THE
GNOSTIC SCRIPTURES
A NEW TRANSLATION
WITH ANNOTATIONS
AND INTRODUCTIONS BY
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THE HYMN OF THE PEARL
or
THE HYMN OF JUDE THOMAS THE APOSTLE
IN THE COUNTRY OF THE INDIANS
IN THE GREEK VERSION (HPrI)

Contents

The Hymn of the Pearl ("The Hymn of the Soul") or The Hymn of Jude Thomas the Apostle in the Country of the Indians presents a Hellenistic myth of the human soul's entry into bodily incarnation and its eventual disembarkation from the body. The mythic tale of salvation is recounted by the protagonist (the soul) in the form of an autobiographical reminiscence. The myth does not directly demand a religious response from the reader, for it is a general description of salvation. Nevertheless, quoted within the story (verses 41–48) is a classic homiletic appeal for conversion, phrased in the traditional language of sleep and awakening. This has been identified as a special type of material (often loosely termed the "gnostic call"), which in fact transcends narrow sectarian and philosophical boundaries (cf. Bijn 31:10f, Zs 130:14f, Poin 27f, CH7 1f).

For the most part, the myth of salvation is not expressed literally in HPrI but, rather, is hidden behind a figurative fairy tale or folklore. To perceive the myth, an ancient reader would have needed to reinterpret the tale allegorically (for the technique, see the "Historical Introduction" to Part Three, "Allegorical interpretation of scripture"). The process of reinterpretation begins within the text of HPrI itself (verses 76–78, 88, 98); the prince's garment, given to him in reward for conquering the dragon of Egypt, is equated with self-acquaintance (gnōsis of the self); by putting on the garment the prince knows himself and "arises" into the realm of peace. Starting from this clue, an ancient reader could work back through the story at another level, retelling it as an account or model of the quest for self-knowledge and salvation. It must be emphasized that, except for the one explicit clue, the text itself provided ancient readers no more than a figurative representation of this hidden message. Readers had to supply or construct the rest of the deeper interpretation.

1 The titles The Hymn of the Pearl and The Hymn of the Soul, by which the present work is generally known, are the creation of modern scholarship. Neither one is found in any ancient manuscript of the work.

2 Some scholars have attributed the work to Bardaisan (born A.D. 154), the bilingual Christian poet and theologian of Edessa, but this attribution is not generally accepted.

Both popular belief and certain kinds of academic philosophy (especially Platonism and Pythagoreanism) accepted that the soul had its "origin" in a nonphysical "realm" from which it "had come"; that its incarnation in a material body hindered it from contemplating the good or god, and was generally harmful; that it might be saved from this unfortunate fate, e.g. by acquiring the self-knowledge taught by wisdom or philosophy; and that the result might be an existence free of the body's influence. The problem of why in the first place the soul had ever "fallen" into existence in a body was a topic of philosophical discussion.

The outlines of this commonplace myth of the soul are parallel to the story line of HPrI. They also agree with the mythic elements in GTh and BTh (the latter two works are overtly Christian while HPrI, as a figurative text, has no place to mention the Christian savior as such). The parallelism can be expressed as follows.

Story line (see Map 6). The (1) king of (2) the East (Parthia) sends (3) a royal prince by way of (4) the satrapy of Mesene ("Meson") to (5) Egypt. In order to (6) get a precious pearl. The prince (7) is poisoned and made intoxicated by (8) Egyptians. But he (9) is awakened by (10) a message from the king. He (11) takes the pearl and (12) returns to the East, where he puts on (13) a robe of gnōsis and (14) ascends to the king's palace, (15) entering the realm of peace.

Allegorical meaning (myth). The (1) first principle of (2) the spiritual realm providentially causes (3) the individual soul to descend past (4) the heavenly bodies (?) into (5) incarnate life in a material body, in order to (6) be educated (get salvation). The soul (7) becomes unconscious and inert because of (8) matter. But it (9) disengages itself in response to (10) the savior or message of philosophy (wisdom). It (11) becomes acquainted with itself and its career and (12) is metaphysically reunited with (13) itself (i.e. becomes integral) and with (14) the first principle, (15) gaining true repose.

Deduction of this myth from the story line of HPrI is confirmed by comparison of HPrI with other works of Thomas scripture; cf. Table 4. The results of such a comparison (column 2 of Table 4, "Implyed Philosophical Myth") describe a specifically Edessene interpretation of HPrI within the school of St. Thomas. But it remains possible that HPrI was originally composed elsewhere and that this interpretation was historically secondary; cf. below "Literary background." The total lack of any specifically Christian or Jewish details or characters also raises the possibility that HPrI was first written for a non-Christian readership. Only specific historical information about the circumstances of its composition could clarify these questions. In the absence of such information it is not surprising that modern scholars have substantially disagreed on the interpretation of HPrI.

Given the importance of the myth for one's life and conduct, why is the philosophical sense of the text not stated more explicitly? No definite answer to such a question is possible, but three factors are worth noting. First, HPrI is formally a work of art, not philosophy; a fairy tale and not a philosophical myth. Second, as a piece of religious art it may have had the secondary function of religious propaganda, that is, to attract interested external readers into a particular school of religious thought by its artistry (for this function, see also TRs, PIF, and even GTR). Third, by incorporating within the text a clue to a parallel allegorical reading, HPrI engages the reader in a lesson in interpretation; this would not be possible if the philosophical meaning were stated explicitly and completely. The other two works included in Part Four also insist on the importance of textual interpretation in the acquisition of salvation (GTh 1, BTh 138:1–371); an act of textual interpretation on the part of the believer seems to be an integral part of the idea of salvation in the school of St. Thomas.

Literal background

The author of HPrI is unknown. Since the text is only attested as a part of The Acts of Thomas (probably written in Edessa, A.D. ca. 200–250) any deductions about
the date and place of composition of HPrl must rest upon two prior questions: (a) whether HPrl was composed by the author of The Acts of Thomas; (b) whether HPrl presupposes a model of divine twoprison based on the name Didymus Jude Thomas (see the “Historical Introduction” to Part Four). To the first of these questions (a) most scholars have answered no; both its style (mainly in the Syriac) and its content suggest that HPrl was composed independent of The Acts of Thomas and was either incorporated in the Acts by their author or interpolated in them by a subsequent editor.

The second question (b) is harder to answer. If HPrl was composed in Edessa (see Map 6), comparison of its structure with the mythic background of GTh and BTh should indicate the original sense of HPrl. In such a case, HPrl could have provided the model, even if it were a non-Christian one, on which the Christian Thomas tradition was based; alternatively, HPrl might have presupposed the Thomas tradition and might represent an apologetic Popularization of that tradition in the form of a folktale. The crucial factor here is the order in which the three works—HPrl, GTh, and BTh—were composed.

But if HPrl was not composed in Edessa, its original meaning might have been something quite different from the theology of divine twoprison; the allegorical obscurity of the text would completely hide any such meaning unless further information could be obtained about the religious context in which the text originally was read. In such a case HPrl would have been imported to Edessa and secondarily adopted by the school of St. Thomas for its own purposes. The date of composition is presumably sometime during the Parthian dynasty of Persia (247 b.c. - A.D. 224), since Parthia is mentioned by name and favorably (HPrl 38). If the work was composed in Edessa, it would have been composed during the Parthian control of that city, which ended in A.D. 165. The original language of composition is a matter of debate—Greek, Syriac, or a simultaneous publication in both languages. The Greek version, which is translated here, is in an unclassical and often obscure prose style, reflecting perhaps the taste of the late-Hellenistic period with some regional peculiarity due to the bilingualism of Edessa.

HPrl is, in the words of the Greek Acts of Thomas (108), a “hymn” (psalmos), implying that it is designed to be sung, perhaps with instrumental accompaniment. It has the strophic form typical of Semitic poetry (neither the Greek version nor the Syriac is written in strictly controlled meter or with a fixed number of syllables per unit, nor is either version rhymed). In narrative structure HPrl resembles a classic folktale or fairy tale; in this sense, its genre is characteristic of oral, popular literature.

The allegorical motif of the pearl (cf. Mt 13:45-46, GTh 76) was widely used not only by Mesopotamian Christian authors, but also in ancient world literature in general.

Mythic characters

I. Inhabitants of the East

The King of Kings, the Great King, the prince’s father
His wife
Other kings (satraps) and royal officials of the Parthian empire
The prince, son of the King of Kings
A noble boy of high rank, who accompanies him in Egypt. Called Brother and Cousin.
Two guides along the road to Egypt
Two treasurers who bring the garment to the prince
A female being who guides the prince back from Egypt to the East

II. Intermediates

The Mosani, inhabitants of Meson (Maišan)
THE HYMN OF JUDE THOMAS THE APOSTLE
IN THE COUNTRY OF THE INDIANS

The journey down to Egypt

1. When I was an infant too young to talk, in my father's palace.
2. Reposing in the wealth and luxury of those who nourished me.
3. My parents equipped me with supplies and sent me out from the East, our country, on a mission.
4. From the wealth of their treasures they gave me a great cargo.
5. Which was light, so that I could carry it by myself.
6. The cargo was gold from the high country, silver plate of the great treasuries.
7. Emerald jewels of India, and agates of Kosan.
8. And they armed me with steel.
9. They took away from me the jewel-studded garment shot with gold.
10. That they had made out of love for me.
11. And the robe of yellow color (tailored) to my size.
12. But they made an agreement with me.
13. Impressed it on my mind, (so that) I might not forget it, and said,
14. "If you go down to Egypt and bring from there the one pearl,
15. Which resides there near the ravenous dragon."
16. "You shall put (back) on that jewel-studded garment and the robe, which you liked.
17. And you shall be a herald for our kingdom, along with your well-remembered Brother."
The bondage in Egypt

Since I had entered Egypt the guides departed who had traveled with me,
And I rushed directly to the dragon and camped near its den,
Lying in wait for it to grow drowsy and fall asleep, so that I might make away with the pearl.
Being on my own, I put on a disguise and (would have) seemed alien even to my own people.
But there I saw a Cousin of mine from the East—a free person,
Gracious, handsome, and young, a child of members of court:
Who came and kept me company,
And whom I made my friend and partner in my travels; had
as a constant companion;
And exorted to guard against the Egyptians and against intercourse with their impurities.
So I put on their style of dress, so that I might not look like one who was foreign
And (had come) from abroad to get the pearl,
Lest the Egyptians arouse the dragon against me.
But somehow they learned that I was not from their land.
They gave me a mixture of cunning and treachery, and I tasted their food.
I did not (any longer) recognize that I was a child of the (Great) King, but rather acted as servant to their king.
And I even came to the pearl for which my parents had sent me on the mission
But sunk into deep sleep under the heaviness of their food.

The exodus

110 Now, my parents also noticed me suffering these things, and they suffered over me.
So a proclamation was heralded in our kingdom, that all should present themselves at our court.

373 And next the kings of Parthia, those in office, and the leaders of the East
Decided that in my case I should not be left in Egypt.
So, too, the members of court wrote to me declaring as follows:
"From your father the King of Kings, your mother who rules the East,
"And their Brothers, who are second after them,
"To our child in Egypt. Peace!
"Arise, and become sober out of (your) sleep.
"Listen to the words written in this letter.
"Remember that you are a child of kings.
"You have fallen under a servile yoke.
"Call to mind your garment shot with gold.
"Call to mind the pearl for which you were sent on the mission to Egypt.
"Your name has been called (to) the book of life,
"Along with that of your Brother whom you have taken to yourself, in our kingdom.")

111 So the king confirmed it, as an ambassador.
Because of (the threat of) the Babylonian children and the tyrannical demons of the Labyrinth.
But for my part I gave a start when I perceived its voice.
And I took it up and kissed it, and I read.
But what was written there concerned that which was engraved in my heart.
And on the spot I remembered that I was a child of kings and that my people demanded my freedom.
I also remembered the pearl for which I had been sent on the mission to Egypt.
And the fact that I had been coming against the fearsome dragon for booty.

Or "the kings of virginity (Greek parthenoi)," the reading of the Greek MS. The Syriac version and the Greek epitome have "Parthia." For the Parthian empire, see "The cultural milieu" in the "Historical Introduction" to Part Four. It was subdivided into smaller kingdoms, each with its local "king." This title was used both by the kings of the Arsacid dynasty of Parthia from about ca. 250 a.c. to a.d. 224 and by the succeeding Sassanian dynasty (A.D. 224–636).
"Cf. note 108,
Second in rank; very high court dignitaries.
"Lit. "after us."
This word is, perhaps, inadvertently omitted in the MS; the Syriac version has "... thy name hath been read out in the list of the valiant."
"Of "region.
"of the (Great) King": lit. "of King," a traditional way of referring to the Persian monarch in Greek.
I.e. the Egyptians' food.
A.I.e. in the East.
Lit. "doors."

1109. a. The Syriac version here has "the borders of Misaan," which Wright identifies with "the district between al-Basra and Wasit, with a chief town of the same name": i.e. Mesene or Characene at the head of the Persian Gulf.
b. "land of the Babylonians": i.e. Egypt.
In HPV "Babyon" is not the Mesopotamian city on the Euphrates, as the author makes clear by the geographical order of place names (verses 18–19, 69–70). Rather, it refers to the Egyptian "Babyon," a fortified garrison in the vicinity of the great pyramids (at modern "Old Cairo") by Fostát. Babylon of Egypt was the site of an important Roman fortress, under the emperor Augustus, one of the three Roman legions in Egypt was stationed there.
c. Lit. "I became foreign in (my) appearance."
d. Probably not an indication of close blood relationship, but rather an Eastern title bestowed at royal court as a mark of honor.
e. Cf. verse 23.
f. These words are inadvertently omitted in the Greek MS; the Syriac version has "because I was come from abroad."
g. Or "region."
h. "of the (Great) King": lit. "of King," a traditional way of referring to the Persian monarch in Greek.
i.e. the Egyptians' food.
110. a. I.e. in the East.
b. Lit. "doors."
111. a. Or "sealed."
b. The saving letter is personified as a savior. It is to pass through hostile territory with the diplomatic immunitly of an ambassador.
d. "the Labyrinth": the Egyptian Labyrinth, a famous and extremely intricate temple complex southwest of modern Cairo. It is located beside the pyramid of Amenemhat (Amenemhet) III at Hawara in the vicinity of Crocodilopolis (Medinet el-Faiyum, capital of the Faiyum Oasis). For readers of the ancient Greco-Roman world the Labyrinth was the most known architectural monument of Egypt after the great pyramids. The cult of Sokh, the crocodile god, was popular in the Faiyum. The Greek version of HPV seems to imply that the pearl and its guardian "dragon" are in the Labyrinth. Verses 51–52 are a feature only of the Syriac version.
e. Lit. "I gave a start at its voice and perception."
f. Cf. verse 11.
g. The Greek MS here erroneously has "and that my freedom demanded my people." The Syriac version has "I remembered that I was a son of royal parents, and my noble birth asserted its nature."
h. Or "to snatch something," lit. "for snatching" (Greek harpēsin): cf. verse 61.
Then I heard it speaking:
"It is I who belong to the one who is stronger than all human beings and for whose sake I was designed by the father himself."
And for my part, I took note of my mature age:
And all the royal impulses reposed on me, as its energy increased:
Thrust out by that being's hand, it hastened to the one who was receiving it:
And a longing aroused me to rush and meet that being and to receive it.
Spread out . . . of colors . . . I was brought back.
And I completely clothed myself in my superior royal robe.

Return to the royal realm

Once I had put it on, I awoke into the realm of peace belonging to reverential awe.
And I bowed my head and prostrated myself before the splendor of the father who had sent it to me.
For, it was I who had done his commands.
And likewise it was he who had kept the promise.
And I mingled at the doors of his archaic royal building.
He took delight in me, and received me with him in the palace.
And all his subjects were singing hymns with reverent voices.
He suffered me also to be ushered in to the King's Court in his company:
So that with my gifts and the pearl I might make an appearance before the king himself.

i. The text of this verse in the Greek MS is corrupt. The Syriac version has "And I stretched forth and took it. With the beauty of its colors I adored myself."

b. Lit. "written.

j. Or "stature."

c. Lit. "motions."

d. Lit. "that being's": cf. verse 80. The original reading of the text is possibly "their."

e. The robe" is the "garment" spoken of earlier in the hymn; cf. verses 9-10.

f. The garment.

g. i.e. hastened to me as I went to receive it.

h. The garment.