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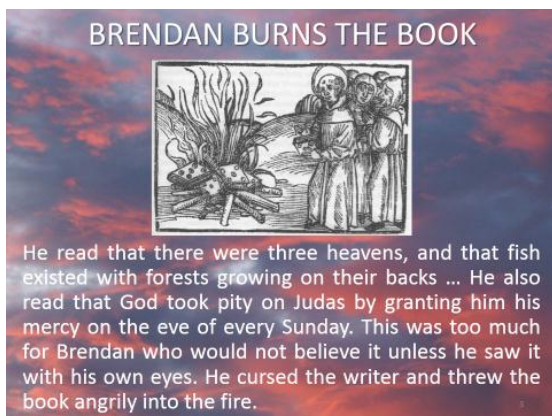


# “WE ARE SPARED HELL” – NEUTRAL ANGELS IN THE MIDDLE DUTCH *VOYAGE OF BRENDAN*

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J.S. MACKLEY

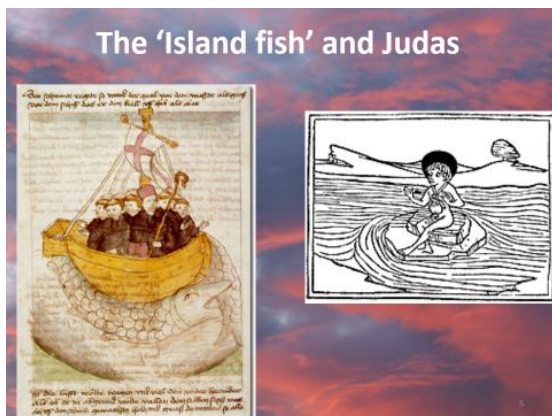
The *Voyage of Brendan* was composed in Latin, known as the *Navigatio sancti Brendani abbatis*, in the tenth century. It tells the story of a pious monk abbot, inspired to see Paradise before he dies. Travelling the ocean, he witnesses many marvels on his journey.



The popularity of Brendan's voyage was such that it was translated into most European languages, and still survives in over a hundred manuscripts. The translations generally follow the Latin version, sometimes with embellishments and sometimes with omissions. However, around 1150, an 'independent reworking' of the story appeared in Middle Dutch called *De Reis van sint Brandan*.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I shall focus on Brendan's encounter with the Neutral Angels. They are transformed from angels to birds in the Latin version, and become hybrids in the Dutch Version.

In the Dutch version, Brendan is a 'scholarly monk' who becomes outraged at the



content of a book of marvels, and burns the book. As a punishment for his incredulity, he is charged to replace this book, and witness the marvels for himself. Although the supernatural events in the *Navigatio* are gradually introduced, giving the audience time to assimilate and accept them, in the *Reis*, the fantastic imagery starts at the

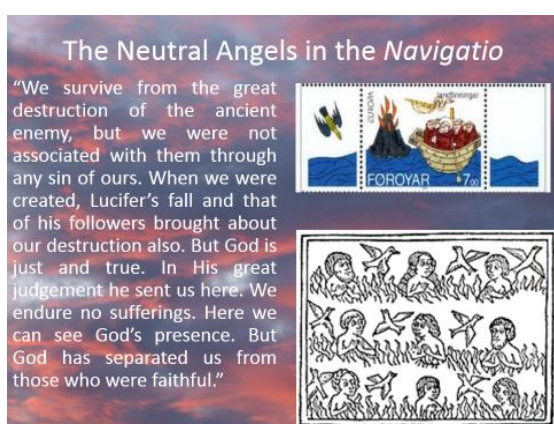
beginning and is maintained throughout. There is also an underlying threat: just as Brendan is punished for his disbelief in the marvels of the ocean, so the audience are

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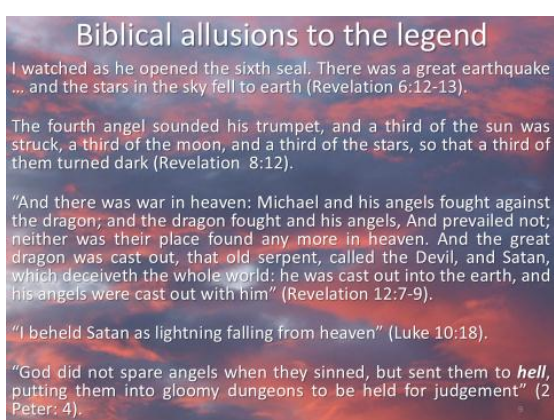
<sup>1</sup> The manuscripts date from the fifteenth century.

warned that they can learn from Brendan, suggesting, that anyone who is unwilling to suspend their disbelief will suffer his fate.

The *Reis* contains a few scenes that are comparable with those that appear in the *Navigatio*. These are the more popular episodes, for example, the island that turns out to be a giant fish, and Brendan's encounter with Judas Iscariot who is released for a day from his torment in hell. However, these scenes lack impact: they are given in summary at the beginning of the narrative of the book of marvels. Indeed, the *Reis* could be considered as a re-telling of some of the marvels, as well as an amalgamation of other popular legends, including the Romance of Alexander.



neither with God nor with Lucifer in the War in Heaven; as they hadn't committed any evil acts, they should not be relegated to hell; however, neither had they been virtuous, so they could not stay in heaven. In the *Navigatio*, they are sent to Earth, a middle space,

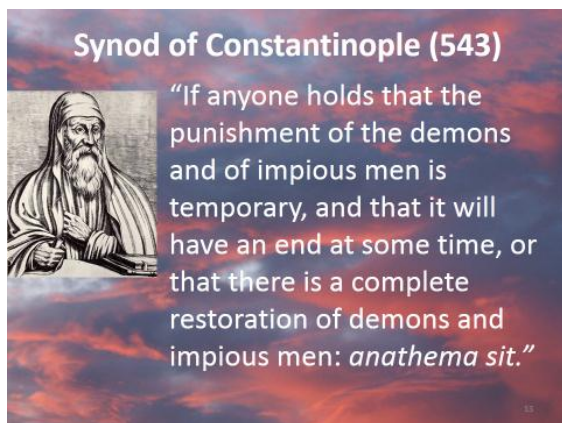


Although these encounters were well-known to the respective medieval audiences, one scene in the *Reis*, that of the neutral angels, is substantially altered, although it maintains the general theme of the *Navigatio*.<sup>2</sup> In the Latin version, the crew arrive at an island that is populated by many white birds. One of the birds explains that the neutral angels sided neither with God nor with Lucifer in the War in Heaven; as they hadn't committed any evil acts, they should not be relegated to hell; however, neither had they been virtuous, so they could not stay in heaven. In the *Navigatio*, they are sent to Earth, a middle space, and assume the form of birds on Sundays and Holy Days. At other times, they 'wander about the air, the earth and the sky, like other spirits on their missions'. They are separated from God, but they can see His presence and are able to praise Him: this is expressed by the long lists of psalms which punctuate the canonical hours. However, only the *theme* of

<sup>2</sup> Dando argues that the theme of the Neutral Angels is seen for the first time in this form in the *Navigatio*, see Marcel Dando, 'The Neutral Angels' in *Archiv für das Studien der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen*, vol. ccxvii, 1980: 259–76, p. 265.

the neutral angels is apparent in the *Reis*.<sup>3</sup> The neutral angels are not mentioned here and the rest of the material has no corresponding analogy in the *Navigatio*.

The theme of the neutral angels is not canonical and consists of some independent strands including the developing concept of Purgatory, Biblical Apocalyptic imagery (for example, the stars falling to earth and turning dark, and the war in heaven), as well as the gospel of Luke, and the Second Epistle of Peter. The word for “hell”, as it is used in 2 Peter, is “tartarus”. *Tartarus* is just one of three words used for hell in the Bible. In Peter’s epistle, it is used to denote the Abyss, or a dark and gloomy prison, and it also represents one of the levels of the Underworld in Greek mythology. This is the same *Tartarus* from which The Beast from Revelation will come at the end of time.<sup>4</sup> *Tartarus* is also used to describe the area described in 1 Enoch where Watcher Angels were sent. (These were the angels who taught mankind the forbidden sciences and were the focus of the annihilation by the Great Deluge). And again, the concept of the Watcher Angels and their positioning in a middle space may also have contributed to the development of the neutral angels.



In addition to the Biblical and Apocryphal references, the legend incorporates the doctrine of the third-century theologian Origen who taught that hell would come to an end and the fallen would be restored to a state of blessedness; this doctrine was condemned by the Synod of Constantinople in 543.<sup>5</sup> Another influence may have been a seventh-century Hiberno-Latin treatise, *De*

*ordine creaturarum*, which Bede used in his early works. The treatise reveals, as Marina Smyth argues, ‘a remarkable degree of resourcefulness and coherence at [its] attempt at

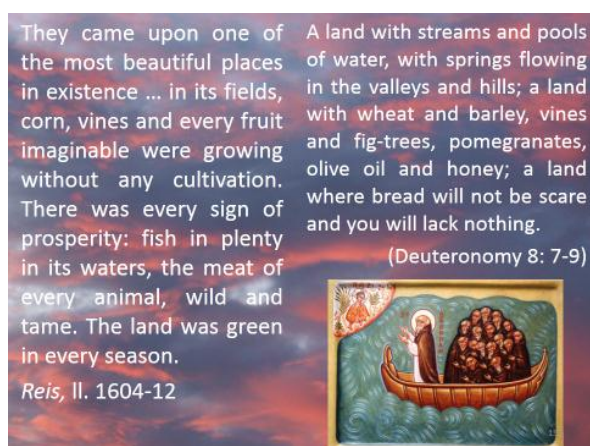
<sup>3</sup> There is another encounter where Brendan sees burning birds flying from a fiery mountain which represents the Mouth of Hell.

<sup>4</sup> According to Greek mythology, it is the place where Sisyphus pushes his boulder up hill and where the dehydrated Tantalus has the thirst-quenching grapes, just out of reach.

<sup>5</sup> The Synod of 543 was not an ecumenical council. And the mention of Origen in the 11th anathema of the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople is believed by some reputable scholars to be a later interpolation. See the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church for more info.

understanding the universe'.<sup>6</sup> The treatise itself describes an area below the firmament called the *caelum firmament*, and, according to Manuel Díaz y Díaz, 'several catholic authors claim that these spaces were intended originally as a dwelling place for those angels who fell with their leader'.<sup>7</sup> There are also allusions to some of the secular Irish Voyage Tales: human souls and even archangels appear as Birds in the *Voyage of the Húi Corra*, and, avoiding the heresies of the legend, in the *Immram Curaig Máele Dúin* the travellers hear the distant singing of psalms and see an island full of birds, but the narrative shies away from committing to the legend of the neutral angels and the travels do not go towards it.

One major difference between the Latin and Dutch versions is the positioning of the encounter within the text. I have argued elsewhere that normally the narrative of the *Voyage of Brendan* roughly divides into three equal parts, and that the encounter with the neutral angels marks the end of the first section.<sup>8</sup> In the *Reis*, the encounter occurs shortly before the end of the journey. This is the longest scene in the text occupying some 600 lines – almost a third of the text; thus, this seems to be the climax towards which the narrative leads rather than the achievement of Paradise.<sup>9</sup>



In the *Reis*, there are two parts to the encounter with the neutral angels: the first is a description of the land, *multum bona terra* which parallels the description of Canaan in Deuteronomy (8: 7-10), and a magnificent but deserted hall. This is an allusion to an episode in the *Navigatio* where Brendan arrives at a Deserted Citadel. In this version, the devil tempts

<sup>6</sup> Marina Smyth, 'The Physical World in Seventh Century Hiberno-Latin Texts,' *Peritia* 5 (1986), 201–34, p. 209.

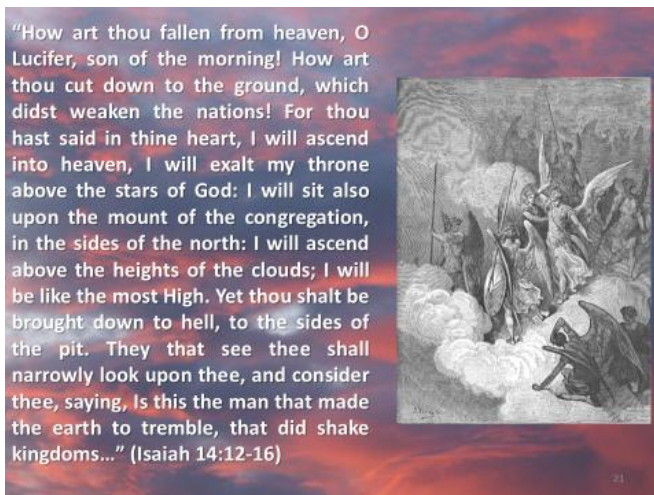
<sup>7</sup> Manuel C. Díaz y Díaz, *Liber de ordine creaturarum: Un anónimo irlandés del siglo VII*, Monografías de la Universidad de Santiago de Compostela 10 (Santiago de Compostela: Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, 1972); 'Quapropter plurimi catholicorum auctorum illud spatium primitus angelis qui lapsi sunt cum suo principe adserunt ad habitandum fuisse destinatum,' Marina Smyth, *Understanding the Universe in seventh-century Ireland* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1996), pp. 185–86.

<sup>8</sup> J.S. Mackley, *The Legend of Brendan: A Comparative Study of the Latin and Anglo-Norman Versions* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), p. 41.

<sup>9</sup> Paradise is a frightening place: St Michael appears, seizes one of the monks and drags him through the gateway of heaven, to which Brendan comments that "we have experienced more harm than good here".

one of the monks to steal, risking his soul. The monk is able to confess and receive absolution before he dies.

The land is described in terms of the earthly paradise, with the hall situated on a mountain called *mons syon*. The Old Testament prophets viewed Mount Zion as the highest mountain and the centre of the future kingdom of God, although its inclusion in the *Reis* is a thinly veiled attempt to add Biblical authority to the monstrous and marvellous imagery that is to follow. The *Reis* reports that no one could reach it unless they could fly, which corresponds with other versions of the legend where Brendan cannot progress beyond a certain point in Paradise, as the human mind cannot comprehend it. The walskerands' country and fortress adopt the features of the earthly paradise: the descriptions parallel those of the books of Genesis and Revelation and indeed, the name *mons syon* is considered the designation of Paradise in the Middle Ages.<sup>10</sup> However, it is difficult to reconcile the elements of the Holy Mountain and the monstrous descriptions of the Neutral Angels as they appear in the *Reis*.



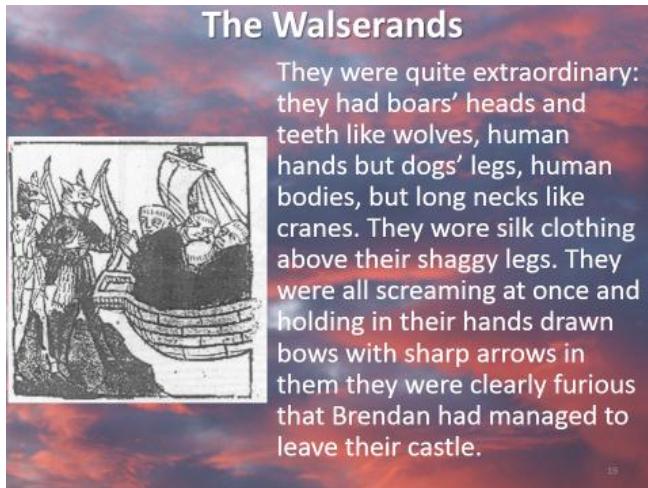
Despite the limited attempts to associate this encounter with Biblical imagery, once inside the fortress, the focus of the narrative quickly moves from the spiritual and towards the material. The crystal hall is filled with precious stones and the casts of many animals. Indeed the list reads like a *liber monstorum* and there is an ingenious description of a river

running through the walls which makes the animals appear to move.

As previously observed, unlike many other episodes in the *Reis*, the emphasis on this encounter is on the material rather than the spiritual. The descriptions of the hall show only wealth and wonder and, for a moment, Brendan and his monks seem led astray. However, Brendan becomes anxious following the supplication of his chaplain (who

<sup>10</sup> Clara Strijbosch, 'Between Angel and Beast: Brendan, Herzog Ernst and the World of the Twelfth Century,' *The Brendan Legend: Texts and Versions*, ed. Glyn Burgess and Clara Strijbosch (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 265–280, p.272.

parallels the monk in the *Navigatio* who stole from the Deserted Citadel). He feels that the beguiling display of wealth is a trap set by men 'who do not fear God'. This brings us to the second theme of this encounter: the monks flee to their boat, but are pursued by monstrous hybrid creatures. They call themselves the "walserands". The name only appears in the Dutch text. The origin of the word is unclear, but according to Jacob Grimm, the word may be a corruption of 'scrat' or 'walscrat' meaning 'evil wood spirit'.<sup>11</sup>



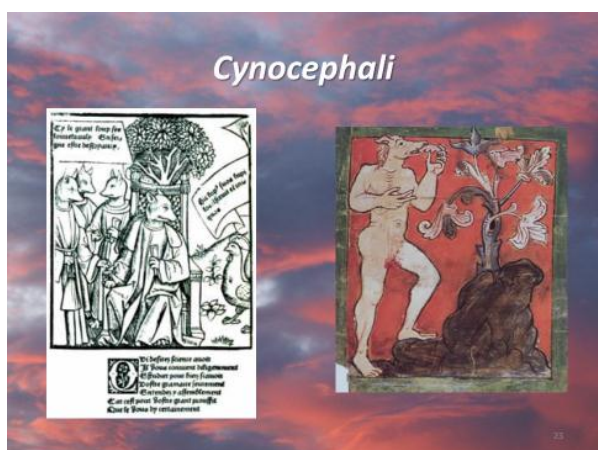
The creatures are described as hybrids so that they assume the traits of the various animals: they are described as having heads of pigs, but teeth of a wolf and long beards; they growl like bears. They have the neck of a crane, a human trunk, hands of men, legs of dogs and hairy feet. Dressed in silk, they carry bows as weapons, which Brendan commands them to lay down

and to reveal what they are. Rather than answering directly, one states that however well Brendan knows God, *they* knew him better and beheld Lucifer's fall owing to his pride, as seen in Isaiah 14:12. Brendan, citing Augustine and Aquinas, states that even angels do not dare to stand upright in the presence of God and declares 'what you assert is foolish talk.' He follows with a long rebuke, wondering how they have seen God when He is invisible. Thus Brendan reasserts himself as a Christian authority; however, the creatures equate Brendan to Thomas Didymus stating that he only believes God's words when he has seen proof for himself. Of course, honest doubt is the beginning of wholesome enquiry and the beginning of wholesome enquiry. Brendan, however, does not believe in anything that he is told. This is the overarching theme of the poem: the walserand knows that Brendan is being punished for his incredulity that resulted in his burning the book of marvels; now Brendan is told "Just think how Christ loves those who believe, but who have not seen".

<sup>11</sup> Jacob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, trans. James Steven Stally Brass, 4 vols (London: George Bell & Sons, 1883), vol. 2, pp. 478–83.

The text then describes the walserands: the symbolic characteristics of their hybrid nature are demonstrated in the attributes of the animals: their apathy during the war in Heaven is shown through their affliction with a swine's head – a pig has no virtues and has the 'unnatural tendency' to live in filth. They have the attributes of a dog as they behaved like dogs in heaven: they have no independent thought but are faithful only to their master. In this case, the angels would not attack anyone threatening their master, but would stand quietly by.

There is only a tenuous connection between the hybrid bestiality of the walserands and



their former status as angels, although we also see similar descriptions of creatures such as those outlined here in a volume of the *Marvels of the East*. The time that the *Reis* was composed, around the mid-twelfth century, was the time of the second crusade. Consequently, there was significantly more information available concerning the way to Jerusalem, but

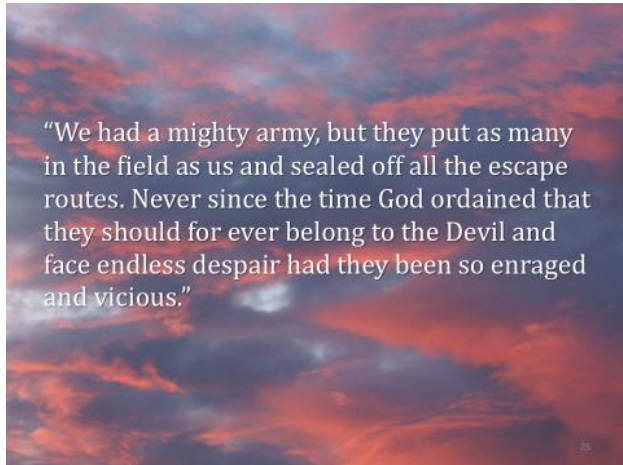
descriptions beyond Jerusalem were vague. It was believed that the terrestrial paradise was located somewhere in the East beyond Jerusalem. One manuscript of the *Marvels of the East* describes a race of half dogs called *cynocephali*:<sup>12</sup> creatures with dogs' heads, horses' manes, boars' tusks and fiery breath. The cities of the *cynocephali* 'are filled with all the worldly wealth: that is, in the south of Egypt'.<sup>13</sup> This description corresponds with that of the walserands and suggests that the *Reis* was indebted to a book describing *Marvels*, such as Brendan burned before the voyage. Cohen describes how *chansons de geste*, romances and manuscript marginalia show Islamic men as dog-headed warriors, and suggests that this hybrid shows the Other as both feral and responsive to the domestication of a Christian master'.<sup>14</sup> However, the fact that the creatures have pigs' heads, animals that are characterised as having 'no virtue' causes some consternation. The mouth is, as David Williams argues, 'the locus of speech, the sign and proof of

<sup>12</sup> **Cynos** (from *kynos*, the genitive of the noun **kyon** "dog"); **Cephalus** (Greek: Κέφαλος **Kephalos**).

<sup>13</sup> Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), p. 189.

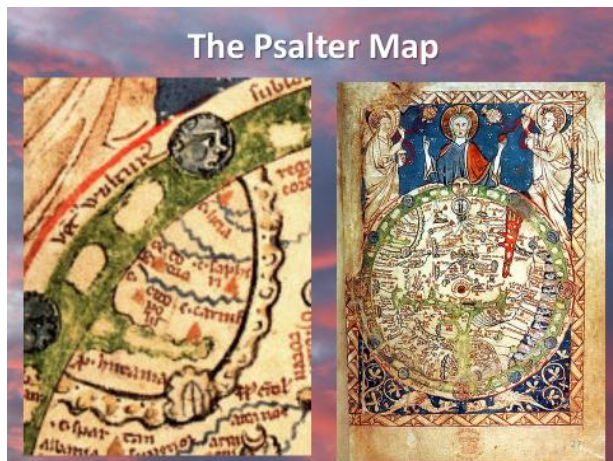
<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex Monsters and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 132.

rationality'<sup>15</sup> which perhaps raises some questions about how an angel – albeit one that no longer resides in heaven – can speak God's truth through the mouth of a swine. The description of the neutral angels is about judgement on outward appearance: the walserands may be monstrous, but they are still angels.



Whatever the truth about the walserands, they acknowledge “we are spared hell”. Corresponding with other representations of the neutral angels in the Brendan legends, despite their apathy, they did no evil, and were even given the country ‘as a reward’, although they now fight against those who align themselves with the devil – the text describes them as ‘dragons’,

which links them to the dragon/Satan in Revelation and steal from the walserands. They describe a mighty battle, but do not describe their adversaries. The *Reis* is a conglomerate of exotica and, if this encounter is partially influenced by Peter's epistle



(particularly the reference to *tartarus* and its association with The Beast from the Abyss), then it is plausible that the unexplained reference to fighting with neighbours could refer to a legend similar to that of the Gates of Alexander, as there are other allusions to the Alexander legend throughout the narrative.<sup>16</sup>

According to Legend, Alexander the Great, discovered the armies of Gog and Magog in the Caucasus mountains, and forged gates to keep the uncivilised races of the north away from the civilised races of the south. These Gates will open at the end of time and Gog and Magog will fulfil the prophecy to destroy the world. If this is the case, then the walserands in the *Reis* maintain the equilibrium of the world, by holding the forces of evil at bay.

<sup>15</sup> David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press 1996), p. 140.

<sup>16</sup> For example, the Gryphons at the Liver Sea.

As Brendan and his crew had no evil intentions, they are invited back to the hall to enjoy the walserands' hospitality. However, Brendan refuses. Although he does not give a reason, one can surmise that it is probably because the walserands have been – at least in part – rejected by God, and although God has provided the wealth for them, Brendan does not wish to spend more time with those who are not of God than is necessary.

The Dutch *Brendan* does not reveal the final fate of the walserands. They can only *hope* that God will have mercy upon them. Consequently, the walserands are unlike the Neutral angels from the *Navigatio*, who enjoy the freedom of bird form. Trapped in hideous bestial bodies, constantly fighting with those in neighbouring lands that plunder their crops, the walserands are punished as they are constantly tormented with uncertainty for what will befall them on Judgement Day. They have avoided the cruel fate of Lucifer and his companions, and spared Hell... for now.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> ll. 1990–3.