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The Secret Tradition¹

This is the kind of divine enlightenment into which we have been initiated by the hidden tradition of our inspired teachers, a tradition at one with Scripture. We now grasp these things in the best way we can, and as they come to us, wrapped in the sacred veils of that love toward humanity with which scripture and hierarchical traditions cover the truths of the mind with things derived from the realm of the senses. Dionysius *On the Divine Names* 5992B

But see to it that you do not betray the Holy of Holies. Let your respect for the things of the hidden God be shown in knowledge that comes from the intellect and is unseen. Keep these things of God unshared and undefiled by the uninitiated. Dionysius *The Ecclesiastical Hierachy* 372A

There was far more to the teaching of Jesus than is recorded in the canonical gospels. For several centuries a belief persisted among Christian writers that there had been a secret tradition entrusted to only a few of his followers. Eusebius quotes from a now lost work of Clement of Alexandria, *Hypotyposes*: ‘James the Righteous, John and Peter were entrusted by the LORD after his resurrection with the higher knowledge. They imparted it to the other apostles, and the other apostles to the seventy, one of whom was Barnabas.’ (History 2.1) This brief statement offers three important pieces of evidence: the tradition was given to an

inner circle of disciples; the tradition was given after the resurrection; and the tradition was a form of higher knowledge i.e. gnosis. All the arguments in this area are open to the possibility of being circular, and it may well be that the later traditions were built upon the evidence in the gospels for an inner group of disciples, by people who felt that the post-resurrection period was the ideal time for Jesus to be giving revelations about the heavenly world, and they used this as an opportunity to import fashionable Gnostic ideas into Christianity.

Such insertions were the established practice of those who were writing apocalypses at the time². The *Apocalypse of Abraham*, for example, is an expansion of Genesis 15, but at the point where the canonical text describes the LORD speaking to Abraham, the writer of the Apocalypse has inserted a heavenly ascent, a vision of the throne of God and a revelation of the future. The *Apocalypse of Abraham* was probably written after 70CE, since it describes the destruction of the temple (Ap.Abr.27.3) and, even though a thorough investigation of the text to determine its original language has yet to be made, it seems likely that it was a Hebrew text from the end of the first Christian century. The *Ascension of Isaiah* is similar; a Jewish legend has been expanded in two places by a Christian writer. The first of the visions was the reason for his being arrested and put to death by the evil king Manasseh; the second, although forming an appendix to the book, is set in an earlier period of the prophet's life, in the reign of Hezekiah. Again, the original language was probably Hebrew, and the date about the end of the first Christian century. Thus it is not impossible that those who were promoting gnostic ideas within the church should have made additions to the established picture of the life of

¹ First published in the *Journal of Higher Criticism* 2.1 1995 pp.31-67. This present version has some corrections and additions to the references.

² It is inappropriate to distinguish too sharply between 'Jewish' and 'Christian' in the years immediately after the beginning of the church: see R Murray 'Jews, Hebrews and Christians. Some needed distinctions' *Nov Test.* 24 (1982)

Jesus. Inserting visions into the post-resurrection life of Jesus would have been as acceptable as inserting visions into the story of Abraham or the legend of the death of Isaiah.

The matter, however, is not so simple, because it begins with the assumption that what we call gnosis must have been alien to the teaching of Jesus, and that all traditions of Jesus teaching this gnosis must have been fabrications. Since Daniélou has shown so convincingly that what the second century writers described as gnosis is none other than the essence of Jewish apocalyptic speculation in Hellenistic guise³, the assumption that it must be alien to Jesus can no longer be made with any confidence. Furthermore, many of the gnostic elements which Daniélou had thought were a pagan modification of apocalyptic can now be seen to have *roots in the theology of the Jerusalem temple*⁴.

The Secret Teaching

There are many passages in the New Testament, both in the gospels and the epistles, where the suspicion of a secret tradition is all too apparent. The curious references in the epistles to the heavenly powers and cosmic struggles, to mysteries, to the transformation of the believer into a more glorious body, and so forth, give good grounds for suspecting that what the later writers described as secret knowledge taught by Jesus may well have been exactly that.

Morton Smith suggested that the Pauline letters, read literally, give a far clearer picture of early Christianity than do the gospels. The discrepancies between the Synoptic picture of Jesus and the apparent beliefs of Paul's churches 'may result from a seepage of secret material

³ J.Daniélou *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture. A History of Early Christian Doctrine before the Council of Nicea* London and Philadelphia 1972 vol.2 pp.458ff, 486ff.

⁴ See my book *The Great Angel* London 1992

into originally exoteric texts... More of the esoteric teaching is found in the epistles of Paul, the oldest Christian documents, and those most surely written for reading within the closed circles of the churches... Paul enables us to glimpse the true beliefs of the congregation to which he writes, and he is to be preferred, as a source of early Christian thought, to the later comparatively exoteric gospels.’⁵ The alternative, as Hengel said, is to assert that the epistles record an immediate decline from the original teaching of Jesus into an acutely Hellenised mystery cult.⁶

If a tradition of secret teaching was known to Clement of Alexandria who flourished at the end of the second century, and if this ‘gnosis’ is the key to understanding his thought⁷, can it be dismissed as an insertion into the teachings of the church? As Daniélou also observed, the later gnostics who presented their (by then heretical) views in the form of the secret teachings of Jesus ‘attestent du meme coup l’existence de celles-ci.’⁸ Clement does not give the impression of having been an innovator; rather, he was concerned with passing on the true traditions of the church. He knew of people who were making ‘ a perverse use of the divine words... they do not enter in as we enter in, through the tradition of the LORD, by drawing aside the curtain’ (Misc.7.17), and goes on to show that Church tradition is older than heresy. These teachers, he said, ‘preserving the tradition of the blessed doctrine derived directly from the holy apostles, Peter, James, John and Paul, the son receiving it from the father (but few were like their fathers) came by God’s will to us also to deposit those ancestral and apostolic seeds.’ (Misc.1.1) This ‘tradition of blessed doctrine’ is described elsewhere as gnosis, that which has descended by transmission to a few, having been imparted unwritten by the apostles.’ (Misc.6.7). It was acquired by ‘drawing aside the curtain’, *temple imagery for*

⁵ M Smith *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* Cambridge MA 1973 p.251

⁶ M.Hengel *Son of God* London 1976 p.2

⁷ Daniélou op.cit.n.3 p. 447

access to the presence of God, the privilege of the high priest. We should expect it to concern, *inter alia*, the Liturgy.

It is important to note that the secret tradition was not written down. Eusebius implies that Clement did write it down, even though Origen, to whom we shall return, was always reticent about committing it to writing. ‘Clement’, wrote Eusebius, ‘in his work on the Pascha declares that his friends insisted on his transmitting to later generations in writing the oral traditions that had come down to him from the earliest authorities of the church (History 6.13). It is the unwritten nature of this tradition which proves to be the greatest problem in any investigation which relies entirely on written sources, there being nothing else to use. We can proceed only by reading between the lines and arguing from silence, always a dangerous procedure, but less so if the context of the lines and the silence be borne in mind.

For Clement, the Son of God has been manifested both as the LORD in the Old Testament and as Christ the LORD in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, the Son had been described both as the Spirit which inspired the prophets, and also as Wisdom⁹; and the significance of Clement’s teachings about gnosis and the secret tradition cannot be fully appreciated unless this identification be kept in mind. Jesus had been the manifestation of the One whom the Old Testament knew as *yhwh*, the LORD, the Revealer. Further, Clement was heir to the teachings of Philo who had demythologised the ancient traditions of Israel and given them a point of contact with contemporary Greek philosophy. For Philo, the *yhwh* of the Old Testament had been the second God of Israel, the Mediator, the Revealer, the Word, the Son of the Highest (i.e. of El Elyon). Clement described Jesus as this second God and thus he could say: ‘We define Wisdom to be certain knowledge, being a sure and irrefragable

⁸ Daniélou ‘Les traditions Secretes des Apotres’ Eranos Jahrbuch 31 (1962) p.203

apprehension of things divine and human, comprehending the past, present and future which the LORD hath taught us, both by his advent and by the prophets' (Misc.6.7). He does not distinguish between the LORD of the Old Testament and the LORD of the New.

'If then we assert that Christ himself is Wisdom, and that it was His working that showed itself in the prophets, by which the Gnostic tradition may be learned, as he Himself taught the apostles during his presence; then it follows that the gnosis which the knowledge and apprehension of things present, future and past which is sure and reliable, as being imparted and revealed by the Son of God, is Wisdom.' (Misc.6.7)

Later Clement asks how anyone can be an atheist who has 'learned the divine mysteries from his only begotten Son' (Misc.7.1).

Whilst there can be no doubt that Clement was using the terminology fashionable in his day, it is necessary to look closely at what he says about the secret teachings, the gnosis, in order to identify exactly what this was, and to see if there is any possibility that it could have come from Jesus as he claims. First, it was knowledge of past, present and future *revealed* by the Son of God (Misc.6.7). *Apokaluptheisa* is the important word, since this immediately places Clement's gnosis in the realm of the visionary experience, apocalyptic, rather than that of pure intellectual inquiry. He implies this elsewhere by the imagery he uses; those who have the truth enter in through the tradition of the LORD by drawing aside the curtain (Misc.7.17). Beyond the curtain in the temple was the heavenly world and the throne of God, and this was the subject of the apocalypists' visions¹⁰. Second, the mysteries were concealed in the Old Testament but revealed by the LORD: 'On the one hand, then, are the mysteries which were hid until the time of the apostles, and were delivered by them as they received from the LORD, and, concealed in the Old Testament, were manifested to the saints.' Paul, he said, 'clearly

⁹ See my book *The Great Angel* op.cit.n.4

reveals that knowledge belongs not to all... for there were certainly among the Hebrews some things delivered unwritten...' (Misc.5.10), in contrast to the more public teaching of the church. He declares, in other words, that *the roots of the secret tradition were pre-Christian*. Third, he describes the goal of the Gnostic as contemplation, *theoria*, something not available to one who confines himself to philosophy. He needs instruction in the prophecies such that he may receive their revelation and attain the goal of contemplation.

‘And if, too, the end of the wise man is contemplation, that of those who are still philosophers aims at it, but never attains it, unless by the process of learning it receives the prophetic utterance which has been made known, by which it grasps both the present, the future and the past,... how they are ,were, and shall be. And the gnosis itself is that which has descended by transmission to a few, having been imparted unwritten by the apostles. Hence, then, knowledge or wisdom ought to be exercised up to the eternal and unchangeable habit of contemplation.’ (Misc.6.7)

This contemplation which gives knowledge of things past present and future seems to have been Clement’s way of describing the goal of the apocalyptists’ ascents, namely the vision of God and the knowledge of all things past, present and future which were the result of that experience. As the Hebrews (gazed) upon the glory of Moses and the prophets of Israel on the vision of angels, so we also become able to look the splendours of truth in the face.’ (Misc.6.15)

This can be illustrated from the two first century apocalypses mentioned above. In the *Apocalypse of Abraham* the patriarch is taken up to the Eternal One by Iaoel (*yhwh-EL*). Having been granted a vision of the throne, the patriarch is told to look down and see the whole plan of history - past present and future - unfolding beneath him (Ap.Abr cc.21-32).

¹⁰ See my book *The Gate of Heaven* London 1991 pp150-177

The *Ascension of Isaiah* also describes how the prophet was taken up into the seventh heaven by a glorious angel, and then saw the whole mystery of the Incarnation, past, present and future (Asc.Isa. chapters 10-11).

The apocalyptists' vision of God did not only give knowledge; it also transformed the mystic into an angelic being, one whose life was that of the other world, even though he might have continued to live for a while on earth as a messenger from God. The Gnostic, too, enjoys a new life, says Clement; he is transformed and becomes divine. '(Gnosis) leads us to the endless and perfect end, teaching us beforehand the future life that we shall lead, according to God and with gods... Then, having become pure in heart and near to the LORD, there awaits them restoration to everlasting contemplation; and they are called by the appellation of gods, being destined to sit on other thrones with the other gods that have been first put in their places by the Saviour.' (Misc.7.10)

On this wise it is possible for the gnostic already to have become God: 'I said ye are gods and sons of the Highest.' (Misc.4.23).

This is exactly the transformation experience at the heart of the apocalyptists' tradition.

Enoch had ascended to the throne and been transformed into a 'son of man' (1 En.71). The Enochic histories describe how Noah and Moses, depicted as animals, had been transformed into 'men', in Noah's case after he had been *instructed in a secret* by one of the four archangels; Elijah (? the people are not named) had been taken up to heaven (1 En.89.1, 36, 52; c.f. 1 En.93.4, 5, 8 where Noah, Moses and ?Elijah are the three 'men' in Israel's history).

In visionary texts, 'man' is the conventional description of an angelic being: Daniel 9.21 has 'the man Gabriel'; Daniel 10.5 'a man clothed in linen'; and Revelation 21.17 'a man's measure, that is an angel's'. *2 Enoch* described how Enoch was anointed and clothed in the robes of glory: 'And I looked at myself and I had become like one of the glorious ones...' (2

En.22.10). *3 Enoch* says that the great angel Metatron, enthroned in heaven and given the divine Name, had been Enoch in his earthly life (3 En. cc.4,10,13). Isaiah was told on his heavenly ascent that he would receive his robe and then be equal to the angels (Asc.Isa.8.14). Philo described how Moses had been transformed into ‘God and King’ when he ascended Sinai (Moses 1.157). It is clearly the same tradition.¹¹

The belief that human beings, as a result of their mystical vision, were transformed into angels was neither new nor the teaching of an unrepresentative minority. When Clement’s gnostic hoped for divinity as a result of his ‘contemplation’ he was only putting into the language of his own day what the ancient religion of Israel had been saying for many centuries, first of its priest kings and then of the various heirs to that tradition. He even spoke of the angelic hierarchies of Israel’s older mythology and knew that they were associated with the role of the high priest. ‘Gnostic souls, that surpass in the grandeur of contemplation the mode of life of each of the holy ranks... reckoned holy among the holy... embracing the divine vision not in mirrors but in the transcendently clear and absolutely pure insatiable vision which is the privilege of intensely loving souls... Such is the vision attainable by the pure in heart. This the function of the gnostic, who has been perfected, to have converse with God through the great high priest.’ (Misc.7.3). To say that such contemplation of the face of God is an element drawn from ‘the vision of the mysteries, a Hellenistic literary touch’ or that ‘certain elements of (Clement’s gnosis) undoubtedly derived from Hellenism, notably those of vision, contemplation and archetypes’¹², is unnecessary and opens up a false gap between this gnosis and anything known to have been associated with Jesus, who had himself said:

¹¹ W.A.Meeks ‘Moses as God and King’ in *Religions in Antiquity. Essays in Memory of E.R.Goodenough* ed.J.Neusner Leiden 1970.

¹² Daniélou op.cit n.3 pp 451,453.

‘Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God’ (Mat. 5.8). Seeking the face/presence¹³ of the LORD had been at the heart of the temple cult (1 Chron.16.11; 2Chron.7.14; Pss. 17.15; 24.6; 27.8-9; 41.12; 105.4 etc.).

The Gnostic believer changes from unbelief to faith, then from faith to knowledge and love, and then ‘such an one has already attained the condition of being equal to the angels’. The Gnostic presses on towards his heavenly home ‘through the holy septenniad (of heavenly abodes) to the LORD’s own mansion’ (Misc.7.10). Again, this is exactly the belief of the apocalyptists: those who ascended through the heavens and saw the throne of God were transformed.

Clement knew the temple setting of the apocalyptic tradition; it is no accident that the image of the high priest’s entering the holy of holies was used to describe the Gnostic entering the state of knowledge. The high priest’s golden plate represented his body which he left behind when he entered the holy of holies, said Clement. Thus he passed through the veil which represented the intelligible world and into the world beyond¹⁴. The possession of knowledge or wisdom had long been the sign of the angelic state; even the serpent in Eden knew as much when he said to Eve that she would become like the gods knowing good and evil. It is hostility to this wisdom tradition which underlies much of the transmission and editing of what we now read as the canonical Old Testament. That ‘gnosis’ existed and had an honourable place in the beliefs of some (most?) of the heirs of Israel’s ancient religious tradition should come as no surprise, nor should the hostility to it which emerged very early in the history of the church.

¹³ Hebrew *panim* can be translated either face or presence.

¹⁴ See my book *The Gate of Heaven* op.cit,n.10, pp150-177

If Clement knew the temple tradition, then he will also have known that the Jerusalem temple was a 'copy', and that everything in it represented some aspect of the heavenly world.

Buildings, furnishings and temple servants were all copies of heavenly originals; Moses had been told to make a tabernacle in accordance with the pattern he had been shown on the mountain (Exod.25.9, 40), and David gave to Solomon a plan of the temple he had to build, every detail of which had been given to him by the LORD (1 Chron.28.11-19). 'On earth as it is in heaven' became one of the principal elements of the apocalyptists' temple rooted traditions, and thus Clement was able to show how the degrees of glory in heaven corresponded to the ranks within the church (Misc.6.13). This feature in Clement's thought is not a sign that he had drawn Platonic archetypes into his gnosis. He may have used terminology drawn from that philosophy, as did Philo, but the heavenly world had long been known in the temple as the plan which determined everything below. This view is known to have survived at Qumran; it is presupposed in the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* and the *Blessings*. Thus again it is unwise to open up unnecessary gaps between the gnosis of Clement and anything that could conceivably have come from Jesus. When Clement declared he had a secret tradition from Jesus, he could have been telling the truth.

Clement knew many of the texts we now call apocalypses. He mentioned *I Enoch* several times in connection with the fallen angels (Inst. 3.2; Misc.1.17; 5.1), the *Assumption of Moses* (Misc.6.15), and, significantly, the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, a work which is otherwise unknown to us. He quotes a passage from this text describing a heavenly ascent to see the angels ('LORDS') sitting on their thrones in the sanctuary of salvation, praising God Most High¹⁵. It may well be that those elements of his gnosis, which we still cannot place with

¹⁵ Text in J.H.Charlesworth ed. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* vol 1, London 1983

certainty within the apocalyptists' scheme as we have reconstructed it from material available to us, may be elements which came from texts and traditions no longer known to us.

Clement also knew two gospels which presumably were used by the Alexandrian Christian community, the so-called *Gospel of the Egyptians* and the *Gospel according to the Hebrews* (Misc.3.45, 63, 64, 66, 68, 91, 97; Excerpts 67 and Misc.2.9; 5.14 respectively). Of the former, little is known for certain beyond the quotations in Clement which deal largely with the questions of marriage and bearing children. There is, however, one quotation from it in Epiphanius (fourth century), which says that the *Gospel of the Egyptians* was a book 'in which many strange things were handed down as having come secretly from the Saviour, such as that he revealed to the disciples that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are one and the same person (Epiphanius Panarion 62). Of the *Gospel of the Hebrews* more is known; it is usually described as having syncretistic-gnostic elements on the basis of its having material not found in the synoptic gospels, but found in gnostic texts¹⁶.

There is a possibility that there has been here, too, a tendency to prejudge issues as to what could and could not have been 'original' to Christianity. The Holy Spirit is described in this Gospel as Jesus' mother who came to him at his baptism and said that she had been waiting for him, her first born who would reign for ever. In him she had at last found her 'rest'.

There had been a division of opinion as to where Wisdom had found this 'rest' in the past; Ben Sira had described how Wisdom, after her long search, found her rest in Israel (b.Sira 24.7), but the tradition of the apocalyptists was very different. They said that Wisdom had found no place in Israel and had taken her place again among the angels (1 En.42). The tradition of Wisdom's exile was perpetuated in the Gnostic writings, and a Gospel which

¹⁶ W.Schneemelcher *New Testament Apocrypha*, Cambridge 1991, p.173

declared that wisdom had finally found her rest in Jesus would have been the link between the ancient traditions of Israel and the later Gnostic writings¹⁷. In the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, Jesus described how his mother lifted him up by the hair and carried him to Mount Tabor. To those who read only the synoptic gospels, these seem fantastic statements; but the belief that the Holy Spirit was both feminine, as, as Wisdom, the mother of the Messiah, was both ancient and widely attested.¹⁸ She appears throughout Gnostic literature as Sophia, and the setting of these texts places both her and the tradition firmly within that of ancient Israel. Further, one only has to read Ezekiel's account of his heavenly journey to Jerusalem to see that the Spirit was described there, too, as having carried the prophet by his hair (Ezek.8.3). It was doubtless the conventional way for such an experience of rapture to be described, but the very fact that it was conventional should warn against assuming that such descriptions could not have been part of the original tradition about Jesus. The real question raised by such material is not: Where did it come from and why? But: Why did it disappear from the public form of the tradition? Clement, who knew a secret tradition at the end of the second century CE, knew all this material and used it freely.

It was fashionable for a long time to dismiss as ridiculous anything which does not conform to the modern Church's idea of what the original Christianity must have been. Hanson has an excellent survey of the state of things forty years ago, before the Nag Hammadi finds made their impact on scholarly certainties. Clement's secret tradition had been dismissed as an 'ecclesiastical Christianity, mystically coloured.' Scholars made no secret of their 'entire disbelief in the authenticity of this secret tradition' and denied any authority to Clement's

¹⁷ I worked out this theme in more detail several years after this article was published; in my book *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* Edinburgh 2000, pp. 109-13, where the letter to the church at Laodicea Rev.3.14-22 depicts the heavenly LORD as Wisdom returning to dwell with those who open the door.

conception of a secret tradition. Hanson himself regarded Clement's claim as 'entirely untrustworthy' on various grounds: first, it consisted of theological speculations with a 'suspiciously Alexandrine ring to them'; second, Clement seems to have been following in the footsteps of Philo; and third, he had been influenced by the allegorical exegesis found in the Letter of Barnabas¹⁹ to such a degree that that 'he persuaded himself that this supposed secret teaching of Barnabas had been maintained independently of the New Testament up to his own day' These three reasons are a good illustration of how an issue can be decided by the premises one brings to the argument. Hanson concluded: 'Clement's teaching did, as far as we can reconstruct it, consist of speculations, intuitions and inspired (or not so inspired) theologising, which had no connection with any oral teaching given by our LORD or his apostles'.²⁰

Much of Clement's secret tradition was widely known among the earliest Christian writers. Or, to put it another way, there appeared very early in Christian writings, references to beliefs that are nowhere recorded in the New Testament and yet clearly originated in the tradition we call apocalyptic. *As more is discovered about this tradition, so more and more points of contact can be found between the beliefs of the ancient temple theology and what became Christianity*²¹. The secret tradition of the priests probably became the secret tradition of early Christianity; the visions and angel lore suggest this, as does the prohibition in Deuteronomy 29.29. What had the secret things been that were contrasted with the Law? What had been meant by saying that the Law was neither too hard nor too distant? The comparison suggests that there had been something both hard and distant which had been brought from heaven by

¹⁸ G.H.Dix 'The Influence of Babylonian Ideas on Jewish Messianism' JTS 26 (1925) pp.241-256

¹⁹ By tradition a Levite, Acts 4.36, and so with temple roots

²⁰ R.P.C.Hanson *Origen's Doctrine of Tradition* London 1954 pp 67-69, 71

someone who had ascended (Deut.30.11-12). This suggests that a secret tradition had been banned by the Deuteronomists who were the temple reformers at the end of the seventh century BCE, and we do not have to look far to discover what this tradition must have been. They offered their Law as a substitute for Wisdom (Deut .4.6 c.f.Gen.3.5, the Wisdom that made humans like gods). They also said that the LORD was not visible in human form (Deut 4.12), even though a contemporary priest Ezekiel had had a vision of a human figure on the throne (Ezek.1.26-28), and Isaiah had seen the LORD (Isa.6.5) and someone, of sufficient repute to have his words included in Scripture, had described the vision of God on Sinai (Exod.24.10).

On whose authority did Christianity suddenly adopt all these apparently strange views? Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, writing at the beginning of the second century, described the Incarnation as the advent of a great star before whom all magic and evil crumbled away (Ignatius Ephesians 19). He claimed to know ‘celestial, secrets and angelic hierarchies and the dispositions of the heavenly powers and much else both seen and unseen’. (Trallians 5). How did he know this and from whom? He was, after all, the bishop who constantly emphasised the need for churches to act only in accord with their bishops and to shun ‘the teachings and time worn fables of another people’ (Magnesians 8). ‘To Jesus alone as our high priest’, he wrote, ‘were the secret things of God committed’ (Philadelphians 9). Why was it to Jesus as the high priest that these things had been committed? *Presumably because it was a temple tradition.* The anonymous *Letter to Diognetus* knew that the way to life was through knowledge, and that Adam and Eve were condemned not for having knowledge, but for misusing it. ‘Without knowledge there can be no life, and without life there can be no trustworthy knowledge’ (Diognetus 12). Irenaeus, at the end of the second century, wrote his

²¹ See my books *The Gate of Heaven* (1991) op.cit.n.10 and *The Great Angel* (1992)

Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching. He described it as a manual of essential teaching (Dem.1), since he was conscious of the threat of heresy and the need ‘to hold the rule of faith without deviation’ (Dem.3). The first major topic on his list of essentials was a description of the seven heavens, the powers and the archangels in them, the relationship of the cherubim and seraphim to the Word and Wisdom of God, and the role of the sevenfold Spirit. He knew that the symbolism of the temple had enshrined this teaching in the seven branched lamp which had represented the seven heavens. *This material based on temple symbolism was, for Irenaeus, the first essential of the apostolic preaching*, but where is it found in the New Testament? There are allusions to such things in the epistles and in the Book of Revelation, but nowhere are they spelled out. It may be significant that rabbinic writings are curiously reticent about temple symbolism.²²

Temple symbolism, the great high priest and a secret tradition were especially associated with liturgical customs, for which there was no obvious authority in the New Testament. Writing in the first half of the third century, and therefore long before developments in the time of Constantine had put great emphasis on temple tradition, Origen compared certain Christian practices - praying towards the east, baptismal, rites and the certain customs in the Eucharist - to secrets of the temple ‘within the veil’²³ which had been guarded by the priests. Explaining the role of the family of Kohath, who carried the tabernacle through the desert (Num.4), Origen emphasised that they were not permitted to see what they were carrying. The high priest Aaron and his sons had to wrap all the sacred furnishings of the tabernacle and thus veil them before entrusting them to others. The mysteries of the Church were similar: ‘handed

op.cit.n.4.

²² E.R.Goodenough *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* vol.4 New York 1953, p.88; also my book *The Older Testament* London 1987 p 221.

²³ Num.18.7 and LXX Num.3.10

down and entrusted to us by the high priest and his sons'.²⁴ Origen does not name the high priest, and so we assume it was Jesus, but it is possible that there had been a continuity with the temple priesthood. Many priests had joined the young Church (Acts 6.7). Origen's theme of the temple secrets becoming those of the Church was taken up by Basil of Caesarea in his *Treatise On the Holy Spirit*. There were, he said, certain practices 'handed own to us in a mystery (*en mysterio*) from the tradition of the apostles.' He mentions first signing with a cross, facing east to pray, and the words of *epiklesis*²⁵. The tradition 'kept in silence and in secret' concerned 'liturgical customs, prayers and rites of the sacraments and other Christian universal customs... (and) the theological doctrines implied in the liturgical rites and prayers...'²⁶

If the secret tradition did concern the practice and meaning of the sacraments, and if this tradition was rooted in the symbolism of the temple and the teachings of the ancient priesthood, its recovery is of more than simply academic interest. It has been all too easy for *sola scriptura* scholars to dismiss such a claim, and then find themselves constructing theological positions which are not even biblical, because they have ignored the envioning traditions which could have illuminated the meaning of the biblical texts. An extreme example would be R.P.C Hanson's assessment of Basil: 'Behind this unfortunate and totally unjustifiable claim for a genuine apostolic origin for liturgical and customary practice of the contemporary Church, lies an uncertainty about how to use biblical material.'(!).²⁷

²⁴ *On Numbers* Homily 5

²⁵ *On the Holy Spirit* 66

²⁶ E.Amand de Mendieta *The Unwritten and Secret Apostolic Traditions in the Theological Thought of St Basil, of Caesarea* SJT Occasional Papers 13 1965, p.41

²⁷ R.P.C.Hanson *Tradition in the Early Church* London 1962 p.184.

Origen knew a great deal about secret tradition, but for him it was not, apparently, an oral tradition. He claimed that Bible, both Old Testament and New Testament, was the source of the *aporreta*, the forbidden, secret or ineffable teaching. There can be little doubt that what he described in this way was the tradition which, in another context and at another period, we should have called apocalyptic, so much of which has a temple setting and concerns the secrets of the holy of holies, ‘revealed’ to the seer. ‘Origen has discerned quite clearly’ wrote Daniélou, which elements in the Old and New Testaments are apocalyptic in character; and their very presence authorises him as he sees it, to conclude that Scripture itself contains teachings reserved for the select few.²⁸ The prophets and the apostles had been enlightened through the Word to understand the unspeakable mysteries: ‘And in the first place we must point out that the aim of the Spirit... was pre-eminently concerned with the unspeakable mysteries concerned with the affairs of men...’ (First Principles 4.2.7). These dealt with Trinity, the Incarnation, and the origin of evil; and Scripture concealed this teaching ‘in words forming a narrative that contained a record dealing with the visible creation.’ (First Principles 4.2.8). To seek such hidden meanings in historical narrative would have been the next logical step from the position of the apocalyptists who saw in everything the correspondence of earth and heaven; if in temple symbolism, why not in historical events also?

Origen’s use of *I Enoch*, (a deposit of priestly material), whether by quotation or allusion, is a clear testimony to knowledge of this tradition (First Principles 1.3.3; 4.4.8; Homily on Numbers 28.2) , although he recognised that it was not regarded as Scripture (Celsus 5.54; Homily on Numbers 28.2). He was emphatic that mysteries of the apocalypses concerning the heavenly gates for the soul were rooted in Scripture, and owed nothing to influences from Persia and the Mithras cult as Celsus had maintained. ‘Let him peruse’, he wrote, ‘at the end

²⁸ Daniélou op.cit.n 3 p 488

of Ezekiel's prophecies, the vision beheld by the prophet, in which gates of different kinds are enumerated... and let him peruse also from the Apocalypse of John, what is related of the city of God and its foundations and its gates' (Celsus 6.23). The extent of his understanding of the apocalyptic tradition can be seen in his speculations about the angelic state. Whilst discussing the Sadducees' question in Matthew 22.23, he wonders whether some people can become angels before the general resurrection. This was the belief of the apocalyptists.

Origen saw the secret teaching of Jesus as part of this apocalyptic tradition rooted in the Old Testament.

Our prophets did know of greater things than any in the Scriptures, which they did not commit to writing. Ezekiel, for example, received a roll written within and without... but at the command of the Logos he swallowed the book in order that its contents might not be written and so made known to unworthy persons. John also is recorded to have seen and done a similar thing (Rev.10.9). Nay Paul even heard 'unspeakable words which it is not lawful for a man to utter'. And it is related of Jesus who was greater than all these, that he conversed with his disciples in private, and especially in their secret retreats, concerning the gospel of God; but the words which he uttered have not been preserved because it appeared to the evangelists that they could not be adequately conveyed to the multitude in writing or speech (Celsus 6.6).

Jesus ' who both beheld these weighty secrets and made them known to a few' (Celsus 3.37), had had knowledge of angels and demons. This emphasis on Jesus having had a secret teaching which he passed on to only a few of his disciples appears time and again in Origen's writings. In the *Preface to First Principles* we read: 'The following fact should be understood. The holy apostles, when preaching the faith of Christ, took certain doctrines,

namely those which they believed to be necessary ones, and delivered them in the plainest terms to all believers, even to such as appeared to be somewhat dull in the investigation of divine knowledge... there were other doctrines, however, about which the apostles simply said that things were so, keeping silence as to how or why....' (Preface 3)

Origen wrote of 'the doctrines which were spoken in private by Jesus to his genuine disciples' (Celsus 3.60), and said something similar of John the Baptist who had given his special teaching on prayer to his close disciples only, and not to everyone he baptised (On Prayer 2.5). Paul also knew secret things. Discussing his teaching about the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, Origen wrote: 'The apostle wished to conceal the secret meaning of the passage which was not adapted to the simpler class of believers... then, knowing that there was secret and mystical meaning in the passage... he subjoins the following, 'Behold I show you a mystery'; which is his usual style in introducing matters of a profound and more mystical nature and such as are fittingly concealed from the multitude...'(Celsus 5.18).

Most significant of all, Origen says that Jesus gave the secret teaching to his disciples after the resurrection. Explaining 'I have yet many things to say to you but you cannot bear them now', (John 16.12), he says that Jesus found it impossible to take his disciples beyond the surface meaning of the Jewish law and 'postponed such a task to a future season, to that namely which followed his passion and resurrection' (Celsus 2.2). Thus Peter was enabled by the Spirit of truth to see beyond the Jewish food laws when he had his vision at Joppa (Acts 10.9-16). 'And so, after that vision, the Spirit of truth which conducted Peter into all truth, told him many things which he was unable to bear when Jesus was still with him in the flesh' (Celsus 2.2).

There are hints of this in the gospels, for example after the Transfiguration: ‘They kept silence and told no one in those days of what they had seen’ (Luke 9.36). But had the transfiguration originally been a resurrection appearance? Was something revealed to the inner circle of the disciples after the ‘exaltation’ of Jesus? The Fourth Gospel emphasises the exaltation of Jesus and links it firmly to the crucifixion (John 3.14; 8.28; 12.32-4), but the earlier tradition of exaltation had been a mystical ascent such as that of Moses when he was made ‘God and King’ (Philo, Moses 1.155-158). The similar tradition in 1 Enoch, where he is transformed by the heavenly vision, and then declared to be Son of Man cannot be dated (or even read) with any certainty, but it is closer to the priestly style of writings than is Philo (1 En.71.14)²⁹. The pattern in the much later 3 Enoch is quite clear; Enoch had been exalted and transformed into the Lesser *yhwh*. The older tradition of exaltation must have originated in temple theology where the one who was raised up saw the throne in heaven and became *yhwh* the Son of God Most High³⁰. With his divinity came the gift of Wisdom. There is an echo of this in Philippians 2.9, where Jesus is exalted and given the great Name i.e.*yhwh*. Romans 1.4 is similar: Jesus is designated Son of God after the resurrection. It would appear that the transformation into a son of God by means of the mystical ascent and enlightenment became associated in Christian thought with the exaltation after the crucifixion. Presumably there had been a similar tradition of enlightenment in the post-resurrection period.

It is possible, however, that the exaltation and enlightenment had been part of Jesus’ own experience as a mystic, and not simply the church’s post Easter interpretation of the crucifixion. There are many examples which point to this, especially in the Fourth Gospel: being born from above, entering and seeing the Kingdom of God (John 3.3, 5), the descent of

²⁹ If that is what the verse means, but in the overall pattern of priestly tradition, a transformation experience seems likely.

³⁰ See my book *The Great Angel* op.cit.n.4

the Son of Man (John 3.13), the one who comes from above and tells what he has seen (John 3.31-2), the claim that Jesus was not of this world (John 8.23). We have no proof that the Johannine Jesus was not drawn from life. 'For John', wrote Morton Smith, 'Jesus is the incarnation of the pre-existent Logos. But this does not prevent John from preserving and reworking material that has come to him from an earlier and more historical tradition, and to such material we owe the recollection that Jesus in his lifetime claimed to have gone up to heaven and to speak of it from first hand knowledge'³¹. Similarly, the synoptic gospels describe a Jesus who saw the heavens open (Mark 1.10), who spoke with Satan and saw all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and was taken (how?) to a pinnacle of the temple (Luke 4.1-13), who saw Satan fall from heaven (when, where ? Luke 10.18).

Origen distinguished between the hidden and the ineffable knowledge. Of some matters he could say: 'these are hidden'; but of others he said: 'If anyone is worthy to know the ineffable things he will learn the Wisdom hidden in the mystery which God established before the ages (Commentary on Matthew 7.2). This Wisdom concerned the heavenly powers of which Paul wrote in Colossians. According to Origen: 'The Jews used to tell of many things in accordance with secret traditions reserved to a few, for they had other knowledge than that which was common and made public' (Commentary on John 19.92). Daniélou concluded that Origen's ineffable mysteries were a continuation of the Jewish mysteries and dealt with the same matters. He suggested that some of this knowledge might have been the names of the angels which were part of the secret teachings of the Essenes.³²

A clear and significant pattern emerges from even so brief a survey as this. Origen and Clement both believed that Jesus had given secret teachings to certain disciples both when he

³¹ Smith op.cit.n.5 p. 247

withdrew with them from his public ministry, and also after the resurrection. Hints in the gospels suggest that Jesus himself had had mystical experiences associated with the secret knowledge. This teaching dealt with heavenly mysteries and was the tradition of the apocalyptists. There are, of course, hints of this in the synoptic apocalypses, but had that been the full extent of the teaching, there would have been nothing to call hidden. We are reduced to the dangerous business of speculation, as to what that teaching might have been, and what happened to it.

³² Daniélou op.cit.n.3. p.493 Josephus *War* 2.8.7