

## Compte rendu

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POIRIER, Paul-Hubert, *L'Hymne de la Perle des Actes de Thomas*. Introduction, texte, traduction, commentaire

par D. J. Lane

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l'Église ne peuvent jamais avoir un juste motif de changer ou de révoquer en doute cette foi » (Dz 1794), plusieurs théologiens ont cru que tout passage à l'hérésie ou à l'apostasie implique un péché directement contre la foi, ou contre quelque autre vertu. Alors qu'il y avait vu antérieurement une faute grave, l'A. a depuis changé d'avis. « La raison immédiate, d'ordre émotif, de ce changement » a été une expérience déconcertante d'un cas d'apostasie. Le motif d'ordre scientifique est l'opinion de trois théologiens (R. Aubert, J. Alfaro, Z. Alzephy). R. Aubert, après un examen élaboré du texte et des documents de Vatican I, arrive à la conclusion que le concile n'a pas eu l'intention d'affirmer, comme le voudraient Harent et Strasser, « que toute apostasie soit nécessairement coupable, ni même, comme le pense Stolz, que toute apostasie liée à un examen scientifique des motifs de crédibilité, le soit » (R. Aubert, *Le problème de l'acte de foi*, 1958, p. 218).

Un autre chapitre qui se rattache pareillement à la foi, n'est pas d'un moindre intérêt. L'A. y aborde un problème soulevé depuis les premiers siècles du christianisme, celui du « salut de ceux qui n'ont pas la foi sans faute de leur part ». L'A. y fait un relevé intéressant des opinions et des ouvrages écrits sur le sujet, puis il apporte à son tour « un nouvel essai de solution ».

On pourra n'être pas toujours d'accord avec l'A. Mais l'on reconnaîtra qu'il aborda d'une manière courageuse et pénétrante les vraies difficultés.

Henri-M. GUINDON, S.M.M.

Paul-Hubert POIRIER: *L'Hymne de la Perle des Actes de Thomas*. Introduction, Texte, Traduction, Commentaire. Louvain-la-Neuve, 1981. (Homo Religiosus 8.) 462pp.

Of the 462 pages in this work a mere 8 pages suffice for the Syriac text of the *Hymn of the Pearl*, which 8 pages reproduce folios 30 verso–32 recto of the British Library Additional Manuscript 14.645. This manuscript, containing 430 folios in two volumes, presents 41 lives of saints and martyrdoms and was given to the Syriac monastery of St Mary Deipara in Egypt. There is an irony in that it was given by a deacon from Takrit, on the Tigris, for whom it was written in 936 AD: the manuscript's link with both Iran and Egypt reflects the association of the *Hymn of the*

*Pearl* with an origin in Iran and Egypt as well as its contents, the journey of a Prince who was sent by his royal father to Egypt in order to recover a pearl guarded there by a dragon and so prove himself worthy of this proper place “in the East.” (The manuscript is described in W. Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum*, pt III, London 1872, at p. 1111.)

The brevity and the simple Syriac of the *Hymn of the Pearl* make the text an obvious one for use by beginners in Syriac, and the text has been readily available in Semitic Study Series, New Series, *A selection of the Acts of Judas Thomas*, Edited, with an Introduction, by T. Jansma, Leiden 1952 as well as in the 1968 Philo Press reprint of William Weight's *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, London 1871. But the discrepancy in length between the text commented upon, 8 pages, and the discussion of it in the remainder of the 462 pages of the work under review is a clear indication that the *Hymn of the Pearl* is far from being simple. The *Hymn* raises all the complex questions of the origin and development of Syriac Christianity as well as the complex questions of literary and critical methods suitable for an analysis and critique of a piece of writing. In *Symbols of Church and Kingdom, a Study in Early Syriac Tradition*, London 1975 at p. 7 Robert Murray comments on the speculative intellectual systems associated with early Syriac Christianity in Edessa, concluding that “Christianity in communion with the Great Church developed there as a sort of precipitate in a cloudy solution.” At page 7 of *Syriac Manuscripts in the Harvard College Library: A Catalogue*, Missoula 1979, Moshe H. Goshen-Gottstein states that “Syriac studies in the broadest sense lie outside the province of the Semitist — an endangered species in any case.” One who would examine a Syriac text, therefore, must possess not only the knowledge of the language, but also that of Christian origins, intellectual history, comparative religion. And, in addition, a proper understanding of the current methods of literary criticism.

The great strength of the work under review is that Professor Poirier has shown himself extremely competent in all those areas, and may be described as an orientalist, a comparative orientalist, and an oriental linguist. Syriacists will be grateful to him and to those who made his work on the text possible: there is here a model of modern critical method applied to a specific Syriac text. The length of Professor Poirier's edition is evidence of the complexity of the

different methods which he identifies and uses, as well as of the intractable nature of the problems presented in the apparently straightforward *Hymn of the Pearl*. Indeed, at page 320 the editor notes that the last word on the text is far from being stated, and that he has done little more than indicate the directions for further work.

The problem of the *Hymn of the Pearl* is simple to state : at a point in the *Acts of Thomas* in the British Library manuscript mentioned above there is a brief rhythmic passage which tells of a prince sent from the East to Egypt with a task to perform and a position to prove himself worthy to hold. In Egypt the prince is forgetful of himself and his quest, but is recalled to himself and his mission, and so fulfils the terms of the quest and the test. The problem is "What does the text mean?" and the corollary, "What does the word 'mean' mean in the question?" Professor Poirier begins by detecting three phases of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century interpretation, successive attempts to explain the *Hymn's* meaning in terms of Manichee-Gnostic thought; of an allegory of the Saved Saviour; or of the image of the human soul, either corporate or individual, in a Valentinian or similar speculative system — these deriving variously from Mesopotamian or Egyptian backgrounds.

For his own study Professor Poirier begins with a strictly literary approach, (concerned with sources, vocabulary and metre) which demonstrates that available Syriac and Greek witnesses to the *Hymn* make it plain that the *Hymn* is not part of the original *Acts of Judah Thomas*, but is an older piece of writing deliberately added. Secondly, a structural analysis of the *Hymn* leads to the conclusion that the *Hymn* is an independent unit of Quest/Test word structure. Thirdly, a lexical analysis shows the *Hymn* to have an origin in Parthian Mesopotamia. Fourthly, a redactional analysis (performed in reverse,) shows how and why and when the *Hymn* could have been associated with the *Acts of Judah Thomas*. The Epitome of the *Acts* by Nicetas of Thessalonika shows how the *Hymn* within the *Acts* was taken to have a reference to the Christian soul, either collective or individual, and also a reference to the descent and return of the Christ. The Life of Mani from the Cologne Codex is a hint of a possible use of the *Hymn* with a reference to the life of the founder of Manicheism. A summary of Gnostic thoughts concerning, the descent, forgetfulness, self-recollection and restoration of such pairs as psyche and nous could indicate a

use of the *Hymn* in general and unspecific patterns of speculation. The Editor's methodical approach gives the edition its greatest value : the simplicity of the *Hymn* is at the root of its complexity — it is polyvalent, and must be understood in the light of linguistic analysis and the principle of manifold or "polysemous" meaning. Nowadays not even an orientalist can get by without a knowledge of modern critical method.

The emphasis of Pr. Poirier's work makes for a short treatment of the text. The Greek and Syriac texts of the *Hymn*, and the Greek of Nicetas' Epitome are given with the minimum of editorial activity and may be relied upon. The texts are provided with a translation and summary of critical readings from earlier editions. There are also complete concordances and indices, and a brief commentary on the Syriac text. Since the outstanding problems have been discussed earlier in the volume there is little left to say in the Commentary itself. Here however the editor has dug a trap for himself : one cannot determine the definitive meaning of a polyvalent text. He has, however, deliberately associated the *Hymn* with such interpretations of Syriac orthodoxy as are found in Ephrem. More words could be taken up — for example "nokri" and the theme of "aksenya" or "dépaysement" in Syriac ascetical writing : but this is not to criticise the editor, but to testify to his success in signifying the open-endedness of the *Hymn* as shown by its history and the use made of it at different times for different purposes by such different religious communities : Parthian, Gnostic, Manichee and Christian. To conclude, the edition is a paradigm of method appropriate to an oriental text.

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Pierre GRELOT, **Problèmes de morale fondamentale**. Un éclairage biblique, Coll. « Recherches morales, 6 ». Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1982, 13.5 × 21.5 cm, 292 pages.

Devant les problèmes éthiques inédits auxquels sont confrontés les humains, la science morale sent le besoin de revoir ses propres fondements. Bien sûr la philosophie et les sciences de l'homme demeurent des lieux privilégiés de connaissance