The inventor of the glowing light (inventor rutili luminis) is hailed at the very outset of Prudentius’ Cathemerinon 5. That the word inventor has a special significance in this hymn becomes evident as it unfolds, for within it Prudentius uses an innovation in material culture (an invention) as the basis of a poetical exegesis. This article demonstrates how he does this, exploring the ways in which Prudentius employs imagery of light, fire and water / liquid in Cathemerinon 5. It argues that these have their origin in his celebration of the glass lamp, a newly introduced piece of technology in Prudentius’ day.

Christianity adopted light as a symbol very early on in its poetry, due to its importance in both the New and Old Testaments and dualistic movements such as Marcionism and Gnosticism. As Assendelft has observed, in Prudentius’ morning and evening hymns light takes on profound symbolic importance and she charts the use of imagery of light and the balance between light and dark in hymns such as Cathemerinon 5.

Ambrosius, among the first writers of Christian hymns, begins one by addressing splendor paternae gloriae, / de luce lucem proferens, / lux lucis et fons luminis, / diem dies inluminans; see further F.J.E. Raby, A History of Christian-Latin Poetry from the Beginnings to the Close of the Middle Ages 2nd ed., Oxford 1953, 35, and generally Den Boeijt in this volume. Herzog (ibid. 69) also cites Cyprian who a century earlier in his treatise on the pater noster calls upon Christ the true sun to make an appearance when the natural sun is setting (De orat. dom. 35).

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1 I am grateful for the many helpful suggestions made by participants at the conference, some of which I incorporated into the article. My special thanks to Professor Haijo Westra (Calgary) who read and commented upon preliminary drafts of the essay, assisted me with much of the German and Dutch scholarship and suggested the dual meaning of the word inventor. My thanks also to Dr Margaret O’Hea (Adelaide) for allowing me to quote from her conference paper (‘Ex Oriente Lux’) on the invention of the glass lamp. All quotations from Prudentius are taken from Thomson’s 1949 edition (Cambridge, Mass.).

Cathemerinon 5, the hymn to the lighting of the lamp, enables Prudentius to devise further dimensions to this imagery. It is understandable how the powerful visual impact of the new glass lamp would appeal to a poet in search of new forms of exegesis and Prudentius’ picture of it, occurring towards the close of the hymn, is one of the first detailed descriptions that we possess from antiquity.

When we examine his description in stanza 36 we can see that the emphasis is on light (lumina, lucem), fire (flamma) and liquid (languidulis natatibus) which was oil or a mixture of both water and oil. It is significant that the stanza concludes on the word vitre that is modified by the adjective perspicuo (lucem perspicuo flamma iacit vitro, 144). This is the only time in the whole of his poetry that Prudentius employs the noun for glass, a word that in its adjectival form was often applied to water. It is the symbolic implications of the glass lamp, uniting the elements of light, fire and liquid within it, that enables Prudentius to play with these concepts throughout the hymn, culminating in this description.

As Toohey has observed, Cathemerinon 5, like many other hymns of Prudentius, has a concentric or ‘ring’ structure with stanzas of invocation and stanzas about the significance of lighting the lamps surrounding biblical narratives in which there are scenes from both the Old and New Testaments.

Ring composition was a favourite device among classical poets who employed repetition of themes and topoi to create concentric patterning.

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3 Assendelft (n. 2), 23–24.
6 Nowhere else does Prudentius employ the term vitre. There is one instance of the Greek word for glass hyalus at Per. 12.53–54 (tum caminos hyalo insigni varie cucurrit arcus: / sic prata vernis floribus renident.) but it is doubtful as to whether this is a reference to actual glass, as most other instances of the substantive refer to a glass-green colour; see further Trowbridge (n. 5) 57. See also Trowbridge, ibid. 69 for an extensive list of references for vitreus applied to water in Latin literature; he comments “In the description of water vitreus is applied to almost every amount, from the dew drop to the vast ocean.”
7 P. Toohey, ‘Concentric Patterning in some Poems of Prudentius’ Liber Cathemerinon’, Latomus 52 (1993) 144. His divisions are as follows: stanzas 1–3: invocation; stanzas 4–7: occasion and significance; stanzas 8–34: biblical narrative (stanzas 8–26 OT, material benefits; stanzas 27–34 NT, spiritual benefits); stanzas 35–37: occasion and significance; stanzas 38–41: final prayer. His divisions and headings will be employed when the hymn’s imagery is discussed in the body of this article.