



‘JOHN THE BAPTIST’S PRAYER’
or ‘The Descent into Hell’ from the *Exeter Book*
Text, Translation and Critical Study

M.R. RAMBARAN-OLM



Anglo-Saxon Studies 21

JOHN THE BAPTIST'S PRAYER

or

THE DESCENT INTO HELL
FROM THE EXETER BOOK

Anglo-Saxon Studies

ISSN 1475–2468

General Editors

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JOHN THE BAPTIST'S PRAYER

or

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FROM THE EXETER BOOK

TEXT, TRANSLATION AND CRITICAL STUDY

M. R. Rambaran-Olm

D. S. BREWER

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First published 2014
D. S. Brewer, Cambridge

ISBN 978-1-84384-366-5

D. S. Brewer is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Ltd
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DE, UK
and of Boydell & Brewer Inc.
668 Mt Hope Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620-2731, USA

website: www.boydellandbrewer.com

A CIP catalogue record of this publication is available
from the British Library

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This publication is printed on acid-free paper.

Typeset by Word and Page, Chester

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Acknowledgements

More often than not, the challenge of completing a monograph is made somewhat easier and life in general is a little less stressful with the knowledge that there are people who are cheering one on and offering support and encouragement, often through simple tasks and words; there have been many people who have helped, guided and encouraged me along my journey, to whom I am ever grateful.

Firstly, I owe many thanks to Graham Caie, whose scholarly advice and guidance was second to none. I could not have asked for a better mentor, and his patient, humorous and paternal nature made it a delight and honour to work with him. I would also like to thank Chris Jones and Jeremy Smith for offering helpful advice and additional guidance towards my research. Moreover, I owe much to Caroline Palmer, Rob Kinsey and Rohais Haughton and their colleagues at Boydell & Brewer for having faith in my work and for offering exceptional support, patience and guidance. I also thank Clive Tolley for undertaking the difficult task I gave him.

My research benefited greatly from the help of a number of other scholars who kindly offered advice, guidance and suggestions from all over the world. I am indebted to Tom Hall, Roy Liuzza, Murray McGillivray, Katie Lowe and Steve Hart for reading and commenting on portions of this edition, as well as Allen Frantzen, Abdullah Alger, Kevin Kiernan and Bruce Zuckerman for offering valuable comments. My research would have suffered if it had not been for Peter Thomas and Michael Howarth, who kindly allowed me to view the Exeter Book in Exeter. I will never forget how breathtaking that Old English manuscript looked when a fraction of light hit a folio in just the right spot, bringing the gold-leaf residue to life as it glistened on the folio. The hours spent with the manuscript in such a sublime setting will always remain with me. I would also like to thank Bernard Muir for his immense help and for allowing me to use his digital images for my research and for this edition. My appreciation goes to Margaret Dykes, the Morrisons and a number of other scholars and students who have offered advice, suggestions or words of encouragement along the way. Additionally, I extend my gratitude to the Lynne Grundy Trust and TOEBI for awarding me a number of research and travel grants.

Above all, the edition would never have been completed if not for the support of my parents, my husband and my little boy. I have not yet figured out how I can ever really repay my parents for the time, encouragement, patience and advice they have offered. The sacrifices they made for me to start and finish my research are countless, and I am indebted to them for

their never-ending support and unwavering faith in my potential even when I was doubtful. Finally, I am grateful for the patience demonstrated, sacrifices made and support offered by Chad, and for Lauchlan's gift of making me laugh at times when research weighed heavily on me. Thank you everyone, for my own 'descent into Hell' is now over!

Abbreviations

ANCL	<i>Ante-Nicene Christian Library. Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325</i> , ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, 9 vols. (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1867–1873), cited by volume and page number
ASPR	<i>Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records</i> , ed. G. P. Krapp and E. V. K. Dobbie, 6 vols. (New York, Columbia University Press, 1931–53)
BL	British Library
DOE	<i>Dictionary of Old English: A to G</i> . (2007). < http://tapor.library.utoronto.ca.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/doe/ >.
EETS	Early English Text Society (es: extra series; os: original series)
KB	Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague
NPNF	<i>A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church</i> , Series I and II, ed. P. Schaff, 28 vols. (Grand Rapids, W. B. Eerdmans, 1886–1900) cited by series and volume number
PG	<i>Patrologia cursus completus series Graeca</i> , ed. J.-P. Migne, 166 vols. (Paris, Garnier, 1857–66)
PL	<i>Patrologia cursus completus series Latina</i> , ed. J.-P. Migne, 217 vols. (Paris, Garnier, 1844–55)

For Mom and Dad

Introduction

The purpose of this edition is to produce a new interpretation of the Exeter Book poem currently entitled *The Descent into Hell*. It is a poem that has been both neglected and misinterpreted over the centuries, and hence a fresh reading of the poem is long overdue. My study focuses extensively on the poem's content, meaning and the methods by which the main theme is conveyed. At the heart of this edition is a change in the poem's current title that, in my view, better reflects its central theme. However, in order to interpret the poem it is essential to have as accurate an edition of the work as possible. For that reason I also present a critical edition of the poem.

As there are several types of editions, it is important to explain why I chose specifically to undertake a critical edition and include a number of editorial practices from other types of editions for the poem I have renamed *John the Baptist's Prayer*.¹ L. Reynolds and N. Wilson argue that on its most basic level the goal of the critical editor is to reconstruct the authorial form of the text. Regarding editorial practice in general, Reynolds and Wilson claim that 'the basic essential equipment is taste, judgment, common sense and the capacity to distinguish what is wrong in a given context: as these remain the perquisite of human wit'.² Reynolds and Wilson are correct, since common sense, logic and critical judgement should feature highly in editing; however, one might question what is meant by 'what is wrong in a given context'. My principal purpose is to create a critical edition by establishing a text free of demonstrable errors and documenting any variants. I follow the editing principle first introduced by F. Bowers which involves leaving the critically established text free of editorial intervention and relegating comments, analysis and any other editorial matter to the Commentary and Appendices.³ At its core, a critical edition aims to present a text that reflects the author's work as opposed to the editor's or scribe's, and while I endeavour to allow the voices of the poet and scribe to speak as much as possible through the text by presenting the established text and apparatus without self-evident errors, it would be imprudent to state that I have presented the text in its original form, especially as there has been so much damage to the manuscript with

¹ I refer to the poem as *The Descent into Hell* in the first two chapters of this book, since the topics deal with historical and linguistic aspects of the poem. From Ch. 3 ff., I refer to the poem as *John the Baptist's Prayer*.

² L. Reynolds and N. Wilson (1974), *Scribes and Scholars*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 213.

³ See F. Bowers (1959), *Textual and Literary Criticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 140–8. See also F. Bowers (1964), *Bibliography and Textual Criticism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 1–80.

consequent lacunae. I have included punctuation, capitalization, lineation and line numbering to help modern readers through the poem. It is important to note that the transcription produced in this edition on pp. 205–7 is consistent with those found in diplomatic editions because it reproduces as accurately as possible the current state of the text in the manuscript. Whereas the established text mediates between presenting a text that represents the poet's original and what appears in the manuscript, the transcription demonstrates the poem's transmission from poet to scribe and offers a more faithful representation of the text as it exists in the manuscript.

The textual critic W. W. Greg introduced the copy-text method of editing by distinguishing 'between the significant or . . . "substantive" readings of the text, those namely that affect the author's meaning or the essence of his expression, and others, such in general as spelling, punctuation, word-division, and the like, affecting mainly its formal presentation, which may be regarded as the accidents, or . . . "accidentals" of the text'.⁴ Greg's proposal advocates editorial choice in determining which of two competing readings works most appropriately for a text. Following Greg's theory of editorial practice I have created a critical edition which focuses more on the poet's expression and the meaning within the poem, rather than presenting a diplomatic edition that most closely concentrates on the linguistic, codicological and palaeographical features of a particular manuscript. I emphasize the poem's aesthetic features, that is to say, I focus on its content and the message it conveys, while reminding readers that this is a poem, a work of art. At the core of this edition is a reinterpretation of the poem which aims, as E. B. Irving Jr states, to 'present it as now, trying to bring out its still living qualities as a still possible experience for today's readers'.⁵

With regard to the stemmatological analysis of the manuscript there is relatively little to convey. Because there is only one extant manuscript of *John the Baptist's Prayer* concerns about whether or not the edition is a 'best text' edition do not feature highly in this book. The reality is that only one manuscript has survived, so in light of this the edition is a 'best text' edition. There are no other manuscripts that contain similar passages to use for codicological, palaeographical or stemmatological analyses, although this is not to suggest that stemmatological analyses have been completely overlooked in this edition. Discussion of the manuscript as it has survived as well as an examination of what the scribal hand or hands tell us with regard to copy-text editing is included. Analysis of the scribal hand, as discussed on pp. 13–14 and 27–30 suggests that the text was copied, so the manuscript used for this edition is clearly not the authorial original.⁶ Although there is no way of confirming or discrediting the notion that the poet and the scribe were one and the same, existing evidence within the Exeter Book as a whole suggests that the entire

⁴ Greg (1950), 'The Rationale of Copy-Text', *Studies in Bibliography* 3, 21.

⁵ E. B. Irving Jr (1998), 'Editing Old English Verse: The Ideal', *New Approaches to Editing Old English Verse*, ed. S. Larratt Keefer and K. O'Brien O'Keeffe. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, p. 14.

⁶ The scribal hand as it relates to the manuscript as opposed to the date of composition of the poem is further discussed on pp. 18–22.

manuscript was recorded by a single scribe and may have been compiled by a single anthologist at a later date.⁷ Pinning down a date of composition of each text within the Exeter Book is difficult and adds to the complexity of each poem's transmission, recording and position within the manuscript. Similarly, the textual transmission of *John the Baptist's Prayer* is not straightforward and the poet and scribe share a complex relationship. Traditional editing of classical works endeavored to eliminate features of texts which were scribal rather than authorial in order to 'reverse the process of transmission and restore the words of the ancients as closely possible to the original form'.⁸ B. Cerquiglini, however, argues that 'l'oeuvre littéraire, au Moyen Age, est une variable . . . qu'une main fut première, parfois, sans doute, importe moins que cette incessante réécriture d'une oeuvre qui appartient à celui qui, de nouveau, la dispose et lui donne forme'.⁹ As Cerquiglini notes, medieval texts are not static, rather they change and become pluralized with each stage of transmission. Textual mobility and variation are not ignored in this edition; thus the established text, translation, transcription and the digitally reconstructed text found on pp. 146–59 and pp. 205–9 offer insight into the 'mobilité essentielle du texte [tôt] medieval'.¹⁰ The various interpretations of the text offered in this edition acknowledge different stages of the poem's transmission throughout its history from its oral roots to its recording, compilation and reconstruction, and reveal, as J. J. McGann claims, that 'the fully authoritative text is . . . always one which has been socially produced; as a result, the critical standard for what constitutes authoritativeness [does] not rest with the author and his intentions alone'.¹¹ With the understanding that the author and scribe of *John the Baptist's Prayer* were not the same individual, care has been taken throughout this edition to differentiate explicitly between scribal or authorial features when discussing specific aspects of the poem while also acknowledging that complete textual authority does not rest solely with the poet.

While I certainly agree that highlighting the linguistic and palaeographical features of the text offers greater understanding of the process involved in the text's creation, the linguistic analysis has not made me relinquish the goal of approaching the text from a literary viewpoint. As a result, while scrutinizing the linguistic features and examining the manuscript, the folia damage and highlighting some linguistic peculiarities, I also explore the poem's content and theme in light of the relationship between the Old English text and its audience. As M. Lapidge states, 'the manuscript, rather than the author, has come to dominate the consciousness of editors of Old English verse [and] every

⁷ See pp. 14–17, 59 of this edition.

⁸ Reynolds and Wilson (1974), p. 212.

⁹ 'the literary work, of the Middle Ages, is a variable . . . the fact that one hand was the first is sometimes, without doubt, less important than this constant rewriting of a work which belongs to whoever fixes it and gives it a new form'. B. Cerquiglini (1989), *Éloge de la variante*. Paris: Cerf, p. 57.

¹⁰ 'essential mobility of the [early] medieval text'. P. Zumthor (1972), 'Essai de poétique medieval' in *Collection Poétique*. Paris: Seuil, p. 71.

¹¹ J. J. McGann (1983), *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 75.

last detail of the manuscript is lovingly reproduced by editors: orthography, punctuation, pointing, and so on.¹² In other words, Lapidge contends that when editors primarily concentrate on palaeographical and codicological features, the text in many ways still remains remote to a reader. Offering little or no attention to literary aspects and features can result in a reader missing out on the primary function of the poem, its literary purpose. Thus, a central aspect of this edition is an analysis of the poem's main theme and how this message is conveyed. Referring back to Reynolds and Wilson's comment on editorial practice with regard to analysing 'what is wrong with a text', I do not merely investigate problems associated with *John the Baptist's Prayer*, whether they be codicological, thematic or other issues, but more importantly I explore the problems associated with previous interpretations of the poem. To summarize, this book offers insight into the poem's language and codicological features, but focuses more on the theological, historical and literary aspects. As a result, the edition belongs to the growing number of manuscript studies that represent both cultural process and cultural product.¹³ Although 'cultural process' is often applied to archaeological analysis, I use the term here to explain that this edition explores the changes and developments within a segment of Christian thought that assisted in the creation of *John the Baptist's Prayer*. At the same time, I also explore the transmission of the poem in its manuscript form to a twenty-first-century digital representation.

The purpose for undertaking this edition derives in part from the lack of critical attention that *John the Baptist's Prayer* has received and, when it has received attention, it is either mentioned in a negative sense or referenced in a slightly patronizing manner.¹⁴ Critical reception of the poem varies from disdain to conditional approval. Early critics like W. Mackie described some passages as a struggle, since 'it is difficult to give a sensible rendering of lines or passages that can never have been anything but incoherent babbling', while E. V. K. Dobbie further claims that it is somewhat 'clumsy and abrupt' in its transitions.¹⁵ Following Dobbie's sentiment, T. A. Shippey argues that the poem is both clumsy and confusing, and G. K. Anderson claims that the poem's 'poetic presentation is distinctly inferior' to other poems.¹⁶ It would be incorrect to suggest that there has not been some appreciation for the text as

¹² M. Lapidge (1991), 'Textual Criticism and the Literature of Anglo-Saxon England'. T. Northcote Toller Lecture 1990, *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 73, 39.

¹³ On 'cultural process' I refer to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Archaeology*, ed. T. Darvill (2008), s.v., which defines the term as a type of research designed to analyse the changes and interactions in cultural systems and the processes by which human cultures change over time.

¹⁴ It is important to note that the earlier editions of the text focus a great deal on codicological and linguistic features, on theories of authorship and identifying the speaker/s; however, all previous editions fail to address the intricacies of the poem's contents and its main theme. See Ch. 3, n. 1, for further discussion of earlier editions.

¹⁵ W. Mackie (ed.) (1934), *The Exeter Book. Part II: Poems IX–XXXII*. London: EETS os 194, Oxford University Press, p. vii. G. P. Krapp and E. V. K. Dobbie (eds.) (1936), *The Exeter Book, ASPR* III, p. lxii.

¹⁶ T. A. Shippey (1976), *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, p. 42. See also Ch. 3, n. 16. G. K. Anderson (1949, repr. 1997), *The Literature of the Anglo-Saxons*. New York: Russell & Russell, p. 174.

several scholars offer positive and constructive small-scale studies. For instance, R. Trask highlights the message of harmony and claims that ‘in totality the poem seems an admirable unity’.¹⁷ In T. D. Hill’s examination of several cryptic passages in the poem he comments on the ‘epic qualities of the poem’s theme and its language . . . [and] show[s] that the *Descent into Hell* is aesthetically and intellectually coherent as a work of art’.¹⁸ Similarly, P. Conner assesses the poem’s structure and concludes that the poet cleverly uses liturgical signals throughout the poem.¹⁹ Rather than discussing vexing passages in the poem, its originality in connection with the Lenten season is applauded and further analysed in separate articles by C. B. Hieatt and Z. Izydorczyk.²⁰

Despite some scholarly praise for the poem, the overall consensus is that ‘when all allowance has been made for the modes of “typological understanding”’,²¹ the poem’s contents are still troublesome and problematic.²² The poem is structurally and thematically complex and with the lacunae aside it is a struggle to identify the main theme because it is not made fully explicit within the text. While I applaud efforts to represent the poem in a more positive light, I maintain that it is more than simply a charming little piece. Rather, I will argue that the poem is multifaceted and the theme is conveyed in a highly sophisticated and methodical manner.

The main reasoning behind such restrained appreciation is because the poem still confuses scholars in terms of its theme and content. Key questions to be addressed in this book include: What is the poem’s main theme? What is the main function of the poem? What indicators in the poem assist in identifying its main theme? And does the current title represent the poem’s main theme? The poem does not have a *descensus* narrative at its core, so the most obvious question is: what is the poem about? To these questions, I suggest a solution which is at the core of this edition. Previous critical analysis has focused on what the poem lacks in relation to typical narratives dealing with the *descensus* rather than examining the poem as it exists, along with its intricacies, wordplay, and imagery. What many critics who find the poem’s theme problematic fail to realize is that the exclusion of specific characteristics typical of *descensus* narratives has a specific purpose, and the reason why readings of the poem are often difficult is because it is approached under the false assumption that it is essentially a *descensus* narrative, due in part to its misleading title. I argue that

¹⁷ R. Trask (1971), ‘“The Descent into Hell” of the Exeter Book’, *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 72, 434.

¹⁸ T. D. Hill (1972), ‘Cosmic Stasis and the Birth of Christ: The Old English *Descent into Hell*, Lines 99–106’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 61, 388.

¹⁹ P. Conner (1980), ‘The Liturgy and the Old English “Descent into Hell”’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 79, 179–91. Liturgy and its connection to the poem are discussed in more detail in Ch. 3.

²⁰ C. B. Hieatt (1990), ‘Transition in the Exeter Book *Descent into Hell*. The Poetic Use of a *Stille* yet *Geondflow[ende]* River’, *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 91, 431–8 and Z. Izydorczyk (1990), ‘The Inversion of Paschal Events in the Old English “Descent into Hell”’, *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 91, 439–47.

²¹ Shippey (1976), p. 42.

²² See pp. 12, 17 and 25 for discussion on the lacunae. See also pp. 208–9 for a facsimile image of one damaged folio and its reconstructed counterpart.

the central focus is not to articulate the apocryphal account of Christ's Descent into Hell; rather, it is on baptism, and an appreciation of John the Baptist's role is crucial to understanding the poem's content, structure and purpose.

Chapter 1 provides historical, palaeographical and linguistic analyses of the folios that contain the poem while offering an examination of the leaves in the wider context of the history of the Exeter Book codex and its compilation. Close examination of the manuscript in Exeter has led to a number of palaeographical discoveries and confirmation of some previous conjectures.²³ This chapter is further supported with linguistic analysis on pp. 22–7 which serves to highlight specific features scrutinized by previous critics. Great effort is made to resolve previously identified cruces wherever possible, while also calling attention to noteworthy features such as one hapax legomenon and one neologism in the text.²⁴ Although considerable attention is paid to the tangible evidence of the manuscript and text, I devote the subsequent chapters of this book to an investigation of the poem's main theme and examine how the poem's title misrepresents the foremost topic being articulated. Thus, my editorial approach 'in this schema is less the giant of nineteenth-century philology than a technician whose job it is to present the "text" in its multivalent forms'.²⁵

While the poem's main theme is arguably not a narrative about the Descent, it is important to understand the history of church doctrine on this topic and how it was understood in the Anglo-Saxon period. Chapter 2 discusses the background history of the Harrowing of Hell, its complex nature and evolution within ecclesiastical history and its appeal for Anglo-Saxons. Further discussed in the chapter is the complex nature and long history of the doctrine's origin within the church along with an analysis of its commentators. The analysis includes an examination of the evolution of the *descensus* theme from the first century until the tenth, supplemented by the catalogue contained in Appendix 1. This examination demonstrates through historical and theological analysis the doctrine's popularity and survival despite having little biblical support, while also providing a record of the complicated thought process involved in its establishment through the words of the theologians and Christian commentators who helped shape the doctrine. The results of investigating the origins of the *descensus* reveal how the doctrine became so attractive in its narrative form that it eventually permeated Anglo-Saxon art and literature outside monastic walls, and more importantly for this edition, helped explain the poet's starting point for his own narrative on baptism and redemption. Chapter 2, therefore, examines where the tradition of Christ's Descent originated, what its appeal entailed, and how any given poet could reinterpret and borrow from this Christian tradition to create a unique piece.

Chapter 3 provides the literary analysis of the poem, focusing firstly on the title, how it has affected the poem's interpretation and why a name change is

²³ See Ch. 1, n. 9, for a list of conjectural readings and proposed reconstructions.

²⁴ See further discussion of *bimengdest* (line 93) and *end* (line 71) on p. 26.

²⁵ K. O'Brien O'Keeffe (1998), 'Introduction', in *New Approaches to Editing Old English Verse*, ed. S. Larratt Keefer and K. O'Brien O'Keeffe. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, p. 8.

important. This is central to the edition. Many modern readers' expectations of the content of a text are triggered by the title of the work, so the title is of major significance. Thus, the misleading title *The Descent into Hell* makes it easy to see why the content is confusing. My proposed title acts as a guide, as it leads to an interpretation of the poem that is focused on John and the baptismal theme as conveyed through liturgical echoes in a prayer-like manner. What follows is a discussion on the poet's treatment of time, how he fuses the heroic tradition with his Christian theme, the liturgical structure of the poem, the emphasis on baptism and the dramatic force in the poem that emphasizes text and audience interaction. Whereas previous scholars like Dobbie have slighted the structural cohesiveness of the poem, subsections 2–6 in Chapter 3 demonstrate that the poem's structure is straightforward, while demonstrating how the language and overall structure work together to reveal the baptismal message of the poem. The various readings of the text in this chapter show what guided the poet in his deviation from traditional renderings of the *descensus*, thus demonstrating that he was not inspired so much by a textual source, but by didactic instinct. The poet exploits the ideas that Christ's Descent contains a universal message and provides an opportunity through re-enactment for Christians to participate in baptism. This chapter examines how the timely baptismal message revealed through the homiletic language and imagery shares strong associations with the Lenten season, and it further highlights how temporal references work to urge the poem's Anglo-Saxon audience into immediate action.

While continuing to highlight the poem's main theme, Chapter 4 provides a comparative analysis of other literary treatments of the *descensus*. The fourth-century *Gospel of Nicodemus* provides the first narrative account of Christ's Harrowing of Hell; thus Chapter 4 begins with a comparison of the apocryphal text in relation to *John the Baptist's Prayer*. This assessment offers insight into the original narrative which laid the groundwork for subsequent texts; however, when compared to *John the Baptist's Prayer*, the striking dissimilarities re-emphasize the fact that the poet's deviation from the apocryphal source is intentional, thus further enforcing the poem's main theme. Subsections 2 and 3 focus on the antiphonal passages in *John the Baptist's Prayer* as they relate to similar passages in *Blickling Homily VII*, *Christ and Satan* and *Christ I*, and although similar in form and in terms of whom they address, the antiphons in these other texts are dissimilar in tone to those in *John the Baptist's Prayer*. Analysis of these antiphons in comparison with *John the Baptist's Prayer* shows the poem to be consistently didactic while emphasizing passivity exercised by certain characters, as opposed to calling attention to spiritual warfare and the cosmic struggle between Christ and Satan. Further analysis of the antiphons illustrates that other texts vary in their treatment of the *descensus* and correspond more closely to a specific scene unfolding within the whole *descensus* narrative. Subsection 4 provides an analysis of all other treatments of the *descensus* narrative in Old English poetry, while demonstrating creative and diverse approaches to the *descensus* theme, which further establishes the foremost theme in *John the Baptist's Prayer*.

In the concluding subsection in Chapter 4, a short analysis of the themes of the *descensus* and baptism in Anglo-Saxon art is presented in relation to the poem. To discuss visual art relating to either the Harrowing or the baptismal sacrament would be a book in itself; however, in subsection 5, two pieces are examined, chosen firstly because they are important art-works dating from the late Anglo-Saxon period and secondly because, I argue, they provide further revelation of the poem's main theme and also reveal how both theological subjects were important topics of representation in art as well as literature within the Anglo-Saxon period.

Pages 146–59 contain the established text and translation. With regard to the former my approach, as briefly discussed on pp. 1–2, is to mediate between a text which closely represents the poet's original composition and a text that will not look overly remote to modern readers. Thus, punctuation is added to facilitate reading, but orthography, letters and spelling are only changed in instances where there is most obviously a scribal error. When necessary, in cases where scribal errors are obvious or manuscript readings questionable, I make appropriate emendations and then give clear explanations in a footnote, with further discussion of my emendations in the subsequent Commentary section.²⁶ Modern punctuation serves to facilitate understanding by making the text accessible to the modern reader. Moreover, by formatting the text with the conventional line layout and caesura, I present the text in a manner that facilitates an appreciation of how the poem might have originally been read.

Regarding line numbering, I follow most editors who claim that there are 137 lines in the poem. Mackie first suggested a 138-line scheme, but this number scheme is not entirely convincing. The rationale behind his line numbering is due in part to the lacunae that has destroyed several words; thus he suggests that there is room for another line. However, the alliteration of the line and the size of the lacuna seem to suggest otherwise, as discussed later. Close examination of the folio in the Exeter Book was carried out and digital reconstructions were developed to aid in validating or disproving several theories relating to the words that might have been part of the missing lines. As a result of personal examination of the folios and undertaking digital reconstruction I provide evidence that the 137-line poem works coherently, even more so than its previously suggested 138-line counterpart.²⁷

While some translations attempt to reflect the alliterative practices of the original poem in their choice of present-day English vocabulary, I have chosen to present the translation more literally in order to demonstrate the baptismal

²⁶ Some examples of this are illustrated in lines 6 (*rēone*), 8 (*blīðne*), 62 (*monigne*), and 129 (*pēah*) and accompanying notes in the Commentary. While J. Cramer and F. Holthausen go beyond corrections where the text necessitates it, making changes, corrections and additions to the text for interpretative reasons, on the other hand, C. Grein, B. Thorpe and I. Gollancz are inclined to retain the manuscript forms as long as they make sense and are identifiable. *ASPR* is inconsistent in its treatment of the linguistic data, and adopts corrections rather unsystematically. W. Mackie retains manuscript forms, while T. A. Shippey emends the text on account of interpretation. B. Muir provides corrections where manuscript evidence exists, while also adopting some spelling alterations based on previous scholarly interpretation.

²⁷ See nn. 22 and 23.

Introduction

message in the poem. My glossary aims to provide a wider range of possible meanings, rather than simply providing modern synonyms. My decision to present the translation by retaining the line-by-line structure of Old English verse, as opposed to presenting it as a prose text, will allow a reader to compare words from an Old English line with its translated counterpart in instances when comparison necessitates, while at the same time not simply presenting the poem as a block of prose text.

In summary: my intention in this edition is to demonstrate how misreadings of the poem have been caused, in part, by the misleading title, as the poem's central theme is not concerned with Christ's actual Descent. What the book proves is that the poem is not inferior to other *descensus* narratives, and that previous scholarship has failed to distinguish between a text in which the content is inferior in quality and one that has been misinterpreted.

Palaeography, Codicology and Language

THE EXETER BOOK MANUSCRIPT

The Exeter Book, also known as manuscript 3501 in the Library of the Dean and Chapter of Exeter Cathedral in Exeter, contains the only extant text of *The Descent into Hell* or *John the Baptist's Prayer*. Dating of the manuscript has not gone without controversy, since it has been difficult to date the specific poetic works within the manuscript.¹ Despite this dating controversy the manuscript is generally attributed to the latter half of the tenth century, and codicological and literary evidence suggests that the entire manuscript was both designed and copied c. 965–75. The Exeter Book may very well be ‘the oldest surviving book of vernacular poetry from Anglo-Saxon England’² and has been at Exeter after it was given to the resident Bishop Leofric (1016–72) who moved the Episcopal see to Exeter from Crediton in 1050.³ Before Leofric’s death on 10 February 1072, he requested the compilation of an itemized donation list comprised of books and religious artifacts with the intention of leaving the listed items to Exeter Cathedral and its community.⁴ The item listed as *-i- mycel englisc boc be gehwilcu(m) þingu(m) on leoðwisan geworht*⁵ is, with reasonable certainty, said to be the earliest reference to the Exeter Book, although scholarly identification is not completely conclusive. P. Conner argues that there seems to be a substantial amount of evidence to suggest that the manuscript was written in either Crediton or Exeter. He supports his claim with evidence including the manuscript’s date and its association with other manuscripts either from Exeter or connection to Leofric, notwithstanding its most certain mention in the donation list.⁶

¹ For a detailed discussion on the complexity of dating the codices in the Exeter Book see B. J. Muir (ed.) (2000), *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*. 2nd ed. 2 vols. Exeter: Short Run Press, pp. 1–3.

² Ibid., p. 1.

³ For a discussion concerning the dates of Leofric’s episcopal activity, life and death see F. Barlow (1972), ‘Leofric and his Times’, *Leofric of Exeter: Essays in Commemoration of the Foundation of Exeter Cathedral Library in A.D. 1072*, ed. F. Barlow et al. Exeter: Exeter University Press, pp. 1–16.

⁴ Muir (2000), p. 2, n. 7, claims that internal evidence indicates that the list was most likely drawn up in the period 1069–72. See also M. Förster (1933), ‘Zum Exeter-Kodex’, *Beiblatt zur Anglia* 44, 14–15.

⁵ On fol. 1v of manuscript 3501. Translation: ‘-i- a large English book about various things, written in verse’.

⁶ P. Conner (1993), *Anglo-Saxon Exeter. A Tenth-Century Cultural History. Studies in Anglo-Saxon History*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, pp. 48–94.

The manuscript consists of 131 fols. with at least one missing folio. However, the four leaves which are relevant to this study (fols. 119v–121v) have survived, albeit with several lacunae.⁷ The manuscript has suffered from various types of damage, suggesting that its survival became dependent on its practical use, possibly as a cutting board and stabilizer for a messy pot in the scriptorium. Among the most visible damage there remain a number of slashes beginning on fol. 8, the first page of the manuscript, indicating that it was used as a cutting board. Evidence also reveals that the codex was used to stabilize a messy pot, exposing the first folio to a circular stain caused by a liquid substance that might have been glue. As though liquid damage was not enough, the manuscript was also exposed to fire, as burn marks are now visible on what was once the exposed back of the codex. Missing strips of various folios have also been sporadically cut out of the manuscript, rendering the text either illegible or difficult to read in some instances. Unlike some of the uses of the manuscript that have left it with scars and irreparable damage, its use to store gold-leaf at some point has left rather charming effects, resulting in a shimmery residue.⁸

The most severe damage, that being the diagonal ash-burn, is of relevance to this study since the burn-mark has affected the last fourteen folios of the manuscript, three of which are scrutinized here. Although the initial traces of the burn are on fol. 117r, losses to the manuscript become increasingly larger and fols. 120r–121v contain large lacunae in the middle of the text which make it impossible to read various lines within the text.⁹

GATHERINGS AND FOLIO PREPARATION

The circumstances surrounding the manuscript's compilation have not gone without debate, and although some argue that the codex is most likely one complete unit, studies by Conner observe that the manuscript is a gathering of three separate booklets.¹⁰ B. J. Muir states that preparation of each gathering of the manuscript was achieved in the same manner, as 'the four bifolia

⁷ The second half of fol. 119 (which is the first leaf in the quire) has been lost. For further information on this see J. Pope (1974), 'An Unexpected Lacuna in the Exeter Book: Divorce Proceedings for an Ill-matched Couple in the Old English Riddles', *Speculum* 49, 615–22.

⁸ A detailed chart and analysis of the folios containing remnants of gold-leaf in the Exeter Book is available in B. J. Muir (1989), 'A Preliminary Report on a New Edition of the Exeter Book', *Scriptorium* 43.2, 284–8, col. 10.

⁹ For various readings and theories concerning the missing words see remarks at lines 30b–31a, 32, 60, 61, 90–3, 94, 123, and 124–5 of the Commentary. See also my article (2007), 'Two Remarks in the Exeter Book's "Descent into Hell"', *Notes and Queries* 54, 1–2.

¹⁰ See P. Conner (1986), 'The Structure of the Exeter Book Codex (Cathedral Library, MS 3501)', *Scriptorium* 40, 233–42. Although Conner bases his claims that the manuscript can be divided into three separate booklets on palaeographical observations and literary relationships among the texts, several critics have reservations about this assertion. See Muir (1989), pp. 83–4, and (2000), pp. 22–3; D. Megginson (1992), 'The Written Language of Old English Poetry', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto; and F. Gameson and R. Gameson (1995), 'Review of P. W. Conner, *Anglo-Saxon Exeter: A Tenth Century Cultural History*', *Notes and Queries* 42, 228–30. For further discussion of the codex division theory see the 'Anthologist and sectional divisions' portion of this edition.

were folded and pricked along a vertical ruling, then laid out flat and ruled horizontally'.¹¹ He further notes that once the vertical pricks and horizontal ruling were in place, deeply impressed ruling frames were positioned, with the folia containing *The Descent into Hell* being no exception. My observation of the manuscript confirms Muir's description of the codex, especially in relation to *The Descent into Hell* poem. Fols. 119v–121v include the vertical and horizontal rulings that are evident on other folia within the manuscript. Close examination of the five leaves containing *The Descent into Hell* poem indicates that the scribe carefully observed the visible margins, keeping a consistently uniform writing frame.

THE SCRIBE AND SCRIPT

The most detailed and comprehensive analysis of the script appears in Conner's monograph, in his earlier codicological analysis and Muir's anthology.¹² Conner offers useful tables regarding variation and distribution of certain letters throughout the codex, but most of his attention focuses on analysis of the script to support his argument that the codex comprises three booklets. Muir records further occurrences of specific word forms in a number of tables, but the description of the script and scribe described in his anthology is brief. While Muir and Conner disagree on the manuscript's compilation, they both agree with previous observations made by Ker and Sisam that there was a single scribe. Because there is insufficient evidence to prove that there is more than one scribe, I agree with previous editors who argue that there was a single accomplished scribe. What is important to this study is that the scribe who copied out *The Descent into Hell* wrote in square Anglo-Saxon minuscule with some examples of uncial forms. The majority of letter forms are minuscule, but the scribal hand uses both uncial and minuscule forms for the letter *s* (*s* and *ſ*) and the uncial form for *d* (*ð*) is used in *The Descent into Hell*. There is variation of thickness in various letter forms. For instance, the letter *m* demonstrates thick vertical strokes, the letter *b* exhibits an alternation of thick and thin strokes on the square axis, while the letter *g* illustrates the alternation of thick and thin strokes on the diagonal axis. The script in *The Descent into Hell* is consistent with that of the rest of the codex, especially in the scribe's adherence to the line guides on each folio. As a result of the line guides some letters like *m*, *n*, and *u* are often flattened or leveled along the top. My observations of the script contained on fols. 119v–121v reaffirm R. Flower's description of the general appearance of the script. He states:

The script achieves a liturgical, almost monumental effect by the stern character of its design and the exact regularity of its execution. . . . The line of writing, by the marked flattening of certain letters, has the effect of being level along the top, but the danger of monotony is avoided by the strong ascenders and

¹¹ Muir (2000), p. 12.

¹² See Conner (1993), pp. 60–80, (1986), pp. 237–40 and Muir (1989), pp. 282–3.

descenders which necessarily abound in Anglo-Saxon script. These combine with narrow treatment of such letters as *u*, *m*, *n* to give the whole page of script a marked up-and-down character which contributes greatly to the set, archaic aspect of the writing. But this impression is to some extent alleviated by certain calligraphic delicacies such as the use of fine hair-lines as decorative adjuncts or finishing strokes to certain letters . . . and the variety of forms employed for a number of the letters makes it clear that the manuscript was produced in a scriptorium in which the art of writing was carefully studied and where many older manuscripts of insular hands were available for study and imitation.¹³

Two small capital letters are used on leaf 119v (*ON*) to indicate the beginning of the poem and there are no ornamental letters or decorative motifs on the folia containing *The Descent into Hell* poem. Abbreviations and apices are further discussed on pp. 20–1 and 22 of this chapter.

THE ANTHOLOGIST AND SECTIONAL DIVISIONS

Although earlier critics contend that the anthologist put little if any thought into organizing the manuscript, there is a growing number of scholars who suggest that there is a purpose and order in the way the texts within the codex were compiled.¹⁴ Analysis of the Exeter Book's contents in relation to its anthologist raises a number of important questions such as: Who was the anthologist and were he and the scribe the same person? Was the anthologist simply a patron who requested a specific selection of texts? Was there more than one anthologist? For some of these questions, a considerable amount of analysis has only provided continued speculation. Whether the scribe and anthologist were different people is impossible to know. However, given the way the anthology is divided, it seems highly unlikely that the anthologist was merely a patron with a request for a selection of *leoðwisan*.¹⁵ The organization of the contents of the anthology is not arbitrary and the anthologist's direct involvement with the compilation seems most likely.

Whether or not the anthologist and scribe were one and the same begs further questions. If the anthologist was the scribe, did he refer to a single exemplar, copying the texts mechanically, or was he compiling the texts

¹³ R. Flower (1933), 'The Script of the Exeter Book', in *The Exeter Book of Old English Poetry*, ed. R. W. Chambers, M. Förster and R. Flower. London: Percy Lund, Humphries and Co., p. 83.

¹⁴ See K. Sisam (1953, repr. 1962), *Studies in the History of Old English Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. Sisam contends that the placing of Christ in judgement after the Ascension 'can be explained as a modest power of arrangement in a compiler' (p. 11). See also N. F. Blake (ed.) (1964), *The Phoenix*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. Blake further suggests that 'the Exeter Book differs from the other three poetic codices in that it is a poetic miscellany in which there does not appear to have been a recognizable principle of selection' (p. 2). For further reading on the compilation and sectional divisions see Muir (2000), pp. 16–25; and Conner (1986). For select reading on booklets within manuscripts see P. R. Robinson (1978), 'Self-Contained Units in Composite Manuscripts of the Anglo-Saxon Period', in *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts. Basic Readings*, ed. M. P. Richards. London: Routledge, pp. 25–35; and P. R. Robinson (1980), 'The "Booklet": A Self-Contained Unit in Composite Manuscripts', in *Codicologica 3: Essais typologiques*, ed. A. Grujts and J. P. Gumbert. Leiden: Brill, p. 48.

¹⁵ Literally 'poetical manner', meaning 'verse'.

to suit a different structural or thematic plan? What is the origin of the collection of poems in the Exeter Book and were they selected from pre-existing poetic collections? Were the poems copied as a single entity or in three separate booklets? And finally, can *The Descent into Hell* offer any evidence in determining the scribe, anthologist and the compilation of the entire codex?

Two arguments have been made about the organization of the codex. One by Conner contends that the anthology consists of three separate booklets possibly written in a non-linear pattern; while Muir, on the other hand, argues that a thematic link throughout the anthology suggests that there is evidence of a thoughtful and more systematic arrangement of the poems within the Exeter Book.¹⁶ Although a definitive conclusion cannot be made to this question, some convincing observations about the codex as an anthology can be made. Muir contends that 'it has been observed that the most apparent organizational feature of the manuscript is that the long poems all come at the beginning, though not much more can be said about its structure'.¹⁷ However, there seems to be more to the compiling of the poems other than just the number of lines each text contains. Although scholars like Conner and Muir may not completely agree on where the sectional divisions occur, I argue, like them, that the poems in the entire codex were placed with thematic relationships in mind.¹⁸

There certainly seems to be a strong thematic link that runs throughout the anthology and *The Descent into Hell's* location within the Exeter Book attests to that conclusion.¹⁹ From *Christ I* to *Juliana*, which are in fact the largest poems in the manuscript, the first eight poems engage with various models

¹⁶ Based on his codicological examinations of the booklet gatherings, binding, folios and thematic organization, Conner suggests that the three bound books were written and arranged in a 2, 3, 1 order. For further analysis see Conner (1986), pp. 233–4, and (1993), pp. 95–147. For Muir's codicological analysis see Muir (1989), pp. 275–88 and (2000), pp. 3, 16–25.

¹⁷ Muir (2000), p. 22. For additional discussion of the codex's arrangement of poems see R. M. Liuzza (1990), 'The Old English Christ and Guthlac Texts, Manuscripts and Critics', *Review of English Studies* 41, 1–11. Liuzza rightly argues that there is a contradiction in the ASPR editors' claim concerning sectional division in the anthology. On the one hand, the ASPR editors contend that the scribe's judgement is evident in the manner in which the sectional divisions are placed within the manuscript, yet on the other, they disregard their previous argument 'on several occasions (*Riddles* 3, 43, 48) neglecting to note the secondary division of *Ascension* at fol. 15a (line 517)' (p. 3). See Muir (2000), p. 23, for a more detailed analysis of the structure of the poems grouped together at the beginning of the codex.

¹⁸ See Ch. 3, pp. 58–9, for further analysis of the poem's place within the Exeter Book in relation to thematic links throughout the codex. For further arguments concerning the thematic links within the Exeter Book see Muir (2000), p. 22, n.63; C. Chase (1974), 'God's Presence Through Grace as the Theme of Cynewulf's Christ II and the Relationship of this to *Christ I* and *Christ III*', *Anglo-Saxon England* 3, 87–101; Liuzza (1990, 6–10); J. Roberts (1979) (ed.), *The Guthlac Poems of the Exeter Book*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 29–31; L. K. Shook (1961), 'The Prologue of the Old English Guthlac', *Medieval Studies* 23, 294–30; and L. K. Shook (1960), 'The Burial Mound in Guthlac A', *Modern Philology* 58, 1–10.

¹⁹ What is illustrated here is that the thematic links in the Exeter Book are strong; however, I am not suggesting that the sections that I describe here form the actual structure of the codex, rather there are definite thematic links that bring the manuscript together as a unit. Until there is substantial codicological evidence that the Exeter Book was arranged in a 2, 3, 1 order, as Conner suggests (see n. 10 of this chapter), I am inclined to believe that the Exeter Book, although consisting of three booklets, was arranged in the order it has come down to us.

for Christian living, offering a smooth transition to the next section of poems from the *Wanderer* to the *Partridge* that deal with soul searching, proverbial wisdom, and the cultivation of the world and spirit. A number of poems directly preceding *The Descent into Hell* including *Judgement Day I*, and *Resignation A* and *B* as well as the four poems subsequently following *The Descent into Hell* are heavily influenced by Easter liturgy.²⁰ The homiletic *Judgement Day I* prompts listeners to remain penitent with their eyes on Doomsday, while *Resignation A* and *B* provide a view of the present day while offering a prayer for patience and humility on the soul's journey. *The Descent into Hell*, heavily influenced by Easter liturgy and its association with the soul's journey towards salvation confirmed through the example of baptism, is well suited to follow poems contemplating the present and future state of the soul. What follows is *Almsgiving*, continuing the theme of salvation by illustrating how generosity is required for Christians, whilst the poem *Pharaoh* deals with the Egyptian leader's army destroyed by the same waters that saved the Israelites. Although, at this point, it might seem that there is a discontinuity of theme in the Exeter Book, Muir suggests that:

The story of the Exodus is central to the Easter liturgy and its typological structure [and] the positioning of Pharaoh [at that point] in the manuscript must be considered the work of an anthologist with a purpose – it recalls that, throughout Salvation History, for Christians life has been renewed repeatedly through water (crossing the Red Sea, Ex. 15: 21–31); springing from the rock struck by Moses in the desert (Ex. 17: 1–7); through Christ's baptism (John 1: 29–34); and from the pierced side of Christ (John 19: 34–7).²¹

The final pieces in the series consist of two prayers: firstly the *Lord's Prayer I*, which provides a modest paraphrase of the Paternoster while stressing God's observance over and aid to humanity, and *Homiletic Fragment II*, an exhortation of praise for Christians in this transient world. Set to follow the texts that first deal with the soul's journey through present and future, *The Descent into Hell* provides a fitting link as it deals with the past, whilst the poet also speaks to readers in the present and looks forward to the future life for Christians who partake in baptism. Similarly, the echoes of liturgy in *The Descent into Hell*, a poem which draws heavily on Easter imagery and closes with an exhortation to Christ, provides a strong link to the subsequent texts which emphasize renewed life through salvation, righteous living and prayer.²² Arguably, it seems that the position of *The Descent into Hell* in the Exeter Book is no coincidence, as its place, nestled amongst texts of similar theme, provides a crucial transitional link between ideas relating to past and future representations of the soul's journey, while connecting with topics of salvation and life thereafter. The bridge that *The Descent into Hell* provides links the preceding and subsequent poems and their overriding messages

²⁰ The four subsequent poems are *Almsgiving*, *Pharaoh*, *Lord's Prayer I* and *Homiletic Fragment II*. It should be noted that the subject matter in *Azarias*, the sixth poem in the codex, is dominated with imagery and themes of the liturgy during Holy Week.

²¹ Muir (2000), p. 24.

²² The link with the Easter liturgy and baptism are discussed in Ch. 3, pp. 84–96.