

A CHRISTOLOGICAL READING OF *THE RUIN*.

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Abstract. The foremost goal of this work is to put forward a Christological interpretation of *The Ruin*, an old English poem found in the Exeter Book that has been catalogued by critics among the Old English Elegies. Comparisons with the Bible will uphold my design, which pivots on the image of Christ as a cornerstone. I shall undertake an allegorical reading, thus I recall that ambiguity and mystery are present in the etymology of the term allegory, which is roughly glossed from the Greek *ἄλλος* ‘other’ and *γορεία* ‘speaking’. More specifically, the term occurs in the Oxford English Dictionary (Simpson & Weiner 1989) as extended metaphor. The author might wish to disguise the meaning of his text thus challenging the reader to disclose it. I hereby accept this challenge.

Keywords: Christological interpretation, Old English, Exeter Book, Old English elegies, allegory, metaphor, reader

DOI: 10.3176/tr.2010.2.04

1. Overview

By a twist of fate, *The Ruin*¹ has come down to us in such a damaged state that I would take the liberty of describing this poem by the polyptoton ‘ruined’. Albeit hyperbolic, this adjective perfectly suits the parchment where the text appears, because it has been affected by serious burn damages. As a result, large parts of the poem are beyond recovery. However, we can recover those features from the text that permit to count it among the Old English Elegies.

Since it is beyond the scope of this work to carry out a palaeographical or codicological analysis of the manuscript and to conjecture about what is lost, the poem will be considered from a semantic point of view. We should be aware that the semantic scope of each word may vary drastically and that the reader is

¹ My reference to the poem is the edition proposed by Klinck (1992). Translations inherent to this poem are also hers.

influenced by many variables in attaching the meaning to a given word. The question becomes trickier if we take the allegorical viewpoint, because polysemy is concerned with the entire text, not with just a word. Thus, we should not consider the surface meaning of the words, but look more carefully for the covert meanings. Afterwards, we have to single out the most relevant meaning for interpretation. Since I would like to propose a Christological reading of the poem, I will have to narrow down the possible meanings of the words, thus setting a religious layer almost on every sentence.

We do not have any indication about the author of the poem, nor have we any certainty about its date because it was probably composed before *Exeter Book*, the codex in which the poem appears on folio 124^r-124^v. *The Ruin* unfolds over 49 lines, many of which are marred by lacunae, namely: 12; 13; 14; 15; 16; 17; 42; 44; 45; 46; 47; 48; 49. Notice that different emendations of damaged words involve different meanings, for instance in the first hemistich of line 12 we come across the word *w_ _ _ ađ*. Klinck (1986) emends *wu[n]ađ* 'remains', while Leslie (1961) reads *worađ* 'moulders'. In the second hemistich, Leslie emends *gehēawen* 'cut down', but Klinck chooses *gehēapen* 'piled up'.

As I have said, lingering over the comparison of different emendations and over the hypothesis for filling the gaps in the text would be misleading here. Moreover, if I were to compare the emendations for every word, I would run the risk of overlooking the message of the text, because my attention would be stuck at the morphological level, thus disregarding the level of semantics. In the course of my discussion, attention will be paid to the semantic scope of words, with special emphasis on those terms liable to Christological reading.

The Ruin has been referred to with a large number of interpretations ranging from the most literal to the most allegorical ones. On the one hand, literal interpretations set forth the description of the city on archaeological grounds, thus striving to identify which place is being described, whether it is the city of Bath, Chester, Durham or the Hadrian's Wall. On the other hand, figurative interpretations, e.g. Keenan (1966), deem the city as Babylon. Lee (1973) has placed the poem among those concerning the *encomio urbis*, Johnson (1980) has recommended that it is a body-city riddle, and Dunleavy (1959) has detected a *de excidio traditio* therein. The most allegorical interpretation was put forward by Cammarota (1997). She pointed out that there is a metaphor for Christ at the very outset of the poem, which is transmitted by the word *weallstan*, i.e. 'cornerstone'. I hope to show that the symbolism of Christ as a Cornerstone is one of the most exploited metaphors in the biblical tradition. In fact, we can find numerous metaphors for Christ, e.g. as the Roof of the hall, as the Head of the body whose limbs are the Christians, as the Shepherd, or in the guise of the Bridegroom (the Church being his Bride), and most commonly as our Lord, the King of Heaven.

Although the word 'elegy' has not been applied to define a genre in Old English, with the exception of Klinck (1984), scholars have the same opinion that *The Ruin* stands out from the other elegies, for those elements that compose what Timmer (1942) has called 'the elegiac mood in old English poetry' are not present

in it. As a matter of fact, there is no speaker's personal lament over a present state of misery, nor moans about being an exile, nor expressions of melancholy for the loss of the beloved, (or: the lost beloved) nor gloating (sure you want this word? It is rather negative) over irretrievable joyful times. Moreover, there is no explicit regret for the transitoriness of earthly joy.

The poem is broadly summarized as the detailed description of a ruined city with an alternating pattern of present tense and past tense. In particular, the present is depicted as bleak, gloomy and decayed, whereas the past appears in its magnificence, glorious and full of life. As I have already mentioned, there is no speaker and the description is left to an impersonal voice. The author used the rhetorical device which Benveniste (1971) calls 'debrayage', i.e. the author does not convey his own feelings across the text, he does not commit himself to the truthfulness of what he had been describing, nor does he scatter any clues about the sensations he wished to arouse in the reader's mind with the poem. It is the reader who has to unravel the message interwoven in the text, thus the author is consequently absolved of criticism.

The switch from past to present occurs so suddenly that it yields the effect of a clash. Since these leaps back and forth in time are not introduced by deictic adverbs (e.g. before, afterwards, once, now etc.), with the exception of *iu* (32b) 'long ago' and *þonne* (47a) 'then', I would tentatively say that the author was jotting down the impressions and the images as they engendered in his mind. It might be called a case of a stream of consciousness *ante litteram*. Indications of time switch are found mainly in verb inflections. There are also demonstrative adjectives interspersed throughout the lines, in order to emphasize the present: *þes* (1a), *þas* (29b; 37a), *þæs* (9b; 30a) 'this'. Whenever the speaker wished to emphasize the past, he employed the demonstrative *þæt* (24a; 41b) 'that'. Indeed, the deictic adjective 'this' strengthens the present, because it creates closeness in space. Since present tense inflections indeed indicate closeness in time, their co-occurrence with adjectives of closeness in space plunges the reader into the *hic et nunc* of the author, as if they were talking face to face. Below a present tense verb co-occurs with a space-proximity adjective:

Wrætlic is þes wealstan! (1a)
Wonderful is this cornerstone

forþon þas hofu dreorgiað (29b)
therefore this dwelling grows dismal

Not only does the author seem to be talking to the reader, but he also seems to be showing him the object under description. The same device is used to underline the distance both in time and in space. When a verb with past inflection and an adjective that indicates space distance co-occur, the text seems to have been cut off from the present and to belong to another world, just because it is placed out of the reader's coordinates of time and space. Evidence on the link between time and space is given by the irrealis unreal? constructions in English: the past tense in a main clause plus the past tense in a subordinate yields the effect of alienation from

reality, thus thrusting the interlocutors far away from here, as in *þæt wæs hyðelic* (41b). The implication is that the referent of *hyðelic* ‘convenient’ is not in this place, nor in this moment, hence it does not exist for the interlocutors.

2. Fate and Time as two ‘characters’ in the poem

The first image that has emerged in my mind after reading the text is the picture of a ruined city which, as the poet explains, was once surrounded by high walls where tall steeples, big towers, majestic churches and sumptuous houses had flourished, but have now turned to rubble. But the very first images in my mind were desolation, stillness and decay. I suppose that everyone looking at a ruined place wonders what that place used to look like. Moreover, he/she is also somehow led to think what a great change has taken place and, most of all, what or who has turned that city into that ruined state. The answer can be found in the text.

Both at the outset of the poem and in the middle of it, the poet has clarified who is responsible for such a decay:

Wrætlich is þes wealstan! Wyrde gebraecon; (1)
Wonderful is this cornerstone, broken by fate

opþæt þæt onwende wyrð seo swiþe. (24)
until the bitter fate changed that

Wyrð can be translated into modern English as ‘Fate’. According to the narrator, it is Fate that has swept away walls, castles, towers and buildings. The power of Fate is shown by the consequences of its action, i.e. crumbling the ‘work of giants’ *enta geweorc* (2b) and changing (*onwendan*) that state of splendour. Fate is a leitmotiv in OE literature. For reasons of space and because it is beyond the design of the foregoing discussion, I shall not reconsider all the concordances of *Wyrð*. Rather, I shall quote other passages² concerned with the strength of Fate among the old English elegies. For instance, the peculiarities of Fate are hinted at in the following lines from *The Wanderer*:

wyrð bið ful aræd (5b)
fate is completely established

Ne mæg werig mod wyrde wiðstandan (15)
A weary heart cannot withstand fate

wyrð seo mære (100b)
that renowned fate

In *The Seafarer* Fate is said to be ‘more powerful’ than man’s imagination:

Wyrð biþ swiþre,
meotud mehtigra þonne ænges monnes gehygd (115b-116)

Fate is more powerful, the creator even mightier than any man’s thought

² Unless otherwise specified, translations of all texts from *ASPR* are Kennedy’s. See www.dmoz.org/Arts/Literature/World_Literature/British/Anglo-Saxon/.

Moreover, a literal interpretation of *The Riming Poem* affirms the power and the rule of Fate, whereas a figurative interpretation of it might have led to translate *Wyrð* into 'God'. Accordingly, the lines below literally report that the world changes according to Fate:

*Swa nu world wendeþ, wyrde sendeþ
ond hetes henteð, hæleþe scyndeð.* (59-60)

so now the world changes according to what Fate sends. He seizes the world with hate, defies heroes and puts them to shame

Fate sends, changes, designs and 'weaves' the threads of one's lot:

Me þæt wyrð gewæf ond gehwyrft forgeaf (70)
For me Fate wove this and ordained this deed

I think that the specific verb *gewefan* is to be connected with the action of the goddess *Urð*, portrayed in the *Völospa* (reference to the edition and translation of Neckel 1983) as one of the three Norns who would 'determine the threads', i.e. weave everyone's lot:

*Urð héto eina, aðra Verðandi
- scáro á scíði -, Sculd ina þriðio;
Þær lög lögðo þær líf kuro
Alda bornom, ørlqg seggia.* (20:5-10)

Urth is one named, Verthandi the next - on the wood they scored - and Skuld the third. Laws they made there, and life allotted to the sons of men, and set their fates.

That the action of *Urð* cannot be changed by men, therefore they have to endure it, is clearly expressed in the lines of *Resignation*:

*Giet biþ þæt selast, þonne monn him sylf ne mæg
Wyrð onwendan, þæt he þonne wel þolige.* (117-118)

Yet it is the best that man cannot change Fate, therefore he must endure it.

Although not overtly stated, it is understood from the following lines too, that *Wyrð* is subdued to God's will:

*feorma me þonne,
wyrða waldend, in þinne wuldordream* (43b-44)

receive me then, Ruler of Fate, in Your glorious joy

It has been pointed out that by the time of composition of *The Ruin*, *Wyrð* was undergoing Christian adaptation, until its meaning became 'Providence'. Timmer (1940:29) has observed that 'Providence is that which is still in God's mind, His forethought, but when carried out it is called *wyrð*'. Thence, the term bears the meaning of God Himself, by semantic extension. A glimpse at *The Seafarer* highlights that Fate is *swiþre* (115b) 'more powerful', but the following lines concede that *meotud mehtigra* (116a) 'God is mightier'.

Human understanding cannot explain the reasons why God charges Fate with the distribution of sorrow or joy. As the speaker of *Resignation* underlines, men can only *wyrde bidan* (105b), ‘endure Fate’. Therefore, we must first learn to think well about the reason of their allotted (woven) destiny:

*Onstep mine hyge,
gæsta god cyning, in gearone ræd.* (39b-40)

Raise my thoughts, good King of souls, into ready counsel.

Turning to *The Ruin*, the other character responsible for the decay of the city is Time. This is another feature that makes up the elegiac mood (Timmer 1942), as well as a common thread in almost all the elegies of the *Exeter Book*. Time is both a relief and a sorrow. If one is sitting sad-hearted, lamenting his desperate condition, he might think that everything, either pleasant or unpleasant, will pass sooner or later. From this perspective, the passing of Time is a relief, as the refrain of *Deor* goes: *þæs ofereode/ þisses swa mæg!* But looking at the flipside, Time could also be a well of sorrows, specially for those who envisage that companionship, money, kinship and all earthly joys are fleeting and transitory. The distinction between life on earth, which is *læne* ‘fleeting’, and life after death which is *ece* ‘eternal’ is one of the most relevant preoccupations for the Anglo-Saxons. Fell (1991:175) talks about ‘perceptions of transience’ and she notes that ‘the things that are *læne* are divisible into three: life itself, property and happiness’. She quotes the passage of *The Wanderer*:

*Her bið feoh læne, her bið freond læne,
her bið mon læne, her bið mæg læne.* (108-109)

Here prosperity is fleeting, here friends are fleeting, here man is fleeting, here kinship is fleeting.

This is summarized also in the following lines of *The Seafarer*:

*Forþon me hatran sind
drytnes dreamas þonne þis deade lif,
læne on londe.* (64b-66a)

Therefore, the joys of the Lord are dearer to me than this dead life, transitory on land.

In *The Dream of the Rood* too, the lines convey the message that we have to earn the eternal bliss in this fleeting life:

*þæt he þonne wile deman, se ah domes geweald,
nra gehwylcum swa he him ærur her
on þissum lænum life geearnap.* (107-109)

And then will He judge, Who has power of judgement, to each man according as here on earth. In this fleeting life, he shall win reward.

At a first glance, Time in *The Ruin* seems the main character. It appears under the pseudonym of *æld* ‘age’, which has mutilated a storm protection:

scearde scurbeorge, scorene, gedrorene,
ældo undereotone (5-6a)

the storm protection is mutilated, cut, ruined, eaten away by age.

Although Time has not been mentioned by the author, it appears within the lines like watermark. Sharp-eyed readers could feel its presence in the haunting references to the former glorious state of the city, in the clash with the present state of misery and desolation, as well as in the adjectives of space and time (albeit very rare), but mostly in the inner structure of verbs.

At this point, it should be noticed that the verb ratio in this poem is far beyond the average of descriptive type of texts. In my opinion, this poem stands out from the conventional classification of descriptive texts, because linkers of space are extremely rare, the occurrence of verbs outnumbers the occurrence of nouns and the dynamic verbs are much more numerous than the verbs of state. Predominantly, the focus of the text falls on time. These are all peculiarities of narrative texts, which is why they do not seem suitable to the poem in question. It is also noteworthy that the verbs outnumber the adjectives, which are the most typical features of descriptions, as they are modifiers of nouns. Moreover, there is a large amount of past participles with adjectival function in the text: *gebræcon* (1b); *gehrorene* (3a); *berofen* (4a); *scorene* and *gedrorene* (5b); *undereotone* (6a); *forweorene* and *geleorone* (7b); *gegrunde[n]* (14a); *gebond* (19b); *gebrocen* (32a); *gefratwed* (33b); *wingal* (34a).

All the same, I concede that this device marks the sense of alienation and estrangement, for it fails to comply with the reader’s expectations of that type of text³. In other words, the form of the text is inconsistent with its function, for dynamic verbs are inconsistent with descriptions.

Since the poem is made up of so many verbs, and having noted that Time is concealed in each verb, no one can deny that this poem is dominated by the action of Time itself, even though it is never visibly mentioned. The author refers to Time by the description of its ravages in the present alternated with the thought of the splendour that city and citizens had enjoyed in the past.

The literal reading of *The Ruin*, underscores that Time and Fate are the main characters whereas a figurative reading could shed light to the true protagonist of the poem, i.e. Christ himself, who rules the world and masters Time and Fate.

3. The Christological reading of the poem

So far, the main concern of those scholars who take the literal point of view has been to identify which city is being portrayed in the poem. Their endeavours were

³ For references to text types see, among the others, de Beaugrande-Dressler (1984) and Biber (1989).

mostly oriented to provide evidence from archaeology. To support their interpretation, scholars have focused too much on the architectonic vocabulary in the poem, at the expenses of semantics. Among these interpretations, Lee (1973) and Greenfield (1966) have successfully shown the city in question to be Bath. In my opinion, the literal approach belittles the strength of language, for it considers the words as they appear, thus leaving the territory of semantics unexplored and the power of language unexploited and downplayed. Therefore, I would rather undertake the allegorical approach, which is mostly addressed to the figure of Christ and the metaphors that refer to Him. Since my view is not the only one available, I am aware that other interpretations should not be rejected *tout court*, because they have the same dignity as mine. The reader should not be forced to accept others' perspective. On the contrary, he/she should have the freedom of choosing among the possible reading levels. The ideal reader should be able to find out those links with other texts that might have been hinted at by the author and purposely concealed in the main text.

I have mentioned that one of the most exploited metaphors for Christ is the image of a stone, namely a cornerstone. This occurs in the biblical tradition, in the patristic literature, and in OE literature too. The most striking occurrence of this metaphor is found in the Bible. Compare the first letter of Peter:

Ad quem accedentes, lapidem vivum, ab hominibus quidem reprobatum, coram Deo autem electum, pretiosum, et ipsi tamquam lapides vivi aedificamini domus spiritualis in sacerdotium sanctum offerre spirituales hostias acceptabiles Deo per Iesum Christum. Propter quod continet Scriptura: "Ecce pono in Sion lapidem angularem, electum, pretiosum; et, qui credit in eo, non confundetur". Vobis igitur honor credentibus; non credentibus autem "Lapis, quem reprobaverunt aedificantes, hic factus est in caput anguli" et "lapis offensionis et petra scandali"; qui offendunt verbo non credentes, in quod et positus sunt. (1 Peter 2:4–8).

Come to him, a living stone, rejected by human beings but chosen and precious in the sight of God, and, like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it says in scripture: "Behold, I am laying a stone in Zion, a cornerstone, chosen and precious, and whoever believes in it shall not be put to shame." Therefore, its value is for you who have faith, but for those without faith: "The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," and "A stone that will make people stumble, and a rock that will make them fall." They stumble by disobeying the word, as is their destiny⁴.

Above, Peter explicitly denotes Christ as the *lapidem vivum* 'living stone'. This allegory occurs also in *The Passion of Saint Juliana*, as the Saint says to her people that they should set their foundations on the 'Living Stone':

⁴ Henceforth, unless otherwise indicated, all the translations of biblical passages are from the Authorized Version, on www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/_INDEX_HTM.

*Ge mid lufan sibbe,
leohte geleafan, to þam lifgendan
stane stiðhydge stapol fæstniað* (652b-654)

Do ye with love of peace and clear belief, stout of heart, set your foundation on the Living stone.

The following passage from the Bible is far more explicit in highlighting that the stone is Christ Himself:

[...] *et omnes eundem potum spiritalem biberunt; bibebant autem de spiritali, consequente eos, petra; petra autem erat Christus.* (1 Cor. 10:4).

[...] and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they drank from a spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was the Christ.

At the end of the sentence, the narrator explains without the use of translated figures of speech, that ‘that stone was Christ’. By synecdoche Christ becomes the house of Christians, i.e. the Church, where they gather to praise their Lord and where they find shelter, joy, friendship, but above all, love and bliss. In the Gospel of Matthew we come across the occurrence of the ‘stone’ upon which the Church will be built:

Et ego dico tibi: Tu es Petrus, et super hanc petram aedificabo Ecclesiam meam; et portae inferi non praevalebunt adversum eam. Tibi dabo claves regni caelorum; et quodcumque ligaveris super terram, erit ligatum in caelis, et quodcumque solveris super terram, erit solutum in caelis. Tunc praecipit discipulis, ut nemini dicerent quia ipse esset Christus. (Matthew 16:18–20).

“And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Then he strictly ordered his disciples to tell no one that he was the Messiah.

From the passage above, the metaphor for Christ as a stone becomes a recursive theme in the Bible. The stone, upon which the Church will be built, is indeed the first main stone, which laid the ground for the development of larger constructions representative of Christianity that will spread everywhere. In this passage Christ delegates Peter with the building of the Church. Consequently, Peter takes on the image of the master-builder. But, unlike the other *waldendwyrhtan*⁵ ‘master-builders’, he does not reject the cornerstone. The role of Peter in creating the Church resembles the role of God in creating men (see Isaiah 64:7). In *Andreas*, the stone must ‘journey forth from that spot and tread the ways of earth’:

⁵ See *The Ruin* (7a). Krapp & Dobbie (1931–42) argue that this compound is highly unusual, so they print it as two nouns in asyndetic parataxis. But Klinck (1992) objects that *w(e)aldend* is often employed as an epithet, then a joint use of them would be natural.

*Da se þeoden bebead þryðweorc faran,
 stan on stræte of stedewange,
 ond forð gan foldweg tredan* (773-776)

And the Prince bade that the imaged stone go forth from that spot upon the road, to journey forth and tread the ways of earth.

We also find a metaphor for the Church as Christ's body, which extends further into the image of faithful men who become the Church, i.e. they become part of Christ's body. He rules the world in the same way as the head masters the limbs in a human body through his nerves:

Ergo iam non estis extranei et advenae, sed estis concives sanctorum et domestici Dei, supraedificati super fundamentum apostolorum et prophetarum, ipso summo angulari lapide Christo Iesu, in quo omnis aedificatio compacta crescit in templum sanctum in Domino, in quo et vos coaedificamini in habitaculum Dei in Spiritu. (Eph. 2:19–22).

So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone. Through him the whole structure is held together and grows into a temple sacred in the Lord; in him you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

The image of Christ as stone reappears in the passage above. From that stone the Church will thrive and spread all over the world. Moreover, the symbolism in the passage indicates that through the Holy Spirit, everyone becomes the house where God inhabits. It is also noticeable that the change of verbs emphasizes the metaphor for body and house: the bodies of Christians are *supraedificati* 'built', having as 'cornerstone Jesus Christ himself', *ipso summo angulari lapide Christo Iesu*. At the same time the House of God, i.e. the Church *crescit* 'grows up'. Again, Christ is physically the Head of the Church's body:

Et ipse est capus corporis ecclesiae; qui est principium, primogenitus ex mortuis, ut sit in omnibus ipse primatum tenens. (Col. 1:18).

He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things he himself might be preeminent.

The following passage highlights the unity between Christ and Men. Here, it is also significant the reiteration of the concept of 'one' and 'many', a reference to the fact that God is everywhere and that He builds His dwelling in the heart of every human being. The difference between unity and multiplicity fades away within Himself to become the mystery of the Christian Faith:

Sicut enim corpus unum est et membra habet multa, omnia autem membra corporis, cum sint multa, unum corpus sunt, ita et Christus; etenim in uno Spiritu omnes nos in unum corpus baptizati sumus, sive Iudaei sive Graeci sive servi sive liberi, et omnes unum Spiritum potati sumus. Nam et corpus non est unum membrum sed multa. (1 Cor. 12:12–14)

As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit. Now the body is not a single part, but many.

God represents the unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They compose the Trinity that dissolves into God Himself. The difference between unity and multiplicity is also absorbed. This entails that there must be no discrimination among humans, being all sons of the same God. We are in fact called upon in the construction of the Church stone by stone, as in *Andreas*:

*Ne dorste þa forhylman hælendes bebod
wundor fore weorodum, ac of wealle ahleop,
frod fyrngeweorc, þæt he on foldan stod,
stan fram stane. Stefn æfter cwom,
hlud þurh heardne, hleoðor dynede,
wordum wemde.* (735-739a)

Neither durst sorry, do not know this word it transgress the bidding of the Saviour, a sign before the hosts, but it leapt forth from the wall, stone from stone, that ancient older work, and stood upon the earth.

The same concept of unity between Christians and the Church is also perceived in the following passage of Peter:

et ipsi tamquam lapides vivi aedificamini domus spiritalis in sacerdotium sanctum offerre spiritalis hostias acceptabiles Deo per Iesum Christum. (1 Peter 2:5).

and, like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

One more suggestive allegory of the great power of the stone is found in the prophecy of Daniel about a rolling stone that has parted from a mountain and has ended up squashing the statue of the king:

Secundum quod vidisti quod the monte abscisus est lapis sine minibus et comminuit testam et ferrum et aes et argentums et aurum, Deus magnus ostendit regi, quae ventura sunt postea; et verum est somnium et fidelis interpretation eius. (Daniel 2:45).

That is the meaning of the stone you saw hewn from the mountain without a hand being put to it, which broke in pieces the tile, iron, bronze, silver, and gold. The great God has revealed to the king what shall be in the future; this is exactly what you dreamed, and its meaning is sure."

Leaving aside all the occurrences of 'stone' in Christian literature, I shall confine myself to their most relevant occurrences within *The Codex Exoniensis* and other OE texts, in particular the *ASPR* (Batley 1986). Afterwards, I draw parallels between them and *The Ruin* to support my hypothesis.

Cammarota (1997) remarks that the protagonist of *The Ruin* appears in the first line. She argues that the term *wealstan* is the linchpin on which the meaning of the poem hinges, for it is a metaphor for Christ so largely exploited in the biblical

tradition: Christ is the *lapis angularis*, 'Cornerstone'. I definitely agree with both her interpretations. Therefore, my reading hinges on the translation of *wealstan* into 'Cornerstone'. My interpretation that Christ is the main character of the poem rests first of all on the consideration that both action and movement are present in the text. As noted above, a large array of dynamicity verbs create the sensation that something or someone is smouldering over the city depicted in the lines. With the sole exception of the verb *wesan* 'to be', I have not found any other verb of stasis. Moreover, *wesan* functions as copula in its occurrences. Given this, the verb bears the meaning 'to exist', and this implies somehow an action. If something exists, it means that it is living, literally or figuratively. Albeit paradoxical, even a dead body exists, as long as we are looking at it, or simply talking thereabout. It is through our perception and imagination that we give life to things. Perception and imagination involve dynamicity, because the mental movement of associating the external world with our internal one is at work. For that reason, I argue that this poem must not be counted among the descriptive texts, owing to the absence of static verbs, which are distinctive features of descriptive texts. Additionally, dynamicity is that *Aktionsart*⁶ which involves movement or change of state.

The perception of movement in the text is constantly felt by the reader. The idea of movement has also been underlined by Calder (1971), although his argument rests solely on the shift of tenses from present to past and vice versa. I would add that all verbs in the poem are what linguists call 'occurrences', because they have internal dynamicity. In my opinion, movement in this poem brings into question the subject that provokes it. Notice also that the change is still taking place and that the movement has started in the past and does not stop at the present. We do not know with accuracy when this movement started and whether or not it will cease. The time at which a given action started is impossible to determine, as the only indicators available are the present and past inflection of the verbs. Unfortunately, since they do not morphologically convey aspectuality, we cannot ascertain whether the action has ever been completed. Apart from the copula 'to be', the verbs inflected in the past tense are mostly past participles, more exactly resultative verbs with adjectival function (see above). Their focus falls upon the endpoint of the action, thus its beginning remains unsaid.

As for the verbs in the present, it is noteworthy that this tense allows only imperfective aspect. This aspect entails an internal point of view on a given situation, so you can only describe its development. Thus, the following verbs yield all progressive aspect: *brosnað* (2b); *hafað* (6b); *wu[n]að* (12a); *dreorgiað* (29b); *sceadeð* (30b). In modern English the progressive *Aktionsart* is expressed by the -ing inflection but this was not available in Old English.

In my opinion the protagonist of the text is God Himself, Who is always among us. The uncertainty is only one: did the author truly intend to represent the continuous and everlasting action of God through the description of its effects?

⁶ According to Comrie (1976), *Aktionsarten* are features of Aspect. The latter is a category of verb, and can be broken down further into three features: dynamicity, durativity and telicity.

My impression is that he did it very cunningly. In fact, if he had told us that his intention was to represent God's continuous action in the world and that men are not aware of this, the poetic strength of *The Ruin* would have vanished. The presence of God is mirrored in the consequences of His actions and is expressed by the inherent dynamicity of the verbs.

Given this, I agree that the description could be about the power of the Stone, i.e. Christ, who has turned heathenism into ruin. In fact, according to the religious point of view, heathenism might be alluded to by the locution *enta geweorc* (2b). Not only does the word *stan* appear in lines 48a, but we also find it as a part of compound nouns, e.g. *wealstan* (1a), *eorcanstan* (36b) and *stanhofu* (38a). It also seems to break into the semantic of certain nouns, such as *wag* (9b), *weall* (20a, 39b), but also *hofu* (29b), *teaforgeapa*⁷ (30a) and *burg* (37a). The author might have consciously concealed the referent *stan* by synecdoche. Indeed, walls were usually made of stones, and so were houses and, extending the synecdoche, cities.

Metonymy is another rhetorical device exploited in the Bible. It is useful to communicate the omnipresence of God viz. His amalgamation with Church and Christians. In fact, we can say that the Church is made up of Christians and that Christians are the Church. Furthermore, the poet's admiration for this 'cornerstone' is the incipit of the poem. I take this stone to be the subject in *burgstede burston/ broснаð enta geweorc* 'rent asunder fortified places and crumbles the work of giants'. It might be the same stone that shatters the statue of the king in Daniel's verse 2:45 (see above).

There is an analogy between the opening of *The Ruin* and *Maxims II* too:

*Cyning sceal rice healdan. Ceastra beoð feorran gesyne,
orðanc enta geweorc, þa þe on þisse eorðan syndon
wrætlic weallstana geweorc.* (1-3a)

A king shall rule. Cities are to be seen far off, cunning work of giants, which are on the earth, wondrous work of wall-stones.

The first *Advent Lyric* (see Muir 2000) also deals with that *weallstan*, which had been rejected by the builders (Acts 4:11). The lyric is worth quoting at length:

*Ðu eart se weallstan þe ða wyrhtan iu
wiðwurpon to weorce. Wel þe geriseð
þæt þu heafod sie healle mærrer
ond gesomnig side weallas
fæste gefoge, flint unbræcene,
þæt geond eorðb[old] eall eagna gesihþe
wundrien to worlde wuldres ealdor.
Gesweotula nu þurh searocræft þin sylfes weorc,*

⁷ The term has been variously interpreted. B-T take it as two separate words: *teafor* 'purple' and *geapu* 'expanse'. Klinck (1992) notes that it could be a substantival adjective 'red-arched' and agrees with Mackie's translation 'this arch of red stone'. Also Johnson (1980) considers it as a compound noun, rendering *teafor* into 'reddish color' and *geap* into 'curved roof'. Since I agree with Klinck's 'red-arched', the image of the stone reappears in the adjective as a part of the arch.

Soðfæst, sigorbeorth, ond sona forlet
 Weall wið wealle. Nu is þam weorce þearf
 þæt se cræftga cume, ond se cyning sylfa,
 ond þonne gebete, nu gebrosnað is,
 hus under hrofe. He þæt hra gescop,
 leomo læmena. Nu sceal liffrea
 þone wergan heap wrapum ahreddan,
 earmefrom egsan, swa he oft dyde. (2-18)

For comparison, I propose my literal translation into modern English:

You are the cornerstone that the workers long ago rejected from the work. It suits you well that you are the head of the glorious hall and you congregate⁸ wide walls, in a firm embrace, flint unbroken, that throughout the earth the eyes of all look with wonder on the lord of glory. Manifest now cunningly your own work pious, triumphant, and soon raise wall against wall. Now your work needs that the maker comes, the king himself; that he then repairs what now is decayed, the house under its roof. He created the body, the limbs, of clay; now the lord of life shall protect the company rescue from devils, the wretched from horror, as he oft had done.

The poet of *The Ruin* seems to be highly influenced by the lyric above, as shown by the similarity in the semantics of the keywords reported below. Particular attention should be paid to those words that bear a relationship with ‘stone’:

<i>The Ruin</i>	<i>The Advent Lyric I</i>
<i>wealstan</i>	<i>weallstan</i>
<i>wrætlic</i>	<i>wundrien</i>
<i>weal</i>	<i>weall</i>
<i>stan</i>	<i>flint</i>
<i>brosnað</i>	<i>gebrosnað</i>
<i>geweorc</i>	<i>weorc</i>
<i>hrofas/ rof</i>	<i>hrofe</i>
<i>lamrindum</i>	<i>læmena</i>
<i>hwæted</i>	<i>gesweotula</i>
<i>gebond</i>	<i>gesomnig</i>
<i>befeng</i>	<i>gefoge</i>

This comparison supports the hypothesis that both poets have derived their metaphors from the Holy Bible, such as the image of God’s embracing the Christians and that the poets influenced each others. In *The Ruin* there is a passage about a wall that *eall befeng* ‘encompassed all’, and the lines of *The Advent Lyric* indeed describe the *fæste gefoge* ‘firm embrace’ of the wall. In fact, among the meanings of the verb *gebeton* (14a), Bosworth-Toller 1973 (hereafter B-T) translate ‘surround with a wall’. One more punning is supposed to be on the word *gebrosnað* (14b). This word translates both ‘corrupted’ and ‘decayed’. According

⁸ Among the other translations offered by B-T, I have chosen this verb because it reminds me of the etymology of the term ‘Church’, which originally meant ‘congregation of men, assembly’.

to the former meaning, the metaphor for men corrupted by paganism is likely to be intended. With the latter, the poet might have described the decayed state of the Church, whence by metonymy the state of the Christians.

Another word to be connected to the Bible is *lamrindum* ‘clay’ in line 17b of *The Ruin*. The metaphor of God as our craftsman is very suggestive, because it cunningly reminds us that the Church is made up of Christians, like a house is made up of stones. I would like to add that not only are bricks made from a blend of stones and clay, but that this material was also used in constructions to hold the stones together. We read in Isaiah that God shaped us from clay:

Et nunc, Domine, pater noster es tu, nos vero lutum; et fīctor noster tu, et opera manuum tuarum omnes nos. (Isaiah 64:7)

Yet, Oh LORD, you are our father; we are the clay and you the potter: we are all the work of your hands.

The wall mentioned in *The Ruin* (line 9b) with the adjective *readfah* ‘red-stained’, is said to have *gebād rice æfter oprum* (10b) ‘survived one kingdom after another’. The passage can be figuratively read as the image of Christ stained with blood. This reading could have further support in the following lines:

*oftstonden under stormum. Stea[p], geap gedreas.
Wu[n]að giet s[e]_____ [n]um geheapen. (11-12)*

Withstood under the storms. Steep, fallen, declined.
Still remains, piled high.

Here, Christ is symbolized by the wall, namely the protection that having withstood the storms, *wu[n]að* ‘remains’. Christ as a shelter from the storms is another commonplace in biblical literature. Christians can find protection in the Church and by synecdoche in Christ Himself:

Et erit vir sicut latibulum a vento et refugium a tempestate, sicut rivi aquarum in sitiēte terra et umbra petrae magnae in terra arida. (Isaiah 32:2).

Each of them will be a shelter from the wind, a retreat from the rain. They will be like streams of water in a dry country, like the shade of a great rock in a parched land.

The metaphor for the protection against the storm of sins is also found in *The Passion of Saint Juliana*, where Christ is described as a ‘Strong Wall’:

*Weal sceal þy tumra
strong wiþstondan storma scurum,
leahtra gehygdum. (650b-652a)*

The strong wall shall firmly withstand the blasts of the storm, the suggestions of sin.

I think that the resistance of the wall is hinted at in the damaged line 13a of *The Ruin*. There we find the occurrence of *felon* ‘has persisted’. I conjecturally take its irretrievable subject to be God’s everlasting presence and His resistance to the

evil. This view hinges on the verb *geheapen* at the end of the line, which it could refer only to a heap. Analysing the possible things that we might ‘pile up’, I argue that in this context a heap of stones is a befitting referent.

After the resurrection of Christ, the account of His whole story was written by the disciples, in order to back up the spread of Christianity. Yet the heathen roots were very hard to weed out, and someone was shunning Christ. This concept might be expressed in *The Ruin*:

*Forþon þas hofu dreorgiað
ond þæs teaforgeapa tigelum sceadeð
hrostbeames rof.* (29b-31a)

According to Klinck, the literal translation runs: ‘Therefore this dwelling grows dismal/ and the tiles are coming away from this red-arched pillar of the vault’. I take it to be the allegory of the Church (*hofu*) that becomes sad as the Christians (*tigelum*) part from Christ (*hrostbeames*). The translation⁹ of the latter term into the modern English ‘pillar of the vault’ emphasizes the strength of Christ by underscoring His prominence and importance. The pillar is definitely the most important part of every construction, because all the other elements hinge upon it. At the same time, the pillar holds all the elements together. Expanding the allegory, we could see the picture of Christ, who prevents the Christians from scattering. The following passage provides one more biblical metaphor of the pillar:

si autem tardavero, ut scias quomodo oporteat in domo Dei conversari, quae est ecclesia Dei vivi, columna et firmamentum veritatis. (1Timothy 3:15)

But if I should be delayed, you should know how to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of truth.

Turning our attention four lines back, we realize that this ruined state had been caused also by *woldagas* ‘days of pestilence’. Recall that pestilence was one of the plagues sent by God against Egyptians. The similarity of lines 25–26 of *The Ruin* and Ezekiel is striking, for we find the keywords ‘pestilence’ and ‘sword’:

*Crungon walo wide; cwoman woldagas.
Swylt eall fornom secgrofa wera.*

The slain in battle fell far and wide, days of pestilence came. Death took away all men brave with sword.

Et immittam ei pestilentiam et sanguinem in plateis eius, et corruent interfecti in medio eius gladio per circuitum, et scient quia ego Dominus. (Ezekiel 28:23).

⁹ This translation is proposed by Klinck (1992). The manuscript reads *hrost beages*, B-T emendation has it as a single word, i.e. *hrostbeages*, which can be rendered as ‘the woodwork of a circular roof’. Leslie (1961) glosses the compound as ‘the circle formed by the inner framework of the roof’.

Into it I will send pestilence, and blood shall flow in its streets. Within it shall fall those slain by the sword that comes against it from every side. Thus they shall know that I am the LORD.

In the passage of *The Ruin* we are told that days of pestilence came and death took away all men brave with sword. Ezekiel talks about pestilence, which took away men, run through with the sword. Although there is a slight dissimilarity between the emendation of Klinck *secgrofa wera* and the passage in Ezekiel *interficti in medio eius gladio*, I might conjecture that the poet of *The Ruin* wished to highlight that those men, who run through others with their sword, could not withstand God's action (in this case sending pestilence).

The compound *eorcanstan*¹⁰ (*The Ruin* 36b) could be one more epithet for Christ, found in other OE poems, notably in *Christ in Judgement*:

*ðæt se eorcanstan eallum sceolde
to hleo ond to hroþer hæleþa cynne
weorðan in worulde, welders agend
eades ordfruma, þurh þa æþelan cwenn.* (1195-8)

The Precious Stone, the Lord of glory, Prince of bliss, would become a refuge and a comfort unto human kind.

Recall that in Peter 2:4–8 (see above) Christ is described as a living stone, chosen and *pretiosum*. In *The Dream of the Rood*, Christ is allegorically the *beorhtan stan* (66b) 'brightest stone'. This allegory is accommodated by the context:

*Curfon hie ðæt of beorhtan stane,
Gesetton hie ðæron sigora wealdend.* (66b-67a)

They chiselled the tomb of the brightest stone and laid the Lord of victories there.

Carving the tomb of a stone does not make sense, as everybody knows that tombs are burial places for humans. Although the adjective 'precious' does not appear in the lines, it can be inferred from *beorhtan*. In fact, among the mental associations that may generate from this term, a very likely one is 'precious'.

Approaching the end of *The Ruin*, there occur two appositions that in my opinion perfectly suit Christ: in line 38a a stone-building (*stanhofu*) appears, while in line 39b the author talks about a wall that encompassed all (*weall eall befeng*). So, the first could be seen as Christ and the second as His embrace of Christians.

From line 39b on, the poet draws the reader's attention to the image of 'water'. He does not explicitly reveal this reference, rather he conceals it under specific

¹⁰ Cross (1955:205) observes that the poet of *The Ruin* did not use the plural 'eorcanstans' and that there are no metrical reasons that hamper such usage. The poet explains in a footnote that there occurs a 'type of anacrusis'. There is an interesting avoidance of syntactical balance in these two lines which may indicate that the poet was emphasising the singular 'eorcanstan'. Since the use of the singular is not due to metrical constraints, I do not think that the poet used the singular to emphasise the term. Rather, I think that he was just describing that particular 'Stone', thence the singular. Among other views, Doubleday (1972) suggests that the noun is an apposition that denotes *beorhtan burg* (37a) as a single precious stone, while according to Leslie (1961) the singular noun is to be interpreted collectively as jewellery.

terms, which are all semantically related to water: *stream* and *wearp* (38b); *wylme* (39a); *babu* (40b, 46b); *geotan* (42a); *hringmere* (45a) and, again, *streamas* (43b). The baptismal water might be hinted at here. It is symbolically used by the priest in the sacrament of baptism to wash away the original sin from the stained soul of the Christians. Moreover, the baptism is the first of all sacraments, through which Christians become members of the Church. As for the words *stream* ‘stream’, *wearp* ‘gush’ and *wylme* ‘surging’, it can be agreed upon that their most conventional interpretations are related to something liquid, aside from the word ‘surging’, which can also refer to human beings. I take these words to be allegories of baptismal water. More specifically, they represent the action of the baptismal water, and action is also entailed in the semantics of ‘stream’, ‘gush’ and ‘surging’, both taking them as nouns and as verbs. The first action of water is cleaning off the original sin, initiating into Christianity and converting people to this religion, in order for the Christians to save their souls. It is God that saves His sons, as He did when they were in the desert without water. He made the water flow from a stone and rescued the Israelis. It is noticeable in the passages below that the water flows out of a stone:

Non sitierunt, cum per desertum duceret eos; aquam de petra produxit eis et scidit petram, et fluxerunt aquae. (Isaiah 48:21).

They did not thirst when he led them through dry lands; Water from the rock he set flowing for them; he cleft the rock, and waters welled forth.

Scidit petram in eremo et adaquavit eos velut abyssus multa. Et eduxit rivulos de petra et deduxit tamquam flumina aquas. (Psalm 78:15–16).

He cleft the rocks in the desert and gave them to drink as in the abyss. He made brooks spring from the stone and made water gush forth (my translation).

Water is the most precious treasure in the desert, hence the occurrence (below) of *sincgife* ‘precious gift’ and *golde eart* ‘fairer than gold’. The miracle of the water flowing out from a stone and saving the faithful is mentioned in *Andreas*:

*Læt nu of þinum staþole streamas weallan,
ea inflede, nu ðe ælmihtig
hateð, heofona cyning, þæt ðu hrædlice
on þis fræte folc forð onsende
wæter widrynig to wera cwealme,
geofon geotende. Hwæt, ðu golde eart,
sincgife, sylla!* (1503-1509a)

Do thou let streams well forth from out thy base, a rushing river. Now the Almighty King of heaven biddeth thee to send forth swiftly on this folk perverse wide-flowing water, dashing unto heaven, to be the death of men. Lo! Fairer than gold art thou or precious treasure!

The significant similarity of the words chosen by the poet of *The Ruin* almost at the end of the poem is noteworthy. Unfortunately, the text at this point is badly damaged. However, lines 38–39 are unscathed. They depict a wide surging, a stream and a gush. Most strikingly, in line 42a we find the imperative *Leton þonne*

geotan ‘let then gush’. In *Andreas*, line 1503 reads *Læt nu of þinum stapole/ streamas weallan*. Since imperatives bear a deontic modality, we can recognize in the lines God’s demand that the stone should send forth gushing water against the *fræte folc* ‘perverse folk’. Turning to *The Ruin*, there is a mention on water flowing over a stone in line 43a. Due to the preceding gap, we cannot be sure whether the water started gushing out of the stone, as in *Andreas*:

*Næs þa wordlatu wihte þon mare
 þæt se stan togan. Stream ut aweoll,
 fleow ofer foldan. Famige walcan
 mid ærdæge eorðan þehton,
 myclade mereflod.* (1522-1526a)

Nor was the longer tarrying a whit but the stone was cleft asunder, and a stream welled forth, and overflowed the land; the foamy waves, with dawn, enfolded earth; the sea flood swelled.

The passage reports the moment when Andreas was rescued by the stream of water as he was going to be killed by the inhabitants of Mermedonia.

Accordingly, water could be seen as a symbol of purification from the original sin, from sins in general as well as from heathenism. It is the water sent by God that saved the Israelis in the desert and Andreas. However, the function of water in *The Ruin* is not to destroy the enemies, but to restore, to pamper and to purify the faithful. Given this, the baths mentioned in lines 40b and 46b should not be taken literally as places for purifying the body, rather, they are places for the purification of the soul. The adjective for water *hate* ‘hot’, emphasises the healthiness and cosiness of the baths, thus yielding a kind of literal invitation to have a bath, thence a figurative advice to purify oneself. Furthermore, the poet explains at line 41b that doing so was *hyðelic* ‘convenient’. The description of the typical environment of the baths is indeed very pleasant, as confirmed by the adjectives *beorhtan* ‘bright’ and *hate* ‘hot’. Moreover, I have indicated the metaphor for Christ as a wall and I repeat that lines 39b–41a report that the baths were indeed encompassed by a ‘wall with a bright bosom, hot in the breast’ (*weall eall befeng/ beorhtan bosme,/ þær þa baþu wæ[r]on,/ hat on hreþre*). The presence of ‘bosom’ and ‘breast’ strengthen the allegorical reading of the wall for Christ, because the nouns denote parts of the human body.¹¹ By metonymy, the persons in the baths might also be encompassed in the warm embrace of Christ. His embrace makes everyone feel cosy, warm, and it arouses the same state of wellbeing that people enjoy in having a warm bath. The author seems to persuade the reader that conversion into Christianity was *hyðelic*. But the poet shifts again into the present and states that *þæt is cynelic þing* (48b) ‘that is a royal thing’.

¹¹ Johnson (1980:405) indicates that *bosme* and *hreþre* promote a link between body and city. The author sees in the springs the heart of the human body, the soul of men. He states that “If the body is like a building because it encloses and protects dwellers (the heart and the soul), it is like a city and the walls surrounding it, which enclose and protect the inhabitants”.

I conjecturally suggest that the referent of the deictic *þæt* might be either the sacrament of baptism with all its implications, or the miracles by the pools of Bethesda or the one of Siloam, where people were healed from every disease:

Est autem Hierosolymis, super Probatica, piscina, quae cognominatur Hebraice Bethsatha, quinque porticus habens. In his iacebat multitudo languentium, caecorum, claudorum, aridorum. Erat autem quidam homo ibi triginta et octo annos habens in infirmitate sua. Hunc cum vidisset Iesus iacentem, et cognovisset quia multum iam tempus habet, dicit ei: "Vis sanus fieri?". Respondit ei languidus: "Domine, hominem non habeo, ut, cum turbata fuerit aqua, mittat me in piscinam; dum autem venio ego, alius ante me descendit". Dicit ei Iesus: "Surge, tolle grabatum tuum et ambula". Et statim sanus factus est homo et sustulit grabatum suum et ambulabat. (John 5:2–9).

Now there is in Jerusalem at the Sheep (Gate) a pool called in Hebrew Bethesda, with five porticoes. In these lay a large number of ill, blind, lame, and crippled. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been ill for a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be well?" The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; while I am on my way, someone else gets down there before me." Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your mat, and walk." Immediately the man became well, took up his mat, and walked. Now that day was a Sabbath.

Haec cum dixisset, exspuit in terram et fecit lutum ex sputo et linivit lutum super oculos eius et dixit ei: "Vade, lava in natatoria Siloae!" — quod interpretatur Missus C. Abiit ergo et lavit et venit videns. (John: 9:6–7)

When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva, and smeared the clay on his eyes, and said to him, "Go wash in the Pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and washed, and came back able to see.

Notice that the Hebraic name of the pool *Bethsatha*, resembles homophonically the verb 'baptize'. According to the English dictionary, this term stems from the Greek 'to immerse, bathe, wash, drench [...]'. In *The Ruin*, the reader comes across a circular pool in line 45a, where *hringemere* appears. At this point, it is very easy indeed to associate the idea of immersing and bathing with the image of a pool. Although this proposal is highly conjectural, I suggest that the *cynelic þing* (48b) might refer to the miracles that had taken place by Siloam and Bethesda. I am aware that I am walking on thin ice, for these lines are ruined by gaps, and mostly because there are no references to the pools mentioned in the Bible. All the same, readers cannot fail to detect the human associations triggered by the words *bosme* and *hreppe*, connected to the wall that 'encompassed all' the places where the baths were. Nor can readers avoid connecting the hot streams of the pool to an uncontaminated, cosy and healthy environment. Furthermore, no one can deny that the baths are places for washing oneself and that in the pool people immerge.¹² Hence, we could find a parallel with the etymology of 'baptize' and with the rite

¹² Objections to my view can be found in Doubleday (1972). He observes that the Roman hot baths were viewed with suspicion because their public use promoted adultery.

of baptism through which the original sin and the impurities of idolatry are washed away.

4. Conclusion

I have tried to demonstrate that the poem is at first sight the description of a ruined city and that the poet alternates snapshots of the present decay against the splendour of the past. Before stepping into my argument, I have conceded that there are various approaches to the text, hence different interpretations. I have looked at the poem through the lens of allegory, in order to transmit a Christological interpretation, although I do not expect that everyone approves my point of view, nor do I assert that my interpretation is the most reliable.

I have noticed that the poem shies away from the common classification of descriptive texts, for the verbs outnumber the nouns and there are few adjectives. Moreover, focus on space, which is the most striking feature of descriptive texts, is also missing. Indeed, focus falls on time, rather than on space, as demonstrated by the abundance of verbs. The consideration that Time is related to the category of verbs called 'tense', has led me to identify it as a character in the poem. I have also considered Fate as another character, since it appears twice in the poem. According to Timmer (see above), Fate is God's will carried out. In fact, quotations from other elegies have provided evidence that Fate is submitted to God.

I have concluded that the 'leading character' in the poem is Christ. My argument pivots on the metaphor for Christ as the Cornerstone, specifically the *lapis angularis* often encountered in the biblical tradition. References to the Bible are the liaison between the poem and my interpretation. I have availed myself of quotations from other OE texts, especially *The ASPR* and *The Exeter Book*, in order to establish that this metaphor was also employed by the Anglo-Saxons. The image of the stone and its rhetorical relevance has also been mentioned. In fact, I have touched upon synecdoche and metonymy. By the former, the stone symbolizes the Church, while by the latter the Church represents the Christians. Particular emphasis has therefore been placed on the semantic associations in which the word stone is present, for instance the term 'wall' reminds us of the stone because a wall was composed of many stones.

Finally, I have highly conjecturally tied the baths and the pool portrayed in the poem with the rite of baptism, i.e. with the conversion into Christianity. Taking into account that the baths are places for washing, I have suggested that the baths symbolize the purification of the soul. I have also exploited the etymology of 'baptism', that is 'immerge, bathe'. Afterwards, I have associated *hringemere* (45a) 'circular pool' with the verb 'to bathe'.

The conclusion is that, according to my view, the poem is about Christ, in particular about the desolation due to His absence, and about His enormous power. The fall of this place is regarded as the consequence of both carnal and spiritual

sins,¹³ namely *wlonc* ‘pride’ and *wingal* ‘drunkenness’. The author has bluntly rendered the outcome of heathenism by the description of stillness, bleak surroundings, dismay and decay. He has also cunningly camouflaged the presence of God under the dynamicity of the poem. In my judgment, this poem conveys the elegiac mood, although the author does not lament in the first person. Nevertheless, he awakens feelings of melancholy and loneliness with his contemplation of this waste land. That is to say that man cannot do anything against God’s choice; they can just look passively, unable to react, with their souls turned into ruin. Despite criticism, I see a ray of hope in the penultimate line — *þæt is cynelic þing* (41b) — as long as I associate it with the surmised rite of baptism yielded by the allegory of the baths as places for purifying the soul. This passage seems to reveal the author’s advice to convert; hence it is this line that has led me to consider the poem a regulative text rather than a pure description.

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¹³ Doubleday (1972:378) explains that ‘*wlonc ond wingal* is a standard Old English formula to explain the fall of cities, whereas Leslie (1983) considers the words as traits of the former inhabitants. Both have noticed the same occurrence in line 29a of *The Seafarer*, where the author is saying that men who possess joy and stay on land, do not understand the sufferings of men at sea.

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