Irish Biblical Apocrypha

Selected Texts in Translation

EDITED BY

MÁIRE HERBERT AND MARTIN McNAMARA
1. **THE WONDERS OF THE NIGHT OF THE NATIVITY**

Here are related the seventeen wonders in the world on the night when Christ was born. It was on the eighth day before the calends of January that he was born. Numerous were the miracles and wonders throughout the whole world on that night.

On that night the vine was found to have ripened and to be in full fruit in Jerusalem.

On that night also, in truth, the palm was found to be bearing its bright crimson flower.

On that night twelve ears of clean corn were found in the east of the plain of Bethlehem.

On that night fourteen wells gushed from the plains and level lands of Bethlehem.

On the same night every lock and chain and fastening, and every temple was found to have opened of its own accord.

On that night a great and overwhelming light was seen to enter all the temples of the entire world, and none of those temples shone more brightly under a hot summer sun than they did on that night.

This was the seventh wonder, that all the inhabitants of the city were awakened from their sleep and slumber, and it was revealed to them that the sky close by them was full of majestic brightly-shining stars, which illuminated the whole world from east to west.

The eighth wonder was that the windows and doors of the great temple of Jerusalem all opened of their own accord on that night.

The ninth wonder was that the infants of Bethlehem in their mothers' wombs got the power of speech, as did also the babies who were being
suckled, and all of them were praising the Creator.

11 The tenth wonder was that a well of spring water burst forth in the land of Israel in a place where no well had been before, and this marvel may still be seen.

12 The eleventh wonder was that there was not a plain or field in the land of Judah which was not filled on that night with fiery crimson flowers, all containing honey and luscious fruit.

13 The twelfth wonder was that those with every infirmity were cured. Those who were blind, lame, or deaf, lepers, and those with palsy, were all made well on that night.

14 The thirteenth wonder was that the majestic star gave directions to the magi who came with gifts for Christ of gold, frankincense, and myrrh...

15 The fourteenth wonder was that the beasts and brute animals were awakened from their sleep and slumber, and were praising the Creator in the presence of the hosts, saying in unison with the angels of heaven: “Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus, Dominus Deus Sabaoth”. When the brute unthinking animals adored the Saviour, it behoves human beings to give him unceasing praise forever.

16 The fifteenth wonder was that all the wise men of Bethlehem, both magi and holy sages, were praising Christ in their sleep, and were prophesying concerning his wisdom and great miracles. And this caused great wonder to all.

17 The sixteenth wonder: As the historians relate, there appeared a whale on the shore of the Caspian Sea on that night. Its name was Sem(en)a. Its enormous size was indescribable, for with fifty men on top of its head, and each man distant from another as far as eye could see, such was the extent of land taken up by that whale. There were three hundred and fifty horns on its head, and each horn could hold enough drink for one hundred and fifty. Moreover, the remains of the whale, and those horns still remain in the houses of nobles in those lands yonder. The written sources say that, when that whale was dying,
three streams gushed forth from his throat, a red stream of wine, a stream of oil, and a stream of red gold.

18 Truly, it was in the time of Octavius Caesar that the prophecies came to pass, and that Jesus Christ was born. For when the Caesarian tax was being levied throughout the whole world, at that time Joseph and Mary came from Nazareth of Galilee to Bethlehem of Juda, to the city of David son of Jesse, for Joseph and Mary were of the line of David, and payment of the tax would not be accepted from them in any other place except in their own paternal land.

11A. ADDITIONAL RELATED TEXT

1 On the day after the birth of Christ, a four-cornered gold ingot appeared in the land of Arabia. From morning to night it continued to grow. The inhabitants of the land and of the adjoining territory were hacking and cutting at it throughout that time, but it remained entirely whole, however much was hewn from it.

2 Now the four-cornered ingot represents the Christian Church throughout the four quarters of the world. The growth of the ingot in the space of a single day signifies the spread of the Church in a single age of the six ages of the world. It also resembles Christ eternally, on whom there will be neither increase nor decrease throughout the ages.
11. THE WONDERS OF THE NIGHT OF THE NATIVITY

McNamara, no. 44A;

Text of *Leabhar Breac*, 132b-133b, collated with other manuscript copies. On the text tradition, see Brian Ó Cuív, "The seventeen won-

In what may be an earlier source used by the compiler, or perhaps even a later interpolation, Joseph in the Protoevangelium Iacobi (18,2) speaks of nature standing still and of other marvels taking place at the birth of Christ. “And I [Joseph] looked up at the vault of heaven, and saw it standing still and the birds of the heaven motionless. And I looked at the earth, and saw a dish placed there and workmen lying round it, with their hands in the dish. But those who chewed did not chew, and those who lifted up anything lifted up nothing, and those who put something to their mouth put nothing (to their mouth), but all had their faces turned upwards. And behold, sheep were being driven and (yet) they did not come forward, but stood still; and the shepherd raised his hand to strike them with his staff; but his hand remained up. And I looked at the flow of the river, and saw the mouths of kids over it and they did not drink. And then all at once everything went on its course (again)” (translation as in E.Hennecke-W. Schneemelcher, New Testament Apocrypha, I,383f.). The passage on the cessation of nature at Christ’s birth is also in the Arundel and Hereford Infancy Gospels (par. 72), in the Irish Infancy Narrative, edited by Hogan (par. 68) and in the text no 10 above (par. 14).

It may be that the tradition found in Irish texts of the seventeen (or sixteen) wonders on the night Christ was born developed from that on the silence or cessation of nature. The precise sources behind these wonders, however, remain to be determined. Robin Flower expressed the view that the “theme” for the Irish account of the seventeen miracles was a passage of Orosius’ Historiarum adversum paganos libri VII (6,18; ed. Zangmeister, CSEL 5, 413), where the Roman historian mentions three portents announcing the advent of Christ. Arguments in favour of this might be seen in the fact that Orosius’ text is clearly used in what appear to be Hibero-Latin commentaries on Luke (Expositio IV Evangeliorum, in Luke 2, PL 30, 587CD and the anonymous Vienna Commentary, In Lucam 2, ed. CCL 108C, 13). A stronger argument might be seen in the fact that the Catechesis Cellica (appar-
ently of Irish origin) develops Orosius' three portents into ten. Despite all this, as Vernam Hull (art. cit. p. 26) has noted, none of Orosius' portents (with the possible exception of the second) bears the least resemblance to the miracles enumerated in the Irish text. Furthermore, for Orosius these portents take place in Rome, not at Jerusalem. These observations apply also to the expanded version of them in the Catechesis Celtica.

Thus, the history behind the Irish text still remains to be disclosed.

11A. ADDITIONAL RELATED TEXT

Text of British Library MS Egerton 92, f 28va

See Brian Ó Cuív, "The seventeen wonders", pp. 117, 124.