The Gospel Extracts and the Theme of the *Royal Prayerbook*

Abstract: Unlike in later private devotional collections, which are typically more diverse in their forms, the early Insular prayerbooks all begin with extracts from the four gospels. The extracts that are found in two of these collections, London, British Library, MS Harley 2965 (the *Book of Nunnaminster*) and Cambridge, University Library MS Ll.I.10 (the *Book of Cerne*), take the form of long continuous passages from each gospel book. These extracts have been well understood, as they appear to be topical, focusing on events near the end of the gospels: Christ's passion and resurrection. The readings found in the third of these collections, London, British Library, Royal 2.A.xx (the *Royal Prayerbook*), are instead made of a wider variety of shorter passages. This study re-examines these extracts and disputes earlier claims that they were compiled primarily for apotropaic reasons or to reflect an interest in Christ's healing miracles. Instead, it suggests that, like the gospel extracts found in the other Insular prayerbooks, these readings may have been chosen to reflect on a Christological event, the ascension.

Contrairement aux collections de dévotion privées ultérieures, qui sont plus diverses dans leurs formes, les premiers livres de prières insulaires commencent tous par des extraits des quatre évangiles. Les extraits que l'on retrouve dans deux de ces collections, London, British Library, MS Harley 2965 (le *Book of Nunnaminster*) et Cambridge, University Library MS Ll.I.10 (le *Book of Cerne*), prennent la forme de longs passages continus de chaque livre d'évangile. Ces extraits ont été bien compris, parce qu'ils semblent être organisés par thème, se concentrant sur des événements proches de la fin des évangiles: la passion et la résurrection du Christ. Les lectures trouvées dans le troisième de ces recueils, London, British Library, Royal 2.A.xx (le *Royal Prayerbook*), sont plutôt constituées d'une plus grande variété de passages plus courts. Cette étude réexamine ces extraits et conteste les affirmations antérieures selon lesquelles ils auraient été compilés principalement pour des raisons apotropaïques ou pour refléter un intérêt pour les miracles des guérisons du Christ. Au lieu de cela, cela suggère que, comme les extraits d'Évangile trouvés dans les autres livres de prières insulaires, ces lectures pourraient avoir été choisies pour réfléchir sur un événement christologique, l'ascension.

The earliest extant private prayerbooks were copied in England between the late eighth and early ninth century. These collections are frequently known by the names the *Book of Cerne*, the *Book of Nunnaminster*, the *Royal Prayerbook*, and the *Harleian Prayerbook*.[1] All four

[1] The *Book of Cerne* is Cambridge, University Library MS Ll.I.10 (820x840), fols. 2–99; the *Book of Nunnaminster* is London, British Library MS Harley 2965 (saec. VIII/IX or IX[1]); the *Royal Prayerbook* is London, British Library MS Royal 2.A.xx (saec. VIII[2] or ix[1/4]); the fragmentary *Harleian Prayerbook* is London, British Library MS Harley 7653 (saec. VIII/IX or IX in.). Dates given above are taken from Helmut Gneuss and Michael Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts: A Bibliographical Handlist of Manuscripts and Manuscript Fragments Written or Owned in England up to 1100* (Toronto, 2014). The earlier of each proposed date corresponds with those given by Lowe in *Codices Latini Antiquiores: A Palaeographical Guide to Latin Manuscripts Prior to the Ninth Century*, ed. E.A. Lowe, vol. II (London, 1972), who dated the *Royal Prayerbook* as s. VIII[2]; the *Book of Nunnaminster* and the *Harleian Prayerbook* as saec. VIII/IX; and the *Book of Cerne* as saec. IX. The later portion of Gneuss and Lapidge's date range likely reflects Jennifer Tunberg

collections, three mostly complete and one fragmentary, appear to have been copied in Western England within the span of less than a hundred years. These manuscripts are commonly thought to also represent the earliest known examples of "themed prayerbooks," collections meant to encourage reflection on particular concepts. Unlike groups of prayers found in later tenth and eleventh century manuscripts, which frequently occur alongside the Psalter, these Insular books are also noteworthy for beginning with extracts from the gospels. Judging by the surviving corpus, the inclusion of extracts, normally taken from all four gospels and placed at the beginning of the collection, appears to have been part of the accepted structure for books of this type.[2] Substantial textual variation between the texts shared between these collections, as well as the survival of four of these collections from a period very poorly represented in the manuscript record indicates that this was an influential format, at least in the area of Western England, even if it does not survive as a model for later devotional collections.

Although most aspects of how these books were used in practice remain opaque, the gospel passages included at the beginning of each collection would have been the first item encountered when the book was opened. These passages may have been meant to stir reflection and direct the user in how to understand the prayers that follow, and it is not surprising that they have featured prominently in previous studies' discussions on the themes of each book. The most elaborate and persuasive arguments in favour of a plan for a themed

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Morrish's (and subsequently Michelle Brown's) dating of Royal and Nunnaminster to the ninth-century; Sims-Williams questioned, however, Tunberg Morrish's basis for placing Royal in the ninth century (p. 298, n. 103). For an introduction to these texts and discussion of their place within the literary milieux of Western England, see Michelle Brown, *The Book of Cerne: Prayer, Patronage and Power in Ninth-Century England* (London, 1996); Patrick Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature in Western England: 600–800* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 275–327.

[2] Only seven folia survive of the *Harleian Prayerbook,* but it seems likely that it may also have once been prefaced by gospel extracts.

collection have been made for the most famous of these collections, Cambridge, University Library MS Ll.I.10, now known as the *Book of Cerne*. This collection is also likely the latest in date of the prayerbooks, being probably copied in first decades of the ninth century. Jennifer Morrish Tunberg, the first to argue for themes in these books, saw this prayerbook as focused on the idea "that God the Father and the Son are the defence of sinners in this life and their salvation."[3] The more detailed examination in Michelle Brown's monograph on the collection expands beyond Morrish Tunberg's discussion and argues for a more specific theme of *communio sanctorum*, the community of all believers, living and dead. Brown draws on a variety of evidence to support this view, including the content and organization of the prayers, as well as the concepts evoked in the Old English "Exhortation to Prayer," which prefaces the collection.[4] Within this context, Brown argues that the gospel passages found in the prayerbook "embody the mystery of Christ's sacrifice, through which communion with the Trinity and Church, the mystical body of Christ, is achieved."[5] These passages constitute a series of long excerpts taken from the four gospels, each beginning with the scenes preceding the crucifixion and continuing through the death and resurrection of Jesus.[6] While the possible themes of the other prayerbooks have been less studied than the *Book of Cerne*, Jennifer Morrish Tunberg suggested that British Library MS Harley 2965, the *Book of Nunnaminster*, reflects specific interests, in particular in the passion of Christ, although she observed the collection to be "less rigorous […] in the organization of its contents around a single theme" than Cerne. [7] This hypothesis closely relates to this collection's gospel

[3] Jennifer Morrish, "An Examination of Literacy and Learning in England in the Ninth Century" (DPhil. diss., University of Oxford, 1982), p. 203.

[4] Brown, *The Book of Cerne*, pp. 148–51.

[5] Brown, *The Book of Cerne*, p. 149.

[6] These passages are Matthew 26–28, Mark 14–16, Luke 22–24, and John 18–21.

[7] Morrish, "An Examination of Literacy and Learning in England," p. 207. Michelle Brown emphasizes instead Nunnaminster's focus on the life and human ministry of Christ in her study: Brown, *The Book of Cerne*, p. 154.

readings, which are similar in form and content to those found in the *Book of Cerne* but focus more narrowly on Christ's death on the cross and stop before the resurrection scenes.[8]

In comparison with these other examples, the purposes underlying the selection of gospel extracts found in a third prayerbook, the *Royal Prayerbook* (British Library MS Royal 2.A.XX), have been less obvious. While adhering to the convention of including passages from all four gospels, this collection's extracts differ significantly from those found in the other two surviving prayerbooks. Unlike in Cerne and Nunnaminster, the gospel extracts in the *Royal Prayerbook* are not single, long passages taken from each gospel book, but instead consist of a patchwork of much shorter selections, none of which focus on crucifixion scenes. This study will re-examine earlier discussions related to Royal's extracts, suggesting that a previous focus on their apotropaic value has been misplaced. Instead, it will contend that these readings were likely organized around a Christological theme—the ascension. A revaluation of the *Royal Prayerbook*'s gospel readings helps shed new light on important commonalities between the three extant collections and offers possibilities for further illuminating early Insular devotional customs.

Royal's Gospel Extracts in Earlier Scholarship

The manuscript now known as the *Royal Prayerbook* is a small book, perhaps made to be easily portable, but is elegant in presentation with colored or decorated capitals.[9] Like the

Morrish Tunberg saw British Library MS Harley 7653, the *Harleian Prayerbook*, as too fragmentary to allow for detailed speculation on its theme.

[8] These extracts are: Mark 14:61–15:44, Luke 22:1–23:44, John 18:1–19:42. The passage from Matthew's gospel is missing in Nunnaminster but it seems very likely to have originally formed part of the original book and to have followed the same principle of selection.

[9] For a description of the manuscript and its contents, see *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts in Microfiche Facsimile*, v. 1, ed. A.N. Doane, Philip Pulsiano, and R.E. Buckalew (Binghamton, 1994), pp. 52–59. Further paleographical study of the manuscript is warranted, especially given Jennifer Morrish Tunberg's assertion that the number of hands has been misidentified ("An Examination of Literacy and Learning in England," pp. 207–13).

other Insular prayerbooks, it brings together a rich collection of materials in a variety of different styles. The prayers following the gospel extracts combine entries composed in Northumbria, Ireland, and Wales with varied texts belonging to the common intellectual heritage of the West.[10] Royal is , however, unusual among the extant collections for its inclusion near the beginning of the prayer section of the essential Christian texts, the Pater Noster and Creed, as well as a several biblical canticles and an apocryphal letter written by Christ.[11] It also uniquely contains a variety of different entries related to healing feminine menstrual disorders, leading to speculation that it may have been originally been intended for the use of a woman or female or double female monastic community.[12] Extensive marginal annotations were made to the collection in the tenth century, demonstrating its continued use throughout the pre-Conquest period.[13]

Royal's gospel lections begin with the illuminated term 'Liber', the first word of Matthew's gospel. This first verse of Matthew acts to open the gospel passages found on the initial eleven folia of Royal 2.A.xx. In order, the passages included are: Matthew 1:1, 18–19 Matthew 28:16–20; Mark 1:1–3; Mark 16:15–20; Luke 1:5–6 Luke 24:48–53; John 1:1–14; John 3:16–17; John 14:2–4, 6; John 15:12–16; John 16: 33–17:14; Matthew 4:23–24;

[10] The best introduction to the striking range of entries and styles found in the collection is Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, pp. 273–327; this discussion encompasses all four collections but pays particular attention to Royal's contents:.

[11] A later hand has glossed many of these pieces in Old English.

[12] For discussion of the possible connection of Royal, as well as the Harleian and Nunnaminster prayerbooks, with female patronage and book ownership, see Michelle Brown, "Female Book-Ownership and Production in Anglo-Saxon England: The Evidence of the Ninth-Century Prayerbooks," in C.J. Kay and L.M. Sylvester (eds), Lexis and Texts in Early English: Papers in Honour of Jane Roberts (Amsterdam, 2001), pp. 45–68, at 51–60; Emily Kesling, "The *Royal Prayerbook's* Blood-Staunching Charms and Early Insular Scribal Communities", *Early Medieval Europe* 29 (2021), 181–200, at pp. 192–98.

[13] For an edition of these later additions, see Joseph Crowley, "Latin Prayers Added into the Margins of the Prayerbook British Library, Royal 2.A.XX at the Beginnings of the Monastic Reform in Worcester," *Sacris Erudiri* 45 (2006), 223–303.

Matthew 8:1–17; Matthew 8:24–27; Matthew 9:1–2; Matthew 9:18–33; Matthew 9:36–10:1; Matthew 12:46–50; Matthew 16:13–19.[14] This large variety of short passages, and their clear divergence from the type of readings included in Cerne and Nunnaminster, has led to uncertainty and divergent theories regarding their meaning and purpose.

Warner and Gilson, who completed in 1921 the *Catalogue of Western Manuscripts in the Old Royal and King's Collection*, wrote only briefly about the selection of passages found in Royal 2.A.XX: 'of these [readings] the first nine or ten are perhaps only chosen to give the beginning and end of the Gospels. The principle upon which the rest are chosen is doubtful.'[15] In the most detailed study of Royal's extracts, Patrick Sims-Williams likewise saw these passages as falling in two parts. He also suggested that the principle of selection behind the first group of readings was to represent the beginning and end of each gospel text. Developing this idea further, Sims-Williams argues that in choosing to represent the incipits and explicits of each gospel (even if the explicit of John is not given in the manuscript), these passages may have been meant to symbolically stand in for the whole book, a practice he compared to Insular pocket gospel books, such as the Book of Deer (which he saw as possibly having an apotropaic or amuletic purpose).[16] This idea places the gospel readings of Royal alongside traditions of using gospel extracts, especially the beginning of John's gospel,

[14] The list given above indicates which gospel verses are included but not how they are divided within the manuscript.

[15] G.F. Warner and J.P. Gilson, *Catalogue of Western Manuscripts in the Old Royal and King's Collections*, 4 vols. (London, 1921), 1: 33.

[16] Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, pp. 291–92. See also Patrick Sims-Williams, Review of Kathleen Hughes' Celtic Britain in the Early Middle Ages: Studies in Scottish and Welsh Sources, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36 (1985), 306–9, p. at 308. This idea has been influential on recent studies. Imogen Volkofsky repeats Sims-Williams' suggestion that these passages may be meant to stand symbolically for the whole ("Life, Literature and Prayer in Early Anglo-Saxon England" (PhD Diss., Univ. of Sydney, 2017), p. 72); Stephanie Clark also quotes Sims-William's analysis of these passages but mistakenly asserts that "Royal contains the opening and closing lines of the four Gospels" (Compelling God: Theories of Prayer in Anglo-Saxon England (Toronto, 2019), p. 18).

as protective texts.[17] Beyond this, Sims-Williams saw the gospel extracts as participating in the "magical aspect" of the codex more generally, something he believed to be more pronounced in the first sixteen quires.[18] The general idea that Royal has a magical tendency distinct from Nunnaminster and Cerne has been a repeated theme in scholarship of the collection, with Michelle Brown suggesting that a "superstitious element" seen in the Royal and Harleian prayerbooks serves to set them apart as a chronologically earlier stage of development for devotional collections of this type.[19]

Alongside the idea that the first group of gospel extracts was designed to stand in for full gospel books, Sims-Williams also proposed that these readings may have had some relationship with the pre-ttismal ceremony known as *Apertio aurium* ("opening of the ears").[20] This ceremony, which is mentioned by Bede, was included in some medieval baptismal traditions as part of the preparation catechumens underwent during Lent.[21] The custom can be seen as part of a broader tradition of pre-baptismal ceremonies involving instruction in the central texts of the Christian faith. These customs arose during the period of adult baptism but continued to be practiced symbolically even after the widespread adoption

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[17] Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, p. 292. "The books themselves, as physical objects, may even have had a prophylactic function," he writes, referring specifically to Royal and the *Harleian Prayerbook* (p. 286).

[18] Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, p. 299. Sims-Williams saw all four prayerbooks as containing magical and superstitious material, although Royal "contains the greatest amount of magical material."

[19] Brown, *The Book of Cerne*, p. 154. For a discussion of the value of the term "magic" in relationship to this collection, see Clark, *Compelling God*, pp. 18–20; see also Kesling, "The *Royal Prayerbook's* Blood-Staunching Charms."

[20] Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, pp. 293–95; this ceremony and its relationship to the Insular prayerbook tradition more broadly is also discussed in Brown, *Book of Cerne*, pp. 109–15.

[21] Bede describes this ceremony in his *De Tabernaculo*: "his qui cathecizandi et christianis sunt sacramentis initiandi quattuor evangeliorum principia recitentur ac de figuris et ordine eorum in apertione aurium suarum sollerter erudiantur" – ""To those who are to be catechized and must be initiated into the Christian sacraments, the beginnings of the four gospels are to be recited and concerning the figures [representing the four evangelists] and their order they are to be educated diligently in [the ritual] the opening of their ears" (Bede*, De tabernaculo* ii, ed. David Hurst, CCSL 119A (Brepols, 1969), p. 89).

of infant baptism.[22] Instructions for the ceremony of *Apertio aurium* are found in a number of surviving liturgical manuscripts, among them the eighth-century Old Gelasian Sacramentary and Bobbio Missal.[23] There is extensive variation in the presentation of the ceremony in its different recorded versions but it often involves the symbolic handing over of the four gospel texts, the reading of their incipits, and an explanatory homily focused on the meaning of the symbols from Ezekiel's vision that are traditionally associated with the evangelists (man, lion, ox, eagle). These actions are then frequently followed with an introduction and explanation of the Creed and the Pater Noster.[24] For Sims-Williams, the presence of passages from the incipits of the gospels, as well as the fact that the Creed and the Pater Noster are the first two entries recorded in the selection of prayers found in Royal, suggested that these pieces might have been chosen for their connection with this ritual.[25] Michelle Brown has also argued for a connection between this ceremony and the four, full page illuminations of the evangelists found in the *Book of Cerne*, which she proposes might have been sometimes shown as a visual stimulus during such a ceremony.[26]

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[22] For more background, see Bryan Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism from the New Testament to the Council of Trent* (Aldershot, 2006), ch. 6; Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 627–33.

[23] The Bobbio Missal is Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. 13246 (saec. s. vii^{ex}/viii^{in}); the published edition is *The Bobbio Missal: A Gallican Mass-Book*, ed. E. A. Lowe, Henry Bradshaw Society 58 (London, 1920), pp. 54–59; the passages for this rite are found on fols. 84r–92v. "The Old Gelasian Sacramentary" is the name normally given to Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana MS Reg. lat. 316 (saec. s. viii^{med}); the passages for this rite are found on fols. 43v–44v. While the manuscript is dated to the eighth century, much of its contents reflect earlier, seventh-century liturgical traditions.

[24] The Pater Noster is not included in the ceremony as found in the Bobbio Missal. For a discussion of the manuscript traditions for *Apertio aurium* ritual and the Lenten scrutinies more broadly, see Arthur Westwell, *Roman Liturgy and Frankish Creativity: The Early Medieval Manuscripts of the Ordines Romani* (Cambridge, 2024), ch. 6.

[25] See the discussion in Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, pp. 293–95.

[26] Brown, *The Book of Cerne*, p. 110; compare Lucy Donkin's discussion of early twelfth-century mosaic images of the evangelists found on the floor of Novara Cathedral in Piedmont and their likely use at this date during the reading of the gospels incipits as part of this *Apertio aurium* ceremony: "Suo loco: The Traditio

In her study of the prayerbooks, Jennifer Morrish Tunberg instead saw Royal's extracts as "recounting the ministry of Christ and predominately his healing of the sick."[27] This interpretation appears to focus particularly on the later portion of the extracts, those taken from the gospel of Matthew. While a variety of scenes are described in these extracts, many of them relate healing miracles; they contain among other accounts the healing of a man suffering from leprosy, the healing of a paralytic man, the raising of Jairus' daughter and the healing of the woman with the flow of blood, the restoring of sight to the blind, and the casting out of demons from a mute man.[28] This view of the selection is in accordance with Morrish Tunberg's broader understanding of the prayerbook as having a medical interest, which she saw as centered on the idea of *Christus medicus*, Christ as the healer of mankind. Morrish Tunberg goes so far as to suggest that the collection may have been "a physician's book."[29] Like Sims-William's study, Morrish Tunberg's view has been influential, and, while no consistent single theme for Royal has been agreed upon in the scholarship, these extracts

evangeliorum and the Four Evangelist Symbols in the Presbytery Pavement of Novara Cathedral," *Speculum* 88 (2013), 92–143, pp. 121–27.

[27] Morrish, "An Examination of Literacy and Learning in England," p. 204.

[28] A fuller discussion of these passages is found in Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, pp. 290–94 (quotation at 291). He sees these passages as "clearly correlat[ing] with the prayers and charms that follow: the "comfortable words" promising salvation to all believers are a counterpart to the prayers expressing penitence and aspiration to eternal life; the miracle stories […] anticipate the charms and benedictions of the sick; and the texts about the powers of the saints give force to the litanies and prayers which seek their intercession."

[29] Morrish Tunberg remarks: "The attention which the texts of Royal 2 A XX pay to details of a medical kind, be it the deeds of Christ the Healer, the metaphor of God as "medicus," or the remedies for physical ills, suggests that medical matters interested the compiler of the manuscript and provided him with his chief criterion of including texts. It is not too fanciful to suppose that Royal 2 A XX was itself a physician's book" ("An Examination of Literacy and Learning in England," p. 207).

have since been frequently seen, alongside having a "magical" or superstitious aspect, as forming part of a broader emphasis found throughout the prayerbook on health and healing.[30]

Royal's Readings: Christ's Promises and Spiritual Gifts

I suggest that while some of these interpretations may help to illuminate certain aspects of these texts, new explanations are needed to satisfactorily explain the selection of readings found in Royal 2.A.XX. Among the ideas mentioned above, the suggestion that the earlier portion of Royal's readings were chosen to represent the whole gospel text, through the inclusion of their opening and closing passages, seems the most unlikely. It should be noted that the gospel passages found in Royal do not perfectly relate the beginning sections of the gospel texts, the dedicatory preface to Luke's gospel has been skipped, for instance, and the entire genealogy of Christ has been omitted from the section from Matthew. The passages given also vary significantly in length, with only two verses recorded from Luke and fourteen verses from John's gospel. These are features that might not be expected if these passages were chosen primarily for their value in a symbolic schema. Finally, and most significantly, the fourth gospel departs from the apparent pattern of including readings from both beginning and concluding chapters, as it offers instead a selective group of readings from John Chapters 3 through 17, without ever including the final words of the gospel book occurring in Chapter 21. If these readings were indeed meant to symbolically evoke the beginning and end of each gospel, we are left to assume that this was a mistake and that the compiler simply became confused or forgot the proposed scheme by the time they reached the fourth gospel. This

[30] Michelle Brown repeats Morrish Tunberg's conclusions and seems to accept her ideas, although she also remarks on the collection's inclusion of liturgical material and "scholarly concern with erudition" (Brown, *The Book of Cerne*, p. 152); for this second point, see also a discussion of the use of Greek in the manuscript: Emily Kesling, "A Blood–Staunching Charm of Royal 2.A.XX and its Greek Text," *Peritia* 32 (2021), 149–62.

omission, alongside the other considerations mentioned, suggests that the desire to represent the beginnings and ends of the gospels is not a likely explanation for the readings given.

Instead of a compiler content with a muddled execution, I suggest that that this group of readings were never chosen primarily for their position in the gospels but instead for thematic reasons. Leaving aside for the moment the extracts taken from the first chapters of each gospel, which will be discussed later, let us consider the three "concluding passages" included in prayerbook (Matthew 28:16–20; Mark 16:15–20; Luke 24:48–53). While occurring at the end of their respective books, these three passages from the synoptic gospels each depict similar scenes in which the resurrected Christ gives instructions to his disciples. Two of these passages, those from Mark and Luke, describe Christ's ascension and were used as Ascension Day pericopes.[31] The passage from Matthew's gospel does not mention the ascension directly, but like the other passages contains a scene in which Christ, risen from the grave, exhorts and makes promises to his followers. This passage includes the promise "Ego vobiscum sum omnibus diebus, usque ad consummationem saeculi" – "I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world."[32] Similarly, the parallel excerpts from the ends of Mark and Luke's gospels speak of the powers that Jesus promises to confer upon his disciples following his ascension. In the passage from Mark's gospel, which is taken from the book's so-called "long ending," now generally not thought to be original to the text, Jesus

[31] Ursula Lenker records Luke 24:44–53 as the pericope used in seventh and eighth-century Northumbrian tradition and Mark 16:14–20 as that recorded in the Roman *Capitulare evangeliorum* which became widely disseminated in tenth- and eleventh-century England: Ursula Lenker, *Die Westsächsische Evangelienversion und die Perikopenordnungen im Angelsächsischen England* (Munich, 1997), p. 322. The Northumbrian manuscripts that mark this pericope include the Lindisfarne Gospels and the closely related London, British Library, MS Royal 1. B. vii, the Codex Amiatinus, as well as the Northumbrian notes found the Burchard Gospels (a sixth-century Italian gospel book). This is also the passage used in Bede's gospel homily for Ascension Day.

[32] Text and punctuation reflect *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam* (Stuttgart, 2007); translations are from the Douay-Rheims. When Royal 2.A.XX contains a variant reading, these will be noted individually.

promises “Signa autem eos qui crediderint haec sequentur: in nomine meo daemonia eicient; linguis loquentur novis; serpentes tollent, et si mortiferum quid biberint, non eos nocebit; super aegrotos manus inponent, et bene habebunt” – “And these signs shall follow them that believe: in my name they shall cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they shall drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay their hands upon the sick, and they shall recover.” Likewise, in Luke 24:49, Jesus says “Et ego mitto promissum Patris mei in vos, vos autem sedete in civitate quoadusque induamini virtute ex alto” – “And I send the promise of my Father upon you, but stay you in the city till you be endued with power from on high.” The passages copied into Royal’s pages represent the concluding words from these three gospel texts—however, more importantly, they consider similar themes related to Christ’s promises to his followers.[33]

While only two of these passages were used for Ascension Day pericopes, all three passages are known to have been seen as closely related to Christ’s ascension. The passage from Matthew’s gospel, for example, is the main source for speech given by Christ to his apostles prior to his Ascension in “Christ II,” also known as “Ascension,” a poem by the English poet Cynewulf. Cynewulf’s dates are unknown but he was likely writing in broadly the same period that the prayerbooks were copied.[34] This poem focuses on Christ’s entry into heaven; near the beginning of the poem, Christ encourages his disciples, saying:

[33] These same passages also form a portion of the larger excerpts given in the *Book of Cerne*, where they have never drawn attention for their status as explicits.

[34] For discussion of the works attributed to Cynewulf and his probable dates, see R.D. Fulk, “Cynewulf: Canon, Dialect, and Date,” in *The Cynewulf Reader*, ed. Robert Bjork (London, 2001), pp. 3–21. Fulk’s assessment of the date and localisation of the poem is based on an analysis of the dialectal features of the verse, the spelling of Cynewulf’s name in the colophons, and metrical considerations. Concerning the spelling “Cynewulf,” Fulk writes: “if Cynewulf was a Mercian (or, indeed, a Southerner, unlikely as that seems) he cannot have written earlier than ca. 750, and if he was a Northumbrian no earlier than ca. 850” (p. 16). Fulk also suggests “a certain amount of probability thus attaches to associating Cynewulf with Mercia on the basis of internal dialect evidence” (p. 14).

Gefeoð ge on ferðde! Næfre ic from hweorfe,

ac ic lufan symle læste wið eowic,

ond eow meaht giefe ond mid wunige,

awo to ealdre, þæt eow æfre ne bið

þurh gife mine godes onsien.

Farað nu geond ealne yrmenne grund,

geond wig-wegas, weoredum cyðað

bodiað ond bremað beorhtne geleafan,

ond fulwiað folc under roderum,

hweorfað to heofonum. Hergas breotaþ,

fyllað on feogað, feondscype dwæscað,

sibbe sawað on sefan manna

þurh meahta sped. Ic eow mid wunige

forð on frofre ond eow friðe healde

strengðu staþolfæstre on stowa gehware.[35]

Be glad in heart. I will never turn away

but will always keep loving you/ and give you power and dwell with you,

always and forever, so that through my grace

[35] Text and trans., *The Old English Poems of Cynewulf*, ed. Robert Bjork (London, 2013), "Christ II: The Ascension," ll. 476–90. Andy Orchard sees this part of Cynewulf's poem as inspired by a passage in Sedulius' *Carmen Paschale*, which depicts this same scene and also features the use of imperatives and contains repeated references to peace (see his discussion in "Alcuin and Cynewulf: The Art and Craft of Anglo-Saxon Verse," *Journal of the British Academy* 8 (2020), 295–399, at pp. 325–31). While Sedulius' work was popular in early Medieval England, especially towards the end of the period, and may have been known to Cynewulf, I am not myself convinced that this passage from "Christ II" need draw directly on this source, as similarities may have arisen independently from the biblical texts (an imperative is used in the passage from Matthew's gospel and Christ promises his followers 'peace' in the dialogue proceeding Luke's account of this scene, 24:36).

you will never be lacking in good.
Go now throughout all the whole earth,
through the distant regions, make known to the
multitudes, preach and proclaim the bright faith,
and baptize people under the firmament,
turn them to the heavens. Smash their idols,
lay them low and hate them, extinguish deviltry,
sow peace in the people's hearts
through the abundance of your powers. I will dwell with
you as a comfort from now on and hold you in peace
with a steadfast strength everywhere.

Some features in this scene are taken from the other gospel accounts, notably earlier in the poem Bethany is given as the location of this speech, a detail only mentioned in Luke's gospel. However, Matthew's gospel is the only source that gives the instruction to baptize or mentions specifically the idea of teaching all nations. Additionally, only Matthew's text includes the promise that he will be with the disciples "ad consummationem saeculi" ("until the consummation of the world"), which here becomes the most emphasized element of this scene.[36] Cynewulf appears to have considered this passage from Matthew's gospel as intimately related to the Luke and Mark's depictions of the ascension. It is probable that the compiler of the Royal manuscript saw this passage in a similar light.

[36] Shannon Godlove remarks on the way this promise from Matthew has been amplified in the poem: Godlove, "The Elevation of the Apostles in Cynewulf's *Christ II: Ascension*," *Philological Quarterly* 91 (2012), 513–53, at p. 515.

Throughout Cynewulf's poem, the ascension is continually linked with the giving of spiritual gifts. This can be seen in the passage quoted above, where Christ promises to "give power" (*meaht giefe*) to the disciples, but it is also an idea developed at greater length later in the poem.[37] Ten different gifts are promised to the disciples, including for example writing, navigation, and smithing. In her analysis of the poem, Shannon Godlove has emphasized the role the ascension plays in this poem in the "planting of wisdom in men's hearts" and allowing them to interpret spiritual truths. She points out that six out of the ten gifts discussed relate to knowledge and understanding, with the gift of wise speech or poetry (*word-laþu*) being described first and at greatest length.[38] While being perhaps distinguished by the degree of emphasis given to this theme in the poem, the association of the ascension, as well the feast of Pentecost, which follows it in the liturgical calendar, with gifts of the holy spirit was well-established idea in early medieval England.[39] I would suggest that Christ's promises to his followers on the eve of the ascension, and in particular the promising of spiritual gifts, are the most important feature that unites these three synoptic passages.

As noted above, instead of including a "concluding passage" from John's gospel, the *Royal Prayerbook* contains a variety of short passages taken from elsewhere in the book. This

[37] More than thirty lines are dedicated to describing these gifts (ll. 659–91).

[38] Godlove, "The Elevation of the Apostles", pp. 522–23.

[39] See Godlove's discussion of this theme in reference to Christ II: "The Elevation of the Apostles," pp. 520–22; see also, Brain Éanna Ó Broin, "*Christus Ascendens*: The Christological Cult of the Ascension in Anglo-Saxon England" (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2002), esp. pp. 52–56. Ó Broin considers, alongside later evidence, the emergence of these ideas in the early church and their appearance in eighth-century sources such Bede's homily for Ascension Day. This same theme is also frequently found in Old English Ascension Day homilies; although these are later in date these texts draw on earlier traditions (see Jerome Oetgen, "Common Motifs in the Old English Ascension Homilies," *Neophilologus* 69 (1985), 437–45). Gregory the Great's sermon for Ascension Day, discussed below, focuses on the spiritual gifts list promised in the concluding passage of Mark's gospel. The inter-relationship of the feasts of Lent and the Easter season can also be seen in the fact that the expansion of the Lenten scrutinies from three to seven is sometimes justified by the allusion to the seven gifts of the holy spirit (for discussion, see Westwell, *Roman Liturgy and Frankish Creativity*, pp. 151–54, 166).

selection begins with the key verses John 3:16–17, “Sic enim dilexit Deus mundum ut Filium suum unigenitum daret, ut omnis qui credit in eum non pereat sed habeat vitam aeternam. Non enim misit Deus Filium suum in mundum ut iudicet mundum sed ut salvetur mundus per ipsum” – “For God so loved the world as to give his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him may not perish but may have life everlasting. For God sent not his Son into the world to judge the world but that the world may be saved by him.” This passage is followed by a selection of passages taken from Chapters 14 through 17, all of which come from Jesus’ words to his disciples the night before his crucifixion. While the verse from John 3 deals only indirectly with divine promises related to mankind, the other passages chosen all reference promises made by Christ or relate scenes in which he intercedes for his followers. Among those copied into the prayerbook is John 15:15–16:

> Iam non dico vos servos, quia servus nescit quid facit dominus eius. Vos autem dixi amicos, quia omnia quaecumque audivi a Patre meo nota feci vobis. Non vos me elegistis, sed ego elegi vos et posui vos, ut eatis et fructum adferatis et fructus vester maneat, ut quodcumque petieritis Patrem in nomine meo, det vobis.
>
> I will not now call you servants: for the servant knoweth not what his lord doth. But I have called you friends, because all things, whatsoever I have heard of my Father, I have made known to you. You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you and have appointed you, that you should go and should bring forth fruit and your fruit should remain, that whatsoever you shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you.[40]

[40]Royal’s text contains subjunctive forms “dicam” and “faciam” in verse 15. For Brown’s discussion of the ceremony and its possible relationship to Cerne’s illuminations and text, see *The Book of Cerne*, pp. 109–15. Brown also quotes substantially from version of the ritual represented in the Sacramentary of Gellone.

Other passages included in this section are the promise that many mansions will be prepared in the Father's house for those that believe and a prayer that Jesus makes to the father in which he asks: "Ego pro eis rogo; non pro mundo rogo sed pro his quos dedisti mihi, qui tuia sunt" – "I pray for them; I pray not for the world but for them whom thou hast given me, because they are thine" and "Pater sancte, serva eos in nomine tuo quos dedisti mihi, ut sint unum sicut et nos" – "Holy Father, keep them in thy name whom thou hast given me, that they may be one as we also are." Like the passages from Mathew, Mark, and Luke's gospels, these texts show a united theme of Jesus' promises to his followers, fellowship between believers, and the empowerment of Christians following Christ's ascension. The relevance of these passages to Ascension Day themes is seen in the fact that two of these extracts sometimes served as readings for the Ascension Day vigil and the Sunday after Ascension in early medieval England.[41] Overall, it seems likely that these passages as well were chosen for their shared themes, and their relationship with Ascension Day promises, rather than their position in the gospel text.

A similar thematic rationale may also help illuminate the readings taken from Mathew's gospel that complete the gospel passages collected in the *Royal Prayerbook*. As noted above, these begin with an assortment of (mostly healing) miracles performed by Christ, an idea that

[41] Importantly, John 17:1–11 was the reading commonly used for the Ascension Day vigil. Readings beginning at John 14:1 and John 16:23 were also used in Northumbria for the Sunday after Ascension, it is uncertain as to which verse these readings terminated, but they may well have both encompassed the passages used in Royal (these readings are indicated in the Northumbrian additions to the Burchard Gospels, a sixth-century gospel book from Italy, as well as in the "quasi-capitularies" found in the Lindisfarne Gospels and the closely related gospel book, London, British Library, Royal 1. B. vii): Lenker, *Die Westsächsische Evangelienversion*, p. 323. See also Broin's discussion of the use of Johnine material in Northumbrian Ascension Day material: Ó Broin, "*Christus Ascendens*," pp. 69–75. For a discussion of the close association of the ascension with Christian community through the shared participation of all believers in Christ's elevation, see Johanna Kramer, *Between Earth and Heaven: Liminality and the Ascension of Christ in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Manchester, 2014), especially pp. 1–13.

has bolstered the theory that Jesus' healing ministry is the main theme of the prayerbook. However, it is frequently overlooked that the final three passages given all depict Jesus instructing his followers.[42] These include Mathew 9:36–10:1, in which the twelve disciples are named and sent out, having been given "potestatem spirituum inmundorum, ut eicerent eos et curarent omnem languorem et omnem infirmitatem" –"power over unclean spirits, to cast them out and to heal all manner of diseases and all manner of sicknesses;" Jesus' declaration that the disciples and "quicumque enim fecerit voluntatem Patris mei, qui in caelis est, ipse meus frater et soror et mater est" – "for whosoever shall do the will of my Father, that is in heaven, he is my brother and sister and mother;" and his giving of the keys of heaven, conferring the power of binding and loosing, to his disciple Peter (a passage traditionally linked to the establishment of the Church on earth). Cumulatively, I would suggest, the passages included from Mathew's gospel reflect on the power of Christ during his earthly ministry, but also on the subsequent inheritance of these gifts by his followers and, perhaps indicated especially through the final passage on Peter, the community of Christ present in the Church. These passages serve to reinforce and solidify the themes present in the commissioning passages from each gospel occurring earlier in the selection.

The Gospel Incipits, Apertio aurium*, and Christ's Incarnation*

Having reconsidered the majority of the gospel readings found in the *Royal Prayerbook*, it is useful to think again about the relationship of these passages, and particularly the gospel

[42] It should be noted that while seeing Christ's life and miracles as the main theme of Royal's readings, Imogen Volkofsky also notes the importance of the power of the apostles and their status as the brothers and sisters of Christ. She sees this focus as working "to legitimize the practice of prayer" and "to emphasize the efficacy of Royal's various prayers to the apostles": Volkofsky, "Life, Literature and Prayer in Early Anglo-Saxon England", pp. 72–73.

"incipits," with pre-baptismal ceremonies current in early medieval England. If, as I suggest, there was no intention to represent the explicits of the gospels in the *Royal Prayerbook*, should we still assume that the extracts from the first chapters of the gospels were chosen deliberately, perhaps for their association with the ritual known as *Apertio aurium*? This question is difficult to answer. As a group, the readings given from the initial chapters of the gospels in Royal do not overlap perfectly with those used in any known version of the *Apertio aurium* ceremony, nevertheless the manuscript tradition demonstrates considerable variation within the extant liturgical tradition.[43] The verses given in Royal from John's gospel (1:1–14) are the same as those reading used in this ceremony in the Gellone and the Old Gelasian Sacramentaries, for instance, but it should perhaps be noted that these lines are presented as two readings in the Royal manuscript, with a rubricated initial beginning verse six.[44] The passage beginning at verse six bears the heading *In Nat(ivitate) s(an)c(t)i Iohannis baptista* ("For the birth of saint John the Baptist"), indicating that the second portion was originally meant as a lection for this feast.[45] While it is difficult to know the intention of Royal's compiler, this division suggests either that these pieces were not intended to be read as a single passage or that they have been brought together from two separate sources. This observation weakens the hypothesis that they could have been copied together directly from readings in a liturgical manuscript, such as a sacaramentary, provided explicilty for *Apertio aurium* ceremony.

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[43] See Westwell, *Roman Liturgy and Frankish Creativity*, ch. 6. See also Sims-William's discussion in *Religion and Literature*, p. 294.

[44] The Gellone Sacramentary is Paris, Bibliotheque Nationale, Latin 12048; the passages for this rite are found on ff. 178v–180v; in the "Gelasian Sacramentary" the passages for this rite are found on ff. 43v–44v.

[45] Royal 2.A.XX, f. 4r. Rubrications on other gospel extracts also mark *De mar(tyribus*) ("For the martyrs"); and *In nat(ivitate) S(an)c(t)i petri sec(undum) Mat(t)h(aeum)* (For the birth of saint Peter according to Matthew). For the possibility that some lections may have been multifunctional and could have been used in liturgical celebrations, see the concluding section of this article.

Nevertheless, the fact that Royal brings together passages from the introductory chapters of each gospel text is likely not a coincidence. That all known prayerbooks of this type appear to purposefully bring together passages from all four gospels, alongside Cerne's prominent inclusion of full-page evangelist illuminations, in my opinion likely does indicate a broader interest in the *traditio evangeliorum* in the milieu in which these texts were compiled. If not taken explicitly from readings for the *Apertio aurium* ceremony, these passages in Royal may well have been chosen at least partially to evoke this ritual and by extension to remind readers of their own baptism. Alongside this idea, however, I would offer a parallel interpretation, one that could be simultaneously understood in these probably polysemous passages. As the three paired readings from Matthew, Mark, and Luke all relate to the ascension of Christ, and those from John's gospel to Ascension Day themes and the gifts given by Christ, could these passages be also meant to focus on another theologically important moment, the incarnation?

The pairing of Christ's ascent to heaven with his descent from heaven during the incarnation is a common motif in patristic literature and was well known in texts popular in early medieval England.[46] The motif has its basis in biblical passages including John 3:13: "Et nemo ascendit in caelum nisi qui descendit de caelo, Filius hominis, qui est in caelo" – "And no man hath ascended into heaven but he that descended from heaven" and Ephesians 4:10: "Qui descendit ipse est et qui ascendit super omnes caelos ut impleret omnia" – "He that descended is the same also that ascended above all the heavens that he might fill all things." Augustine builds on this comparison in his sermons, for example, writing: "Descendit sine corporis indumento, ascendit cum corporis indumento. Nemo tamen, nisi qui descendit, ascendit" – "He descended without the garment of a body, he ascended with the

[46] For background on this theme, see George Hardin Brown, "The Descent-Ascent Motif in *Christ II* of Cynewulf," in *The Cynewulf Reader*, ed. Robert Bjork (London 2001), 133–46.

garment of a body; and yet nobody ascended except the one who descended."[47] In a very popular homily that served as the primary source for Cynewulf's "Christ II," Gregory the Great, drawing on an earlier tradition, extends this structure to include five "leaps" taken by Christ. He famously describes these leaps as being: "De caelo venit in uterum, de utero venit in praesepe, de praesepe venit in crucem, de cruce venit in sepulcrum, de sepulcro rediit in caelum" – "From heaven to the womb, from the womb to the manger, from the manger to the cross, from the cross to the sepulcher; and from the sepulcher he returned into heaven."[48] Even with this expanded setup, Gregory still asserts the particularly important parallelism between ascension with the incarnation, however, as he remarks in this same homily: "Quia nascente Domino videbatur divinitas humiliata; ascendente vero domino, est humanitas exaltata" – "when the Lord was born his divinity seemed to have been humbled, whereas when he ascended his humanity was exalted." Perhaps by pairing the first chapter readings, which all deal either with Christ's birth or the prophesies surrounding it, with Ascension-Day scenes (or in the case of John other Ascension-related content) the compiler of Royal intended to spur reflection on this theologically significant theme.

The Royal Prayerbook *as a Themed Collection*

In this piece I have suggested that one of the primary focuses undergirding the selection of

[47] Augustine, Sermones Ad Populum. Classis II. De Tempore in PL 38, Sermo CCLXIII (trans. *The Works of Saint Augustine: On the Liturgical Seasons*, ed. Rotelle, trans. Hill, Sermon 263A (New York: 1993), p. 224).
[48] PL 76, 1213–19; translation *Forty Gospel Homilies,* trans. Hurst (Kalamazoo, 1990), Homily 29. The idea of "leaps" here is taken from a verse in the Song of Songs: "ecce: iste venit saliens in montibus, transiliens colles" – "behold: he cometh leaping upon the mountains, skipping over the hills" (Cant 2:8). Cynewulf expands these five leaps into six. For more background on the idea of "leaps" of Christ and their association with Ascension Day, see Ó Broin, "*Christus Ascendens*," pp. 48–52; see also Albert Cook, *The Christ of Cynewulf: A Poem in Three Parts* (Boston, 1900), note on line 720.

gospel extracts found in the *Royal Prayerbook* was the ascension of Christ. Unlike the passion, which seems to be the focus of Nunnaminster's entries, or the resurrection, which may be the focus of Cerne's, the ascension is an event that is described very sparingly in the gospels. With depictions of the ascension only found in Mark and Luke, the compiler may have decided to supplement these scenes with other material: passages used as liturgical lections on related days (such as on the Ascension Day vigil, and the Sunday following Ascension) and passages generally related to the same theological themes celebrated on Ascension Day, notably the communion with Christ promised to all believers and the giving of spiritual gifts. I would further propose that it is within this framework of spiritual gifts, gifts such as the healing of the sick and the casting out of demons, that we should understand the miracles stories also recorded among these gospel passages. Here we see Christ practicing the miracles which he promises the saints will also later accomplish.

` Of the three mostly complete prayerbooks, only the *Book of Cerne* appears to have arranged its prayers according to a detailed set schema. In this sense, the *Book of Cerne* may be a "themed prayerbook" in a way that the other surviving collections are not. However, the gospel extracts found in Royal do have a coherent theme that resonates with at least some of the other content included in the collection. I would suggest that the emphasis earlier scholars have observed on the themes of miracle and healing in Royal's other entries should first and foremost be understood within the collection's overarching Christological focus. An example is the *Letter to Abgar*, whose importance to the compiler and users is visible in its prominent position near the beginning of Royal's prayers and the fact that it was later partially glossed in Old English. This text claims to be a letter written by Christ to Abgar, the king of Edessa. Royal's version of this text, which is the earliest known from the British isles, is accompanied by a incipit that underlines the role of Christ in this text, emphasising that Christ wrote this letter with his own hand and that it is in his voice ("dominus manu scripsit

et dixi"); it also mentions the ascension directly, as Jesus promises, "when he has been taken up" (*cum ergo fuero adsumtus*), to send a disciple to heal the king. The phrasing of the letter has been altered in a few instances from its source text, Rufinus's translation of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History,* to bring it closer to Christ's words in gospels. These changes include the addition of an echo of Christ's post-resurrection words in Mark 16:16 (a text included in Royal's readings and used as an Ascension day pericope) that "qui credit in me saluus erit" – "who believes in me, will be saved."[49] Like the gospel extracts, letter would have likely served to remind readers of Christ's promises of salvation his followers, as well as his and his disciples' manifold powers on earth.

I also suggest that it also within the context of spiritual gifts that we might best understand the prominent presence of multiple entries aimed at staunching a flow of blood that occur within the manuscript. Of the four individual entries of this type found in the main text of the manuscript, three of these evoke the gospel account of the healing of the woman with the flow of blood, whose story is also included in the gospel readings given the from the book of Matthew.[50] These three texts are clearly interrelated and share a quotation from Sedulius' Latin hymn *A solis ortus cardine*; this excerpt tells the story of this miracle, linking the tears of the penitent woman with her flowing blood. Sedulius' hymn occurs in full in Royal following immediately after the final blood-staunching charm found on folio 49v. Another of these texts makes use of quotation from Psalm 50 to ask God for healing, reading: "libera me de sanguinibus deus deus salutis meae" ("deliver me from blood, O God, God of my salvation"). Here we should probably understand *salus* as having a dual meaning both as health and salvation. The emphasis on the miraculous powers of Christ and his followers in

[49] Royal 2.A.XX, f. 12r. For a history of this text and a discussion of the variants found in Royal, see Kesling, "Christ's Letter to Abgar in England and Ireland.".

[50] For the full text of these entries and discussion of their place in an early Insular literary milieu, see Kesling, "The *Royal Prayerbook's* Blood–Staunching Charms."

these entries has been sometimes understood as a magical focus. However, it is important to remember that these same gifts could be, and were, frequently understood in a spiritual fashion.[51] Although physical healing through the saints, was certainly possible and not heterodox, a more general spiritual application of many of the promises emphasized in these passages would probably have been very familiar to the users of this collection.

A closer connection specifically with the rituals of Ascensiontide may be found in Royal's inclusion of a litany on folio 26. Litanies of the saints are not found in the other extant prayerbooks, but the use of this type of prayer was associated with the three Rogation days celebrated prior to the feast of the Ascension.[52] A description of the rituals associated with these days is the 747 Council of Clovsho under the heading *De Diebus Lætaniorum* ("Concerning the Days of the Litanies"), which mentions the necessity of performing processions, masses, and fasting during this time.[53] More detailed descriptions of the

[51] Referring to the miracles mentioned in the long ending of Mark's gospel, Gregory the Great asks in his homily on the ascension (citation above): "Nam sacerdotes ejus cum exorcismi gratiam manum credentibus imponunt, et habitare malignos spiritus in eorum mente contradicunt, quid aliud faciunt, nisi daemonia ejiciunt? […] Qui quoties proximos suos in bono opere infirmary conspiciunt, dum eis tota virtute concurrunt, et exemplo suae operationis illorum vitam roborant qui in propria actione titubant; quid aliud faciunt, nisi super aegros manus imponunt, ut bene habeant?" – "When [the Church's] priests impose their hands on believers through the gifts of exorcism, and forbid the evil spirits to dwell in their hearts, what else are they doing but casting out demons? […] As often as they catch sight of their neighbours faltering in their good works, and they gather round them in all their strength, and by the example of their own deeds fortifying their wavering lives, what are they doing but laying their hands on the sick to heal them?" Gregory's writings were extremely influential in in Anglo-Saxon England. This same homily was later used as the basis for homily by Ælfric, also prepared for Ascension Day, in which he relates that "Ac ðeah-hwæðere Godes gelaðung wyrcð gyt dæghwamlice þa ylcan wundra gastlice þe ða apostoli ða worhton lichamlice" – "But God's Church still daily performs spiritually the same miracles which the apostles performed physically" (*Homilies of Anglo-Saxon Church*, ed. B. Thorpe (London, 1844–46) I, pp. 304–6).

[52] For background on the use of litanies in early medieval England, as well as Royal's text, see *Anglo-Saxon Litanies of the Saints*, ed. Michael Lapidge (London, 1991), pp. 11–13, 212–13.

[53] Arthur West Haddan and William Stubbs, *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, 3 volumes (Oxford, 1869-71), vol. 3, p. 368; see also Kramer, *Between Earth and Heaven*, pp. 152–54. For a discussion of rituals surrounding Holy Week (and Passion Week) which proceeds it in a slightly

celebrations associated with this period are found in the slightly later corpus of Old English Rogationtide homilies, which employ the Old English terms for this period: *gangdagas* ('walking days') and *gebeddagas* ('prayer days').[54]As described in these later sources, the processions undertaken on these days were community events and normally involved walking to various churches with items such as a cross, relics, and gospel books carried in front.[55] It is possible that Royal, or similar books including gospel readings, may have been carried in Rogationtide processions and that its litany may also have been used in that context.

Taken together, the conclusions of this study have suggested that the gospel readings found in the *Royal Prayerbook* do not differ as significantly in theme and purpose from those found in the other extant prayerbooks as has generally been supposed. The extant

later period, see M. Bradford Bedingford, *The Dramatic Liturgy of Anglo-Saxon England*, pp.114–70. The three days prior to Ascension Day were kept as Rogation Days; these day were also a period of reflection that included outdoor processions. The celebration of rogation days preceding Ascension was originally a Gallican tradition; these days were eventually distinguished from the celebration of similar rituals on 25 April (a later Roman tradition) as the Minor and Major Litanies, but Joyce Hill has demonstrated that both names were used in early medieval England to apply to the rogation days preceding Ascension, see Joyce Hill, "The *Litaniae maiores* and *minores* in Rome, Francia and Anglo-Saxon England: Terminology, Texts and Traditions," *Early Medieval Europe* 9 (2000), 211–46: see also Helen Appleton, "Folk Horror: Hell and the Land in Old English Homilies for Rogationtide," in *The Literature of Hell*, ed. Margaret Kean (Cambridge, 2021), pp.13–36.

[54] See Bedingfield's discussion in *The Dramatic Liturgy of Anglo-Saxon England,* pp. 191–209 and Kramer, *Between Earth and Heaven*, p. 168.

[55] See, for instance, the description of this period in Vercelli Homily XII: "þa halgan gangdagas þry, to ðam þæt we sceoldon on Gode ælmihtigum þiowigan mid usse gedefelice gange 7 mid sange 7 mid ciricena socnum 7 mid fæstenum 7 mid ælmessylenum 7 mid halegum gebedum. 7 we sculon beran usse reliquias ymb ure land, þa medeman Cristes rodetacen þe we Cristes mæl nemnað, on þam he sylfa þrowode for mancynnes alysnesse. Swelce we sculon beran ða bec þe man hateð godspel, on þam syndon awritene þa halgan 7 þa godcundan gecryno" – "the three rogation days, for which we should serve God Almighty with our proper processions, and with song, and with church visits, and with fasts, and with alms, and with holy prayers, and we should carry our relics around our land, the esteemed sign of Christ's cross, which we call Christ's sign, on which he himself suffered for mankind's redemption. Likewise, we should carry the books which one calls the gospels, in which are written are written the holy and godly mysteries" *The Vercelli Homilies and Related Texts*, ed. Donald G. Scragg, EETS os 300 (Oxford, 1992), XII, p. 228; see also Helen Gittos, *Liturgy, Architecture, and Sacred Places in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 138–40.

manuscripts in the Insular prayerbook tradition all begin with gospel readings apparently chosen to reflect on theologically significant moments in the life of Christ, and in particular on elements of the paschal mystery. It may well be that Christological contemplation was an integral part of the tradition of early Insular prayer collections, with these works possibly even serving a special purpose as paschal books. Both the period before Easter (Lent) and the period before Ascension (Rogationtide), were periods of spiritual reflection and healing. The use of a personal devotional book would have been particularly appropriate for these occasions.[56] A connection between these books and Eastertide may also help explain the link that previous scholars have seen between these books and baptismal ceremonies. The readings found in Royal and the illuminations in Cerne may have been intended as primarily devotional, encouraging meditation on the gospels and as a reminder to the user of their own baptism during the easter season. However, it is possible that these books may have intended to have been multi-functional. While their small size and the arrangement of their readings suggests use a private use, Royal's gospel incipits may possibly have been used to assist in the performance of the Lenten baptismal scrutinies in locations where other resources were scarce, with a similar dual use existing for the collection's litany.[57] While major questions

[56] Describing the period before Ascension, the author of the *Old English Martyrology* writes: "Ðas ðry dagas syndon mannes sawle læcedom ond gastlic wyrtdrenc; forðon hi sendon to healdanne mid heortan onbryrdnesse, þæt is mid wependum gebedum ond mid rumedlicum ælmessum ond fulre blisse ealra mænniscra feonda, forþon ðe God us forgyfeð his erre, gif we ure monnum forgeofað" – "These three days are the medicine of man's soul and a spiritual potion; they are therefore to be kept with compunction of the heart, that is, with weeping prayers and with generous alms and the complete benevolence of all human enemies, because God will spare us his anger, if we forgive our people": text and translation is from *The Old English Martyrology: Edition, Translation, Commentary,* ed. Chrstine Rauer (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 96-97. This quotation reflects the verision of the text found in the B, C, and E texts. The *Old English Martyrology* is generally thought to date to the ninth century (see Rauer's discussion in *The Old English Martyrology*, pp. 1–4).

[57] We see an interesting glimpse of this multi-functionality in a later period. According to a hexameter poem included in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Lat. liturg. fol. 5, that book, a collection of gospel readings which served as a private devotional collection of Queen Margaret of Scotland in the eleventh century, fell into the river while it was being transported to be used in the community to swear oaths. For a discussion of this poem,

concerning the creation and use of these collections remain to be answered, they hint at a complex and sophisticated culture of private devotion in the early Insular world.

as well as the similarities between this collection and the early Insular prayerbook tradition, see R. Gameson, 'The Gospels of Margaret of Scotland and the Literacy of an Eleventh Century Queen' in *Women and the Book: Assessing the Visual Evidence*, ed. L. Smith and J. H. M. Taylor (London, 1996), 148-71.