The Hodayot are unlike both biblical psalmody and most of Second Temple prayer and psalmody in the degree to which the “I” who speaks describes and reflects on what one might call his “sense of self.” This essay attempts to uncover some of the conceptualizations of the self present in the Hodayot and to demonstrate how they differ from antecedent conceptualizations, even as they make use of older materials and motifs. The object of this type of inquiry is often referred to as “indigenous psychology.” This term is borrowed from anthropology and refers to folk theories about the nature of the person and its relation to the world, theories that are often embodied in unselfconscious language usages, as well as in explicit statements. Even where these conceptualizations of the person are not self-consciously explicit, it is often possible to deduce them from an analysis of the metaphors and even the syntax of the texts.

Theoretical Models

For several decades there has been a growing interest in the anthropology of the self, an inquiry that has increasingly become tied to cognitive studies (cognitive linguistics, cognitive study of metaphor, cognitive anthropology). Cognitive studies has made the case that

1 It is with great pleasure that I dedicate this essay to Eileen Schuller, whose critical text editions and interpretive work is foundational for all future study of the Hodayot.


certain basic facts about our embodied nature entail the recognition that some universals exist in our ways of thinking and of conceptualizing ourselves. Nevertheless, these universal determinants leave a significant amount of room for particular and varied realizations in different cultures—and, indeed, within a culture.

A particularly helpful and flexible model for analyzing universal and particular features in indigenous psychologies is one developed by Paul Heelas and Andrew Lock, which focuses in particular on the capacity for agency. The model assumes two universal coordinates, identified as location and control. First, location: every culture must have some ability to differentiate between a self and its other, a conceiver and its environment. In large part, this is the distinction between internal and external, although the nature of what constitutes internal and external admits of considerable variety. Second, control: this has to do with how activity and passivity are conceptualized. Is a person “in control” or envisioned as “under the control” of someone or something else? The accompanying figure 1 illustrates the coordinates.

Working with this set of coordinates, Heelas and Lock plot out a number of ethnographically well-studied indigenous psychologies, as illustrated in figure 2.

Here the polar opposites are what they call “idealist” and “passiones” psychologies. In the idealist psychology the external world is envisioned as dependent upon the self, as in Tibetan Buddhist thought, in which “the world and all phenomena which we perceive are but mirages born from our imagination.” The self is in control, and the location of this control is internal, in the mind. Other examples would include certain new age “mind over matter” psychologies, such as EST or A Course in

make an impact on biblical studies. The most comprehensive study, based in cognitive grammar, is E. van Wolde, Reframing Biblical Studies: When Language and Text Meet Culture, Cognition, and Context (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009).

4 After Heelas and Lock, Indigenous Psychologies, 33.
5 After Heelas and Lock, Indigenous Psychologies, 40.