

Johanna Kramer, *Between earth and heaven: Liminality and the Ascension of Christ in Anglo-Saxon literature*. Pp. xiv + 250 (Manchester Medieval Literature and Culture). Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2014. £70.00 (ISBN 978 0 7190 8789 9).

Johanna Kramer's new monograph insists upon the centrality of the Ascension in the religious and cultural life of Anglo-Saxon England. It focuses upon the ways in which complex abstract theology relating to the Ascension is communicated to lay and clerical audiences through art, liturgy, ritual, and various textual genres in Latin and the vernacular. Kramer emphasizes the skilful ways in which anonymous texts and images, as well as the works of well-known figures such as Bede and Ælfric, 'pursue their larger goal of teaching Ascension theology with complexity and theological rigour' (17).

Central to Kramer's understanding of the theological significance of the Ascension is her subtle interpretation of it as a fundamentally and multifariously liminal event, as outlined in her densely-argued introductory chapter. Drawing heavily on cultural anthropology—particularly the works of Victor Turner—Kramer stresses that the Ascension is liminal not only in the more obvious facts of Christ's 'both/and' nature and his transition across the *limen* separating earth and heaven, but in its role as a 'ritual of status elevation' (7) in which all Christians participate. Although Christ's nature remains unchanged, the elevation of humanity resultant on his entry into heaven enacts a transformation that encompasses and unifies the body of the *totus Christus*. Yet this transformation is itself liminal: the salvation that it makes available remains only potential, dependent upon the willingness of individuals to follow Christ in his Ascension. So each Christian experiences the Ascension as a moment of liminality and potentiality re-enacted in liturgical celebrations in which distinctions between present time, historical time, and salvation time are collapsed.

According to Kramer, Anglo-Saxon authors are primarily concerned 'to teach Ascension theology, not to produce it' (59), drawing upon scriptural accounts and established patristic traditions for their theological interpretations. In her first chapter, then, Kramer traces the development of Ascension theology, particularly in the works of Ambrose of Milan, Augustine of Hippo, Leo the Great, and Gregory the Great. Kramer identifies the key aspects of the Ascension theology inherited by the Anglo-Saxons as 'Christ's dual nature, his simultaneous absence and presence, the *totus Christus*, the tension between seeing and believing, the importance of Christ's opening of heaven to humanity, and the personal responsibility all Christians bear for following in Christ's footsteps and ascending themselves' (59).

Where the Anglo-Saxon tradition is distinctive, however, is in its use of 'concrete, materially grounded, and spatially conceived imagery' (15) to convey aspects of this theology. As is explained in the introduction, this places the majority tradition that Kramer examines in contrast to what is surely the most famous Ascension text from the Anglo-Saxon period, Cynewulf's *Christ II*. Cynewulf's more abstract approach, which focuses on an immediate mental imitation of Christ's Ascension rather than an ultimate physical one, offers a 'cerebral and theoretical' (15) meditation which stands apart from, and thus places in relief, the more concretely imagined Ascension teaching typical of the period. For this reason, and partly to counter a bias towards Cynewulf's poem in existing scholarship on the Ascension in Anglo-Saxon England, *Christ II* plays a less central part in this book than might have been expected.

In Chapter 2, Kramer examines how the motif of the *vestigia Domini*—Christ’s still-visible footsteps preserved on the Mount of Olives—is employed in the *Old English Martyrology* and Blickling Homily XI. Kramer insightfully shows how this motif, originally a feature of pilgrim narratives, both provides a materialist focus for Ascension teaching, and encodes a theological understanding of the Ascension as a liminal event, emphasising Christ’s dual nature and his simultaneous presence and absence. Chapter 3 examines Bede’s *De Ascensione Domini* and the post-Conquest Trinity Homily XIX, focusing upon how these texts emphasize Christ’s liminal activities by juxtaposing his entry into heaven, again imagined in a notably material way, with his previous entry into hell at the Harrowing. Chapter 4 takes a wider cultural perspective, examining texts and ritual practices associated with Rogationtide, a period which Kramer shows was understood as equivalent to Lent as a penitential season preceding the feast of the Ascension. In particular, this chapter argues for a connection between the perambulations associated with Rogationtide and the liminality central to Ascension’s complex theology.

Chapter 5 provides a brief, but welcome, account of the iconography of the Ascension in manuscript illustration. The chapter focuses on the famous ‘disappearing Christ’ motif that appears in England in the eleventh century, reading this as a visual analogue to the liminal central to Ascension teachings. This chapter is followed by a short, summative afterword that in part revisits the question of the distinctiveness of Cynewulf’s approach to Ascension teaching in *Christ II*.

With a study of this kind, each reader will find areas that they would have liked to have been addressed differently or in more detail. I will mention only two such personal quibbles. Firstly, while Kramer is certainly right to insist upon the theological ‘centrality’ (14) of the Ascension in early medieval Christianity, she seems at times to downplay how it might also have been understood as one part of a more extensive soteriological programme. One might think of creedal formulas or the sequence of *Christ* poems at the beginning of the Exeter Book, but also of *The Dream of the Rood*, which seems to be concerned with many of the ideas of liminality that Kramer highlights. Here, Christ’s entry into heaven is (albeit briefly) juxtaposed with the Harrowing in a manner similar to that found in the texts discussed in chapter 3, but both events are placed within the wider context of Christ’s mission which includes, most notably, the Crucifixion, but also the Incarnation, the Resurrection, and the Last Judgement. Secondly, I would have welcomed a deeper interrogation of the oft-repeated statement that the sources discussed served to ‘teach’ Ascension theology. The differences between Latin or vernacular homilies, manuscript illumination, and lay ritual as conduits for theological instruction are not seriously considered, and some of the theologically-significant meanings that Kramer discovers are so subtle as to make one wonder whether they served a deliberate didactic purpose or reflected the author’s own theological education.

However, these are minor objections that do not seriously detract from what is a well-written and scholarly study. The book is meticulously produced, with very few typographical errors. It will no doubt be widely read and often cited in the years to come, and will be particularly welcome to anyone interested in the influence and development of patristic theology and the history of religious observance in Anglo-Saxon England.

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