

Empire, Ethnic Election and Exegesis in the *Opus Caroli (Libri Carolini)*

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Modern historians have long argued that the early medieval Franks thought themselves to be the chosen people or new Israel, especially as they gained a great empire under the Carolingian dynasty in the late eighth century. The Opus Caroli of Bishop Theodulf of Orléans has often been cited as one of the clearest expressions of this self-conception as God's elect. A massive work attacking the legitimacy of the Byzantine empire in the context of the iconoclasm dispute during the early 790s, it does indeed contest the Byzantine claim to be the Christian empire. But Theodulf's repeated statement that 'We are the spiritual Israel' is best understood not as an assertion of ethnic election, but as a reference to the Christian tradition of Scripture exegesis which should (he argues) underpin both the Frankish and the Byzantine understanding of images. The Carolingian claim to empire rested on the Frankish championing of the universal Church, and its traditions of orthodoxy and correct biblical interpretation.

'We, who are the spiritual Israel': thus spoke the imperious voice attributed to Charlemagne, the king of the Franks, in a massive theological treatise, the *Opus Caroli*, fulminating against the (as it saw them) heretical rulers of Byzantium.¹ Imperious, and perhaps even proto-imperial, for within less than a decade of those words being written Charlemagne had been crowned emperor in Rome. The *Opus Caroli* systematically attacked the acts of the second council of Nicaea (787) as having embraced the worship of images and condemned its convenors, the Empress Irene and her son Constantine VI, as unworthy of their position, claiming that their arrogance constituted blasphemy and their practices idolatry, and that their empire was the

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I am grateful to the Master and Fellows of Churchill College, Cambridge, for electing me to the research fellowship which made this work possible. Thanks are also due to Zachary Giuliano and to the anonymous readers for their detailed suggestions.

¹ '[N]os, qui spiritalis Israel sumus': *Opus Caroli regis contra synodum* [hereafter: *OC*] 1.17 (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 183). All translations are my own.

spiritual descendant of pagan Babylon.² Unsurprisingly, then, recent studies of the *Opus Caroli* (previously known as the *Libri Carolini*) have presented it as the ideological preparation for the transformation of the kingdom of the Franks into an empire, seeking to replace the Greek empire with the ‘new Israel’ of the Franks.³

This reading of the *Opus* as celebrating the ethnic election of the Franks and their status as a chosen people is widespread in scholarship; the statement ‘we, who are the spiritual Israel’ is almost universally accepted as meaning that the Franks are the new Israel.⁴ I know of only one explicit rejection of this interpretation, in a French doctoral thesis published in 2007.⁵ This article, however, argues that the *Opus Caroli* presents Charlemagne as the pre-eminent ruler of the Christian world, not through the election of the Franks, but through his constant attention to Christian universality and orthodoxy. In the early ninth century, the Carolingians drew increasingly on an ideology of Christian empire by associating themselves with the promotion of orthodox religion in all places and amongst all peoples;⁶ the

² OC 1.1–3, 3.15 (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 105–24, 399–407). Ann Freeman argued that the *Opus Caroli* misrepresented the Nicene council, due to a poor Latin translation of its acts: ‘Carolingian Orthodoxy and the Fate of the *Libri Carolini*’, *Viator* 16 (1985), 65–108. Recent research has contested this, however, suggesting that the *Opus* displays a good understanding of the Greek arguments: Hans-Georg Thümmel, ‘Die fränkische Reaktion auf das 2. Nicaenum 787 in den *Libri Carolini*’, in Rainer Berndt, ed., *Das frankfurter Konzil von 794. Kristallisationspunkt karolingischer Kultur* (Mainz, 1997), 965–80; Thomas F. X. Noble, *Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians* (Philadelphia, PA, 2009), 181–3.

³ Noble, *Images*, chs 4–5; idem, ‘Tradition and Learning in Search of Ideology: The *Libri Carolini*’, in Richard Sullivan, ed., *The Gentle Voices of Teachers: Aspects of Learning in the Carolingian Age* (Columbus, OH, 1995), 227–60; Kristina Mitalaitė, *Philosophie et théologie de l’image dans les Libri Carolini* (Paris, 2007), 51. But contrast Alberto Ricciardi, ‘Prima dell’impero. Antagonismo Franco-Bizantino, identità politiche e ideologia dal mito delle origini Troiane all’*Opus Caroli regis contra Synodum (Libri Carolini)*’, *Rivista Storica Italiana* 125 (2013), 643–80.

⁴ Elisabeth Dahlhaus-Berg, *Nova Antiquitas et Antiqua Novitas. Typologische Exegese und isidorianisches Geschichtsbild bei Theodulf von Orléans* (Cologne, 1975), 196; Celia Chazelle, ‘Matter, Spirit, and Image in the *Libri Carolini*’, *Recherches Augustiniennes* 21 (1986), 163–84, at 184; Noble, ‘Tradition and Learning’, 239–40, 249; Karl F. Morrison, ‘Anthropology and the Use of Religious Images in the *Opus Caroli Regis (Libri Carolini)*’, in Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Anne-Marie Bouché, eds, *The Mind’s Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ, 2006), 32–45, at 36.

⁵ Mitalaitė, *Philosophie et théologie*, 411. Ricciardi, ‘Antagonismo Franco-Bizantino’, 667–8, does not address the phrase, but the implications of his argument are that he would reject it as a claim for Frankish election.

⁶ For example, Jonathan P. Conant, ‘Louis the Pious and the Contours of Empire’, *EME* 22 (2014), 336–60, especially 357–9; Mayke de Jong, ‘The Empire that was Always

Opus Caroli already encouraged such an imperial vision of Charlemagne's power in the 790s. In it the 'spiritual Israel' represented the community of all orthodox Christians.

That the Franks under Charlemagne and his Carolingian predecessors considered themselves a chosen people, the new Israel, was simply accepted for much of the twentieth century.⁷ After all, Charlemagne's grandfather Charles Martel had been compared to Joshua for defending the faith from heathens, while his father Pippin was remembered as having been anointed king of the Franks on the model of the Old Testament monarchs, and the great Charles himself was nicknamed David by his court intellectuals.⁸ However, in 2000 Mary Garrison published an important article arguing that the Frankish identification with Israel had been exaggerated, coming later and more slowly than traditionally thought.⁹ Subsequent work has questioned the old assumption that the Carolingian Franks considered themselves to be the chosen people;¹⁰ many scholars now argue that, while earlier in the eighth century the Carolingians utilized ideas of Frankish ethnic and religious superiority to strengthen their position as they seized power, Charlemagne's reign, with its vast expansion of Carolingian territories into a multi-ethnic empire, saw a shift to a rhetoric which drew on a Christian ideology and which was intended

Decaying: The Carolingians (800–888)', *Medieval Worlds* 2 (2015), 6–25, especially 14–15 [online journal], at: <https://www.medievalworlds.net/0xc1aa5576_0x00329658.pdf>, last accessed 12 December 2017.

⁷ For example, Ernst Kantorowicz, *Laudes Regiae: A Study in Liturgical Acclamations and Medieval Ruler Worship* (Berkeley, CA, 1946), 56–9; Eugen Ewig, 'Zum christlichen Königsgedanken im Frühmittelalter', in Hartmut Atsma, ed., *Spätantikes und fränkisches Gallien. Gesammelte Schriften (1952–1973)*, 3 vols (Munich, 1976), 1: 3–71, at 41–5; Janet L. Nelson, 'The Lord's Anointed and the People's Choice: Carolingian Royal Ritual', in David Cannadine and Simon Prince, eds, *Rituals of Royalty: Power and Ceremony in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, 1987), 137–80, reprinted in eadem, *The Frankish World, 750–900* (London, 1996), 99–131.

⁸ Continuation of Fredegar, *Historia vel gesta Francorum* 20 (MGH SRM 2, 177); *Royal Frankish Annals, s.a. 750* (MGH SRG i.u.s. 6, 8, 10); Alcuin, *Epistola* 41 (MGH Epp. 4, 84).

⁹ Mary Garrison, 'The Franks as the New Israel: Education for an Identity from Pippin to Charlemagne', in Yitzhak Hen and Matthew Innes, eds, *The Uses of the Past in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 2000), 114–61.

¹⁰ Mayke de Jong, 'The State of the Church: *Ecclesia* and Early Medieval State Formation', in Walter Pohl and Veronika Wieser, eds, *Der frühmittelalterliche Staat – europäische Perspektiven* (Vienna, 2009), 241–54, at 250–1; Gerda Heydemann and Walter Pohl, 'The Rhetoric of Election – 1 Peter 2.9 and the Franks', in Doreen van Espelo et al., eds, *Religious Franks: Religion and Power in the Frankish Kingdoms. Studies in Honour of Mayke de Jong* (Manchester, 2016), 13–31.

‘to meld together and unite diverse communities’.¹¹ The rulers of the Frankish empire saw themselves as having a special relationship with God, but increasingly grounded this in a (universal) Christian, rather than Frankish, identity. In the context of this scholarship we should nuance older ideas that the *Opus Caroli* asserted a Frankish identification with the new Israel.

Such interpretations of the *Opus* certainly sit uneasily with the recognition, now established beyond all reasonable doubt, that its author was not a Frank at all. The text as it stands was primarily the work of one man: the Spanish-born Visigoth, Theodulf, later archbishop of Orléans.¹² Theodulf worked on behalf of Charlemagne, in whose voice the text speaks; the king’s circle of theologians and advisers seem initially to have mapped out Theodulf’s programme of writing, and his text ended up being read and approved by Charlemagne, whose comments appear as marginal glosses in the original manuscript surviving in the Vatican.¹³ While the impact of the *Opus Caroli* remains unclear, that it represented a grand politico-ideological statement arising from Carolingian elite discussion, as Thomas Noble argued, seems very likely.¹⁴ It reflected not just the genuine horror felt by devout Carolingians at what they read in the acts of the second Nicene council, but also some of the ideology of Charlemagne’s regime in the years leading up to the king’s imperial coronation on Christmas Day 800.

While for much of the 780s relations between the Byzantine empire and the Franks had been good, they soured violently at the end of that decade. That development provides the context for the savagery with which the Empress Irene and her son, the Emperor Constantine,

¹¹ Quotation from Matthew Innes, “Immune from Heresy”: Defining the Boundaries of Carolingian Christianity’, in Paul Fouracre and David Ganz, eds, *Frankland: The Franks and the World of the Early Middle Ages. Essays in Honour of Dame Jinty Nelson* (Manchester, 2008), 101–25, at 124. See also De Jong, ‘State of the Church’, 248–51; Helmut Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity, 550–850* (Cambridge, 2015), 295–422, 451–5.

¹² Ann Freeman, *Theodulf of Orléans: Charlemagne’s Spokesman against the Second Council of Nicaea* (Aldershot, 2003).

¹³ Janet L. Nelson, ‘The Voice of Charlemagne’, in Richard Gameson and Henrietta Leyser, eds, *Belief and Culture in the Middle Ages: Studies Presented to Henry Mayr-Harting* (Oxford, 2001), 76–88, at 77.

¹⁴ Noble, ‘Tradition and Learning’, 232, 249–50. Freeman argued that Charlemagne discontinued the project when faced with papal support for Nicaea II: ‘Carolingian Orthodoxy’. More recently, Noble has proposed that Rome and the Franks agreed to disagree: *Images*, 172–8.

were denied the status of true Christian rulers in the *Opus Caroli*.¹⁵ Moreover, in the early 790s, as Theodulf worked on countering the decisions of the Eastern council, Charlemagne moved to contest the Byzantine imperial claims that they defended orthodoxy and the universal Church. In 794 he held a church council at Frankfurt which dealt both with the question of the Eastern attitudes to images and with the adoptionist heresy which the court theologians had identified as recently emerging in Spain.¹⁶ Whether Charlemagne intended Frankfurt, which brought together 'all the bishops of the kingdom of the Franks, or of Italy, Aquitaine and Provence',¹⁷ to be an ecumenical council remains unclear, but that was certainly how it was remembered: as a direct rejection of Nicaea II's claims to universal jurisdiction.¹⁸ The *Opus Caroli* denied the Greeks any right to claim that Nicaea was an ecumenical council, and proposed a new basis upon which a council could be deemed universal, probably with preparations for Frankfurt in mind.¹⁹ It also highlighted the multi-ethnic nature of Charlemagne's empire, and his work and that of his predecessors in spreading Roman Christianity to new peoples: 'not only the provinces of all Gaul and Germany and Italy, but even the Saxons and certain peoples of the northern region are recognized as converting to the beginnings of the true faith through us'.²⁰ Theodulf's text should therefore be read as part of a wider move towards claiming that

¹⁵ Michael McCormick, 'Western Approaches (700–900)', in Jonathan Shepard, ed., *The Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire, c.500–1492* (Cambridge, 2009), 395–432, at 414–17; Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c.680–850* (Cambridge, 2011), 258–9. For the circumstances of Irene and Constantine's reign in relation to the council of Nicaea, see *ibid.* 260–76.

¹⁶ John C. Cavadini, *The Last Christology of the West: Adoptionism in Spain and Gaul, 785–820* (Philadelphia, PA, 1993); Florence Close, *Uniformiser la foi pour unifier l'Empire. Contribution à l'histoire de la pensée politico-théologique de Charlemagne* (Brussels, 2011).

¹⁷ 'Coniungentibus ... cunctis regni Francorum seu Italiae, Aquitaniae, Provinciae episcopis ac sacerdotibus synodali concilio': *Capitulare Francofurtense* 1 (MGH Conc. 2.i, 165).

¹⁸ Marie-France Auzépy, 'Frankfort et Nicée II', in Berndt, ed., *Das frankfurter Konzil, 279–300*, at 289–90; Close, *Uniformiser la foi*, 126–9; Noble, *Images*, 169–72, 178–80; *Royal Frankish Annals* (and their ninth-century reworking), *s.a.* 794 (MGH SRG i.u.s. 6, 94–5); *Annals of Lorsch, s.a.* 794 (MGH SS 1, 35–6).

¹⁹ OC 3.11, 4.13, 4.28 (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 376–8, 515–22, 557–8); Close, *Uniformiser la foi*, 144–9.

²⁰ 'Quod non solum omnium Galliarum provinciae et Germania sive Italia, sed etiam Saxones et quaedam aquilonalis plagae gentes per nos ... ad verę fidei rudimenta conversae facere noscuntur': OC 1.6 (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 136).

the Frankish empire was now the true Christian empire, successor to that which had overseen the earlier ecumenical councils, marked with the clear signs of catholic imperialism: orthodoxy and universality.²¹

But did being the new Israel contribute to becoming the new empire? The most recent major study of the *Opus Caroli* in English has no doubt about this: Noble understands Theodulf's message to be that 'Charlemagne is like David, and the Franks are a new chosen people';²² the 'Franks were the direct heirs of Israel'.²³ In arguing against this interpretation of the *Opus*, I structure my response around a new reading of the text's mention of the 'spiritual Israel'. I maintain that the phrase does not evidence Frankish belief in their election: firstly, because there is little reason to suppose that the 'we' in question refers to the Franks; secondly, because the language appears in a commentary on Christian exegesis, emphasizing separation from the Old Testament and the Jewish past; and thirdly, because 'spiritual Israel' is a patristic term for the universal Church of all peoples.

A contrast between 'us' and 'them' appears frequently in the *Opus Caroli*, meaning that scholars often portray the work as presenting a sharp distinction between good Franks and bad Greeks,²⁴ but the Franks themselves are never mentioned in the *Opus Caroli*. The only appearance of the word *Franci* comes at the very start of the work in the title given to Charlemagne: 'by the will of God, King of the Franks, ruling Gaul, Germany and Italy, and their neighbouring provinces'.²⁵ The *Opus's* targets are occasionally referred to as 'Greeks' (*Græci*) or 'Easterners' (*Orientalēs*), but Theodulf only once presented the theological debate as a contest between East and West, in his preface.²⁶ He much preferred to associate his opponents, rather than the 'we' of the text, with ethnic or geographic

²¹ Dahlhaus-Berg, *Nova Antiquitas*, 200–1; Auzépy, 'Francfort et Nicée II', 299–300.

²² Noble, *Images*, 209.

²³ *Ibid.* 234.

²⁴ Chazelle, 'Matter, Spirit, and Image', 176; Noble, 'Tradition and Learning', 241–4; Morrison, 'Anthropology', 33–4.

²⁵ 'NUTU DEI REGIS FRANCORUM, GALLIAS, GERMANIAM ITALIAMQUE SIVE HARUM FINITIMAS PROVINTIAS ... REGENTIS': *OC* preface (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 97). This was not the standard form of Charlemagne's title in the early 790s, which was usually 'king of the Franks and Lombards, and patrician of the Romans'.

²⁶ 'Contra cuius errores ideo scribere compulsi sumus, ut ... inerte[m] vel potius inerte[m] orientali de parte venientem hostem occidua in parte per nos favente Deo adlata sanctorum patrum sententia feriat' ('Against whose errors therefore we are compelled to write, so that ... the opinion of the holy fathers, conveyed (with God's support) through us in

identities.²⁷ In doing so, he implied that the 'church of one region' had heretically sought 'to anathematize the churches of the whole world'.²⁸ Theodulf often contrasted 'us' with 'them'²⁹ (or even 'you'³⁰) in purely religious terms, usually referring to the incorrect Byzantines as 'those who adore images', on the basic principle that the *Opus* spoke for orthodox Christians against a group of heretics who talked 'irrationally and most stupidly' (restraint not being a feature of Theodulf's argumentative style).³¹

However, on some occasions the first person plural seems to include the Byzantines who venerate icons. Thus, when Theodulf condemned Irene and Constantine for declaring that God 'co-reigns with us', he picked up their 'us' and spoke in terms of all humans: 'when our being is so different from God's being, and our living so different from his living, and our reigning so different from his reigning, the madness of those who ... say that they even co-reign with God ought to be more a source of grief than amazement'.³² Theodulf moved on to the imperial use of the adjective 'divine' in Byzantium, which he saw as a pagan tradition; he declared: 'We ... who both follow Truth and were redeemed by that Truth, just as we spurn the lie of the pagan gods, we ought to spurn pagan words.'³³ The phrase 'we ought' suggests that Theodulf was here lecturing the Byzantines on how all Christians should behave.³⁴ Theodulf's

the Western region, may strike the incompetent, or rather unarmed, enemy coming from the Eastern region'): *OC* preface (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 101). Probably this represents the royal 'we' of Charlemagne's voice, used also elsewhere: *OC* 1.6, 4.3 (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 136, 494–5).

²⁷ For Easterners, see *OC* preface, 1.6 (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 98–9, 132); Theodulf described the priest John, the representative of the Eastern patriarchs, as 'legatus Orientalium' throughout the *Opus*, which may have been understood in this sense. For Greeks, see *OC* 3.11, 4.18, 4.23 (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 375, 532, 546).

²⁸ '[U]nius partis ecclesia ... totius mundi ecclesias conetur anathematizare': *OC* 3.11 (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 376).

²⁹ *OC* 2.9, 2.31, 3.18 (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 253, 325, 420).

³⁰ *OC* 2.30 (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 317).

³¹ For example, 'ut illi stultissime et irrationabiliter dicunt': *OC* 1.16 (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 175).

³² 'Cum ergo nostrum esse tantum distet a Dei esse et nostrum vivere ab eius vivere et nostrum regnare ab eius regnare, dolenda potius quam admiranda est illorum vecordia, qui ... Deum sibi conregnare etiam dicunt': *OC* 1.1 (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 105).

³³ 'Nos ... qui et Veritatis sectatores et ab ipsa Veritate redempti sumus, sicut sprevimus gentilium deorum mendacium, spernere debemus gentilia vocabula': *OC* 1.3 (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 124).

³⁴ Cf. Lawrence Nees, *A Tainted Mantle: Hercules and the Classical Tradition at the Carolingian Court* (Philadelphia, PA, 1991), 118.

first person plural also included we ‘who come to the faith after the Lord’s incarnation’, we ‘who do not assert those things which were prophesied concerning the coming of Christ and the calling of the Gentiles to be future, but ... believe them to be past’, and we ‘who worship the one and only God’;³⁵ in other words, ‘we’ in the *Opus Caroli* often simply means Christians, particularly the Gentiles, who came to the faith only after Christ’s incarnation.³⁶

That Christian identity proved important in the specific contexts in which Theodulf declared that ‘we’ are ‘the spiritual Israel’. The bishops at Nicaea II had argued that the pictures of the saints encourage Christians to imitate the saints’ way of life just as Moses had blue fringes added to the clothing of the Hebrews to remind them to obey God’s commands. The *Opus Caroli* offered a different interpretation, explaining that Moses made the blue fringes:

... either in order to distinguish the people of Israel, so that [the fringes] might be a sign on clothing, just like circumcision was a sign on the body; or so that we, who are the spiritual Israel, might have a just and holy way of life as a garment, the extremities of which garment ought to be decorated with fringes, since our life ought to be instructed by the testimonies of holy Scripture.³⁷

Two chapters later Theodulf addressed the Byzantine assertion that just as the Jews had been given the two cherubim which decorated the Ark of the Covenant, ‘so the cross and images of the saints ... are given to us Christians to ... adore’.³⁸ He mocked the suggestion that ‘those who followed the shadow of the Law’ (i.e. the Hebrews) should have honoured divinely sanctioned sculptures, whereas ‘we who follow the truth, which is Christ’, would adore earthly objects

³⁵ [N]obis, qui post incarnationem dominicam ad fidem venimus’ (a quotation from Bede, *De Templo* 1 [CChr.SL 119A, 183]); ‘Nos vero, qui ea, quae de Christi adventu et vocatione gentium prophetata sunt, non ut futura autumamus, sed ut praeterita devota mente tenemus et credimus; nos, qui uni et soli Deo ... servimus’: *OC* 1.20, 2.11, 3.18 (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 202, 257, 420).

³⁶ See also *OC* 3.15 (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 405–6).

³⁷ [S]ive *ad dinoscendum populum Israel*, ut essent signum in *veste*, sicut *circumcisio signum in corpore*, sive ut nos, qui spiritalis Israel sumus, habeamus pro indumento iustitiam et sanctam conversationem, huius indumenti extremitas fimbriis iacinctinis sit ornata, quatenus vita nostra sanctarum Scripturarum sit testimoniis erudita: *OC* 1.17 (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 183); text in italics is from Jerome, *Commentarii in Matheum* 4 (CChr.SL 77, 211).

³⁸ [S]ic nobis christianis donata est crux et sanctorum imagines ad ... adorandum’: *OC* 1.19 (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 192). Theodulf directly quotes the Latin translation of the Nicene acts available to him.

made by any craftsman.³⁹ Here, Theodulf was clearly picking up the contrast between Jews and 'us Christians' made in the Nicene acts in order to run with it to his rhetorical climax:

We who do not follow the death-dealing letter but the life-giving spirit, who are not the carnal but the spiritual Israel, who having scorned visible things, contemplate the invisible, we give thanks to have received from the Lord not only mysteries greater than images, which lack all mystery, but greater and more lofty signs of mysteries than those same tables [of the Law] or the two cherubim. For clearly the tables and the two cherubim provided patterns of future things, and while the Jews had the things carnally which were hidden prefigurations in typological figures of future things, we hold spiritually in truth those things which were prefigured by those models or carnal prefigurations.⁴⁰

When seen in their context, these claims that 'we' are 'the spiritual Israel' therefore have much more to do with exegesis than with ethnic election. In both cases Theodulf contested the Byzantine understanding of the Old Testament, suggesting that the Nicene fathers had missed the spiritual meaning of the objects in ancient Jewish cult; the Greeks ignored the fact that the Christian fulfilment of the Jewish material lies in the spirit, and not in a continuing veneration of matter, especially since this is now without the divine imprimatur which was given to the cherubim upon Mount Sinai. Exegesis forms a major theme in the *Opus Caroli*, as many scholars have already noted,⁴¹ and the first two books of the work deal mostly with the council of Nicaea's second-rate understanding of Scripture. They make the point repeatedly that the Greeks failed to recognize that the Old Testament finds fulfilment in Christ's incarnation and therefore

³⁹ '[I]llos, qui umbram legis sequebantur, habuisse foederis tabulas continentes legis decalogum, nos, qui veritatem, quae Christus est, sequimur, habere opera quorumlibet artificum': *OC* 1.19 (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 192–3).

⁴⁰ 'Nos enim, qui non sequimur litteram mortificantem, sed spiritum vivificantem, qui non carnalis, sed spiritalis Israel sumus, qui spretis visibilibus invisibilia contemplamus, non solum imaginibus maiora mysteria, quae omni mysterio carent, sed ipsi tabulis seu duobus cherubim maiora et eminentiora mysteriorum insignia a Domino accepisse nos gratulamur. Cum videlicet tabulae et duo cherubim exemplaria fuerint futurorum, et cum Iudei haberint carnaliter res, quae typicis aperte figuris praefigurationes fuerint futurorum, nos habemus in veritate spiritaliter ea, quae illis exemplaribus sive praefigurationibus carnalibus praefigurabantur': *OC* 1.19 (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 193).

⁴¹ Dahlhaus-Berg, *Nova Antiquitas*, 191–5; Celia Chazelle, 'Images, Scripture, the Church, and the Libri Carolini', *Proceedings of the PMR Conference* 16–17 (1992–3), 53–76, at 59–61; Noble, *Images*, 187–91; Mitalaité, *Philosophie et théologie*, 410–13.

must be understood spiritually. For Theodulf, the ability to distinguish good exegesis from bad exegesis divided the Byzantines from 'us', clearly right-thinking Christians 'who with God's help understand the prophecy of the Psalms spiritually', and 'who, following the Apostle, understand the Law to be spiritual'.⁴²

Such a spiritual understanding of the Old Testament as prefiguring the redeeming actions of Christ and their effects on the lives of believers constituted nothing more, of course, than the approach to Scripture bequeathed to the Middle Ages by the Church Fathers. For the Fathers this Christian exegesis stood sharply apart from an imaginary 'Jewish' understanding of the Bible.⁴³ Consequently, the purpose of Theodulf's explanations that the spiritual Israel ought to read Scripture spiritually was to suggest continuity, not between the Franks and Israel, but between the bishops of the second council of Nicaea and the Jews.⁴⁴ Theodulf borrowed his claim that we 'do not follow the death-dealing letter but the life-giving spirit' from Jerome, who differentiated Christian from Jewish interpretations of the prophets with these words.⁴⁵ The *Opus Caroli* therefore reminds the Byzantines that 'we Christians' should not understand things in a Jewish and earthly manner, but suggests that the Greeks were doing just that. In this context, 'we are not the carnal, but the spiritual Israel' asserted distance from, as much as continuity with, the Hebrew past.

The reference to the spiritual Israel was not, therefore, to the Franks as a chosen people, but simply to Christians, all of whom, both Franks and Greeks, ought to read the Bible spiritually. The phrase 'spiritual Israel' appears frequently in patristic and early medieval theology, almost always referring to the Christian people throughout the world. Jerome differentiated the carnal from the spiritual Israel to make the kind of Pauline point which underpins

⁴² 'Nos autem, qui opitulante Deo psalmodum prophetiam spiritaliter ... intelligimus'; 'nos, qui secundum Apostolum legem spiritalem esse scimus': *OC* 1.30, 2.9 (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 231, 253).

⁴³ R. A. Markus, 'The Jew as a Hermeneutic Device: The Inner Life of a Gregorian Topos', in John C. Cavadini, ed., *Gregory the Great: A Symposium* (London, 1995), 1–15; Paula Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism* (New York, 2008), 73–8.

⁴⁴ The Nicene bishops are compared to Pharisees at *OC* 1.17 (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 184).

⁴⁵ 'Nos enim, qui non sequimur litteram mortificantem, sed spiritum vivificantem': *OC* 1.19 (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 193); 'Nos autem qui non sequimur occidentem litteram, sed spiritum uiificantem': Jerome, *Commentarii in prophetas minores: In Sophoniam* 3 (CChr.SL 76A, 700); a borrowing not noted by the excellent MGH edition.

Theodulf's use of the terms in relation to matter versus spirit.⁴⁶ Bede (d. 735) emphasized Christian universality; the phrase 'spiritual Israel' could refer to 'the Christian people', 'the Catholic, that is universal, Church' or simply the people 'who will be saved in Christ from all the nations of the earth'.⁴⁷ The clearest patristic use of the phrase comes in Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*, where he explained that in the Bible the species could sometimes refer to the genus, that is that a scriptural mention of a single city, nation or human could signify all cities, nations or humanity.⁴⁸ One must differentiate between those occasions when the species represents the genus and those when it does not, that is, between the passages in which Scripture is speaking of the spiritual Israel and those which refer to the carnal:

Thus, the spiritual Israel consists, not of one nation, but of all the nations which were promised to the fathers in their seed, which is Christ. This spiritual Israel, therefore, is distinguished from the carnal Israel which is of one nation, by novelty of grace, not by nobility of homeland, in mind, not in nation.⁴⁹

Theodulf knew his Augustine well and *De doctrina christiana* has been identified as an important source for the *Opus Caroli*.⁵⁰ Augustine's affirmation that members of the spiritual Israel are not distinguished by ethnic descent even finds an echo in a hymn written by Theodulf for Palm Sunday, in which the Christian boys processing compare themselves to the Jews who gathered on the original Palm Sunday: 'The glory of noble blood made them Hebrews; / behold, the godly crossing over makes us Hebrews.'⁵¹ The patristic meaning

⁴⁶ Jerome, *Commentarii in Esaiam* 6.15.1 (CChr.SL 73, 254).

⁴⁷ '[S]piritualis Israel, id est populi christiani': Bede, *Homelie evangelii* 1.17 (CChr.SL 122, 124); 'catholica, id est universalis, ecclesia spiritalis uidelicet Israel': idem, *In primam partem Samuhelis* 1 (CChr.SL 119, 38–9); 'illa propagationem carnalis Israel ista spiritalis significat ... qui de uniuersis cognitionibus terrae in Christo saluator': idem, *In Genesis* 3 (CChr.SL 118A, 169).

⁴⁸ Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* 3.34.47 (CChr.SL 32, 106–7).

⁴⁹ 'Sic fit Israel spiritalis non unius gentis, sed omnium, quae promissae sunt patribus in eorum semine, quod est Christus. Hic ergo Israel spiritalis ab illo Israele carnali, qui est unius gentis, nouitate gratiae, non nobilitate patriae, et mente, non gente distinguitur': Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* 3.34.48–9 (CChr.SL 32, 109).

⁵⁰ Celia Chazelle, "Not in Painting but in Writing": Augustine and the Supremacy of the Word in the *Libri Carolini*, in Edward English, ed., *Reading and Wisdom: The De doctrina Christiana of Augustine in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, IN, 1995), 1–22. Theodulf also knew the writings of Jerome and Bede well.

⁵¹ 'Fecerat Hebraeos hos gloria sanguinis alti; / Nos facit Hebraeos transitus ecce pius': Theodulf, *Carmina* 69 (MGH Poetae 1, 558). The *transitus* is presumably both the

of the phrase 'spiritual Israel' matches the significance of its uses in the *Opus Caroli* as explored above. This is unsurprising, considering the depth of Theodulf's patristic knowledge displayed throughout the treatise.

'Spiritual Israel', thus, does not claim for the Franks the status of the chosen people as the successors of Old Testament Israel. Indeed, such an interpretation of Theodulf's words hardly makes sense when 'we' appears in many contexts in the *Opus* but never refers explicitly to the Frankish people, when the phrase has a long patristic history, certainly known to Theodulf, in which it signified the universal Christian people, and when it appears in the context of discussions concerning correct Christian exegesis which emphasize the difference, and not the sameness, of the old and new dispensations. Through a case-study analysis of this one phrase we can, therefore, question the reading of the *Opus Caroli* as presenting the Franks as a chosen people. Instead, the Carolingians grounded their claims to superiority over the Byzantines in the universal Christian standards which the Greeks had failed to meet. The *Opus Caroli* does slip into a kind of Western parochialism on occasion, in its clear preference for evidence from the Latin Fathers and its emphasis on the special status of the Roman Church (without any acknowledgement that the papacy's support for the doctrines of Nicaea II established their orthodoxy).⁵² Nonetheless, my analysis reveals the importance of universalism to the assault on Byzantine legitimacy at Charlemagne's court in the early 790s.⁵³

This makes sense against the background of wider changes in the politicized use of identity in the Carolingian world, and Theodulf's work may be best understood as part of the shift within Carolingian ideology from a close identification with the Frankish *gens* towards universalizing claims to Christian empire, claims which are echoed in other theological arguments emerging from Charlemagne's circle in the early 790s. When the Frankish bishops rebuked their Spanish colleagues for embracing adoptionism, they presented themselves as

Christian's crossing from earthly to heavenly things mentioned next in the poem and Christ's crossing over in death on the cross; it also hints at the crossing from species to genus, a movement Augustine expressed using *transire*: *De doctrina christiana* 3.34.48–9 (CChr.SL 32, 107, 109).

⁵² OC 1.6, 2.17 (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 132–5, 267); Close, *Uniformiser la foi*, 147–50.

⁵³ See Thomas F. X. Noble, 'Review Article: From the *Libri Carolini* to the *Opus Caroli Regis*', *Journal of Medieval Latin* 9 (1999), 131–47, at 138.

'all the bishops of Germany, Gaul and Aquitaine' speaking with the 'entire clergy of the Catholic peace' to defend the universal Church from the errors of peripheral Christians;⁵⁴ the contemporaneous Carolingian assault on Byzantine error rested upon the same ideological foundations. The 794 Council of Frankfurt showed Charlemagne as he wished to be seen: defending 'everywhere' and 'in all things ... the orthodox faith, both handed down by apostolic teachers and preserved by the universal Church'.⁵⁵ Charlemagne was not an ecumenist, pushing a neutral Christian identity. Such claims to care for the universal Church were just as self-interested and self-important as claims to be the new Israel would have been – but they were different claims.

Theodulf in the *Opus Caroli*, with hyperbolic literalism, revealed how the Greeks had lost sight of the universal Church. The acts of Nicaea II anathematized anyone who 'does not instruct the entire people beloved by Christ to adore images', revealing that the Byzantines had forgotten that the Christian people was a vast group spread throughout the whole world, and that it was therefore impossible for any one person to instruct all Christians in their entirety.⁵⁶ 'Almost the entire world is filled with Christ's people', Theodulf declared, in words which received Charlemagne's enthusiastic approbation when the *Opus Caroli* was read out at court. His approval is noted in the margin of the manuscript preserved in the Vatican.⁵⁷ The Franks presented themselves as deserving the leadership of the Christian empire, but they did not need to be the chosen people or a new Israel for that; they just needed to speak up for all those things the Eastern emperors had forgotten: the orthodox faith, correct interpretation of Scripture and the universal Church.

⁵⁴ 'Sancta synodus et venerabiles in Christo patres cum omnibus episcopis Germaniae, Galliae et Aequitaniae et toto catholicae pacis clero praesulibus Hispaniae': the Frankish bishops to the bishops of Spain (MGH Conc. 2.i, 143).

⁵⁵ 'Hanc igitur fidem orthodoxam et ab apostolicis traditam doctoribus et ab universali servatam ecclesia nos ... ubique in omnibus servare et praedicare profitemur': Charlemagne to the bishops of Spain (MGH Conc. 2.i, 158). On these letters (both of which Alcuin probably wrote), see Close, *Uniformiser la foi*, 115–19; Owen M. Phelan, *The Formation of Christian Europe: The Carolingians, Baptism, and the Imperium Christianum* (Oxford, 2014), 53–6.

⁵⁶ 'Anathematizat enim, "qui non instruunt omnem Christo dilectum populum adorare imagines": OC 3.7 (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 368).

⁵⁷ '[V]idelicet pene totus mundus Christi populo plenus sit': OC 3.7 (MGH Conc. 2 Suppl. 1, 368); the marginal note reads 'excellently [said]'.