PART THREE

PATRISTIC STUDIES
NOTES ON DIVESTING AND VESTING IN
THE HYMN OF THE PEARL

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The *Hymn of the Pearl* is a ballad about a quest for one magic jewel and a set of magical or religious garb. Seemingly composed in the second century, it survives in only two manuscripts, both preserved in the British Library. This conventional title is not original; neither are two other titles by which the ballad is known: the “Hymn to the Redeemer” and the “Hymn of the Soul.”

These later titles, however, indicate a continuing problem within the scholarly interpretation of the composition: although it sings a tale whose details are specific, if mystifying, the *Hymn of the Pearl* seems to attract metaphorical interpretations that are retrojected as its genuine meaning. In that way, it resembles in miniature certain canonical works; a theological imperative of some kind propels later readers to insist, as the *Pirēkē Aboth* says of Torah, that “everything is in it.” It is Gnostic; it

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1 Early last spring I asked Robert Grant whether *The Hymn of the Pearl* was a Gnostic composition. It was a propitious day and occasion to inquire—an annual St. Patrick’s Day party to honor with libations a mysterious hero who, like the youth in the *Hymn*, charmed and exorcised snakes. This was a question I had neglected to ask as a student in his 1977 seminar on Gnosticism, but now the time was ripe to approach the oracle. All fellow disciples of Professor Grant will savor his gnomic reply: “Not necessarily.” Unlike Grant, other scholars, less ambivalent, have been more certain about the gnostic origins of the *Hymn*. It is to Professor Grant, then, and to his learned caution that this article is gratefully dedicated, for instruction received since then *viva voce* and in numerous illuminating publications. From him I have learned an important lesson: far more questions in the study of early Christianity remain open than stamped with the deadening letters: case closed.

2 For a recent discussion of the possible ancient purposes of the tale of the hero’s quest, see Walter Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religions* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 56–78. To Burkert’s list of examples could be added modern ones like *The Lord of the Rings* and other works of J.R.R. Tolkien, and (*pace* Burkert, who thinks the quest tale is being replaced by visual media), massively multiplayer online (video) games World of Warcraft or the single-player AdventureQuest, as well as the film *The Matrix* and its videogame spinoff.