

The Apostles' Creed

Introduction

As members of a largely illiterate society, most of the pre-Conquest English had limited access to the sorts of texts that survive for us to study today. Mass was their main portal to texts composed in writing: here they heard vernacular sermons, as well as such Latin liturgical texts as the Psalms and canticles. But there were two short texts every Christian was expected to know by heart: the Paternoster and the Creed. As the Catholic Church at this time practised infant baptism, it was incumbent on the godparents to teach their ward these documents of faith, in English if (as was normally the case) they knew no Latin. So rare, in fact, was a working knowledge of Latin, that even some priests — in this context repeatedly described as “rural” — were in need of English texts of the Creed and Paternoster. Under more favourable conditions, one imagines every Christian knew these texts by heart, so that they lived on as oral knowledge despite the key role of writing in their transmission history. This is still true of the Paternoster today in many cultures inflected by Christianity, and the same could be said about the Creed not so long ago.

Various Latin recensions of the Creed were in circulation. The briefest form, the Apostles' Creed (referred to in some of the vernacular manuscripts as the *lessa creda* or “Lesser Creed”), occurs in full in some nine OE translations and glosses. A slightly longer form is the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed or extended Nicene Creed (often referred to simply as the Nicene Creed today; *mæsse creda* or “Mass Creed” in OE, suggesting this was the form most commonly recited in Mass after the homily) favoured by Alcuin and the tenth-century reformers, in spite of whose efforts it survives in only two Old English copies. A much different and far longer text is the Athanasian Creed, which was used in the divine office and survives in a range of OE psalter glosses. The text below is a specimen of the Apostles' Creed.

For an index, edition, and study of the creeds in Old English, see [Ronald Alfred Banks, “A Study of the Old English Versions of the Lord's Prayer, the Creeds, the Gloria, and Some Prayers Found in British Museum MS. Cotton Galba A. xiv”](#) (doctoral thesis, [Queen Mary University of London](#), 1968).

Manuscript

London, British Library MS Cotton Cleopatra B xiii, fols. 58r–58v (s. xi (3rd quarter))

Text

(1) Ic gelyfe on God fæder ælmihtigne, (2) scyppend heofenan and eorðan, (3) and ic gelyfe on hælend Crist, (4) his ancennedan sunu urne drihten, (5) se wæs geeacnod of þam halgan gaste (6) and acenned of Marian þam mædene, (7) geþrowod under þam pontiscan Pilate, (8) on rode ahangen. (9) He wæs dead and bebyrged, (10) and he nyðer astah to helle, (11) and he aras of deaðe on þam þriddan dæge, (12) and he astah up to heofenum, (13) and sitt nu æt swiðran Godes ælmihtiges fæder. (14) Ðanon he wile cuman to demenne ægðer ge þam cucum ge þam deadum. (15) And ic gelyfe on þone halgan gast, (16) and þa halgan gelaðunge, (17) and halgena gemænnysse, (18) and synna forgifennysse, (19) and flæsces ærist, (20) and þæt ece lif; (21) sy hit swa.

([1] Credo in Deum patrem omnipotentem, [2] creatorem caeli et terrae, [3] et in Ihesum Christum, [4] filium eius unicum dominum nostrum, [5] qui conceptus est de spiritu sancto, [6] natus ex Maria uirgine, [7] passus sub Pontio Pilato, [8] crucifixus, [9] mortuus et sepultus. [10] Descendit ad inferna, [11] tertia die resurrexit a mortuis, [12] ascendit ad caelos, [13] sedit ad dexteram dei patris omnipotentis. [14] Inde uenturus est iudicare uiuos et mortuos. [15] Credo in spiritum sanctum, [16] sanctam ecclesiam catholicam, [17] sanctorum communionem, [18] remissionem peccatorum, [19] carnis resurrectionem [20] uitam aeternam; [21] amen.)