

IS THE TITLE OF THE OLD ENGLISH POEM THE *DESCENT INTO HELL* SUITABLE?¹

Abstract

The author studies and reevaluates the traditional acceptance of titles of OE poetry in the example of the case of the *Exeter Book's The Descent into Hell*, also known as *The Harrowing of Hell*.

Keywords: Old English Poetry, *Descent into Hell*.

Resumen

La autora estudia y reevalúa la adaptación tradicional de los títulos de la poesía del inglés antiguo en el ejemplo de la obra titulada *El descenso a los infiernos* del *Libro de Exeter*, conocido también como *La liberación del Infierno*.

Palabras clave: Poesía del inglés antiguo, *Descent into Hell*.

All too often we unquestioningly accept the titles of Old English poetry that were given by an early editor, and such a title might well color our interpretation of a poem. This is especially true when dealing with anonymous Old English poetry, in which scholars are left with little or no details about an author and sometimes have the dubious task of naming an untitled medieval text.

Scholars have often been left with the complicated and challenging task of trying to interpret anonymous texts, while also providing them with suitable names; however, when an anonymous poem is misinterpreted by an editor and then also named by that editor, the results are often that the editorial name endowed on the poem somehow reflects the gross misinterpretation of the text. Such is the case for the *Exeter Book's The Descent into Hell*, which has been given a name that might be unsuitable and might not clearly represent the poem as a whole, since past editors seem to have misread the poem's central theme.

¹ I would like to thank Professor Graham Caie for his comments on this paper, as well as the Lynne Grundy Memorial Trust Fund for their generous support.

The poem preserved on folios 119 verso -121 verso of the *Exeter Book* has been generally known as *The Descent into Hell*, ever since late commentators made a slight editorial change from the previous title *The Harrowing of Hell*. Although there was a recognition that the name of the poem was not fitting and an attempt was made to rectify the matter regarding the title, the new suggestion and the generally accepted title today is no more suitable than its predecessor. The issue about the title has not yet been resolved satisfactorily and the existing title of this *Exeter Book* poem has obviously been unsettling for more recent scholars as well. Nearly forty years ago, Richard Trask recognized that the current title was unsuitable and, suggested the title 'Christ and John' to replace the current title.² While Trask points out that the title hardly does the poem justice, he only alludes to the issue in passing and does not press the matter. In the following paper I hope to outline why the current name of the *Exeter Book* poem is unsuitable and recommend titles that would be more appropriate for it.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* one of the main definitions of the term "title" in reference to literature is:

the name of a book, a poem, or other [written] composition describing; an inscription at the beginning of a book, describing or indicating its subject, contents, or nature, and usually also giving the name of the author, compiler, or editor, the name of the publisher, and the place and date of publication.³

While the *OED* gives us a straightforward definition and outlines the basic function of a title, John Fisher explores the definition and function of a title

² Trask suggests that "taking the speaker in the latter half of the poem to be John the Baptist, the poem might on a literal level be called simply 'Christ and John.'" *The Descent into Hell of the Exeter Book.* *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 72 (1971), p. 425.

³ "title, n.³" *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 28 Sept. 2006 <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50253513>.

in greater detail. In Fisher's appropriately named article called "Entitling" the critic argues:

While titles are names, they are a good deal more than just names. They are not necessarily descriptions, although they can contain descriptive elements. They are names for a purpose, not merely for the purpose of identification and designation, in spite of the important practical role which indexical names play in the designative process. The unique purpose of titling is hermeneutical, [as] titles are names which function as guides to interpretation. (J. Fisher 1984: 288)

By 'hermeneutical,' Fisher elucidated that it "is to allow for interpretive discourse, so if the title does not allow for interpretive discourse, it is nothing more than a label." (J. Fisher 1984: 288) If he is correct in his assertion that there is a significant and meaningful connection between titles and the literary works they correspond with, and furthermore, titles, themselves, function as guides to interpretation, then the current title *The Descent into Hell* functions as a guide to misinterpretation.

One reason why the poem was given its current title by early editors was because they based their title on a misunderstanding of the poem's major theme. Certainly the poem does deal with one of the extended accounts of Salvation history found in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*,⁴ in which Christ freed the

⁴ It should be noted that the account of Christ's descent is not mentioned in the Bible, apart from a number of vague references scattered throughout. See Ps. 68:18; Matt. 12:40, Eph. 4:7-11, Rom. 10:6-7, Phil. 2:9-11, Col. 2:15, I Cor. 15:55, I Pet. 3:19. For various allusions to God appearing as conqueror of the lower regions see: Ps. 24, Isa. 42:7, 45:2, 53:8-9 and Hos. 6:2, 13:14. Christ's descent is generally considered a legend, fully exploited in the apocryphal *Evangelium Nicodemi*, but the story itself is not an actual component of Salvation history. The concept of redemption history rings more clearly through the echoes of baptism that dominate the poem, something of which I discuss further in this paper. See also Trask's "*The Descent into Hell* of the *Exeter Book*," and Zbigniew Izydorzyc's "The Inversion of Paschal Events in the Old English *Descent into*

Ancient Just from their long captivity in Hell and, further, the poem is inextricably linked to the Easter liturgy. From this, it seems that the editors have assigned the poem the title, *The Descent into Hell*. Since early commentators had also established that the main source for the poem must have been the Apocryphal text the *Gospel of Nicodemus*,⁵ critics attempted to

Hell," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 91 (1990), pp. 439-445. See also footnote 6 for a more detailed description of the *Gospel of Nicodemus*.

⁵ The *Gospel of Nicodemus* is comprised of two parts known separately, as the *Descensus Christi ad Inferos* and *Acta Pilati*, and together as the *Acta* or *Gesta Pilati* or *Gospel of Nicodemus*. The basic authority of the text rests in the name of Nicodemus, the secret follower of Christ (See: John 3:1-10; 7:50-1; 19:39), who, along with Joseph of Arimathea, is a leading character in the narrative. As a whole, the text is comprised of sixteen chapters dealing with the trial, death, descent, resurrection and ascension of Christ. The narrative of the Saviour's descent to Hell, included in chapters 12-15, involves two first-hand accounts of his Harrowing narrated by two men, Karinus and Leucius, who are raised from the dead after witnessing the spectacle themselves. By combining the names of the two eye-witnesses, some scholars have hypothesized that a second century Christian named Lucius Charinus may have written the apocryphal text, although no confirmed author has ever been established with certainty. For further discussion on the theory of authorship in *Descensus Christi ad Inferos* see W. H. Hulme's *The Middle English Harrowing of Hell and Gospel of Nicodemus*. London: Early English Text Society, 1907, p.lxi. Although a primary function of the *Gospel of Nicodemus* was used to prove to unbelievers that Christ resurrected, the apocryphal text's earliest audiences, undoubtedly would have included believers from the early Church; and its widespread appeal led to the original Latin text being translated into Greek, Armenian, Coptic, Syriac and Georgian. Although the text was never accepted as canonical, it became one of the most popular of the New Testament apocrypha, gaining widespread appeal by the Middle Ages. Not only do Anglo-Saxon and several Middle English translations exist, but the story of the descent proved to be a popular theme to depict in both art and drama spanning the course of the entire medieval period. Dating of the *Acta Pilati* has proven to be a difficult task, since the two portions of the text probably originated at different times and in complete independence of each other. Attempts to pin down the text's composition as a whole vary anywhere from the first to the sixth century AD. Hulme asserts that "the *Descensus* is the older of two [parts] and probably received its literary form as early as the second or third century" (*The Middle English Harrowing of Hell and Gospel of Nicodemus*. p.lxi), however this is still uncertain. The *Acta Pilati* has proven no less troublesome to date, and among the many complications surrounding the dating of the text is Saint Justin Martyr's 2nd-century allusion to Christ's trial before Pilate, in the apologist's *Apologia prima*, which bears close resemblance to the account recorded in the apocryphal text. Despite the similarity between the two texts no tangible evidence can verify whether the early Christian writer was referring to an actual record or not, and most attempts to establish a date of composition for the *Gospel of Nicodemus* have been unfruitful. For further discussion on the author, composition, provenance and narrative

draw comparisons between the two works, while not only speculating that the poet's concern was to tell the story of Christ's descent, but also concluding that the poem's title should somehow reflect this connection with its main source. However, in naming the poem first *The Harrowing of Hell* and then afterwards *The Descent into Hell*, the only achievement editors made was in indicating the basic setting or backdrop of the poem, while in the process neglecting to point out the main emphasis of the poem.⁶

As some scholars have noted, the poem can appear inadequate when compared to typical narratives involving the Harrowing of Hell, especially those that closely follow the account described in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*. M. Bradford Bedingfield (2002: 145) explains that the central elements of the Harrowing in its narrative developments include:

the appearance of a light in the darkness of Hell, the complaints/questions of the devils into the abyss, the plaints of the faithful (including the likes of Abraham and David, and often several of the prophets) to be freed, and then of Adam and, especially, Eve, who invokes her daughter Mary. Quite frequently, the Harrowing is followed by an account of the end of the world.

of the apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus*, see: G. C. O' Calleaigh's "Dating the Commentaries of Nicodemus." *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 56. No. 1. (Jan., 1963), pp. 21-58; see also *The Gospel of Nicodemus*. ed. H. C. Kim. Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1973; see also Thomas Hall's "The *Evangelium Nichodemi* and *Vindicta Saluatoris* in Anglo-Saxon England," *Two Old English Apocrypha and their Manuscript Sources*. ed. J. E. Cross, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 36-81.

⁶ Within the poem, there is very little reference made to the physical description of Hell and only the half line 'under bealuclommum' (*The Descent into Hell*. l. 65b) explicitly describes the grimness of the Underworld. References to John's anguish and suffering in Hell provide a sense of the psychological effects of suffering in the Underworld (ll. 85-6, 98, 107), however, any sort of detailed description of Hell is absent, apart from typical descriptions of the Underworld as dark place (l. 55a).

Unlike the Apocryphal text of the *Gospel of Nicodemus* or other prose or poetic works in which the central theme is concerned with Christ's descent,⁷ the poem of the *Exeter Book* gives one brief line to Christ's actual entrance into Hell. As readers, we are not presented with a grandiose or spectacular image of Christ's descent, in which the Savior, leading a heavenly host, bravely and mightily breaks through the gates of Hell with divine strength and force in order to free the righteous from Hell. The narrator, not to distract us from the main message, simply, yet eloquently, explains in one brief line "ac þa locu feollan / cluster of þam castrum; cyning in oþrad."⁸ Not to understate the dramatic events, the poet's choice to condense the description of Christ's descent into Hell into one line of poetry functions to move the action along quickly and efficiently without detracting from the main message of the poem that focuses, not simply on Salvation history, but a contemporary and timeless Salvation message for readers.

Just as the poem shares little resemblance with other Harrowing accounts in terms of describing Christ's actual descent, the poem also contains no verbal responses by the devil and his minions, no personification of Hell itself, and no dialogue between Satan and Hell. For those familiar with the Harrowing account presented in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, the dramatic episode involving a verbal exchange between Satan and personified Hell is both fascinating and remarkably comedic as the ancient enemies not only anticipate Christ's grand entrance, but attempt to deflect their failure at not being able to keep Him out, by hurling insults and accusations at one other.⁹ However,

⁷ See especially: Christ I & II, Christ & Satan, Guthlac B, Dream of the Rood, etc.

⁸ *The Descent into Hell*. ll. 39b-40. All quotes from the poem are taken from: *The Exeter Book*. Ed. by George Philip Krapp & Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie. New York: Columbia University Press, 1936.

⁹ Two separate comedic examples within *Evangelium Nicodemi* include: "Inferus et Mors et impia official eorum cum crudelibus ministries expauerunt in propriis regnis agnitam tanti luminis claritatem dum Christum repente in suis sedibus uiderunt, et exclamauerunt dicentes: "victim sumus a te." (XXII. 1) "Tunc Inferus suscipiens Satan principem cum nimia increpatione dixit ad eum: "O princeps perditionis et dux exterminationis Beelzebub, dirisio angelorum Dei, sputio iustorum, quid hec facere uoluisti? In cuius exicium

in the poem of the *Exeter Book* the poet makes no mention of Satan's response and/or reaction to Christ's appearance, in fact Satan does not speak at all, while Hell, itself, remains a static, but grim location, "shrouded in darkness", as the narrator states in line 55a. Moving towards the peak or climax of traditional Harrowing narratives, Satan and his minions verbalize their defeat in a huge spectacle, while the righteous, represented by Adam and Eve, articulate gratitude, humility and praise for their Redeemer who has come to free them. Yet, in the *Exeter Book* poem, Adam and Eve remain silent with the multitude of the righteous and the only hint at Satan's defeat comes in three lines that summarize the Saviour's motivation for his journey. The lines read: "Geseah he [Iohannis] helle duru hædre scinan, / þa þe longe ær bilocen wæron, / beþeahhte mid þystre."¹⁰ Apart from those aspects which are briefly summed up or altogether missing from the *Exeter Book* poem, another key component is also omitted that is usually found within works that deal with the Harrowing of Hell. Christ, who is obviously the central figure within the Harrowing narratives, often compellingly expresses His purpose, reprimands Satan, and comfortingly addresses the righteous as well. However, in the *Exeter Book* poem, the Saviour does not speak and apart from the poem's narrator, who opens the poem and closes it with a final message of thanksgiving to God, John the Baptist is the sole and central speaker within the text. Here again, the inclusion of John the Baptist as the one who receives Christ in Hell and as the one who speaks on behalf of the saints demonstrates a complete departure from Harrowing narratives both in literature and artistic depictions.¹¹ Throughout the history of Harrowing accounts, Adam is consistently presented as the first to receive Christ and address Him on behalf

mortis nobis tanta spolia promisi? Ignorasti ut insipiens quid egisti..." (XXIII.1). *Evangelium Nichodemi. Two Old English Apocrypha and Their Manuscript Source*. ed. J. E. Cross. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp 220-224.

¹⁰ The Descent into Hell ll. 53-55a.

¹¹ "Fysde hine þa to fore frea moncynnes; / wolde heofona helm helle weallas / forbrecan ond forbygan, þære burge þrym / onginnan reafian, reþust calra cyninga" (ll. 33-36).

of humanity, while the *Exeter Book* poem, alone, depicts John the Baptist performing Adam's usual duties, while Adam himself remains silent amongst the crowd of saints. Finally, there is no mention at the end of the poem of the end of the world or Judgment Day. Rather, in the closing lines of the *Exeter Book* poem, the narrator graciously thanks Christ for the hope that He gives us through His baptism and through His example, essentially urging us to hasten on our own journey towards Salvation through baptism. With an exhortation of praise, the narrator concludes the poem by declaring:

“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!”
(ll. 133-137).

So what, in the end, would be the point of leaving out seemingly climactic, exciting, and traditional details of the Harrowing account? Basically, I believe that the departure from the Apocryphal text is deliberate on the part of the poet who uses the scenario of Christ's descent as a backdrop in order to present a message focused on the journey towards Salvation. This, of course, does not mean that the Harrowing account is not significant within the poem's structure, but certainly it is not the principal theme of the text. In actuality, the direction that the poet takes readers on is a different journey, if I may say so. Mimicking the two Marys at the beginning of the poem, who journey to Christ's tomb early in the morning, likewise following Christ's crossing into Hell, and understanding John's connection with baptism while being reminded not only through his words, but through his role in Christian history and furthermore, by grasping the narrator's closing utterance of thanksgiving which inspires readers on a journey towards Salvation through their own baptism, readers are reminded of the Christian message of Salvation, while also being prompted to serve and praise God through prayer and deeds like John the Baptist. So, ultimately, although the seed of the poem comes

from the Apocryphal text, the poem flourishes into a Christian message of hope drawing on an allusion of the soul's journey, the path to Salvation through baptism and the associations to the resurrection and rebirth that every Christian receives through baptism.

Since the main focus of the poem has to do more with John's prayer of praise and thanksgiving and less to do with Christ's actual descent, the title *The Descent into Hell* does nothing but impoverish readings of the poem since readers' immediate expectation is to read a poem which deals significantly with this episode. In the same vain, if the title does not impoverish a reading and one is able to recognize the poem's central theme, then, at the very least, the title can mislead readers into judging the poet's ability to convey the story of Christ's descent effectively and accurately while also concluding that the poet's fresh approach to the Harrowing account is both "confusing and perhaps a clumsy", as T. A. Shippey suggests.¹² However, the poem is not confusing in the least if it is read as somewhat of a lyrical rhapsody with a brief introductory setting that is appropriate to the actual theme and central message. Essentially, because the narrative is concerned more about Christ's reception in Hell and the text is almost exclusively a "hymn of thanks, praise and exhortation spoken [or sung] by John the Baptist," (Trask 1971: 425); it should be viewed on its own merits as an innovative approach in dealing with the Salvation message, and should simply not be viewed as a failed attempt to describe Christ's descent into Hell. There is an obvious means to an end, and although the poet's use of language and structure is subtle rather than blatantly obvious from the onset, the outcome for readers could and should be rewarding in terms of discovering the theme and message within the poem for themselves.

¹² Shippey asserts that "when allowance has been made for the modes of 'typological understanding', *The Descent into Hell* remains a confusing and perhaps a clumsy poem (though the opposite view is stoutly maintained by both Thomas Hill and Richard Trask...)." Shippey (1976: 42) further exclaims that the poem's "originality, is not denied, nor (if this is compatible with clumsiness) its self-assurance."

A change in the title might not have been enough to convince some critics of the poem's merits, such as William Mackie, who in his edition of the *Exeter Book* suggests that the poet was amateurish, that "the poem is nothing more than incoherent babbling" and further argues that the poem must have been a fragment.¹³ However, E. V. K. Dobbie asserts that "there is nothing in the text as it stands in the manuscript which would warrant our considering it anything but a complete poem." (Krapp & Dobbie 1936: lxi) As readers, we do not have to look too hard to discover that the poet has a different agenda other than to relay the Harrowing of Hell account to readers.

If we return to John Fisher's definition, that titles share a close relationship with texts and provide a means to interpretation, and also by looking at the *Exeter Book* poem on its own merits without comparing it to texts that are mainly concerned with the Apocryphal account of Christ's descent, titles that are more fitting for the *Exeter Book* poem and meet the criteria previously mentioned are: "John the Baptist's Prayer", or perhaps "John's Prayer of Praise and Thanksgiving" or simply "John's Prayer". While Christ's descent is integral to the poet's message because it provides the setting for the narrative, the only speaker in the poem is John the Baptist whose obvious connection with baptism and message of hope and gratitude outweighs the brief reference to Christ's Harrowing, so it is really John's message that is at the core of the text.

Another possibility would be to emphasize the lyrical elements that clearly ring throughout the poem with a fitting title like "John's Song." Prayer, liturgy and lyrical worship are driving forces within the poem, so indicating at least one of those themes more overtly in the title would signify, more precisely, what the poem is about and help facilitate readings and interpretations of the poem. The emphasis on prayer and liturgy calls out in

¹³ Mackie exclaims that "*The Harrowing of Hell*, give[s] the most trouble to a translator, since it is difficult to give a sensible rendering of lines or passages that can never have been anything but incoherent babbling." *The Exeter Book*. Part II: Poems IX-XXXII. London: Oxford University Press, 1934, p. vii.

blatantly obvious ways, not only via the text itself, but also by means of where the poem is located within the *Exeter Book*. It is no coincidence that the text is nestled in between two other poems that deal with prayer and Salvation, being preceded first by the poem *Resignation* which deals with prayer for patience and humility along a journey corrupted by trials and Satan's temptations, and then followed by *Alms-giving*, a short poem concerned with personal Salvation. Although scholars have established that a single scribe recorded the works within the *Exeter Book* manuscript, it is unclear and may remain so whether the scribe was also the anthologist who compiled the individual works within the manuscript. Still, Roy Liuzza argues that the scribe or the anthologist ordered the poems as they are in the manuscript, because they fit together sensibly and the thematic links are too strong to be accidental.¹⁴ Since the manuscript is arguably laid out in sections dealing with different themes, the anthologist obviously had something else in mind that critics of the poem as we know as *The Descent into Hell* have overlooked.

Overall, a new and more appropriate title like any of the ones I have suggested, would function then as part of the text itself in a way, essentially, to indicate what exactly is at the core of the poem, while welcoming readers to begin their journeys through the text, as opposed to distracting them from discovery and meaning.

Although I am by no means suggesting that the *Exeter Book* poem is the greatest of Old English poems, comparable to the likes of *The Dream of the*

¹⁴ Liuzza explains: "The poems... of the *Exeter Book* represent a manuscript sequence, poems perhaps by different authors but deliberately set and probably altered to be read as a series. Manuscript divisions and stylistic differences are less important than the thematic concatenations that bind the poems together... the model of textual unity suggests that an additional interpretative richness may be achieved by reading Old English poetry as the medieval reader would have read it, in series in its manuscript context; 'monkish interpolation', as it cannot be avoided, should be recognized, understood, and embraced. The textual unity [of the *Exeter Book*] extending from *Christ I* to *Juliana* and perhaps beyond share a certain thematic, and to an extent stylistic, harmony that can only be called codicological or scribal unity." (1990: 10-11).

Rood, the poem in question is indeed more than just “babbling”¹⁵ and a more suitable title, like any of my proposed titles, would indicate that the poet’s message is not lost and that the poem, although a relatively short, modest piece, is strikingly attractive and has value within the corpus of Old English poetry. What I have attempted to highlight is that the poem is valuable, not just because of its age, but because of its content, theme, message and the glimpse, readers catch, into the mind of one innovative, creative and perhaps peculiar Anglo-Saxon poet. Perhaps, my objective is not to give the poem a title per se, but more fittingly to illustrate that the poem is entitled to a name that it has been long due. To furnish the poem with a name that is more fitting would be to warrant its value on its own merits without having to compare it to supposed sources, while also acknowledging that its main theme is not so unclear and confusing.

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¹⁵ As Mackie suggests. See footnote 13.

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