

# The Wisdom of Egypt

Jewish, Early Christian, and Gnostic Essays in  
Honour of Gerard P. Luttikhuisen

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## THE IDENTITY OF LITHARGOEL IN THE ACTS OF *PETER AND THE TWELVE*

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The *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*, the first writing in Nag Hammadi Codex VI, is very different from the other apostolic Acts transmitted in the Early Church.<sup>1</sup> Instead of reporting the teachings and miracles of an apostle, it contains narratives about the deeds of the twelve apostles preceding their ministry. The late Hans-Martin Schenke situated the book in the milieu of wandering monasticism in the second century CE.<sup>2</sup> In his recent monograph, A.L. Molinari suggested that the writing addressed the crisis of the Church immediately following the Decian persecutions (249-251).<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere I have argued that the book is an allegorical tale about engaging in monastic life, and its final redaction took place in a Pachomian monastery in Upper Egypt between 347 and 367.<sup>4</sup> This article proposes a new interpretation of the enigmatic character Lithargoel, who appears in different forms at various points of the narrative, and is ultimately identified as Jesus Christ.

### 1. *Lithargoel's appearances in the Acts of Peter and the Twelve*

Following some scattered words at the badly damaged beginning of the text,<sup>5</sup> we read about the apostles' readiness to fulfil their ministry.

<sup>1</sup> NHC VI.1. I adapt the translation by D.M. Parrott and R.McL. Wilson in J.M. Robinson (ed.), *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Leiden/New York 1996<sup>4</sup>, 289-94.

<sup>2</sup> H.-M. Schenke, 'The Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles', in: W. Schneemelcher and R.McL. Wilson (eds), *New Testament Apocrypha*, ii, Cambridge/Louisville 1992, 412-25 at 414. Cf. D.M. Parrott, 'The Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles: Introduction', in: Id. (ed.), *Nag Hammadi Codices V.2-5 and VI*, Leiden 1979, 287-9 at 289.

<sup>3</sup> A.L. Molinari, *The Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles (NHC 6.1): Allegory, Ascent, and Ministry in the Wake of the Decian Persecution*, Atlanta 2000, 235.

<sup>4</sup> I. Czachesz, *Apostolic Commission Narratives in the Canonical and Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* (Diss. Groningen), Groningen 2002, 155-71 and Id., *Commission Narratives: A Comparative Study of the Canonical and Apocryphal Acts*, Louvain, forthcoming.

<sup>5</sup> The upper parts of the first eight pages (of a total of twelve) are damaged, thus the beginning of the narrative is also unclear.

When the opportune moment comes from the Lord, they go down to the sea and find there a ship. After sailing for a day and a night, a wind comes that takes them to a small city called Habitation (σωπῆ) in the midst of the sea.

Lithargoel appears here for the first time. A man comes out of the city, 'beautiful in his form and stature', whose appearance is described in detail:

A man came out wearing a cloth bound around his waist, and a gold belt girded [it]. Also a napkin was tied over [his] chest, extending over his shoulders and covering his head and his hands.

I was staring at the man, because he was beautiful in his form and stature. There were four parts of his body that I saw: the soles of his feet and a part of his chest and the palms of his hands and his visage. These things I was able to see. A book cover like (those of) my books was in his left hand. A staff of styrax wood was in his right hand. His voice was resounding as he slowly spoke, crying out in the city, 'Pearls! Pearls!' (2.10-32).

Peter greets the man, who identifies himself as a fellow stranger. He cries again, 'Pearls, pearls!'—but the rich men of the city do not even recognise him because of their disdain. The poor, however, ask him to show them the pearls. The merchant invites them to his city where he will not only show them pearls but will also give pearls to them for free.<sup>6</sup> Peter asks the name of the merchant:

'I want to know your name and the hardships of the way to your city because we are strangers and servants of God. It is necessary for us to spread the word of God in every city harmoniously.' He answered and said, 'If you seek my name, Lithargoel is my name, the interpretation of which is, the light, gazelle-like stone' (5.8-18).

Then Lithargoel describes the road to his city: 'No man is able to go on that road, except one who has forsaken everything that he has and has fasted daily from stage to stage.'<sup>7</sup> On the road, there are black dogs which kill people for their bread; robbers who kill them for their garments; wolves which kill them for water; lions which eat them for the meat in their possession; and bulls which devour them

<sup>6</sup> There is a doublet in the dialogue (4.4-15/4.21-34), on which more will be said below.

<sup>7</sup> *Acts of Peter and the Twelve* 5.21-5. 'Fasting daily from stage to stage' ΠΗΝΟΤΕΥΕ ΠΗΜΗΝΕ ΧΙΝ ΜΟΝΗ ΩΔ ΜΟΝΗ) may designate a spiritual journey (of preparation) or an actual manner of travelling from monastery (μονή) to monastery; cf. section 4 below.

for the vegetables that they carry. Finally, he tells the name of the city: 'Nine Gates'. The apostles forsake everything and set out for Lithargoel's city. They do not take garments with them, nor water, meat, or vegetables. Thus, they evade the robbers, wolves, lions, and bulls, and successfully arrive at the city.<sup>8</sup>

As they sit down in front of the gate and talk, Lithargoel appears for the second time in the narrative, now as a physician:

As we discussed the robbers on the road, whom we evaded, behold Lithargoel, having changed, came out to us. He had the appearance of a physician, since an unguent box was under his arm, and a young disciple was following him carrying a pouch full of medicine (8.16-19).

The apostles do not recognise Lithargoel in the physician until he calls Peter by name:

'How do you know me, for you called my name?' Lithargoel answered, 'I want to ask you who gave the name Peter to you?' He said to him, 'It was Jesus Christ, the son of the living God. He gave this name to me.' He answered and said, 'It is I! Recognize me, Peter' (9.6-15).

At this point Lithargoel gives the apostles the unguent box and the pouch, and commands them,

Go into the city from which you came, which is called Habitation. Continue in endurance as you teach all those who have believed in my name, because I have endured in hardships of the faith. I will give you your reward. To the poor of that city give what they need in order to live until I give them what is better, which I told you that I will give you for nothing (10.1-13).

When Peter doubts whether they can provide for the needs of the poor, the Lord answers that his name and the wisdom of God surpasses gold, silver and precious stones. He gives them the pouch (this is a repetition in the narrative, cf. above) and adds, 'Heal all the sick of the city who believe in my name' (10.34-11.1). The disciples ask, 'We have not been taught to be physicians. How then will we know how to heal bodies as you have told us?' (11.3-13).

The Lord answers,

[T]he physicians of this world heal what belongs to the world. The physicians of souls, however, heal the heart. Heal the bodies, therefore, so that through the real powers of healing for their bodies, without

<sup>8</sup> The 'black dogs' appear on the list of dangers but are missing from the description of the journey; cf. Czachesz, *Apostolic Commission*, 163.

medicine of this world, they may believe in you, that you have power to heal the illnesses of the heart also [...] (11.16-26).

Finally, the Lord warns the apostles against the partiality for the rich in many churches, and orders them not to dine in the houses of the rich, nor make friends with them, rather 'judge them in uprightness' (12.8-9).

## 2. The name Lithargoel and its implications

The name Lithargoel is introduced in *Acts of Peter and the Twelve* 5.16-9. 'If you seek my name, Lithargoel is my name, the interpretation of which is, the light, gazelle-like stone.'<sup>9</sup> Scholars have unanimously suggested that the name Lithargoel is a composite of three elements. Two components are Greek: λίθος ('stone') and ἀργός ('light' or 'quick'); the third is Hebrew: 'el ('God' or 'divine being').<sup>10</sup> There is less unanimity as to how the name should be translated and interpreted. Krause translated it as 'Gott der Perle', Schenke as 'the angel of the light bright stone(s)'; Molinari turns the possessive structure around and suggests 'the shining stone of God'.

The usual explanation of Lithargoel's name basically follows the redactional gloss, 'the interpretation of which is, the light, gazelle-like stone'. This explanation has gone so far unchallenged; it seems, however, rather questionable. Did the first part of the name Lithargoel originally mean 'shining stone'? Is it really a composite of λίθος and ἀργός? A closer look reveals that the gloss probably contains a folk etymology. The supposed Greek composite 'lithargos' meaning 'shining stone' is grammatically problematic. There are, indeed, compounds in classical Greek where an adjective modifies the meaning of a substantive, such as ἀκρόπολις (upper city). The majority of such compound words are adjectives themselves: ἀργυρότοξος (having a silver bow), μακρόχειρ (long-armed), χρυσοκόμος (having golden hair). In all compounds belonging to these two types, however, the adjective precedes the substantive, never the other way around.<sup>11</sup> Therefore,

<sup>9</sup> *Acts of Peter and the Twelve* 5.16-9. πωνε νδαρσε ετασιωου, 'a gazelle-like stone that is light.'

<sup>10</sup> Wilson & Parrot, 'Acts of Peter and the Twelve', 214-15; Molinari, *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*, 135.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. E. Schwyzler, *Griechische Grammatik*, i, Munich 1968, 452-5.

'shining stone' or 'having a shining stone' would be 'argolithos' rather than 'lithargos'.

The theophoric element 'el is widespread in ancient Hebrew names.<sup>12</sup> Various instances suggest that 'el remained in use for creating proper names in the second temple period. The *Book of Watchers* (*1 Enoch* 1-36), written originally in Aramaic,<sup>13</sup> contains two *onomastica* of rebelling angels and archangels, respectively. Sixteen of the nineteen names of rebelling angels in *1 Enoch* 6.7, and all seven names of the archangels in 20.1-8 are compounds with 'el. Many of the rebels' names, as G. Nickelsburg suggests, may 'present imitations of the old morphology with no specific translation in mind, or one might read 'el to refer to the angel, i.e., "the angel in charge of x".'<sup>14</sup> Similar names appear in the writings from the Nag Hammadi codices, such as Samael, Gamaliel, Yoel, Youel, Telmael, Telmachel, Harmozel, Poimael, Oroiael, Yobel, Gabriel, Nebruel, Balbel, Achiel, Iabel, Michael, Uriel.<sup>15</sup> Some of these names are known from Hebrew and Aramaic sources; others may simply imitate the traditional pattern.

Although our list is only exemplary, some trends can be observed which may be helpful in deciphering Lithargoel's name. (1) Most names ending with 'el in Jewish-Aramaic texts and a great many in Nag Hammadi literature can be reasonably explained from Hebrew or Aramaic roots (which may or may not coincide with the etymology given in the texts themselves).<sup>16</sup> (2) Among the names in Nag Hammadi texts, there

<sup>12</sup> H. Haber, 'Theophoric Names in the Bible', *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 29 (2001) 56-9. J.D. Fowler, *Theophoric Personal Names in Ancient Hebrew: A Comparative Study*, Sheffield 1988, 38-44 and passim.

<sup>13</sup> G.W.E. Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch: A Commentary on the Book of 1 Enoch*, Minneapolis, MN 2001, 1; for dating the original form to the early third century BCE, see *ibid.*, 169-70.

<sup>14</sup> Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch*, 179.

<sup>15</sup> Samael: *The Hypostasis of the Archons* (NHC II.4) 87.3; Samael and Armozel: *Trimorphic Prottennoia* (NHC XIII.1); Gamaliel, Yo(u)el, Telmael, Telmachel, Harmozel, Poimael, Oroiael, Yobel, Gabriel, Nebruel: *Gospel of the Egyptians* (NHC III.2 and IV.2); Yo(u)el: *Zostrianos* (NHC VIII.1) 57.15, 125.14; Balbel and the rest: *Apocryphon of John* (NHC II.1 etc.) 16-17, cf. M. Waldstein and F. Wisse, *The Apocryphon of John*, Leiden 1995, 101-5. If 'Balbel' is the Palpel of Aramaic *bal* ('spoil'), it does not belong in this list.

<sup>16</sup> B.A. Pearson, 'Jewish Sources in Gnostic Literature', in: M.E. Stone (ed.), *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period*, Assen/Philadelphia 1984, 443-81 at 453-5, argues for a strong influence of *1 Enoch* on the *Apocryphon of John*, and proposes that *The Hypostasis of the Archons* was based on 'Jewish Gnostic' material, as were probably the *Trimorphic Prottennoia* and the *Gospel of the Egyptians* (469). Samael is the chief antagonist

are Hebrew/Aramaic compounds, haphazard combinations, as well as names probably based on Greek roots, such as Harmozel (ἁρμόζω) and Poimael (ποιμήν). Telmael might be explained from both Aramaic (ܛܠܡ, 'deceive') and Greek (τέλμα, 'swamp') roots. (3) The ending 'el is never preceded by compound words (either Hebrew/Aramaic or Greek).

With these observations in mind, we suggest that Lithargoel was created from the Greek adjective λήθαργος. This was an equivalent of the more archaic ἐπιλήσιμων,<sup>17</sup> both meaning 'forgetful'. In Syriac, *lith'argô(s)* was used as a Greek loanword.<sup>18</sup> The name could originally designate an angel or mythological character that was 'forgetful about God', or simply 'forgetful'. Below we will argue that there was a semantic link between the meaning of the name and its original narrative context. As the narrative context changed during subsequent phases of redaction, the name was also given a new interpretation.<sup>19</sup>

### 3. *Lithargoel in the sources of the Acts of Peter and the Twelve*

Right from the start, inconsistencies in the narrative (particularly the repeated shifts of voice) have led scholars to distinguish different sources and redactional layers in the text. Lithargoel's repeated metamorphoses (merchant, physician, Jesus Christ) supported additional arguments for the source-critical approach. The different solutions are neatly summed up by Molinari,<sup>20</sup> so there is no need to rehearse the history of research here.

One piece of the text stands out due to its stylistic and logical unity: the story of the pearl merchant in the first part of book (2.10-5.1). This passage has a consistent narrative voice in the first person singular; it focuses on a central theme: who receives a share of the

of God in Talmudic and post-Talmudic literature, cf. 'Samael' in: I. Singer (ed.), *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, New York/London 1905, x, 665-6 and *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Jerusalem 1971, xiv, 719-22.

<sup>17</sup> Phrynichus, *Ecloga* 391.

<sup>18</sup> R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*, Oxford 1879-1901, 1945 s.v. ܠܝܛܐܪܓܘܝܠ.

<sup>19</sup> An alternative possibility is that Lithargoel was composed by prefixing the name Raguel (Hebrew רַגוּל) with the Aramaic negative copula ܠܝܛ. The meaning of the name would be either 'No Friend of God' or 'No Shepherd of God'; cf. Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch*, 311; J.A. Fitzmyer, *Tobit*, Berlin 2003, 94.

<sup>20</sup> Molinari, *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*, 20-31.

pearls?; finally, it has a clear story-line from the appearance of the merchant to the invitation of the poor to his city. Various elements of the merchant episode reappear in later parts of the book: the journey to the merchant's city, the giving of the pearl for free, and the preference for the poor over the rich. Scholars have recognised in the merchant story a possible source of the *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*; they do not agree, however, on when and how the subsequent passages (the explanation of the hardships and the apostles' journey) were connected to this episode.

On one hand, Krause and Schenke regarded Lithargoel's description of the hardships of the road as an original part of the merchant episode; they assigned the journey of the apostles to a separate source. Patterson and Molinari, on the other hand, reject this division. In Patterson's opinion, the story of the merchant (3.11-5.5) was inserted into the larger Peter narrative (1.1-8.9), which contained both Lithargoel's account of the hardships and the report about the apostles' journey. Molinari goes even further, assigning the first part of the book, including the merchant episode, the explanation of the road, and the apostles' journey, to one source called *The Story of the Pearl Merchant* (1.1-9.1).<sup>21</sup> He identifies various redactional elements within this unit, however.<sup>22</sup>

In Molinari's view, the original story of the merchant contained an elaborate Gnostic mythological apparatus.<sup>23</sup> The source included a journey to the heavenly spheres and explanations of both the journey process and other important details about how earthly conduct affects heavenly existence. Molinari hypothesises further details of the original narrative, such as fantastic heavenly creatures, the heavenly court room, the blissful lifestyle of the saved, and the sufferings of the damned.<sup>24</sup> Those details were eliminated by the redactor, and replaced by the dialogue about the hardships of the road.

During this redactional procedure, Molinari suggests, the name Lithargoel was introduced to associate the pearl with Jesus. The actual reinterpretation of the pearl as Jesus, according to Molinari, occurs during Lithargoel's second appearance outside the city, which he identifies as another source called *The Resurrection Appearance* (9.1-

<sup>21</sup> Molinari, *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*, 31.

<sup>22</sup> Molinari, *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*, 131-8.

<sup>23</sup> Molinari, *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*, 93-130.

<sup>24</sup> Molinari, *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*, 132 note 1.

9.29). Into this material, the redactor inserted the explanation: 'Do you not understand that my name, which you teach, surpasses all riches, and the wisdom of God surpasses gold and silver and precious stones?' (10.25-30).

In order to strengthen the link between Lithargoel and Jesus, the redactor inserted the physician material into both above-mentioned sources. The redactor took a special interest in the healing of bodies and souls.<sup>25</sup> Both the pearl merchant and Jesus Christ (in the dialogue before the city gates) are characterised as physicians. The former is equipped with a book cover and a staff of styrax wood, which, according to Molinari, may have had medical significance.

Molinari's source hypothesis has its advantages over the earlier theories. One of its merits is that it preserves the pearl narrative as one unit, including the journey to the Nine Gates. Molinari also shows how the theme of healing of souls and bodies, an important theological point of the redactor, was used to establish unity between the three sources. He is able to show that the pearl merchant story could serve as the core of the narrative, onto which the traditional Christian materials, the post-resurrection epiphany and the exhortatory discourse (*The Author/Redactor's Theology*, 9.30-12.19) could be systematically added.

At some points, however, we have to disagree with Molinari. His suggestion that Lithargoel's name was added to the text in order to identify the pearl with Jesus' name relies on weak arguments. If we take a closer look at the dialogue on which Molinari builds his theory, we have to dismiss this proposal. Indeed, Lithargoel/Christ claims his name (ΠΑΡΑΝ) surpasses 'all riches' (10.26-27). In the subsequent lines, it is God's wisdom that 'surpasses gold and silver and precious stones' (10.28-30). The disciples will give those two things to the poor, Christ's name and God's wisdom. From the preceding part of the dialogue it becomes clear that neither is identical with the pearls. Christ instructs the disciples, 'To the poor of that city give what they need in order to live until I give them what is better, which I told you that I will give for nothing' (10.8-13). That is, the pearls will be given to the poor not by the disciples, but rather by Christ himself. Moreover, in the previous dialogue with the pearl merchant 'the name' is explicitly identified as 'Jesus', not 'Lithargoel': 'Why do you sigh, if you, indeed, know this name "Jesus" and believe in him?' (6.14-16). To sum up, the assumed

<sup>25</sup> Molinari, *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*, 51, 138-9.

redactional addition about giving Christ's name to the poor hardly establishes a link between Jesus and the pearls, as Molinari suggests.

If Molinari's theory of the redactor's identification of the pearls with Jesus' name does not hold water, can we still maintain that Lithargoel was added to the story by the final redactor? It seems a rather complicated redactional manoeuvre to introduce a third character (Lithargoel) to connect two others (merchant and Christ). Why did the redactor not simply identify the merchant as Christ in the resurrection dialogue (before the city gates)? Another problem, which has already been mentioned in the previous section, concerns the explanation of the name Lithargoel. If the redactor construed the name Lithargoel to suggest that Jesus is the pearl of God,<sup>26</sup> it is unlikely that he added an explanation omitting the theophoric element. To sum up, it is very probable that the final redactor did not invent the name Lithargoel, but that it was in one of his sources.

An alternative interpretation of the merchant story may resolve several difficulties in the earlier source theories. The reader of the merchant story is reminded of another famous passage about a pearl in one of the Apocryphal Acts, i.e. the Hymn of the Pearl in the *Acts of Thomas* 108-113. In both texts, people are sent or invited, respectively, to fetch a precious pearl from a distant city. As we will see below, the explanation of the hardships of the road and the apostles' journey also fit excellently into the plot known from the Hymn of the Pearl. It seems that the Hymn of the Pearl and the pearl merchant story are variants of the same *sujet*. We suggest that the major source of the *Acts of Peter and the Twelve* was centred around a Pearl Narrative.

Molinari's source theory requires him to hypothesise an elaborate Gnostic mythological apparatus in the original text. This becomes unnecessary if we compare the merchant story with the fully preserved Hymn of the Pearl. The latter was also interpreted as a Gnostic myth; recent scholarship, however, suggests that this was overinterpretation.<sup>27</sup> Gnostic claims about creation, the origin of evil, and the person and mission of Jesus Christ are missing from both texts. When identifying the source of the animal figures in the story, Molinari himself comes up with a non-Gnostic parallel, i.e. the famous vision of daemons in

<sup>26</sup> Molinari, *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*, 138.

<sup>27</sup> G.P. Luttikhuisen, 'The Hymn of Jude Thomas, the Apostle, in the Country of the Indians (ATH 108-113)', in: J.N. Bremmer (ed.), *The Apocryphal Acts of Thomas*, Louvain 2001, 101-14.

the *Life of Antony*.<sup>28</sup> The animal figures may indicate an ascetic, rather than Gnostic, theological setting.

How does the figure of Lithargoel fit into the Pearl Narrative? A closer examination of the text shows that the name Lithargoel does not appear at all in the merchant episode (2.10-5.1) or the final exhortatory dialogue (9.31-12.22). It occurs first in the explanation of the hardships of the journey, accompanied by the explanatory gloss analysed above (5.2-6.22). The description of the disciples' journey and arrival follows the discussion of the hardships logically, without mentioning Lithargoel's name again (6.23-8.11). Lithargoel reappears before the city gates as a physician (8.14-35). At the end of the episode, he abruptly leaves the disciples and then comes back in a hurry. When he arrives back, he identifies himself as Jesus to the disciples (9.1-30).

Is Lithargoel just a name that can be removed from the text without changing anything else? Do any of the above-mentioned episodes create an identity for Lithargoel which is distinct from other characters in the book? A closer look reveals that this actually happens at his appearance before the city gates (8.14-35). In this context we read that Lithargoel is a 'good man' (ἀγαθός πῶμος), 'the son of a great king' (πωμῆρ ἰουνοῦς ἡβῆρο), who 'does not reveal himself to every man' (ἐμαρτοῦοντῶντοῦ ἐρωμῆ νημ). This is a profile of Lithargoel as a literary character that can be clearly distinguished from both the pearl merchant in the previous parts of the book and Jesus Christ in the subsequent part.

In the Hymn of the Pearl, the hero is also the first son of 'the king of kings'.<sup>29</sup> During his stay in Egypt, the prince also hides his identity.<sup>30</sup> This raises the possibility that Lithargoel originally played a similar role in the pearl story as the prince in the Hymn of the Pearl. His name would also make perfect sense in that context. The forgetfulness of the hero is an essential part of the plot of the Hymn of the Pearl: 'I forgot that I was a son of kings / and served their king; / and I forgot the pearl, / for which my parents had sent me, / and because of the burden of their oppressions, / I lay in a deep sleep.'<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Life of Antony* 9. Cf. Molinari, *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*, 122; Czachesz, *Apostolic Commission*, 163.

<sup>29</sup> *Acts of Thomas* 110.

<sup>30</sup> *Acts of Thomas* 109.

<sup>31</sup> Trans. A.F.J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, Leiden 2003<sup>2</sup>, 183. In the *Apocryphon of John* 56.2, forgetfulness and sleep symbolise

Interestingly, the 'shining stone' etymology also makes sense in the context of the Pearl Narrative. The Hymn of the Pearl makes repeated mention of the richness of the royal family; the parents have a robe made for the prince which is woven with gold and decorated with precious stones (διάλιθος). After his return from Egypt, the prince is solemnly invested with the robe, which is now said to be adorned with precious stones (λίθοι τίμιοι) and pearls, and filled with the image of the king of kings. In this attire, he is supposed to appear before the king. These motifs in the narrative might have inspired the redactor to add the naïve etymology to the name Lithargoel.

In this scenario, the merchant must have been the character who reminded the 'forgetful' protagonist of his original mission. He could also explain the difficulties of collecting the pearl. The prince in the Hymn of the Pearl has to snatch the pearl from the 'loud-breathing serpent':

I remembered the pearl, / for which I was sent to Egypt, / and I began to charm him, / the terrible loud-breathing serpent. / I hushed him to sleep and lulled him into slumber, / for my father's name I named over him, / and the name of our second (in power), / and my mother, the queen of the East; / and I snatched away the pearl, / and turned to go back to my father's house.<sup>32</sup>

Since the Hymn of the Pearl was probably written in Christian East Syria in the second or third century CE,<sup>33</sup> it is likely that the Pearl Narrative originated in the same context. The presence of *lith'argôs* as a loanword in Syriac (see above) makes it plausible that Lithargoel's name was also created in that context. Moreover, the symbol of the 'pearl' has been widely used in Christian Syrian tradition.<sup>34</sup>

If Lithargoel was the original hero of the Pearl Narrative, this also

the fallen state of Adam: 'This is the tomb of the form of the body with which the robbers clothed the man, the fetter of forgetfulness (ληθη).' (Waldstein and Wisse, *Apocryphon of John*, 122.)

<sup>32</sup> Transl. Klijn, *Acts of Thomas*, 185.

<sup>33</sup> H.J.W. Drijvers, in: W. Schneemelcher and R.McL. Wilson (eds), *New Testament Apocrypha*, Cambridge/Louisville, Kentucky 1992, ii, 332.

<sup>34</sup> 'Pearl' can stand metaphorically, among other things, for Eucharistic bread, a relic, virginity, and faith; cf. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus*, 2215-16 s.v. *ܠܝܬܐܘܪܐ*. A. Guillaumont, 'De nouveaux actes apocryphes: les Actes de Pierre et de Douze Apôtres', *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 4 (1979) 141-52 at 145, argues for a Syrian origin of the *Acts of Peter and the Twelve* because of the important role of the pearls in the narrative. See also the Appendix below.

provides a motivation for his secondary identification as the Saviour. According to one of the usual interpretations of the Hymn of the Pearl, the Saviour was sent from the divine world in order to rescue the soul (the pearl) from its imprisonment by demonic powers.<sup>35</sup> Scholars who follow this interpretation also subscribe to the Gnostic understanding of the Hymn. However, it is not necessary to connect the two: the theme of Jesus' descent to the world and his subsequent return to heaven has inspired texts belonging to various genres, without implying Gnostic mythology.<sup>36</sup> The identification of Lithargoel as the Saviour happened prior to the final redaction. To this purpose, the post-resurrection scene of 9.1-30 was added to the original Pearl Narrative.

To sum up, we propose that Lithargoel was the protagonist of one of the sources of the present *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*. In this source, which we call the Pearl Narrative, the protagonist collected a precious pearl from a distant city, a plot that is similar to that of the Hymn of the Pearl. The hero was named Lithargoel, because he 'forgot about God'. The story was (later) interpreted as the descent of Jesus to the world and the post-resurrection episode was added, where the true identity of the hero was revealed.

#### 4. *Lithargoel and the redaction of the Acts of Peter and the Twelve*

The final redaction of the *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*, Molinari suggests, took place in the years immediately following the Decian persecutions (249-251), probably in Alexandria.<sup>37</sup> Molinari bases his hypothesis mainly on the particular interest of the text in two subjects: rejection of the rich and concern about physical and spiritual healing.<sup>38</sup> The rejection of the rich, in his view, fits into the situation after the persecutions, because the rich denied their faith in greater numbers than the poor.<sup>39</sup>

Molinari's analysis of the Decian persecution and its consequences

<sup>35</sup> This interpretation has been suggested by E. Preuschen, G. Bornkamm, and W. Foerster; cf. Luttkhuizen, 'Hymn of Judas Thomas', 105. Luttkhuizen, following Klijn and Drijvers, offers a non-Gnostic reading of the text.

<sup>36</sup> Two early sources are, for example, *Philippians* 2.6-11 and *Ascensio Isaiae* 10-11.

<sup>37</sup> Molinari, *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*, 235-6.

<sup>38</sup> Molinari, *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*, 201-36.

<sup>39</sup> Molinari, *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*, 205-14.

does not provide sufficient arguments for his theory about the date and provenance of the text. First, if we accept that the *Acts of Peter and the Twelve* was written as a reaction to persecution against Christians, we can choose from many alternatives in the first to the third centuries. It goes without saying that Early Christian literature is replete with the discussion of persecution and martyrdom.<sup>40</sup> It is not necessary to discuss Molinari's arguments about the exceptionally harsh rejection of the rich in this writing, because his main concern is the connection of richness with apostasy. At this point, however, the text offers little: the dwellers of Habitation endure 'in the midst of the apostasies and the difficulties of the storms' (7.13-14). Apostasies do not play a role in the denunciation of the rich in the text. One can base such an argument only on 'veiled reference', as Molinari puts it.<sup>41</sup> As a consequence, Molinari has to make concessions that seriously weaken his theory of date and provenance:

[T]he specific community that produced our text, with its strict policy of 'renunciation' of the world, probably did not have wealthy members. This would explain the rather vague reference to apostasies. The community is commenting upon the apostasies they have witnessed (probably from some distance) in the less ascetical, more worldly churches. [...] In my judgement the redactor has witnessed the persecution from afar [...].

The themes of bodily and spiritual healing and Jesus' presentation as a physician were also widespread in early Christian literature.<sup>42</sup> This does not mean, of course, that the redactor could not see these themes as highly relevant for his particular situation. Yet we face major problems when basing the theory of redaction on the arguments provided by Molinari. Let us imagine that our redactor has knowledge of the Decian persecutions, wants to criticise the lapses of the rich, and finds healing highly relevant to that situation. Why would he then pick sources which do *not* deal with his problems, invent a physician

<sup>40</sup> See for example A. Bernet, *Les chrétiens dans l'Empire romain: des persécutions à la conversion Ier-IVe siècle*, Paris 2003; P. Barceló, 'Christenverfolgungen: Urchristentum und Alte Kirche', in: H.D. Betz et al. (eds), *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (1999<sup>4</sup>), ii, 246-8; W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus*, Oxford 1965. The rhetoric of endurance (10.1-7) also imitates well-known patterns: e.g., Matthew 11.28-30; 16.24; Revelation 3.21.

<sup>41</sup> Molinari, *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*, 190.

<sup>42</sup> Ignatius, *Epistle to the Ephesians* 7.2, already cites a hymn of Christ the Physician. For an overview, see M.E. Honecker, 'Christus medicus', *Kerygma und Dogma* 30 (1984) 307-23.

figure himself, and add all his theological interests as an appendix, as it were, to the sources.<sup>43</sup> Is it not more reasonable to hypothesise that a redactor selected sources that themselves contained material and ideas that were relevant to the redactor's purposes?

Since this article concentrates on Lithargoel, it would fall beyond its scope to fully resolve the redaction problems. We will focus instead on the question of how the Pearl Narrative and its protagonist Lithargoel fit into the concept of a redactor working in a Pachomian monastery. A monastic community, indeed, is implicitly suggested by Molinari himself: 'The redactor may well have been a member of a more rigorist sect of Christianity, loyal yet desirous of a greater expression of their faith, that had withdrawn to a location outside a major city.'<sup>44</sup> Whereas the existence of a monastic community shortly after 250 is rather improbable, it is easy to find such a formation a century later.

The constraints of this article make it impossible to rehearse the arguments for a Pachomian *Sitz im Leben*; for the sake of convenience, we will summarise the major points here.<sup>45</sup> (1) After their arrival at the Nine Gates, the disciples are not talking about that which is 'distraction of this world'; rather, they *continue* in contemplation (ΜΕΛΕΤΗ, exercise) of faith. The whole journey is thereby interpreted in the text itself as a spiritual exercise. (2) The hardships of the road receive substance when compared with the *Rules* of Pachomius. Various commands about clothing, bread, water, meat, vegetables can be compared with the 'hardships of the road'. (3) The disciples' arrival, waiting, and reception at the gates parallels the novice's experience as described in the *Rules*. The novice waits at the gate for a few days; he tells his story and demonstrates readiness to renounce his family and possessions; he is stripped of his clothes and garbed in a monastic habit; finally, he is handed over to the porter who brings him before the brothers at the time of prayer. (4) Monasteries were competing for patronage, and a great number of failed monks went begging in the cities.<sup>46</sup> As a consequence, 'partiality for the rich' was a recurring issue in monastic literature. (5) Pachomius taught about the connection between physical and spiritual healing in similar terms as the *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*:

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Molinari, *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*, 133-4 and passim.

<sup>44</sup> Molinari, *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*, 191.

<sup>45</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Czachesz, *Apostolic Commission*, 158-66.

<sup>46</sup> The mention of 'beggars' (ΠΑΛΑΤΗΝΗΤΗΔΕ) in 4.4-5.1 may refer to this group.

'Do not think that bodily healings are healings; but the real healings are the spiritual healings of the soul.' (6) Finally, the larger theory of the production and use of the Nag Hammadi Codices in a Pachomian monastery supports the hypothesis of a similar *Sitz im Leben* for the final redaction of the *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*.

The Pearl Narrative, as argued above, was an ancient layer of the text which probably originated in the same Syrian context as the Hymn of the Pearl. The interpretation of the text as a narrative of the Saviour's descent to the world was later made explicit by adding the post-resurrection episode. The physician material was introduced into the final part of the Pearl Narrative at the same time; it might have been part of the revelation material used by the redactor, or was derived from tradition. In this context, Lithargoel's attributes as a physician (8.15-19), as well as references to him as 'good man' and 'son of a great king' who 'does not reveal himself to every man' (8.35-37), anticipated his identification as Christ.

Just as the Hymn of the Pearl became part of the *Acts of Thomas*, the Pearl Narrative could have been integrated into a story of the apostles' commission, or even into a longer *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*, comparable to the 'major' Acts.<sup>47</sup> The doublet in 4.4-34 seems to support this idea. This passage contains the dialogue between the pearl merchant and the poor of the city (Habitation):

4.4-15

'Please take the trouble to show us the pearl so that we may then see it with our own eyes. For we are poor. And we do not have this price to pay for it. But show us that we might say to our friends that we saw a pearl with our own eyes.'  
He answered, saying to them: 'If it is possible, come to my city, so that I may not only show it before your very eyes but give it to you for nothing.'

4.21-34

'Now then, the kindness which we want to receive from you is that you show us the pearl before our eyes. And we will say before our friends proudly that we saw a pearl with our own eyes—because it is not found among the poor, especially such beggars as these.'  
He answered and said to them: 'If it is possible, you yourselves come to my city, so that I may not only show you it but give it to you for nothing.'

Since the two versions of this doublet do not literally agree, it cannot be a simple copying error. The most natural explanation is that it was

<sup>47</sup> Pace Schenke, 'Acts of Peter and the Twelve', 415.

produced as the redactor excerpted a larger narrative. The original text had a repetitive structure, with two invitation episodes rather than only one. Our hypothesis of the Pearl Narrative integrated in a larger *Acts of Peter and the Twelve* would explain the repetition: the pearl merchant first directed Lithargoel/Christ to the city; for the second time, the apostles, imitating his example, were instructed similarly. The doublet in 4.4-34, the shifts of narrative voice, and other inconsistencies in the first part of the text could result from the combination of two travel narratives into a single one.

The monastic redactor could have found this source interesting for several reasons. (1) He saw metaphorical potential in the journey narrative to use it as an image of the difficulties of joining a monastic community and living up to the rules of monastic life. (2) His attention was grabbed by the city where the pearl was hidden, and to which the hero was directed by the pearl merchant. The city could be understood as a symbol of the monastery. (3) The figure of the pearl merchant inviting the hero to his city raised the possibility of interpreting him as Pachomius, who invited hermits and others willing to denounce the world to his monasteries. In the Bohairic *Life of Pachomius*, St Antony says, 'Then the path of the apostles was revealed on earth. This is the work our able Apa Pachomius undertook. He became the refuge for everyone in danger from the one who has done evil from the beginning.'<sup>48</sup>

These points of interest determined the way the redactor changed the Pearl Narrative, and added his own material to it. First, he had one character too many in the story. In his understanding of the narrative, as Lithargoel/Christ invites the disciples to the heavenly city, so Pachomius invites the monks to the monastery. Lithargoel's journey to the city is not reported any more, and his figure almost completely coalesces with the pearl merchant.

The pearl merchant received the attributes of a physician, and identified himself as Lithargoel in the dialogue. The naïve etymology of 'shining stone' was created by the redactor, because 'forgetful about God' or 'forgetful angel' did not make sense in the new context. Second, the dangers of the road, which might have been symbolised only by animals originally (cf. the serpent in the Pearl of the Hymn and the

<sup>48</sup> Bohairic *Life of Pachomius* 127, trans. A. Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia*, Kalamazoo, Michigan 1980, vol. i.

animals in St Antony's dream), became identified with various monastic precepts about clothing, bread, water, and so forth. Subsequently, the exhortation was added to the narrative, or alternatively, adopted from another source, or possibly from another part of a longer *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*. The theme of 'partiality for the rich', a major issue in the monastic world, was added to it, and possibly also the explanations about healing bodies and souls.

The authority of Pachomius in the monastic community cannot be overestimated. The *Lausiac History* claims that Pachomius received the *Rules* from an angel on a bronze tablet.<sup>49</sup> Obedience to the Pachomian rules was a matter of salvation: 'Whoever transgresses any of these commands shall, for his negligence and his contempt, do penance publicly without any delay so that he may be able to possess the kingdom of heaven.'<sup>50</sup> Pachomius had visions and regarded himself as a salient figure of salvation history. Tradition made him the successor of prophets and apostles.<sup>51</sup> His figure was especially idealised when Theodore assumed leadership of the community after an interim period of disturbances.<sup>52</sup> Having the superhuman image of Pachomius in mind, the redactor could easily understand his activity of establishing monasteries and calling monks to join his communities as an imitation of Jesus' calling and commissioning his disciples.

### 5. Conclusion

Lithargoel has received a new identity in this article. First, we have suggested a new etymology for his name. Deriving Lithargoel from the Greek λήθαργος is preferable to previous suggestions both from grammatical and semantic points of view. With the help of the Hymn of the Pearl in the *Acts of Thomas*, we have hypothesised a Pearl Narrative which served as a source for the book. In *Acts of Peter and the Twelve* 8.14-35, we have found passages which characterise Lithargoel in a way that fits excellently into the plot of the Pearl Narrative. We have also outlined subsequent levels of redaction before the Pearl Nar-

<sup>49</sup> Palladius, *Lausiac History* 32.3.

<sup>50</sup> *Rules* 144. Text in A. Boon, *Pachomiana Latina*, Louvain 1932.

<sup>51</sup> P. Rousseau, *Pachomius: The Making of a Community in Fourth-Century Egypt*, Berkeley, CA 1985, 57-63.

<sup>52</sup> Rousseau, *Pachomius*, 178-83.

rative reached the final redactor. Textual clues have been found which can be used to reconstruct the outline of a longer *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*. Finally, we have highlighted various aspects of the text that could be relevant for a redactor in a Pachomian monastery, as well as modifications that this particular *Sitz im Leben* probably motivated.

## APPENDIX

The legend of Mār Awgen (St Eugene of Clysma) perhaps contains a trace of the pearl merchant motif. Awgen's legend, attested from the seventh century,<sup>53</sup> reports that the saint was a pearl diver before he joined a Pachomian monastery and later founded Syrian monasticism. He sold the pearls, and 'distributed [them? their price?] among the churches, the people, the poor, the needy, the orphans, and the widows.'<sup>54</sup> The legend may witness that the merchant story was known in the Syrian Church and confirm the Syrian origins of the Pearl Narrative. However, since Awgen's legend is not attested before the seventh century, the possibility that it was inspired by the *Acts of Peter and the Twelve* cannot be ruled out. Further, Awgen is presented as Pachomius's follower, which may indicate that his story originated in a Pachomian context. In that case, the legend may provide indirect evidence of the Pachomian *Sitz im Leben* of the *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*.

<sup>53</sup> N. Sims-Williams, 'Eugenius', in: *Encyclopedia Iranica* (Columbia University; <http://www.iranica.com>); M.G. Bianco, 'Eugenius', in: A. Di Berardino et al. (eds), *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, i, Cambridge 1992, 296; N. Sims-Williams, 'Dādišo' Qatrāyā's Commentary on the *Paradise of the Fathers*', *Analecta Bollandiana* 112 (1994) 33-64, esp. 47 note 38.

<sup>54</sup> *Life of Awgen*, edited by P. Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum et Sanctorum Syriace*, ii, Paris 1892, 376-480 at 378, lines 11-13. For an English summary, see E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of Governors*, i, London 1893, pp. cxxv-cxxxi at cxxv. Cf. Awgen's legend in the *Chronicle of Seert*, text and translation in Addai Scher, *Histoire nestorienne inédite* (Patrologia orientalis 4.4), Paris 1908, 234-6.

## GNŌSIS, MAGEIA, AND THE HOLY BOOK OF THE GREAT INVISIBLE SPIRIT

MARVIN MEYER

This essay, written in honor of a colleague whose career has focused upon the study of Gnostic texts, particularly texts from the Nag Hammadi library, examines features of *gnōsis* and *mageia* in one such text, *The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*, or *The Egyptian Gospel*. The present examination seeks to explore the adequacy of these two terms—*gnōsis* and *mageia*, along with related terms—that may be used to define and describe ancient texts and traditions, and then it attempts to apply these terms to *The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*, in order to raise issues of definition and taxonomy. Is *The Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit* a Gnostic text? Is it a magical text? Is it both? Is it neither?

*Gnōsis*

*Gnōsis* and *mageia*, or 'Gnosticism' and 'magic,' remain two of the most elusive of categories in our current scholarly repertoire. Both sets of terms are vigorously debated, both are commonly addressed in the scholarly literature.

Two recent monographs have suggested that 'Gnosticism' and related terms may no longer be viable for scholarly discussion. In the first of these books, *Rethinking 'Gnosticism': An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, Michael A. Williams proposes that the 'dubious category' to be dismantled is 'Gnosticism' itself.<sup>1</sup> Williams surveys a variety of efforts on the part of scholars to define and describe 'Gnosticism,' and he remains dissatisfied with them all. He states, 'The term "Gnosticism" has indeed ultimately brought more confusion than clarification.'<sup>2</sup> Some scholars have described 'Gnosticism' as

<sup>1</sup> M.A. Williams, *Rethinking 'Gnosticism': An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, Princeton 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Williams, *Rethinking 'Gnosticism'*, 263.