

## THE ODES OF SOLOMON AND THE ACTS OF THOMAS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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The Odes of Solomon and the Acts of Thomas are two of the most important apocryphal documents of the early Syrian church. As significant as each is in its own respect, of special interest to this study is whether or not they possess anything in common as regards provenance, content, or even authorship.

The Odes of Solomon, as they now exist, are found principally in Syriac texts, the most important one being that edited by J. Rendel Harris in 1909.<sup>1</sup> They consist of forty-two separate psalms not including the eighteen which constitute the Psalms of Solomon and which are found attached to the Odes as either a preface or an appendix.<sup>2</sup> The Psalms are a Jewish product originating at ca. 70-40 B.C.<sup>3</sup> They evidently formed a prophetic substratum upon which the later Christian Odes rested and with which they are invariably associated in the MSS and traditions. A.F.J. Klijn and Berthold Altaner date the Odes in the second century, whereas Harris would place them as early as A.D. 70.<sup>4</sup>

Nearly all scholars are agreed that the Syriac texts represent an original Greek composition, though how and when they became part of the Syriac literature is impossible to tell. And equally obscure is the matter of authorship. W. R. Newbold argued that the author was none other than Bardaisan,<sup>5</sup> but the fact that it was written in Greek and that the date of composition seems to be too early for Bardaisan renders this hypothesis well nigh inconceivable. Altaner flatly states that Bardaisan "is certainly not the author."<sup>6</sup> Burkitt argues that any resemblances between the content of the Odes and the thought of Bardaisan are superficial and that

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<sup>1</sup>J. Rendel Harris, *The Odes and Psalms of Solomon* (Cambridge: University Press, 1909). There are also traces of the Odes in Greek, Coptic, and Latin MSS.

<sup>2</sup>The order found in the Harris MS (Odes-Psalms) has been confirmed by a text published by Burkitt two years later. Cf. F. C. Burkitt, "A New MS of the Odes of Solomon," *JTS* XIII (1912): 372-385.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 374.

<sup>4</sup>A. F. J. Klijn, *The Acts of Thomas* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1962), p. 48; Berthold Altaner, *Patrology* (Freiburg: Herder and Herder, 1960), p. 77. Cf. Harris, p. 58.

<sup>5</sup>Wm. R. Newbold, "Bardaisan and the Odes of Solomon," *JBL* XXX (1911): 172. Newbold reached his conclusions largely on the basis of a comparison of the Odes with the Bardaisanian "Book of the Laws of the Countries."

<sup>6</sup>*Op. cit.*, p. 63.

the stylistic differences observable through a careful study of the Syriac texts themselves would rule out Bardaisan authorship.<sup>7</sup>

Of special interest is the alleged Gnostic atmosphere of the Odes of Solomon as maintained, for example, by Harnack.<sup>8</sup> He says that this can be demonstrated by the fact that Ode 6, which to him was essentially Gnostic, was incorporated into the celebrated *Pistis Sophia*, an Egyptian Gnostic production.<sup>9</sup> Harris denies that Ode 6, to say nothing of the entire collection, is Gnostic in any sense.<sup>10</sup> He sees in the themes and motifs of the Ode very obvious Old Testament sources. What the Ophite community of Egypt did with the Ode, of course, is something else again. But to aver that the Odes of Solomon are Gnostic because a Gnostic sect made use of some of them is specious.

Before setting out to discuss the teaching of the Odes it might be well to investigate the introduction to the Acts of Thomas, the document which Klijn says is most parallel to the Odes of all of Syriac literature.<sup>11</sup> This fascinating apocryphal account of Judas Thomas, one of the Twelve, was an original Syriac composition dating from about A.D. 200-250.<sup>12</sup> The consensus is that it arose from a Bardaisanian circle if not from the pen of the notorious Edessan himself. The two main lines of support for this are (1) the treatise *Liber Legum Regionum*, a Bardaisanian writing which closely parallels the Acts of Thomas, and (2) the statement of Ephraem that the followers of Bardaisan wrote "Acts of the Apostles." The only one of the latter known from Syria is the Acts of Thomas. Klijn rejects this authorship theory, however, pointing out the various features in the Acts which are diametrically opposed to the teachings of Bardaisan as they are known from other sources.<sup>13</sup> This is an important matter, for the orthodox status of both the Acts of Thomas and Bardaisan is affected by their connection, if any. If Bardaisan is, indeed, the author, his theological stance shifted considerably from the position reflected in the Acts and that manifested in most of his other writings including the above-mentioned *Liber Legum Regionum*.

Strangely enough, the Acts of Thomas was little known in the Greek and Latin world and, in fact, is first mentioned by Epiphanius. The extant Greek version shows unorthodox deviations from the original Syriac

<sup>7</sup>*Op. cit.*, p. 373.

<sup>8</sup>Cited in Harris, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup>Besides lines 8-18 of Ode 6, *Pistis Sophia* contains Odes 1; 5:1-11; 22; and 25. This Coptic document was apparently translated directly from the Greek, so there is little evidence that it came to Egypt from Syria. Even if it did, the most that can be established is that the sections borrowed from the Odes were felt by the Egyptian Gnostic community to be amenable to their thought.

<sup>10</sup>*Op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup>*Op. cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>12</sup>Altaner, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

<sup>13</sup>*Op. cit.*, pp. 44-45. Examples are the asceticism in the Acts and the lack of astrological emphasis. Bardaisan was much opposed to the former and very much an exponent of the latter.

which, however, have been corrected by the later Syriac MSS which we now possess. This argues for the orthodoxy of the early Syrian church, an orthodoxy established upon a Jewish theological matrix and opposed to the larger Hellenistic environment. Klijn maintains that chapters 32, 40 and Hymn I show evidence of Jewish Haggadic material; chapter 70 speaks of "evil inclination," a Jewish concept; and chapter 94 makes much of pure and impure food, likewise Jewish in intent. He admits, however, that the extended love story of chapters 114-16 is Greek in character, a factor which he attributes to Hellenistic influences already at work in Jewish thought.<sup>14</sup>

It is almost universally recognized that there are compelling points of similarity between the Odes of Solomon and the Acts of Thomas, the following list being by no means a comprehensive outline of them:

- (1) Both stress Christ's descent to hell
- (2) Both state that Christ opened a way to heaven
- (3) In both Christ adapts himself to human perception
- (4) In both his work is a contest
- (5) In both he is identified with power, wisdom, and knowledge
- (6) Both state that man must be freed from corruption
- (7) Both state that ignorance disappeared
- (8) Both contrast light and darkness, error and truth, sickness and healing
- (9) In both there is a letter sent from heaven
- (10) In both there is a being clothed in light or brightness
- (11) In both there is a hostility to marriage
- (12) Both mention the "bitter herbs" or "trees"<sup>15</sup>

Even this limited list seems rather convincing in support of a common theology in the two documents. However, there are also notable differences, two of the more important of which are (1) the distinction between the soul and the body in the Acts and (2) the antithesis between Christ and Satan in the Acts as opposed to that between Christ and the earth in the Odes. These differences, with most of the others, can no doubt be explained on the basis of theological development from the first to the third century, a development especially characterized by the intrusion of Greek philosophical notions introduced by Tatian and others.<sup>16</sup>

In conclusion, it is fair to say that the Odes of Solomon and the Acts of Thomas are treatises which both detail the orthodox theology of the early Syrian church and that their dependence (certainly Acts' dependence upon Odes) is not so much conscious as intuitive—they both draw from the same Old and New Testament wells of inspiration. Klijn expresses well the importance of the Acts of Thomas when he points out that they "show

<sup>14</sup>*Op. cit.*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>15</sup>In Acts the bitter herbs speak of the Encratitic view that marriage and sexual union are bitter; in Odes, bitterness speaks of reverting to the old life following regeneration.

<sup>16</sup>Klijn (*op. cit.*, pp. 51-52) observes that Tatian introduced Greek heterodoxy into the Syrian community.

a doctrine which is in agreement within a group within Syriac Christianity which was influenced by Western ideas without losing [sic] its essential ancient Syrian traditions. This group was influenced by Tatian and accepted his ascetic views. The orthodox church as manifested by Ephrem originated from this group, but modified some of its extreme ideas. It is, however, possible that some Christians still tried to live in accordance with the ancient views propagated in the Acts of Thomas at a later stage. This means that the Acts of Thomas are a land-mark in Syriac theology."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup>*Op. cit.*, p. 52.