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**Why does the River Jordan stand still?**  
*(The Descent into Hell, 103-06)*

Barbara Raw

At the centre of the Old English poem, *The Descent into Hell* are four antiphon-like invocations, addressed to Gabriel, Mary, Jerusalem and the River Jordan. The last two, which refer to the stillness of the city and the river, are as follows:

Eala Hierusalem in Iudeum,  
hu þu in þære stowe stille gewunadest!  
Ne mostan þe geondferan foldbuende  
ealle lifgende, þa þe lof singað.  
Eala Iordane in Iudeum,  
hu þu in þære stowe stille gewunadest!  
Nales þu geondflowan foldbuende;  
mostan hy þynes wætres wynnum brucan.

*(The Descent into Hell, 99-106)*

[Oh Jerusalem in Judea, how still you remained in that place; nor could those dwelling on earth, all the living who sing your praise, go about in you. Oh Jordan in Judea, how still you remained in that place; you could not flow among those dwelling on earth; they were able to make use of your water with joy.]

The passage has provoked a good deal of discussion, partly because the last two lines are syntactically unsatisfactory and partly because it is not clear how the references to Jerusalem and the Jordan are related to the main theme of the poem, namely Christ's descent into hell.<sup>1</sup> The two most recent scholars to discuss the meaning of the passage have approached it via analogues to the ideas. T. D. Hill has suggested that the poet is drawing a parallel between Christ's birth and his death and

that the invocations are related to a passage in the apocryphal *Protevangelium Jacobi* which describes how everything stood still at Christ's birth.<sup>2</sup> None of the passages quoted by Hill refers specifically to either Jerusalem or the Jordan, however, and a reference to the nativity seems unlikely in view of the reference to the Jordan later in the Old English poem (131-32), which clearly refers to Christ's baptism. Patrick Conner argues that the poem is closely based on the liturgy for Holy Saturday and that it forms a kind of vernacular liturgy of baptism.<sup>3</sup> Conner bases his interpretation of the invocations to Jerusalem and the Jordan on the text *Vidi aquam*, sung instead of the *Asperges* at the beginning of mass during the Easter season: 'Vidi aquam egredientem de templo a latere dextro, alleluia; et omnes ad quos pervenit aqua ista salvi facti sunt, et dicent: alleluia, alleluia' [I saw water flowing from the right side of the temple, alleluia; and all to whom that water came were saved, and they shall say: alleluia, alleluia]. He emphasises the link made in this text between the water (a symbol of baptism) and the Temple in Jerusalem, and interprets the invocations in the Old English poem as a statement about man's need to seek baptism if he is to enter the heavenly Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup>

Conner is clearly correct in associating the Old English poem, *The Descent into Hell*, with the Easter liturgy: the range of allusions involved is much wider than he suggests, however.

The poem opens with a description of the visit of the women to Christ's tomb, based on texts used in the liturgy for Holy Saturday. The poet's reference to two women rather than three (9-13) shows that his source is the Gospel for the Easter Vigil Mass (Matthew 28.1-7), not that for Easter Day (Mark 16.1-7). The reference to the women's grief (4-6), not mentioned in the gospels, recalls one of the antiphons for Lauds of Holy Saturday, 'Mulieres sedentes ad monumentum lamentabantur, flentes Dominum' [The women seated by the tomb lamented, weeping for the Lord].<sup>5</sup> The reversal which follows the visit of the women to the tomb (14-16) is the multi-faceted and transcendental event celebrated in the liturgy rather than the simple human reversal of the gospel story or the military triumph described in *The Gospel of Nicodemus*.<sup>6</sup> The gospels depict Christ's resurrection as a return to this world, even if a temporary one; *The Gospel of Nicodemus* focuses on the rescue of those imprisoned in hell and Christ's triumphal return to heaven. The Anglo-Saxon poet, on the other hand, stresses the implications of Christ's resurrection for his own time. There are no references to the angel's message to the women or to the appearances to Mary Magdalen and the disciples as there are in the gospels. Instead, the scene focuses on John the Baptist, who acts as a spokesman

for the patriarchs imprisoned in hell before Christ's coming and for their Christian descendants, who wait to be released by Christ from their sins. John calls out to his kinsman, expressing his trust in him and reminding him of the time when they first met, when Christ, like an Anglo-Saxon lord, gave his retainer armour and weapons and promised to be his protector (56-75).<sup>7</sup> He invokes Gabriel, Mary, Jerusalem and the Jordan (76-106), imploring Christ by his childhood, his wounds, his resurrection, his mother, Jerusalem which awaits his return and the Jordan in which he was baptised, to have mercy on his creation (107-32). Finally, the poet speaks in his own person, and calls on Christ to sprinkle all men with the water of baptism:

Oferwurpe þu mid þy wætre, weoruda dryhten,  
 bliþe mode ealle burgwaran,  
 swylce git Iohannis in Iordane  
 mid þy fullwihte fægre onbryrdon  
 ealne þisne middangeard. Sie þæs symle meotude þonc.

*(The Descent into Hell, 133-37)*

[Lord of hosts, graciously sprinkle all those in this stronghold with that water, as you and John in the Jordan happily inspired all this world by that baptism. May thanks always be given to the Lord for that.]<sup>8</sup>

The invocations to Jerusalem and the River Jordan in the Old English poem are based on three closely related Old Testament events: the crossing of the Red Sea under Moses, the crossing of the Jordan under Joshua, and the Babylonian exile. These events were described by the writers of the Old Testament as though they were repetitions of the same act: God promises to be with Joshua when he crosses the Jordan just as he had been with Moses at the crossing of the Red Sea (Joshua 3.7); the crossing of the Euphrates during the return from Babylon, like the crossing of the Red Sea and of the Jordan, involves a parting of the waters so that the exiles can cross dry-shod:

And Yahweh will dry up the gulf of the Sea of Egypt  
 with the heat of his breath,  
 and stretch out his hand over the River,  
 and divide it into seven streams,  
 for men to cross dry-shod,

to make a pathway for the remnant of his people  
left over from the exile of Assyria,  
as there was for Israel  
when it came up out of Egypt. (Isaiah 11.15-16)

For the writers of the Old Testament, these narratives defined the identity of the Jews as the people of God; they were examples of deliverance from slavery and looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, who would establish his kingdom in Jerusalem. For the early Christians, they were metaphors for the coming of Christ. Christ's life was portrayed in the gospels as a recapitulation of the story of the Exodus: his baptism in the Jordan parallels the baptism of the Jews when they passed through the Red Sea; his temptation in the desert parallels the temptations to which the Jews gave way during their wanderings in the desert; his death and resurrection correspond to the celebration of the Passover.<sup>9</sup> Christ is the new Moses and the new Joshua, who will lead his people into the true place of rest (Heb. 3.1-4.11). The city in which he reigns resembles the temple described by Ezekiel in his vision of the rebuilding after the return from Babylon (Apoc. 22.1-2, Ezekiel 47. 1-12).

The invocation to Jerusalem in the Old English *The Descent into Hell* talks of a city which is silent because it is empty of those who normally sing its praise:

Eala Hierusalem in Iudeum,  
hu þu in þære stowe stille gewunadest!  
Ne mostan þe geondferan foldbuende  
ealle lifgende, þa þe lof singað.

(*The Descent into Hell*, 99-102)

[Oh Jerusalem in Judea, how still you remained in that place; nor could those dwelling on earth, all the living who sing your praise, go about in you.]

The lines echo Jeremiah's lamentation over the deserted city of Jerusalem at the time of the Babylonian captivity: 'Oh how lonely she sits, the city once thronged with people, as if suddenly widowed. . . . The roads to Zion are in mourning: no one comes to her festivals now. Her gateways are all deserted' (Lamentations 1.1, 4).<sup>10</sup> The songs of praise which have been silenced in the Old English poem resemble the songs of Zion, silenced during the exile in Babylon:

Beside the streams of Babylon  
we sat and wept  
at the memory of Zion,  
leaving our harps  
hanging on the poplars there.  
For we had been asked  
to sing to our captors,  
to entertain those who had carried us off:  
'Sing' they said  
'some hymns of Zion'.  
How could we sing  
one of Yahweh's hymns  
in a pagan country? (Psalm 136.1-4)

The address to the River Jordan, which follows the address to Jerusalem, draws attention to the stillness of the river and to the fact that people living on earth can make use of its waters:

Eala Iordane in Iudeum,  
hu þu in þære stowe stille gewunadest!  
Nales þu geondflowan foldbuende;  
mostan hy þynes wætres wynnnum brucan.

(*The Descent into Hell*, 103-06)

[Oh Jordan in Judea, how still you remained in that place; you could not flow among those dwelling on earth; they were able to make use of your water with joy.]

The reference to the stillness of the Jordan derives from a verse in the psalm, *In exitu Israel*: 'Mare vidit et fugit, Iordanis conversus est retrorsum' [The sea fled at the sight, the Jordan stopped flowing, Psalm 113.3]. The psalm celebrates the departure of the Israelites from Egypt and this particular verse, like that from Psalm 65.6, 'Qui convertit mare in aridam, in flumine pertransibunt pede' [He turned the sea into dry land, they crossed the river on foot], recalls the parting of the waters of the Red Sea and the parting of the waters of the Jordan, described as follows in the Book of Joshua:

Look, the ark of Yahweh, the Lord of the whole earth, is about to cross the Jordan at your head. Choose twelve men at once from the tribes of Israel, one man from each tribe. As soon as the priests with the ark of Yahweh, the Lord of the whole earth, have set their feet in the waters of the Jordan, the upper waters of the Jordan flowing down will be stopped in their course and stand still in one mass. Accordingly, when the people struck camp to cross the Jordan, the priests carried the ark of the covenant in front of the people. As soon as the bearers of the ark reached the Jordan and the feet of the priests who carried it touched the waters (the Jordan overflows the whole length of its banks throughout the harvest season), the upper waters stood still and made one heap over a wide space – from Adam to the fortress of Zarethan – while those flowing down to the Sea of the Arabah, that is, the Salt Sea, stopped running altogether. The people crossed opposite Jericho. The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of Yahweh stood still on dry ground in mid-Jordan, and all Israel continued to cross dry-shod till the whole nation had finished its crossing of the river.

(Joshua 3.11-17)

The reference to making use of the waters in the Old English poem recalls a verse from the psalm of thanksgiving which follows the description of the return from Babylon in Isaiah 11, quoted above:

And you will draw water joyfully  
from the springs of salvation. (Isaiah 12.3)

This psalm, like the prophecy of the coming of the Messiah (Isaiah 11.1-14) which precedes the account of the return from Babylon, looks forward to the Messianic age when God will live in the midst of his people.

These biblical passages suggest that the invocations to Jerusalem and the Jordan in the Old English poem refer, first, to the journey from Egypt to the promised land and, secondly, to the Babylonian exile and the return from Babylon to a land where there will be abundant water. The relevance of the invocations to the account of Christ's descent into hell derives from the symbolic interpretation given

to the crossing of the Jordan and the exile in Babylon in Christian tradition and in the liturgy for Lent and Easter.

Joshua, like Moses, was a well-known image of Christ. In some respects, he was a more important figure, for he was responsible for leading the Jews into the promised land, a land which Moses was unable to enter. Joshua's crossing of the Jordan was considered to be a symbol of Christ leading mankind back to heaven; Ælfric, for example, draws attention to the parallel in a homily for mid-Lent Sunday:

Ða Iordanis seo ea on emtwa toeode, and for ðæs folces fare flowan ne mihte, and ætstod se stream, swa steap swa munt, and Israhel eode eall be ðam grunde, dryge to lande, and seo ea eft toam. . . . Iosue hæfde þæs hælendes getacnunges, on naman and on dædum. . . . Iesus is Ebreisc nama, þæt is on Leden, Salvator, and on Englisc Hælend, for ðan ðe he gehælð his folc fram heora synnum, and gelæt to ðam ecan earde heofenan rices, swa swa se heretoga Iesus [i.e. Joshua] gelædde þone ealdan Israhel to ðam earde þe him behaten wæs.

[Then the River Jordan divided in two and was unable to flow because of the people's crossing, and the stream stood still as high as a mountain, and all Israel went through the depths, dryfoot to land, and the river flowed once more. . . . Joshua was a symbol of the Saviour in name and deed. . . . Jesus is a Hebrew name, in Latin, *Salvator*, and in English, *Saviour*, because he heals his people from their sins and leads them to the eternal land of the heavenly kingdom, just as the leader Joshua led the old Israel to the land which was promised to them.]<sup>11</sup>

God's promise to Joshua immediately before the crossing of the Jordan, 'Hodie incipiam exaltare te coram omni Israel' [Today I will begin to exalt you before all Israel, Joshua 3.7], was interpreted as an allusion to the exaltation of Christ at his baptism, an action completed when he was raised up (or exalted) on the cross: Origen explained the passage in this way, as did later, western, writers such as Hrabanus Maurus.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the crossing of the Jordan was commonly interpreted as a symbol of the sacrament of baptism through which man was enabled to enter heaven.<sup>13</sup> The relationship between man's preparation for baptism, the journey of the Jews to the promised land and the Psalm, *In exitu Israel*, is set out



very clearly in Origen's commentary on the Book of Joshua:

All these things come to you in a mystical way. When you left the darkness of idolatry and were anxious to reach the understanding of the divine law, you began your exodus from Egypt.

When you were numbered among the catechumens and first undertook to obey the laws of the Church, you crossed the Red Sea. As you halt each day on your journey through the desert, you devote some time to listening to God's law and looking on the face of Moses, unveiled for you by the glory of the Lord. And if you come into the spiritual waters of baptism and in the presence of the priests and levites are initiated into those great and awe-inspiring mysteries (which are familiar to those who have the right to know about them), then you too will cross the Jordan through the ministry of the priests. You will enter the promised land, where Jesus, following Moses, takes you in his charge and becomes your leader on this new journey.

Mindful of all these great signs of God's power, how the sea was parted for you and how the river waters stood still, you will turn to them and say, 'What ails you, Oh sea, that you flee? Oh Jordan, that you turn back? Oh mountains, that you skip like rams? Oh hills, like lambs?' And you will hear the divine answer, 'The earth has trembled at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob, who turns the rock into a pool of water, the flint into a spring of water.'<sup>14</sup>

But man's baptism did not only recapitulate the crossing of the Jordan: it involved a sharing in Christ's death and resurrection, and it was for this reason that it was administered during the Easter Vigil service at which Christ's passing from death to life was recalled. The relationship is explained in the addresses to the newly baptised by Cyril of Jerusalem and his successor, John:

You were conducted by the hand to the holy pool of sacred baptism, just as Christ was conveyed from the cross to the sepulchre close at hand. . . . You made the confession that

brings salvation, and submerged yourselves three times in the water and emerged: by this symbolic action you were secretly re-enacting the burial of Christ three days in the tomb. . . . No one should think, then, that his baptism is merely for the remission of sins and for adoption as sons in the way that John's baptism brought only remission of sins. We know well that not merely does it cleanse sins and bestow on us the gift of the Holy Spirit – it is also the counterpart of Christ's suffering. This is why, as we heard just now, Paul cried out, 'Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death' (Rom. 6.3-4).<sup>15</sup>

A reference to the stillness of the Jordan would, therefore, be very appropriate in a poem concerned with the sacrament of baptism, as *The Descent into Hell* clearly is. There are, however, wider implications in the reference to the Jordan and its association with the invocation to Jerusalem.

Lent was not only the time when the catechumens prepared for baptism; it was a time of exile from God during which the church lived in a symbolic Babylon. As Amalarius of Metz said:

[Septuagesima] Populi Dei tempus captivitatis significat, qui peccando recessit a Deo, et per misericordiam eius revertitur ad requiem. Populus Dei in Babilonia detentus est captivus sub numero septuagenario; quo numero completo reversus est in Hierusalem.

[[Lent] symbolises the time of captivity of God's people, who abandoned God by sinning and returned to rest through his mercy. God's people were kept captive in Babylon for seventy years and when that number had been fulfilled they returned to Jerusalem].<sup>16</sup>

Easter was the time when the church returned from exile to Jerusalem – not, this time, the earthly city, but the heavenly Jerusalem of which the earthly city was a symbol. This return was anticipated in the liturgy for mid-Lent Sunday. The Roman stationary church for this Sunday was Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, where

relics of Christ's passion were preserved; the congregation therefore assembled in Jerusalem to celebrate the return of the Jews from captivity to the historical Jerusalem and to anticipate the return of the church to the heavenly Jerusalem.<sup>17</sup> The Introit for the mass on mid-Lent Sunday is taken from Isaiah 66.10-11, 'Laetare Hierusalem et conventum facite, omnes qui diligitis eam: gaudete cum laetitia, qui in tristitia fuistis: ut exultetis, et satiemini ab uberibus consolationis vestrae' [Rejoice, Jerusalem, and come together all who love her: rejoice with joy, you who have been sad, that you may exult and be filled from the breasts of your consolation].<sup>18</sup> The Gradual is taken from Psalm 121, which celebrates the joy of those who stand in the restored city of Jerusalem.<sup>19</sup> The texts of the office focus on Moses and Joshua, and the responsories for the second nocturn of the Night Office liken the church on its way to the heavenly city to the Jews following Joshua into the promised land:

Vos qui transitori estis Jordanem, aedificate altare Domino de lapidibus quos ferrum non tetigit, et offerite super illud holocausta et hostias pacificas Deo vestro.

Cumque intraveritis terram quam Dominus daturus est vobis aedificate ibi altare. Et offerite super illud holocausta et hostias pacificas Deo vestro.

Sicut fui cum Moysse ita ero tecum, dicit Dominus; confortare et esto robustus; introduces populum meum ad terram lacte et melle manantem.

[You who are about to cross the Jordan, build an altar to the Lord of stones that iron has not touched, and offer on it holocausts and peaceful sacrifices to your God. When you have entered the land which the Lord will give you, build an altar there. And offer on it holocausts and peaceful sacrifices to your God. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you, says the Lord; take comfort and be strong; you will lead my people into a land flowing with milk and honey.]<sup>20</sup>

The Lenten theme of exile and return was repeated during the last few days of Holy Week. Jeremiah's lament over the deserted city of Jerusalem was sung at the Night Office on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday, and his picture of the empty city became an image of the emptiness of the world between Christ's death on Good Friday and his resurrection on Easter Day. In the words of an early Greek

homily, there was a great silence on earth:

Quid istud rei est? hodie silentium magnum in terra; silentium magnum, et solitudo deinceps; silentium magnum, quoniam Rex dormit; terra timuit et quievit, quoniam Deus in carne obdormivit, et a saeculo dormientes excitavit.

[What is happening? Today there is a great silence over the earth, a great silence, and stillness, a great silence because the King sleeps; the earth was in terror and was still, because God slept in the flesh and raised up those who were sleeping from the ages.]<sup>21</sup>

In this great silence, the church meditated on the reversal brought about by Christ's death. His freeing of the souls of the patriarchs and prophets from hell was recalled in the responsory for the second nocturn of the Night Office of Holy Saturday:

Recessit Pastor noster, fons aquae vivae, ad cuius transitum sol obscuratus est; nam et ille captus est, qui captivum tenebat primum hominem; hodie portas mortis et seras pariter Salvator noster dirupit.

[Our shepherd, the source of living water, has departed. At his passing the sun was darkened, for he who held the first man captive is now taken captive himself. Today our Saviour has shattered the bars and burst the gates of death.]<sup>22</sup>

His victory over death was foreshadowed in the antiphon for Lauds of the same day: 'O mors ero mors tua: morsus tuus ero inferne' [Oh Death, I will be your death; Sheol, I will be your destruction].<sup>23</sup> Christ's passage from death to life was presented as the reality prefigured by the crossing of the Red Sea, of which the crossing of the Jordan was an image. The psalm *In exitu Israel*, which contains the reference to the Jordan standing still, was sung during the procession to the font on Easter Day,<sup>24</sup> and the theme of entry to the promised land was continued in the Introit chants for the Monday and Tuesday of Easter Week: 'Introduxit vos Dominus in terram fluentem lac et mel' [The Lord has brought you into a land flowing with milk and honey] and 'Aqua sapientiae potavit eos' [He gave them the water of wisdom to drink].<sup>25</sup>

This second chant is particularly important in relation to the words 'mostan hy bynes wætres wynnum brucan' in the Old English invocation to the Jordan. The image of the living water is central to the Old Testament picture of the promised land and to the passages in the New Testament which derive from it. The Book of the Consolation of Israel (Isaiah 40-55), written towards the end of the exile in Babylon, describes the salvation of Israel in terms of abundant water:

Oh, come to the water all you who are thirsty;  
though you have no money, come! (Isaiah 55.1)

Zechariah, describing the golden age which will follow the coming of the Messiah, says: 'When that day comes, running waters will issue from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea, half of them to the western sea; they will flow summer and winter' (Zechariah 14.8). Ezekiel's vision of the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem (Ezekiel 47.1-12) describes the water which flows from the right side of the temple and which becomes a river with trees growing from its banks. The passages from Zechariah and Ezekiel were read during the liturgy for the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, and it was at this feast that Christ cried out: 'If any man is thirsty, let him come to me! Let the man come and drink who believes in me! As scripture says: From his breast shall flow fountains of living water' (John 7.37-38).<sup>26</sup> In the description of the New Jerusalem in the Apocalypse, which is based on Ezekiel's vision, the river rises from the throne of God and the Lamb (Apoc. 22.1-2): the physical temple of Ezekiel has been replaced by the spiritual temple of Christ's body<sup>27</sup> and the river therefore becomes the water which flowed from Christ's side on the cross. These ideas are represented in a historiated initial to the Canticum of Isaiah (Isaiah 12.1-6) in the twelfth-century St Albans Psalter, where the verse, 'You will draw water joyfully from the springs of salvation' is illustrated by a picture of a man drawing water from a river; in the centre of the river is a tree-cross with a lamb on its cross-bar.<sup>28</sup> In this picture, Isaiah's springs of salvation, to which man looks forward as he returns from Babylon to Jerusalem, have become the river of life of the Apocalypse, from which rises the cross, the source of eternal life.

The invocations to Jerusalem and the Jordan, then, can be related to a complex of Old and New Testament images connected with the land to which Joshua led the Jews, the land to which they returned from Babylon and the heavenly Jerusalem to which Christ led mankind. Entry to this land is through baptism: Christ's baptism,

his death and resurrection (which was also a baptism),<sup>29</sup> and man's baptism, through which he shares Christ's death and resurrection. As was said above, early theologians considered that God's promise to Joshua before his crossing of the Jordan was fulfilled when Christ was baptised in the Jordan.<sup>30</sup> The connection between these two events was recalled in the liturgy for the feast of Epiphany and for its octave, when the verse, 'Mare vidit et fugit, Iordanis conversus est retrorsum', was used as one of the responsories:

Hodie coeli aperti sunt et mare dulce factum est, terra exsultat, montes et colles laetantur, quia a Joanne in Jordane Christus baptizatus est.

V.A. Quid est tibi mare quod fugisti, et tu Jordanis quia conversus es retrorsum? Quia a Joanne in Jordane Christus baptizatus est.

V.B. Mare vidit et fugit, Jordanis conversus est retrorsum. Quia a Joanne in Jordane Christus baptizatus est.

[Today the skies are opened and the sea is made sweet, the earth exults, mountains and hills rejoice, because Christ is baptised by John in the Jordan. Why did you flee, oh sea, and why did you turn back oh Jordan? Because Christ is baptised by John in the Jordan. The sea saw and fled, Jordan turned back. Because Christ is baptised by John in the Jordan.]<sup>31</sup>

One of the antiphons for Lauds of the feast of Epiphany, used also on the octave of the feast, refers to the stillness of the river Jordan at Christ's baptism and interprets it as one of the signs of Christ's divinity, like the dove of the Holy Spirit and the voice of God the Father:

Baptizat miles Regem, servus Dominum suum, Joannes Salvatorem; aqua Jordanis stupuit, columba protestatur, paterna vox audita est: Hic est Filius meus.

[The soldier baptises the King, the slave his Lord, John the Saviour; the water of Jordan was amazed, the dove exclaimed, the voice of the Father was heard. This is my Son.]<sup>32</sup>

The point is made more explicitly in the Epiphany homily in the Vercelli Book:

Swylce wearð æt þam dryhtenlican fulwihte se cwide and se witedom gefylled and geworden þe David se witiga in þam sealme sang and toward sægde, ða he þurh Haligne Gast and þa dryhtenlican fulwihte him toward geseah, and ða sægde he and witgade þæt þæt wæter sylf urne Dryhten ongeate and andettan sceolde. He ðus cwæð: 'Quid est mare quod fugisti, et tu Iordanis, quare conversus es retrorsum?' 'Hwæt is þe, sæ, forhwan fluge ðu? Oððe þu, Iordan, forhwan cerdest ðu on bæcling?' 'Iordan' is haten seo ea þe se Hælend on gefulwad wæs, and heo is swiðe mycel wæter and swiðe strang stream hafað and sæflod onyrneð. And þa wæs geworden in þa tid, þe se Hælend in þæt wæter astag, þa gecyrde se sæflod and se stream eall on bæcling and swa stille gestod þæt flod. Swylce he flowan ne meahte, ac he wæs swiðe mid þy godcundan egesan geþreatod þæt he hine styrian ne dorste.

[So at the Lord's baptism the speech and the prophecy were fulfilled and came about that the prophet David sang and prophesied in the psalm, which he saw were to come through the Holy Ghost and the baptism of the Lord, and then he spoke and gave witness that the water itself would recognise and confess our Lord. He spoke as follows, 'Quid est mare quod fugisti, et tu Iordanis, quare conversus es retrorsum?' 'Why do you flee, oh sea? Or you, Jordan, why do you turn back?' 'Jordan' is the name of the river in which the Saviour was baptised, and it is a very great stretch of water and has a very strong current and runs into the sea. And then was fulfilled at that time, when the Saviour descended into that water, that the sea flood and the stream turned back and the flood stood thus still. As if it could not flow, but it was greatly oppressed with divine fear so that it dared not move.]<sup>33</sup>

Christ's baptism marked the beginning of his public ministry, when he was anointed by God for the work of salvation which was to be completed by his exaltation on the cross.<sup>34</sup> It was one of three occasions when the Holy Spirit intervened directly in Christ's life<sup>35</sup> and marked a turning-point in man's history. Cyril of Jerusalem drew a parallel between the creation of the world through water and its re-creation in

the water of the Jordan.<sup>36</sup> The author of *The Gospel of Nicodemus* associated Christ's baptism with the promise of salvation made to Adam after the fall:

Then the most beloved Son of God will come on earth to raise up Adam's body and the bodies of the dead; he will come and be baptized in the Jordan. When he has emerged from Jordan's water, he will anoint all who believe in him with the oil of his mercy; and this, the oil of mercy, will last eternally for the generation of those who are born from water and the Holy Spirit. Then the most beloved Son of God, Christ Jesus, will descend to earth and bring our father Adam back into paradise to the tree of mercy.<sup>37</sup>

These passages tempt one to interpret the reference to the stillness of the Jordan in *The Descent into Hell* as an allusion to Christ's baptism. To concentrate on this theme to the exclusion of the wider theme of exile and return, however, impoverishes the poem as well as failing to account for the reference to Jerusalem. The Old English poet relates the annunciation, the nativity and the baptism to man's wretchedness before the coming of Christ and his longing for the coming of the *Logos*, the Word of God (76-98); at the same time, he speaks for the Christian, who relives salvation history through the liturgy. The different strands of meaning in the poem are brought together in the references to Jerusalem and the Jordan which recall in one complex symbol the metaphorical narratives of the Old Testament, the historical reality of Christ's life, the sacramental system of the church and the future to which the church is moving. The deserted city of Jerusalem is the city lamented by Jeremiah, the city from which man is exiled during Lent and the silent city of the liturgy for Holy Week. Towards the end of the poem it becomes the city to which Christ will return (128-30): either the earthly Jerusalem of the second coming or the heavenly Jerusalem to which Christ returns at his ascension. The Jordan is the river crossed by Joshua as he enters the promised land, the river of the return from Babylon, the river crossed metaphorically by the church on her journey to Jerusalem during Lent, the river of baptism and the river across which Christ leads his followers back to heaven. Its stillness is a mark of God's constant care for his people, an acknowledgement by the created world of the divinity of Christ and the means by which God gives the sweetness of heavenly grace to man through the water of baptism.



NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For discussion see *The Exeter Book*, ed. G. P. Krapp and E. van K. Dobbie, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records III (1936), 358-59.

<sup>2</sup> T. D. Hill, 'Cosmic stasis and the birth of Christ: the Old English *Descent into Hell*, lines 99-106', *JEGP*, 71 (1972), 382-89. Hill (p. 385) translates lines 105-06 as 'Not at all did you flow to the dwellers on earth nor could they joyously partake of your waters', supplying an auxiliary in 105 and a negative in 106.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick W. Conner, 'The liturgy and the Old English *Descent into Hell*', *JEGP*, 79 (1980), 179-91.

<sup>4</sup> Conner, 'The liturgy', pp. 187-89.

<sup>5</sup> *Corpus antiphonalium officii*, ed. R.-J. Hesbert, 6 vols, *Rerum ecclesiasticarum documenta*, Series maior, Fontes 7-12 (Rome, 1963-79), I, 176-77 (74b); II, 318-19 (74b).

<sup>6</sup> For a translation of *The Gospel of Nicodemus* see *Sources and Analogues of Old English Poetry*, ed. M. J. B. Allen and D. G. Calder (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 175-86.

<sup>7</sup> The military imagery recalls the description of the Visitation in the Blickling homily for the birth of John the Baptist, 'wæpn gegrap mid to campienne, ærþon þe he to his lichoman leomum become; and he ær þone feþan sohte, ærþon þe he leoht gesawe' [He took up a weapon to fight with before he received limbs, and he sought battle before he saw the light], *The Blickling Homilies*, ed. R. Morris, EETS, os 58, 63, 73 (repr. as one vol., 1967), xiv, p. 167; see G. Crotty, 'The Exeter *Harrowing of Hell*: a reinterpretation', *PMLA*, 54 (1939), 349-58, at 354-55. The weapons are, of course, the grace received in baptism, and anticipated in the case of John the Baptist, who was sanctified by Christ in the womb.

<sup>8</sup> I accept Conner's interpretation of the closing lines of the poem as a general plea to Christ for the grace of baptism, spoken by the poet in his own person ('The liturgy', pp. 184-85); this suggestion avoids any problems caused by the change of pronoun from *wit* (line 132) to *git* (line 135).

<sup>9</sup> Herbert McCabe, *The New Creation* (London, 1964), p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. also Jeremiah 7.34, 'I will silence the shouts of rejoicing and mirth, the voices of bridegroom and bride, in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem, for the whole land will be reduced to desert', and 25.10-11, 'I will put an end for them to the shouts of rejoicing and mirth, to the voices of bridegroom and bride, to the sound of the millstone and to the light of the lamp. The whole land shall be devastated and reduced to a desert, while they will stay in slavery among the nations for seventy years.'

<sup>11</sup> *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies, the Second Series*, ed. M. Godden, EETS, ss 5 (1979), xii, Dominica in media Quadragesime, pp. 121-22. See also, *The Old English version of the*

*Heptateuch*, ed. S. J. Crawford, EETS, os 160 (1922, repr. 1969), pp. 32-33, 'Tosue hæfde ðæs Hælendes getacnunge, mid þam þe he gelædde to þam lande þæt folc, þe him behaten wæs, swa swa se Hælend deð, þe læt to heofenan rice þa ðe on hine gelyfað, gif hi mid godum weorcum hine gegladiað' [Joshua symbolised the Saviour because he led that people to the land which was promised to them just as the Saviour does, who leads to the heavenly kingdom those who believe in him, if they please him with good works].

<sup>12</sup> Origen, *Homiliae in Librum Jesu Nave*, transl. Rufinus, Hom. IV. ii, PG 12.843; Hrabanus Maurus, *Comment. in Librum Josue* I. iv, PL 108.1013. See also p. 41.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Isidore, *In Josue*, iii, PL 83.371-72, Bede, *Quaestiones super Jesu Nave Librum*, iii, PL 93.417, Hrabanus Maurus, *Comment. in Librum Josue* I. iv, PL 108.1013-14.

<sup>14</sup> Origen, *Homiliae in Librum Jesu Nave*, Hom. IV. i, PG 12.843, translation taken from the modern Breviary for Wednesday of week 10 of the year.

<sup>15</sup> John of Jerusalem, *Catechesis XX Mystagogica II*, De baptismi caeremoniis, iv and vi, PG 33.1079 and 1082; translation taken from the modern Roman Breviary for Thursday in Easter Week. The address is often attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem but most scholars now believe it to have been written by John, see P. W. L. Walker, *Holy City, Holy Places? Christian attitudes to Jerusalem and the Holy Land in the Fourth Century* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 410-11.

<sup>16</sup> Amalarius, *Liber officialis*, I. i. 2, ed. J. M. Hanssens, *Amalarii episcopi opera liturgica omnia*, Studi e testi 138-40 (Vatican City, 1948-50), 139, pp. 26-27. Cf. Ælfric, *Catholic Homilies*, II. v, Dominica in Septuagesima, ed. Godden, p. 49, 'We willað eow secgan be ðyssere andweardan tide, hwi seo halige gelaðung forlæt on Godes cyrcan Alleluian, and Gloria in excelsis Deo, fram ðisum andwerdum dæge oð þa halgan Eastertide. Sum wis lareow hatte Amalarius, se awrat ane boc be cyrclicum ðeawum, hwæt ða gesetnyssa Godes þenunga on gearlicum ymbryne getacniað, and cwæð be ðyssere andwerdan tide þe is gecweden Septuagesima, þæt heo gefylð ða getacnunge þæra hundsefontig geara þe Israhela folc on hæftede, Babiloniscum cyninge þeowde' [We will tell you concerning the present season, why the congregation stops singing *Alleluia* and *Gloria in excelsis* in God's church, from the present day until the holy season of Easter. A certain wise teacher called Amalarius, who wrote a book about church customs, explaining the symbolism of the yearly course of the church's liturgy, says that this present season called Septuagesima represents the seventy years during which the people of Israel served the king of Babylon in slavery].

<sup>17</sup> See O. B. Hardison, *Christian rite and Christian drama in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore, 1965), p. 105, note 43.

<sup>18</sup> *Antiphonale missarum sextuplex*, ed. R.-J. Hesbert (Brussels, 1935), pp. 74-75 (60).

<sup>19</sup> *Antiphonale missarum sextuplex*, ed. Hesbert, pp. 74-75 (60); cf. Psalm 47.12-13, 'Go through Zion, walk round her, counting her towers, admiring her walls, reviewing her palaces; then

tell the next generation that God is here, our God and leader, for ever and ever.'

<sup>20</sup> 'Responsorio de Josue', Fourth Sunday in Lent, Night Office, *Corpus antiphonarium*, ed. Hesbert, I, 152-53 (64b), II, 276-77 (64b). See also, 'Josue, animadvertite in omnibus quae loquor; quoniam tu transibis Jordanem pro me, ad terram quam daturus est Dominus Deus' [Joshua, consider all that I say, for you will cross the Jordan on my behalf, to the land which the Lord God is going to give you], Fourth Sunday in Lent, Night Office, *Corpus antiphonarium*, ed. Hesbert, II, 275 (64a), found only in S. Lupi Beneventani (L).

<sup>21</sup> PG 43.439.

<sup>22</sup> *Corpus antiphonarium*, ed. Hesbert, I, 174-75 (74a), II, 318-19 (74b).

<sup>23</sup> *Corpus antiphonarium*, ed. Hesbert, I, 176-77 (74b), II, 318-19 (74b).

<sup>24</sup> *Corpus antiphonarium*, ed. Hesbert, I, 182-83 (75d), II, 331 (75f), IV, 523; *The Leofric Collectar*, ed. E. S. Dewick, Henry Bradshaw Society, 45 (1914), col. 137.

<sup>25</sup> Exodus 13.5 and Ecclesiasticus 15.3, *Antiphonale missarum sextuplex*, ed. Hesbert, pp. 100-01 (81a), and 102-03 (82).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. his words to the woman of Samaria, 'Anyone who drinks the water that I shall give will never be thirsty again: the water that I shall give will turn into a spring inside him, welling up to eternal life' (John 4.14).

<sup>27</sup> 'The Lord God Almighty and the Lamb were themselves the temple' (Apoc. 21.22); cf. John ii 19-21; see also E. O Carragáin, 'Vidi aquam: the liturgical background to *The Dream of the Rood* 20a: *swætan on þa swiðran healfe*', *Notes and Queries*, 228 (1983), 8-15.

<sup>28</sup> p. 372, reprod. *The St Albans Psalter (Albani Psalter)*, ed. O. Pächt, C. R. Dodwell and F. Wormald, Studies of the Warburg Institute, 25 (London, 1960), pl. 91d.

<sup>29</sup> 'Can you drink the cup that I must drink, or be baptised with the baptism with which I must be baptised?' Mark 10.38; 'There is a baptism I must still receive, and how great is my distress till it is over!' Luke 12.50.

<sup>30</sup> See above, p. 35 and note 12.

<sup>31</sup> *Corpus antiphonarium*, ed. Hesbert, I, 64 (24b), 71 (25b); II, 105 (24c); versicles A and B are alternatives, found in different manuscripts. Commentators made a distinction between the 'sweet' water above the point at which Joshua crossed (interpreted as baptism, the sweetness of heavenly grace or perseverance in the faith) and the waters below the crossing point, which flowed into the Salt Sea: see for example Isidore, *In Josue*, iii, PL 83.371-72, Bede, *Quaestiones super Jesu Nave Librum*, iii, PL 93.417, Hrabanus Maurus, *Comment. in Librum Josue I*, iv, PL 108.1013.

<sup>32</sup> *Corpus antiphonarium*, ed. Hesbert, I, 66 (24c), 70 (25b); II, 106 (24.2a), 108 (24.2b), 115 (25b).

<sup>33</sup> *Vercelli Homilies ix-xxiii*, ed. P. E. Szarmach (Toronto, 1981), xvi, p. 44. The practice of

portraying the river Jordan standing up in a heap in some early representations of Christ's baptism may, perhaps, be an allusion to this turning back of the river; see, for example, the painting in the Benedictional of St Æthelwold, BL MS Add. 49598, 25r, reprod. E. Temple, *Anglo-Saxon manuscripts 900-1066, A Survey of Manuscripts illuminated in the British Isles*, 2 (London, 1976), pl. 85.

<sup>34</sup> See above, p. 35 and note 12.

<sup>35</sup> The other occasions are the incarnation and the resurrection; see McCabe, *The New Creation*, p. 53.

<sup>36</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis III illuminandorum*, v-vi, PG 33.434.

<sup>37</sup> *The Gospel of Nicodemus*, iii, in *Sources and Analogues of Old English Poetry*, ed. Allen and Calder, p. 179.