

The Hymn of the Pearl: Apocryphal Acts, Women and Later Greek Conceptions of the Soul

Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta

Abstract: This article examines the Hymn of the Pearl within the Acts of Thomas in relation to later Greek conceptions of the soul and their reception in early Christian and Gnostic literature. Bringing together three central themes prominent in the scholarship of Professor Jan Bremmer – the soul, women, and the Apocryphal Acts –, the study first outlines the development of the concept of the soul from early Greek thought to Middle Platonism, emphasizing its increasing autonomy, divine origin, and estrangement from the body. It then analyzes the *Exegesis of the Soul* (NHC II,6), highlighting the consistent portrayal of the soul as female and its descent and degradation through embodied existence, followed by redemption through divine intervention. The article then proceeds to a close reading of the Hymn of the Pearl, arguing against the widespread view that it is a later interpolation and defending its originality within the Acts of Thomas. Through comparative analysis, it demonstrates strong structural and thematic parallels between the Hymn and the *Exegesis of the Soul*, suggesting that both texts adapt a shared Platonic myth of the soul's descent and return. While the *Exegesis of the Soul* preserves the feminine characterization of the soul, the Hymn transforms it into a male figure, reflecting different narrative and theological aims. Ultimately, the study argues that these texts emerge from a common second-century Mediterranean intellectual milieu and that the Hymn of the Pearl should be considered integral to the *Acts of Thomas*.

Keywords: Hymn of the Pearl; *Acts of Thomas*; Middle Platonic views of the Soul; *Exegesis of the Soul* (NHC II,6); Descent and ascent of the soul

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Introduction

On the occasion of Jan Bremmer's birthday, I have chosen to organize my article around some of Jan's favorite themes. First is the theme of the "soul," to which Jan devoted considerable attention, and a pivotal book, his *Early Greek Concept of the Soul* from 1983 – a work that, forty years after its publication, remains essential for all those investigating this aspect of the human being. Next is the theme of "women" or femininity, which holds particular significance for Jan's oeuvre, witness the title of the first volume of his "Kleine Schriften," in Mohr Siebeck, *Maidens, Magic, and Martyrs in*

Early Christianity.¹ The third subject I choose is, of course, “Apocryphal Acts,” a theme that has left an indelible mark on his scientific output since the end of the 1990s – a period that coincided with my pursuit of a Theology PhD at the University of Groningen. During this time, the collaboration with Caspar Caroli University in Budapest played a crucial role in providing impetus to the research on the Apocryphal Acts in Groningen and as well as to *Studies in Early Christian Apocrypha*, a book series edited by Jan and published by Peeters, which is set to reach its 24th volume shortly.

The following pages will address all three themes. Firstly, I will provide a preliminary approach to the soul, focusing especially on later Greek views. Unlike early Greek conceptions, which timidly recognised the soul’s independence from the body for the first time,² later views asserted the soul’s absolute autonomy due to its divine origin, emphasising its unnatural relationship with both body and world. Among other sources, I will refer to the *Exegesis of the Soul*, a treatise in Nag Hammadi Codex II,³ which exemplifies this later Greek perspective on the soul and simultaneously connects it with the second theme of this article. The *Exegesis of the Soul* not only presents the soul as overtly female but also draws a parallel between its descent to earth and a maiden abandoning the house of her father.⁴

Regarding the third theme, “Apocryphal Acts of Apostles,” I will delve into the *Acts of Thomas* – a subject that has captured my attention during the last few years and was the focal point of the twentieth volume of the *Studies on Early Christian Apocrypha*.⁵ More specifically, I will focus on the *Hymn of the Pearl*, a section of the *Acts* that since the end of the 19th century has

1 Jan Bremmer, *Maidens, Magic and Martyrs in Early Christianity: Collected Essays I* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017).

2 Jan Bremmer, *The Early Greek Concept of the Soul* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press 1983).

3 *Exegesis on the Soul* (NHC II,6) 127, 18–137, 27.

4 On the theme, see Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta, “Platonism and the Expository Treatise,” on the Soul (NHC II,6),” in Luc van der Stockt et al. (eds.), *Gods, Daimones, Rituals, Myths and History of Religions in Plutarch’s Works* (Logan-Málaga: Universidad de Málaga and Utah State University, 2010), 345–62; Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta, “‘Come out of your Country and your Kinsfolk’: Allegory and Ascent of the Soul in The Expository Treatise on the Soul (NHC II,6),” in Martin Goodman, George van Kooten and Jacques van Ruiten (eds.), *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 401–20.

5 See now Israel Muñoz Gallarte and Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta (eds.), *New Trends in the Research on the Apocryphal Acts of Thomas* (Leuven: Peeters, 2024).

frequently been suspected of being an alien interpolation into the primitive text, but which I consider an integral part of the *Acts of Thomas*.

The common thread throughout these three sections is primarily Jan Bremmer's scholarly work, to which we all, especially myself, owe so much. Secondly, it is also the soul's femininity, a recurring theme in all the treatments of the soul this article addresses, except for the *Hymn of the Pearl* in the *Acts of Thomas*, where the soul is represented by a "prince from the East." Does this *Hymn* alter the gender of the soul for the sake of the story? Was the protagonist of the *Hymn of the Pearl* originally a man or a woman (or androphile or gynophile, according to the more politically correct terms recently shaped by modern behavioural sciences)? I hope to shed at least some light on these questions. In an age in which gender boundaries are blurring, my question might sound futile. However, assessing the issue properly may help us both to unravel the question of the *Hymn's* origin and its time of composition, and perhaps also to definitively affirm the *Hymn's* belonging to the *Acts of Thomas*.

1. The Soul

If it is true that "in mainstream fifth-century Greek culture, belief in an afterlife of the soul was weak and unclear,"⁶ the development that the concept of the soul underwent in the following five centuries is surprising. By the time of Plutarch, almost no one doubts the pre- and after-life of the soul, as the numerous ancient overviews of opinions on the soul properly record.⁷ Moreover, from a timid belief in the soul's mobility and its capacity to temporarily leave the body in the earlier period, Greco-Roman texts assert the soul's absolute separateness and independence from the body.

Consequently, Plato's insistence in several of his dialogues on the soul's pre-existence seems to have paid off. Even if Socrates did not convince Cebes or Simmias in the *Phaedo* (70a; 77b), he managed to persuade many readers

6 See Hendrik Lorenz, "Ancient Theories of Soul," in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2009 Edition), in reference to David B. Claus, *Toward the Soul* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press. 1981), 68; John Burnet "The Socratic Doctrine of the Soul," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 7 (1916), 235–59, at 248–9.

7 See Aristotle, *De an.* 406A–411B; Cicero, *Tusc. Disp.* 1.9–49; Aetius, *Placita* IV, 2–3 (Doxogr. gr. 386–389); Tertullian, *De an.* 5; Plotinus, *Enn.* 4; Iamblichus, *De an.* (Stobaeus, Ecl. 1.362–367); Nemesius, *De nat. hom.* 536–537.

in later centuries to such an extent that he provided the pattern that has dominated views on the soul ever since. The soul not only originates in the godly region, but its character is also radically different from the physical body and the material world it inhabits.

Plato could not convince Aristotle though. His criticism reveals a more extensive disagreement with Plato than (Ps-)Hippolytus was ready to admit (*Aristoteles in tertio de philosophia libro multa turbat a magistro suo [Platone] uno dissentiens*).⁸ Aristotle's view of the soul leaves no room for ambiguity. Unlike Plato, he affirmed the indissoluble bond between soul and body, asserting the mortality of the soul, which seems to nullify the entirety of Plato's theory. As is well known, however, these views, even if central to the *Corpus Aristotelicum*, were not widespread in Antiquity – at least not until the publication of the corpus in the first century BCE.⁹ Until that time, the “Aristotelian” view was more aligned with what Aristotle presented, for example, in his dialogue *Eudemus* or *On the Soul*, where the bond between soul and body is likened to the torture inflicted on captives by Tyrrhenian pirates. Indeed, in his *Contra Julianum Pelagianum*, Augustine attributes to Aristotle the following view:

[...] we are punished much as those were who once upon a time, when they had fallen into the hands of Etruscan robbers, were killed with studied cruelty; their bodies, the living (*corpora viva*) with the dead, were bound so exactly as possible one against another: so our souls, bound together with our bodies, are like the living joined with the dead.¹⁰

The story of the Etruscan robbers left an indelible mark in Antiquity, and besides Aristotle, we also find it in Cicero's *Hortensius*, Virgil's *Aeneis*, Iamblichus's *Protrepticus*, and, as mentioned earlier, in Augustine. Nevertheless, the influence of the Platonic view of the soul can even be found outside Platonism, for example among Stoics such as Cicero, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius, which perhaps explains Eduard Zeller's description of them as

8 Cf. (Ps-)Hippolytus, *Haer.* I 20, 3; I 20, 6. See also Cicero, *De nat. deor.* I 13, 33 = Arist. *Philos.* fr. 26 Ross; 25, 1 Gigon, with J. Pépin, *Théologie cosmique et théologie chrétienne* (Paris, 1964), 140, who reads: *Aristoteles in tertio de philosophia libro multa turbat a magistro suo [Platone] uno dissentiens*. See A. P. Bos, “‘Aristotelian’ and ‘Platonic’ Dualism in Hellenistic and Early Christian Philosophy, and Gnosticism,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 56 (2002), 273–291, at 277 note 15. Cf. also Atticus fr. 7 (= Euseb. *P.E.* XV 9, 14).

9 Interestingly, Cicero in his *Tusc. disp.* 1.31 does not mention Aristotle among those who denied the soul's immortality, only referring to Epicureans and Stoics.

10 Augustine, *Contra Jul. Pelag.* IV 15, 78.

“platonisierende Stoiker.” It is also visible among Neo-Aristotelians, such as in Alexander of Aphrodisias’ *De anima*.¹¹

However, it is Middle Platonic views that interest me, since they provide the background for Christian views of the soul, which I focus on in the second and third sections of this article. For the sake of space, I will limit myself to Plutarch, as he discusses the pre- and after-life of the soul in different tracts of his *Moralia*. As for the afterlife, it appears predominantly in the three writings that develop Plato’s myth of Er, namely *De sera*, *De genio*, and *De facie*, which extensively describe the soul’s whereabouts after death. Regarding the soul’s pre-existence, I refer to the fragments of his treatise *De anima* as preserved by Themistius (177) and Stobaeus (178), in which it is implied. To begin with, there is the view that “the soul’s entanglement with the body and confinement in it are against nature.”¹² Originally independent, the soul not only leaves the body behind after death but any time it can, for example, in sleep. According to Plutarch, this is what produces the pleasure of sleep, as it is “the soul’s release and respite, when it lays down its burden, as it were, later to take it up and shoulder it again.” This is so because “in its association with mortal limbs, organs and affections, that which is unnatural and alien to it seems, because of long familiarity, not to be at all oppressive; yet it has a feeling of release and lightness, accompanied by pleasure, on release from its bodily activities. It is by them that it is harassed, on them that it wears itself out, from them that it needs rest and relaxation.”¹³

In Plutarch’s view, the soul suffers when associated with the body much in the same way as it does in the *Exegesis of the Soul* (NHC II,6). This text offers a clear example of the separateness of the soul I mentioned earlier, and its artificial bond with the body. Originally divine, the soul is now degraded due to incarnation: the soul’s sojourn in the physical world, where it has to cope with both body and world, is equated to exile in an alien environment and described in terms of physical and emotional alienation:

Wise men of old gave the soul a feminine name. Indeed, she is female in her nature as well. She even has her womb. As long as she was alone with the father, she was virgin and in form androgynous. But when she fell down into a body and came to this life,

11 See Philip Merlan, *Monopsychism, Mysticism, Metaconsciousness: Problems of the Soul in the Neoaristotelian and Neoplatonic Tradition*, International Archives of the History of Ideas 2 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969).

12 Plutarch, Frag. 177.

13 Plutarch, Frag. 178.

then she fell into the hands of many robbers. And the wanton creatures passed her from one to another and [...] her. Some made use of her by force, while others did so by seducing her with a gift. In short, they defiled her, and she [...] her virginity.¹⁴

2. Women

Written in the second century, the *Exegesis on the Soul* presents one of the rare descriptions of the soul's descent into the world and subsequent embodiment. Most interestingly, the soul is depicted as female, and her doomed destiny on earth is compared to different social aspects of a woman's life, all presented in very dark hues. This is not surprising, as everything is the result of the soul's disobedience, and in the androcentric framework of ancient literature female defiance necessarily results in disaster.

The story is straightforward: while the soul lived in her father's house, her existence was happy; she was a virgin and androgynous in form. One day, she abandoned the fatherly house and came to this life. Once on earth, she forgets her divine abode and falls "in the hands of many robbers" who force her to serve them on their beds. She gives herself to other wanton creatures who again abuse her, and with whom she conceives defective, feeble children. She then repents and decides to abandon her sordid life. The Father then intervenes, sending her the bridegroom so that she, after uniting with him in the Bridal Chamber, may recover her pristine condition.¹⁵

That the soul is feminine is a well-established *topos* in Gnostic literature. This is not the case only in the *ExSoul*, but also in numerous texts related to Achamot/Sophia,¹⁶ or Helena.¹⁷ With their stories about the descent and ascent of ill-fated female figures, these texts might be seen as metaphorical descriptions of the soul's sojourn on earth and its possible redemption. Behind all of them, we find the same disobedience triggering feminine

14 *Exegesis on the Soul* (NHC II,6) 127, 18–128, 1. Translated by William C. Robinson Jr., in Bentley Layton (ed.), *Nag Hammadi Codex II,2–7 Together with XIII,2, Brit Lib. Or. 4926 (I) and P.Oxy 1, 654, Vol. 2* (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 1436–169.

15 Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta, "La existencia terrena como violencia en dos textos de Nag Hammadi: La enseñanza autorizada (NHC VI,3) y La exégesis del alma (NHC II,6)," *Oriente y Occidente* 18.1/2 (2022), website: <https://research.rug.nl/en/publications/cc2a4f2e-56ed-4b46-afff-07288799bc47>.

16 See, e.g., Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1.5–8.

17 See Hippolytus, *Refutatio* 6.19–20.

disgrace.¹⁸ The imagery of the Bridal chamber, frequent both in Valentinian¹⁹ and non-Valentinian Nag Hammadi texts²⁰ also indirectly bears witness to it, since it stages the reunion of what was separated in the beginning due to insubordination.

However, it is not only Gnostic literature that is explicit about the soul's femaleness. Perhaps because in Greek the term for the soul is a feminine noun, Greek literature also assumes the femininity of the soul from the outset, sometimes presenting it as a goddess.²¹ Different Middle-Platonic testimonies are also clear about the soul's femaleness: for example, Philo of Alexandria provides a precedent for the notion of the womb of the soul that we also find in *ExSoul*, as we will see later.²² This is also the case in Apuleius's *Golden Ass*, where the famous story of Eros and Psyche presents the soul as a girl. The sentence *et Psychen hoc enim nomine puella nuncupebatur* ("and Psyche, for by this name the girl was now called") aptly summarizes Venus's repeated references to the soul as a mortal girl (4.30). Due to Venus's influence, her destiny on earth is comparable to that of the soul in *ExSoul*, since the goddess determines that the girl "be seized by a violent, burning passion for the most wretched of men, one to whom Fortune has denied rank, wealth, even health, one so insignificant there is none on earth equal to him in misery." More importantly, Plutarch's *Platonicae Quaestiones* 2 (1001BC) and his *De animae procr. in Timaeo* also stress the femininity of the soul, which is described as God's daughter. Due to its participation in God's intellect, reason and harmony the soul was not created by God but is a part of him.²³ It is through his daughter that the Father can transmit his order

18 While Plato's *Symposium* attributes the separation to external forces (Zeus and Apollo), Christian gnostic texts make the female part responsible for the loss of the pristine androgynous condition.

19 *Exegesis of the Soul* (NHC II,6) 132.2–133.10; *Tripartite Tractate* (NHC I,5) 93.1; 122.15–16, 21; 128.33; 138.11; reconstructed in 135.31; *Gospel of Philip* (NHC II,3) 65.1–26; 67.2–27; 69.1–70.4; 70.9–71.15; 72.17–23; 74.12–24; 76.1–5; 81.34–82.26; 84.14–86.18; reconstructed in 75.29.

20 *Gospel of Thomas* (NHC II,2) 75, 104; *Dialogue of the Savior* (NHC III,5) 138.48–50; *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* (NHC VII,2) 57.10–18; 62.6–10; 65.35–66.8; 67.5–11; *Authoritative Teaching* (NHC VI,3) 22.23–34; *Teachings of Silvanus* (NHC VII,4) 94.19–29.

21 See Richard Reitzenstein, *Die Göttin Psyche in der hellenistischen und frühchristlichen Literatur* (Heidelberg: Carl Winters, 1917).

22 Philo, *De mutatione* 255; *Leg. Alleg.* III 180.

23 Plutarch, *Qu. Plat.* 2,1001BC; *De an. procr.* 1014AB.

to chaotic matter.²⁴ Finally, as mentioned earlier, Plutarch of Chaeronea's fragment 178, probably a portion of his lost tract *De anima*, also deals with the soul's embodiment, presenting it as an utter disaster.

Admittedly, however, *ExSoul* is perhaps the clearest enunciation of the soul's femininity. This is evident from the start of the text: "Wise men of old gave the soul a feminine name. Indeed, she is female in her nature as well. She even has her womb."²⁵ According to Kulawik, in the framework of the text, womb and soul are compared because they are capable of generating and growing both good and bad things.²⁶ And indeed *ExSoul*, in line with Diotima's speech in the *Symposium*, refers to soul as having good and bad offspring.²⁷ The continuation of the text, however, develops this image in even clearer tones, presenting the soul as fulfilling different female social roles. Needless to say, all of these are depicted in a very negative light. While originally divine and androgynous, the soul is initially described as a daughter after her first disobedience and the abandonment of her house. She then becomes a mistress, and subsequently a prostitute. In these roles, she associates with the wrong husbands, and both willingly and by force has sex with them. As a result, she becomes a mother – specifically, a mother of weak and feeble-minded children – and finally a poor widow.

As is frequently the case in the context of the *descensus animae*,²⁸ *ExSoul* remains ambiguous as to the first cause of the soul's devolution. However, it seems obvious that her disobedience in abandoning her maiden's quarters determines all the following steps of degradation. Her redemption consequently depends on the Father's will. It is only after his intervention that she becomes a bride, ready to unite with the bridegroom in the Bridal Chamber, and thanks to this reunion recover her androgynous form.

24 Plutarch, *De an. procr.* 1013E; *Qu. Plat.* 4, 1003A. See on the issue, Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta, "Dios como Padre y artifice en *Moralia* de Plutarco," in Pedro de Navascués et al. (eds.), *Filiación. Cultura pagana, religión de Israel, orígenes del cristianismo* (Madrid: Trotta, 2014), 139–156.

25 *ExSoul* (NHC II,6) 127, 19–22.

26 Cornelia Kulawik, *Die Erzählung über die Seele (Nag-Hammadi-Codex II,6). Neu herausgegeben, übersetzt und erklärt* (Berlin – New York: de Gruyter, 2006).

27 *ExSoul* (NHC II,6) 134,2–3, good offspring; 128, 23–26, bad offspring. See Roig Lanzillotta, "Platonism and the Expository Treatise," 345–62, at 348–49.

28 See André Jean Festugière, *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste. III: Les doctrines de l'âme* (Paris: Gabalda, 1953), 63–118; John Dillon, "The Descent of the Soul in Middle Platonic and Gnostic Theory," in Bentley Layton (ed.), *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 357–364.

3. The Hymn of the Pearl

The *Hymn of the Pearl* includes a similar story, narrating the soul's descent, its wandering in the world of matter, final redemption, and restitution to its divine abode. Unlike the *Exegesis of the Soul*, the protagonist of the story is not a girl but a young man. The conspicuous parallels between both, however, seem to imply that we are facing two versions of the same story of the soul's descent that develop along different narrative lines.

The *Hymn of the Pearl* is perhaps the most famous section of the *Apocryphal Acts of Thomas*. Inexplicably, very soon after the text's first publication in Syriac (1871) and Greek (1903), the *Hymn* was suspected of not belonging to the primitive text of the *Acts of Thomas*.²⁹ This is for two reasons: 1) ever since the publication of the Syriac text by Wright, several studies have claimed the existence of an underlying poetic meter in the Syriac text, the so-called *Doppeldreier*, which in their view is proof that the text is different to the rest of the *Acts of Thomas*; 2) the style, vocabulary, tenor, and message of the *Hymn* did not seem to accord with the rest of the text.³⁰

However, as I have sufficiently shown in my other studies on the *Acts of Thomas*, the claim that the *Hymn* does not belong to the primitive text is a fallacy based on a biased analysis of the data at our disposal.³¹ To begin with, the very fact that the *Hymn* is transmitted in two manuscripts, belonging to two different branches of the textual transmission, Greek and Syriac, ought to be enough evidence to assert that the *Hymn* belonged to the primitive

29 William Wright, *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles. Edited from the Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum and Other Libraries*, 2 vols. (London: Williams & Norgate, 1871–1872); Maximilian Bonnet, *Acta apostolorum apocrypha. Partis alterius volume alterum. Acts Philippi et Acta Thomas, accedunt Acta Barnabae* (Leipzig: Hermann Mendelssohn, 1903).

30 This is exactly the synthesis of the history of research provided by Paul-Hubert Poirier, *L'Hymne de la Perle* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), 175. After affirming that the *Hymn of the Pearl* is “an independent piece, without any relation with the work in which it is transmitted,” he points out that “scholars arrived at this conclusion mainly due to internal criteria by comparing, on the one hand, contents, vocabulary, themes and style of the *Hymn of the Pearl*; and, on the other, those of the *Acts of Thomas*.”

31 Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta, “Reinterpreting the Textual Transmission of the Acts of Thomas. Towards a New Understanding, Classification, and Chronology of the Greek Testimonies,” in Gallarte and Roig Lanzillotta (eds.), *New Trends in the Research on the Apocryphal Acts of Thomas*, 1–25; Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta, “Codex Vallicellianus B 35: An Assessment of the only Extant Greek Manuscript of Acta Thomae Including the “Hymn of the Pearl,” in Gallarte and Lanzillotta (eds.), *New Trends in the Study of the Acts of Thomas*, 43–60.

text of the Acts – at least, to the only text one can reconstruct based on the materials available today.

Regarding the first reason mentioned above, in an article from 2015, I assessed one by one all the arguments adduced to sustain the alleged existence of a six-syllable meter behind the Syriac text, which served both the argument for the priority of the Syriac version, and that of the independence of the *Hymn* from the *Acts of Thomas*.³² The results of my analysis are clear: the hypothesis first proposed by Nöldeke in 1871 and restated in 2021 by P. H. Poirier, in the re-edition of his doctoral thesis of 1981, lacks any scientific basis whatsoever and seems to be based on pure speculation.³³

In a more recent study, I also assessed the alleged differences in style, vocabulary, tenor, and message between the *Hymn of the Pearl* and the rest of the *Acts of Thomas*. First of all, it is important not to overstate these differences. There are indeed some minor variances when we compare the *Hymn of the Pearl* (and that of the Bride) with the rest of the text, but these differences are not enough to provide evidence that they are later additions to the primitive text. Rather, the differences can be explained by the simple fact that the *Hymn* and the rest of the *Acts of Thomas* were diversely affected by textual transmission.³⁴ The bulk of the *Acts of Thomas* shows traces of heavy secondary and even tertiary redactions. In particular, the sections including discourses by the apostle Thomas show editorial intervention, in which later redactors intended either to adapt the apostle's words to later modes of thinking or, if this was not possible, to eliminate them altogether. The latter was the case with the *Hymn of the Pearl*. The allegorical nature of the *Hymn* made it difficult, if not impossible, to adapt to later standards, as a result of which most of our manuscripts simply eliminate it. The conclusions of my research are clear: 1) together with the *Hymn of the Bride*, the *Hymn of the Pearl* was an integral part of the *Acts of Thomas* from the beginning; 2) the fact that both sections were less affected by textual transmission means that their tenor is closer to the primitive text of the *Acts of Thomas*.

32 Roig Lanzillotta, "A Syriac Original for the Acts of Thomas? The Theory of the Syriac Priority Revisited, Evaluated and Rejected," in Ilaria Ramelli and J. Perkins (eds.), *Early Christian and Jewish Narrative: The Role of Religion in Shaping Narrative Forms* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 105–133.

33 Paul-Hubert Poirier, *L'Hymne de la Perle des Actes de Thomas* (Louvain-La-Neuve: Center for the History of Religions, 1981), 35–39; Poirier, *L'Hymne de la Perle* (2021), 75–78.

34 See Roig Lanzillotta, "Reinterpreting the Textual Transmission."

Be that as it may, the focus of this part of this article is not the textual transmission of the *Acts of Thomas* but the contents of the *Hymn of the Pearl*. In my view, its tenor and message are very much in line not only with the rest of the *Acts of Thomas*, but also (and especially) with the religious and philosophical world of the second century CE. In this sense, if we can show the close contact between the *Hymn* and other literary products of the historical period, we will kill two birds with one stone: on the one hand, we will reassert that the *Hymn* belongs to the primitive text, since it reflects the same intellectual background as the rest of the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas*; on the other hand, it will show that the *Acts of Thomas* are a product of the same cultural milieu as the other apocryphal Acts of the apostles, namely the Mediterranean milieu of the second century.

The story included in the *Hymn* is as straightforward as that of the *Ex-Soul*. A young prince from the East is sent by his parents from “the House of his Father” to Egypt to recover a precious pearl guarded by a serpent. On departing, he leaves his royal dress back home with the promise that he will recover it once he returns with the pearl.³⁵ Even if in local disguise, however, the Egyptians realize he is a stranger:

I clothed myself in garments like theirs, so that I would not be seen as a stranger and as one who had come from abroad to take the pearl, lest the Egyptians might arouse the serpent against me. But somehow, they learned that I was not their countryman. They dealt with me treacherously, and I tasted their food.³⁶

As it is well known, in Antiquity Egypt was considered “the land of the body.”³⁷ Due to the attraction of the sensual, the prince forgets both his origin and his mission. His parents, however, intervene and release him from his sufferings by sending a letter through an eagle that will wake him from his torpor. After recalling his origin and mission, the prince leaves all Egyptian pleasures behind, snatches the pearl, and gets back to his Father’s kingdom, where he reunites with both his royal dress and his brother.³⁸

35 Israel Muñoz Gallarte, “The Robe in the ‘Hymn of the Pearl’: Analysis of ATh 111.75–113.97,” in Ch. Burnett and P. Mantas España (eds.), *Spreading Knowledge in a Changing World* (Córdoba: UCOPress – The Warburg Institute, 2019), 119–138.

36 Translated by J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament. A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford: OUP, 1993), 439–511, at 489.

37 Sarah J. K. Pearce, *The Land of the Body: Studies in Philo’s Representation of Egypt* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007).

38 *ATh* 108–113.

The striking similarity between the stories in the *Hymn of the Pearl* and the *Exegesis of the Soul* has not gone unnoticed. Bernard Pouderon compared both stories in two articles published in 2002.³⁹ Similarly, the 2006 Cornelia Kulawik's commentary on *ExSoul* mentioned the *Hymn* among the possible sources of the *ExSoul*.⁴⁰ Kulawik also refers to a paper on the matter presented by U. Tervahauta at a Ph.D. seminar in Helsinki in 2001, under the title "Authoritative Teaching, the Exegesis on the Soul, and the Hymn of the Pearl: A Comparison."⁴¹ Finally, in 2007, Andrew Philip Smith published a comparison of both writings.⁴²

I cannot go into detail on the analysis of these previous studies. Suffice to say that they all underline the conspicuous similarities between both stories: in both the *Hymn* and *ExSoul* the protagonists, the prince and the soul, depart from their fatherly house, in a reference to the divine region to which they both belong.⁴³ In so doing they arrive in Egypt, which in both stories represents the land of the body, and consequently symbolizes the soul's embodiment, and the subsequent attraction and enchantment of the world of matter.⁴⁴ Both texts present the soul's incarnation and sojourn in Egypt as a time of servitude;⁴⁵ while the prince is intoxicated by the food of the Egyptians and, due to heavy sleep, forgets his mission on earth,⁴⁶ the soul prostitutes herself to the sons of the Egyptians "receiving from them the bread, the wine and the oil"⁴⁷

39 Bernard Pouderon, "Paysages d'âmes gnostiques: 1. L'Exégèse sur l'âme," and "Paysages d'âmes gnostiques: 2. L'Hymne de la perle," in Bernard Pouderon and Daria Crismani (eds.), *Lieux, décors et paysages de l'ancien roman des origines à Byzance. Actes du 2e colloque de Tours, 24-26 octobre 2002* (Lyon: Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée Jean Pouilloux, 2005), 319-336 and 337-343.

40 Cornelia Kulawik, *Die Erzählung über die Seele (Nag Hammadi-Codex II,6). Neu herausgegeben, übersetzt und erklärt* (Berlin und New York: De Gruyter, 2006), 311-314.

41 Kulawik, *Die Erzählung über die Seele*, 311, note 211. I was unable to consult this unpublished paper.

42 Andrew Philip Smith, *Gnostic Writings on the Soul. Annotated & Explained* (Woodstock, Vermont: Skylight Paths, 2007).

43 *ExSoul* (NHC II,6) 127, 22-25; *AThom* 111, 75.

44 While *AThom* is explicit in its references to Egypt (109, 28; 42; 46, etc.), *ExSoul* (NHC II,6) 130, 19-20; 20-24 refers to the "sons of the Egyptians." See also *ExSoul* (NHC II,6) 137, 11-15.

45 *ExSoul* (NHC II,6) 128, 10-11.

46 *AThom* 109, 32-35.

47 *ExSoul* (NHC II,6) 130, 24-25: For she said, "I shall prostitute myself to my lovers. It was they who gave me my bread and my water and my garments and my clothes and my wine and my oil and everything I needed."

and subsequently “forgets the time when she was at the house of her Father”.⁴⁸

In both stories the Father’s intervention puts an end to their suffering: in the *Hymn of the Pearl* the parents send a letter to wake the prince from his torpor; in *ExSoul* the father in turn sends the bridegroom. However, this step takes place only after the necessary purification: whereas the prince takes “off the dirty clothing and left it behind in their land,”⁴⁹ the soul in *ExSoul* is “cleansed of the external pollution which was pressed upon it, just as garments, when dirty, are put into the water and turned about until their dirt is removed and they become clean: And so the cleansing of the soul is to regain the newness of her former nature and to turn herself back again. That is her baptism.”⁵⁰

Once so far both protagonists are ready for redemption. And indeed, thanks to the Father’s intervention in both cases we find the same happy ending: the prince awakens from his slumber, remembers his mission, and snatches the pearl from the dragon. He then recovers his royal dress, which symbolizes the recovery at the same time of his pristine androgynous condition: “I perceived in it my whole self as well and through it, I knew and saw myself. For though we originated from the one and the same we were partially divided, then again, we were one, with a single form.”⁵¹ Similarly, in *ExSoul* thanks to the Father sending her the bridegroom, the soul gets into the Bridal Chamber, where she recovers her androgynous condition, and finally comes back to her original abode: “For since that marriage is not like the carnal marriage... But once they unite with one another, they become a single life.”⁵²

It seems plausible that we are dealing in both cases with the same basic story, which is articulated differently depending on the goals of the texts. Based on close similarities of the *Hymn* with other Nag Hammadi texts, such as the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Book of Thomas the Contender*, Bentley Layton reconstructed what he calls the “Myth of the Soul in Thomas Literature,” the basic line of which he summarizes as follows:⁵³

48 *ExSoul* (NHC II,6) 132, 19–21.

49 *AThom* 11, 62.

50 *ExSoul* (NHC II,6) 131, 27–34.

51 *AThom* 112, 77–78.

52 *ExSoul* (NHC II,6) 132, 35–133, 7.

53 Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (New York, 1987), 366–370.

The first principle of the spiritual realm providentially causes the individual soul to descend past the heavenly bodies into incarnate life in a material body, in order to be educated (get salvation). The soul becomes unconscious and inert because of matter. But it disengages itself in response to the saviour or message of philosophy (wisdom). It becomes acquainted with itself and its career and is metaphysically reunited with itself (i.e. it becomes integral) and with the first principle, gaining true repose.⁵⁴

We have seen, however, that the *ExSoul* reflects the same myth of the soul without belonging to a scholarly construct such as the alleged “Thomasine literature.” In this sense, I am inclined to think that the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Hymn of the Pearl* in the *Acts of Thomas*, the *Book of Thomas the Contender*, and the *ExSoul* reflect the same Platonic background, which all of them adapt according to the changing goals and contexts they serve.

4. Conclusions

It is time to offer some conclusions:

1. I have argued that *ExSoul* and the *Hymn of the Pearl*, together with the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Book of Thomas the Contender*, share the same basic Platonic myth. Of all four Christian adaptations, *ExSoul* preserves the myth of the soul in its purest form. The femaleness of the embodied soul, the myth of its original androgynous form which she recovers at the end of the story, its unnatural mixture with the world of nature, and especially its capacity to produce good and bad children, are clear reminiscences of Plato’s *Symposium*, which the other texts tend to blur together due to their major degree of Christianization. Admittedly, this Nag Hammadi tract also adapts the myth to a Christian framework. This is mainly visible in three elements: the notion of the soul’s responsibility in its fall, which echoes the female disobedience we find in other (Gnostic) texts; repentance, or *metanoia*, as the starting point of the soul’s redemption; and finally, and especially, the Father’s grace as the only efficient cause enacting the soul’s salvation.
2. Following closely in proximity is the *Hymn of the Pearl*. Behind its apparent folktale character and numerous Oriental embellishments (which have distracted many a scholar), the *Hymn* still betrays a clear Platonic background. Notably, the first cause of the soul’s devolution is still attributed to the providential intervention of the spiritual realm, something that was

⁵⁴ Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, 367.

missing in *ExSoul*. The soul's descent and ascent are well preserved, and there are still clear echoes of its androgynous original form. The myth of the soul, however, has been dramatically adapted to such an extent that the femaleness of the soul disappears in favour of a more androcentric view, one that is in line with Peter's criticism and Jesus's reply in logion 114 of the *Gospel of Thomas*:

Simon Peter said to him, "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life." Jesus said, "I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven."⁵⁵

3. The *Hymn's* Platonism, and its conceptual proximity to *ExSoul* and the *Gospel of Thomas*, shows that it was an integral part of the *Acts of Thomas*. In my view, this proximity allows us, on the one hand, to place the composition of the *Acts of Thomas* not in Edessa, but in the same Mediterranean context that produced the other Apocryphal Acts; and, on the other hand, to date the *Acts of Thomas* to the second rather than to the third century.

Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta

Faculty of Religion, Culture and Society

University of Groningen Oude

Boteringestraat 38, 9712 GK, Groningen, The Netherlands

f.l.roig.lanzillotta@rug.nl

⁵⁵ *GosThom* (NHC II,2) 114. Translated by Thomas O. Lambdin, "The Gospel according to Thomas," in Layton (ed.), *Nag Hammadi Codex II,2-7*, 52–93, at 93.