VIII. The Hymn of Jude Thomas, the Apostle, in the Country of the Indians (*ATH* 108-113)

**GERARD P. LUTTIKUIZEN**

The text of the so-called 'Hymn' or 'Song of the Pearl' is preserved in only two manuscripts of the *Acts of Thomas*, one Syriac manuscript (10th century) and one Greek (11th century). In the Syriac manuscript, the text of the song is preceded by a title. It is not called 'The hymn of the pearl' (this modern designation is not fully adequate, as we shall see) but, rather, 'The hymn (*madrasa*) of Jude Thomas, the apostle, when he was in the country of the Indians'. In this manuscript we also find a colophon, a concluding description of the poetic text: 'Conclusion of the hymn of Jude Thomas which he said in prison'. In the Greek manuscript, the title and the colophon are missing. Here, more than in the Syriac manuscript, the hymn of the Apostle is an integral part of the text of the *ATH*.

However, the contents and the literary form of the hymn even in the Greek manuscript suggest that originally it was transmitted without its present context and that it was put into the mouth of the apostle by the author of the *ATH* or by an editor. Disconnected from the *ATH*, the poetic story sounds like an eastern fairy tale:

1 In the Syriac manuscript, the poetic text is followed by a doxology or hymn of praise to the Father and the Son. For a discussion of the possible relations between the 'Song of the Pearl', the doxology and the narrative text of the *ATH* see P.-H. Poirier, *L'Hymne de la Perle des Acrcs de Thomas* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1981) 171-84.

In the surviving Greek text, more traces of transformation and revision are found than in the Syriac text. Cf. H.J.W. Drijvers, 'Acts of Thomas', in *N7A* II, 322-39 at 330: 'In contrast to the Wedding Hymn, it is the Syriac version of the Hymn of the Pearl which has best preserved the original.'

2 The text is written in the traditional style of Semitic poetry. It is composed of more than 100 couplets (double clauses), cf. Poirier, *L'Hymne*, 194-7.
In the first-person style, a Parthian prince tells how, as a young boy, he was sent away by his royal parents to achieve a difficult task: he was charged to go to the far country of Egypt in order to snatch away a precious pearl from a dangerous serpent or dragon. When he left home, he had to leave behind not only the luxurious and safe environment of the royal palace but also the costly robe that gave him his princely identity and dignity. An agreement was made with his parents that if he succeeded in his mission, the garment would be returned to him and he would share with his brother the inheritance of the kingdom.

Accompanied by two guides, he sets off on the long road to Egypt. After his arrival in Egypt, the two men leave him. In the neighbourhood of the serpent, he plans to wait until the serpent sleeps and then to snatch away the pearl. The prince tells how initially he was alone and tried to avoid the Egyptians and their unclean habits. But a noble relative of his, who also stays in Egypt, advises him to adapt himself to the Egyptians so that they will not treat him as a foreigner and frustrate his plan by waking up the serpent. Following this advice, he gradually comes under the influence of the people of that country. He begins to wear Egyptian clothes and tastes Egyptian food. Eventually, he wholly forgets about his mission and falls into a deep sleep.

But his wretched situation comes to the notice of his parents, who remind the boy of the agreement they had made with him. They write him a letter that flies like an eagle all the way to Egypt. Not only can the letter fly, it can also talk. The prince awakens to the voice of the letter. When he reads the letter, he remembers his royal descent and the purpose of his stay in Egypt.

He immediately casts a spell on the dragon-like serpent, snatches away the pearl and takes the shortest way home, guided by the shining letter. On the way, he receives back his royal robe that he had almost forgotten. The garment, which in the meantime had grown with him, is as a mirror to him: when he sees it, he becomes one with it and so fully realizes who he is.

Then he comes home. Finally he had achieved what he was charged to do and he is richly rewarded by his father.

The probability that the poetic story was inserted into the ATh could induce us to study it as a separate text. But this is not what I intend.

---

4 As is done by K. Beyer, 'Das syrische Perlenlied. Ein Erlösungsmythos
to do in this chapter. Rather, I will focus on the question of what the text means when it is read within the context of the ATh. In the Acts, the poem is said or chanted by the apostle Jude Thomas during his imprisonment in India (108-13). I quote the preceding narrative context:

And as he prayed, all the prisoners looked on him, and asked him to pray for them. And when he had prayed and sat down, he began to say this psalm (in the Syriac manuscript 'this madrasha', followed by the title)\(^5\): "When I was a little child in the palace of my father", etc.

Obviously the person of the speaker (the apostle Thomas), his situation in an Indian prison, and the explicit introduction of the text as a didactic poem or a religious song preclude the readers of the ATh from understanding the story as a fairy tale. The context clearly suggests that its language is figurative and that it has some religious meaning. Therefore, the question we will discuss is: What did the poem mean to those hearers and readers who were familiar with and sympathized with the overall message of the apostle Jude Thomas?

1. A Gnostic Context?

It would not be difficult to perceive the hymn recited by Jude Thomas as a story with a hidden deeper meaning if we could be sure that the context of the ATh presents the apostle as a Gnostic teacher. It may be recalled that until recently this assumption was widespread in scholarship, particularly in German research. Suffice it to refer to studies by Günther Bornkamm and Werner Foerster.

In his introduction to the ATh in the third edition of Hennecke-Schneemelcher, Neuestamentliche Apokryphen (1964) Bornkamm states: 'Die Erlosungsanschauung, die den Akten (the ATh) zugrunde liegt, ist die der Gnosis.' Thereupon Bornkamm summarizes the supposedly Gnostic features of the myth of salvation which he finds in als Marchengedicht', Zeitschr. der deutschen morgenl. Ges. 140 (1990) 234-59. Cf. his observation on p.236: 'Da das Gedicht ursprünglich selbständig war. muss es aus sich selbst heraus verstanden werden'.

\(^5\) Cf. 1 Cor 14.26 for a similar use of the word psalmos.
the \textit{ATH}\textsuperscript{6}. Not surprisingly, Bornkamm affirms that these allegedly Gnostic features of the \textit{ATH} recur in the Wedding Song of \textit{cc.6-7} and in the Hymn of the Pearl. Actually, in this third edition of \textit{Hennecke-Schneemelcher}, the \textit{ATH} stands out against the other AAA for its Gnostic character. None of the other apocryphal acts are considered undoubtedly Gnostic (with the exception of \textit{cc. 94-102} of the \textit{Acts of John}, which are interpreted by Knut Schaferdiek as a Gnostic gospel in Johannine style\textsuperscript{7}).

Wholly in line with this view of the \textit{ATH} as a particularly Gnostic writing, Werner Foerster incorporates excerpts from the \textit{ATH} - and only from these \textit{Acts} - in his three-volume edition of Gnostic texts\textsuperscript{8}. Note that he does not include \textit{AJ 94-102}\textsuperscript{9}.

Scholars who, like Bornkamm and Foerster, assume that the religious message of the apostle in the \textit{ATH} is Gnostic have good reasons for interpreting the Hymn of the Pearl as a Gnostic allegory. Actually, two alternative Gnostic interpretations of the Hymn of the Pearl have been proposed. The first interpretation, which has been held ever since Theodor Noldeke (1871), supposes that the royal child, who was sent from his home to the far and impure country of Egypt, represents the soul (or the \textit{pneuma}, the \textit{nous}) having descended from the divine realm into the dark material world\textsuperscript{10}. In the cosmic world, the soul is entangled in the forces of darkness. It forgets about its royal provenance and its true identity until it is awakened by a revelation from above (the letter sent by the parents). The beautiful garment is viewed \textit{inter alia} as the purely spiritual or godlike part of the soul\textsuperscript{11}. In this interpretation, the function of the pearl is less obvious. But it should be noted that the pearl plays only a supporting part in the story, just as the serpent does. The letter and the garment, in fact,

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 300. Cf. id., \textit{Mythos und Legende in den apokryphen Thomas-Akten} (Gottingen, 1933) 8: 'Die Anschauungen vom Erloser und von der Erlosung innerhalb der Akten bewegen sich ganz im Rahmen des gnostischen Erlösermythos'.

\textsuperscript{7} In the same volume, 142f.


\textsuperscript{11} Cf. e.g. Bomkamm, \textit{NTA} 3, 304.
are much more important to the development of the story. This can be concluded from the number of lines devoted to these narrative figures (the precious garment is mentioned in 30 double lines, the pearl occurs in 7 double lines). Moreover, the pearl and the serpent remain silent whereas the letter and the garment speak". For these reasons, the current designation 'Song of the Pearl' is not wholly adequate. Although I do not adopt this Gnostic interpretation, it has much to recommend it. I shall return to aspects of this interpretation later.

According to the other Gnostic interpretation, which is preferred by Bomkamm and Foerster and which was proposed for the first time by Erwin Preuschen, the prince is not the soul itself (the *pneuma*, the *nous*) but the heavenly Redeemer of the soul: the Saviour who was sent from the divine world into the realm of darkness in order to rescue the soul (the pearl) from its imprisonment by demonic forces. It may seem strange that the prince (the Saviour) eats of the food of the Egyptians, that he falls asleep and forgets his mission so that he has to be reminded of his task and be rescued by his parents; here, however, Bornkamm and Foerster follow Reitzenstein who sees in the Hymn of the Pearl an illustration of the postulated Gnostic myth of the redeemed Redeemer (*Salvator salvandus*).

Recent scholarship is less confident about the Gnostic character of the *ATH*. For non-Gnostic interpretations of these Acts, I refer to the commentary by A.F.J. Klijn and to the introduction to the *ATH* by H.J.W. Drijvers in the fifth edition of Schneemelcher, I would like

---

12 Beyer, 'Das syrische Perlenlied', 239.
14 Cf. e.g. Bomkamm, *Mythos und Legende*, 112: 'Das weitverbreitete mythologische Grundmotiv der Dichtung und die Bildersprache im Einzelnen lassen keinen Zweifel darüber, dass hier der Mythos von dem gotlichen Gesandten, der vom Himmel in das Reich des Bosen ausgesandt, den Mächten verfällt und selbst erlost wird, dichterisch verarbeitet ist.'
to support this non-Gnostic interpretation of the *ATH* by an examination of the way in which, in these *Acts*, reference is made to biblical traditions. I propose that the evaluation of biblical traditions is a useful gauge or criterion for determining the extent to which a given early Christian writing can be considered Gnostic\(^\text{16}\). My hypothesis is that the readers of the *ATH* are not likely to have interpreted the hymn of *cc.108-13* in a Gnostic sense, if these *Acts* do not contain a particularly Gnostic soteriology.

I begin with the use of Old Testament traditions. The apostle Jude Thomas emphasizes that world and man were created by God. It was God's enemy, the Devil, who, in the shape of a serpent, incited Adam and Eve to be disobedient to their creator (cf. *c.32*). And it is a consequence of their siding with God's enemy that human beings live a sexual life and produce mortal and ungodly children (*c.12*). The task of the apostle is to persuade people to turn from their allegiance to the Devil—an allegiance which becomes manifest above all in their indulgence in sexual and other passions and pleasures—and to live a fully spiritual life in agreement with what is believed to be God's true purpose for his creation.

The present—supposedly wretched—situation of human beings is seen as the result of their being deluded by the Devil. This view is much more in agreement with the Genesis accounts of the creation and the fall of Adam and Eve as they were interpreted in emerging mainstream Christianity than with the revisionistic rewriting of these biblical traditions in such mythological Gnostic texts as *The Secret Book of John*, *The True Nature of the Archons*, and *The Testimony of Truth*.

In these Gnostic writings, the Genesis accounts are rejected and replaced by the allegedly true story of the creation and the earliest history of humankind. The unorthodox interpretation of the biblical stories is caused by the fact that Hellenistic Gnostic ideas about God, the created world, and man conflicted with the information of the Genesis text. The Gnostics behind *The Secret Book of John* and related writings were convinced that all material and perishable

---

\(^{16}\) In my definition of ancient gnosis, I start from those groups and their writings and ideas which, in the ancient sources, are characterized as Gnostic. A central place, then, is due to the group behind *The Secret Book of John*, cf. my 'A Gnostic Reading' (see note 9).
things, the human body included, were not created by their fully transcendent and unknowable highest God but by an ignorant and evil demiurge. They recognized in the biblical creator-God not their supreme Godhead but the inferior demiurge (who, with the help of biblical texts, is depicted as a jealous, ignorant and even malicious god).

How far the \textit{ATH} are removed from the Genesis interpretation of the above texts can be illustrated with the description of the serpent and its role in the Paradise story. In \textit{The Secret Book of John, The True Nature of the Archons, On the Origin of the World}, and \textit{The Testimony of Truth}, the serpent in Paradise is viewed as an ambassador of the true God and even as an early manifestation of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of spiritual humanity. The serpent is glorified because it encouraged the first human beings to violate the commandment of the creator forbidding them to eat from the tree of knowledge. This commandment of the creator-God is interpreted as his attempt to prevent Adam and Eve from attaining the truth about their divine descent and nature.\footnote{See my article 'A Resistant Interpretation of the Paradise Story in the Gnostic Testimony of Truth' in G.P.Luttikhuizen (ed), \textit{Paradise Interpreted = Themes in Biblical Narrative} 2 (Leiden, 1998) 140-52.}

The Gnostic \textit{Testimony of Truth} contains an anthology of 'serpent texts' in which the serpent in Paradise is equated \textit{inter alia} with serpents mentioned in the Moses stories in \textit{Exod} 7 (the rod in Moses' hand which became a serpent) and \textit{Num} 21 (the serpent of bronze which Moses hung on a pole to protect and heal the \textit{people}).\footnote{Nag Hamm. Cod. IX,3, pp. 48,13-49,9.} The obvious intention of this anthology of positive serpent texts is to suggest that, just like the other serpents, the serpent in Paradise acted to the benefit of humankind. The contrast with the enumeration of the wicked deeds of the serpent in \textit{ATH} c.32 is conspicuous.

In \textit{ATH} c.49, Jesus Christ is mentioned as the one who was proclaimed in the Scriptures. The reference to the Old Testament as 'the Scriptures' and the statement that Jesus Christ was proclaimed in the Scriptures bear witness to a high esteem of the biblical text. This view is evidently much more in agreement with the emphasis given to the continuity of the two Testaments in emerging mainstream
Christianity than it is with the critical attitude towards the Old Testament expressed or presupposed in the above Gnostic writings19.

I now turn to the use of New Testament traditions in the ATh. In these Acts, we find a great diversity of allusions to New Testament texts and traditions. I confine my remarks to the life and the mission of Jesus Christ. I have already pointed to c.59, where it is said that Jesus was proclaimed in the Scriptures. Several statements lay stress on Jesus' incarnation and on his physical sufferings. In c.72, for instance, Jude Thomas affirms that Jesus put on a body and became man and (as such) appeared to all. In c.79, he repeats that Jesus was born and he adds that Jesus was reared as a child. The apostle addresses Jesus as the one who was slain, who was dead and buried (47). He praises Jesus' manhood or humanity (anthropôtês) that died in order to give us life (80). Jesus gave himself for us (huper hêmôn) and with his blood purchased us (72). C.158, the last chapter before the martyrdom, contains detailed reminiscences of the humiliations suffered by Jesus before and during his crucifixion. In the long Greek version of c.19, Jude Thomas thanks the Lord for his having been dead for a short time in order that he (the apostle) might live for ever. He also praises Jesus' resurrection from the dead, by which rising and rest were given to 'our souls' (80).

This affirmation of the true humanity of Jesus, of his physical sufferings, and his death and resurrection contrasts sharply with the radical reinterpretation of early Christian traditions about Jesus' suffering in Christian Gnostic literature. An interesting case is the revelatory teaching of Jesus about his suffering in cc.94-102 of the AJ. These Gnostic chapters tell how on Good Friday the Lord shows John, his beloved disciple, the true cross, which is a cross of light. He explains to John that his suffering is of a quite different nature from what the multitude, which at that moment is gathered around the wooden cross in Jerusalem, believes. In his esoteric teaching, the Lord denies that he was ever submitted to physical suffering. After this revelation, John laughs at the multitude of believers who do not understand the true meaning of Jesus' coming into the world. The Christological teaching of these chapters of the AJ is in basic agreement with many other Christian Gnostic texts known to us from the Nag Hammadi library, e.g. The Gospel of Philip, The Letter of Peter

This comparison of references to Old and New Testament traditions in the \textit{ATH}, on the one hand, and in undoubtedly Gnostic texts, cc.94-102 of the \textit{AJ} included, on the other, leads to the conclusion that the \textit{ATH} represents a non-Gnostic realm of thought. It may be the case that, in the course of the transmission of the text, this writing experienced one or more orthodox revisions. But it is difficult to believe that an earlier text of the \textit{ATT} attributed to the apostle basically different ideas about God's creation, about the origin of evil, and about the person and the mission of Jesus Christ". 

If we wish to understand the Hymn of the Pearl within its present context – as a didactic poem, that is, recited by the apostle Jude Thomas – this conclusion makes a Gnostic interpretation of the song implausible. If it is interpreted in a Gnostic sense, it is bound to remain a \textit{corpus alienum} within the \textit{ATH}.

2. \textit{A Thomasine Context?}

We will now briefly consider the extent to which the \textit{ATH} represent distinctly ‘Thomasine’ views (views, that is, which this work shares with other texts connected with the name of the apostle Thomas: \textit{The Gospel of Thomas} and \textit{The Book of Thomas the Contender}, both from the Nag Hammadi collection). A positive conclusion should encourage us to see the text of the song recited by the apostle in light of such ideas.

\begin{itemize}
\item[D. Voorgang, \textit{Die Passion Jesu und Christi in der Gnosis} (Frankfurt, 1991).]
\item[A.F.J. Klijn, ‘Early Syriac Christianity – Gnostic’?, in U. Bianchi (ed), \textit{Le Origini dello Gnosticismo} (Leiden, 1970) 575-9 at 577 acknowledges that the text of the \textit{ATH} was corrected in the course of time, but he adds: 'these corrections were not made in Christological passages'.]
\item[In the \textit{AJ}, we find a clearly Gnostic revelation (cc.94-102) within a non-Gnostic context. But, as P.J. Lalleman, \textit{The Acts of John} (Leuven, 1998) has demonstrated, in the \textit{AJ} the combination of non-Gnostic and Gnostic texts makes perfect sense: the Gnostic chapters are meant as a further, more advanced account of the beliefs of the Johannine community which produced these texts. Lalleman speaks of a two-stage initiation into Johannine]
\end{itemize}
Several recent studies deal with the question of what the Thomas writings have in common. The results, however, are rather negative. Of course, Thomas is a central figure in each of these writings but the roles he plays are quite different. For instance, it is only in the ATh that Jude Thomas is depicted as a missionary representative of Jesus' teaching. Only here do we find an elaboration of the twin symbolism. The ideological views these writings have in common (notably: the renunciation of the material world and the preference for an ascetic lifestyle, the disinterest in the resurrection of the body, the emphasis on self-knowledge) are also found in many other writings of Late Antiquity.

3. The Hellenistic Anthropology of the ATh

This brings me to my main point. I propose that we give more explicit attention to the Greek-Hellenistic thought-world underlying and expressing itself in the religious message of the ATh, and particularly in its anthropological ideas. If we take into account the basically Hellenistic dualistic character of the religious message of the ATh, it makes sense to understand the Hymn of the Pearl as a poetic imagination of these ideas.

Gnosticism. There can be no doubt that 'Johannine Gnostics' were able to recognize the Gnostic message of these chapters, however enigmatic and cryptic they may have been to 'the multitude' of non-enlightened Christians. But whereas the Gnostic section of the AJ contains clear signs of its being meant as an esoteric Gnostic revelation, similar clues are virtually absent in the Hymn of the Pearl and in its preceding context.


24 Note that my approach to the texts is different from that formulated by Poirier, L’Hymne, 308: ‘il faut se demander s’il n’y aurait pas, entre l’HP et les AcTh, une parenté de thème ou de contenu qui aurait suggéré d’y inclure celui-là dans ceux-ci.’ My interest is not in the composers of the ATh and their possible motives for inserting the hymn but in the interpretation of the hymn by the hearers and readers intended by the authors of the Acts.
The apostle Jude Thomas claims – in his preaching and prayers – that it is the soul which will be saved and will live for ever. He refers to the resurrection of the body only in one passage (the eucharistic ceremony reported in c.158). For the rest there is total silence about the resurrection and the future life of the body. I have already mentioned that in c.80 the apostle thanks the Lord for his having offered resurrection and rest 'to our souls' (cf. c.36: as long as we are in the body we are not able to express what God will give 'to our souls').

Frequently the worthlessness and corruptibility or mutability of the body is emphasized (cf. esp. 37 and 88). The body is just a temporary dwelling-place of the soul. Death is seen as deliverance and release of the soul from the body (ἀπαλαγή καὶ τοῦ σώματος λύσις: 160). The body grows old and becomes dust and so returns to its true nature (37). I consider the apostle's reference to God as 'the Saviour of my soul and the one who restores it (the soul) to its own nature' (141) a very significant passage. Apparently the expression 'the restoration of the soul to its own nature' means that after its release from the body, the soul will be restored to the state it was in before it was clothed with a body (cf. 43).

The strict division between soul and body, the idea of the pre-existence and the immortality of the soul and the contempt for the body as a temporary and perishable dwelling-place of the soul, are anthropological ideas which belong to the Platonic koine of Late Antiquity. Indeed, several of these ideas were inherited in some form by Christians – by diverse groups of mainstream Christians as well as by Gnostic Christians – and to an extent even by Jews. But this does not alter the fact that we are dealing with a basically Hellenistic dualistic view of man.

I observed above that, in his preaching, the apostle often refers to biblical traditions. First of all, the allegedly wretched situation of

---

25 Here the apostle prays: 'let us receive renewal of soul and body'.
26 In the last lines of c.37, the apostle speaks about the help and guidance of Jesus in the present world (ἡ χώρα τῆς πλάνης). In this connection, he is called 'physician even of the bodies' (ἰατρὸς δὲ καὶ τῶν σωμάτων).
27 Very similar ideas about the soul and its fate can be found in The Tractate of the Soul (Nag Hamm. cod. 11.6). In Corp. Herm. X, and in Plotinus, Enneads, 5.1. Cf. also Origen. Comment. in Mt 13:45-46 (the parable of the precious pearl). The last two texts were brought to my attention by M. Pesthy.
human beings and their inclination to shameful – i.e. sexual – deeds are traced back to the influence of God's enemy, the Devil. Furthermore, the real humanity and the physical suffering of Jesus are emphasized. I suspect that these biblical traditions were used to underscore and further substantiate a teaching which was based, first of all, on a widespread Greek philosophical view of man. The biblical tradition concerning the origin of evil, for instance, served to warn more emphatically against the needs and passions of the body. By renouncing sexuality, the apostle affirms, Christians make themselves immune to the malicious tricks of the Devil. It is made clear that even Jesus had to fight the Devil.

In this connection, it should be noticed that the ATTh does not contain a soteriology in the sense of a teaching about a Saviour. In these Acts, every individual has to achieve his or her own redemption from the bonds and the tricks of the Devil, first of all, indeed, by renouncing sexuality. In this process, Jesus is merely a guide and a model.

4. The Hymn as a Poetic Imagination of the Teaching of the Apostle

Theological issues are not involved (at least not overtly) in the story of the Parthian prince recited by Jude Thomas. We may take it for granted, therefore, that this text was less exposed to orthodox revisions than other speeches of the apostle. In so far as we can detect traces of editorial interpretation in the poem, they quite probably have a different background. In this respect lines 76-78, 88, and 98 (cc. 112-3, where the prince describes what happened when, on the way home, he saw his royal garment) are an interesting case.

28 Drijvers, in his introduction to the ATTh, NTA II, 295; English transl., 329.
29 Cf. cc. 10, 80, 37, 39, 60, 66, 81. Also for this reason the readers of the ATTh are not likely to have found in the Hymn of the Pearl a poetic illustration of the mission and the fate of the Saviour.
30 In these lines, the Greek text does not differ substantially from the Syriac version which is rendered here.
THE HYMN OF JUDE THOMAS, THE APOSTLE

76. When suddenly I saw my garment
it became a mirror image to me.
77. I saw in it my whole self
and I knew and saw myself through it.
78. For although being one, we were divided
and again we were one in a single form.

88. Again I saw throughout it
Motions of knowledge being sent forth
98. When I had put it on
I ascended to the land of peace and honour'.

In these passages, the poetic story is interlarded with references to
the religious meaning of self-knowledge (which the prince attains
when he is reunited with his precious garment, apparently a metaphor
for his better half or heavenly twin). They provide the reader with a
key for decoding the story and for understanding it as an allegory. As
Bentley Layton alleges, 'Starting from this clue, an ancient reader
could work back through the story at another level, retelling it as an
account or model of the quest for self-knowledge and salvation".
But I doubt that this clue to a specific meaning is an original element
of the text. It might, instead, reflect an early attempt to interpret the
story as an allegory about redemption through self-knowledge". As
such, it would belong to the history of the reception of the poem
rather than to its traditional content".  

I argued above that the readers of the AT'h are likely to have
understood the story recited by the apostle as a poetic expression
or illustration of his teaching35. They must have been particularly

\[31\] In 98b I follow the Greek text (Syriac: 'to the gate of hail and adoration').
\[33\] This particular allegorical interpretation could have developed in
diverse Gnostic, Manichaean, and Catholic environments. Readers will turn
to allegorical interpretation when they no longer understand the logic of the
story in question or when this logic does not satisfy them.
\[34\] In the case of an apocryphal text like this, which was constantly re-told
and re-written and which is known to us from comparatively late manuscripts,
it is quite difficult to distinguish later from earlier recensions (let alone from
the original text). But this should not induce us to give up this distinction.
\[35\] Or also as a metaphor of the missionary travel of the apostle in India
which, in its turn, can be read as an image of the dangerous travel of man or
susceptible to words, phrases, narrative sequences, etc. that might illustrate this message. They could be tempted to understand the poem in a typically allegorical way (as the above quoted lines of the surviving versions suggest) but the literary elegance of the text – its poetic form and the alluring plot – may just as likely have prevented them from immediately decoding the story in order to find its supposed referential meaning.

I propose that an adequate way to understand this poetic text was – and still is – to read it as a coherent story provoking a network of allusions e.g. to the dignity of the soul and to the danger of losing this dignity and nobility here on earth. If we bear in mind that the poem speaks about a young boy, it also makes sense to see his fate in the light of the Greek philosophical idea that the soul is tested or educated during this life.

When the boy gets himself into trouble, his parents care for him and remind him of his royal descent and of the mission he is to achieve in Egypt. This part of the story can easily be associated with the Christian message represented and proclaimed by the apostle Jude Thomas. As the preceding chapters of the Acts have demonstrated, the apostle reminded people of the dignity of their soul and called upon them to free themselves from the passions and low desires that prevent them from recovering their true spiritual identity. Read in this way, the poetic story may convey a much broader range of possible meanings than when we approach it as an elaborate allegory (with virtually each narrative detail having its one and only referential meaning).