“THE GARMENT Poured ITS ENTIRE SELF OVER ME”:
CHRISTIAN BAPTISMAL TRADITIONS AND THE ORIGINS OF THE HYMN OF THE PEARL

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1. Introduction

Aside from his pioneering work on Sethian Gnosticism and Neoplatonism, John Turner is also a leading scholar of Gnostic ritual culture and the traditions associated with the apostle Thomas. Therefore this contribution, fondly dedicated to him, turns to that justifiably famous piece of ancient poetry, the so-called Hymn of the Pearl, embedded in the narrative of the second-century apocryphal text The Acts of Judas Thomas, Apostle to the Indians. While the Acts were probably written in Syriac, the wide use of Parthian terminology in the Hymn hinting at a dating somewhere in Sassanian-occupied Syria (thus in the first two centuries CE),\(^1\) the origins of the poem remain a mystery. In the following, I will briefly detail the contents of the Hymn with special attention to its doctrine of a celestial “garment” or “robe,” before detailing several modern interpretations of it, advanced by Poirier, Layton, and DeConick. Each approach has its virtues, but is also inadequate, inviting a closer look into its background in early Christian baptismal liturgy. This comparison indicates that the Hymn and its description of a robe that “pours itself” over its protagonist may have originated within early Christian baptismal circles, instead of pre-Christian Jewish and/or Iranian groups.

\(^1\) For dating the Acts Thom., see Bremmer 2001; on the language of the Hymn, see Poirier 1981, 169 ff., 261 ff.; Drijvers 2003, 332. See now also Russell 2001–2002, esp. 206, a study which helpfully elucidates the Parthian background of Syria during the period of the Hymn’s composition, but does not address the abundant Jewish and Christian lore that the text also draws upon. Beyer 1990, 241, also suggests a non-Christian, Iranian origin for the poem.
2. The *Acts of Thomas* and the *Hymn*

The *Acts of Thomas* is a typically Hellenistic romance which features the (mis)adventures and martyrdom of one of the Apostles, probably written in Syriac around the turn of the third century. In our story, Jesus sells our eponymous hero to a Hindu merchant, forcing him to evangelize in India, where various escapades ensue (there are weddings, wedding nights interrupted, man-eating tigers, and a good deal of carpentry). As apostles are wont to do, he breaks up a marriage, winds up in jail, and sings a song, our *Hymn*.

The contents of the hymn may be briefly described as follows: a young prince is sent by his parents to Egypt to recover a pearl guarded by a ferocious serpent. He is told that when he returns, he will receive a beautiful robe and rule the kingdom, second in authority only to his father. Once in Egypt, the prince falls prey to the malicious wiles of the locals and forgets his quest. His royal parents learn of his troubles, sending a magical letter that awakens him. He recalls and accomplishes his mission by putting the dragon to sleep with a magic spell. Finally, he returns home, and at the palace the royal servants bring out the robe, the description of which is clearly the centerpiece of the *Hymn*, as follows:

> And because I did not remember its fashion—
> For in my childhood I had left it in my father’s house—
> All of a sudden, when I received it,
> The garment seemed to me to become like my mirror image.
> I saw it all in all,
> And I too received all in it,
> For we were two in distinction
> And yet again one, in one likeness.
> And the treasurers too,
> Who brought it to me, I saw in like manner
> To be two (and yet) one likeness,
> For one sign of the king was written on them (both) ...

The prince goes on to list the various jewels on the robe. Then:

> And I saw also that all over it
> The rumblings of knowledge were working,

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2 On the Hellenistic romances and the various Acta of the apostles, see the classic study of Söder 1932.
3 Chs. 105–108.
4 Vss. 75–81. All translations in the following are my own, except where noted. The text is from Poirier 1981; for the Greek, see also Bonnet 1959.