abbot of Fulda, a post he would hold for twenty years.³³ Most of his biblical commentaries, including those on Ruth, Judith and Esther, were completed while overseeing the Fulda community. A closer look at Rabanus' method of interpretation will be provided below, but a few preliminary points on these three works' historical context will help readers navigate not only the expositions themselves but also the dedications introducing them. The commentary on Judith and Esther was completed in about 834 and sent to Empress Judith of Bavaria (r. 819-840), the second wife of Louis the Pious (r. 813-840), along with a dedicatory letter by Rabanus. In this letter, Rabanus explains that the purpose of the commentary is above all a practical one: the zealous and sagacious Empress is to model herself after the exemplars of Judith and Esther in order to overcome both her spiritual and physical enemies.³⁴ One need look no further than the Carolingian court to discover the nature of Empress Judith's conflict.³⁵

Only a few years prior, Louis the Pious' three sons by his first wife, Ermengarde of Hesbaye (r. 813-818), had launched two revolts against their father. Angered at the prospect of sharing the imperial territories with Charles (Louis' young son by

³² Phelan, "The Carolingian Renewal," p. 147.

³³ Kottje, "Raban Maur," col.1; *Gesta abbatum* (ed. G. Waitz), *MGH, Scriptores* vol. 13, p. 273.

³⁴ PL 109, cols. 539-42.

³⁵ De Jong, "The Empire as *Ecclesia*: Hrabanus Maurus and Biblical *Historia* for Rulers" (In *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages* [Cambridge: 2000]), pp. 206-7.

Judith), the brothers Lothair, Pippin, and Louis the German collaborated to oust the Emperor and Empress from power in 830. By the end of the same year, however, Louis and Judith had regained authority. After Louis made provisions for Charles by planning to divide the Carolingian Empire into four equal kingdoms (one for each of his sons), Lothair, Pippin, and Louis the German combined forces once more and confronted their father in 833 on the Campus Mentitus.³⁶ Thereupon, Louis the Pious was forced to abdicate, but he soon regained support and took up the throne yet again in 834.³⁷ Although Louis would continue to reign until his death in 840, tensions between him and his sons did not entirely cease.³⁸ These struggles explain Rabanus' dedicatory letter to Judith, but they also offer the key for understanding his letter addressed to Bishop Hunbert of Würzburg around 838 to accompany the commentary on Ruth. Therein, Rabanus expresses his anxiety over a "shared danger hanging ominously over the present time,"³⁹ another reference to the upheavals in the Carolingian court.⁴⁰ In spite of this anxiety,

³⁶ Near Colmar in the north-east of France (Thomas Noble, *Charlemagne and Louis the Pious: Lives by Einhard, Notker, Ermoldus, Thegan, and the Astronomer* [Pennsylvania State UP: 2009], p. 280, n. 273.).

³⁷ Victor Genke and Francis Gumerlock, *Gottschalk and a Medieval Predestination Controversy: Texts Translated from the Latin* (Marquette UP: 2010), pp. 23-28.

³⁸ De Jong, "The Empire as *Ecclesia*," p. 207. A principal source for the actions of Louis' sons against their father is the contemporary biography of Louis titled *Vita Hludovici* (*The Life of Louis*), written in about 840-41. The anonymous author, often called "the Astronomer" for his keen observations on celestial phenomena, bases his account not only on the work of Charlemagne's biographer Einhard and imperial annals, but also on firsthand documents and his own testimony (Noble, *Charlemagne and Louis the Pious*, pp. 219-21).

³⁹ PL 108, col. 1109.

⁴⁰ De Jong, "The Empire as *Ecclesia*," p. 207.

Rabanus remained loyal to Louis and Judith, insisting that only through a renewed effort towards sanctity could the troubles of this world be overcome.⁴¹

The spirit of renewal visible in Rabanus' writings also animated his administrative work.⁴² Indeed, the growing lists of the monastery's members and property holdings reflect a flourishing community under his abbacy.⁴³ Additionally, when compared to their earlier counterparts, the collections of books detailed in Rabanus' library catalogue are more complete: among other things, efforts were made to obtain any missing works by Saint Jerome.⁴⁴ These new resources, along with Rabanus' own involvement in the abbey's school, contributed to Fulda's reputation as a beaming intellectual

⁴¹ Ibid.; Raaijmakers, *The Making of the Monastic Community*, pp. 227-28.

⁴² Raaijmakers, *The Making of the Monastic Community*, p. 227.

⁴³ Raaijmakers, p. 179. The lists of Fulda's members were later included in the confraternity book of Reichenau monastery (*Das Verbrüderungsbuch der Abtei Reichenau*, eds. J. Autenrieth, D. Geuenich, and K. Schmid, *MGH, Libri mem.* NS 1; Raaijmakers, *The Making of the Monastic Community*, p. 178).

⁴⁴ Raaijmakers, *The Making of the Monastic Community*, pp. 189-93. We have two surviving fragments of Rabanus' library catalogue. The first is a list of roughly 110 books found in a mid-9th-century manuscript alongside four shorter book lists (Vaticanus Palatinus Latinus 1877). In its original, complete state, it seems to have been a comprehensive record of all the library's holdings. The second has been partly preserved in Johann Friedrich Schannat's eighteenth-century work, *Historia Fuldensis* (Raaijmakers, *The Making of the Monastic Community*, pp. 178, 191-95). On the growth of the library under Rabanus, see also Herrad Spilling's "Das Fuldaer Skriptorium zur Zeit des Hrabanus Maurus" (In *Hrabanus Maurus: Lehrer, Abt und Bischof*, pp. 165-81). The Fulda library had also inherited volumes from Saint Boniface's personal collection. See *A Companion to Boniface*, p. 269, n. 115.

centre.⁴⁵ Despite his new responsibilities as abbot, Rabanus did not stop teaching. In fact, like his own former master Alcuin, he mentored some of the finest young minds in the empire at this time, including Lupus Servatus (c. 805 – c. 862), who would become abbot of Ferrières, and Walafrid Strabo (c. 808-849), the influential theologian and future tutor of Emperor Louis the Pious' son, Charles the Bald.⁴⁶ Perhaps most interesting for our own purposes is Rabanus' dedication to revitalizing the cult of the saints while serving as abbot.⁴⁷ A work by his former student Rudolf of Fulda (d. 862) titled *Miracula* outlines the significant number of saints' relics brought to Fulda and its dependent churches at Rabanus' behest, including those of Saints Alexander and Fabianus, Saint Cecilia, and Saint Venantius.⁴⁸ Relics of Saint Bede, one of Rabanus' intellectual and spiritual patrons, were also housed at Fulda,⁴⁹ and Rabanus personally distributed relics of Saint Boniface to the local churches.⁵⁰ While biblical commentaries could provide guidance for the Emperor and Empress during political unrest, relics nourished all the faithful, who found themselves in no less need of spiritual

⁴⁵ Raaijmakers, *The Making of the Monastic Community*, p. 179.

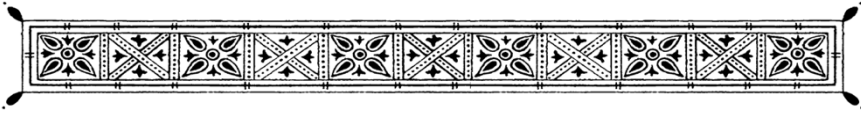
⁴⁶ Kottje, "Raban Maur," col. 1; Kottje, "Hrabanus Maurus – 'Praeceptor Germaniae'?" p. 536; Nicholas Weber, "Lupus" (*The Catholic Encyclopedia*); Arthur Remy, "Walafrid" (*The Catholic Encyclopedia*).

⁴⁷ Raaijmakers, *The Making of the Monastic Community*, p. 227.

⁴⁸ The work's full title is *Miracula sanctorum in Fuldenses ecclesias translatorum* (*The Miracles of the Saints Who Were Brought to the Churches of Fulda*). It details the transfer of relics belonging to approximately forty Roman martyrs which took place in the years 835, 836, and 838 (Raaijmakers, *The Making of the Monastic Community*, p. 214). For Saints Alexander and Fabianus, Cecilia, and Venantius, see Waitz's edition of the *Miracula* in *MGH, Scriptores* vol. 15.1, pp. 332, 336, and 333, respectively.

⁴⁹ *Carmina*, no. 41, vv. 4-5 (PL 112, col. 1624B-C).

⁵⁰ *A Companion to Boniface*, pp. 396-397.



Commentary on the Book of Ruth

Preface

Written to Bishop Hunbert⁹⁸

Rabanus, humble servant of God's servants, sends his greetings in Christ to Bishop Hunbert, the most beloved lord and venerable Father earnestly devoted to the cultivation of the purest charity.

Having received your Holiness' letters, which you desired to address to my insignificance, I am overjoyed because I recognized in them your skilful diligence and fine talent in the study of Divine Scripture. I have humbly thanked the Lord for granting you such assiduous exercise in the meditation of His Law from which His people can derive salutary lessons. Therefore, since your paternal care deigned to request of our meagreness some small solace in this activity, I profess that I wish to be your servant and the benevolent assistant of your noble zeal—to the extent that divine grace permits—for the sake of our love of God and your humble devotion to Him. While we carry out this work, let only the will of God, Who also gave us a will, be done.

As for the rest, you saw fit to write to me that I might compose for you a small treatise on the Heptateuch.⁹⁹ I have done what

⁹⁸ Bishop of Würzburg from 833 until his death in 842.

⁹⁹ That is, the first seven books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, and Judges. The first five books on their own are referred to as the "Pentateuch."

I could, and I am sending you the final part of that text dedicated in your name, that is, my commentary on Judges and Ruth, which is now complete. The commentaries on Moses' Pentateuch which I produced with quite some effort at the behest of the holy man Frechulf¹⁰⁰ I have already sent to him to be transcribed. Once I have received them back, I will send you a copy as well. Recently, I also sent my exposition of Joshua to Frederick of good memory, bishop of the church of Utrecht.¹⁰¹ I will take care to deliver this to you too when it is returned to me, if God wills it. And I gladly intend to provide not only these writings but all that I can for your benefit. I simply ask that you relieve our weakness with your sacred prayers and pious exhortations, for I am grieved both by the annoyance of my own affliction and by the anxiety of the common danger which hangs ominously over the present time. Thus, I am greatly in need of your prayers and Almighty God's mercy, lest I be overcome by my tribulations, necessities, dangers, and various temptations.

You should know, then, that the work which I am now sending you was derived not only from the words that our forefathers have written in their books but also from my own effort, to the extent that divine grace allowed it. In other words, it consists partly of the ideas of the Fathers and partly of my own paltry thought, wherever I deemed it necessary. Your prudence knows to praise the former's wisdom and eloquence and to endure our ignorance and boorishness,

¹⁰⁰ Frechulf of Lisieux (fl. 820-850), bishop and author of the *Histories*, a chronicle covering the creation of the world to the seventh century.

¹⁰¹ Saint Frederick of Utrecht (c. 780-838). His devoted missionary work in the Netherlands and Germany led to his appointment as Bishop of Utrecht in either 815 or 816. Frederick was martyred after saying Mass on July 18th, which is now his feast day.

fulfilling that saying of the Apostle: "Supporting one another in charity."¹⁰² And this one, too: "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so you shall fulfil the law of Christ."¹⁰³

The first two books of my commentary contain an allegorical exposition of Judges. In the third, you will find Ruth, which some authors join to the Book of Judges and others place on its own, explained at some length. As you read over these commentaries, I pray that you attribute anything suitable you find to Him Who is the Source of all goodness, ascribing anything unsuitable to our infirmity and inexperience rather than to malice. And may you strive to entreat Almighty God with pious prayers to correct and indulge us, before Whom the imperfection of our weakness is completely manifest, just as the Psalmist says: "Thy eyes did see my imperfect being."¹⁰⁴

It is quite appropriate for you, most reverend Father, who have discharged the divine office of judging in God's Church, to read the Book of Judges earnestly, to actively imitate their good works and just judgements, to defend God's people from the attacks of the enemy with spiritual weapons, and, according to the admonition of the Apostle of the Gentiles to his disciple, to "be vigilant, to labour piously, to do the work of an evangelist, and to fulfil your ministry."¹⁰⁵ Thus, when the Prince of shepherds, the King of Kings, the Judge of the living and the dead appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory¹⁰⁶ with the rest of the holy prelates of God's

¹⁰² Ephesians 4:2

¹⁰³ Galatians 6:2

¹⁰⁴ Psalm 138:16, Vulgate numbering.

¹⁰⁵ 2 Timothy 4:5. Rabanus has slightly modified the quotation. The original text has "labour in all things."

¹⁰⁶ 1 Peter 5:4

Church and hear from the Truth Himself that Gospel saying wherein He praises the servant who laboured well and managed his master's money faithfully: "Well done, good and faithful servant, because thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will place thee over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord."¹⁰⁷ May Almighty God, Trinity and indivisible Unity, together with the holy angels and elect souls in the heavenly kingdom, make you a perpetual sharer in that servant's joy. We wish Your Blessedness lasting health in Christ, holy Father, as you keep us in your thoughts.

¹⁰⁷ Matthew 25:21

Chapter 1

Elimelech, his wife Noemi, and their two children journey from Bethlehem Juda to the land of Moab in order to sojourn there.

In examining the Book of Ruth, we believe that we must supplicate Him Who wished to be born of her lineage¹⁰⁸ and to dwell as a man among men, and Who was also God, so that He might deign by His grace to illuminate us and allow us to reveal appropriately—to the extent that He permits—the mystical meaning of certain elements in this book for His praise and the benefit of the holy Church. Consequently, we might attribute both of the following to the same gift: that a foreigner was worthily united to the people of God and that one who lacked eloquence was permitted to preach God’s goodness and mercy.¹⁰⁹ Let us now begin by considering the significance of the very first verse:

In the days of one of the Judges, when the judges ruled, there came a famine in the land (1:1).

What does that famine in the land during the days of one of the Judges signify? It means that because of the scarcity of spiritual doctors and teachers among the people of God, to whom the authority of judgement was granted, there was a famine not of bread and meat but of hearing the word of God¹¹⁰ in the land of the Synagogue when the Law itself was corrupted by Jewish traditions, and the Psalms and Prophets (not to mention the divine histories) were not truly

¹⁰⁸ Ruth is mentioned as an ancestor of Christ in Matthew 1:5.

¹⁰⁹ A reference to Moses, who tells the Lord at the Burning Bush that he is “slow of tongue” (Exodus 4:10).

¹¹⁰ Amos 8:11

understood according to their proper signification but were instead disfigured by a foolish and carnal interpretation.

Therefore, a certain man of Bethlehem Juda went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons (1:1).

Some have wished to understand this man as the Decalogue of the Law,¹¹¹ his wife as the Synagogue, and his two sons as the two honours or ranks of dignities which comprised the system of governance in the Old Testament period: the honour of king and priest. Indeed, these ranks were preeminent according to the law not only among the Jewish people but also among the other nations; and so, in a certain manner, they succeeded in joining to themselves two peoples, namely, the Israelites and the proselytes, as occurred in the times of David, Solomon, and the other kings. But others relate the same man to the Lord Jesus Christ, Who, having been born of a virgin in Bethlehem Juda, wished to sojourn in this world with His wife, that is, the holy Church, whom He presented to Himself, beautiful and without spot or wrinkle,¹¹² and with his two children. These can be understood as the two orders, namely, the prophets and the Apostles, who are rightly called “free”¹¹³ because they are known to have been liberated from the yoke of sin and from their former servitude by the blood of our Redeemer.

He was named Elimelech, and his wife, Noemi: and his two sons, the one Mahalon, and the other Chelion, Ephrathites of Bethlehem Juda (1:2).

¹¹¹ That is, the Ten Commandments.

¹¹² Ephesians 5:27

¹¹³ The Latin term for children, *liberi*, can also mean “free.”

Elimelech's name certainly means "My God."¹¹⁴ And who can bear this name more fittingly than our Saviour, to whom the Psalmist says, "Hearken to the voice of my prayer, O my King and my God"?¹¹⁵ The Apostle adds: "Whose are the fathers, and of whom is Christ, according to the flesh, Who is over all things, God blessed for ever."¹¹⁶ His wife's name is Noemi, that is, "beautiful."¹¹⁷ In the Song of Songs, the Bridegroom says to her, "Thou art beautiful, O my love, sweet and comely as Jerusalem: terrible as an army set in array."¹¹⁸ Moreover, Elimelech's two sons are called Mahalon and Chelion: the name of the former is interpreted to mean "through a window" or "from the beginning,"¹¹⁹ while the name of the latter means "perfection."¹²⁰ Mahalon can justifiably symbolize the prophets as a type, since it was through the prophets, as if through a window, that the first light of faith entered the world, and the prophets were the first preachers of the true light, which is Christ. The second brother, whose name means "perfection," represents the Apostles, who unambiguously explained what the prophets had said enigmatically, bringing it to the perfection of complete understanding.

¹¹⁴ Or, more fully, "My God is King" from *Eli* (my God), and *melek* (king).

¹¹⁵ Psalm 5:3

¹¹⁶ Romans 9:5

¹¹⁷ From *na'em* (to be pleasant).

¹¹⁸ Song of Songs 6:3

¹¹⁹ From the Hebrew roots *khalon* (window) or *khalal* (to begin). Rabanus has borrowed his Hebrew etymologies from Saint Jerome's *Liber de Nominibus Hebraicis*. In most instances, the etymologies are transparent, but in some cases, the derivations are more conjectural. We have supplied the most likely sources for Jerome and Rabanus' etymologies in the footnotes.

¹²⁰ From the root *kalah*, meaning completion.

Chapter 1

Of King Assuerus and his most renowned banquet.

In the days of Assuerus, who reigned from India to Ethiopia over a hundred and twenty-seven provinces: When he sat on the throne of his kingdom. (1:1-2).

The account of Esther is contained not only in the Divine Books but also in Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*,⁵⁹⁷ although the two versions differ in some respects. However, even Josephus addresses the question of who this Assuerus was who "reigned from India to Ethiopia over a hundred and twenty-seven provinces." Referring to this king, Josephus claims that he was Cyrus, the son of King Xerxes, who ruled in Persia after his grandfather Darius. Therefore, he says that he was the Cyrus called Artaxerxes by the Greeks, the one surnamed Long-handed, who ruled for forty years.⁵⁹⁸

But I do not think that Esther lived under Artaxerxes the Long-handed, since Ezra, who writes that at this time Ezra and Nehemiah returned from Babylon and relates all the things they did thereafter,⁵⁹⁹ would never have remained silent about her. This is why in his *Chronicle*, Eusebius believes

⁵⁹⁷ *Antiquities of the Jews*, XI.6.

⁵⁹⁸ Artaxerxes I the Long-handed (r. 465-424 B.C.), whose father was Xerxes I (r. 486-465 B.C). For the above references to Esther and Assuerus, see Roger Pearse's 2005 English translation of Jerome's *Chronicle*, accessible at attalus.org, under the 79th and 93rd Olympiads.

⁵⁹⁹ 1 Esdras 7:7 (8:6 in the Septuagint) says that Esdras (also known as Ezra) returned to Jerusalem "in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the King," i.e. in 458 B.C. The Book of Nehemiah (2:1) says that Nehemiah began rebuilding the Temple "in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes the king," i.e. in 445 B.C.

that Assuerus was Artaxerxes II who reigned for forty years after his father Darius Nothus.⁶⁰⁰

The city Susan was the capital of his kingdom (1:2).

Susan is the capital of Persia, which historians say was founded by Memnon's brother.⁶⁰¹ It is called Susan because of its proximity to the river Susan, where the palace of Cyrus was situated, a structure conspicuous for its bright and variegated rocks, together with its golden columns, ceilings, and stones, as well as its representation of the sky marked with shining stars and other things that appear unbelievable to the human mind. It is here that according to the book, King Assuerus offered the greatest banquet with the most extensive preparation and an abundance of riches to his subject peoples. The text continues:

Now in the third year of his reign he made a great feast for all the princes, and for his servants, for the most mighty of the Persians, and the nobles of the Medes, and the governors of the provinces in his sight, that he might shew the riches of the glory of his kingdom, and the greatness, and boasting of his power, for a long time, to wit, for a hundred and fourscore days. And when the days of the feast were expired, he invited all the people that were found in Susan, from the greatest to the least: and commanded a feast to be made seven days in the court of the garden, and of the wood, which was planted by the care and the hand of the king.

⁶⁰⁰ Artaxerxes II (r. 405/4-359/8 B.C.). His father, Darius II Nothus, ruled from 423 to 405/4 B.C.

⁶⁰¹ A mythical king of Ethiopia.

And there were hung up on every side sky-coloured, and green, and violet hangings, fastened with cords of silk, and of purple, which were put into rings of ivory, and were held up with marble pillars. The beds also were of gold and silver, placed in order upon a floor paved with porphyry and white marble: which was embellished with painting of wonderful variety. And they that were invited, drank in golden cups, and the meats were brought in divers vessels one after another. Wine also in abundance and of the best was presented, as was worthy of a king's magnificence. Neither was there any one to compel them to drink that were not willing, but as the king had appointed, who set over every table one of his nobles, that every man might take what he would (1:3-8).

Even though the preparation for this exceedingly opulent feast appears to demonstrate the mighty king's historical display of riches and abundance of delights, it actually signifies, as a very sacred allegory, the magnitude of the spiritual riches and the excellence of the vital treasures which our most powerful King, Christ the Lord, distributes generously to each of His faithful according to His proper dispensation. For that most wealthy king, who prevented the imminent destruction of the Jews—which the unjust were plotting—after being entreated by the prayers of his most faithful wife, prefigures none other than our Redeemer, Who liberates His elect from the hands of their enemies and subjects the latter to worthy punishments because He Himself is called upon daily by the prayers of the Holy Church, His most beloved Bride.

Furthermore, there is no doubt that Esther is a type of the Church and that by no means should she be called the wife of anyone other than Christ. Let no one flee from this interpretation, then, on the grounds that the historical King

Assuerus was an infidel, as though this would make him incapable of being the type of a just king. For we are not saying that the disbelief or the sins of anyone, whether faithful or faithless, express the acts of that man, "Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth."⁶⁰² To be sure, "What fellowship hath light with darkness? Or what concord hath Christ with Belial?"⁶⁰³ But the *good* deeds and *just* judgements of anyone are best ascribed to none other than Him Who is the source of every good and concerning Whom it is said: "He shall judge the world with justice, and the people with his truth."⁶⁰⁴ For just as the transgressions and impious deeds of the Gentiles do not easily agree in likeness with the truth, neither do the faithful's transgressions and sins.

We have said this, therefore, because some of the doctors symbolically ascribe David's actions against Uriah and his wife to Christ and His Church.⁶⁰⁵ But what reason is there for anyone to say that Moses' unbelief at the Water of Contradiction,⁶⁰⁶ Aaron's creation of the calf,⁶⁰⁷ Solomon's

⁶⁰² 1 Peter 2:22

⁶⁰³ 2 Corinthians 6:14-15

⁶⁰⁴ Psalms 95:13; 9:9

⁶⁰⁵ 2 Kings (2 Samuel) 11. Saint Augustine interpreted David's adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of the Hittite Uriah, as signifying the mystery of the Church: David, representing Christ, separated the Church (Bathsheba) from the Devil (Uriah), and united her to himself after she had bathed, that is, after she had been purified by baptism (*Contra Faustum*, Book XXII.87). Saint Ephrem the Syrian further interprets the letter which David gave to Uriah ordering his execution as the Scriptures which are in the Jews' keeping but testify against them.

⁶⁰⁶ Numbers 20:10-13

⁶⁰⁷ Exodus 32:1-6

lust,⁶⁰⁸ Hezekiah's arrogance,⁶⁰⁹ Peter's denial,⁶¹⁰ and Saul's blasphemy⁶¹¹ accord figuratively with our Redeemer? Yet no one is rightly able to deny that their good deeds and correct teachings greatly testified to Him. Thus, no one should blame us for comparing the pious works and just judgements of a great king to the King and Judge of all eternity by showing that they are in some way similar, since anything that is good is His and all iniquity escapes Him. If anyone thinks that what we are saying is unsuitable, let him read the prophet Isaiah, who compared the Persian king Cyrus, a Gentile, to our Redeemer, saying in the person of the Lord:

I will give thee hidden treasures, and the concealed riches of secret places: that thou mayest know that I am the Lord because I call thee by thy name, the God of Israel. For the sake of My servant Jacob, and Israel My elect, I have even called thee by thy name: I have made a likeness of thee, and thou hast not known Me. I am the Lord, and there is none else: there is no God, besides Me: I girded thee, and thou hast not known Me.⁶¹²

Let him also read the works of the Fathers, who have said that the acts and fates of the reprobate kings Saul and Jeconiah figuratively represent the holiest works of our Redeemer; that is, they interpret Saul, who was anointed king but was then deservingly slain for his crimes,⁶¹³ in relation to the death of

⁶⁰⁸ 3 Kings (1 Kings) 11

⁶⁰⁹ 2 Chronicles 32:25-31

⁶¹⁰ Matthew 26:33-35

⁶¹¹ Acts 8:1

⁶¹² Isaiah 45:3-5

⁶¹³ 1 Kings (1 Samuel) 31:4

Christ the innocent King, and they ascribe the displacement of Jeconiah from Juda to Babylon,⁶¹⁴ which he endured because of his sins, to the type of our Redeemer's grace, by which He deigned to pass through the world to save the nations once the Jews had been abandoned for their faithlessness.

What's more, the Fathers proposed that the words and acts of Pharaoh and Nabuchodonosor were to be understood symbolically in relation to the enemies of the Church. For example, Pharaoh commanded that the male infants of God's people be drowned in the river, but that the females be preserved,⁶¹⁵ because the devil desires to destroy the strong works in us and nurture the dissolute and the weak. Similarly, Nabuchodonosor commanded all the peoples subject to him to prostrate themselves and adore his statue at the sound of instruments and musicians.⁶¹⁶ The devil, too, busies himself with diverting human beings from an upright mind through the sweetness of earthly pomp and by perverting the hearts of the deceived to the pursuit of lust, which is "the service of idols."⁶¹⁷

Therefore, if certain works or just punishments of the reprobate prefigured not only bad but also good things, why could not the upright acts or sayings of good men, which are contained in the prophetic volumes, have prefigured the good

⁶¹⁴ 4 Kings (2 Kings) 24:12; II Chronicles 36:20

⁶¹⁵ Exodus 1:15-22

⁶¹⁶ Daniel 3:4-5

⁶¹⁷ Colossians 3:5

works of those who came after? For as someone has said,⁶¹⁸ “it is the excellence of Holy Scripture to sometimes relate past events so as to express future ones; the actor is approved in such a way that he is opposed in the symbol; deeds are condemned so as to persuade us to carry them out in a mystical manner.” Likewise, let us look to the works of Saint Augustine, who said that the seven husbands of a single wife who died without children (which the Sadducees used against the Lord to deny resurrection) certainly prefigures the mystery of the Church.⁶¹⁹ And indeed, he taught that the wife, her barrenness and death, and the death of the men themselves prefigure remarkable things, even though neither the Lord Himself nor any of the Evangelists narrate this story in their own person; rather, that which the impious uttered against the Lord with their wicked mouths was included by the Evangelists in their writings because of the most sacred response that the Lord gave to them. Thus, when the faithful reader finds teachings like these among the sayings of the holy Fathers, let him not blame us if we insert some things that resemble them in our own work.

Now in the third year of his reign he made a great feast for all the princes, and for his servants, for the most mighty of the Persians and the Medes, and the governors of the provinces in his sight, that he might shew the riches of the glory of his kingdom (1:3-4).

⁶¹⁸ Saint Gregory the Great, *Morals in Job*, Book III.28.55. The rest of this passage together with the preceding two paragraphs are borrowed from Bede’s *Commentary on Ezra*, Book II (PL 91, col. 863D-864B).

⁶¹⁹ Matthew 22:23-33; Saint Augustine interprets the seven husbands as the seven ages of the world in which the wicked proved unable to produce fruits of justice (*Questions on the Gospel*, no. 32).