

M. R. Rambaran-Olm, *John the Baptist's Prayer or The Descent into Hell from the Exeter Book. Text, Translation and Critical Study*, Anglo-Saxon Studies 21 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014). ix + 249 pp.; 18 plates. ISBN 978-1-84384-366-5. £60.00.

In this book, M. R. Rambaran-Olm presents a new critical edition of the Exeter Book poem traditionally known as *The Descent into Hell*, complete with translation, commentary, glossary, and diplomatic transcription, and a lengthy study of the poem which argues that it has been misunderstood and, through its title, misrepresented by previous scholarship. A new title, *John the Baptist's Prayer*, is proposed.

Where the surviving text of the poem can be read, Rambaran-Olm favours a markedly conservative editorial approach. So, excluding matters of punctuation and one typo (*weordo* for *weorod* at 48a), the text of the undamaged portions of the poem differs from the *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* edition in two instances only (at lines 6a and 8b). On both occasions Rambaran-Olm supports the manuscript reading; both cases involve some special pleading. On the other hand, Rambaran-Olm is happy to supply readings for various lacunae caused by damage to the manuscript, often returning to earlier editorial conjectures which are supported by innovative digital reconstructions of the lost portions of the manuscript.

The value of this book, however, is not primarily in its textual criticism but in the monograph-length study which precedes the edition and in the appendices that follow it. The palaeographical and linguistic analysis presented in chapter 1 is not always convincing, but chapters 2 and 4, taken in conjunction with appendix 1, offer a useful account of the origins and development of the *Descensus* motif and its treatment in Anglo-Saxon England. The heart of the book is chapter 3 (with appendix 3), which provides a fresh analysis of the poem, refocusing attention away from the account of Christ's entry into hell and onto the two speeches of John the Baptist, highlighting their liturgical echoes, their celebration of the theme of baptism, and the potential dramatic sensibility that they reveal.

There are frustrations involved in reading this book. Typographical errors and inconsistencies are numerous. There is a significant degree of repetition, both within the study itself and between the study and the commentary. The glossary presents grammatical and philological information inconsistently. Such issues may not seriously inconvenience or mislead readers, but they could have been avoided. More serious problems include a tendency to misattribute quotations from other primary texts and, at times, to misrepresent the arguments of other scholars (notably through selective quotation and ellipsis). It is unfortunate that such problems should mar what is otherwise a welcome new study of an often-neglected Old English poem.