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## "Without Blinding Darkness": The Imagery of Divine Light in "Nauigatio Sancti Brendani"

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◆ ‘Without blinding darkness’:  
The imagery of divine light in  
*Nauigatio Sancti Brendani*

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Picture is my own; Wellfleet, Cape Cod, M.A., 10 November 2011.

# *Nauigatio Sancti Brendani* (NSB)

O'Meara, J.J. (trans.), *The Voyage of Saint Brendan: Journey to the Promised Land* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1976).

Orlandi, G. (ed.), *Navigatio sancti Brendani. Alla scoperta dei segreti meravigliosi del mondo* (“The Voyage of Saint Brendan: Discovering the secrets of the wonderful world”) (Florence: SISMELE—Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2014).

Selmer, C. (ed.), *Navigatio Sancti Brendani* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1959).

Late 8th century-early 9th century Hiberno-Latin *immram*.

Attested by approximately 125 manuscript witnesses across over a dozen languages (see list by G. Orlandi in G.S. Burgess and C. Strijbosch, *The Legend of Brendan: A Critical Bibliography* (Dublin: RIA, 2000) 13-26).

# The Cyclical Nature of NSB

“The eschatological theme moves with the structure of the voyage. Although the voyage takes seven years, only three cycles are related, the first two and the last, framed by Brendan’s setting out and return. The first cycle establishes the itinerary of the voyage both spatially and thematically; the second cycle establishes the regularity of movement and reinforces the theme of monastic life and stability. The events of the last cycle of voyaging echo those of the previous cycles and draw the theme to its conclusion.”

— Dorothy Ann Bray, ‘Allegory in the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*’, in *Viator* 26 (1995) 1-10, rep. Jonathan Wooding (ed.), *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2000) 175-86, at 184-5.

# Episodes in NSB

§1 ~ §28

Barrind and the *terra repromissionis sanctorum*

~

Brendan and the *terra repromissionis sanctorum*

§12

“The Community of Ailbe”

“The Clear Sea”

~

“The Crystal Pillar”

§11~§15~  
§27

“The Paradise of Birds”

# NSB §1 ~ §28

Barrind and Brendan both encounter or do the following things in their visits to the *terra repromissionis sanctorum*.

A thick, heavy fog which surrounds the island;

A great light breaks the fog after a number of days to reveal the island;

A description of an island which brings prosperity and immortality;

A fifteen-day reconnoiter of the island shows no end of the island;

A river running west to east which divides the island in half;

A divine figure that meets each figure at the river and there commends each abbot on finding the island, declares the purpose of the island being for the saints at Doomsday, and charges each abbot to sail back to Ireland.

# NSB §1 ~ §28

“Dies namque est semper sine cecitate tenebrarum hic. Dominus noster Jhesus Christus lux ipsius est” (§1; Selmer 7, G1v, ll. 59-60).

““For here it is always day, without blinding darkness. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the light of this island”” (§1; O’Meara 5).

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“[E]t civitas non eget sole neque luna ut luceant in ea nam claritas Dei inluminavit eam et lucerna eius est agnus” (Apocalypse 21.23).

“And the city [New Jerusalem] hath no need of the sun, nor of the moon, to shine in it. For the glory of God hath enlightened it: and the Lamb is the lamp thereof” (Apocalypse 21.23).

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“Sicut modo apparet uobis matura fructibus, ita omni tempore permanet sine ulla umbra noctis. Lux enim illius est Christus” (§28; Selmer 80, G21r, ll. 33-4).

““Just as this land appears to you ripe with fruit, so shall it remain always without any shadow of night. For its light is Christ”” (§28; O’Meara 69).

# NSB §12

Ailbe is model of ideal monastic community, according to author of NSB.

Heavy parallels between description of chapel of Ailbe and New Jerusalem in Hebrews 12.22 and Apocalypse of John (3.12, 4.4, ch. 21).



# NSB §12

While they were thus conversing a fiery arrow sped through a window before their very eyes and lit all the lamps that were placed before the altars. Then the arrow immediately sped out again. But a bright light was left in the lamps.

Saint Brendan again asked:

‘Who will quench the lights (*luminaria*) in the morning?’

The holy father replied:

‘Come and see the secret of it. You can see the tapers burning in the centre of the bowls. Nothing of them actually burns away so that they might get smaller or reduced in size, nor is there any deposit left in the morning. The light is spiritual.’

Saint Brendan asked:

‘How can an incorporeal light (*lumen*) burn corporeally in a corporeal creature?’

The elder replied:

‘Have you not read of the burning bush burning at Mount Sinai? Yet that bush was unaffected by the fire’ (§12; Selmer 36-7, G9v, ll. 131-42; O’Meara 31-2).

## NSB §12

“Dum autem perfinissent debitum uespertinale, cepit sanctus Brendanus considerare quomodo illa ecclesia erat edificata. Erat enim quadrata tam / longitudinis quam et latitudinis, et habebat septem luminaria, tria ante altare quod erat in medio, et bina ante alia duo altaria. Erant enim altaria de crystallo quadrato facta et eorum uascula similiter de crystallo, id est patene, calices, et urceoli, et cetera uasa que pertinebant ad cultum diuinum, et sedilia xxiiii per circuitum esslesie. Locus uero ubi abbas sedebat erat inter duos choros.” (§12; Selmer 33-4, G8v-G9r, ll. 82-90).

“When they had finished the office of vespers Saint Brendan examined how the church was built. It was square, of the same length as breadth, and had seven lights—three before the altar, which was in the middle, and two each before the other two altars. The altars were made of crystal cut in a square, and likewise all the vessels were of crystal, namely patens, chalices and cruets, and other vessels required for the divine cult. There were twenty-four seats in a circle in the church. The abbot, however, sat between the two choirs.” (§12; O’Meara 29).

# NSB §12

“[E]t sustulit me in spiritu in montem magnum et altum et ostendit mihi civitatem sanctam Hierusalem descendentem de caelo a Deo, habentem claritatem Dei lumen eius simile lapidi pretioso tamquam lapidi iaspidis sicut cristallum... [E]t civitas in quadro posita est et longitudo eius tanta est quanta et latitudo et mensus est civitatem de harundine per stadia duodecim milia longitudo et latitudo et altitudo eius aequalia sunt” (Apocalypse 21.10-11, 16).

“And he took me up in spirit to a great and high mountain: and he shewed me the holy city Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, Having the glory of God, and the light thereof was like to a precious stone, as to the jasper stone even as crystal... And the city lieth in a four-square: and the length thereof is as great as the breadth. And he measured the city with the golden reed for twelve thousand furlongs: and the length and the height and the breadth thereof are equal” (Apocalypse 21.10-11, 16).

# NSB §12

“[S]tatim fui in spiritu et ecce sedis posita erat in caelo et supra sedem sedens. [E]t qui sedebat similis erat aspectui lapidis iaspidis et sardini et iris erat in circuitu sedis similis visioni zmaragdinae. [E]t in circuitu sedis sedilia viginti quattuor et super thronos viginti quattuor seniores sedentes circumamictos vestimentis albis et in capitibus eorum coronas aureas. [E]t de throno procedunt fulgura et voces et tonitrua et septem lampades ardentes ante thronum quae sunt septem spiritus Dei. [E]t in conspectu sedis tamquam mare vitreum simile cristallo et in medio sedis et in circuitu sedis quattuor animalia plena oculis ante et retro” (Apocalypse 4.2-6).

“And immediately I was in the spirit. And behold, there was a throne set in heaven, and upon the throne one sitting. And he that sat was to the sight like the jasper and the sardine stone. And there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald. And round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats, four and twenty ancients sitting, clothed in white garments. And on their heads were crowns of gold. And from the throne proceeded lightnings and voices and thunders. And there were seven lamps burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. And in the sight of the throne was, as it were, a sea of glass like to crystal: and in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne, were four living creatures, full of eyes before and behind.” (Apocalypse 4.2-6).

# NSB §21 ~ §22

Consecutive episodes unique to the third and final detailed cycle of the seven cycles produces two signs which both confirm Brendan's spiritual closeness to New Jerusalem, the source of light, and forerun Brendan's encounter with light in the *terra repromissionis sanctorum*:

“Quodam uero tempore... inuenerunt mare clarum ita ut possent uidere quicquid subtus erat” (§21; Selmer 56, G15r, ll. 8-10).

“It happened on one occasion that... they found the sea so clear that they could see whatever was underneath them” (§21; O'Meara 49).

... apparuit illis columna in mare et non longe ab illis uidebatur, sed non poterant ante tres dies appropinquare... Columna erat de cristallo clarissimo... mare apparuit illis uitreum pre claritate, ita ut omnia que subtus erant possent uidere” (§22; Selmer 58-9, G15v-16r, ll. 1-3, 8-9, 17-8).

“... a pillar in the sea appeared to them that seemed to be not far distant. Still it took them three days to approach it... The pillar was of bright crystal... the sea was as clear to them as glass, so that they could see everything that was underneath... The light of the sun was as bright below as above the water...” (§22; O'Meara 50-1).

# NSB §21 ~ §22

“[Q]uoniam servasti verbum patientiae meae et ego te servabo ab hora temptationis quae ventura est in orbem universum temptare habitantes in terra. [V]enio cito tene quod habes ut nemo accipiat coronam tuam. [Q]ui vicerit faciam illum columnam in templo Dei mei et foras non egredietur amplius et scribam super eum nomen Dei mei et nomen civitatis Dei mei novae Hierusalem quae descendit de caelo a Deo meo et nomen meum novum” (Apocalypse 3.10-2).

“Behold, I come quickly: hold fast that which thou hast, that no man take thy crown. Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I will also keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon the whole world to try them that dwell upon the earth. He that shall overcome, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God: and he shall go out no more. And I will write upon him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God, and my new name” (Apocalypse 3.10-2).

# NSB §11 ~ §15 ~ §27

“A hymn is due to thee, O God, in Zion, and a vow shall be paid to you in Jerusalem” (§11; Psalm 64.1; Selmer 25, G6v, ll. 51-2; O’Meara 22).

“May the radiance of the Lord, our God, be upon us!” (§11; Ps. 139.17; Selmer 26, G7r, ll. 66-7, O’Meara 22).

“How good and pleasant it is that brothers live together as one!” (§11, cf. §26; Ps. 132.1; Selmer 26, G7r, ll. 71-2; O’Meara 22).

“Hear us, O God, our saviour, our hope throughout all the boundaries of the earth and in the distant sea.” (§11; Ps. 64.6, cf. Ps. 99.9; Selmer 28, G7v, ll. 110-1; O’Meara 25).

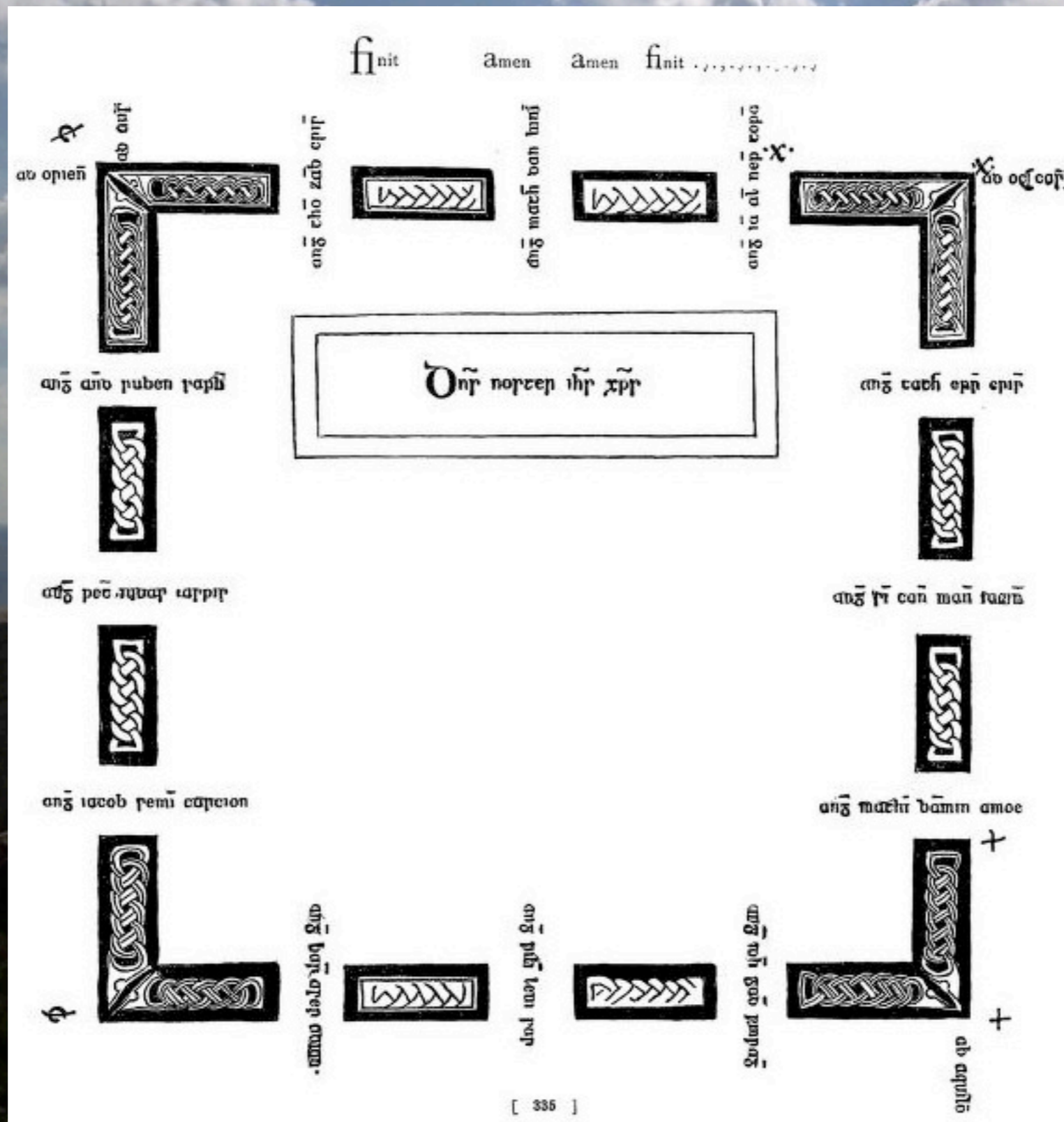
[“God is wonderful in his saints. The God of Israel will himself give valour and strength to his people. Blessed be God” (§15; Ps. 67.36; Selmer 41, G11r, ll. 14-5; O’Meara 36; “steward”).]

“Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the lamb!” (§15; Apocalypse 7.10; Selmer 43, G11v, ll. 47-8; O’Meara 37-8).

“The Lord God has given us light [*illuxit nobis*]. Appoint a holy day, with festal branches up to the horn of the altar” (§15; Ps. 117.27; Selmer 43, G11v, ll. 48-50, O’Meara 38).

“As they embarked in the boat, all the birds that were on the island began to say as it were with one voice: ‘May God, the salvation of all of us, prosper your journey’” (Selmer 78, G20v, ll. 26-7; O’Meara 67).

# The Diagram of New Jerusalem in Book of Armagh



Picture is my own; Mnajdra, Qrendi, Malta, 17 December 2013.



# The Cyclical Nature of NSB

“The last four lines of the text [of the Apocalypse] are in 171r<sup>o</sup>, extending across the width of the page. There appears to have been a line of subscription subjoined, now irrecoverably erased. The rest of the page is taken up by a strange design,—a rectangular diagram representing the city that ‘lieth foursquare,’ the ‘Jerusalem’ of Rev. xxi. 10-16, with its twelve gates, each bearing the name of its precious stone, its tribe, and its Apostle.”

— John Gwynn (ed.), *Liber Ardmachanus: The Book of Armagh* (Dublin, 1913) cxxix., quoted in Thomas O’Loughlin, ‘The Plan of the New Jerusalem in the Book of Armagh’, in *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 39 (2000) 23-38, rep. in T. O’Loughlin, *Early Medieval Exegesis in the Latin West* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2013) IX:23-38.

Picture is my own; Mnajdra, Qrendi, Malta, 17 December 2013.

# New Jerusalem in the Apocalypse of John

“[E]t habebat murum magnum et altum habens portas duodecim et in portis angelos duodecim et nomina inscripta quae sunt nomina duodecim tribuum filiorum Israhel. [A]b oriente portae tres et ab aquilone portae tres et ab austro portae tres et ab occasu portae tres. [E]t murus civitatis habens fundamenta duodecim et in ipsis duodecim nomina duodecim apostolorum agni...” (Apocalypse 21.12-4).

“And it had a wall great and high, having twelve gates, and in the gates twelve angels, and names written thereon, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel. On the east, three gates: and on the north, three gates: and on the south, three gates: and on the west, three gates. And the wall of the city had twelve foundations: And in them, the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb...” (Apocalypse 21.12-4).

# Divine Light in Bede and Adomnán

“Visions of heavenly light, like other miracles, show the saints’ contact with the God who is both holy and light... in the visions of heavenly light that appear in the lives of the saints, we see glimpses of this light of Christ which marks them as the saints of God. They are seen as they are in God’s sight and shine with his light, which is reflected through them (292)... This paper has affirmed that Bede and Adomnán have preserved the visions of light to demonstrate the holiness of the saints and has also suggested that the light is Christ’s light because the saints are Christ’s holy people. By this study of their accounts of visions and light, I have shown them to be theologians of the ascetic life working and living in the same tradition. They have inherited this tradition from those who went before them in the ascetic life which they share...”

— Stephen Sharman, ‘Visions of divine light in the writings of Adomnán and Bede’, in J.M. Wooding, R. Aist, T.O. Clancy, and T. O’Loughlin (eds.), *Adomnán of Iona: Theologian, Lawmaker, Peacemaker* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2010) 289-302.

Picture is my own; Mnajdra, Qrendi, Malta, 17 December 2013.

# Conclusion(s)

NSB is a product of early ninth-century *céilí Dé* monastic reformation movement in Ireland which beautifully blends together multiple genres, including hagiography, biblical exegesis, and *immram*.

Purpose of NSB is to propose an ideal ascetic model to encourage cenobitic practice towards entrance into the New Jerusalem whenever Doomsday happens.

Divine light is one of multiple literary motifs or genre features (others include hagiography, biblical numerology, and sea beasts) which is used to promulgate the point of NSB in a tenuous time for early medieval Ireland (and possibly the Holy Roman Empire).

◆ ‘Without blinding darkness’:  
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