

**Margaret Barker**

## **The Secret Tradition**

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 [author's note].<sup>1</sup>

'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 time<sup>2</sup>. The *Apocalypse of Abraham*, for example, is an expansion of Genesis 15, but

---

<sup>1</sup> [publication data now given above.— ed.]

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 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 guise<sup>3</sup>, 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*<sup>4</sup>.

### **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

---

<sup>2</sup> 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).

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> See my book *The Great Angel* London 1992.

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 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.'<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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 thought<sup>7</sup>, 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.'<sup>8</sup> 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 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

---

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

<sup>6</sup> M.Hengel *Son of God* London 1976 p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Daniélou *op. cit.* n. 3 p. 447.

<sup>8</sup> Daniélou 'Les traditions Secretes des Apotres' *Eranos Jahrbuch* 31 (1962) p. 203.

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 Wisdom<sup>9</sup>; 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 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

---

<sup>9</sup> See my book *The Great Angel op. cit.* n. 4.

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). *Apokaluphtheisa* 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 apocalyptists' visions<sup>10</sup>. 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 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 lael (*yhwh-EL*). Having been granted a vision of the throne, the patriarch is told to look down and see the

---

<sup>10</sup> See my book *The Gate of Heaven* London 1991 pp. 150-177.

whole plan of history - past present and future - unfolding beneath him (*Ap. Abr.* cc. 21-32). 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; cf. *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.<sup>11</sup>

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

---

<sup>11</sup> W.A. Meeks 'Moses as God and King' in *Religions in Antiquity. Essays in Memory of E.R. Goodenough* ed. J. Neusner Leiden 1970.

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'<sup>12</sup>, is unnecessary and opens up a false gap between this gnosis and anything known to have been associated with Jesus, who had himself said: 'Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God' (Mat. 5.8). Seeking the face/presence<sup>13</sup> 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 beyond<sup>14</sup>. 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.

---

<sup>12</sup> Daniélou *op. cit.* n. 3 pp. 451,453.

<sup>13</sup> Hebrew *panim* can be translated either face or presence.

<sup>14</sup> See my book *The Gate of Heaven op. cit.* n. 10, pp. 150-177.

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.

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 *1 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 High<sup>15</sup>. It may well be that those elements of his gnosis, which we still cannot place with 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

---

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



*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 texts<sup>16</sup>.

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 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 writings<sup>17</sup>. 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.<sup>18</sup> 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

---

<sup>16</sup> W. Schneemelcher *New Testament Apocrypha*, Cambridge 1991, p. 173.

<sup>17</sup> 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.

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

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 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 Barnabas<sup>19</sup> 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'.<sup>20</sup>

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*<sup>21</sup>. 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 someone who had ascended (Deut. 30.11-12). This suggests that a secret tradition had been banned

---

<sup>19</sup> By tradition a Levite, Acts 4.36, and so with temple roots.

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

<sup>21</sup> See my books *The Gate of Heaven* (1991) *op. cit.* n. 10 and *The Great Angel* (1992) *op. cit.* n. 4.

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 cf. 1 En. 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 *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.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> 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.

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'<sup>23</sup> 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 down and entrusted to us by the high priest and his sons'.<sup>24</sup> 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*<sup>25</sup>. 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...'<sup>26</sup>

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

---

<sup>23</sup> Num. 18.7 and LXX Num. 3.10.

<sup>24</sup> *On Numbers* Homily 5.

<sup>25</sup> *On the Holy Spirit* 66.

<sup>26</sup> 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.

customary practice of the contemporary Church, lies an uncertainty about how to use biblical material.'(!).<sup>27</sup>

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.<sup>28</sup> 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 *1 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 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.

---

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

<sup>28</sup> Daniélou *op. cit.* n 3 p 488.

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)<sup>29</sup>. 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 High<sup>30</sup>. 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 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

---

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

<sup>30</sup> See my book *The Great Angel op. cit.* n. 4.

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'<sup>31</sup>. 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.<sup>32</sup>

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 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.

### **The Post-Resurrection Teaching**

The second characteristic of the secret tradition which Clement describes and Eusebius quotes (*History 2.1*), is that it was passed to the disciples after the resurrection. Many early Christian texts have the form of a revelation given by the risen Jesus to certain disciples, and the sheer number of them must raise questions: why was this particular

---

<sup>31</sup> Smith *op. cit.* n. 5 p. 247.

<sup>32</sup> Daniélou *op. cit.* n. 3. p. 493 Josephus *War 2.8.7*.



form adopted, and how did it relate to the secret tradition? Most of the texts have been labelled (one might almost say dismissed) as gnostic, and it is obvious why this form of revelation discourse would have appealed to gnostic writers. On the other hand, they must have had good reason for presenting their characteristic teachings as a post-resurrection discourse, rather than, for example, as a variant of the Sermon on the Mount. As Daniélou observed, the fact that the heretics wrote in this way indicated that they were imitating a recognised Christian form.<sup>33</sup> The form was very different from anything in the synoptic gospels although it had some affinities with the Fourth Gospel. The content, though, was not entirely alien as even the synoptic gospels record that the secrets of the kingdom had been revealed to only a few during the Galilean ministry (Mark 4.11 and parallels). *Might it be, then, that post-resurrection did not necessarily mean post-Easter? Might it mean the teaching given by Jesus after he had been raised up as the Great High Priest?*

The experience of 'death' is common to many mystery traditions, the condition of transition to another mode of being. 'The true knowledge' wrote Eliade, 'that which is conveyed by the myths and symbols, is accessible only in the course of, or following upon, the process of spiritual regeneration realised by initiatory death and resurrection... If one knows death already here below... then one is living, we may say, a beginning of immortality or growing more and more into immortality.'<sup>34</sup>

His material was drawn from the mystery and shamanic traditions of many cultures. Chernus, however, has shown that a similar pattern can be detected in third century CE Jewish midrashim: 'the direct vision of God, conceived in an esoteric context, the fire phenomenon related to revelation, the need to accept death as a means for special access to the knowledge of the Torah, and the dew as the agent of the resurrection.'<sup>35</sup> The tradition by this period was associated with the revelation at Sinai<sup>36</sup> (just as Moses experienced apotheosis on Sinai), but Merkavah texts also warn of the danger of anyone attempting to experience the vision of the throne. Of the four rabbis (Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Aher and Akiba) who attempted to enter the garden (i.e.Paradise), only Akiba entered in peace and came out in peace (b.Hagigah 14b). Those who successfully experienced the vision were transformed by it and began a new existence as an angelic

---

<sup>33</sup> Daniélou *op. cit.* n. 8. p. 203.

<sup>34</sup> M. Eliade *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* London 1960 229.231.

<sup>35</sup> I. Chernus *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism* Berlin and New York 1982 p.38

<sup>36</sup> Just as Moses experienced apotheosis on Sinai, according to Philo (*Moses* 1.157), even though this had originally been an experience of the royal cult in the holy of holies.

being. There is the cryptic account in 1 Enoch 71 which cannot be dated, but a very early account of this experience is embedded in Isaiah 33:

Who among us can dwell with the consuming fire  
Who can dwell with the burnings of eternity?...  
Your eyes will see the king in his beauty,  
They will see a land that stretches far. Isa.3.14,17.

It is possible that this is what was meant by the post-resurrection experience of Jesus. I shall return to this.

The usual picture of Jesus is very different, drawn from an amalgam of the synoptic gospels. Few of us were raised on the revelation discourses of the Fourth Gospel and, as a result, these discourses are perceived as something of a problem. Those who have wanted to abandon the traditional picture of Jesus the Galilean miracle worker have usually opted for something more ordinary: the carpenter from Nazareth who was a good itinerant preacher although perhaps somewhat misguided at times, or the cynic sage whose reputation was much enhanced by Jewish marketing men. His over-enthusiastic followers saw in him far more than he had ever intended, we have been told, and attributed to him all sorts of miraculous acts including rising from the dead. To abandon the synoptic Jesus for someone even stranger, on the other hand, is something not to be undertaken lightly, and yet this is now the possibility being offered as a result of studying early texts which deal with the person and teaching of Jesus.

Recent scholarship has suggested that the synoptic gospels' pictures of Jesus, far from being accurate, are in themselves specially constructed to present a certain point of view, and that their hold over our minds, their 'tyranny', has prevented unbiased access to extra-canonical sources. In other words, when the synoptic evangelists selected material for their portraits of Jesus, each evangelist chose, so far as can be determined, from among undifferentiated traditions about Jesus in the context of a given confession i.e. in accord with a given cover story of faith; that is to say, in accordance with the given community image of Jesus.<sup>37</sup>

The last fifty years or so have seen a great increase in the amount of ancient Christian material from which to reconstruct the original 'picture' of Jesus. Papyrus Egerton 2<sup>38</sup>, (a fragment of otherwise unknown material about Jesus), the *Gospel of Thomas*, the

---

<sup>37</sup> C.W. Hendrick 'The Tyranny of the Synoptic Jesus' in *Semeia* 44 (1988) p.2.

<sup>38</sup> *Fragments of an Unknown Gospel* ed. H.I. Bell and T.C. Skeat British Museum 1935.

*Apocryphon of James* and the *Dialogue of the Saviour*<sup>39</sup> are all thought to derived from early Christian oral tradition, just as did the synoptic gospels, but the picture the non-canonical texts give is very different, making Jesus more akin to a Merkavah mystic than to a simple teacher.

What, then should be the criteria for reconstructing the original Jesus? Hedrick, for example, suggested that the lack of an apocalyptic Son of Man Christology in the *Gospel of Thomas* casts doubt on the value of that aspect of the synoptic picture. If the *Gospel of Thomas* is authentic, then 'apocalyptic' should not be the primary context from understanding the original Jesus. And if this is correct, then the 'secret' teaching, which so strongly resembles that of the apocalypses, can easily be shown to be a later addition. A line of reasoning is thus established and then substantiated by a complementary tendency to present Jesus more as a wise man than as an apocalyptic prophet.

It is all a matter of definition. Can we, for example, any longer regard 'wisdom' and 'apocalyptic' as separate categories and thus replace the apocalyptic prophet with the wise man?<sup>40</sup> Is it wise to take one feature of the synoptic gospels such as a Son of Man Christology and say because this is absent from e.g. the *Gospel of Thomas*, there are grounds for doubting the importance of the apocalyptic world view for understanding Jesus? The world view, which, for the sake of giving it a name, we call 'the apocalyptic world view' was not confined to unrepresentative or sectarian groups in Palestine. It was the way a large number of people viewed the world. *Apocalyptic was the world view of the Jerusalem temple cult and of all who had any association with it*; it will have been the norm for most of the heirs to Israel's ancient religion: Jews, Samaritans, Gnostics or whatever. Even the most cursory reading of the *Gospel of Thomas* shows that it originated in an apocalyptic milieu, despite there being no Son of Man Christology. It claimed to be 'secret sayings' whose correct interpretation would lead to triumph over death. The disciples were told 'Nothing which is hidden will not become manifest' (Thomas 5); 'Nothing covered will remain without being uncovered' (Thomas 6); 'Jesus said "I have come to cast upon the earth fire, sword and war"' (Thomas 16); 'When you make the above like the below then you will enter [the kingdom]' (Thomas 22); 'When will the new world come? What you look forward to has already come but you do not recognise it' (Thomas 51); 'Jesus said "When you make the two one you will become the sons of men"' (Thomas 106); 'The Kingdom of the Father is spread upon the earth and

---

<sup>39</sup> These three texts can be found in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* ed. J.M. Robinson Leiden 1996.

<sup>40</sup> My book *The Older Testament* London 1987 argues that we cannot.

men do not see it' (Thomas 113). One can only say that this is not 'apocalyptic' if one has not realised the temple matrix of 'apocalyptic' with all that this implies in terms of theology and world view.

There are similar questions about the meaning of 'gnostic' and how gnosis relates to Thomas and the whole revelation genre. J.M. Robinson states that the definition of gnosis adopted by the Messina Colloquium has added to the problem in that the definitions were based on the gnosticism known from second century sects<sup>41</sup>. What, he asked, of those of the first century? He attempted to work 'not back from second century gnosticism, where one is sure to be talking about gnosticism, but rather forward from Jesus' immediate followers (for whom the same cannot surely be said), in search of a hypothetical sociological roadbed for a trajectory from Jesus to Gnosticism.' Rigid definitions hindered rather than helped. He quoted H-M Schenke: 'I am of the opinion that clarity of concepts can, under certain conditions, also obscure the issue at stake...'<sup>42</sup> The proposed definition of gnosticism was a retrograde step insofar as it retained the implication that gnosticism was a Christian heresy. Any text such as the Gospel of Thomas was automatically marginalised in any reconstruction of Christian origins.

The problem of early Christian post-resurrection revelation discourses is thus beset with presuppositions: there is the 'tyranny' of the synoptic Jesus; there is the persistent belief (hope?) that gnosticism was a heresy; and there is the false distinction between Wisdom and Apocalyptic and an unsatisfactory definition of both. Without these presuppositions the whole picture alters; the *Gospel of Thomas* may embody an ancient tradition quite independent of the synoptic gospels; what was later recognised and defined as gnosticism may have been present in the earliest Christian teaching because it originated in pre-exilic traditions of Israel in the temple cult<sup>43</sup>. In other words, 'Gnostic' ideas could have been part of the teaching of Jesus, his 'wisdom' could have been one aspect of temple traditions. Such a sweeping away of certainties brings us face to face with the most difficult question of all: might Jesus have seen himself as the revealer of heavenly secrets to the chosen few? The Jesus of the post resurrection revelations is so different from the synoptic Jesus that we feel it must be a distortion by heretics who had their own ulterior motives. But, as Hedrick observed, had history left us only Q, John and

---

<sup>41</sup> J.M. Robinson 'On Bridging the Gulf from Q to the Gospel of Thomas (or vice versa)' in *Nag Hammadi, Gnosticism and Early Christianity* ed. C.W. Hedrick and R. Hodgson Cambridge MA 1986 pp 127-175.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid p.133.

<sup>43</sup> See my book *The Great Angel op. cit.* n. 4.

Thomas, our picture of Jesus would have been very different<sup>44</sup>. If we take the Jesus material as a whole, together with the Palestinian culture in which it was rooted, the visionary tradition of these post resurrection texts assumes a greater importance, not least because the goals of the visionaries was the heavenly throne which transformed the beholder into an angel, a son of God.

Who distorted the tradition? Recent work on the transmission of the New Testament has shown convincingly that what is currently regarded as 'orthodoxy' was constructed and imposed on the text of the New Testament by later scribes 'clarifying' difficult points and resolving theological problems.<sup>45</sup> Some of the difficulties removed by their efforts were texts which supported a Gnostic point of view, or suggested an adoptionist Christology. *Both 'Gnostic' and 'Adoptionist' ideas (or an earlier form of them) would have been part of the temple theology and therefore of any 'secret' tradition derived from it.* It may be that those traditions which have been so confidently marginalised as alien to early Christianity, on the basis of the present New Testament text, were those very traditions which later authorities and scribes had set out to remove.

Eight early texts which show Jesus as the revealer of hidden things passed on to an inner circle, are grouped together in Schneemelcher's revised edition of Hennecke's *New Testament Apocrypha*<sup>46</sup> under the heading 'Dialogues of the Redeemer'. It is not easy to date any of them, but the *Apocryphon of James*, the *Dialogue of the Saviour* and the *Epistle of the Apostles* are thought to be the earliest. The *Apocryphon of James* is usually dated in the early or middle second century, and it is in the form of a letter sent by James the Righteous to someone whose name cannot be deciphered, but who has enquired about the secret teaching. 'You asked me to send you the secret teaching which was revealed to me and Peter by the LORD... Be careful and take heed not to rehearse to many this writing which the Saviour did not wish to divulge even to all of us, his twelve disciples...' The letter goes on to describe the occasion on which the secret teaching was given. The disciples were all together, 'recalling what the Saviour had said to each of them whether in secret or openly... and lo the Saviour appeared... 550 days<sup>47</sup> after his resurrection from the dead.' Peter and James were then drawn aside for special instruction. When the teaching had finished, the LORD ascended, saying: 'For a chariot of spirit has borne me aloft. And now I begin to strip myself that I may clothe myself...'

---

<sup>44</sup> *Op. cit.* n. 37 p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> See B. Ehrmann *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* Oxford 1993.

<sup>46</sup> *Op. cit.* n. 16.

<sup>47</sup> This is approximately the traditional length for the pre-Easter ministry.

Peter and James ascended after Jesus. In the first place they saw and heard wars and trumpets; passing further up, they saw and heard the angelic hosts but they were not permitted to ascend further into the presence of the majesty. Then the other disciples summoned them back to earth and learned that what they had seen of the exalted Christ.

Irrespective of the pedigree of the teaching itself, there are several details of interest here. The epistolary form is reminiscent of the beginning of the Book of Revelation, where the risen LORD sends letters to the seven churches of Asia (Rev. **cc.2-3**); the ascent of Peter and James is reminiscent of the ascent of John (Rev. 4.1-2) and the ascent of Paul (1 Cor.12.1-4); and Jesus being carried up in the chariot of the spirit resembles the opening line of one of the *Odes of Solomon*: 'I went up into the light of truth as into a chariot... (Ode 38). We may conclude, then that the components of the genre which carried the secret teaching were well attested elsewhere in known Christian texts; there must have been disciples who practised the apocalyptists' ascent and, like them, recounted what they had seen. It is unlikely that prominent figures such as John and Paul are recorded in the New Testament as having experienced the ascent if it was totally alien to the teaching of Jesus and the tradition of the churches. If Jesus himself had practised such ascents, what happened to the record of his visionary experiences? If we compare what is recorded in later sources about first century Jewish mystics, that they had an inner group of close disciples but a wider circle of followers, we should expect that the key teachings were revealed only to a favoured group. There are anachronisms in the accounts, such as sages named who lived after the destruction of the temple, but there must have been some foundation for the story that Rabbi Nehunya ben Ha-Qanah used to sit expounding all the matter of the Merkavah, the descent and the ascent, how one descends unto and how one ascends from (the Merkavah).<sup>48</sup> This is how the Christian tradition remembers Jesus: with an inner group and then a wider circle of followers. If we take into account all the early texts, then Jesus too taught about the heavenly ascent, but only to his inner circle.

Another early revelation discourse is the *Dialogue of the Saviour* which may date from the second century or even earlier. Unlike the *Apocryphon of James* it has no framework narrative, but seems to be a collection of sayings, similar to the *Gospel of Thomas* or the much debated and elusive Q, which has been expanded by questions from the disciples and answers from the LORD. The LORD lays his hands on Judas, Matthew and Mary, and they (or perhaps only Judas, it is not clear) have a vision of a high place and of 'the

---

<sup>48</sup> I. Gruennwald *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* Leiden 1980 p. 162.

abyss below'. Much of the revelation concerns the spiritual garments, 'the garments in which we shall be clothed [when] we leave the corruption on the [flesh] (Dialogue 143).

The *Epistle of the Apostles* is also thought to be a mid-second century composition, and its significance lies chiefly in the fact that it has the form of a special revelation of the risen LORD but is not in any sense a Gnostic text. It has been suggested that this was 'orthodox' Christianity taking over and using a typical Gnostic form, 'an attempt to combat Gnostic opponents with their own weapons'<sup>49</sup>. It will be recalled that Daniélou made an exactly opposite suggestion, namely that the Gnostics chose the revelation discourse form in order to give an air of authenticity to their own compositions<sup>50</sup>. After a conventional account of the life of Jesus, there follows a post-resurrection revelation which forms the bulk of the text. 'But we touched him that we might truly know whether he had risen in the flesh, and we fell on our faces confessing our sin that we had been unbelieving. Then the LORD our Redeemer said: 'Rise up and I will reveal to you what is above the heaven and your rest that is in the kingdom of heaven. For my Father has given me the power to take up you and those who believe in me' (*Ep. Apost.* 12)

Although there is no Gnostic terminology as such, the text deals with very similar ideas. We could almost be reading an account of the Gnostic system transferred into a 'conventional' Christian or Jewish setting. The opposite is more likely, namely that the *Epistle of the Apostles* gives the early 'orthodox' version of what is more extensively recorded elsewhere in gnostic guise. The LORD gives details of his descent as Gabriel: 'On that day when I took the form of the angel Gabriel, I appeared to Mary and spoke with her. Her heart received me and she believed; I formed myself and entered into her womb; I became flesh ' (*Ep. Apost.* 14). The description is reminiscent of Isaiah's vision in the *Ascension of Isaiah* 10, and is clearly a part of the earliest tradition, but not obviously present in the New Testament. The LORD reveals the time and the manner of his second coming and shows how prophecies have been fulfilled. These were his own earlier prophecies, since he had spoken through the ancient prophets. The fulfilment of the his earlier prophecies is the guarantee of his present sayings. 'All that I said by the prophets was thus performed and has taken place and is completed in me, for I spoke in (or by) them. How much more will what I myself have made known to you really happen, that he who has sent me may be glorified by you and by those who believe in me' (*Ep. Apost.* 19).

---

<sup>49</sup> *Op. cit.* n. 16 p. 229 quoting Vielhauer.

<sup>50</sup> See n 8 above.

He predicts the natural and supernatural phenomena which will precede the judgement: hailstones, plagues and stars falling from heaven. As in the synoptic apocalypses and the Book of Revelation, the time of the disaster is also the time of suffering for the faithful, suffering which, true to the apocalyptic tradition, is explained as a test of faith: 'If they suffer torment, such suffering will be a test for them whether they have faith and whether they keep in mind these words of mine and obey my commandment (*Ep. Apost.* 36). The Ethiopic text at one point seems to associate the heavenly revelation with baptism: 'You have revealed to them what is in heaven... (for) by my hand they receive the baptism of life and the forgiveness of sin (*Ep. Apost.* 42). It ends with a description of the ascension: There is thunder, lightning and an earthquake, the heavens open and a cloud takes the LORD away. The voice of many angels is heard, welcoming their priest to the light of glory. *Note again that it is Jesus the priest.*

The most remarkable feature of the *Epistle of the Apostles*, apart from its sober ordinariness in comparison with other post-resurrection revelations, is its clear demonstration of the earliest Christian belief that Jesus had been the manifestation of *yhwh* as Gabriel<sup>51</sup>. He had come to Mary and taken human flesh, and he had spoken through the ancient prophets<sup>52</sup>. Whatever date may eventually be assigned to the *Epistle of the Apostles*, it is in touch with very early Palestinian Christianity and expresses this tradition in the form of a post-resurrection discourse.

Another text chosen by Schneemelcher as a 'Dialogue of the Redeemer' is the *Book of Thomas*. Dates ranging from the second to the early fourth century have been suggested for the work which is known only from a Coptic text found at Nag Hammadi. It is assumed that Coptic was not the original language, and that the book originated in East Syria, the home of the other Judas Thomas traditions. It carries, however, the same traditions as Egyptian texts, showing that these traditions, wherever they originate, were not an isolated phenomenon. Most significant for our purposes is the fact that the text seems to be composite. The framework is a revelation discourse ('the secret words which the Saviour spoke to Judas Thomas and which I, Matthew, wrote down'), but the body of the text is described as a Platonising Hellenistic Jewish Wisdom writing<sup>53</sup>. In other words, an earlier wisdom text has been taken over and passed on as the words of Jesus. This could indicate that teachings alien to anything that Jesus could have taught

---

<sup>51</sup> See my book *The Great Angel* op. cit. n. 4.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Gospel of Thomas 52: His disciples said to him: 'Twenty four prophets spoke in Israel and all of them spoke in you.'

<sup>53</sup> *Op. cit.* n. 16.p. 36.



or known were incorporated into 'heretical' texts, or it could indicate that Jesus was known to have stood in a particular tradition.

A similar process of incorporation can be seen by comparing the non-Christian *Letter of Eugnostos* and the Christianised version of the same text known as the *Wisdom of Jesus Christ*. The *Letter*, which was incorporated and presented as the words of Jesus, is based on beliefs which go back to the pre-monotheistic religion of the first temple in Jerusalem, and which, as I have argued elsewhere, formed the original basis for Christian theology<sup>54</sup>. Where those beliefs were current and who wrote them down as the *Letter* is a question for another time. What is highly significant is that material such as this in the *Letter* was attributed to Jesus. The language may be that of Hellenised Judaism but the ideas are not. It is misleading to say that the *Letter* was a 'non-Christian Gnostic tractate modified in order to express newly acquired Christian beliefs or to attract Christians to Gnostic teachings or perhaps for both reasons'.<sup>55</sup> It is in fact the expression of non-Deuteronomic/pre-Deuteronomic Hebrew ideas, evidence that they had survived the 'reform' which had promoted one particular type of monotheism.<sup>56</sup> The setting for this Christian version of the text is, again, a post resurrection revelation discourse, this time to twelve men and seven women assembled on a mountain in Galilee. The Saviour appears like a 'great angel of light' (cf. Rev. 1.12) and reveals to them the system of the heavenly powers and the relationship between the LORD of the universe and the heavenly beings known as the sons of God, those whom Philo called the 'powers' (*Wisdom of Jesus Christ* 98-100). Beneath the language of a later age there is discernible a description of the incarnation as the presence in human form of all the powers, exactly as described in Colossians: 'In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell' (Col.1.19).

There is no shortage of post-resurrection revelation discourses with their descriptions of ascent. The settings are all broadly the same, even though the disciples present vary from one text to another. Eusebius knew that many had received such revelations: 'Paul... committed nothing to writing but his very short epistles; and yet he had countless unutterable things to say, for he had reached the vision of the third heaven, had been caught up to the divine paradise itself and had been privileged to hear there unspeakable words. Similar experiences were enjoyed by the rest of the Saviour's pupils... the twelve apostles, the seventy disciples and countless others besides' (History 3.24). What has happened to all these experiences? Was Eusebius writing fiction at

---

<sup>54</sup> My book *The Older Testament* op. cit. n. 40.

<sup>55</sup> D.M. Parrott 'Eugnostos the Blessed' in op. cit. n. 34.

<sup>56</sup> This is the theme of my book *The Older Testament*.

this point, or is there a major element of early Christianity missing from our present understanding of its origins? There is certainly a great difference between how the Christians described their origins in the middle of the fourth century, and how those origins are commonly described today. This older understanding is represented by the post-resurrection texts, even though these may, in their present form, be a later version of that tradition.

The problem is to identify the original setting and function of such discourses once our ideas have been set free from the tyranny not only of the synoptic Jesus but also of the synoptic gospels. Schneemelcher's introduction to his section on non-biblical material about Jesus admits that at first sight these revelation texts seem to be 'a motley and manifold collection, the unity of which is at least questionable.'<sup>57</sup> But are they? We have again the problem of pre-suppositions; the synoptic gospel form has been treated as the norm, even though that actual form is unique to the Christian community. It may even be that Mark was the creator of this form, or it may have arisen within the early communities loosely based on contemporary fashions in biography and intended as an exoteric account of the life and teaching of Jesus. There are endless possibilities for speculation. What is certain is that 'this genre of text has no analogies in ancient literature'<sup>58</sup>, let alone in Palestine. On the other hand, a literary form known to have been used in Palestine at the time of Jesus, namely as apocalypse or revelation text, is thought to be a secondary addition to Christian tradition and an unpromising source for real information about Jesus. A simple comparison of available literary types would suggest that the revelation discourse is more likely to be the original.

In addition, there are certain characteristics of this revelation which suggest a Palestinian origin. First, the resurrection experience is described in terms of a theophany. Jesus is presented in the same way as *yhwh* had been in the Old Testament. The *Apocryphon of John* begins thus with the heavens opening, great lights and earth tremors. A divine form appears to him, first as a youth, then as an old man and then as a servant. There was, he said, 'a (likeness) with multiple forms in the light and the (forms) appeared through each other and the likeness had three forms'. This is a classic description of a theophany, a mixture of singular and plural forms, as can be seen by comparing it with Abraham's encounter with the three figures at Mamre<sup>59</sup>, (Gen. 18) or with Ezekiel's vision of many forms in the fire (Ezek. 1.4-21), or with the inexact description of John's vision of the Lamb, the Angel and the One on the throne (Rev. 5.1-

---

<sup>57</sup> *Op. cit.* n. 16 p. 77.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 80, 82.

<sup>59</sup> Josephus tells this story as the appearance of three angels, no mention of YHWH (Ant.1.11.2).

7). There were heated debates among the rabbis in the years after the advent of Christianity: How were they to explain the plurality of divine forms in theophanies? They concluded that the variety of appearances did not indicate a plurality of powers in heaven.<sup>60</sup>

Second, in the *Apocryphon of John*, the Saviour revealed the secrets concerning the origin of the world and the destiny of humanity. There is no obvious parallel to this in the synoptic gospels, but there are several parallels in the Jewish mystical and apocalyptic texts. The forbidden things were defined as 'What is above, what is below, what was beforetime and what will be hereafter' (*m. Hagigah* 2.1). Does this make it more or less likely that such ideas could have come from Jesus? The *Apocryphon of John* ends with a solemn curse on anyone who betrays or reveals the mysteries which have been revealed: 'Cursed be everyone who will exchange these things for a gift or for food or for clothing or for any other such thing. ' A similar curse appears at the end of the Gnostic *Book of Jeu*: 'These mysteries which I give you, preserve, and give them to no man except he be worthy of them... Preserve them and give them to no one whatsoever for the sake of the good of this whole world.'<sup>61</sup> These must have been intended as secret texts for a chosen circle of initiates only, and yet they apparently record revelations in the manner of an Old Testament theophany. The description of the return of Jesus at the beginning of the *Pistis Sophia* is similar. After an earthquake and great commotion in the heavens, Jesus returns in a blaze of light which dazzles the disciples. The *Letter of Peter to Philip* has a similar passage. Peter has gathered the disciples on the Mount of Olives, where they see a vision of great light and hear a voice saying: 'Hear my words that I may send you. Why do you seek after me? I am Jesus Christ who is with you forever.' In the *Wisdom of Jesus Christ*, Jesus appeared 'like a great angel of light and his likeness I must not describe'.

The origin of all these phenomena lies in the secret traditions of the priests, who had been required to guard the whatever concerned the altar and what was within the veil (Num. 18.7 also LXX Num. 3.10). Anyone other than a priest who approached them, would die. One of the secrets of the priesthood must have been experiencing theophany, something described in the ancient high priestly blessing: 'May the LORD make his face/presence shine on you, May the LORD lift up his face/presence upon you' (Num. 6.25-6)<sup>62</sup>. At the end of the second temple period, this was one of the forbidden texts,

---

<sup>60</sup> A.F. Segal *Two Powers in Heaven* Leiden 1978 pp. 33-59.

<sup>61</sup> Text in Schneemelcher *op. cit.* n. 16 p. 372.

<sup>62</sup> The familiar *Hallelu jah*, always understood to mean 'Praise the LORD', but never translated, could have had another meaning. The root *hll* also means 'shine' and it is not impossible that

which could be read in public but not explained (m.Megillah 4.10). The appearance of the LORD above the ark in the holy of holies had probably been a similar experience, as was John's experience of the risen LORD with the seven lamps (Rev. 1.12-16). The transfiguration was such an experience, when the LORD was seen by the three disciples as a radiant presence, and the experience brought them into a new state of existence<sup>63</sup>.

### **The Risen LORD**

The time has come for a new understanding of Jesus. It has been fashionable to assume that much of 'his' teaching was in fact the product of the early Christian communities, that much of the theology, specially the Christology, was the result of ingenious preachers, squeezing all they could from the Old Testament texts, and then packaging it for the tastes of their potential converts. Layers have been detected in the teachings of Jesus: the *Gospel of Thomas* has the kingdom of God sayings but no Son of Man, so it must be 'early'; the kingdom of God has receded from Q and the Son of Man as future redeemer has become the key; there are Wisdom sayings with no eschatological expectation and so forth<sup>64</sup>. Is it not more likely - and I say no more than this - that the original insights, claims, teaching and theology which became Christianity go back to a single source rather than to a series of committees? In other words, could Jesus have been the founder of Christianity after all? The various layers in the tradition could then be a reflection of the development of Jesus' own thought, his own growing awareness of his role and mission. It is commonplace to chart the development of, say, Paul's thought; the early letters are different from those he wrote later in life. Why should the same not be true of Jesus?

---

the acclamation. was calling on the LORD to appear. D. Aune *The Cultic Setting of Realised Eschatology in Early Christianity* Leiden 1972 p. 101: 'The cultic worship of the Johannine community provided a present experience of the exalted and living Jesus in terms of the recurring actualisation of his future Parousia.'

<sup>63</sup> Nikolai Motovilov had a similar experience in Russia in 1833, when visiting Fr Serafim, a saintly visionary and healer, who was said to manifest the divine radiance. 'The Fr Serafim took me firmly by the shoulders and said to me, "Both of us my friend are now within the Holy Spirit. Why do you not look at me?" I answered, "I am not able, Father, for there is a lightning flashing from your eyes. Your face has grown more radiant than the sun, and my eyes cannot bear the pain." Fr. Serafim said, "Do not be afraid, my good Theophilus, you have also now become as radiant as I. You yourself are now in the fullness of the divine Spirit or otherwise you would not be able to perceive me in the exact same state.'" See L Dupre and D.E. Saliers *Christian Spirituality* London 1990 vol.3 p. 462.

<sup>64</sup> See J.M. Robinson *op. cit.* n. 36 pp. 142ff summarising Koester's views.

It is no longer permissible to take scholarly investigation to a certain position and then allow a patina of piety to restrict access to the most vital questions. Nor is it really satisfactory to define terms and ask questions in such a way that the answer has to be: 'Christianity was all the result of a massive misunderstanding, or the ingenious marketing of usable myths, or some clever confidence trick that has deceived the human race ever since.' The answers from which there is no escape are: Jesus and the beliefs about him were established *immediately after his death* and became the faith of the Church. The question therefore must be: Where did these beliefs originate? It was recognised long ago that the so much that would have been vital to understanding Christian origins perished after the wars against Rome. Until recently, the Judaism of the time was reconstructed from texts written many generations after those events, and so there were, unacknowledged, massive anachronisms built into the 'background to the New Testament.' Something of the real situation in Palestine can now be reconstructed from the Qumran material, and it is a very different picture.

Paul's letters give a glimpse of first generation Christian beliefs, but not a complete picture. They were written to churches who had already received their first instruction, and would not have needed much further teaching about the life of Jesus. Paul dealt largely with points that needed further clarification. This makes it difficult to estimate the extent to which he was an innovator. There were disagreements in the early Church about what Paul was teaching, but these concerned the role and status of the Jewish Law, not his teaching about Jesus. There is no systematic presentation of his complete teaching about Christ the Redeemer. It is everywhere assumed yet nowhere explained or defended. At the centre of his preaching there was not the teacher from Galilee but the Redeemer from heaven. Why? Paul must have known much about Jesus' life before his conversion experience; afterwards he put a different interpretation on the same facts. Whose interpretation? It must have been that of the Christians to whose belief he was converted, the belief in the Redeemer, the belief of the Palestinian community a few years after the crucifixion. This was the belief of those who had actually known Jesus. The Jesus who was *only* a teacher from Galilee disappeared from the tradition at a very early date, so early that one wonders if it was ever really very important.<sup>65</sup> If 'Jesus, just the teacher from Galilee' is a fiction of recent New Testament scholarship, might this false norm be the real problem in understanding other early Christian writings?

The dating and classification of early Christian writings is a dangerously subjective business. J.A.T. Robinson showed just how easy it was to question the whole structure

---

<sup>65</sup> See J.G. Machen *The Origin of Paul's Religion* London 1921 pp. 117-169.

when he gave convincing arguments for a comprehensive re-dating.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, there is a tendency to classify according to the categories of a later age. What became the canonical texts are the norm, and all others, together with the ideas they represent, have a lower status. Instead of asking how such 'strange' texts came to be written, we should be asking how they came to be excluded. What tendency in the early churches wanted to marginalise and even eliminate visionary material, and how early was this tendency? One criterion for exclusion was theology, and yet critical study is showing that some early theology was deliberately eliminated from the New Testament texts.<sup>67</sup> Retrojected, this means that we may here also have accepted and used entirely false markers by which to detect primitive belief and to identify the 'original' Jesus.

The Qumran texts have given new insights into the world view of first century Palestine. The role of the priests and the temple is now seen more clearly than was formerly possible. The *Melchizedek Text* (11QMelch), for example, depicts the heavenly high priest bringing salvation to his people on the great Day of Atonement. The Letter to the Hebrews is similar and the high priest there is named as Jesus. The *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* (esp. 4Q Shir Shabb 400-409) described the worship in heaven which was the reality underlying the worship in the temple; the Letter to the Hebrews and the Book of Revelation assume a similar belief. The *Damascus Rule* speaks of the 'hidden things in which all Israel has gone astray' and of 'God in his wonderful mysteries...'. Those who hold to the truth are 'destined to live for ever' and to regain the glory of Adam (CD III). The *Damascus Rule* (CD) was a book for priests clinging to their ancient ways, whose leaders had to be learned in the *Book of HGW*, an work we no longer know (CD X,XI,XIV). Josephus records that they were sworn to repeat none of their secrets, to preserve the books of the group and the names of the angels<sup>68</sup> (War 2.8.6). The recurring, one might almost say the major theme of the Qumran Hymns is the knowledge of the divine mysteries which enables the initiates to stand in the presence of the holy ones in the council of heaven. They tell of someone raised to the everlasting height to be part of the congregation of the sons of heaven (1QH XI, XIV, XV formerly known as III,VI,VII respectively). There is someone who can say : 'Thou hast shown thine infinite power... given me knowledge through thy marvellous mysteries and shown thyself mighty within me in the midst of thy marvellous council' (1 QH XII formerly IV). 'Thou hast enlightened me through thy truth in thy marvellous mysteries (1 QH XV formerly

---

<sup>66</sup> J.A.T. Robinson *Redating the New Testament* London 1976.

<sup>67</sup> Ehrmann *op. cit.* n. 45.

<sup>68</sup> This could be the names of angels for purposes invocation, or it could be the more mundane 'names of their leaders' who were priests and therefore deemed angels.

VII). We also read: 'Thou hast taught them thy marvellous mysteries... that he may stand before thee with the everlasting host... to be renewed with all the living and to rejoice together with them that know (1QH XVIII formerly X); 'The mystery of thy wisdom has opened knowledge to me' (1QH XX formerly XII); 'The mysteries of thy wisdom make known thy glory' (1QH V formerly XIII); 'Illumined with perfect light' (1QH XXI formerly XVIII). There is a description of transformation reminiscent of 1 Enoch 14 and 71 and of the accounts of the later mystics: 'Shaking and trembling seize me and all my bones are broken; my heart dissolves like wax before fire and my knees are like water... I rose and stood and my spirit was established in the face of the scourge' (1QH XII formerly IV). 1 Enoch is one of the best represented texts at Qumran<sup>69</sup>, and this is important evidence for the priestly traditions there. According to the *Book of Jubilees* Enoch was a priest who burned the incense of the sanctuary (Jub.4.25), was the first to learn 'writing and knowledge and wisdom' (Jub.4.17), and entered the holy of holies (1 En. 14). The name Enoch probably means the 'taught or initiated one'<sup>70</sup> When the high priest entered the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement, he was enacting the experience of the mystics and he too entered in great fear (m.Yoma 5.1;7.4; contrast Heb.10.19 'We have confidence to enter the sanctuary...').

The priests and their traditions passed into the young church; a great number of them were 'obedient to the faith' (Acts 6.7). The exact relationship between the high priests and the early Christians, especially the family of Jesus, invites speculation. John, one of the three associated with the secret tradition, was known to the high priest (John 8.15). Eusebius records that John had worn the insignia of a high priest, the golden plate bearing the Name (History 3.31). Presumably this means he had the role of high priest in the Church. The Letter of Jude quotes from 1 Enoch, the repository of priestly mystical traditions. In our time, access to books is commonplace, but this was not the case in first century CE Palestine. How then did one of Jesus' family know that book well enough to quote from it? Jerome quotes the lost *Gospel of the Hebrews* which says that Jesus gave his linen shroud to the high priest's servant after the resurrection and then appeared to James the Righteous, one of his family and another of the three associated with the secret tradition. He was also the first bishop of the Jerusalem church. Eisenmann has recently suggested that there are similarities between the Letter of James in the New Testament and some Qumran texts, that James the Righteous may have been the leader known at Qumran as the Teacher of Righteousness. Some of the Qumran texts (e.g.4Q266, said to be the missing last column of the Damascus Rule)

---

<sup>69</sup> There is evidence for 20 scrolls of Enoch, 21 of Isaiah, 3 of Psalms but only 6 of Jeremiah.

<sup>70</sup> S. Reif 'Dedicated to *hnk*' in VT xxii (1972) pp. 495-501.

would then be products of the Palestinian Christian community.<sup>71</sup> Whether or not he is correct in all details, the similarities are certainly striking, and must be borne in mind when attempting to reconstruct what would and would not have been possible in early Christianity. Men of Jesus' family were clearly in the same mould as the writers of the Scrolls, and James was also closely linked to the temple.

Further, James had the authority to impose temple purity regulations on Paul (Acts 21.21-4). Hegesippus, 'who belonged to the first generation after the apostles' (Eusebius History 2.23), records that James was an ascetic from birth, consuming neither meat nor wine and refusing to wash, shave or anoint himself with oil. He wore priestly robes of linen and used to enter the sanctuary of the temple alone to pray for the forgiveness of the people's sins. Such a description, if it is to be taken literally, can only mean that he was a high priest, performing the ritual of the Day of Atonement. His testimony to Jesus as Son of Man, sitting at the right hand and destined to return with the clouds of heaven, caused his death in the temple at the instigation of the scribes and Pharisees. A Rechabite tried in vain to save him. He was buried in the temple where he died and the siege of Jerusalem began shortly afterwards, as punishment for the crime (Eusebius History 2.23)<sup>72</sup>. There was a book known as the *Ascents of James*, which was used by the Ebionites,<sup>73</sup> and one wonders what these 'ascents' *anabathmoi*, might have been, given the known traditions of the priesthood and the fact that Merkavah mystics practised and taught in the temple.<sup>74</sup>

The Rechabite who tried to save James was one of a priestly family. In the time of Jeremiah they had been ascetics, refusing to build houses or to plant crops, and abstaining from wine (Jer.35.6-7). John the Baptist, also of a priestly family, abstained from wine all his life and lived in the desert. He could well have been a Rechabite. There is a work of uncertain date, the *History of the Rechabites*, extant in many ancient languages but probably originating in Hebrew. The present form of the text is Christian<sup>75</sup>, but underlying it is a pre-Christian original which tells how the Rechabites left Jerusalem after the king who succeeded Josiah [the king who purged the temple in about 621BCE] had tried to persuade them to abandon their way of life. This is

---

<sup>71</sup> R. Eisenmann and M. Wise *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered*, Shaftesbury 1992 pp. 212ff.

<sup>72</sup> To be buried in a holy place suggests that James was a very important figure.

<sup>73</sup> Epiphanius *Panarion* 30.16.

<sup>74</sup> *Hekhalot Rabbati* 225-228, and see n. 48.

<sup>75</sup> I.e. it was Jewish text which Christian scribes were interested to preserve but Jewish scribes apparently not.



described as 'forsaking the LORD and abandoning the covenant' (History of the Rechabites 10). Abstaining from wine must have been the outward sign of a particular religious tradition. They had been rescued from prison by angels and led to a paradise place, a holy land. They were called the Blessed Ones, and no ordinary mortals were able to visit them. Their assembly was like the angels of heaven, and the angels of God lived with them. They were dressed in garments of glory and they offered prayer day and night. Their wives accompanied them, but they lived apart.

Who might these Rechabites have been and how did they come to be called the Blessed Ones? Perhaps we here the memory of another *rechab*, the chariot throne in the temple<sup>76</sup> which the chosen few were able to contemplate and thus achieve the angelic state. The sons of *rechab* would have been priests devoted to the heavenly chariot throne<sup>77</sup>, and when the temple 'reformers' had wanted them to abandon their traditions, they refused<sup>78</sup>. They left Jerusalem for another place, where they lived a monastic existence, the life of the angels. The Talmud records that they were also known as *nozerim* 'the diligent observers'<sup>79</sup>, a significant name, perhaps, because the Christians were known as Nazoreans. It was one of these Rechabites who tried to prevent the death of James, the leader of the Jerusalem Christians and a guardian of the secret tradition, a man, says Eusebius, 'universally regarded as the most righteous of men because of the heights of philosophy and religion which he scaled in his life' (History 2.23).

The *Odes of Solomon* may provide yet another piece of evidence to link Jesus to the ascent tradition of the temple, and its secrets. It is not possible to give an exact date and provenance for the odes, but their similarities to the Qumran Hymns and to the Fourth Gospel, and the possibility that they were known by Ignatius of Antioch, indicate that they were probably in existence at the end of the first century CE in a Hebrew Christian community. Most striking are the passages which seem to be Christ himself speaking. It has been customary to explain these as an example of early Christian prophecy, speaking in the name of the LORD. The very strangeness of the words and ideas

---

<sup>76</sup> The two words are related.

<sup>77</sup> 'Sons of' indicating a characteristic rather than family descent.

<sup>78</sup> It is significant that the 'priestly' account of the first temple mentions the chariot throne and the veil, 1 Chron. 28.18; 2 Chron. 3.10-14, whereas the reformers' account is silent on these matters, 1 Kgs 6.

<sup>79</sup> *B. Baba Bathra* 91b. See also the tradition recorded in *j. Ta'anit* 4.5 that a large number of priests fought with the Babylonians against Jerusalem after Josiah's 'reform' of the temple, and that they were later settled by Nebuchadnezzar in Arabia.

attributed to Jesus in the *Odes* compels us to ask if there is here an authentic memory of the words of Jesus. Could an 'early' community have falsified the tradition to this extent, especially as it has echoes in the 'orthodox' writings of John and Ignatius? The Christ of the *Odes* practises the mystical ascent:

(The Spirit) brought me forth before the LORD's face  
And because I was the Son of Man, I was named the Light, the Son of  
God;  
Because I was the most glorious among the glorious ones,  
And the greatest among the great ones...  
And he anointed me with his perfection  
And I became one of those who are near him. (Ode 36.3,4,6).  
Another describes the Merkavah experience, an ascent to the chariot to  
learn the truth'  
I went up into the light of truth as into a chariot,  
And the truth led me and caused me to come...  
And there was no danger for me because I constantly walked with him  
(Ode 38.1,5)<sup>80</sup>

Christ speaks of his mystery, his faith and his knowledge, and about a garment that will be shown to them (Ode 8). He speaks of gathering in the Gentiles and capturing the world for the Most High (Ode 10). He speaks of being exalted by the Most High and being raised to understanding, loosing all who have been bound, and giving knowledge and resurrection (Ode 17). In Ode 22 he describes descending from on high and defeating the seven headed dragon. In Ode 25 he speaks of a garment of the Spirit that replaces the garment of skin. Ode 28 is inspired by Psalm 22 and Ode 31 by Isaiah 53.

It is not impossible that these *Odes* incorporate material from Jesus himself, or that they are in his style. The question is: How much of such a Merkavah mystic can be recovered from the gospel pictures of Jesus? First we do not know what were the influences on his boyhood. We do not know what tradition formed his mind and shaped the ideas he was later to preach, although we do know that he impressed temple teachers when he was only a child (Luke 2.46-48). The fact that member of his family (John the Baptist<sup>81</sup>, James the Righteous<sup>82</sup> and Jude<sup>83</sup>) all had links to the esoterica of the priesthood must

---

<sup>80</sup> Translation in J.H.Charlesworth *The Odes of Solomon* Oxford 1973.

<sup>81</sup> His father has a vision of an angel in the temple, Luke 1.11.

<sup>82</sup> A high priest figure to whom are attributed visions and 'a book of ascents.'

<sup>83</sup> He could quote from 1 Enoch.

make this at least a likely context for his formative years. Second, there could have been a gradual process of recognition, reflected in some of the parables and sayings about the kingdom which were autobiographical. In the synoptic accounts, these are the only teachings associated with the 'secrets' or the 'mysteries' of the kingdom, and were explained privately to the disciples (e.g. Matt. 13.10-17). The seed grew secretly; it began as small as a mustard seed and grew to be great. Or it was found as a treasure or a pearl of great price, and everything had to be given up for it. The kingdom was not an external phenomenon but something discovered within (Luke 17.21), which was manifested in the overthrow of evil (Luke 11.20). These were Jesus' own accounts of his spiritual growth.

The accounts of the baptism show that this was a crucial moment in Jesus' life. He saw the Spirit of God come upon him and declare him to be the beloved Son (Matt 3.16-17 and parallels). The Codex Bezae of Luke 3.22 has: 'Today I have begotten you', quoting instead Psalm 2.7. Perhaps this was the point at which Jesus became fully conscious of his role. The story is not told in the first person, but neither is the account of the temptation in the desert, which must have come from Jesus himself unless it is a complete fiction.

After the baptism, there was the time in the desert when Jesus was tempted by Satan, was with the wild beasts and was served by the angels. (Mark 1.12-13). The sequence of Satan, beasts and angels suggests that these beasts were not the wild creatures of the Judaeian desert, but rather the beasts of the visionaries, the living creatures around the throne (Rev. 4.6). The angels were his servants cf. the worship of the enthroned Lamb (Rev. 5.6-13) or 'I was the greatest of the great ones' (Odes of Solomon 36.4). In the account of the conflict with Satan (Matt 4/Luke 4), the point at issue is: 'If you are the of God...', as if the conflicts record Jesus' coming to terms with his new situation. The visionary experiences of being taken to a great height, the temple pinnacle or a high mountain, are authentic. Ezekiel had been transported in the Spirit to the temple and to a high mountain (Ezek. 8.3; 40.2); Habakkuk was stationed on a high tower to receive his vision (Hab.2.1-2); Enoch was lifted up by angels to a high place where he saw a tower above the earth (1 En. 87.3); Abraham stood on a high place when he had his vision of the throne (Ap.Abr.17.3); John was carried to a high mountain to see the heavenly Jerusalem (Rev. 21.10). Origen quotes from the lost *Gospel of the Hebrews* in which Jesus himself says: 'My Mother the Holy Spirit took me by one of my hairs and carried me to the great mountain Tabor' (Commentary on John 2.12). Jesus' vision of the cities of the world reminds us that there had been sons of God who were convinced by the words of Azazel, bound themselves to him with a great oath and then came to earth to rule it and destroy it (1 En. 6).

After the desert experience, according to Luke, Jesus claimed to be the fulfilment of the prophecy in Isaiah 61. The Spirit was upon him, he had been anointed and was to inaugurate the great year of Jubilee (Luke 4.16-21). In the Melchizedek Text (11Q Melch) the same passage in Isaiah is applied to the Jubilee brought by the heavenly high priest Melchizedek, who is the LORD himself, the great year of Jubilee which culminates in the final Day of Atonement. The hostile reaction to this revelation will have led to the formation of an inner group to whom the secret could be communicated. Thus the disciples were chosen and the Transfiguration made the inner group aware of Jesus' experience of transformation. The description is authentic; as Jesus was praying, his face shone and his clothes became dazzling white. The voice from heaven this time addressed the disciples: 'This is my Son, the Chosen One.' Again this is authentic. The fact that the disciples saw the brightness means that they had become a part of it.

Both Luke (24.25-27) and John (5.39), in very different contexts, record that Jesus found himself in the Old Testament. This is an extraordinary claim, and must be one of the clearest pieces of evidence that Jesus saw himself as the LORD. In first century Palestine, such a belief would have been possible for someone who had achieved the mystical ascent and been transformed. It is only traditions recorded much later in 3 Enoch which show clearly how a human could ascend to the presence of the throne and become 'the lesser LORD'. Heated debates in the early Christian period, however, as to whether or not there were two powers in heaven, show just where the Christian claim lay. '*Being*' the LORD *had been part of the tradition of the high priests and before them, of the kings.* They had worn the Name on their foreheads.<sup>84</sup> The principle of temple practice, 'on earth as it is in heaven' meant that the act of atonement, in reality the work of the LORD (Deut. 32.43) was enacted on earth by the high priest. This was the suffering and death that was necessary for the Messiah.

In my book *The Great Angel. A Study of Israel's Second God*, I showed how the first Christians recognised Jesus as *yhwh*, the LORD, the Son of God Most High. This claim came from Jesus himself, who had attained the ultimate mystical experience of the high priesthood, seen the throne and been transformed by that experience. The Messianic titles Son of Man and Son of God, and the role of the mysterious Servant resulted from that experience, as did the realisation that the coming of the LORD to his people meant the great Day of Atonement when he took upon himself the sins and sicknesses of the creation (Isa.53.4 cf.Matt.8.17), and gave his own life to his people (Isa.53.10). Thus it was that Peter could say 'You denied the Holy and Righteous One ... and killed the Author of Life' (Acts 3.14-15).

---

<sup>84</sup> According to Philo, *Moses* 2.114 and *Aristeas* 98, they wore the four letters of the Name.

Once Jesus is set back within the temple tradition, there is a whole new landscape for the study of Christian origins. The pre-existent and adoptionist Christologies are seen to be both compatible and original. The 'knowledge' characteristic of the non-canonical gospels would have originated in esoteric teaching such as was characteristic of priestly groups, and perhaps even underlying Isaiah 53.11. The central themes of sacrifice, redemption and atonement can be seen in their original setting, and Jesus' disregard for the purity laws can be seen as the practical enactment of priestly atonement, bringing the excluded sinner back into the community rather than excluding him.

The various 'layers' and inconsistencies in the tradition about Jesus originated first in the development of his own thought and only later in the various groups which had access only to certain parts of his teaching. Before his experience of becoming the Great Angel, the LORD, he taught as a wise man and a healer, like many others of his time, warning of the judgement to come. This has been amply demonstrated in the books which set Jesus in his contemporary context. For many, this is what he remained. Once Jesus had achieved his transforming vision, he spoke as Son of Man, the Man who had passed beyond 'death' and become an emissary from the other world. When the disciples realised this, they were able to see the glory. The confession at Caesarea was followed by the transfiguration. The inner group who received the 'post-resurrection' teaching would have had no need of a passion narrative or a future judgement with the Son of Man. Thus the *Gospel of Thomas*. Their Son of Man would have been a heavenly revealer rather than a future judge. Thus the Gospel of John. The future coming of the LORD in judgement would have been given as exoteric teaching, such as the parable of the sheep and the goats, but for the inner circle, the eschatology was realised, the judgement was past, and eternal life had begun. Whoever had seen Jesus had had the transforming vision (John 14.9). The other-worldly Jesus of the Fourth gospel may well have been drawn from life, and the underlying strata of the Book of Revelation may well have been what they claimed to be: 'The Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to Him to show to his servants what must soon take place.' (Rev. 1.1).<sup>85</sup>

What Chernus wrote of the Merkavah mystics is equally true of the earliest Christian community: 'The unique contribution of the esoteric tradition seems to be the teaching that those who are willing to risk the initiatory death will in return be capable of experiencing a richer and fuller life, one which is enhanced by a more complete experience of God' On the other hand this full and immediate revelation turns out to be

---

<sup>85</sup> I have since written a book with this title.

too much for the community as a whole to bear, and therefore it is not useful in enriching and guiding the ongoing life of that community.<sup>86</sup>

The *Gospel of Philip* (CG II.3) knew all this:

The Nazarene is he who reveals what is hidden... Those who say that the LORD died first and then rose up are in error for he rose up first and then he died. If one does not first attain the resurrection, will he not die? (56).

Jesus did not reveal himself in the manner in which he was, but it was in the manner in which they would be able to see him that he revealed himself. He revealed himself to them all. He revealed himself to the great as great. He revealed himself to the small as small. He revealed himself to the angels as an angel and to men as a man. Because of this, his word hid itself from everyone. Some indeed saw him, thinking that they were seeing themselves, but when he appeared to his disciples in glory on the mount, he was not small. He became great, but he made his disciples great that they might be able to see him in his greatness (57-8).

There was far more to the teaching of Jesus than is recorded in the four canonical gospels. 'James the Righteous, John and Peter were entrusted by the LORD after his resurrection with the higher knowledge' *James and John were remembered in Church tradition as having been high priests, and Peter as the first Bishop of Rome.*

---

<sup>86</sup> | Chernus *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism* Berlin/New York 1982 pp. 53,55.

Margaret Barker The Secret Tradition[1]. 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 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. Secret Tradition Since the medieval period, students of occultism (that which is hidden) have professed a belief that the ancient wisdom and secret tenets of the various psychic sciences have been preserved to modern times by a series of adepts, who have handed these secrets down from generation to generation in their entirety. Leaders have gained authority by claiming to be in contact with such secret adepts, for proficiency in any one of the occult sciences requires instruction from a master of that branch. Source for information on Secret Tradition: Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychol

7. As regards the Secret Tradition, the forms assumed were, in respect of the Instituted in Mysteries, of a ceremonial and liturgical kind respect of cryptic literature, there was more than ; one embodiment ; in fine It is necessary sense of the Secret Tradition in Christian Times, and the arts being that of the occult sciences The tradiconnected with or arising therefrom. tion of which the Instituted Mysteries is a reflection or a veil, and of which the concealed literatures like. are a presentation, also under a has no consanguinity and no real external.