Chapter 5. The "Hymn of the Pearl"

In the Simonian doctrine we have introduced a specimen of what we shall call the Syrian-Egyptian gnosticism. We follow this with an introductory example of the other main type of gnostic speculation, which for reasons to be explained later we shall call the Iranian one. Strictly speaking, the text chosen for a first representation of this type is not a systematic but a poetic composition, which clothes the central part of the Iranian doctrine in the garment of a fable apparently dealing with human actors, and in concentrating upon the eschatological part of the divine drama omits its first, cosmogonic part. It is nevertheless in its vividness and subtle naiveté such an immediately captivating document of gnostic feeling and thought alike that no better introduction to the whole type could be provided. The more theoretical, cosmogonic chapter of the doctrine will be supplied later in the account of Mani's teaching. After the calculated brazenness of Simon Magus, the moving tenderness of the following poem will come as a striking contrast.

The so-called "Hymn of the Pearl" is found in the apocryphal Acts of the Apostle Thomas, a gnostic composition preserved with orthodox reworkings that are relatively slight: the text of the Hymn itself is entirely free of these. "Hymn of the Pearl" is a title given to it by modern translators: in the Acts themselves it is headed "Song of the Apostle Judas Thomas in the land of the Indians." In view of the didactic intention and narrative form of the poem, "hymn" is perhaps not exactly appropriate. It is with the rest of the Acts extant in a Syriac and a Greek version, the Syriac being the original one (or an immediate descendant of the original, which was doubtlessly Syriac). In our rendering, based mainly on the Syriac text, we shall disregard the metrical divisions and treat the text as a prose narrative.

(a) THE TEXT

When I was a little child and dwelt in the kingdom of my Father's house and delighted in the wealth and splendor of those who raised me, my parents sent me forth from the East, our homeland, with provisions for the journey. From the riches of our treasure-house they tied me a burden: great it was, yet light, so that I might carry it alone. . . . They took off from me the robe of glory which in their love they had made for me, and my purple mantle that was woven to conform exactly to my figure, and made a covenant with me, and wrote it in my heart that I might not forget it: "When thou goest down into Egypt and bringest the One Pearl which lies in the middle of the sea which is encircled by the snorting serpent, thou shalt put on again thy robe of glory and thy mantle over it and with thy brother our next in rank be heir in our kingdom."

I left the East and took my way downwards, accompanied by two royal envoys, since the way was dangerous and hard and I was young for such a journey; I passed over the borders of Maishan, the gathering-place of the merchants of the East, and came into the land of Babel and entered within the walls of Sarbug. I went down into Egypt, and my companions parted from me. I went straightway to the serpent and settled down close by his inn until he should slumber and sleep so that I might take the Pearl from him. Since I was one and kept to myself, I was a stranger to my fellow-dwellers in the inn. Yet saw I there one of my race, a fair and well-favored youth, the son of kings [lit. "anointed ones"]. He came and.

1 Supposed to have been composed when he was imprisoned there.
2 We have met this symbol already in the Mandaean literature (see above p. 79), where differently from here the provision is intended for the return of the souls, but for this purpose also brought down by the alien man in his own journey: it is the transmundane spiritual instruction, the gnosis, which he communicates to the faithful. A similar symbolic meaning has probably to be assumed for the "burden" from the heavenly treasure-house mentioned in the next sentence.
3 The burden as described in the omitted lines consists of five precious substances, which clearly connects the "Prince" of this tale with the Primal Man of Manichaean speculation: see below, p. 216 f.
4 For the symbolism of the garment, see above, p. 56.
attached himself to me, and I made him my trusted familiar to whom I imparted my mission. I [he?] warned him [me?] against the Egyptians and the contact with the unclean ones. Yet I clothed myself in their garments, lest they suspect me as one coming from without to take the Pearl and arouse the serpent against me. But through some cause they marked that I was not their countryman, and they ingratiated themselves with me, and mixed me [drink] with their cunning, and gave me to taste of their meat; and I forgot that I was a king's son and served their king. I forgot the Pearl for which my parents had sent me. Through the heaviness of their nourishment I sank into deep slumber.

All this that befell me, my parents marked, and they were grieved for me. It was proclaimed in our kingdom that all should come to our gates. And the kings and grandees of Parthia and all the nobles of the East wove a plan that I must not be left in Egypt. And they wrote a letter to me, and each of the great ones signed it with his name.

From thy father the King of Kings, and from thy mother, mistress of the East, and from thy brother, our next in rank, unto thee, our son in Egypt, greeting. Awake and rise up out of thy sleep, and perceive the words of our letter. Remember that thou art a king's son: behold whom thou hast served in bondage. Be mindful of the Pearl, for whose sake thou hast departed into Egypt. Remember thy robe of glory, recall thy splendid mantle, that thou mayest put them on and deck thyself with them and thy name be read in the book of the heroes and thou become with thy brother, our deputy, heir in our kingdom.

Like a messenger was the letter that the King had sealed with his right hand against the evil ones, the children of Babel and the rebellious demons of Sarbug. It rose up in the form of an eagle, the king of all winged fowl, and flew until it alighted beside me and became wholly speech. At its voice and sound I awoke and arose from my sleep, took it up, kissed it, broke its seal, and read. Just as was written on my heart were the words of my letter to read. I remembered that I was a son of kings, and that my freeborn soul desired its own kind. I remembered the Pearl for which I had been sent down to Egypt, and I began to enchant the terrible and snorting serpent. I charmed it to sleep by naming over it my Father's name, the name of our next in rank, and that of my mother, the queen of the East. I seized the Pearl, and turned to repair home to my Father. Their filthy and impure garment I put off, and left it behind in their land, and directed my way that I might come to the light of our homeland, the East.

My letter which had wakened me I found before me on my way; and as it had wakened me with its voice, so it guided me with its light that shone before me, and with its voice it encouraged my fear, and with its love it drew me on. I went forth. My robe of glory which I had put off and my mantle which went over it, my parents... sent to meet me by their treasurers who were entrusted therewith. Its splendor I had forgotten, having left it as a child in my Father's house. As I now beheld the robe, it seemed to me suddenly to become a mirror-image of myself: myself entire I saw in it, and it entire I saw in myself, that we were two in separateness, and yet again one in the sameness of our forms. And the image of the King of kings was depicted all over it. I saw also quiver all over it the movements of the gnosis. I saw that it was about to speak, and perceived the sound of its songs which it murmured on its way down: "I am that acted in the acts of him for whom I was brought up in my Father's house, and I perceived in myself how my stature grew in accordance with his labors." And with its regal movements it pours itself wholly out to me, and from the hands of its bringers haste that I may take it; and me too my love urged on to run towards it and to receive it. And I stretched towards it and took it and decked myself with the beauty of its colors. And I cast the royal mantle about my entire self. Clothed therein, I ascended to the gate of salutation and adoration. I bowed my head and adored the splendor of my Father who had sent it to me, whose commands I had fulfilled as he too had done what he promised. ... He received me joyfully, and I was with him in his kingdom, and

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5 The stages of the return journey correspond to those of the descent.
6 We pass over an extensive description of the robe.
all his servants praised him with organ voice, that he had promised that I should journey to the court of the King of kings and having brought my Pearl should appear together with him.

(b) COMMENTARY

The immediate charm of this tale is such that it affects the reader prior to all analysis of meaning. The mystery of its message speaks with its own force, which almost seems to dispense with the need for detailed interpretation. Perhaps nowhere else is the basic gnostic experience expressed in terms more moving and more simple. Yet the tale is a symbolic one as a whole and employs symbols as its parts, and both the total symbolism and its component elements have to be explained. We shall begin with the latter.

Serpent, Sea, Egypt

If we take it for granted that the Father's house in the East is the heavenly home and defer the question as to the meaning of the Pearl, we have to explain the symbols of Egypt, the serpent, and the sea. The serpent we meet here for the second time in the gnostic world of images (see above, p. 93 f.); but differently from its meaning in the Ophitic sects, where it is a pneumatic symbol, it is here, in the form of the earth-encircling dragon of the original chaos, the ruler or evil principle of this world. The Pists Sophia (Ch. 126, p. 207, Schmidt) says, "The outer darkness is a huge dragon whose tail is in its mouth." The Acts themselves, in a passage outside the Hymn, offer a more detailed characterization of this figure through the mouth of one of its dragon-sons:

I am the offspring of the serpent-nature and a corrupter's son. I am a son of him who . . . sits on the throne and has dominion over the creation beneath the heavens, . . . who encircles the sphere, . . . who is outside (around) the ocean, whose tail lies in his mouth.

(para. 32)

There are many parallels to this other meaning of the serpent in gnostic literature. Origen in his work Contra Celsum (VI. 25. 35) describes the so-called "diagram of the Ophites," where the seven circles of the Archons are placed within a larger circle which is called the Leviathan, the great dragon (not identical, of course, with the "serpent" of the system), and also the psyche (here "world-soul"). In the Mandaean system this Leviathan is called Ur and is the father of the Seven. The mythological archetype of this figure is the Babylonian Ti'amat, the chaos-monster slain by Marduk in the history of creation. The closest gnostic parallel to our tale is to be found in the Jewish apocryphal Acts of Kyriakos and Julitta (see Reitzenstein, Das iranische Erlosungsmysterium, p. 77), where the prayer of Kyriakos relates, also in the first person, how the hero, sent out by his Mother into the foreign land, the "city of darkness," after long wandering and passing through the waters of the abyss meets the dragon, the "king of the worms of the earth, whose tail lies in his mouth. This is the serpent that led astray through passions the angels from on high; this is the serpent that led astray the first Adam and expelled him from Paradise. . . ." 

There too a mystical letter saves him from the serpent and causes him to fulfill his mission.

Sea or waters is a standing gnostic symbol for the world of matter or of darkness into which the divine has sunk. Thus, the Naassenes interpreted Ps. 29: 3 and 10, about God's inhabiting the abyss and His voice ringing out over the waters, as follows: The many waters is the multifarious world of mortal generation into which the god Man has sunk and out of whose depth he cries up to the supreme God, the Primal Man, his unfallen original (Hippol. V. 8.15). We quoted (p. 104 f.) Simon's division of the One into him who "stands above in the unbegotten Power" and him who "stood below in the stream of the waters, begotten in the image." The Peratae interpreted the Red Sea (Suf-Sea), which has to be passed on the way to or from Egypt, as the "water of corruption,* and identified it with Kronos, i.e., "time," and with "becoming* (ibid. 16. 5). In the Mandaean Left Ginzah III we read: "I am a great Mana . . . who dwelt in the sea . . . until wings were formed for me and I raised my wings to the place of light." The apocryphal Fourth Book of Ezra, an apocalypse, has in chap. xiii.

*In the Ada Thomae (para. 32) these and many other acts of seduction are attributed to the son of the original serpent, from whose speech we have quoted the description of his progenitor.
an impressive vision of the Man who flies up "from the heart of the sea." The fish symbolism of early Christianity must also be noted in this connection.

_Egypt_ as a symbol for the material world is very common in Gnosticism (and beyond it). The biblical story of Israel's bondage and liberation lent itself admirably to spiritual interpretation of the type the Gnostics liked. But the biblical story is not the only association which qualified Egypt for its allegorical role. From ancient times Egypt had been regarded as the home of the cult of the dead, and therefore the kingdom of Death; this and other features of Egyptian religion, such as its beast-headed gods and the great role of sorcery, inspired the Hebrews and later the Persians with a particular abhorrence and made them see in "Egypt" the embodiment of a demonic principle. The Gnostics then turned this evaluation into their use of Egypt as a symbol for "this world," that is, the world of matter, of ignorance, and of perverse religion: "All ignorant ones [i.e., those lacking gnosis] are 'Egyptians'" states a Peratic dictum quoted by Hippolytus (V. 16. 5).

We noted before that generally the symbols for world can serve also as symbols for the body and vice versa; this is true also for the three just treated: "sea" and "dragon" occasionally denote the body in Mandaean writings, and regarding "Egypt" the Peratae, to whom it is otherwise "the world," also said that "the body is a little Egypt" (Hippol. V. 16. 5; similarly the Naassenes, _ibid._ 7. 41).

_The Impure Garment_

That the stranger puts on the garments of the Egyptians belongs to the widespread symbolism of the "garment" which we met before (p. 56). The purpose stated here, that of remaining incognito to the Egyptians, connects that symbolism with a theme found throughout Gnosticism in numerous variations: the savior comes into the world unknown to its rulers, taking on by turns their various forms. We met the doctrine in Simon Magus, connected with the passage through the spheres. In a Mandaean text we read, "I concealed myself from the Seven, I compelled myself and took on bodily form" (G 112). In fact this theme combines two different ideas, that of the ruse by which the Archons are outwitted, and that of the sacrificial necessity for the savior to "clothe himself in the affliction of the worlds" in order to exhaust the powers of the world, i.e., as part of the mechanism of salvation itself. And if we look at our text closely, we realize that the King's Son has actually no choice but to put on the terrestrial garments, seeing that he has left his own in the upper realm. It is obvious also, and in spite of its paradoxical part of the logic of the process itself, that the familiarity with the "Egyptians" made possible by this change of garments to some extent defeats the purpose of the messenger's protection by making him a partaker in their meat and drink. The Egyptians, though they do not recognize his origin or mission (in that case they would have aroused the dragon against him), perceive his difference from themselves and are anxious to make him one of them. They succeed precisely for the reason that his concealment succeeded: namely, his having a body. Thus the means of concealment from the cosmic powers becomes almost by necessity a cause of self-alienation which imperils the whole mission. This is part of the divine predicament: the necessary condition of the savior's success at the same time introduces the greatest threat of failure.

_The Letter_

The tribulations of the messenger and his temporary succumbing are described in the metaphors of sleep and intoxication which were dealt with in Chap. 3 (see "Numbness," "Sleep," "Intoxication," p. 68 ff.). His recovery of consciousness through the voice of the letter belongs to the general imagery connected with the "call" (see _The Call from Without_, p. 74 f.) The "letter" in particular is the theme of the entire Ode XXIII from the apocryphal Odes of Solomon, of which we render here one stanza.

His plan of salvation became like unto a letter,

his will came down from on high
and was dispatched like an arrow
which is driven mightily from the bow.

Many hands reached out for the letter
to snatch it, to take it and read it;
but it eluded their fingers.
They were afraid of it and of the seal upon it,
having no power to break the seal, for the force of the seal was stronger than they.

(5-9)

We may note that the Mandaeans, reversing the direction, called the soul departing from the body "a well-sealed letter dispatched out of the world whose secret nobody knew... the soul flies and proceeds on its way..." (Mandaische Liturgien, p. 111). But more naturally the letter is the embodiment of the call going into the world and reaching the soul dormant here below, and this in the context of our narrative creates a curious contrapuntal play of meaning. The caller in gnostic symbolism is the messenger, and the called the sleeping soul. Here, however, the called sleeper is himself the messenger, the letter therefore a duplication of his role as he on his part duplicates that of the divine treasure he came to retrieve from the world. If we add to this the duplication of the messenger's figure in his heavenly garment, his mirror-image with which he is reunited at the completion of his mission, we perceive some of the logic of that strain of eschatological symbolism which has been summarized in the expression, "the saved savior."

The Conquering of the Serpent and the Ascent

The manner in which the messenger overcomes the serpent and snatches the treasure from it is barely narrated in our text. It simply states that the serpent is put to sleep, that is, experiences what the messenger has experienced before. What is here briefly attributed to a charm is in other sources explained by the fact that the Light is as much poison to the Darkness as the Darkness is to the Light. Thus in the Manichaean cosmogony the Primal Man, seeing his impending defeat in the encounter with the forces of Darkness, "gave himself and his five sons as food to the five sons of Darkness, as a man who has an enemy mixes a deadly poison in a cake and gives it to him" (according to Theodore bar Konai). By this sacrificial means the furor of the Darkness is actually "appeased." Here the connection of the gnostic savior-motif with the old sun-myth of nature religion is obvious: the theme of the hero's allowing himself to be devoured by the monster and vanquishing it from within is extremely widespread in mythology all over the world. Its transposition from nature religion to the symbolism of salvation we witness in the Christian myth of Christ's harrowing hell, which properly belongs in a dualistic setting like the Mandaeans and is hardly genuinely Christian. In the Odes of Solomon we can read:

Hell beheld me and became weak: Death spewed me out and many with me: gall and poison was I to him: I descended with him to the uttermost depth of Hell: his feet and head became strengthless... (Ode XLII, 11-13)

The Mandaeans most literally preserved the original, non-spiritualized form of the myth. In their main treatise on the descent of the savior into the lower worlds, Hibil, the savior-god, thus describes his adventure:

Karkum the great flesh-mountain said unto me: Go, or I shall devour thee. When he spake thus to me, I was in a casing of swords, sabres, lances, knives, and blades, and I said unto him: Devour me. Then... he swallowed me half-way: then he spewed me forth... He spewed venom out of his mouth, for his bowels, his liver and his reins were cut to pieces.

(G 157)

The author of the Hymn was obviously not interested in such crudities.

The ascent starts with the discarding of the impure garments and is guided and spurred on by the letter, which is light and voice at the same time. It has thus the function ascribed to Truth in a parallel passage from the Odes of Solomon:

I ascended up to the light as if on the chariot of Truth, the Truth guided and led me. She brought me over gulfs and abysses and bore me upward out of gorges and valleys. She became to me a harbor of salvation and laid me in the arms of life everlasting.

(Ode XXXVIII, 1-3)

In our narrative, however, the guidance of the letter ceases at what we must call the climax of the ascent, the encounter of the returning

8 About this we shall hear more in the ascent-doctrine of the Poimandres.
GNOSTIC SYSTEMS OF THOUGHT

The Heavenly Garment; the Image

In the Mandaean Liturgies for the Dead we read the standard formula: "I go to meet my image and my image comes to meet me: it caresses and embraces me as if I were returning from captivity" (e.g., in G 559). The conception is derived from an Avesta doctrine according to which after the death of a believer "his own religious conscience in the form of a fair maiden" appears to his soul and replies to his question as to who she is,

I am, O youth of good thoughts, good words, good deeds, good conscience, none other than thine own personal conscience: ... Thou hast loved me ... in this sublimity, goodness, beauty ... in which I now appear unto thee.

(Had5)htNas\2. 95.)

The doctrine was taken over by the Manichaeans: ct F 100 of the Turfan fragments, where it is said that the soul after death is met by the garment, the crown (and other emblems) and "the virgin like unto the soul of the truthful one." And in the Coptic-Manichaean genealogy of the gods we find among the divine emanations the "figure of light that comes to meet the dying," also called "the angel with the garment of light." In our narrative the garment has become this figure itself and acts like a person. It symbolizes the heavenly or eternal self of the person, his original idea, a kind of double or alter ego preserved in the upper world while he labors down below: as a Mandaean text puts it, "his image is kept safe in its place" (G 90). It grows with his deeds and its form is perfected by his toils. Its fullness marks the fulfillment of his task and therefore his release from exile in the world. Thus the encounter with this divided-off aspect of himself, the recognition of it as his own image, and the reunion with it signify the real moment of his salvation. Applied to the messenger or savior as it is here and elsewhere, the conception leads to the interesting theological idea of a twin brother or eternal original of the savior remaining in the upper world during his terrestrial mission. Duplications of this kind abound in gnostic speculation with regard to divine figures in general wherever their function requires a departure from the divine realm and involvement in the events of the lower world. For the interpretation of our text, these considerations strongly suggest that the Second ("next in rank") repeatedly mentioned as staying with his parents, and together with whom the King's Son is to be heir in his Father's house, is another such duplication, and in fact the same as the garment: he is actually no longer mentioned where otherwise we should most expect him to be mentioned, namely, after the stranger's triumphant return. In the latter's reunion with his own garment, the figure of the brother seems to have been reabsorbed into a unity.

The Transcendental Self

The double of the savior is as we have seen only a particular theological representation of an idea pertaining to the doctrine of man in general and denoted by the concept of the Self. In this concept we may discern what is perhaps the profoundest contribution of Persian religion to Gnosticism and to the history of religion in general. The Avesta word is daena, for which the orientalist Bartholomae lists the following meanings: "1. religion, 2. inner essence, spiritual ego, individuality; often hardly translatable."11

In the Manichaean fragments from Turfan, another Persian word is used, grev, which can be translated either by "self" or by "ego." It denotes the metaphysical person, the transcendental and true subject of salvation, which is not identical with the empirical soul. In the Chinese Manichaean treatise translated by Pelliot, it is called "the luminous nature," "our original luminous nature," or "inner nature," which recalls St. Paul's "inner man"; Manichaean hymns call it the "living self" or the "luminous self." The Mandaean "Mana" expresses the same idea and makes particularly clear the identity between this inner principle and the highest godhead; for "Mana" is the name for the transmundane Power of Light, the first deity, and at the same time that for the transcendent,

9 Avesta is the canon of Zoroastrian writings as reedited in the Sassanian period.

10 Cf. the reverse of this idea in The Picture of Dorian Gray.

non-mundane center of the individual ego. The same identity is expressed in the Naassene use of the name "Man" or "Adam" for the highest God and for his sunken counterpart.

In the New Testament, especially in St. Paul, this transcendent principle in the human soul is called the "spirit" (pneuma), "the spirit in us," "the inner man," eschatologically also called "the new man." It is remarkable that Paul, writing in Greek and certainly not ignorant of Greek terminological traditions, never uses in this connection the term "psyche," which since the Orphics and Plato had denoted the divine principle in us. On the contrary, he opposes, as did the Greek-writing Gnostics after him, "soul" and "spirit," and "psychic man" and "pneumatic man." Obviously the Greek meaning of psyche, with all its dignity, did not suffice to express the new conception of a principle transcending all natural and cosmic associations that adhered to the Greek concept. The term pneuma serves in Greek Gnosticism generally as the equivalent of the expressions for the spiritual "self," for which Greek, unlike some oriental languages, lacked an indigenous word. In this function we find it also in the so-called Mithras Liturgy with adjectives like "holy" and "immortal," contrasted with the psyche or the "human psychical power." The alchemist Zosimos has "our luminous pneuma" "the inner pneumatic man," etc. In some of the Christian Gnostics it is called also the "spark" and the "seed of light." It is between this hidden principle of the terrestrial person and its heavenly original that the ultimate recognition and reunion takes place. Thus the function of the garment in our narrative as the celestial form of the invisible because temporarily obscured self is one of the symbolic representations of an extremely widespread and, to the Gnostics, essential doctrine. It is no exaggeration to say that the discovery of this transcendent inner principle in man and the supreme concern about its destiny is the very center of gnostic religion.

*The Mandeans, incidentally, sometimes connect the phrase "the hidden Adam" with the term "Man" when used in relation to man. 12 The Authorized Version renders psychikps by "natural."

The Pearl

This brings us to our last question: What is the meaning of the Pearl? The answer to this question determines also the meaning of the story as a whole. As a mythographic detail, the question is easily answered. In the glossary of gnostic symbolism, "pearl" is one of the standing metaphors for the "soul" in the supernatural sense. It could therefore have been listed simply with the equivalent terms dealt with in the preceding survey. Yet it is more of a secret name than the more direct terms of that enumeration; and it also stands in a category by itself by singling out one particular aspect, or metaphysical condition, of that transcendent principle. Whereas almost all the other expressions can apply equally to divinity unimpaired and to its sunken part, the "pearl" denotes specifically the latter in the fate that has overtaken it. The "pearl" is essentially the "lost" pearl, and has to be retrieved. The fact of the pearl's being enclosed in an animal shell and hidden in the deep may have been among the associations that originally suggested the image. The Naassenes, interpreting in their own way Matt. 7:6, called "understandings and intelligences and men" (i.e., the "living" elements in the physical cosmos) "the pearls of that Formless One cast into the formation [i.e., the body]" (Hippol. Re jut. V. 8. 32). When the soul is addressed as "pearl" (as happens in a Turf an text), it is to remind it of its origin, but also to emphasize its preciousness to the celestial ones who seek for it, and also to contrast its worth to the worthlessness of its present surroundings, its luster to the darkness in which it is immersed. The address is used by the "Spirit" as the opening of his message of salvation. In the text referred to he goes on to call the soul a "king" for whose sake war was waged in heaven and earth and the envos were sent.

And for thy sake the gods went forth and appeared and destroyed Death and killed Darkness. . . . And I have come, who shall deliver from evil. . . . And I shall open before thee the gate in every heaven . . . and show thee the Father, the King for ever; and lead thee before him in a pure garment. 12

12 Reitzenstein, Das iranische Erlösungsymsterium, pp. 22 ff.
Now, if this is the message addressed to the Pearl, the reader, who remembers the story from the Acts of Thomas, must be struck by the fact that this is also the message addressed to him who went forth to recover the Pearl: he too is assured that the "gods," the great ones in his Father's kingdom, care about his deliverance, he too is reminded of his kingly origin, and he too is guided upward by the "letter," that is, the Spirit or the Truth; finally he too is led before the Father in pure garments. In other words, the fate of the messenger has drawn to itself all the characteristics which would aptly describe the fate of the Pearl, while in the Hymn the Pearl itself remains a mere object, and even as such entirely undescribed. So much is it here merely the symbol for a task on whose execution the messenger's own destiny depends that it is all but forgotten in the story of his return, and its handing over to the King is barely mentioned. Thus, if our poem is sometimes called "The Hymn of the Soul," its content seems to justify this designation in the figure of the Prince alone: whatever it has to tell about the soul's condition and destiny, it tells through his experiences. This has led some interpreters to believe that the Pearl stands here simply for the "self" or the "good life" of the envoy which he has to find on his terrestrial journey, this terrestrial journey being a trial to which he is subjected in order that he may prove himself: which means that he himself, and not the Pearl, represents the "soul" in general, and that the journey was really undertaken not for the Pearl's sake but for his own. In this case the Pearl, the object of the quest, would have no independent status apart from the quest: it would be rather an expression for the latter, which may then be designated as "self-integration."

Much as such an interpretation seems to be supported by the symbolism of the heavenly garment which grows with the traveler's deeds, etc., the allegorical meaning of the Pearl itself is too firmly established in gnostic myth\(^\text{18}\) to allow of its being dissolved into a mere moral function; and as undoubtedly as the envoy's experiences can be substituted for those of the Pearl, if this is to represent the soul, just as undoubtedly is the recovery of the Pearl itself the primary concern of the Celestials which prompts the mission of the Son with its otherwise unnecessary dangers to himself. The Pearl is an entity in its own right; it fell into the power of Darkness prior to the sending out of the Prince, and for its sake he is ready to assume the burden of descent and exile, thereby inevitably reproducing some of the features of the "pearl's" own fate.

In fact, the interpreters' puzzle, the interchangeability of the subject and object of the mission, of savior and soul, of Prince and Pearl, is the key to the true meaning of the poem, and to gnostic eschatology in general. We can confidently take the King's Son to be the Savior, a definite divine figure, and not just the personification of the human soul in general. Yet this unique position does not prevent him from undergoing in his own person the full force of human destiny, even to the extent that he the savior himself has to be saved. Indeed, this is an irremissible condition of his saving function. For the parts of divinity lost to the darkness can be reached only down there in the depth in which they are swallowed up; and the power which holds them, that of the world, can be overcome only from within. This means that the savior-god must assimilate himself to the forms of cosmic existence and thereby subject himself to its conditions. The Christian reader must not confuse this necessity with the orthodox interpretation of Christ's passion. Since the gnostic concept of salvation has nothing to do with the remission of sin ("sin" itself having no place in gnostic doctrine, which puts "ignorance" in its place), there is in the savior's descent nothing of vicarious suffering, of atonement as a condition for divine forgiveness, and, with the one exception of Marcion, nothing even of a ransom by which the captive souls divers—with the apostles; the merchants—with the enlighteners of the heavens (sun and moon as agents of salvation in the Manichaean myth); the kings and nobles—with the Aeons' of the Greatness. Cf. Matthew 13:45 f. A Mandaean example should be added: "The treasurers of this world assembled and said 'Who has carried away the pearl which illumined the perishable house? In the house which it left the walls cracked and collapsed'" (G 517): the "house" may be the body but is more probably the world, in which case the "pearl" is the general soul or the sum of all souls (whose removal according to Mani leads to the world's collapse), and this should also be the meaning of the Pearl in our poem.

\(^{18}\) Cf., e.g., the extensive allegory of the "Holy Church" in the Manichaean Kephalaia (p. 204), which may be summarized thus: The raindrop falls from above into the sea and forms in the oyster-shell into a pearl; the divers descend into the depths of the sea to bring up this pearl; the divers give it to the merchants, and the merchants give it to the kings. The allegory then equates: the raindrop—with the spoil that was carried off in the beginning, i.e., the living Soul; the oyster-shell—with the flesh of mankind in which the Soul is gathered and laid up as pearl; the
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128 have to be bought back. Rather, the idea is either that of a technical necessity imposed by the conditions of the mission, namely, the nature of the system, far from the divine realm, into which the messenger has to penetrate and whose laws he cannot cancel for himself, or that of a ruse by which the Archons are to be deceived. In the latter version the suffering or temporary succumbing of the savior may not be real at all but merely apparent and part of the deception. This of course is not the case in our poem, where the stranger's predicament is quite real; yet even here his trials are an outcome of the inevitable dangers of his mission and not part of its very meaning. To put it differently, they imperil the success of his mission and are triumphantly overcome, whereas in the Christian account the trials are the very means and manner of the fulfillment of the mission. With this cardinal difference in mind, we may still say that there is a sacrificial element in the savior's descent according to our poem, in that he was willing for the Pearl's sake to take upon himself an exile's fate and to duplicate in his person the history of that which he came to redeem: the Soul.

If in addition we are right in discerning in the King's Son certain features of the Primal Man of Manichaean doctrine, he also duplicates the fate of that pre-cosmic divinity in which the present condition of the Soul, i.e., the Pearl, originated. Indeed, as we shall see when we come to the Manichaean cosmogony, all these successive and mutually analogous phases of the world-drama, notwithstanding their cosmic significance, symbolize also the tribulations and triumphs of the human soul. The reference to the Primal Man in particular supplies a final link in the solution of our riddle. It is not for nothing that a pre-cosmic (and mediately cosmogonic) eternal divinity bears the name "Man": the souls dispersed in the world are his "Light-Armor," part of his original substance, which he lost to the Darkness in the primordial fight (the "spoil carried off" in the allegory quoted, note 15), so that he is actually present in every human soul, exiled, captive, stunned; and if the Prince as his later representation comes to recover these lost elements, he in a sense really seeks his own, and his work is one of reintegration of the divine self—even of his own self, only not in the sense pertaining to an individual person. If, then, there is this metaphysical, though not numerical, identity between the messenger and the Pearl, every hearer of the tale can legitimately, without confounding personal identities, recognize in the adventures of the messenger the story of his own earthbound soul, see his own fate as part and analogue of the deity's, yet at the same time also as the latter's object. Thus in the proper perspective the competing interpretations resolve themselves as not really alternative but complementary.

19 This is the interpretation put by many Christian Gnostics upon the passion of Christ, the so-called Docetism.