

THE HOMILETIC NATURE OF CYNEWULF'S ASCENSION POEM

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Gregory's Evangelical Homily XXIX on the Ascension (PL 76.1213-19) is the inspiration for Paul the Deacon's Homily CXLIII (PL 95.1339-40), Cynewulf's *Christ II* ("The Ascension"), parts of Haymo's *In Die Sancto Ascensionis Domini* (PL 118.542-49), Aelfric's Homily XXI in his First Series of Catholic Homilies, and the Ascension homily edited by Morris and dating from the High Middle Ages.¹ *Christ II*, therefore, fits squarely into a continuous sequence of Ascension homilies derived from Gregory's original and ought logically to reflect this homiletic kinship. Cynewulf's poem, in fact, is so thoroughly homiletic in form, purpose, description, style, and origin that it is very likely that Cynewulf composed it as a poetic homily, albeit a homily directed towards individuals rather than congregations as such. In all likelihood, as with Alcuin's poetic Willibrord, *Christ II* was designed for private monastic meditation; that meditation would have been most meaningful on the feast of the Ascension when the monastic reader would also have been contemplating Gregory's Homily XXIX provided in the recitation of the Divine Office.²

Most of the concepts and even many of the details contained in Cynewulf's Ascension poem are traceable either directly or indirectly to Gregory's Evangelical Homily XXIX. In some cases Cynewulf's thematic development merely hints at his source; in other cases he expands upon that source and at other times rejects Gregory's material as intrusive

upon his thematic purpose. Differences in content, therefore, can generally be accounted for by the fact that Gregory's discourse is pericope in form and details each element of the biblical passage, whereas Cynewulf's poem is more limited in scope and more nearly relates formally to the thematic homily. As a result, for example, Cynewulf, unlike Aelfric who follows Gregory's example in the use of the pericope form,³ declines to elaborate on Christ's admonition "Praedicate Evangelium omni creaturae" ("Preach the Gospel to all creatures," col. 1214). Instead, he mentions the directive in his biblical paraphrase (481a-85a) and makes a concrete application of it in his acrostic when he asserts that he wishes to teach each of the beloved lest he neglect the needs of the soul. Similarly, Christ's promise of the power to cast out devils (a promise much discussed by Gregory and Aelfric) is paraphrased in Anglo-Saxon terms as an order to fell pagan idols (485b-88a).⁴ Unlike Aelfric, Cynewulf makes no mention of the significance of Thomas' doubting; of the act of preaching as a sowing of seed; of the importance of faith and baptism; of the significance of miracles; of the "coelum aereum" ("the airy heaven") and the "coelum aethereum" ("the ethereal heaven," col. 1217); or of the distinction between the "ascensions" of Elias, Enoch, and Christ. However, Cynewulf's unusual epithet "cyning clænra" ("king of the chaste," 703a) may echo the significance of this three-fold ascension since the perfection of each of the three men is gauged according to his personal purity and that of his mother. Similarly, the discussion of "Sedit a dextris Dei" ("He sat at the right hand of God," col. 1217) receives no specific elaboration, as it does in Gregory and Aelfric; and of these first eight sections of Gregory's homily there is only allusive imitation in Cynewulf (and detailed imitation in Aelfric). However, Cynewulf does make explicit use of sections nine to eleven.⁵ In section nine, Gregory discusses the significance of the angels' white robes at the Ascension (viz., "gaudium et solemnitas," "joy and solemnity," col. 1218) and the contrasting significance ("divinitas humiliata," "divine humility," col. 1218) of the evangelist's failure to mention such robes at Christ's nativity. Familiarity with this explanation is essential if the audience is to understand the poet's opening remarks that books do not mention the angels' white robes at Christ's nativity as they do at the Glorious Prince's Ascension:

Hwæpre in bocum ne cwið

þæt hy in hwitum þær hræglum oðywden
 in þa æpelan tid, swa hie eft dydon
 ða se brega mæra to Bethania,
 þeoden þrymfæst, his þegna gedryht
 gelaðade, leof weorud. (453b-58a)

[Yet it is not recorded in books that
 they appeared there in white robes in
 that noble time, as they afterwards did
 when that famous Lord, that Prince
 secure in glory, summoned his troop of
 followers, the beloved band, to Bethany.]

The verses, of course, are part of the pericope which Cynewulf is paraphrasing; "in bocum" ("in books," 453b) almost certainly refers to the Bible and possibly to Gregory and the exegetical tradition. By complicating the biblical account with reference to the nativity, Cynewulf implicitly involves the homiletic tradition and seems to have limited his audience to those conversant with the Divine Office since the allusion is so specific as to require more than the general familiarity one may assume of the churchgoing populace. Furthermore, the epithet "þeoden þrymfæst" ("Prince secure in glory," 457a) is interpretative; "þrymfæst" seems to reflect the "gaudium et solemnitas" of Gregory's homily. In addition, Cynewulf's comment on the white robes which he specifically states suit ("gedafenað") the messengers who wear them seems to suggest special significance:

Wel þæt gedafenað

þæt to þære blisse, beorhte gewerede,
 in þæs þeodnes burg þegnas cwoman,
 weorud wlitescyne (551b-54a)⁶

[It was certainly appropriate that his
 servants, the radiant host, came into
 the place of bliss, the city of the Lord,
 clothed in brightness.]

Such white robes would have been particularly meaningful to an audience acquainted with the homiletic explanation as it is recorded by Gregory and Aelfric. Similarly, introducing his acrostic *Cynewulf* returns to the significance of the white robes when he states:

Us secga^ð bec
 hu æt ærestan eadmod astag
 in middangeard mægna goldhord (785b-87b)
 [Books tell us how the Treasure of
 mankind at first descended humbly
 into middle-earth.]

"eadmod" ("humbly"), too, derives from the homily and refers to Gregory's seeing "divinitas humiliata" ("divine humility") in the fact that at Christ's birth angels are not reported to be clad in white robes. Here "bec" ("books") must refer to the homilists, and it suggests that "bocum" (453b) also does.⁷

Cynewulf's commentary on the Harrowing of Hell and on the Saviour's gifts to men are biblical, and are not based on Psalm 67.19 as Migne's edition suggests, but on St. Paul's use of that Psalm in Ephesians 4.8-13.⁸ Gregory, like *Cynewulf*, follows St. Paul's interpretation of the Psalm with the Apostle's expansion of "dedit dona hominibus" ("he gave gifts to men"); *Cynewulf*, however, senses the Anglo-Saxon's attraction towards St. Paul's interpretation of the Psalm and embellishes it. Speaking of Psalm 67.19, St. Paul had said, in part:

Propter quod dicit: Ascendens in altum
 captivam duxit captivitatem: dedit dona
 hominibus. Quod autem ascendit, quid est,
 nisi quia et descendit primum in inferiores
 partes terrae? Qui descendit, ipse est et
 qui ascendit super omnes coelos, ut impleret
 omnia. Et ipse dedit quosdam quidem apostolos,
 quosdam autem prophetas, alios vero evangelistas
 (Ephesians 4.8-11)
 [So it says, "Ascending on high, he led captives

out of captivity, he gave gifts to men." What, however, does "he ascended" mean except that he first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended, it is he himself who ascended above all the heavens, that he might fill all things. And he himself gave some men as apostles, some as prophets, and some as evangelists. . . .]

Both Gregory and Cynewulf relate this captivity to the state of the wandering Christian. The poet's transition

Hwæt, we nu gehyrdan hu þæt hælubearn
 þurh his hydercyme hals eft forgeaf,
 gefreode ond gefreopade folc under wolcnum . . . (586-88)
 [Lo, now we have heard how that salutary son
 afterwards gave salvation through his coming
 to this earth, freed and made peace with
 the folk under the clouds . . .]

both echoes Gregory's application of the Harrowing and leads directly to St. Paul's explanation of "dedit dona hominibus." Gregory turns from the brief mention of these gifts in St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians to his detailing of them in I Corinthians 12.8-10; Cynewulf alters his source, so that between the general and detailed account of the gifts of God to man he inserts Job's comparison of Christ to a bird. In this way he consistently alternates his discussion of the Ascension with that of its consequent benefits to men.

When one considers the customary manner in which Cynewulf condenses his source, and the thematic arrangement of his poem, it is difficult to respond sympathetically to Pope's reviving of the missing-leaf theory at verse 556.⁹ Similarly, Cynewulf's use of St. Paul's allegorizing of Psalm 67.19 seems to undermine Brooke's suggestion that "The order of the poem now becomes confused. An episode is introduced which concerns the Harrowing of Hell, an event which the legend always places after the Resurrection and not after the Ascension."¹⁰

Continuing with his commentary on the Father's abrogating of the

"cwide" ("decree") which had condemned the Christian to his earthly exile, the poet has again taken the lead from his Gregorian source.¹¹ The related reminder that the body is corruptible though the soul is now capable of heavenly incorruptibility is common to Gregory, Cynewulf, and Aelfric, as is Job's comparison of Christ to a bird. Gregory's enumerating of the gifts of men apparently inspires Cynewulf's, though their content differs. Both ideas are followed by Habacuc's comparison of the ascended Saviour to the sun and the Church to the moon in its orbit, a comparison which reminds the homilists of Solomon's allegory on the Leaps of the Lover (Christ) approaching his Beloved (the Church) (Cant. 2.8-14). To Gregory's five leaps¹² Cynewulf has added a sixth, the Harrowing of Hell; it is a popular Anglo-Saxon addition which echoes the poet's earlier use of the Harrowing and, as we shall see, which fits well into the structure of the poem. Gregory now turns to a discussion of the Redeemer as Judge. It is a theme which is much expanded in *Christ II*, where it apparently becomes the inspiration both of Cynewulf's personal resolve to preach and of the universal lesson which follows. Finally, Gregory's closing exhortation that amidst the spiritual storms of life the Christian should fix his anchor in the hope of an eternal homeland is expanded into the famous sea image with which Cynewulf concludes his poem.¹³

Generally speaking, then, the bulk of the concepts contained in the Ascension poem are traceable either directly or indirectly to Gregory's Evangelical Homily XXIX. The essential structural differences in the two festal celebrations lie in the approach each author takes. Gregory's homily is a pericope analysis whereas Cynewulf, as the ensuing discussion will show, has selected his material in order to demonstrate a theme. But Gregory and Cynewulf share more than homiletic material. They also share a common goal: to teach, that is, to preach. Cynewulf's personal reflections look both forward and backward. Having examined his conscience in light of the message of Christ's Ascension as he sees it, and perhaps recalling Christ's parting instruction to go forth and preach to all creatures ("Euntes in mundum universum, praedicate Evangelium omni creaturae," 1213), Cynewulf speaks with the preacher's resolve when he says,

Forþon ic leofra gehwone læran wille

þæt he ne agæle gæstes þearfe,
 ne on gylp geote, þenden god wille
 þæt he her on worulde wunian mote,
 somed sipian sawel in lice,
 in þæm gæsthofe. (815a-20a)

[Therefore, I will instruct each of the
 beloved, that he not neglect the needs of the
 soul, nor overwhelm it with pride, when God
 wishes that he might dwell here in this world,
 that soul and body might journey together
 in the soul's hovel.]

Since Cynewulf is explicitly assuming the preacher's role, one must expect that in *Christ II* he will employ regularized homiletic structural devices, formulae, and images. Indeed, in *Christ II* he produces a pleasing thematic homily thoroughly consistent with its Anglo-Saxon and Latin forebears.

Although the homiletic nature of *Christ II* can be explained in part by noting the Gregorian source from which the poem has evolved, the identification of the poem and the homiletic tradition is much more deeply-rooted. The formal characteristics common to *Christ II* and the Anglo-Saxon homily suggest that Cynewulf may, in fact, have been composing a poetic sermon.

Christ II begins with a purely homiletic exordium, though the usual "men þa leofestan" ("beloved men") appears in a singular form, "mon se mæra" ("illustrious man," 441a). When Cynewulf uses the plural "we," he seems to be including both his audience and himself as poet-preacher. Similar homiletic exordia introduce other Old English poems. In *An Exhortation to Christian Living*, for example, the poet begins,

Nu lære ic þe swa man leofne sceal.

[Now I would instruct you, as one should
 one who is beloved.]

This exordium is a variation of the homiletic formula, but it is close enough to be recognizable, and it is singular. Moreover, as the editor's

title implies, the poem contains homiletic exhortations (58b-60a, 69a-70b), and has the air of a sermonette. At the least, therefore, *Exhortation* implies the existence of didactic poems addressed to individual readers (or, less likely, individual members of a listening audience). Alcuin's Willibrord homilies suggest a related Latin precedent. In the preface to his prose version, Alcuin explains his purpose in composing both a prose and a poetic homily, pointing out that the prose version is intended to be read publicly to the brothers in church whereas the poetic *Life* is designed to be read by scholars in the privacy of their cells.¹⁴ In the case of *Christ II*, therefore, there is a real possibility that Cynewulf may have adapted for the private pleasurable edification of the learned monk the central lesson appearing in the monastic office on the feast of the Ascension.

As a second possibility, one may see in the "mon se mæra" exordium an address to a learned nobleman. Aelfric's *ad populum* adaptation of Gregory shows the possibility of its being delivered to non-clerical Anglo-Saxon audiences. Moreover, the Canons of Ecgbert imply that masses, presumably accompanied by homilies, were being celebrated in the homes of the wealthy in eighth-century England. Ecgbert warns that no priest dare say mass in private homes or in any other places except dedicated churches.¹⁵ It is a custom which must still have been alive at the turn of the tenth century since in a letter to Bishop Wulfsgie, Aelfric found it necessary to repeat Ecgbert's admonition.¹⁶ This, coupled with the clerical obligation to preach the gospel in English to the people on Sundays and feast days,¹⁷ presents the very real possibility that Cynewulf may well have been following the traditional advice to adapt one's preaching to the interests and intelligence of one's audience. The "mon se mæra" addressed may conceivably be a learned nobleman.

As a final possibility, "mon se mæra" may simply be a means of addressing individuals within an audience (congregation), perhaps following Aelfric's advice of explaining the spiritual significance of the gospel in English to the people. The *Seasons for Fasting* provides an excellent example of just such a form of address. The poem is structured much like a homily and is replete with homiletic formulae, exempla, and familiar homiletic imagery.¹⁸ Although there is no formal exordium, there is a

passage in which the lay audience is addressed as "folces mann":

Gyf se sacerd hine sylfne ne cunne
 þurh dryhtnes ege dugeþum healdan,
 nu þa, folces mann, fyrna ne gyne
 þe gehalgod mann her gefremme,
 ac þu lare scealt lustum fremman
 ryhthicgennde þe he to ræde tæchð,
 drince he him þæt drofe oððe þæt dæghluttre
 wæter of wege, þæt is wuldres lare. (200-07)

[If the priest does not know how to maintain himself with decorum for fear of his Lord, now then, man of the people, pay no heed to the sins which the consecrated individual has performed here, but you must perform eagerly, through your learning, those reasonable deeds which he teaches in his instruction. May he drink to himself that murky or clear water from the sea, that is the doctrine of glory.]

In spite of the unusual regularity of the poem's stanzaic structure, it is difficult to visualize the "folces mann" ("man of the people") being addressed in *Seasons for Fasting* as a learned nobleman. Biblical allusion is superficial,¹⁹ and there is a pedestrian, almost gossipy, air about the poem which suggests to me a popular audience of more than one person. *Seasons* may well have taken its place among Anglo-Saxon pulpit literature, but it is a far cry from the studied *Christ II*.

In the case of *Christ II* there is a real demand for knowledge of Gregory and Gregorian exegesis, a scholar's familiarity to be expected only of a monastic congregation; moreover, Cynewulf requires of his audience a knowledge of runes, a knowledge hardly to be expected of the average layman. Considering Alcuin's precedent explicitly stated in his preface to Willibrord, one can conclude with some confidence that *Christ II* was designed to be read privately "in secreto cubili inter scholasticos" ("in the privacy of the cell among your scholars"), likely in connection with the Feast of the Ascension when Gregory's homily almost certainly

would have formed part of the Divine Office. "mon se mæra," therefore, is a polite homiletic exordium directed towards the individual monastic scholar.

Following the exordium, Cynewulf provides a biblical passage which is neither the gospel of St. Mark 16.14-20 (as is Gregory's pericope) nor sequential treatments of St. Luke's Acts of the Apostles 1.3-15 and the gospel of St. Mark 16.14-20 (as in Aelfric); instead, Cynewulf loosely incorporates both biblical passages into a continuous narrative (458b-546b) both preceded and followed by allusions to the exegetical significance of the resplendent angels (443a-58a, 547-57). Such free handling of the biblical passages precludes the possibility of a pericope-type analysis; furthermore, the cameo-like presentation of the gospels both underlines the scope of the poem (the life of Christ, from birth to Ascension) and stresses the thematic intention: to show how Christ humbled himself for the salvation of mankind and ascended gloriously to that home which his birth, death, and Ascension have prepared for the wandering faithful.

The theme of the poem is implicit in Cynewulf's use of St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians 4.8-13 and may well be summarized in the phrase "dedit dona hominibus" ("he gave gifts to men"). Consequently, the poet varies biblical allusions to the Ascension with discussions of its salutary benefits. Having completed his paraphrase of Mark and Luke, and having concluded his allusive exegetical explication of the appropriately-garbed angels, Cynewulf provides his first example of the benefits accruing to the Ascension, the Harrowing of Hell. In line with Gregory's interpretation and with the common homiletic end, the Harrowing is universalized to include all men, "monna gehwylc" ("each of men," 589b), "folc under wolcnum" ("folk under the heavens," 588b). The rhyming catalogue which follows is a poetic embellishment of Gregory's interpretation of the event as Christ's absorbing the corruption of mankind through his incorruptibility.²⁰ Indeed, verses 586-626 are little more than a paean explaining and expanding this Gregorian interpretation of the salutary benefits deriving from Christ's Ascension. Job's hymn (627-53), as Cynewulf says (654-58), is meant as an allegorical "proof" of the fact of the Ascension; this established, the poet again returns to his theme, "dedit dona hominibus."

After Christ's Ascension, he says, God's Spiritual Son, the shaper of this world, gave gifts to mankind:

Ða us geweorðade se þas world gescop,
godes gæstsunu, ond us giefre sealde. (659-60)

Lines 664-85 catalogue these gifts, and lines 686-711 provide a poetic discussion of Habacuc's comparison of the ascended Saviour to the sun and the Church to the moon in its orbit. Following his pattern of alternating proofs for Christ's Ascension with concrete examples of its benefits to mankind, Cynewulf adds that that Church was itself persecuted; but through the gifts of the Spirit the joy of his servants was maintained after the Ascension of the eternal Lord.²¹

In addition, Habacuc's comparison reminds the homilists of Solomon's allegory on the Leaps of the Lover (Christ) to his Beloved (his Church) (Cant. 2.8-14). This allegory provides a perfect summary²² since it climaxes in the Ascension and since the basic allegory, the love of Christ for his Church, recalls Christ's pre-Ascension promise (488b-90b) and provides its fulfillment. Moreover, the Leaps supply a natural and explicit transition from the first to the second coming, from exposition to homiletic application. That transition is neatly made in the first of a series of homiletic exhortations. Surveying the life of Christ as it is summarized in the Leaps, Cynewulf admonishes his Christian audiences to imitate the Ascension of Christ by leaping from virtue to virtue so that they may leap to the heavenly home through their holy works (746b-50a). The series of "sculon" ("we must") passages which Cynewulf introduces at this point begin the homiletic conclusion which culminates in the characteristic "uton" ("let us") exhortation (771b-77a) and the customary doxology (777b-78b). In addition, the extended military image echoes the Harrowing of Hell episode where it was originally introduced (566-70), and in so doing recalls the universal redemption effected by the Ascension; similarly, the definition of the Saviour as "se us lif forgeaf, / leomu, lic ond gæst" ("he who gave us life, limb, and spirit," 776b-77a) appropriately climaxes the theme of the poem, "dedit dona hominibus."

To this point there is no essential structural difference between *Christ II* and a typical Anglo-Saxon thematic sermon, except that it is

more "poetic" than even an Aelfrician homily. What follows is integral (it continues the military image with which the impersonal segment of the poem concludes, and is verbally and conceptually related to the homily proper), but non-essential (it is a personal response to a universal exhortation).²³ It is, in effect, exactly the meditative type of epilogue one may expect to conclude a poem to be read in the privacy of a monastic cell. Alcuin completes his poetic Willibrord with a personal note in which he identifies himself and asks for the prayers of his monastic reader:

Carmiger indoctus cecinit hos Alcuine versus,
 Cui, rogo, quisque legas, dic, miserere Deus. (PL 101.724)²⁴
 [Alcuin, an unskilled poet, has sung these verses;
 I pray that whoever reads them beg mercy for him
 from God.]

Alcuin's personal conclusion, however, is intrusive, whereas Cynewulf weaves his acrostic into the fabric of his poem. His opening line "Ne pearf him ondrædan deofla strælas" ("there is no need for one to dread the devil's darts," 779) provides a fine transition from the homily proper by reviving the martial imagery with which it concludes, and by providing the basis for the interlacing of the idea of divine protection (761a, 775a, 781b). Cynewulf further develops this association between the personal and the impersonal sections of *Christ II* by arguing the necessity for man to live well if he is to be rewarded eternally, and by returning to the virtue of humility ("eadmod", "humble," 786b) exegetically associated with the robe motif and the birth of Christ. Even the acrostic seems to summarize much of the argument of the text proper and to lead directly into the concluding verses. The "feoh" ("wealth") rune is intimately related to the "wynn" ("joy"), "ur" ("ure", "our"), and "lagu" ("water") runes all of which preach the transience of earthly goods and the stability of the spiritual. The development of the idea that the goldhoard of men ("mægna goldhord," 787b) is the source of lasting treasures is similar to the ironic message of the wealth motif of other didactic Old English poems (*Physiologus*, for example) and is an imaginative offspring of the "dedit dona hominibus" theme. "mægna goldhord" is an

appropriate epithet, carefully used to introduce the stock homiletic argument of sublunary instability. Moreover, it summarizes the generosity of the glorious "Drihten," the Giver of Treasures ("sincgiefan," 460a), Gracious Giver ("wilgiefan," 537a), Dispenser of wealth over this wide land ("welan ofer widlond," 605a), Dispenser of earthly wealth (eorðwelan," 611a); more important, he is the gift-throne of souls (gæstagiēfstol," 572a) and he is the Giver of Life to the folk, Ruler rich in his splendour ("folca feorhgiefan, frætsum ealles waldend," 556), mankind's dispenser of blessings ("eorla eadgiefan," 546a), eternal source of blessings ("ece eadfruma," 532a), and the provider of heaven's holy gems ("halge gimmas," 692b). This idea of spiritual wealth extends also to the souls of men; when the Saviour of souls ("sawla nergend," 571b) descended into hell he claimed the tribute ("gafoles," 559a), the greatest of booties ("hupa mæste," 568b), from the pirating demon and placed them before the giftstool of souls ("gæstagiēfstol," 572a).²⁵

Because the ideas of judgment and reward are an extension of this treasure motif and the benefits derived from the Ascension, the epilogue introduces the prospect of a judgment in which each shall be rewarded:

Is þam dome neah
 þæt we gelice sceolon leanum hleotan. (782b-83b)²⁶
 [The judgment is at hand at which each must
 receive his reward without distinction.]

Appropriately, both the Judge and his attendants are resplendent in their adornments ("frætsum blican," 507b, 522b).²⁷ The phrase is an Anglo-Saxonism for Gregory's exegesis of "sedit a dextris Dei" which Gregory suggests is meant to indicate the glory of the Judge after his Ascension:

quia post Ascensionis suae gloriam iudex in
 fine videbitur (col. 1217)
 [for the judge will be seen in the end after
 the glory of his Ascension.]

"Cen" ("cene," "brave"), "yr" ("yrmð," "misery"), and "neod" ("need")²⁸ are easily adapted to a judgment theme. In its context, the "cen" rune

warns that even the brave will tremble when Heaven's King speaks the dreaded words ("reþe word," 798b); this stress on the terror of the judgment is interlaced throughout the epilogue (790, 809, 825) and implies the need for supreme courage, "cen". The final two runes, "yr" and "neod," are two sides of the same coin. The "yr" ("yrmǫ") rune in particular recalls the Lord's threat to the earthly exile "þu scealt yrmþum lifgan" ("you shall live in misery," 621), a threat revoked by Christ's Ascension "Ūa he þa yrmþū eft oncyrde" ("when he afterwards altered that misery," 614). Hence, the idea that at the second coming "𐌆 (yr[mǫ]) ond 𐌆 (neod)" may most easily find solace ("ypast meahtan / frofre findan," 800b-1a) is a fitting conclusion to the thematic analysis of the benefits of the Saviour's first coming.

Cynewulf's epilogue, therefore, is a personal reflection on the Gregorian homily which he has reshaped into poetic form. Yet, the interlacing of ideas and the thematic control which lead unfalteringly to the final verse ("þa he heofonum astag," "when he rose to heaven," 866b) fuse the epilogue and the text proper. The poet's personal religious inspiration and his exhortative conclusion are, as a result, no awkward appendage, but part of the poetic whole. Cynewulf incorporates the imagery and theme from his poeticizing of Gregory, providing a personal reaction to the homiletic doctrine.

In addition to the above-mentioned structural characteristics which *Christ II* shares with the homily, Cynewulf's poem also incorporates several less well-defined homiletic modes of expression. Some of these are exhortative. Aside from the homiletic "uton" passages which conclude both the body of the poetic homily (771b-77a) and the epilogue (864-66), there are several common variations of the homiletic exhortation. There is, for example, Cynewulf's use of the Wulfstianian phrase "is us þearf micel" ("there is a great need for us," 751b, 847b). The appearance of the exhortative modal auxiliary is even more common: "þæs we ealles sculon . . ." ("For all that we should . . .," 611b), "Swa we men sculon . . ." ("So we men should . . .," 746b), "Forþon we a sculon . . ." ("therefore we should ever . . .," 756a). Associated with this is the direct address in which the "ic" ("I") of the speaker becomes incorporated into the hortatory "we."

Just as there is much in the form of *Christ II* to point to a type of homiletic composition, so is there in the modes of description adopted by Cynewulf. For example, the military imagery (which is in no way suggested by Gregory's discourse) causes the Harrowing of Hell to become a siege directed against warring demons who fight with airborne weapons ("wæpna wyrpum," 565a). The scene anticipates the extensive use of this stock homiletic image of the devil attacking the soul of man with the lethal darts of temptation (756-77a) which concludes the homiletic segment and which also introduces the acrostic (779-85a). Cook's footnotes²⁹ to these images are significant because they indirectly provide historical and comparative evidence for the point to be made here: Old English literature is not based so much on real life as it is on other literature. The use of bows and arrows in an Old English Christian poem or an Old English homily is not necessarily meaningful to the audience because such weapons are in themselves familiar to it; Cook suggests that they are not familiar. Rather, they are well-established literary images for Christian audiences of Latin homilies or of Old English homilies inspired by the Roman tradition. The same argument applies to Cynewulf's sea image which has grown both from the kernel of the image in Gregory's homily and from the whole of the homiletic tradition itself.

Another descriptive technique which Cynewulf uses here, and elsewhere, and which is common to the homiletic tradition is the catalogue. Wulfstan, of course, is master of the device, but so were the authors of Vercelli II, IV, VII, and Blickling V, VIII, X.³⁰ The first of Cynewulf's catalogues is the "swa . . . swa" series (591-96) whose form is reminiscent of the frequent homiletic contrasts of heaven and hell; the special effect of the rhyme is similar to that achieved by the *Phoenix* poet in his descriptions of paradise (*Phx* 15-8, 51-7) and is comparable to the poetic catalogues composed by the prose homilists. The listing of the gifts of men (668b-81a) is also to be found in Gregory and is initially inspired by St. Paul (Eph. 4.8-13 and I Cor. 12.8-10).

In addition, there are incidental details which were apparently familiar to Old English preachers and their congregations. For example, the idea that Christ rose through the roof of the temple and left his footprints for the plain view of his worshippers (494b-97b) is a tradition

which Cook traces to the pseudo-Bede *De Locis Sanctis*,³¹ though its appearance in the Blickling Ascension Homily³² and the popular Old English Martyrology (May 5), a book which Hertzfeld says existed "to refresh the memory of the preacher,"³³ suggests that the tradition was a homiletic commonplace.

Christ II, therefore, is so thoroughly indebted to the homiletic tradition in its form, description, purpose, style, and origin that one can conclude with some confidence that Cynewulf composed his Ascension poem as a poetic homily. As was the case with Alcuin's poetic Willibrord, Cynewulf's Ascension poem was likely designed as an *ad clerum* homily for private monastic meditation rather than *ad populum* for popular congregations. That meditation would have been most meaningful on the feast of the Ascension when the monastic reader would also have been contemplating Gregory's Homily XXIX provided in the recitation of the Divine Office for that festal occasion.

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NOTES

¹ Richard Morris, ed., *Old English Homilies and Homiletic Treatises of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* EETS, O.S. 53 (London 1867-73) 109-15. Reference to Aelfric's Ascension Homily is to *The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church*, ed. Benjamin Thorpe, I (1844; rpt. New York 1971); reference to *Christ II* is to George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, eds., *The Exeter Book* (1936; rpt. New York 1961).

² Albert Stanburrough Cook, ed., *The Christ of Cynewulf* (1909; rpt. Hamden, Conn. 1964) xliii, notes the relationship between *Christ II* and Gregory's 29th Evangelical Homily, and points out that "these extracts are taken from the Breviary." The point is an important one since to demonstrate the use of Gregory's homily in the Divine Office is to argue that Cynewulf could assume that clerical audiences, at least, were aware

of the content, if not the detail, of Gregory's discourse. Since there is no known extant version of a contemporary Cynewulfian Office, the best one can do is to examine those editions available and ultimately to argue the immense popularity of Gregory in Anglo-Saxon England as the surest evidence at hand. In fact, this type of evidence does suggest a very high probability of the homily's being used in the Anglo-Saxon Divine Office, a probability which the argument of this paper will reinforce.

Cook's use of the word "Breviary" is historically inaccurate. Fernand Carol, "Breviary," *Catholic Encyclopedia*, II (1913) 769 (cf. p. 773), suggests that the term dates from the eleventh century when the Office was collected in an abbreviated form. Before this time the Office books likely consisted of at least several homiliaries and a psalter, books useful and fairly convenient within the monastery but hardly convenient outside the monastery. The Roman Breviary, therefore, is not necessarily any indication of the nature of the Office which would have been recited in the eighth, ninth, or tenth centuries in any given region of England. However, any Gregorian homily still in use in the Breviary was likely also used in Anglo-Saxon England where Gregory was universally esteemed as the founder of English Christianity and where the Roman tradition through Gregory was very strong from the time of Augustine. In fact, Gregory's Ascension homily does show signs of real popularity in extant mediaeval breviaries. For example, the Salisbury Breviary uses part of Gregory's homily for Matins on Ascension Thursday. See Francis Procter and Christophori Wordsworth, eds., *Breviarium ad Usum Insignis Ecclesiae Sarum*, I (Cantabrigiensis 1882) cols. dcccclix-dcccclxii. See also the following Breviaries where the homily appears in connection with the feast of the Ascension: *The Hereford Breviary*, Walter Frere and Langton E.G. Bowra, eds., I (London 1904) 373; *The Second Recension of the Quignon Breviary*, J. Wickham Legg, ed. (London 1908) 155; *The Colbertine Breviary*, I (London 1912) 131. In addition, Suibert Bäumer, *Histoire du Bréviaire* (Paris 1905) 410-11, points out that during the Carolingian transformation of the lessons, there was a concomitant increase in the production of homiliaries, not all of which were adopted by the Divine Office. He adds that "Seules les quarante homélies de saint Grégoire étaient universellement connues, et on les employait aussi bien pour la prédication à la

sainte Messe que pour les lectures de l'office nocturne." This is hardly a surprising development in light of the Anglo-Saxon missionary efforts and particularly those of Boniface (cf. Bäumer, p. 327), as well as the liturgical influence of Alcuin. If such a statement as Bäumer's is true of Carolingian France, how much more true it must have been of England during the Age of Alfred and during the Benedictine Revival.

Peter Clemoes, "Cynewulf's Image of the Ascension," in *England Before the Conquest: Studies in Primary Sources Presented to Dorothy Whitelock*, Peter Clemoes and Kathleen Hughes, eds. (Cambridge 1971) 302 ff, argues that *Christ II* is molded in part by liturgical services and explains the use of words in the poem as being appropriate for reading in church. Philip West, Jr., "Liturgical Style and Structure in Bede's Homily for the Easter Vigil," *ABR* 23 (1972) 1-8, examines one of Bede's homilies "in light of its aural effects drawn from the liturgy" in an article whose method is somewhat similar to Clemoes' Cynewulfian study.

³ Aelfric repeats all of the principal elements of Gregory's homily, follows Gregory's order, and often translates him directly. However, Aelfric begins his homily with a pericope from Saint Luke which he discusses from pp. 294-300; then he presents the pericope from Saint Mark and reiterates most of Gregory's interpretation. F.A. Blackburn, "Is the 'Christ' of Cynewulf A Single Poem?" *Anglia* 19 (1897) 94, calls *Christ II* a homily and sees a likeness to the pericope style of Aelfric and Gregory. However, he speaks in sweeping generalizations which oversimplify the relationship.

⁴ Cynewulf's exhortation, as he paraphrases Saint Mark, "hergas breotaþ, / fyllaþ ond feogað" ("break their idols, fell and hate them," 485b-86a) perfectly echoes Gregory's advice to Abbot Mellitus that he destroy heathen idols but not their shrines, advice recorded by Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History* (1.30). In his *Dialogues* Gregory relates similar instances, as does Aelfric in his *Lives of the Saints*. The example of St. Bartholomew demonstrates this act of exorcism in some detail, as do the various lives of Saint Martin. The Old English "deofolgielð" ("devil gold," i.e., "idol") epitomizes the intimate relationship that the Anglo-Saxon saw between the devil and idolatry; it is a relationship Gregory often assumes in his *Dialogues* and which Aelfric exposes in his

Bartholomew.

⁵ Cynewulf does demonstrate a familiarity with the whole of the homily (as the following discussion will suggest) and has apparently selected sections nine to eleven because they best suit his thematic purpose.

⁶ Compare this with Aelfric's translation of Gregory: "Bliss is getacnod on hwitum reafe" ("joy is symbolized in the white clothing," Thorpe, I, 298-300). The appearance of "bliss" in each text suggests that Cynewulf has the exegetical explanation in mind as he writes.

⁷ "bocum" ("books"), lines 701 and 793, seems to refer to the Bible only, though "boceras" ("scholars") elsewhere (e.g., *Exo* 531) is to be associated with the Fathers. The contexts of lines 453b and 785b, however, do reflect Gregory's exegesis and in these cases, at least, almost certainly refer to the Fathers. (See Thorpe, I, 186-8, for "bec" used with biblical and patristic meaning.)

⁸ Compare Gregory:

Ascendens in altum captivam duxit captivitatem, dedit
dona hominibus. (col. 1218)

[Ascending on high he led captivity captive, gave
gifts to men.]

with Psalm 67.19:

Ascendisti in altum, cepisti captivitatem:
accepisti dona in hominibus.

[You ascended on high. You have held captivity
captive: you have received gifts in men.]

and St. Paul (Eph. 4.8):

Ascendens in altum captivam duxit captivitatem,
dedit dona hominibus.

St. Paul has altered the Psalm in order to lead into his catalogue of gifts toward men. This Pauline source clearly establishes the authenticity of the Harrowing episode in *Christ II* and associates it with the Ascension. (Translations from the Vulgate are my own.)

⁹ See John Pope's "Preface to the Reproduction," of *The Christ of Cynewulf*, A.S. Cook, ed., p. iv; and "The Lacuna in the Text of Cynewulf's *Ascension (Christ II, 556b)*," in E. Bagly Atwood and Archibald A. Hill, eds., *Studies in Language, Literature, and Culture in the Middle Ages and Later* (Austin, Texas 1969) 210-9. In the latter article Pope uses palaeographical and literary arguments which are generally more convincing.

¹⁰ Cook (at n. 2) 129-31, provides an excellent critical summary of the problem, and Brooke's comment is taken from this summary. Cook quotes Bede's *Ymnus in Ascensione Domini*, 116-8, as a possible source of much of Cynewulf's phraseology. I feel that the critics have consistently overlooked the role of Gregory's homily here and the reference to Saint Paul's letter to the Ephesians which both Cynewulf and Gregory apparently have in mind. Furthermore, the Harrowing of Hell is a popular Anglo-Saxon theme which fits well into the arrangement of Cynewulf's poem. Beyond this, one should presume the necessary poetic skill to expand upon the idea. For a theological comment on Saint Paul's interpretation of the descent as a Harrowing, see Jean Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy* (1951; rpt. Notre Dame, Ind., 1956) 314-5.

¹¹ Aelfric, too, uses the word "cwid" here:

Mid his upstige is adylegod þæt cyrographum ure
 geniðerunge, and se cwyde ure brosnunge is awend. (p. 300)
 [with his ascension the writ of our condemnation
 is blotted out, and the decree of our ruin is removed.]

Compare Aelfric's phraseology with Gregory's:

deletum est hodierna die chirographum damnationis
 nostrae . . . (col. 1218).
 [the writ of our damnation is deleted today.]

¹² In Morris' *Ascension homily*, (at n. 1) 111 f., there are seven leaps, "Inde in infernum" ("from that place to hell") and "Inde in mundum" ("from that place to earth") having been added to Gregory. Haymo's *Ascension homily* refers generally to the leaps, specifying neither number nor nature (PL 118.548). So familiar do these leaps seem to have

become that by the time the *Ancrene Riwle* was composed their original form was taking new variations:

eue þi moder leop efter hire eien. urom hire eien;
 to þe eppel. vrom þe eppel i parais; ađum to þer
 eorðe. vrom þer eorðe to helle. þer heo lei i ne
 [sic] prisune; uour þusund 3er 7 moare. heo 7
 hire louerd boðe. 7 tauhte al hire ofsprung to
 leapen alle efter hire to deaðe wið vten ende. (p. 23)
 [the eye of Eve, your mother, then leaped from her
 eye to the apple, from the apple in paradise down
 to this earth, from the earth to hell; there she
 lay in prison for four thousand years and beyond,
 she and her lord both, and taught all her offspring
 all to leap after her to a death which has no end.]

See Cook (at n. 2) 143-4, n. 720, where he traces the ultimate source of the leaps to two commentaries of Saint Ambrose.

¹³ Gregory's brief allusion to the traditional image is expanded by Cynewulf so that its paternity is almost obscured. However, the following verbal relationship shows quite clearly where the poet received the kernel of his inspiration. Gregory's

spei vestrae anchoram in aeternam patriam figite (col. 1919)
 [fix the anchor of your hope in the eternal homeland]

becomes in Cynewulf

þæt we oncnawan magun ofer ceoles bord
 hwær we sælan sceolon sundhengestas,
 ealde yðmearas, ancrum fæste.
 Utan us to þære hyðe hyht stapelian (861a-64b)
 [that we may know over the boat's deck where
 we should bind the sea-steeds, the ancient
 mares of the sea, fast at anchor. Let us set our
 hope to that harbour]

14 unum prosaico sermone gradientem, qui publice
fratribus in ecclesia, si dignum tuae videatur
sapientiae, legi potuisset: alterum Pierio pede
currentem, qui in secreto cubili inter scholasticos
tuos tantummodo ruminari debuisset. (PL 101.693-94)
[one proceeding by way of a prose sermon which
could be read to the brothers publicly in church
if it should seem worthy to you; the other running
in poetic feet which ought to be contemplated only
by scholars in the privacy of their cells.]

15 Ut nullus sacerdos in domibus vel aliis locis,
nisi in ecclesiis dedicatis celebrare missas
audeat. (PL 89.381, par. IX)
[So that no priest should dare to celebrate mass in
houses or any places except in dedicated churches.]

16 mann ne sceole mæssian innan nanum huse, buton
hyt 3ehal3od sy. (Bernard Fehr, *Die Hirtenbriefe Aelfrics*

[1914; rpt. Darmstadt 1964] 16, par. 69)

[Mass must not be offered in any house unless it
has been consecrated.]

Compare with:

Scitote etiam quod non licet celebrare missam
in domibus laicorum nisi in ecclesia. (Fehr 60, par. 23)
[Know well that it is not permitted to celebrate
mass in the houses of the laity, but only in
church.]

Compare with:

3e ne motan mæssian on læwedra manna husum. (Fehr 152, par. 19)
[You may not offer mass in the houses of laymen.]

Compare with:

Roger Fowler, *Wulfstan's Canons of Edgan* (Oxford 1972) 8, par. 30.

17 Se mæssepreost sceal sec3an sunnanda3um and mæsse-
da3um þæs 3odspelles an3yt on englisc þam folce. (Fehr 14, par,
61; cf. Ecgbert, PL 89.381, par. 3)

[the mass-priest shall explain in English the
interpretation of the Gospel to the people on
Sundays and feast days.]

18 Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems* (1942; rpt.
New York 1958) 98-104. "Ðonne is þearf micel" ("there is a great need,"
192a) is a homiletic formula, as are the various exhortative phrases;
e.g., "Nu we herian sceolan" ("now we should praise," 39a), "Sceolan
sacerdos singan mæssan" ("the priest should sing mass," 184), "Uton þæt
gerine rihte gehicgan" ("let us keep that mystery properly in mind," 128),
"uton fæstan swa" ("let us fast so," 140a). Dobbie notes in his introduc-
tion, p. xciii, that the poet's use of Moses, Elijah, and Christ as exam-
ples of those instituting the Lenten fast is similar to Aelfric's in
Thorpe, I, 178 and II, 100. For the homiletic depiction of temptation
as the devil shooting darts, see lines 160-75.

19 This is consonant with Dobbie's note that the exempla are par-
alleled in Aelfric's first two series of Catholic Homilies. Both of
these homiletic series are *ad populum*.

20 Ascendens quippe in altum captivam duxit
captivitatem, quia corruptionem nostram virtute
suae incorruptionis absorbit. (col. 1218)
[Indeed, ascending on high he led captivity
captive because he absorbed our corruption by
virtue of his incorruptibility.]

21 Hwæpre forð bicwom
þurh gæstes giefes godes þegna blæd
æfter upstige ecan dryhtnes. (709b-11)
[Yet the joy of God's servants was maintained
through the gift of his Spirit after the ascension
of the eternal Lord.]

22 Most of the Leaps are mentioned in the course of *Christ II*. The
conception and birth are discussed at the outset and are referred to
twice thereafter (627-29a, 785b-89a). Christ's mounting of the cross is

expressly mentioned at line 470a and is alluded to in the rejoicing over Christ's altering of the decree made in Eden (611b-26b). The Harrowing of Hell is considered at lines 558a-85b, and the final leap, the Ascension, is the occasion for which *Christ II* was composed.

²³ Cynewulf also makes a clear distinction between the body of his text and his personal reflections in *Elene*. He ends that text conclusively with a "finit" (1235b).

²⁴ Compare Cynewulf's personal plea in *Juliana*:

Bidde ic monna gehwone
 gumena cynnes, þe þis gied wræce,
 þæt he mec neodful bi noman minum
 gemyne modig, ond meotud bidde
 þæt me heofona helm helpe gefremme (*Jul* 718b-22b)
 [I pray that each man of humankind who utters
 this poem that he, magnanimous and zealous one,
 remember me by name and pray the Lord that the
 protector of heaven help me]

²⁵ The moral irony is reminiscent of the land-loving "seafarers" of "The Whale" who become the devil's plunder ("noþe, *Whl*, 28a; "herehupe," 61a), but whose salvation is possible by recognizing the true wealth (*Pnt* 29b) of the resplendent protector of life (*Pnt* 62a), the allegorical harrower of hell of "The Panther."

²⁶ The idea is developed through verbal and substantive use of variations of "lean" ("reward"). See lines 473, 783, 827, 831, 846.

²⁷ The Ascension and the second coming are almost invariably related because of the promise at the time of the Ascension:

Wile eft swa peah eorðan mægðe
 sylfa gesecan side herge,
 ond þonne gedeman dæda gehwylce
 para ðe gefremedon folc under roderum. (523-26)
 [Nevertheless he himself with a huge army will
 seek out this earth and then he will judge each
 of those deeds which his people beneath the
 heavens have performed.]

²⁸ I find Tupper's early approach to the problem of interpreting the runes the most helpful of any yet to appear: "The Cynewulfian Runes of the Religious Poems," *MLN* 26 (1912) 131-7. He argues that if we must derive equivalents from these three problem runes, "cen," "yr," and "ur," let us do so in context of Old English literary practice. Since the Anglo-Saxon was fond of the play-on-word (e.g., the "sigel" rune can mean "sun" and "sail," "rad" can be either "riding" or "modulation"), he argues "yrre" ("anger") for "yr" (though I would prefer "yrmō" ["misery"] because it seems to translate better in each of the acrostics), "ure" ("our") for "ur" and "cene" ("brave") for "cen."

²⁹ Cook (at n. 2) 147-50.

³⁰ See my "The Poetic Content of the Revival Homily," in *The Old English Homily and Its Backgrounds*, Paul E. Szarmach and Bernard F. Huppé, eds. (Albany 1978) 145-6.

³¹ Cook (at n. 2) 122-3.

³² Richard Morris, ed., *The Blickling Homilies* (1874-80; rpt. Oxford 1967) 125-9.

³³ George Hertzfeld, *An Old English Martyrology* (London 1900) xi.