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Title: The heresies of Brendan's Voyage

Creators: Mackley, J. S.

Example citation: Mackley, J. S. (2009) The heresies of Brendan's Voyage. Seminar Presentation presented to: *International Medieval Conference (IMC) 2009, University of Leeds, 13-16 July 2009.*

Version: Presented version

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THE HERESIES OF BRENDAN'S VOYAGE

Paper presented at the International Medieval Congress, Leeds, 13 July 2009

Abstract: The Voyage of Brendan was denounced by Vincent of Beauvais and cited in an Inquisitional deposition. The most popular scenes in the narrative use source material that is itself heretical. The principal heresy is Brendan's encounter with Judas Iscariot: Judas is granted a comparative respite from the tortures of hell, which he describes in graphic detail. The descriptions of hell are not canonical, although they correspond with lesser-known terms the Bible uses. Likewise, Judas's character is embellished; the liberal theology of the narrative focuses on the rewards for good deeds performed in one's lifetime, rather than the punishment for sins.

It's said that you can't please all the people all the time, and the *Voyage of Brendan* is a perfect example of this. The voyage tells of an abbot who wishes to see the marvels of paradise and the fates of the damned before he dies. He travels for on a seven-year cyclical voyage, experiencing many marvels on the way, and succeeds in achieving Paradise. Although it was one of the most widely disseminated texts of the Middle Ages – and even now over a hundred manuscripts survive from as early as the tenth century, in ten languages and in various forms – there were dissenting voices that would never be satisfied because of its heretical nature. Vincent of Beauvais, for example, distinguished the *Vita* from the *Voyage* of Brendan, the former being an accurate report of a pious abbot and the latter being 'full of apocryphal ravings'. In particular, Vincent's objections carried with them a significantly darker prospect: in 1274, Bernard Raymond Barahon of Toulouse, a Waldensian sympathiser, was questioned in a deposition concerning the nature of Paradise. Bernard answered that he believed Paradise was a place of rest because he had read it in the life of Brendan. Following the Inquisition, Bernard handed the inquisitors his two books, a copy of the Brendan legend, and an Occitan translation of the Bible. It's entirely plausible that Bernard had the Occitan version of the Brendan legend, the manuscript of which contains a textual reference to 1211.

Bernard's understanding of Paradise is one of a handful of heresies contained in Brendan's *voyage*. For the purposes of this paper, I'm defining heresy as the 'dissent or deviation from a dominant theory, opinion, or practice in relation to the Bible'. The principal heresies in the *Navigatio*, which generally serves as a model for the voyage as a whole, include the location of the *terra repromissionis sanctorum* – the *Promised Land of the Saints* – which can be reached by boat (although, it should be added that Brendan cannot reach it without the piety, obedience and sacrifice required by Christian doctrine). In addition, during the course of the journey, the monks stop at an Island inhabited by birds who claim

to be the Neutral Angels – those that sided neither with God nor Lucifer in the War in heaven, and as a punishment for their apathy they were banished to earth until the Day of Judgement. This part of the legend – one of the most popular episodes of Brendan’s Voyage – was considered so heretical that some manuscripts omit all but the vaguest suggestions of the Paradise of Birds and any mention of the Neutral Angels has been excised altogether. In parallel stories – the Irish *Immrama* or voyage tales – souls are transformed into birds, although, again, in one of these tales, the characters hear the distant singing of psalms and see an Island full of birds, but there is no mention of the neutral angels: the two events are never linked. Likewise, the Occitan version of the story which we assume that Bernard had, particular does not mention Lucifer when giving the account of the neutral angels.

The principal heresy in the versions of the Brendan legend, however, is Brendan’s encounter with Judas Iscariot. In the *Navigatio*, this is the penultimate encounter before the crew reach paradise. In particular, I want to focus on the discussion of Judas’s suffering in relation to the Anglo-Norman version of the *Voyage* which was composed at the beginning of the twelfth century in octosyllabic rhyming couplets. The Anglo-Norman version is more densely structured than the *Navigatio*. Benedeit, the composer, excises many long-winded liturgical passages as well as scenes from the *Navigatio*’s Irish heritage with which he does not fully understand. However, his most dramatic change is the section on Brendan’s meeting with Judas Iscariot, which occupies a total of 282 of the 1840 lines, just over a sixth of the whole text. In the *Navigatio*, Judas’s torments are dismissed in one line: “I burn, like a lump of molten lead in a pot, day and night in the centre of the mountain that you have seen” (*nan ardeo sicut plumbi liquefacta in olla die la nocte in medio montis quen vidistis - Navigatio, caput XXV*). Conversely, Benedeit takes 110 lines to illustrate Judas’s suffering, using sources which can be traced from Otherworld Visions, the horrific methods of contemporary torture as well as those described in the Apocrypha, most particularly the books of Maccabees, and a variety of texts that describe the torments of the Christian martyrs.

At the start of the encounter, Brendan and his crew see a rock in the distance upon which they see a naked man, lacerated and torn, bound by a cloth and clinging to a pillar, beaten by stinging waves. Unsurprisingly, he is lamenting and begging for mercy, yet acknowledging that he deserves so much punishment. Approaching, Brendan genuflects and the winds and the waves calm, so they can converse freely. Brendan asks him what sin

he committed that he deserves such terrible suffering. At this point, Judas reveals that this is not a punishment, but a comparative relief for him, as he is granted a day of respite for the good deeds that he performed in his lifetime.

One of the clearest influences on the Judas encounter is the fourth century *Apocalypse of Paul*, an apocryphal text that is itself heretical: Augustine denounces it as ‘full of fables’, and the Gelasian Decree condemns it. Jacques Le Goff states the *Apocalypse* ‘had the greatest influence on medieval literature concerned with the afterlife in general and with Purgatory in particular’.¹ In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul states that he met a man ‘caught up to the third heaven’, which no doubt influenced the *Apocalypse*.² In this, Paul describes judgements of the righteous and sinners, and the ensuing blessings and punishments. One of these tortures evokes the imagery of Judas on the rock: stones pelt a bishop who ‘gave not righteous judgement’ which ‘wounded his face like a tempest’. Similarly, Brendan’s grief at Judas’s punishment in the A.N. *Voyage* reflects Paul’s anguish at the torments in hell.³ However, in the *Apocalypse* an angel rebukes Paul, wondering if he is more merciful than God who ‘established the judgement and left every man of his own will to choose good or evil’. Only when Christ appears in hell do the sinners plead for ‘refreshment’, to which Jesus demands ‘What *good* works have ye done?’ Punishment is inflicted without mercy on those who had no mercy in their lifetime, yet, as Jesus explains, the sinners receive grace because of Paul’s intercession for them.

The scene with Judas in the Anglo-Norman *Brendan* is an opportunity for Benedeit to describe the torments of hell in vivid detail. Scenes of violence are very few in the narrative, so when they come, they are graphic and terrifying. The scene begins with Brendan seeing something in the ocean. The figure he approaches is naked, ‘lacerated and torn’, beaten by the waves. His face is covered by the cloth, but this is not caught on iron hooks, as described in the *Navigatio*; instead, he clings to a pillar so that the waves do not drag him away. Benedeit describes his voice as ‘hoarse and weary’,⁴ and adds a twelve-line lamentation that moves Brendan to tears, echoing Paul’s anguish in the *Apocalypse*.⁵ Brendan calms the storms and questions him about his torment. Judas recounts events

¹ Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, p. 35.

² 2 Corinthians: 2–5.

³ ‘Pur le parler Brandans ne pout / Avant parler, mais dunc se tout,’ Waters, ll. 1267–8.

⁴ ‘Cil respundit a voiz basse- / Mult ert roie, forment lasse,’ Waters, ll. 1269–70.

⁵ Waters, ll. 1433–44.

that occurred at they appear in the Bible, namely that he acted as treasurer for the disciples (and adds that not only did he steal the money from the purse, but that he squandered it surreptitiously), sold his saviour, and was 'downcast' – a euphemism, if ever there was one – when he saw Jesus in the hands of Pilate and then the Jews. Judas returns the thirty pieces of silver, but his restitution is not accepted. He explains to Brendan that he did not repent, but killed himself and the reason for his eternal damnation is because he did not make his confession. Therefore, as with other versions of the Judas legend, his crime is not that he betrayed Jesus, but instead that he despaired of Christ's mercy.

Judas recounts the story of the betrayal, repeating the phrase 'when I saw' six times, equating to his six days of torture in hell. He explains there are two hells: the first is on a mountaintop, the other is in a valley; the two are separated by the sea. He says that he's the only one who suffers in both of them. The first hell is described as hot and sweaty and is the more painful; the second hell is cold and stinking, which is the more horrible of the two.

Judas lists his daily tortures: on the Monday in the mountain-hell, he is 'turned on the wheel', presumably to induce dizziness, rather than being broken on the wheel as suffered by St Catherine of Alexandria. His second punishment, having been hurled into the valley-hell, is to be chained to a bed of spits. He is then crushed with rocks and lead and his body is 'all pierced through by being spitted there' (ll. 1359-68). His punishment on Wednesday in the mountain hell is to be boiled in pitch then burned in a fire so intense that it would melt marble, and presumably Judas would have been blinded and suffocated by the pitch as it formed a mask around his face; by contrast on Thursday, when he is hurled again into the valley, he is frozen so intently that he longs for the fires of the previous day. This is an appropriate contrast to the tortures on Wednesday and seems to be a reversal of the scene of torture in the *Apocalypse of Paul* where the sinners are plunged into a river of fire.

Judas's fifth torture is an amalgamation of suffering: he is flayed until nothing remains of his skin, then pushed into a compound of salt and soot with a burning stake. However, the flesh grows back after each bout of torture so the torment can be repeated. He is then forced to drink molten lead and copper in anticipation of Saturday's punishment, which is to be hurled into the valley-hell and imprisoned in a dark, filthy dungeon; however, he swells with nausea as he can no longer vomit because of the molten metal he has ingested. Although his Sunday is spent away from the two hells, and he still receives a comparative

physical torture through being lashed by the waves and the cloth, his tortures also take on a further dimension: once Brendan has calmed the seas and the winds in a manner equating to Jesus calming the storms, Judas's punishment ceases to be physical.⁶ His respite gives him time to reflect and thus the torture becomes a psychological anguish.

It may seem heretical that Judas describes the two hells: these descriptions are not found in the Bible; however, the Bible uses *three* different Greek words that are all translated as 'hell' in the King James Bible: *Hades* (*Sheol* in Hebrew); *Tartarus* and *Gehenna*.

Hades, or *Sheol* corresponds to the modern word 'grave'. In this condition there is no awareness of the state of death.⁷ This is where the dead will sleep until the Resurrection. *Tartarus* in Greek mythology is the name of a prison where the wicked are punished: it is the place where Sisyphus pushes his boulder up the hill. The Bible uses the verb *tartaroo* – to imprison – where Peter explains that fallen angels were cast into 'gloomy dungeons' to await judgement.⁸ *Gehenna* refers to a real place south west of Jerusalem, the Valley of Hinnom, where in the Old Testament the Israelites sacrificed their children.⁹ Later it was a place where Jerusalem's rubbish was destroyed in constantly burning fires, it was also the place where the city inhabitants would dispose of anything unclean, including the bodies of executed criminals; thus it is a term used to signify the burning fires of hell, with the parabolic interpretation of total annihilation of the soul.¹⁰ Therefore, although the description of hell in a valley is not canonical, In Revelation, this distinction of different hells is made most clear where John describes how 'death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death' (Revelation 20:14). The 'second death' is total annihilation: those who do not suffer the second death live with Christ in eternal life.

Of these three definitions of hell, then, only two suggest torture: in *Hades* the soul is oblivious until the Day of Judgement. It is these two hells that Judas suffers in the Anglo-Norman *Voyage*. He describes how in one hell he is 'removed and roasted, bound to a post between two fires', which is clearly a description of *Gehenna*. He then describes how he is

⁶ *Matthew* 8:23–27; *Mark* 4:37–41; *Luke* 8:22–25.

⁷ *Ecclesiastes* 9:5, 10. Cf. *Psalm* 16:10; *Ezekiel* 32 27–29; *Matthew* 11:23; 16:18; *Acts* 2:31.

⁸ *2 Peter* 2:4; cf. *Jude* 6,7.

⁹ *Jeremiah* 32:35

¹⁰ *Matthew* 5:29, 30; *James* 3:6.

put in a dungeon where he endures the tortures ascribed to that day.¹¹ Judas is denied the oblivion of *Hades* and must endure the daily tortures of *Tartarus* and *Gehenna*.

However, as far as I can tell, there is nowhere in the Bible that describes Hell atop a mountain – which is also where Benedeit situates his Paradise in the final encounter. In fact, the *Navigatio* is closer with descriptions of hell, effectively positioned in the heart of a volcano which erupts when another soul is claimed. The Bible describes how Hell is “in the earth and in the foundations of the mountains” (Deuteronomy 32:22); it is “deep underground” (Job 11.8); it is “a pit” (Isaiah 14.15; Ezekiel 31:16) most importantly, Hell is eternal and irreversible. Revelation 14.1 describes how the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever and they have no rest day or night.’ So, here is where the true heresy that pervades through much of the Brendan legend is revealed – the heresy is that there is some release from hell. This is also the assertion of Origen whose writings in the third century suggest that at the end of the world [souls] are possessed of free-will and may, of their own accord admit either good or evil ... angels may become men or demons and again from the latter they may rise to become men or angels. However, Origen’s doctrine of *apokatastasis*, a universal re-integration in which he believed that hell would come to an end and the fallen would be restored to a state of blessedness – was condemned by the Council of Constantinople in 543. Once again, the liberal theology that is being presented concerning the concept of mercy, as show by both Judas and the neutral angels, is based on censured teaching.

Although Benedeit’s principal focus is on Judas’s suffering in hell, the message of this scene (as with the *Navigatio*) is that God rewards the good deeds one performs in their lifetime. The Anglo-Norman *Voyage* mentions *some* of the deeds described in the *Navigatio* but not all of them; however, they are also embellished. The *Navigatio* states that the cloth was not Judas’s to give away, and so it lashes him in the face; in the Anglo-Norman *Voyage*, Judas uses the alms from the disciples’ purse to buy the sheet for a poor naked man, and thus it protects him from the waves and prevents him from drowning; however, it offers no defence in hell as it was not bought with his own money. Similarly, Benedeit embellishes Judas’s use of the rock. In the *Navigatio*, the rock represented a stepping stone which he placed in a ditch, meaning that travellers did not have to deviate so far on their journey;

¹¹ ‘E puis sui mis en gaiole,’ Waters, l. 1419.

in the Anglo-Norman *Voyage*, the rock has become a hillock, and there is the addition of a small strong bridge which suggests that Judas was indeed helping travellers overcoming a serious impediment on their journey. However, none of these good deeds appear in the Bible, where Judas is cast as a 'devil', a 'thief' and the 'one who betrayed' Jesus, and this additional characterisation, creating sympathy for him, also does not conform to the medieval stance towards the punishment of their perfunctory betrayer

When Judas explains that he is released from hell on Sundays and for certain festivals, it actually transpires that he enjoys his comparative release from hell for 106 days a year. The intense torture is 259 days, but it has to be remembered that the respite is only comparative: Judas still suffers in both and equally, that when Brendan first sees Judas, he believes that Judas is being tortured.

Furthermore, Judas's respite echoes Brendan's journey. When Judas is released from hell at Easter, Brendan travels from an island of giant sheep to the back of an enormous fish that the monks initially mistake for an island. By Pentecost, he has reached the Paradise of Birds which is the abode of angels that sided neither with God nor Lucifer, and were cast out of heaven for their apathy. The parallel is clear: the angels have been removed from heaven, Judas has been granted a release from Hell. The characters are in motion, but they are uncertain about their ultimate fate.

In conclusion, the legend of Brendan in its various forms, shows a rather liberal approach to theology, much to the chagrin of commentators such as Vincent, and, more particularly, the Inquisition. Neither version is condemnatory of the transgressors in the Bible, and instead, the versions try to generate sympathy of the Biblical characters by adding a depth to their characters. Ultimately, however, the message to those transgressors against God – even through apathy – is that they face a Limbo; waiting instead for possible respite or even salvation. Rather than punishment for the sins one commits in life – and even Brendan berates himself for failing to achieve perfection – instead it speaks of rewarding the good deeds that one does. Even so, Judas is punished for his sins, and the respite is only a comparative relief.