

The Hymn of the Pearl – an Edessan *Okhēma*?

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The so-called *Hymn of the Pearl* is a poem embedded in the narrative of the 2nd-century apocryphal text *The Acts of Judas Thomas, Apostle to the Indians*. In my paper, I will briefly detail the contents of the hymn with special attention to its doctrine of a celestial “coat” or “body.” before recounting several schools of interpretation of it:

- First, I will discuss the interpretation Hans Jonas, who saw the poem as describing the descent and ascent of the “redeemed redeemer.” I will argue that Jonas’ reading is prey to many of the weakness of scholarship of his time, but also has great insight for us today.
- Second, I will detail the text’s background in the “Thomasine School” of Gnosticism, as emphasized by Bentley Layton. Given the text’s locus in the *Acts of Thomas* and the great importance of Thomasine Christianity in Syria, the Thomasine context cannot be ignored. This background, I will argue, explains the *Hymn*’s emphasis on asceticism, its climax in a visionary mystical experience, and the identification of donning the subtle body with achieving ultimate self-knowledge.
- Third, Layton has also suggested further research into the Greek philosophical background of the *Hymn*. Consequently, I will briefly compare the hymn’s doctrine of the subtle body with Neoplatonic conceptions of the soul’s vehicle, or *okhēma*.

I will conclude that this comparison is not a fruitful one, and that the *Hymn*’s doctrine of the celestial body must be sought elsewhere. The Thomasine context is promising, but the philosophical one doesn’t pan out. Further research into the hymn requires, first, greater understanding of the Jewish visionary ascent mysticism of the Levant, and, second, a solid comparison of the contents of the *Hymn* with 1st and 2nd-century C.E. Syrian transformative baptismal liturgies, as discussed in the work of Wayne Meeks and Dennis Ronald MacDonald (although I will propose some modifications to their analysis of the *Hymn*). This comparison indicates that the *Hymn* and its doctrine of the celestial coat may have originated within 1st-century Semitic Christian circles, instead of pre-Christian Jewish and/or Iranian groups.