

## The Hymn of the Pearl

Recent translations of ancient Mandaean and Manichaean texts, from a time period at least two hundred years prior to the organization of the Roman Catholic Church, provide significant insight to the ritual literature of Primitive Christianity. The beautiful imagery and symbolism of the early Christian poem known as the "Hymn of the Pearl," portrays a soul's journey from the heavenly court of regal parents through an earthly probation to a divine inheritance. Scholars varyingly date this work as early as 50 AD, (within the first generation of Christians), to as late as 150 AD.

The Pearl contains a phrase hauntingly recognizable to those familiar with the nineteenth century hymn "O My Father." After setting the backdrop the recitation begins: "In my first primeval childhood I was nurtured in the royal house of my Father with loving care in the midst of abundance and glory."

Excerpts from John Welch and James Garrison thoughts on this subject contain the following, "The Hymn of the Pearl is quoted in an apocryphal work entitled The Acts of the Apostle Thomas, probably named after Didymus Judas Thomas, the same Thomas who doubted Christ's resurrection. Many manuscripts of the Acts survive, but only two contain the Hymn of the Pearl; one is a Syriac version and the other is in Greek. The original text of the hymn appears to have been written in Syriac, in the first or second century AD.

In The Acts of Thomas, we find Thomas imprisoned in India, imploring the Lord for deliverance. When he finishes praying for himself and for the other prisoners, he sits down and begins to recite the Hymn of the Pearl. The hymn tells of the journey of a soul through a treacherous kingdom in order to recover a sacred pearl and to return with it to awaiting parents. The whole poem is spoken by the soul in the first-person singular, making it beautifully personal. The composition begins with the soul as a young boy in his primeval childhood, being nurtured in the royal house of his parents, the King of Kings and the Queen of the East.

One day his parents instruct him that he is to leave home and his glittering robe and garments and take a journey down into Egypt to find there a pearl guarded by a terrible serpent. The parents covenant with him that, if he recovers the pearl and returns home with it, he will be allowed to put his glorious robes back on and will be made an heir in the kingdom together with his oldest brother, the second in command. Accordingly, he leaves home with a bundle of provisions prepared for him, and with a pair of guides, he makes his way for Egypt.

He is left on his own just outside of Egypt, and he decides to head straight for the serpent, because, if he can catch it asleep, he can easily snatch the pearl away and accomplish his mission. Outside the den he settles in, waiting for the serpent to fall asleep, and while there, encounters a young man from his homeland, whom he takes in as a partner and companion and whom he warns

about the wickedness of the Egyptians. He also decides to dress himself in Egyptian clothes in order to blend in with them lest they recognize him as a foreigner and call the serpent against him. The Egyptians, however, detect him and trick him into eating their food. The food has the effect of a drug, making him forget who he is and that he is on a mission; soon he is serving the king of Egypt.

Meanwhile, his parents and oldest brother see his plight and in council decide that they must write a letter commanding him to wake up and to remember that he is a son of royalty and that he is on a sacred mission. All the nobles of the kingdom sign the letter, the king seals it with his right hand, and it is sent. The letter reaches the boy, wakes him up from his sleep, and reminds him of his origin and his purpose. Determined to fulfill his mission, he puts the serpent to sleep by invoking the name of his father, his mother, and his elder brother. He seizes the pearl, sheds the filthy clothes of the Egyptians, and makes a journey back to his home in the East. As he approaches his home, his beautiful robe and garments are sent out to him, and after dressing himself in them, he reenters the home of his parents with the pearl. There he is lovingly received and made an heir to the kingdom together with the eldest brother.

Hugh Nibley, a scholar of considerable credentials, sees the hymn as the reflection of a ritual journey of the soul, a journey of "deliverance from the dark prison of this world and of the underworld." Accordingly, the main character in the hymn is the redeemed soul, probably of a typical good Christian, retelling the story of personal salvation and deliverance. Especially intriguing to Nibley is the bundle of treasures given to the soul before the soul leaves its premortal existence. In his view, the Apostle Thomas is suggesting that the treasures are "the treasures of wisdom" or the knowledge of ordinances, especially those of the temple, and the garment left behind symbolizes the premortal glory of the soul and the robe of the priesthood.

The soul travels down through Babel and into Egypt, which represent the materialistic world and "spiritual Sodom," or the telestial world. The pearl that the soul must find there is in fact the soul itself, "rescued and returned from the depths." The serpent guarding the pearl embodies all obstacles that would impede progress and spiritual growth. The Egyptian food that puts the soul to sleep could have various interpretations, such as sin or pride; Nibley, however, favors the view that it represents the false philosophies of men.

Concerning the robe sent to the soul as it returns home, Nibley wishes to see this encounter in a ritual sense, although the text is problematical and hence most translations of this passage are obscure. Passing through this stage, the soul is received back to its heavenly family, where it receives the promised rewards. Significantly, the hymn mentions not only the soul's father, the King of Kings, but also the soul's mother, the Queen of the East, (likely Sophia, the ancient mother goddess revered throughout the ancient world). The Hymn puts emphasis on the elder brother and second in command, who symbolically is Jesus, the anointed

one and eldest son of God the Father and his soul mate. The letter is sent from the heavenly home to the sleeping soul.

### **East**

Excerpts from Alonzo Gaskill regarding the significance of East: “From earliest antiquity, the four cardinal directions have held an important place in most cultures. Most Semitic peoples used the rising of the sun as their primary point of reference. (See Genesis 13:14; 28:14; Deuteronomy 3:27; Luke 13:29, compare Isaiah 11:12; Ezekiel 37:9) Because the sun rose in the east and served as their principal means of gaining bearings, that direction was preeminent. The direction mentioned in a (biblical) verse is often the key to understanding the essential message of the verse. One who naively glosses over specified directions will miss much of import in scriptural texts.” In scripture, God attributed symbolic significance to directions. East is the direction that represented God. If something came from the east it was representative of the idea that it was of God, sent by God, or godly in nature. Anciently, maps up through the Middle Ages typically placed east at the top.

When Adam and Eve partook of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they were driven out of Eden in an eastward direction. The Eastward movement of Adam and Eve following their expulsion from Eden should not be overlooked. Its presence in the text ensures that the student of scripture will perceive the Fall as positive, and a divinely foreordained event. This concept was subsequently changed by the Roman church after 325 AD. If something moves eastward, it is symbolically moving toward God. The eastern sky represents Heaven. The Queen of the East is another name for Sophia, the Queen of Heaven, Mother of Light, High Priestess of the Eternities, Woman of Holiness.

### **Symbolism**

Symbolism in its various forms is intentionally present in scripture. This fact seems to be counter-intuitive to Western thought. None-the-less, symbolism is the very language of scripture. The entire scholarly world is united in the belief that the standard Christian approach to the Old Testament was typological. This approach is evident in New Testament writings and heavily present in the writings of the Apologists of the second and third centuries. (Before Christianity became the political institution of Rome) Maurice Farbridge noted that “in the ancient East...symbolism permeated the whole life of the people.” One text on the history of biblical interpretation notes: “Without the typological method it would have been almost impossible for the early church to retain its grasp on the Old Testament... The early church was intensely interested in the ways in which the life of Jesus was prefigured in the Old Testament.” To be fluent in the language of the Spirit one must be fluent in the language of symbolism.