Title: “Such a great multitude’: Biblical numerology as a literary device in Nauigatio Sancti Brendani

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The scholar John MacQueen, in his brief Numerology: Theory and outline history of a literary mode (Edinburgh, 1985), argues that the early ninth-century Hiberno-Latin text Nauigatio Sancti Brendani (Voyage of Saint Brendan; NSB) is one of many Irish numerological writings produced by the later Carolingian court. Further, he calls the numerology employed by the text to be specifically biblical in basis. The literary device of numerology is attested across many traditions around the world over the course of human history. Specifically, numerology is noted in the Jewish textual tradition through its frequent occurrence in the Tanakh. This would, in turn, be inherited by the Christian textual tradition which incorporated most of the Tanakh into its own Scriptures. Writers of the late antique and early medieval periods, including Augustine, Eucherius of Lyons, and John Scottus Eriugena, understood the role of numerology as a literary device, particularly in biblical exegesis. This understanding was accepted by writers in early medieval Ireland, whether writing from Ireland or at the Carolingian court. NSB, which has been recently argued to be the result of a writer at the Carolingian court altering a copy of what is believed to be an earlier version of NSB written in Ireland that is now lost, is one exemplar of this understanding of the place of biblical numerology.

The aim of this presentation is to argue that the literary device of biblical numerology is employed by the anonymous author of NSB to emphasize the orderliness and omnipotence of the God which Brendan and his band of monks serve. The presentation will begin by briefly summarizing the text and presenting evidence for its intended audience and purpose, defining biblical numerology, and outlining its role in the Jewish and Christian textual traditions up to the early medieval period. Then, the presentation will provide a handful of examples of the use of biblical numerology in NSB. The talk will conclude by discussing what can be drawn from the examples of biblical numerology in NSB having the purposes of NSB and biblical numerology in mind. The presentation has been tailored such that it can be given within twenty minutes. A laptop will be provided to host a PowerPoint slideshow, which shall be used as a visual aid for the presentation, thus necessitating the need for projector access. (This presentation is based upon “A navigation of the influence of biblical numerology upon the purpose of Nauigatio Sancti Brendani”, an unpublished thesis for the Master of Arts in Theology degree at Providence College.)