Memory, Sight, and Love in Cynewulf's *Elene*

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Abstract: It is conventionally assumed that Cynewulf is not interested in depicting any psychological realism in his characters, only figural truths, and that *Elene* is structured around a binary opposition such as that between the letter and the spirit. In fact, Cynewulf does create characters whose actions are psychologically plausible on a literal level, if we accept that psychology is influenced by culture. Cynewulf does not depict a spiritual development that is oppositional, or which adheres to ideas of hierarchies of cognition, but one which is holistic and tripartite, and which resembles Augustine's trinity of the soul. Each character encounters the Cross through learning, experience, and the grace of rewarded receptivity. They can gain each of these three modes of understanding in any order, but it is only when they have united all three that they receive affective wisdom from the Holy Ghost.

Key Words: Old English, Cynewulf, Elene, Gregory, Augustine, Mind, Psychology, Poetry, Cross

Since the early 1970s it has been common practice to read *Elene*, Cynewulf's Old English verse retelling of the legend of the Invention of the Cross, figuratively. Critics such as Thomas Hill (who pioneered typological approaches to Old English poems in the Robertsonian tradition), Varda Fish, and Manish Sharma see in *Elene* an enactment of binary conflicts between letter and spirit, Old Testament and New, Jews and Christians.[1] More recently, Christina Heckman has offered a new figurative reading of *Elene* which equates the invention of the Cross to "the dialectical process of *inventio*, seeking truth and wisdom by discovering arguments."[2] She highlights the ways Elene's dispute with the Jews enacts the "limits of reason,"[3] drawing out particularly the poem's depiction of the dependence of Christianity on the old knowledge of the Jews, and the uselessness of secret and hidden knowledge. Though couched in different terms and separated by decades, the readings by Hill and Heckman are similar in that they see the poem as pitting two ways of understanding against each other. Both also see the poem as interrogating the limits of a certain category of rational knowledge—identified by Heckman as reason or dialectic and by Hill as the literal interpretation of Jewish law.

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[1] Hill, "Sapiential Structure," (1971); Fish, "Theme and Pattern," (1975); Sharma, "Reburial of the Cross," (2009). Regan, "Evangelism," is another early (1973) figural reading of the poem, but it is less dualistic, treating Elene as enacting the role of the Church Militant and Judas the role of Catechumen.

[2] Heckman, "Things in Doubt," 450.

[3] Ibid, 469.

If we wish to understand Anglo-Saxon texts, we must strive to think like Anglo-Saxon readers; educated Anglo-Saxon readers were used to reading figuratively, and particularly to thinking typologically.[4] However, as Gregory warns in his Part IV of his Epistle at the beginning of his *Moralia in Iob*,

> Aliquando autem qui verba accipere historiae juxta litteram negligit, oblatum sibi veritatis lumen abscondit; cumque laboriose invenire in eis aliud intrinsecus appetit, hoc quod foris sine difficultate assequi poterat, amittit.[5]
>
> [But sometimes, he who neglects to interpret the historical forms of words according to the letter, keeps that light of truth concealed which is presented to him, and in laboriously seeking to find in them a further interior meaning, he loses that which he might easily obtain on the outside.][6]

While *Elene* has allegorical significance, it is not 'an allegory' in the sense that works like Prudentius' *Psychomachia* or *Piers Plowman* are, and we cannot reduce the text solely to its figural meaning any more than a medieval exegete could restrict themselves to an exclusively typological understanding of scripture.

One of the reasons figural readings of the poem predominate is that the characters in *Elene* do not behave in ways we find psychologically plausible. This is accounted for by assuming that Cynewulf is interested *only* in the figural meanings of the legend, and not in the depiction of genuine mental processes. Jackson J. Campbell claims that "those fascinating psychological ambivalences which intrigue us moderns apparently did not interest Cynewulf very much,"[7] and Hill goes so far as to say that Cynewulf "makes virtually no attempt to depict the psychology of either Judas or any of the other main protagonists."[8]

A reassessment of the poem without the burden of the assumption that its actors are, above all, allegorical figures reveals that Cynewulf is in fact deeply interested in the minds of his characters, who model the process by which every person may come to know the Cross. When we say that an author writing today is interested in the psychology of their characters, we mean that

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[4] See Irvine, *Textual Culture*; Dyer, "Psalms in Monastic Prayer"; and Gillingham, *Psalms Through the Centuries*, 53–54.
[5] Quotations of Gregory's Epistle are from the *Patrologia Latina* 75.0509D–0516C.
[6] Translations of Gregory provided in brackets are from *Morals on the Book of Job*.
[7] Campbell, "Cynewulf's Multiple Revelations," 242.
[8] Hill, "Bread and Stone, Again," 256.

they emphasize the distinct individuality of each human personality. But for a person trained in exegetical reading, as Cynewulf must have been, there is no coincidence, only providence—and so patterns and formulas are far more interesting than distinctions. When Cynewulf sets out to explore the minds of his characters, he emphasizes the patterns of thought and experience which he believes are universal. He explores the development of mature understanding, and in so doing transforms a narrative about conversion into a meditation on *conversio:* the Christian's daily process of turning towards the Cross. Attention to the poem's depictions of spiritual development also reveals that Cynewulf envisions the mental process of *conversio* as having a threefold form similar to Augustine's trinity of *memoria, intellegentia*, and *uoluntas* [memory, intelligence, and will].

LEARNING: A THREE-PART MODEL

The plot of *Elene* does not deviate substantially from its probable exemplar (some form of the *Acta Cyriaci*), but it is considerably more descriptive, and many of Cynewulf's additions deal with thoughts and feelings.[9] Antonina Harbus, who briefly catalogues the poem's references to the mind and mental processes, characterizes *Elene* as having "a discourse heavily oriented towards knowledge and perception."[10] In itself, this is unremarkable, since the cultivation of such moments of "subjectivity" is, as Britt Mize has recently shown, fundamental to the transformation of a source text into the form and register of traditional Old English verse.[11] However, in this case, the aesthetic turn towards subjectivity supports a thematic development of ideas about the experience of spiritual maturity.

While many readings of *Elene* (including those mentioned above) construe the poem in terms of a binary opposition, Daniel G. Calder's *characterizes Elene* as being based around tripartite structures, including tripartite "ways of knowing":

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[9] Campbell summarizes the problems of taking any extant version of the *Acta Cyriaci* as we have it now as Cynewulf's model in "Cynewulf's Multiple Revelations," 230. The version of the legend which is believed to be most similar to the one Cynewulf would have known can be found in Holder's edition of the *Inventio Sanctæ Crucis*.

[10] Harbus, *Life of the Mind* 98–102 at 102.

[11] Mize, *Traditional Subjectivities*

> All these correspond to the three states of being the poem examines—a sinful past, a 'converted' present, and an unknown future—and to the three ways of knowing which the poem forces each character to adopt—the literal, the allegorical, and the anagogical. Just as the action moves from literal battle to eternal and spiritual struggle, so each of the characters goes from either an ignorance or a hostility toward the letter to an acceptance of the all-permeating eternal truths contained in the Cross.[12]

A model of perception with three stages is in harmony with the poem's tendency to use threes at a stylistic and rhetorical level (also noted by Robert E. Bjork), and this is a better starting point for understanding the depiction of the psychology of faith than a binary, oppositional structure.[13] However, Calder's equation of the literal with ignorance and hostility is potentially misleading.

Implicit in Hill and Heckman's assertion that reason is depicted as an inferior mode of understanding, and also in Calder's characterizing the movement between the literal, allegorical, and anagogical as a linear progression, is the assumption that the poem conceives of modes of understanding as having a hierarchical arrangement, like the modes of perception in the writings of Boethius and Augustine. There are Old English texts which explicitly address hierarchies of cognition; the most obvious example is the Old English translation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, which by and large maintains the original's hierarchy of *sensus*, *imaginatio*, *ratio*, and *intelligentia*.[14] However, in responding to a similar discussion of forms of perception in Augustine's *Soliloquies*, the Old English translator's treatment of the concepts is entirely different. The translator's alterations have recently been analyzed by Leslie Lockett, who observes that the "epistemological hierarchy of *sensus-cogitatio-intellectus* is replaced by opposition of 'inner' and 'outer' senses," and notes that the "use of geometry to demonstrate that *intellectus* apprehends incorporeals is replaced by use of the letter and seal from the *hlaford* to demonstrate belief in things unseen."[15] The result of these changes is that the value of reason is amplified and discussion of a form of perception superior to reason omitted. Although Godden and Irvine do not attribute the

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[12] Calder, *Cynewulf*, 137.
[13] Cf. Bjork's observation of "triadic structure" in several of the poem's speeches:. "Judas with a New Voice," 62-89.
[14] See Godden, "Anglo-Saxons on the Mind," 276.
[15] Lockett, *Anglo-Saxon Psychologies*, 313–373, esp. 340–342 and 336. See also Gatch, "King Alfred's Version of Augustine's *Soliloquia*".

Boethius and the *Soliloqiues* to King Alfred or even necessarily to his circle,[16] Godden elsewhere maintains that there is a close relationship between these two texts, and that the *Soliloquies* "is so closely aligned, in style and concerns and sources, with the *Consolation* that the two works stand together."[17] If two texts so closely related to each other do not agree either with each other or with their Latin sources about the relative value of reason, we cannot assume that Cynewulf would have taken a hierarchical model of perception for granted.

If we turn back to the literal level of the poem and allow that each character experiences—rather than simply stands for—different modes of understanding, it becomes clear that what Cynewulf is critiquing is not reason, but *incomplete* understanding. There are several instances in the poem where a character exhibits only partial understanding: Constantine perceives the cross with his senses but does not know what it stands for; Judas understands what the cross stands for historically but does not understand it spiritually. However, there is no suggestion (as we might expect if Cynewulf were following a hierarchy with *sensus* at its base) that Constantine's sensory perception of the Cross is inferior to Judas' rational knowledge of Christian history—only that both modes of understanding are incomplete.

Cynewulf's model of intellectual progress is neither dualistic nor hierarchical, but tripartite and holistic. Each character must apprehend the Cross through the lenses of learning, experience, and grace before they understand it fully. These three categories of understanding correspond with Augustine's trinity of the soul: learning, experience, and grace belong respectively to *memoria, intellegentia,* and *uoluntas* [memory, intelligence, and will].[18] James F. Doubleday and John L. Selzer have previously successfully demonstrated the influence of Augustine's trinity of the soul on *The Wanderer*, arguing respectively that the structure of the poem is best explained as if we understand the central character to be exercising memory understanding and will in sequence, and that the systematic application of these three powers is a formal characteristic of texts in the

[16] See Godden and Irvine, *The Old English Boethius* Vol. I, 140–151.
[17] Godden, "Did King Alfred Write Anything?" 17.
[18] Augustine, *De Trinitate.* Augustine mentions this trinity of the soul in Book 4 Chapter 21, and develops the idea further in Books 10, 14, and 15.

meditative tradition.[19] The relevance of this trinity to *Elene* is less obvious, and has not to my knowledge been commented upon previously. *Elene* has a narrative, not a meditative structure, so it does not move through a straightforward sequence of memory, understanding, and will as *The Wanderer* does. Instead, we see the influence of the idea of the trinity of the soul in the way that each of the characters who eventually achieves joyful wisdom as a gift from the Holy Ghost learns to contemplate the Cross in a threefold manner which unites the three categories of learning, experience, and grace.

'Learning' and 'experience' are self-explanatory, but 'grace' requires some further definition: this is the term I am using for those moments in the poem when a character is filled with joy and wisdom as a reward for openness, receptivity, or patient desire. It is a gift, because it ultimately comes from outside—the Holy Ghost is nearly always cited as the source of the joy and wisdom the character experiences when their understanding of the Cross deepens. However, for grace to be given, one must be receptive to it: it only comes in response to a character's will and desire. The combination of will and desire also characterizes Augustine's concept of *voluntate*, which he frequently equates with *amoris* [love] in the final chapters of *De Trinitate* (in Book 14 Chapter 8, he also describes a trinity of memory, sight, and love.) *De Trinitate* was certainly known in Anglo-Saxon England. Michael Lapidge identifies three insular manuscripts of *De Trinitate* and two associated with the Anglo-Saxon mission on the continent, references to the work on two inventories, and allusions to it in the writings of Bede, Alcuin, Ælfric, and Byrhtferth.[20] Selzer also discusses some of the evidence that Anglo-Saxon writers were actively engaging with Augustine's ideas about the trinity of the soul.[21] In fact, the concept was sufficiently widely known that Cynewulf need not necessarily have encountered it directly in Augustine's writings—as Godden and Irvine note, this trinity was a "patristic commonplace" which appears in the writings of Alcuin and Isidore, and eventually in the Old English Boethius.[22]

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[19] Doubleday, "Three Faculties of the Soul"; Selzer, "Meditative Tradition".
[20] Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Library*, 287.
[21] Selzer, "Meditative Tradition," 231.
[22] Godden and Irvine, *The Old English Boethius*, Vol. II, 304.

We may also think about learning, experience, and grace in terms of past, present, and future; in terms of the Old Law, the New Law, and the Heavenly Kingdom; and in terms of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. In the *Moralia in Iob*, Gregory describes an exegesis that is threefold.[23] The Augustinian exegetical structure discussed in Bede's *De Schematibus et Tropis* is fourfold, but it also requires the consideration of past, present, and future, and the exercise of memory, intelligence (or sight), and will (or love).[24] Perception of the literal and typological senses of a text requires knowledge of scripture and history—that is, memory of the past. Perception of the tropological or moral sense of a text requires the intelligence to discern how it applies to the reader's society and personal experience—that is, understanding of its relevance to the present life. Perception of the anagogical sense of a text requires a hopeful acceptance of what is to come—that is, a will oriented towards the future. In *Elene* the 'text' that is being read is the Cross, and each of the four main characters must learn to read it in a similarly threefold manner before they achieve spiritual maturity.

THE EDUCATION OF CONSTANTINE

Constantine is the first character whose spiritual education is portrayed. He begins with 'grace' or rewarded receptivity. When Constantine receives the vision he *hreðerlocan onspeon, / up locade* [unlocked his breast-locker, looked up],[25] a metaphor of opening which, as Sharma has observed, has connotations of "spiritual receptiveness".[26] Constantine's willingness to accept the sign of the cross causes him joy: it leaves him *bliðra* [more happy] and *sorgleasra* [more free from sorrow].[27] The reiteration of the visibility of the sign throughout the battle emphasizes the idea that the vision and the battle that follow also constitute Constantine's sensory encounter with the cross and his

[23] *Nam primum quidem fundamenta historiae ponimus; deinde per significationem typicam in arcem fidei fabricam mentis erigimus; ad extremum quoque per moralitatis gratiam, quasi superducto aedificium colore vestimus.* [For First, we lay the historical foundations; next, by pursuing the typical sense, we erect a fabric of the mind to be a strong hold of faith; and moreover as the last step, by the grace of moral instruction, we, as it were, clothe the edifice with an overcast of colouring.]

[24] See *De Schematibus et Tropis II*, 166, and see also Irvine *Textual Culture*, 295.

[25] *Elene*, ll. 86b–87a. Quotations of *Elene* are from *ASPR* II and translations are my own.

[26] Sharma, "Reburial of the Cross," 283.

[27] *Elene*, l. 96b; l. 97a.

experience of its power in the present life. By the end of the battle, he has apprehended the Cross through both sight and love.

The clearest indication that Cynewulf is not presenting a dichotomy, in which spirit or faith is necessarily *superior* to reason or learning, is that in his initial encounter with the Cross, Constantine lacks precisely what Judas possesses, and possesses precisely what Judas lacks, but his perception is still depicted as incomplete. He understands the Cross's immediate significance (that it gives him victory) and he grasps its essential emotive truth, but because he does not know the Cross' history, he does not understand the most important thing about it: whose sign it is. What he lacks is not reason or faith, but information—communal, textual memory. He does not seek the most reasonable men to deduce the sign's meaning, or the most pious, but the most learned:

> Þa þe snyttro cræft
> þurh fyrngewrito gefrigen hæfdon,
> heoldon higeþancum hæleða rædas.[28]
>
> [Who that wise craft had found out through ancient writings and who held men's counsels in their memories.]

In the Latin *Inventio Sanctae Crucis,* the Holy Ghost is an instigator of actions. References to the Holy Ghost occur as Helena sets out on the quest for the Cross, inquires after the nails, and seeks a use for the nails.[29] In *Elene,* however, the Holy Ghost is always mentioned at moments when an action or episode is concluded and a character's understanding and joy increase. Catherine A. Regan has argued that where the Holy Ghost fills Judas with wisdom and *fyrhat lufu* [fire-hot love],[30] this wisdom is "Augustinian *sapientia*" (as opposed to more purely rational *scientia*) because this type of wisdom "involves the affective as well as cognitive faculties."[31] Although Regan only attributes such a transformation to Judas, affect and grace in fact characterize Constantine's mature knowledge as well. Once the third component of Constantine's education is in place, his spiritual maturity is signaled by references to the newfound pleasure he takes in the

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[28] *Ibid,* ll. 154b–156
[29] References to the Holy Spirit appear in ll. 49, 54, 299, 320–21, and 358 of the *Inventio Sanctæ Crucis.*
[30] *Elene,* l. 936b.
[31] Regan, "Evangelism," 274

Cross and to the role of the Holy Ghost in this transformation: *wæs him niwe gefea / befolen in fyrhðe* [a new joy was granted in his heart] when he became a devout believer *þurh gastes gife* [through the Ghost's gift].[32] His initial opening of his heart to vision of the Cross is not more or less important than seeing its power or knowing its history; these experiences are not hierarchical, but they are all necessary.

THE EDUCATION OF JUDAS

The second character whose spiritual education is described in *Elene* is Judas. The Jews, and particularly Judas, possess far more information about Christ than Constantine does—the group of Jews who appear before Elene are selected for being well-versed in the holy books which foretold Christ's coming, and Judas is aware of the circumstances of the Crucifixion. The Jews have *memoria*: knowledge of the past and of God the Father through the old laws and prophets. What they lack are the openness to and experience of the Cross which would move them to use their knowledge correctly. This is what Elene means in her first speech to the Jews, where she calls them *modblinde* [blind in spirit].[33]

In the *Acta Cyriaci* Judas is stubborn, but in *Elene* he appears genuinely confused. Hill finds the fact that Judas accepts the information his father has given him and yet resists Elene a "strikingly unrealistic detail" which demands that the poem be read figuratively,[34] and Calder likewise says that Judas' "arbitrary" behavior here "cannot be accounted for on any realistic grounds, forcing an interpretation of Judas' persistence on a figural level."[35] While fully accepting Hill's reading of Judas as a "typal figure representing the Jewish nation outside the church,"[36] I would argue that, Judas' behaviour is not entirely unrealistic. Irrational and inconsistent behaviour is just what one might expect of a man who is confused, and struggling with the cognitive

[32] *Elene*, ll. 195b–196a; l. 199a.
[33] Ibid, l. 306a.
[34] Hill, "Sapiental Structure," 210.
[35] Calder, *Cynewulf*, 121
[36] Hill, "Sapiental Structure," 211.

dissonance produced when what he has been told by someone he trusts does not match what he has experienced. This is not sloppy writing, or evidence that Cynewulf does not care about the literal level of the narrative, but a depiction of the confused psychological state of a mind clouded by sin. Judas can repeat his father's words, but he cannot make sense of them or believe them: he has *memoria,* but not *intellegentia* and *uoluntate.*

Judas further demonstrates his confusion when he unwittingly acts out a misinterpretation of his own parable of the bread and stone. To Elene's question of whether he will choose life or death, he asks: what starving man who came upon a loaf and a stone in the desert would choose the stone (ll. 611–618)? His subsequent indecision demonstrates that he does not understand his own parable. The root of his interpretive impasse is his inability to perceive the applicability—the moral—of his parable. Judas can understand only the past, not the present: he is not capable of reading tropologically.

The aspect of the poem which most often strikes modern readers as psychologically implausible is Judas' conversion as a result of his imprisonment. We cannot believe that a conversion elicited through torture could be genuine, so critics explain that Judas' imprisonment is an enactment of Christ's kenosis or his entombment, or Joseph's captivity in the well, or the preparatory fasts of the Catechumen, or of concepts such as exile and penitence.[37] Regan, for example, says Judas' hunger is his "subconscious yearning for truth."[38] All of these readings may well have occurred to educated Anglo-Saxon readers. However, Judas' suffering and his response to it also make psychological sense within the logic of the poem and, most likely, the experiences of its contemporary audience.

Even before Judas is cast into the pit, Cynewulf tells us, he *gnornsorge wæg* [bore miserable sorrow], and *cwæð þæt he þæt on gehðu gespræce / ond on tweon swiðost, wende him trage hnagre*

[37] Hill convincingly argues for the appropriateness of seeing Judas as a type of Christ in this scene because it evokes Joseph's captivity in the dry well, which is a type of the Harrowing of Hell which is itself a typological allusion to baptism. See Hill, "Bread and Stone," 255.
[38] Regan, "Evangelism," 268.

[said that he spoke in anxiety and in fiercest doubt, he expected for himself more abject affliction].[39] There are no such mental agonies alluded to in the *Acta Cyriaci.* However, they do have a parallel in the way Cynewulf describes his own experience of grappling with the Cross in the epilogue—the intellectual process of comprehending the Cross has intense physical and emotive effects. As Leslie Lockett has demonstrated, mental distress of both intellectual and emotional character was thought by the Anglo-Saxons to be felt physically in the breast, as heat and tightness.[40] Because he has attempted to hide from Elene and from himself what cannot be hidden, Judas experiences intellectual distress, which manifests as physical distress: *him wæs geomor sefa, / hat æt heortan* [his mind was troubled, hot at heart].[41] Elene's decision to cast Judas into the pit proceeds on the logic that spiritual suffering *is* physical suffering; if the mind can afflict the body, afflicting the body can push the mind. Like the Wanderer and the Seafarer, and like the wise men and prophets of the Old Testament who, according to Vercelli Homily VII *wæron þurh geswinc gebyrhte* [were enlightened through affliction].[42] Judas must endure physical hardship, both as a metaphorical extension of his mental suffering, and as a crucible which will ultimately clarify his mind.

Human nature may be fixed, but psychology is cultural.[43] It is likely that Cynewulf and many of his contemporaries would have seen spiritual advancement brought about by enforced fasting as entirely plausible, based on their own experience. Regan has shown that there are resemblances between Judas' experiences and those of a catechumen; while the audience of *Elene* may not necessarily have actually engaged in catechumenical fasting, other forms of fasting were practiced by monks, clergy, and lay people.[44] Fasting was an important aspect of religious life and assuming that people who engaged in it did not feel that they benefitted from the experience would

[39] *Elene*, l. 655b; ll. 667–668.
[40] Lockett, *Anglo-Saxon Psychologies.*
[41] *Elene*, ll. 627b–628a.
[42] Scragg, *Vercelli Homilies*, 133–138, l. 24.
[43] The existence of the discipline of Cultural Psychology attests to this.
[44] Bedingfield argues that the catechumenical period of fasting was only occasionally practiced in Anglo-Saxon England due in the early period to the practicalities of missionary work and in the later period to the prevalence of infant baptism. Bedingfield, "Baptism in Anglo-Saxon England" 171–190.

be a kind of cultural arrogance. The Vercelli compiler certainly considered fasting an efficacious means of spiritual advancement; it is an important theme of the manuscript's Rogation homilies, as well as Homily III (which Scragg describes as a "penitential homily for Lent").[45] In Éamonn Ó Carragáin's early work on the Vercelli Book, he suggests that "the Guthlac excerpt [Vercelli XXIII] complemented *Elene* just as much as *The Fates of the Apostles* complemented *Andreas*" because of their common interest in fasting.[46]

The obvious objection is that a Christian chooses to fast, whereas Judas was forced to fast. But not all Christians were Guthlac; many people who fasted for reasons of social convention or regulation must have done so under the direction and guidance of others.[47] Fasts undergone as penance for a specific transgression were undertaken under the direction of a confessor, and the customary monastic fasts determined by the calendar would have to have been learned by each new generation under the direction of their teachers. People whose experience has told them that fasting is beneficial and that stern direction is sometimes required to carry it out successfully would be far more likely to accept the plausibility of Judas' conversion than a modern audience whose experience has told them that no spiritual or intellectual progress is possible if there is no tea.

After this suffering, and as a result of it, Judas understands that his learned and rational understanding is not sufficient. He asks for a miracle, not just to locate the crosses, but to confirm his belief: he says that if God will grant him a sign,

> Ic gelyfe þe sel
> ond þy fæstlicor ferhð staðelige,
> hyht untweondne, on þone ahangnan Crist.[48]
>
> [I will the better believe in you and the more steadfastly found my heart, my undoubting hope, on the crucified Christ.]

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[45] Scragg, *Vercelli Homilies,* 70.
[46] Ó Carragáin, "Vercelli Collector," 69. See also Leneghan, "Teaching the Teachers," 649.
[47] The *Dialogue of Egbert* describes of a period of fasting which became a firm custom among both monks and laity and was kept *quasi legitima*—as if it were law—which suggests some degree of compulsion, if only through social pressure. Haddan and Stubbs, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents*, 413. See also Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity*, 254–261.
[48] *Elene,* ll. 795b–797.

Judas requires a sensory experience of the power of the Cross to help him to perceive its purpose in the present life. The emergence from the pit is a first step, but only when he has witnessed the miracle for himself does he say:

> Nu ic þurh soð hafu seolf gecnawen
> on heardum hige þæt ðu hælend eart
> middangeardes.[49]
>
> [Now I through truth have known for myself in [my] hard heart that you are the saviour of middle earth].

Gregory the Great warns at the start of the *Moralia in Iob* that *aliquando vero exponere aperta historiae verba negligimus, ne tardius ad obscura veniamus* [yet it sometimes happens that we neglect to interpret the plain words of the historical account, that we may not be too long in coming to the hidden senses]. Judas does not neglect the 'plain words of the historical account' once he learns about the power of the Cross; the experience of the Cross in the present does not *replace* Judas' memory of the Cross in history, but augments it. Judas continues to use his textual knowledge (for example, about the three crosses and about the ranks of angels in heaven) to great effect in his new role as a Christian teacher. In Judas' address to God (ll. 725–801) he demonstrates the extent of his learning. First, he recites cosmological knowledge which cannot come from experience because, as he says,

> Ne mæg þær manna gecynd
> of eorðwegum up geferan
> in lichoman.[50]
>
> [Mankind may not travel there in body away from the paths of earth.]

He particularly notes those angels who approach God most closely (the seraphim), and those former angels who have been cast furthest from Him. Next he enunciates rational proof of Christ's divinity using 'if' statements.[51] His learning and his reason are still relevant, and have not diminished in importance with his new ability to read spiritually.

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[49] Ibid, ll. 807–809a.
[50] Ibid, ll. 734b–736a.
[51] E.g., *gif he þin nære / sunnu synna leas, næfre he soðra swa fela / […] wundra gefremede* [if he were not your sinless son, he would never have worked so many miracles]. Ibid, ll. 776b–778b.

At this point, Judas has experienced the Cross in memory and sight, but his education is only complete when he experiences the grace of rewarded humility. Discovering which of the three crosses is the True Cross is not simply a matter of learning or intelligence but of receptive, expectant waiting. The 'experiment' of testing to see which cross would restore the dead man does not follow immediately after their exhumation. Instead, Judas counsels patience. The assembled crowd sit and *sang ahofon* [raised up song], waiting for the ninth hour.[52] In this they enact in microcosm the essential function of the Christian liturgy in which song and prayer mark time in the vigil of the faithful who expect the return of Christ. The act of waiting is important enough that the approach of the *nigoðe tid* [ninth hour] is noted not once but twice within five lines.[53]

After the vigil, the True Cross is revealed, and Judas must face down the devil. At this point, the narrator says of Judas:

> Him wæs halig gast
> befolen fæste, fyrhat lufu,
> weallende gewitt þurh witgan snyttro.[54]
>
> [In him was the Holy Ghost firmly granted**,** fire-hot love, fervid understanding through the wise one's wisdom.]

The Holy Ghost has not been with Judas before this point—not in his emergence from the pit, not at the miracle of the smoke, not at the exhumation of the crosses. It is only now that Judas' spiritual maturation has been completed—by the combination of knowledge, experience, and hopeful patience—that the Holy Ghost is with him, contributing to his wisdom.

THE EDUCATION OF ELENE

As Robert DiNapoli notes, Elene does not undergo as dramatic a transformation as Judas. However, I would debate his assertion that "Elene never changes at all."[55] She undergoes her own

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[52] Ibid, l. 867b.
[53] Ibid, ll. 869a and 873b. The *Acta Cyricaci* also says that they must wait for the ninth hour, but it does not say that this was at Judas' instigation, or mention the singing. Mayr-Harting has written about the importance of the ninth hour in Anglo-Saxon prayers on the passion: *The Coming of Christianity*, 188.
[54] *Elene*, ll. 935b–937.
[55] DiNapoli, "Poesis and Authority," 625.

spiritual journey. Like Judas, she begins with learning and memory: when she arrives in Jerusalem, she knows the Old Laws well enough to debate them with the Jews. However, she does not yet have first-hand experience of the Cross, and her desire and expectation have not yet been rewarded. She certainly is patient in her expectation—it is not until over 1000 lines into the poem that Judas (now Cyriacus) hands her the nails. It is only then, when she obtains the final piece of the Cross, that *wuldres gefylled / cwene willa* [the queen's desire was fulfilled by glory] and her understanding, like that of Judas, is completed by the grace of the *halig heafonlic gast* [holy heavenly Ghost].[56] In this moment, she kneels in *leohte geleafan* [bright belief].[57] Although she has been described as *eadig* [blessed] throughout the poem, this is the first time she is directly associated with the sort of light imagery which is so often used of holy women such as Judith and Juliana.

It is also the first time her faith and wisdom have been described an affective terms. If Judas' *fyrhat lufu* in the presence of the Holy Ghost indicates the onset of *sapientia* (as Regan argues), the same must also be true of Elene's new wisdom that is marked by *wopes hring* [the sound of weeping] and *hat heafodwylm* [hot tears].[58] Elene falls to her knees, weeps, and thanks God because now she has seen for herself the proof of what she has read:

> Gode þancode,
> sigora dryhtne, þæs þe hio soð gecneow
> ondweardlice þæt wæs oft bodod
> feor ær beforan fram fruman worulde,
> folcum to frofre. Heo gefylled wæs
> wisdomes gife, ond þa wic beheold
> halig heofonlic gast, hreðer weardode,
> æðelne innoð.[59]
>
> [She thanked God, Lord of victories, because she knew truly in the present that which was oft foretold far earlier before from the beginning of the world, as a comfort to people. She was filled with wisdom's gift, and the Holy heavenly Ghost occupied that dwelling-place, guarded the breast, noble interior.]

These lines allude to all three modes of understanding: learning, experience, and grace. The half-line *þæt wæs oft bodod* [that which was oft foretold] alludes to knowledge of prophecy and

[56] *Elene*, ll.1134b–1135a; l. 1144a.
[57] Ibid, l. 1136a.
[58] Ibid, l. 1131b; l. 1132a.
[59] Ibid, ll. 1138b–1145a.

scriptural learning. The adverb *onweardlice* means "at the present time" (or "in the presence of"/ "in the very place") and indexes experience.[60] And finally, the image of the *halig heofonlic gast* [Holy Heavenly Ghost] filling Elene's breast with wisdom shows the grace that is the fulfilment of her will and desire. Elene is not content when she achieves her stated mission of unearthing the True Cross—it is only when she achieves an understanding of the Cross which has a tripartite structure combining first-hand experience, validation of her learning, and the support of the Holy Ghost that she fully experiences joyful wisdom.

THE EDUCATION OF CYNEWULF

The Cynewulf persona, as depicted in the epilogue, is the fourth—often overlooked—protagonist in *Elene.* The epilogue aligns his experience with that of the major players in the narrative, particularly Judas. Whereas Constantine began with grace before progressing to experience and learning, and Judas and Elene began with learning, before progressing to experience and grace, Cynewulf begins with experience. Living in Christendom after the establishment of the New Law, he sees and understands the relevance of the Cross in the present life, yet, he says, *nysse ic gearwe / be ðære rode riht* [I did not know clearly about the true Cross].[61] What he must explore further in order to fully understand the Cross are its past and future: its role in history, and the direction it will lead him after death. He therefore first seeks information about the Cross recorded *on bocum* [in books].[62] In order to make use of that knowledge, Cynewulf withdraws into solitude, like Judas going into the pit, to contemplate the Cross by night. He does not undergo a mortification of the flesh on a par with that which Judas suffers, but the pressing awareness of his own mortality occasioned by his departed friends causes mental agony sufficient for the purpose of turning his thoughts forward, towards his end and the world's end, in anagogical contemplation.

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[60] 'Andweardlice', *Dictionary of Old English.*
[61] *Elene*, ll. 1239b–1240a.
[62] Ibid, l. 1254b.

For Cynewulf as for Judas, study and rumination are not sufficient in themselves; learning, experience, and patient desire must all be aligned. Wisdom at last comes from outside the self, as the construction *me […] wisdom onwreah* [wisdom revealed to me] makes clear.[63] Cynewulf calls this wisdom a *gife unscynde* [honourable gift], and describes how God *bancofan onband, breostlocan onwand* [unbound [his] bone-coffer, unwound [his] breast-locker]; the imagery is similar to that at the start of the poem, when Constantine *hreðerlocan onspeon* [unlocked his heart-locker] upon receiving the vision of the Cross, inviting the reader to perceive parallels between Constantine and Cynewulf's revelations.[64] Like each of his protagonists, Cynewulf must apply his memory, his intelligence, and his will to the task of understanding the Cross fully in his soul, before he is granted the consolation of wisdom.

TEACHING

The process of *conversio* does not end here in private wisdom, however; understanding must be followed by teaching. The frequent allusion to teaching in the narrative is a motif several critics have commented upon.[65] Most recently, Francis Leneghan has suggested that an interest in Christian teaching and teachers is the organizing principle behind the collection in which *Elene* appears:

> The Vercelli Book is mostly comprised of homiletic texts, regularly supplemented by hagiographic and devotional narratives on the lives of religious teachers. […] It is therefore likely that the collection was made for someone deeply, and perhaps professionally, interested in the art of preaching.[66]

He argues that behind the selection of texts for the Vercelli Book lies the model of Gregory's *Cura Pastoralis,* which contains "the classic portrait of the life of the ideal pastor, in equal parts teacher and contemplative."[67] Cynewulf's postscript presents him in the role of an active Christian pursuing

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[63] Ibid, ll. 1240b, 1242a.
[64] Ibid, l. 1246b; l. 1249; l. 86b. See also Birkett, "Runes and *Revelatio*".
[65] Notably Wright, "Cynewulf's *Elene*," 540, and Regan, "Evangelism," 260. Regan draws a distinction between the preaching (Kerygma) Elene does to the Jews and the teaching (Didache) she does to Judas.
[66] Leneghan, "Teaching the Teachers," 632.
[67] Ibid, 633.

deeper knowledge of the Cross, and the composition of poem is how he answers the duty to share his knowledge. It is also how he reminds others of that duty; the poem both argues that the call to teach must be answered and demonstrates the techniques of a teacher.

Cynewulf's solitary withdrawal to ruminate on the Cross is obviously a model for the contemplative life of the Christian teacher, but so too is the process of learning Constantine, Judas, and Elene go through. The speed of Constantine's conversion has bothered critics; Sharma writes, "the question might be legitimately posed as to whether his conversion is truly an 'experience' at all."[68] If we take this poem to be attempting to depict the psychological realities of reflection and contemplation (what Angela Abdou expresses as *micro-conversion* and Ó Carragáin as *conversio morum*)[69]—a quest for a holistic and mature comprehension of Christianity's most significant object rather than the object itself—Constantine's 'conversion' no longer looks so hasty. It is only Constantine's initial decision which is quick; his spiritual progression towards full understanding is in fact slower than Judas' because he does not already possess Judas' learning. Judas takes longer to embrace Christianity, but once he makes that decision, he becomes a spiritual leader in short order because he already has more substantial knowledge to build upon.

In the account of Constantine's education, Cynewulf gives us a psychologically plausible glimpse of the process of learning: beyond the essentials, Constantine does not receive his knowledge of Christianity passively and quickly by simply being told, but must study scripture for himself. Neither does he study alone; his reading is guided and mediated by *larsmiðas* [teachers].[70] In particular, those teachers speak to him *gastgerynum* [with/about spiritual mysteries/insight].[71] We might infer from this that another thing Constantine learns from his teachers is the skill of exegetical reading—the ability to read more than just the literal meaning of the text.

Ellen F. Wright sees the series of encounters between Elene and the Jews as a "ritualistic" exchange because "Elene simply chastizes the first two groups, obviously not expecting answers

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[68] Sharma, "Reburial of the Cross," 281.
[69] Abdou, "Speech and Power," 195; Ó Carragáin, "Vercelli Collector," 67.
[70] *Elene*, l. 203b.
[71] Ibid, l. 189b. See also Irvine, *Textual Culture*, p. 442.

from them"—it is a very indirect way of finding out the location of the Cross.[72] Elene's accusations (ll. 288–410), and Judas' cosmological monologue on his emergence from the pit (ll. 725–801), might seem like tedious delay of the narrative, but in fact the didactic speeches embedded within the poem model good teaching. Taken together, they progress from the fundamentals of Christianity, through increasingly complex ideas, and culminate in the eschatological imagery presented in Cynewulf's own voice at the poem's end. They also guide the reader through a spiritual journey resembling those made by the three major characters.

The first reference to Christian teaching comes when the Christians of Rome understand by the identification of the cross in Constantine's vision that the time has come when they may reveal to Constantine the essentials of Christian doctrine. The speech of the Christians in ll. 176–188 is almost identical in theological content to the Apostles' Creed, except that it omits reference to Mary and explicitly refers to the Harrowing of Hell. While Elene's first exchange with the Jews sets out the precedent within Hebrew (Old Testament) Law according to which they should have expected and accepted Christ, Judas' long exchange with the Jews in which he recounts his father's teaching sets out the more recent (New Testament) history of Christ and the early church. Taken together, these speeches prompt the reader to recall scriptural learning about Christ in history. Upon this foundation of knowledge of the past Judas adds the argument for why Christ matters in the present: he describes in detail to the Jews *hu arfæst is ealles wealdend* [how merciful is the ruler of all] for his willingness to forgive each sin.[73] Then, when Judas gives his cosmological speech on emerging from the pit, this turns the thoughts of the reader upward towards the mystical. This anagogical direction of thought is reinforced by the eschatological imagery of the epilogue, and also by the runic signature itself, as Tom Birkett has recently demonstrated. He argues that, in each of Cynewulf's signed poems, "the way the runic conceit is set up actually serves to minister to the reader and guide them into a state of revelation,"[74] and explains how the runic signatures "signal the

[72] Wright, "Cynewulf's *Elene*," 546.
[73] *Elene*, l. 512.
[74] Birkett, "Runes and *Revelatio*," 777.

moment where the story told becomes directly applicable to the reader engaged in unlocking the meaning of the passage, and thus represent a progression to an anagogical understanding of how the passage, and the poem, may relate to the fate of the individual soul."[75]

Cynewulf cannot give his readers learning, experience, and desire as he can his characters, but he can guide them on a parallel journey of contemplating past, the present, and future, and so encourage them to apply their memory, intelligence, and will.

CONCLUSIONS

Cynewulf's *Elene* demonstrates that whether one begins preparing oneself for the grace of affective wisdom as a heathen like Constantine, a Jew like Judas, or a Christian seeking deeper spiritual understanding like Cynewulf and Elene, the process requires threefold understanding of the Cross' role in the past, power in the present, and salvific and eschatological implications for the future. These modes of understanding are not, as much recent scholarship has argued, hierarchical or oppositional: they can be achieved in any order, and, as in the homiletic metaphor of society as a stool held up by the legs of *laboratores, bellatores, oratores*, they are mutually dependent upon each other.[76] As the characters approach the Cross, so we should approach the poem—seeing beyond the literal meaning, but, as in Gregory's exegesis of Job, not discounting it.

The critical insistence that the poem is about the victory of the spiritual and figural over the literal has caused the fate of the Cross at the end of the poem to appear to be irreconcilable with the poem's message. After all the trouble of exhuming the Cross so it will no longer be concealed, it seems strange to many critics that Elene should then have it encased in gold and gems. Sharma, for example, sees the bejewelling of the Cross as a "regressive movement back towards the bondage of the letter"[77] forced by shape of the narrative Cynewulf was adapting but running contrary to his thematic interests. But as Gregory insists, the literal level of understanding is not a regression; it is

[75] Ibid, 789.
[76] Used, for example by Ælfric in the 'Libellus', 228. See also Hill, "A Riddle on the Three Orders".
[77] Sharma, "Reburial of the Cross," 290.

always the foundation of the figural. The ability of teachers like Cyriacus to bring people to a spiritual knowledge of the Cross is predicated on the earthly power of the Church. Thus the Cross is encased in treasure, and the nails are literally, not metaphorically, sent to the vanguard of Christendom. The adornment of the Cross also invests it with a new figural significance: the presence of the Cross enthroned at the centre of Christendom while the nails which pierced its extremities are now at the extremities of Christendom creates a new, powerful symbol of temporal power, and causes the physical, literal, visible world to express spiritual truths. Whatley argues that Constantine's battle, which takes up a substantial portion of the poem, is more than a diverting prologue: "Cynewulf's version celebrates more explicitly than the Latin original the transfer of the covenant from the Jews to the Christians, and the *reuniting* of divine and earthly power behind the sign of the cross" (emphasis mine).[78] So it is at the end of the poem as well: divine and earthly power are united, and so are literal and figural meaning.

When we take seriously the literal level of the poem, and view the players as characters who develop in response to their experiences rather than merely symbolic embodiments, allegorical personifications or groups or ideas, it becomes apparent that Cynewulf is depicting an intellectual process of discovering the Cross in which learning is not sufficient without sensory perception, sensory perception is not sufficient without learning, and neither can proceed without patient desire. I have referred to these factors as learning, experience, and grace, but as I have suggested, they could equally be put in exegetical terms: knowledge of the Cross in history (the literal and typological) must be combined with experience of the Cross in the present life (the tropological) and the acceptance of its salvific and eschatological implications (the anagogical). The Holy Ghost is strongly associated not only with this third way of understanding the Cross, but also with the affective wisdom which is granted to each character when they unite all three ways of contemplating the Cross. Constantine, Judas, and Elene are filled with joy, and Cynewulf with consolation, when through the union of the three faculties of memory, sight, and love, they learn

[78] Whatley, "The Figure of Constantine," 202.

that that the Cross means more, and means in more ways, than they once thought it did. Far from being a poem that can only be understood allegorically, *Elene* is deeply invested in depicting the psychology of coming to a mature understanding of the Cross.

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