



HYMN OF THE PEARL

HYMN OF THE PEARL, or Hymn of the Soul, a Syriac poem, of which an early Greek translation also exists, composed probably in the third century C.E. in the region of Edessa (q.v.; modern Urfa, in southeastern Turkey), in an environment strongly influenced by the Parthians. The text (see Poirier, 1981; this includes the edition of both the Syriac and Greek texts, with a French translation) is first attested in a 10th-century manuscript of the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas* (see the English translation by Drijvers, which includes the Hymn), where it is most likely an interpolation, though Meshcherskaya argues that it is part of the original composition. Although the *Acts of Thomas*, which purports to chronicle the apostolic mission to India of Yehuda/Judas, the twin brother (Syriac *thoma*, hence Thomas) of Jesus Christ, is replete with Christian themes and images (the Hymn, somewhat less so), the entire text was regarded by Manicheans as canonical, even though, with notable exceptions such as the Hymn itself, it does not reflect their doctrine precisely. A plausible but much-contested hypothesis attributes authorship of the Hymn to the poet and philosopher Bardesanes of Edessa (154–ca. 222). Han Drijvers has discovered in it aspects of his independently Gnostic (or unorthodox Christian) cosmology. The strongly Iranian flavor of the Hymn itself argues for Edessene origins: the city at that time was called “Daughter of the Parthians” and had close political links to Arsacid Armenia, where Bardesanes took refuge for the remainder of his life after the Roman conquest of the city.

Poetry, particularly in the form of heroic epic recited by bards (Parthian *gōsān*; Armenian 10anword *gusan*), played a central role in the pre-Islamic



Iranian world in the transmission of religious ideas; and the Hymn, a poetic masterpiece, can be read as a compressed heroic epic, employing, for the purpose of inculcating the doctrine of a Gnostic religion (either Manicheism or a religion like it), the venerable themes of the quest and dragon-combat. In Armenia the latter aspect, which displays Anatolian, Indo-European, and Iranian features, figures in epics of all periods, from the archaic myths about the god Vahagn (Avestan *Vərəθraγna*), the “dragon-reaper” (Armenian *višapak’at*), and the epic of Tigran II the Great (1st century B.C.E.) and his war with Aždahak the Mede, to the folk epic of Sasun recited down to the present day.

The itinerary of the princely hero of the Hymn would have been just as familiar to an Iranian or Armenian listener as the story line itself, for it is a virtual gazetteer of northwestern Iran and Mesopotamia; and the vocabulary of the hymn is itself replete with evocative Parthian loanwords. Thus the Hymn would have been ideally suited for preaching Manicheism orally to people of all social classes in Arsacid lands. One such area, where Bardesanes lived, was Armenia, a country thoroughly steeped in Iranian religion, social institutions, and culture, where Syriac was also quite widely known, and to which Māni dispatched two epistles; the Manichean apostolic legend of Mar Gabryāb also appears to draw upon previously existing Armenian Christian apostolic legendry (originating from the Edessene *Doctrine of Addai*), and to have an Armenian *locus*.

In the *Acts*, while the reader is repeatedly reminded that his native speech is Hebrew, Thomas recites the Hymn to his fellow sufferers in an Indian prison. This is an ironically appropriate frame narrative, since the Hymn presents the world itself as a prison; and it serves also to emphasize the essentially oral character of the Hymn as a performance piece. The Hymn is recited in the first person by the hero, the Prince, whose parents, the King of Kings and the Queen of the East, send him from Parthia to retrieve the Pearl from the abode of the serpent, in the sea near Egypt. They equip him for the long journey with two guides (Syriac loanword *parwanqā*, from Middle Iranian *parwānag*) and treasures from Ganzak, Kušān, and India. He takes off his splendid robe and travels down through Mesopotamia, by way of Mesene, Babel, and demon-haunted Sarbūg (probably from Serug, a place connected by Jews and Christians with the origins of idolatry, rather than the Iranian word **sāru-pāka*, which was hypothesized by Ilya Gershevitch [1954]; but in the Hymn its demons are Iranian *dēws*, q.v.). His companions part from him, and he settles



near the serpent's inn (Syriac loanword *ašpāzā*, cf. Persian *sepanj*, Armenian *aspnĵ-akan*). There he meets and befriends a compatriot freeman (cf. Middle Iranian *āzād*) to whom he explains his mission. He is warned to disguise himself and to shun the ways of the Egyptians, but he falls victim to the treachery of the local people, who perceive him as a stranger; he eats their food, forgets his mission, and falls asleep. Apprised of his peril, his parents convene the nobles and chieftains of Parthia and send a letter, which travels in the shape of an eagle, to awaken him and remind him of his identity and his mission; once he accomplishes it, he is to return, in order that his name should be read in the Book of Heroes (Syriac *sfar ḥališē*) and he should put on his robe and become joint-heir with his brother. The prince rises and remembers and goes forth, but he does not fight the serpent as a traditional epic hero might; rather, he casts a spell, or “magianizes” (*memaggēš*), which puts the serpent to sleep, and takes the pearl home, passing through Hyrcania (Gorgān) on the way. He puts on his marvelous robe, perfectly tailored to his figure and richly adorned with the image of the king of kings, which moves, shimmers, and utters the gnosis. Once more among the princes of Parthia (the Syriac text uses the Middle Iranian term *wāspuhr* “prince” and employs also the Parthian title of the heir-apparent, *pasgrīw*, an office actually attested at Edessa), he presents the Pearl to his father.

The poem is a Gnostic allegory, if by the term one means only to characterize a few canonical religions, and many more religious movements, which shared in common the general philosophy and sentiment that man is a stranger in a degraded, prison-like, and deceptive world that he must escape from; he must regain the happiness of his true and luminous self in this alien universe, with the help of hard-won esoteric knowledge (*gnōsis*). The “Iranian” form of gnosticism, suffused with the Zoroastrian cosmic drama of the opposition of good and evil, but reversing in its anti-cosmic stance the worldview of the older faith, presupposes a radical dualism between the worlds; in the Hymn these two worlds are represented by Iran, the realm called in the Hymn simply the East (Syriac *madnaḥā*), and Egypt, a place of darkness in the Bible and in Iranian lore (where it is the abode, for instance, of Alexander “the Accursed”).

A number of the places mentioned in the Hymn figure in the itineraries of Mani himself, though this may be simply because he was a traveler in the same region. The plot and imagery of the Hymn find their closest analogues in the religious traditions that developed and survived down to modern times in the very regions where it is set: the Aramaic-speaking Mandaean (lit.



Gnostics) of Iraq and Iran tell the story of Hibil-Ziwa, dispatched by his father from the heavenly realms to rescue a pearl from the “dark worlds” that are guarded by a dragon (see Drower). He is unable to return; so, following a council convened by his worried father, Manda d-Hiia (Gnosis of Life) sends him a letter in the form of a bird. One can find parallels for the prince’s freeborn companion in the Mandaean belief in a guardian spirit called “brother or sister of *Mšunia Kušta*” (i.e., Paradise) and the institution in the Yazidi religion, a Kurdish faith with ancient Iranian roots, of the brother and sister of the afterlife (Kurdish *birē axiretē*, *xūška axiretē*). In the mystical philosophy of Sohrawardi (d. 1191) called *ešrāq*, or “going to the East,” the soul, alien to this earth and forgetful of its home, must find a pearl on Mt. Qāf and make a return journey to the Light. In his spiritual geography, sorrow (*anduh*) dwells in Egypt, just as in the Hymn. Rudolf Macuch has suggested that Sohrawardi derived some of his terminology for the luminous, otherworldly realms, such as *Hurqalyā* “burning fire,” from Mandaic **anhūr qalyā* (same meaning), from Mandaean Aramaic usages.

The mention of a *Book of Heroes* would have evoked for ancient listeners to the Hymn the Zoroastrianized champions of the Kayanian epic cycle, who are celebrated in both liturgical and minstrel poetry and commemorated at feasts. The conceit of “the book within the book” is itself a kind of introspective reflection upon fame and the epic genre. The robe is probably representative of the spiritual self or double: the medieval Armenian poet Kostandin of Erzinka (Turkish Erzincan) describes (see Russell, “Epic of the Pearl”) his childhood vision of the luminous youth who gave him the gift of poetry, whom he begs for the gift of a fine robe (*xilay*). Most elements of the description of the robe in the Hymn might apply to actual Iranian brocades of the day, which were indeed decorated with roundels portraying the king of kings, and later, eagles carrying youths, a motif which evokes the letter-eagle that guided the Prince home.

Whereas one might expect the hero to slay a dragon, the Prince instead sacerdotally enchants it (the Syriac term derives from Old Persian *magu* and refers to the chants of the Zoroastrian magi, which were supposed to possess supernatural power); he does not confront his enemies, but rather he disguises himself. Although this is in keeping with the aversion to violence of many gnostics, it still surprises the expectations of a listener accustomed to the literary formula of dragon combat. The Hymn as a whole derives added impact from the surprise thus achieved by employing, and then deliberately



undermining, the epic genre. While the epic is intrinsically social and affirmative of human institutions, the Hymn is intensely individual, almost dreamlike, and the Prince's quest has as its aim, not earthly life, but departure from it.

While the Iranian setting and epic genre certainly predominate, many images of the Hymn would be congruent and evocative also for a listener acquainted with the Jewish and Christian scriptures: Moses in Egypt as a stranger in a foreign land, the precious pearl, the rescue of Israel "on the wings of eagles" from Egyptian captivity, and the parable of the prodigal son are prominent examples of such parallels. Jewish and pagan Mesopotamian listeners would have recognized in the dragon combat their own themes, of Leviathan, and of the victorious *Drachenkampf* celebrated in the *Enuma Eliš* (see Parpola. pp. 181-93). However, these multiple and multicultural layers of meaning reflect the reality of the Iranian world of the Arsacid and Sasanian periods, where Zoroastrians, Jews, Armenian and Syrian Christians, and adherents of numerous other faiths coexisted. Mani addressed his hybrid, gnostic message to all of them.

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