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James V. Garrison
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The "Hymn of the Pearl": An Ancient Counterpart to "O My Father"

An early Christian hymn portraying a soul’s journey from the heavenly court of regal parents through an earthly probation to a divine inheritance fascinates interpreters of many faiths.

John W. Welch and James V. Garrison

One of the most endearing writings found in early Christianity is known as the "Hymn of the Pearl." This text has immediate appeal to readers of all levels and resonates a beautiful message of a soul’s journey from a premortal home, through mortality, and back to heavenly parents. To this extent, the poem can be seen as an early Christian counterpart to the early Latter-day Saint hymn "O My Father."

The Hymn of the Pearl is quoted in an apocryphal work entitled The Acts of the Apostle Thomas, probably named after Didymus Judas Thomas, the same Thomas who doubted Christ’s resurrection. Many manuscripts of the Acts survive, but only two contain the Hymn of the Pearl; one is a Syriac version and the other is in Greek. The original text of the hymn appears to have been written in Syriac, probably in the first or second century A.D.

In The Acts of Thomas, we find Thomas imprisoned in India, imploring the Lord for deliverance. When he finishes praying for himself and for the other prisoners, he sits down and begins to recite the Hymn of the Pearl. The hymn tells of the journey of a soul through a treacherous kingdom in order to recover a sacred pearl and to return with it to awaiting parents. The whole poem is spoken by the soul in the first-person singular, making it beautifully personal. The composition begins with the soul as a young boy in his primeval childhood, being nurtured in the royal house of his parents, the King of Kings and the Queen of the East. One
day his parents instruct him that he is to leave home and his glittering robe and garments and take a journey down into Egypt to find there a pearl guarded by a terrible serpent. The parents covenant with him that, if he recovers the pearl and returns home with it, he will be allowed to put his glorious robes back on and will be made an heir in the kingdom together with his oldest brother, the second in command. Accordingly, he leaves home with a bundle of provisions prepared for him, and with a pair of guides, he makes his way for Egypt.

He is left on his own just outside of Egypt, and he decides to head straight for the serpent, because, if he can catch it asleep, he can easily snatch the pearl away and accomplish his mission. Outside the den he settles in, waiting for the serpent to fall asleep, and while there, encounters a young man from his homeland, whom he takes in as a partner and companion and whom he warns about the wickedness of the Egyptians. He also decides to dress himself in Egyptian clothes in order to blend in with them lest they recognize him as a foreigner and call the serpent against him. The Egyptians, however, detect him and trick him into eating their food. The food has the effect of a drug, making him forget who he is and that he is on a mission; soon he is serving the king of Egypt.

Meanwhile, his parents and oldest brother see his plight and in council decide that they must write a letter commanding him to wake up and to remember that he is a son of royalty and that he is on a sacred mission. All the nobles of the kingdom sign the letter, the king seals it with his right hand, and it is sent. The letter reaches the boy, wakes him up from his sleep, and reminds him of his origin and his purpose. Determined to fulfill his mission, he puts the serpent to sleep by invoking the name of his father, his mother, and his elder brother. He seizes the pearl, sheds the filthy clothes of the Egyptians, and makes a journey back to his home in the East. As he approaches his home, his beautiful robe and garments are sent out to him, and after dressing himself in them, he reenters the home of his parents with the pearl. There he is lovingly received and made an heir to the kingdom together with the eldest brother.

LDS readers can immediately sense the potential significance of the Hymn of the Pearl since many of its elements are consistent with fundamental LDS precepts. In addition to the obvious symbols
are some subtle ones, and these symbols have caught the attention of several scholars. For example, Hugh Nibley has outlined possible LDS interpretations for many parts of this text.6 Nibley sees the hymn as the reflection of a ritual journey of the soul, a journey of “deliverance from the dark prison of this world and of the underworld.”7 Accordingly, the main character in the hymn is the redeemed soul, probably of a typical good Christian, retelling the story of personal salvation and deliverance. Especially intriguing to Nibley is the bundle of treasures given to the soul before the soul leaves its premortal existence.8 In his view, the treasures are “the treasures of wisdom” or the knowledge of ordinances, especially those of the temple,9 and the garment left behind symbolizes the premortal glory of the soul and the robe of the priesthood.10

The soul travels down through Babel and into Egypt, which represent the materialistic world and “spiritual Sodom,” or the telestial world.11 The pearl that the soul must find there is in fact the soul itself, “rescued and returned from the depths.”12 The serpent guarding the pearl embodies all obstacles that would impede progress and spiritual growth. The Egyptian food that puts the soul to sleep could have various LDS interpretations, such as sin or pride; Nibley, however, favors the view that it represents the false philosophies of men.13

Concerning the robe sent to the soul as it returns home, Nibley wishes to see this encounter in a ritual sense, although the text is problematical and hence most translations of this passage are obscure. Nibley emphasizes the point that the text clearly involves a message “whispered,” although “all the translators are puzzled by the context.”14 Passing through this stage, the soul is received back to its heavenly family, where it receives the promised rewards. Significantly, the hymn mentions not only the soul’s father, the King of Kings, but also the soul’s mother, the Queen of the East, along with the elder brother and second in command, who together send the letter from the heavenly home to the sleeping soul.

While the hymn lends itself well to an LDS interpretation, one needs to be aware of the problems in such an understanding as well. The text has puzzled many scholars, who have placed it in various contexts, including pre-Christian gnosticism, Syrian Christianity, Iranian or Egyptian religion, Hellenistic miracle stories, or Greek
worship of Helios in Syria.\textsuperscript{15} For example, the hymn contains many common gnostic elements,\textsuperscript{16} and thus some of its symbolism is difficult to accommodate within an LDS framework. For instance, difficulties arise when one recognizes that the pearl was already in place in Egypt before the king’s son was sent to retrieve it. Under Gnosticism this is easily explained: The pearl is not the soul of the main character, but rather a lost soul needing to be freed by a savior, the king’s son. But in freeing the pearl, the king’s son himself must be freed when he eats the food of the Egyptians. The hymn, then, becomes a story with two levels: one of a lost soul saved and another of a savior saved. While the idea of a “savior saved” was common in Gnosticism,\textsuperscript{17} it opposes LDS belief. Second, the “dirty garment” of the Egyptians should probably be understood to represent the mortal body.\textsuperscript{18} Gnosticism, like the hymn, viewed the body as “filthy,” something to be overcome and “left behind,” quite the opposite of LDS doctrine.

Moreover, although the hymn can clearly be viewed as a general parable of salvation or of the freeing of a soul lost in the world and its return to its heavenly parents, the identities of the characters remain subject to various interpretations. The main character may be either the soul of a good Christian or of a savior. Some see the soul as the Savior, as does Jonas: “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,”\textsuperscript{19} while others have noted that it could be both: “Whether this . . . is the soul or a redeemer does not make much difference as in both cases we are dealing with a phenomenon of the deity saving itself. Thus the hymn is explained as a classic example of the gnostic ‘redeemed redeemer’.”\textsuperscript{20} A simpler explanation emerges from the plain recognition that the soul is not the same person as the elder brother, the second in command, but still has its own divine potential. Following the view that “the younger son is the Christian who believes in Christ the Son of God and thus becomes a son of God (John 1:12), and that the elder brother is Jesus Christ (Heb. 2:10-15),” Colless argues for an entirely Christian interpretation of the hymn as presenting “the teaching of the Apostles . . . in parable form, modelled on the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) and the pearl merchant (Matt. 13:45-46).”\textsuperscript{21}

The meanings of some of its further elements seem obvious enough; others are more obscure. The house of the soul’s father is
clearly the heavenly home, and the King of Kings is God the Father. It is also well accepted that Egypt represents the material world, since this is a common image both in Gnosticism and Christianity, and likewise, the serpent is either the ruler of the material world or the presence of evil in the material world. The main issues of dispute among the scholars are over the meaning of the letter, the robe and garment, and the pearl; on these points there is little consensus. The pearl may represent “the sparkle of light emprisoned in this world or the soul lying in the darkness of the human body.” Others see in it “the individual’s capacity for growth . . . even in an alien environment; the goal of this growth is realizing the full capacities of the personality.” Another interesting view is that “to fetch the one pearl means partaking in the kingdom.” Klijn determines this by comparing the pearl in the hymn to the pearl of Matthew 13:46, but then he adds, “It appears that the pearl can not be considered to have one general meaning. Every thing related with the heavenly world can be compared with the pearl.” Finally, the sacred ritual meaning that Nibley has suggested opens the possibility of yet further meanings for the garment, the robe, the instruction carried by a messenger, and a pearl of exaltation.

Readers may easily agree or disagree with any of the interpretations suggested here or elsewhere in the scholarly commentaries, but on one feature of the hymn all would agree, namely its simple beauty and appeal: “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.”

The hymn is available in a variety of translations. Some are simplified retellings of the hymn, but the better ones adhere to the original texts, especially the Syriac. Bevan gives a translation based solely on the Syriac text and presents it side by side with the Syriac. Others translate the Syriac text and show variations in the Greek. Among these are the classic translation by M. R. James, a beautiful translation by Hans Jonas, and a very readable translation by Werner Foerster and R. McL. Wilson. Another, the Bentley Layton translation, translates only the Greek text but gives ample footnotes to show variances from the Syriac. One of the more
interesting translations is an attempt by Burkitt to render the Syriac in English hexameter verse—an ambitious and largely successful endeavor. A full translation of the hymn has not been previously published in LDS sources. We reproduce here, by permission, the Oxford translation of Foerster and Wilson (pages 135–38 below).

John W. Welch is the Robert K. Thomas Professor of Law at Brigham Young University, and James V. Garrison is a graduate student in law and classical studies at Brigham Young University.

NOTES

1 It has long been recognized that the Hymn of the Pearl is a separate work from The Acts of Thomas that was likely “borrowed from some extraneous source and inserted—at what period we cannot say—into the Acts.” Anthony Bevan, “The Hymn of the Soul Contained in the Syriac Acts of St. Thomas,” Texts and Studies 5, no. 3 (1897; reprint, Nendeln/Liechtenstein: Kraus, 1967): 2; see also F. Crawford Burkitt, Early Eastern Christianity (London: Murray, 1904), 211.

2 Although referred to as Thomas, the main part of the apostle’s name is Judas, or Jude. Thomas is a Syriac or Aramaic word that means “twin,” and Didymus a Greek word that also means “twin,” producing the name Didymus Thomas (see John 11:16). His name, then, means “Jude the twin.” Other apocryphal works attributed to him are The Gospel of Thomas and The Book of Thomas. Some also attribute the Epistle of Jude to Thomas. The Epistle of Jude was written by the “brother of James” (Jude 1:1). Both Mark 6:3 and Matthew 13:55 confirm that a Jude/Judas was the brother of James, the same James who was the brother of Christ (see also Gal. 1:19). Whether this Jude is Didymus Judas Thomas is debatable, since there was a third Jude in the Twelve besides Judas Thomas and Judas Iscariot. This was Judas “not Iscariot” (Luke 6:16; John 14:22), also called Lebbaeus or Thaddaeus (Matt. 10:3; Mark 3:18).

3 Eighty-one manuscripts of the Acts of Thomas have been found to date, six in Syriac and seventy-five in Greek. The Syriac manuscript containing the Hymn of the Pearl dates to A.D. 936, and the Greek to the eleventh century A.D.

4 Bevan recognized that the Syriac version of the hymn is written in hexameter, with the verses arranged in couplets. On stylistic grounds, it is evident that the hymn was originally composed in Syriac and that “even those who believe the Acts to have been first composed in Greek admit that the [hymn] is not a translation but a purely Syriac work.” Bevan, “The Hymn of the Soul,” 2, 7–8; see also Burkitt, Early Eastern Christianity, 212. The hymn has been dated to as early as A.D. 50–70 by A. Adam, Die Psalmen des Thomas und das Parlement als Zeugnisse vorchristlicher Gnosis (Berlin: Topelmann, 1959), 59, and to as late as A.D. 200–225 by Bentley Layton, The Gnostic Scriptures (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1987), 367.
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5 The ancient title is "Song of the Apostle Judas Thomas in the Land of the Indians." "Hymn of the Pearl" is a modern title. It is occasionally referred to as "Hymn of the Soul," another modern title.


7 Nibley, Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri, 267.


10 That the garment represents premortal glory was recognized as far back as Burkitt, who notes that "the Robe is no article of clothing, but a Bright Form. The Syriac word means The Bright or The Shining thing." Burkitt, Early Eastern Christianity, 215. Nibley draws particular attention to the fact that "the two garments go together to make a unity, but the white undergarment is the proper pre-existent glory of the wearer, while the other is the priesthood later added to it." He notes also that "the individual's garment fits him and no one else." Nibley, Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri, 268.

11 Before reaching Babel and Egypt, the soul and its two guides pass through Mesene, where the soul is left on its own. Nibley equates Mesene with a way station, "the place of transition between worlds; neither heaven nor earth but in between; . . . [t]he place where the hero must change his clothes and part with his heavenly guides, who can accompany him no further." Nibley, Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri, 268. Stephen E. Robinson suggests in personal correspondence that the two guides are probably not heavenly beings but mortal parents, who bring children to the age of accountability, when the test truly begins.

12 Nibley, Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri, 268.

13 Nibley notes that it is the richness of the food that puts the soul to sleep, where the richness is satisfying to the appetites and senses. False philosophies likewise are pleasing to the intellect and senses alone. Nibley, Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri, 269.

14 See Nibley, Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri, 270-72.

15 For a discussion of these interpretations, see Ioan P. Culianu, "Erzählung und Mythos im 'Lied von der Perle.'" Kairos 21 (1979): 60-71.

16 Gnosticism believed that the soul was imprisoned in physical existence and could be freed only by a difficult journey through enemy powers and by secret knowledge (gnosis) revealed from heavenly messengers. Gnostic thought was heavily influenced by Jewish and Christian religion. For instance, Jesus was commonly viewed as one of the heavenly messengers who came to deliver the secret knowledge. Gnosticism also featured strong themes of "dualism," such as spirit versus physical matter, good versus evil, and light versus darkness.


18 Most of the scholarly community is in agreement with Bevan: "There can be no doubt that the Egyptian garb, which the prince puts on as a disguise and casts away as soon as his mission is accomplished, represents the human body." Bevan, "The Hymn of the Soul," 5; see also Klijn, "The So-Called Hymn," 154-64,
esp. 162. Compare Jonas, who agrees that it is the body but asserts that it is put on by a savior as a way of remaining unknown to the world’s rulers, “taking on by turns their various forms.” He also notes 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.” Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 118-19.


22More disputed are the identities of the Queen of the East and the eldest brother. As Nibley points out, most commentators think that the trio of the king, the queen, and the eldest brother is the Trinity. Nibley, *Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri*, 270. Burkitt believes that the Queen of the East corresponds to the Holy Spirit, since “in Semitic languages *Spirit or Wind* [a common term for "spirit" in antiquity] is feminine.” Burkitt, *Early Eastern Christianity*, 214. Klijn suggests that the eldest brother is the Holy Spirit: “[Because the soul will inherit the kingdom with the eldest brother] we are probably dealing with the relation soul-Spirit. . . . [T]he real destination of man is to be united with the Spirit.” Klijn, “The So-Called Hymn,” 161.

23For Egypt as a gnostic symbol, see Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 118. Egypt is also a common symbol of captivity in Christianity, as in the Israelite captivity in Egypt.

24Klijn, “The So-Called Hymn,” 156.


26Klijn, “The So-Called Hymn,” 158.


30One of the better retellings is by Anne Twitty in “The Hymn of the Pearl/Gnostic,” *Parabola* 10, no. 2 (summer 1985): 75-77.


33Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 113-16. A main weakness in the Jonas translation is that he omits parts of the text: the descriptions of the robe, the garment, and the journey back from Egypt. His work also presents, in several respects, a pre-Nag Hammadi understanding of Gnosticism.


Hymn of the Pearl

When I was a speechless infant in my father’s palaces, resting in the ease and luxury of those who reared me, my parents provided me with means of support\textsuperscript{a} and sent me out from the East, our homeland. From the wealth of their treasuries they put together a pack, large and light, such that I could carry it alone.\textsuperscript{b} The pack from above consists of gold and unminted silver from the great treasures, of chalcedony stones from India and of pearls from the land of the Cushites. And they armed me with diamond \textlangle which scratches iron\textrangle. And they took off from me the suit\textsuperscript{c} encrusted with stones and shot with gold, which they had made in their love for me, and the robe of yellow colour to match my height.\textsuperscript{d} And they made an agreement with me, engraving it upon my mind that I should not forget it,\textsuperscript{e} and said: “If you go down to Egypt and fetch from there the single pearl which is there beside the devouring dragon, you shall (again) put on the suit encrusted with stones and the robe which goes over it; and with your brother, our second,\textsuperscript{f} become an heir in our kingdom.”

I came from the East by a hard and terrible way with two guides, for I had no experience for travelling that way. And I came also along the border-lands of Mesene, where there is the hostel of the oriental merchants, and reached the land of the Babylonians <and entered the walls of Sarbug>. But when I came to Egypt, the two guides who had travelled with me left me, and I made straight for the dragon and waited near his lair, watching for him to doze and

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Passages in angle brackets <> are explanatory expansions from the Syriac version.

\textsuperscript{a}James: “my parents provisioned me”; Jonas: “my parents sent me forth . . . with provisions for the journey”; Layton: “my parents equipped me with supplies.”

\textsuperscript{b}James: “they put together a load, both great and light, that I might carry it alone”; Jonas: “they tied me a burden: great it was, yet light, so that I might carry it alone.”

\textsuperscript{c}James: “garment”; Layton: “garment.”

\textsuperscript{d}James: “made for my stature”; Jonas: “woven to conform exactly to my figure”; Layton: “tailored to my size.”

\textsuperscript{e}James: “And they made a covenant with me, and inscribed it on mine understanding, that I should not forget it”; Jonas: “and made a covenant with me, and wrote it in my heart that I might not forget it.”

\textsuperscript{f}Jonas: “our next in rank.”
fall asleep so that I might take away my pearl. And I was alone and foreign in appearance, and I looked strange even to my own (household companions). But there I saw one who was related to me, from the East, one who was free, a graceful and handsome boy, a son of noblemen. He came and associated with me, and I had him as my companion, making him both friend and partner in my journey. And I urged him to be on his guard against the Egyptians and the society of those impure men. But I put on their clothes, so that I might not appear foreign, as one from abroad, in order that I might get the pearl, and so that the Egyptians should not wake up the dragon against me.

But I do not know how they discovered that I was not from their land. But they cunningly devised a trap for me, and I tasted their food. I ceased to know that I was a king’s son, and I served their king. I forgot the pearl for which my parents had sent me, and under the weight of their food I sank into deep sleep.

But as I suffered these things my parents also observed it and were sorry for me. And a proclamation was made in our kingdom that everyone should come to our gates. And the kings of Parthia and the potentates and the great ones of the East took a decision about me that I should not remain in Egypt. They wrote me (a letter) and the mighty ones each signed it: “From the father, the king of kings, and the mother who possesses the East, and the brother who is the second beside us, to our son in Egypt, greetings. Get up and sober up out of your sleep, and listen to the words of this letter. Remember that you are a king’s son. You have come under a servile yoke. Think of your suit shot with gold; think of the pearl on account of which you were sent to Egypt, so that your name may be mentioned in the book of the valiant, and you may be an heir with your brother in our kingdom.”

James: “And forasmuch as I was alone I made mine aspect strange, and appeared as an alien to my people”; Jonas: “Since I was one and kept to myself, I was a stranger to my fellow-dwellers”; Layton: “Being on my own, I put on a disguise and would have seemed alien even to my own people.”

Jonas: “one of my race.”

Literal, “anointed ones.”

James: “they that bare office”; Jonas: “the nobles”; Layton: “those in office.”

Jonas: “Awake and rise up out of thy sleep.”

The Greek version renders this passage differently than the Syriac, as the James translation shows:
And the king sealed (the letter) because of the wicked,\(^a\) the children of Babylon, and the tyrannical demons of Sarbug. It flew in form of an eagle, the king of all birds. <It flew and landed by me and became entirely speech.> And at the sound and sight of it I started up from sleep, took (it), kissed (it) tenderly, and read. And it had written in it just what was written down in my heart. And immediately I remembered that I was a son of kings, and my freedom longed for its kind.\(^b\) And I remembered also the pearl for which I had been dispatched to Egypt. I began to charm the terrible dragon with spells and put him to sleep by uttering the name of my father <the names of our second (son)\(^c\) and of my mother, the queen of the East>. I stole the pearl, took it away, and returned to my parents.\(^d\) And I took off the dirty garment and left it behind in their country. And at once I directed my course towards the light of the homeland in the East. And I found on the way (the letter) that had roused me. And this, just as it had by its sound raised me up when I slept, also showed me the way by the light (shining) from it; for the royal (letter) of silk stuff was before my eyes.\(^e\) And with love guiding and drawing me, I went past Sarbug. Leaving Babylon on the left I reached great Mesene, which lies on the coast.

<My parents sent me by their treasurers my shining suit and my long robe.> And I did not remember (any more) my brightness.\(^f\) For when I was still a child and quite young I had left it behind in my father’s palaces. And suddenly I saw the suit which resembled (me) as it were in a mirror, and I spied my whole self in it, and I knew and saw myself through it; for we were partially separated from each other, though we were from the same, and again we are

Remember thy garment spangled with gold, and the glorious mantle which thou shouldst wear and wherewith thou shouldst deck thyself. Thy name is named in the book of life, and with thy brother whom thou hast received thou shalt be in our kingdom.

\(^a\)James: “the King . . . sealed it with his right hand because of the evil ones”; Jonas: “the King had sealed [the letter] with his right hand against the evil ones.”
\(^b\)Jonas: “my freeborn soul desired its own kind.”
\(^c\)James: “our second in rank”; Jonas: “our second in rank.”
\(^d\)Jonas: “and turned to repair home to my Father.”
\(^e\)James: “For at times the royal garment of silk shone before mine eyes.”
\(^f\)Jonas: “Its splendor I had forgotten, having left it as a child in my Father’s house”; James: “But I remembered not the brightness of it; for I was yet a child and very young when I had left it in the palace of my Father.”
one through one form.¹ Not only (so), but I saw also the treasurers themselves who carried the suit as two, yet one form was present upon both, one royal sign in both.² They had wealth and riches in hand, and they gave me precious things,³ the gorgeous suit which had been skilfully worked in bright colours with gold and precious stones and pearls of brilliant hues. They were fastened above. And the image of the king of kings (was) fully present through the whole (suit).⁴ Sapphire stones were set appropriately above.

I saw moreover that movements of knowledge were emitted by the whole, and that it was ready to utter speech. I heard it speak: "I am (the property) of him who is bravest of all men, for whose sake I was engraved by the father himself." And I myself noticed <my stature, which increased in accordance with its impulse>.⁵ And all the royal movements extended to me. It made haste, straining towards him who should take it from his hand. And love roused me to rush to meet him and receive it. And I reached out, <adorned myself with the beauty of its colours,> and drew my brilliant garment entirely over me.

But when I had put (it) on I was lifted up to the gate of acknowledgement and worship. And I bowed my head and acknowledged the radiance of the father who had sent this to me; for I had done what had been commanded, and he likewise, what he had promised. And in the gates of the palace I mingled with those of his dominion. And he rejoiced over me and received me with him in the palace. And all his subjects sing with pleasant voices. And he promised me that I would also be sent with him to the gates of the king, so that with my gifts and my pearl I might together with him appear before the king.⁶

¹Jonas: "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."
²Layton: "one single royal token consisting of two halves."
³James: "and paid me the due price"; Layton: "and gave me my reward."
⁴Jonas: "And the image of the King of kings was depicted all over it."
⁵Jonas includes this sentence also as part of the robe's speech: "And I [the robe] perceived in myself how my stature grew in accordance with his labors."
⁶Jonas: "He [the king] received me joyfully, and I was with him in his kingdom, and 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."