

“Whatever makes for progress towards gnosis”

Esoterism and spiritual advancement in the *Stromateis* and the *Letter to Theodore*

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Five decades have passed since Morton Smith allegedly discovered a fragment of an otherwise unknown letter of Clement of Alexandria within the bowels of the library of an ancient monastery near Jerusalem, hastily copied into the endpapers of a seventeenth-century edition of the epistles of Ignatius of Antioch. In that time innumerable monographs, articles, and conferences have hotly and continually debated its authenticity, together with the implications of the provocative quotations from the “secret gospel” of Mark given therein. During the past decade the pendulum of prevailing scholarly opinion on the origins of the so-called *Letter to Theodore* has swayed with dizzying rapidity between an acceptance of Clementine authorship and the contrary conclusion that it is a brilliant forgery foisted upon the credulous scholarly community, most likely by Smith himself. Unfortunately, apart from a forensic analysis of the original manuscript—which was removed from the monastic library by ecclesiastical authorities under shadowy circumstances and subsequently disappeared—the prospect of a truly definitive resolution remains highly unlikely despite the recent claims of vindication from members of both camps.¹

In light of the breadth and depth of this vigorous academic dialogue, it is somewhat surprising that a substantive comparison of the themes and attitudes of the letter with the

¹ Greek quotations from the writings of Clement (together with the relevant section numbers for all undisputed quotations) are taken from Otto Stahlin, *Clemens Alexandrinus* (repr. ed; 4 vols; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1972).

English quotations from the writings of Clement are taken from the translations of A. Cleveland Coxe found in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume II: Fathers of the Second Century* (repr. ed; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994) unless otherwise indicated.

Greek and English quotations from the *Letter to Theodore* are taken from the transcription and translation given in Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973).

Greek and English quotations from Eusebius of Caesarea are taken from *Ecclesiastical History, Volume I* (Loeb Classical Library 153; trans. Kirsopp Lake; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

¹ On the removal of the letter from the Monastery of Mar Saba by the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, see Charles Hedrick, “The Secret Gospel of Mark: Stalemate in the Academy,” in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* (henceforth *J ECS*) 11.2 (2003), 140. Hedrick also states that the evidence conclusively reveals that “Morton Smith did not forge the manuscript” (ibid), while Adela Yarbro Collins, in a brief endorsement of Peter Jeffery’s *The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled: Imagined Rituals of Sex, Death, and Madness in a Biblical Forgery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), writes that “Peter Jeffery’s book proves beyond a reasonable doubt that Morton Smith forged the discovered text.”

extensive extant corpus of acknowledged works of Clement has only rarely been conducted. Such long-standing neglect may be attributed in part to the myopic preoccupation of both biblical scholars and the larger public with the included portions of a previously unattested gospel containing a strange and potentially homoerotic scene of mystical initiation. As F. F. Bruce sagely commented in the year following Smith's initial publications of the find, "All the world loves a mystery, and there is something about the announcement of a 'secret' Gospel which attracts instant attention."² Numerous other critics have simply adopted alternative evaluative approaches to the question of Clementine authorship. Smith's own positive judgments were heavily dependent upon statistical analyses of vocabulary and grammatical style rather than topical considerations. He finds the precise parallel between the dozen prepositions which occur in the body of the letter and those used most frequently throughout the accepted writings to be highly significant and suggestive; likewise the demonstrable similarities in the syllabic patterns of its sentences when compared to the third book of the *Stromateis* are telling.³ His second, shorter study of the text largely limits the appraisal of the nature of its contents to a single vague and insubstantial paragraph.⁴ On the other hand, some negative assessments have attempted to utilize the same statistical evidence to indicate that the literary character of the document is actually "*more* like Clement than Clement ever was,"⁵ or prefer to isolate and identify potential historical anachronisms, clues,

² F. F. Bruce, *The 'Secret' Gospel of Mark* (London: The Athlone Press, 1974), 3.

³ Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, 74-76. The third book of the *Stromateis* was chosen "because it is closest in content to the letter" (75).

⁴ Idem, *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel According to Mark* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 28-29. In sum, both the author of the letter and Clement "have much the same notions of scripture... know the classics well and admire the same authors. Most important, both have the same idea of Christianity" (28).

⁵ Bart Ehrman, "Response to Charles Hedrick's Stalemate," in *J ECS* 11.2 (2003), 161; italics original. The phrase is repeated virtually verbatim in his *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 85-86. In both cases, Ehrman is referring to the earlier study of A. H. Criddle, "On the Mar Saba Letter Attributed to Clement of Alexandria," in *J ECS* 3 (1995): 215-20. Although Scott G. Brown (*Mark's Other Gospel: Rethinking Morton Smith's Controversy* [ECSJ 15; Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005], 55) contends that Ehrman "mischaracterized Criddle's study" with these statements, Criddle's conclusion that the

or circumstances which necessitate a modern author and therefore provide irrefutable evidence of forgery.⁶

Those rare treatments which have undertaken any form of substantive comparison between the body of recognized literature and the disputed correspondence have done so in a limited or perfunctory manner. The relevant section of Eric Osborn's magisterial review of Clementine research in the late twentieth century is a notable example. In his estimation the *Letter to Theodore* is the product of a "pious forger," as its contents display drastic discontinuities with the Alexandrian father's understanding of true gnosis: "for Clement true gnosis is not attained by acquaintance with hidden documents, but by faith and love as learned through interpretation of public apostolic writings."⁷ This conclusion, and also the premise that Clement absolutely prohibits the use of lies and deceptions for Christians—a ban which would be incompatible with the letter's instructions that one "should... [not] concede that the secret gospel is by Mark, but should even deny it on oath" (οὐδε... συγχωρητεον του μαρκου ειναι το μυστικον ευαγγελιον αλλα και μεθ ορκου αρνετεον; *Lett. Theo.* 2.11-12)—represented the principal thematic objections raised by Werner Georg Kummel in 1974,⁸ and were essentially repeated by Bart Ehrman two decades after Osborn

letter "contains too high a ratio of Clementine to non-Clementine traits to be authentic and should be regarded as a deliberate imitation of Clement's style" (216) sounds quite similar.

⁶ E.g., Jeffrey, *The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled*; Stephen Carlson, *The Gospel Hoax: Morton Smith's Invention of Secret Mark* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005). The latter suggests a number of clues left behind by Smith as indicators of a hoax, such as the letter's brief reference to salt (table salt having been perfected by the *Morton Salt Company* in the early twentieth century).

⁷ Eric Osborn, "Clement of Alexandria: A Review of Research, 1958-1982," in *Second Century* 3.4 (1983), 224.

⁸ Werner Georg Kummel, "Auf den Spuren des Urmarkus? Ein neuer Fund und seine Beurteilung," in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 71 (1974); quoted in Hans-Martin Schenke, "The Mystery of the Gospel of Mark," in *Second Century* 4.2 (1984), 70. The translation is that of Schenke. Specifically, Kummel rejects "the description of ecclesiastical archives holding secret writings, the recommendation of a lie to be reinforced by a false oath for political reasons..."

had himself appropriated them.⁹ Kummel, Osborn and Ehrman are to be commended for their awareness of and response to an inexcusable lacunae in the continuing investigation of the letter, and their comments provide a helpful point of departure for any succeeding consideration of its relationship to Clement's thought. However, the arguments mentioned above suffer considerably in the wake of a more sensitive examination of his conceptions of integrity, knowledge, exegesis, and esoterism, particularly in view of key passages from the remarkable *Stromateis*,¹⁰ perhaps the greatest work of Christian theological exposition prior to Augustine's *City of God*.¹¹ Elements such as the paradigmatic model of a universal spiritual and intellectual journey towards an ultimate union with God, the consequently delineated stages of awareness and ability for its human sojourners, and the matchless exegetical faculties bestowed upon the true gnostic and evidenced in the author's own work are all constituent components of a cosmology where Smith's controversial manuscript may also comfortably reside.

As several studies have described the letter's apparent advocacy of deceitful behavior as utterly incongruous with Clement's attitudes expressed elsewhere, this point is certainly worthy of additional attention from the outset. In the opening book of the *Stromateis*, the redoubtable theologian notes that the enlightened Christian, the one who "has a show of wisdom" (σοφίαν ἵνα δεῖξῃ; *Strom.* 1.18.90.2), is bound by multiple moral imperatives

⁹ Ehrman, "Response to Charles Hedrick's Stalemate," 160-161. The contention that the instructions to lie about the secret gospel's very existence contradicts Clement's other opinions on false oaths is perhaps the most frequently cited such disparity; it is also mentioned by Charles Murgia, "Secret Mark: Real or Fake?" in Reginald H. Fuller, *Longer Mark: Forgery, Interpolation, or Old Tradition?* (Protocol of the Eighteenth Colloquy; Berkeley: Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, 1976), 35-40.

¹⁰ While this enigmatic Greek term is difficult to render into English idiom, perhaps the best approximation is "patchwork" or "patchwork quilt," as in a variety of thoughts or ideas sewn together; cf. Hubertus R. Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction* (trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007). Danielou's suggestion of "carpet" (in his *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture* [trans. John Austin Baker; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973], 447) possesses a similar connotation.

¹¹ This is the judgment of Andre Méhat; see the citation in Osborn, "Clement of Alexandria," 222.

including honesty, and cites a pertinent apostolic admonition from the Letter to the Ephesians: “[w]herefore, putting away lying, speak every man truth” (διο αποθεμενοι το ψευδος λαλειτε αληθειαν; Eph. 4:25; 1.18.90.2). But his succeeding statements on the subject, even those sometimes invoked in favor of an unequivocal ban on prevarication,¹² are marked with significant qualifications and conditions which should not be casually dismissed. He does declare that the true gnostic “lies not, nor does aught contrary to his compacts. And so he swears not even when asked for his oath; nor does he ever deny, so as to speak falsehood, though he should die by tortures” (ου ψευδεται ουδε παρα τας συνθηκας τι ποει ταυτη δε ουδε δυνυσιν ορκον απαιτηθεις ουδε εξαρνος ποτε ψινεται ινα μη ψευδεται καν εναποθησκη ταις βασανοις; 7.8.51.8). Furthermore, the righteous individual “both thinks and speaks the truth” (τε γαρ φρονει αμα και αληθευει; 7.9.53.1). The former comment, however, is immediately preceded by the provisional assertions that “the man of proved character in such piety is *far from being apt to lie and to swear* (πολλυ γε δει τον εν τοιαυτη ευσεβεια εξεταζομενον προχειρον ειναι περι τε το ψευσασθαι περι το ομοσαι; 7.8.50.1; italics added), and that “[t]he Gnostic swears truly, *but is not apt to swear* (αυτικα ευορκος μεν ου μην ευεπιφορος επι το ομνυναι ο γνωστικος; 7.8.51.3; italics added). In both cases the insertion of qualifying terms intimates that while complete, unadorned candor is to be desired, there may be situations in which it is not warranted.¹³

¹² Most frequently, *Strom.* 7.8.51 ff. Cf. Murgia, “Secret Mark: Real or Fake?” 38-39). For a response to this view, see Brown, *Mark’s Other Gospel*, 31-32. In a footnote for his own similar argument, Ehrman quotes the declaration that “we [Christians] must never adulterate the truth” (ου γαρ χρη ποτε μοιχευειν την αληθειαν; 7.17.105.5; *Lost Christianities*, 267 n. 23), but omits succeeding phrases which significantly alter its meaning: “... by gratifying our own lusts and vanity, by defrauding our neighbours” (ταις ιδιαις επιθυμιας και φιλοδοξιας... επι τη των πλησιον απατη; 7.17.105.5). This says nothing of other, less unambiguous circumstances.

¹³ Judith Kovacs (“Divine Pedagogy and the Gnostic Teacher according to Clement of Alexandria,” in *JECs* 9.1 [2001], 19) suggests that Clement indicates that a “Gnostic teacher may be forced to mislead but not to tell an outright lie,” which is a plausible interpretation.

This suspicion is confirmed by the ensuing remarks that the true gnostic is “never *willing* to lie in uttered word” (μηδε... ψευσασθαι θελων; 7.9.53.6; italics added) and is only completely forthright with “those who are worthy to hear” (τους επαιειν αξιους; 7.9.53.1); elsewhere “medicinally, as a physician for the safety of the sick, he may deceive or tell an untruth” (καθαπερ ιατρος προς νοσουντας επι σωτηρια των κλαμοντων ψευσεται η ψευδος ερει; 7.9.53.3). Not surprisingly, some later critics found the deceptive undercurrent of these words to be unpalatable at best. The nineteenth-century Anglican layman Charles Kingsley brusquely exclaimed, “If St. Clement said that, so much the worse for him. He was a great and good man. But he might have learned from his Bible that no lie was the truth, and that it is ill stealing the devil’s tools to do God’s work withal.”¹⁴ Kingsley’s gruff condemnation, however, cannot and should not expunge the nature of Clement’s statements from the text of the *Stromateis*.

The probability that Clement’s stances on sincerity are infused with a pragmatic recognition of varying spiritual competencies is further strengthened by his allegorical exegesis of two biblical passages involving potentially dangerous cavities: the imprisonment of Joseph within an empty pit at the hands of his jealous brothers (Gen 37:23-24) and the legal penalty for the careless owner who fails to cover an open pit and thus allows unwary animals to fall to their deaths (Ex. 21:33-34). Surprisingly, Joseph’s “uncommon foresight” and “love of instruction” (πλειον τι προορωμενον; φιλομαθιας; 5.8.53.2)—readily recognizable characteristics of the proper gnostic—do not immediately lead to his perfection

¹⁴ Quoted in Jeffrey, *The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled*, 178. Kingsley’s bitter rhetorical opponent, Cardinal John Henry Newman, had cited Clement’s comments in support of his arguments for the gradual development of doctrine influenced partly by the needs and abilities of the larger public. Jeffrey, in identifying Smith as the actual author of the *Letter to Theodore*, suggests that his own sympathies with Newman explain the letter’s demand for lying under certain circumstances.

and exaltation, but rather to an aggressive and near-fatal reprisal from his kin following a rather arrogant narration of a dream foretelling his supremacy over the rest of the family. The remark that the pit was completely free of water, a parenthetical aside in its original context,¹⁵ is highly significant in a Clementine analysis, as he frequently associates this essential element with life, truth, and knowledge (e.g., *Ex. Heath.* 10.99.3). Through his incarceration in a lonely place “destitute of knowledge” (κενος δε επιστημης; *Strom.* 5.8.53.3) Joseph’s advanced standing is ostensibly reduced to that of his ignorant brethren; he is the one to pay the price for the rash and untimely boasting concerning his preeminence, albeit temporarily so.¹⁶ Ultimately the exceptionality of the chosen son is upheld, but it is nevertheless insinuated that his revelation of said exceptionality occurred at an improper or inopportune time.

The provocatively peculiar emphases of this reading of a familiar patriarchal vignette are more fully explicated in the succeeding reference to the Mosaic prescription against neglectfully exposed hollows or reservoirs, part of the ancient Israelite code known as the “Book of the Covenant.”¹⁷ It is linked to the discussion of Joseph not only through sheer proximity but also through their shared use of the Greek term λαικκος (“cistern”; “pit”; “prison”); thus the structure of the argument of this section of the *Stromateis* may be rightfully described as a *gezara shava* and should be evaluated as such, with both stories

¹⁵ Originally, it indicated that the hole into which Joseph was cast was used as a cistern; cf. Roland E. Murphy, “Genesis,” in Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and idem, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1990), 38.

¹⁶ This is not to say that Clement denies Joseph’s superior status as “unconsciously wise” (ο διαλεληθως σοφος; 5.58.4), or declares that he is to blame for his own struggles. The “envy” (a participial form of ζηλωω; 5.58.2) of his brothers is still seen as the principal mitigating factor in the assault. The immediate verbal and hermeneutical linkage with the excerpt from Exodus, however, suggests additional layers of interpretation.

¹⁷ This collection of laws (Ex. 21:1-23:33) is generally regarded as the oldest in the Hebrew Bible. Cf. Nahum M. Sarna, “Exodus, Book of,” in David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (6 vols; New York: Anchor Doubleday, 1992), 2.695.

brought together in the service of the same rhetorical goal.¹⁸ According to the statute itself, the owner of the uncovered pit is liable for any animals straying into it, and must make equivalent financial restitution to their owners. The relevant scriptural citation is accompanied by explanatory comments which reveal the practical implications of the preceding texts; the knowledgeable reader is instructed to “[c]onceal it [the potent γνώσις], then, from those who are unable to receive the depth of knowledge, and so cover the pit” (επικρυπτομενος δ ουν προς τους ουξ οιους τε οντας παραδεξασθαι το βαθος της γνωσεως κατακαλυπτε τος λακκον; 5.8.54.3-4). As Judith Kovacs has sagely noted in her careful study of the role of the pedagogue in Clement’s writings,¹⁹ the fate of the careless Christian teacher parallels that of the negligent landlord of Exodus. Indeed, “[T]he Gnostic shall himself pay the penalty... incurring the blame for the one who was scandalized, or drowned, because of the magnitude of the word, since he was still of slender understanding” (ο γνωστικος αυτος ζημιωθησεται... την αιτιαν υπεχων του σκανδαλισθεντος ητοι καταποθεντος τω μεγεθει του λογου μικρολογου επι οντος; 5.8.54.4).²⁰ Together the λακκοι of Joseph and the Book of Covenant warn of the harsh consequences for the wise if the unenlightened are allowed to obtain what they cannot conceivably grasp.

In sum, then, the *Stromateis* indicates that the most perfected Christians are expected to exercise caution amongst those of lesser spiritual status, including pagans and more elementary believers, regarding their privileged insight and abilities. Such a stance fits well

¹⁸ Examples of *gezara shava* (traditionally associated with the rabbinic school of Hillel the Elder) are found throughout a number of ancient Judeo-Christian texts, including the New Testament. For a particularly excellent analysis of its role within a portion of the anonymous Letter to the Hebrews, see Harold W. Attridge, “Let us strive to enter that rest’: The logic of Hebrews 4:1-11,” in *Harvard Theological Review* 73.2 (1980), 279-288.

¹⁹ Judith Kovacs, “Divine Pedagogy and the Gnostic Teacher,” 21-22. The author is grateful for her recommendation of this article and its isolation of Ex. 21:33-34 as a key text in Clement’s esoteric understanding of the concepts of Christian teaching and learning.

²⁰ The translation of this excerpt is that of Kovacs.

with the taxonomy of humanity displayed in Clement's interpretation of the progressive sanctity of the concentric Temple precincts and their inhabitants (5.6.32-40) and in the sequential orientation of his three most significant surviving works: "the *Protreptikos*, addressed to pagans, the *Paidagogos*, for the simple believers, and the *Stromateis*, which contains seeds of γῶσις for the Christian who seeks perfection."²¹ Even the very construction of the *Stromateis* reflects his personal commitment to this precautionary practice; within it are "scattered the sparks of the true knowledge here and there... so that it should not be easy for the uninitiated to come across them to discover the holy traditions" (εγκατασπειραντες δογματων ως μη ραδιαν ειναι τω περιτυχοντι των αμυητων την των αγιων παραδοσεων ευρεσιν; 7.18.110).²²

With these texts and ideas in hand, the letter's command to Theodore and his followers to swear oaths of denial when confronted with any version of the secret gospel is not especially shocking or even surprising. Whether the actual contents of the oaths in question concern the legitimacy of the emendations of the heretical Carpocratian sect or the mere existence of a more confidential gospel written by Mark,²³ they are incited by the presence of some form of this difficult and possibly destructive text among a badly misguided community whose allegiance to heterodox dogma renders them unworthy and unable to probe its depths. Based upon the straightforward guidelines of the *Stromateis* and

²¹ Kovacs, "Concealment and Gnostic Exegesis: Clement of Alexandria's Interpretation of the Tabernacle," in *Studia Patristica* 31 (1997), 420-422.

²² The translation of this excerpt is that of Guy Stroumsa, given in his *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism* (2nd ed; Numen Studies in the History of Religions; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 115. The author is grateful to this excellent work for isolating this excellent reference.

²³ Smith's original translation read "nor, when they [the Carpocratians] put forward their falsifications, should one concede that the secret gospel is by Mark, but should even deny it on oath" (*Lett. Theo.* 2.11-12). Recently Scott G. Brown has suggested that the Greek phrase ουδε προτεινουσιν αυτοις τα κατεψευσμενα συγχωρητεον του μαρκου ειναι το μυστικον ευαγγελιον αλλα και μεθ ορκου αρνετεον should be rendered "nor, when they put forward their falsifications, should one concede that it is *Mark's mystic gospel*, but should even deny it on oath" (*Mark's Other Gospel*, 30; italics added). According to this reading the gnostic would not be denying that Mark wrote an esoteric gospel, but that the Carpocratian additions were actual components of it.

the author's own example, the appropriate response of the proper gnostic is to prevent the "scandal" or "drowning" of others by any available means. In Scott G. Brown's wry estimation, "If lying to Christians for their own good was acceptable to Clement, it is hard to doubt that telling half-truths to heretics for the good of the church would not be."²⁴

The casual contention that Clement's discernment of gnosis is exclusively based upon the elucidation of "public apostolic writings" or even the more general category of "readily available texts,"²⁵ and its corollary that he shuns or marginalizes alternative avenues of the communication of wisdom, are equally dubious. His preferences towards the familiar books of the contemporary Christian canon are indisputable; Annewies van den Hoek and many others have noted that the most frequently cited author in his richly augmented writings "is, by quite a wide margin, good old Saint Paul."²⁶ Together the books of the Old and New Testaments account for nearly two-thirds of the approximately eight thousand literary quotations scattered throughout his extant corpus. Such statistics are illustrative of their vital role as sacred flint which "kindles the living spark of the soul, and directs the eye suitably for contemplation" (δε η γραφη το ζωπυρον της ψυχης και συντεινει το οικειον ομμα προς θεωριαν; 1.1.10.5), the primary source of the ecclesiastical rule of faith, and the indispensable apostolic witness to the life and teachings of the perfect διδασκαλος, Jesus Christ. However, Clement's views on scripture cannot be properly appreciated apart from the interrelated elements of esoterism and spiritual progress which so strongly color his thought. As the preceding discussion of the issues of verbal oaths and deceit has shown, the

²⁴ Brown, *Mark's Other Gospel*, 31.

²⁵ The former phrase is used by Osborn ("Clement of Alexandria," 224), the latter by Ehrman ("Response to Charles Hedrick," 161).

²⁶ Annewies van den Hoek, "Techniques of Quotation in Clement of Alexandria: A View of Ancient Literary Working Methods," in *Vigiliae Christianae* 50.3 (1996), 227.

learned theologian possesses a keen awareness of the exegetical disparities between members of the community of believers and a correspondingly keen interest in the protection of immature individuals from the overwhelming aftereffects of divine knowledge. This attitude also encompasses the subject of scripture, which offers one level of insight to the basic believers guided by *πιστις* but reveals additional secrets to those who have advanced and added the necessary *γνωσις*.²⁷ After quoting the prophet Hosea's equation of wisdom with comprehension (Hos. 14:9), Clement reminds his readers that "the Gnostic alone is able to understand and explain the things spoken by the Spirit obscurely" (*μονον δυνασθαι τον γνωστικον τα επικεκρυμενωσ προς του πνευματος ειρημενα νοησειν τε και διασαφησειν*; 6.15.115.5-6). Hence even the beloved, common texts which constitute the very heart of the faith are partially secret to a majority of simpler Christians from whom their higher meanings are withheld.

Moreover, many scholars have long been aware that "Clement's gnosis... draws on written material of very varied character,"²⁸ including Greco-Roman and extracanonical Judeo-Christian works. The breadth of his sources was such that Harnack suggests he regarded *any* form of religious or ethical writing as inspired,²⁹ while this may be overstating the case, his use of "it is written," a formulaic phrase normally reserved for the introduction of acknowledged scripture, with other literature is certainly striking.³⁰ Unlike many other apologists and commentators—unlike his most distinguished reputed pupil, the brilliant Origen—Clement borrows heavily from the renowned philosophers, poets, and historians of

²⁷ Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 111-113; Kovacs, "Concealment and Gnostic Exegesis," 419-420.

²⁸ Danielou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture*, 455.

²⁹ Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma* (7 vols; trans N. Buchanan et al; Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1907), 2.157-158; cited in James A. Brooks, "Clement of Alexandria as a Witness to the Development of the New Testament Canon," in *Second Century* 9.1 (1992), 49.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

ancient Greece and Rome. The magisterial indices compiled by Otto Stahlin between 1933-1936 contain more putative references to Plato than to any New Testament author with the exception of Paul. Homer and the Stoic philosopher Chrysippus of Soli are borrowed more frequently than the Gospel of John; Euripides more than the Gospel of Mark; Herodotus more than the Acts of the Apostles.³¹ Several Euripidean plays are unknown apart from his quotations.³² Although it may seem unnecessary, in light of the aforementioned statements of previous scholars it should be noted that these texts, so obviously important to Clement and his exegetical program through their extensive use, were neither apostolic in origin nor readily available or accessible to an overwhelmingly illiterate and uneducated Christian public.³³ The latter circumstance is a kind of esoterism in its own right, shrouding the texts in the twin cloaks of unavailability and incomprehensibility.

It does not seem appropriate, however, to adopt the extreme position of Petrus Dausch and conclude that Clement does not differentiate between the inspiration and weight of the most authoritative Christian literature and that of the writings of Greece and Rome;³⁴ the fact that roughly sixty percent of his total quotations come from the Old and New Testaments, and comments such as his enjoinder to the gnostic to “take his departure home to the true philosophy” (*απιεναι οικαδε δυνασθαι επι την αληθην φιλοσοφιαν*; 6.11.89.3) following the assimilation of the best portions of Hellenistic culture, preclude this type of

³¹ van den Hoek, “Techniques of Quotation in Clement of Alexandria,” 227, 237, 240 nn. 45-51. As indicated above, the statistics are those of Stahlin’s indices.

³² *Ibid.*, 231.

³³ The definitive treatment of literacy in the ancient world remains that of William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), whose overall literacy rate of approximately ten percent throughout the Hellenistic and Roman periods is endorsed by others such as Harry Gamble (*Books and Readers in the Early Church* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995], 4). Harris also notes that both Clement and Origen admit that Christianity is a largely uneducated movement (319), making it even more unlikely that its members would have possessed ready familiarity with the pagan classics.

³⁴ Petrus Dausch, *Der neytestamentliche Schriftcanon und Ciemens von Alexandrien* (Freiburg: Herder, 1894), 52-52; Quoted in Brooks, “Clement of Alexandria as a Witness,” 49.

judgment. Instead these statistics serve as indisputable indications of Clement's repeatedly stated belief that classical culture includes a mutilated but discernible fragment of divine truth: "the barbarian and Hellenic philosophy has torn off a fragment of eternal truth not from the mythology of Dionysus, but from the theology of the ever-living Word" (ἡ τε βαρβαρος ἡ τε ελληνηκη φιλοσοφια την αιδιον αληθειαν σπαραγμον τινα ου της δε του λογου του οντος αι θεολογιας πεποιηται; 1.13.58.6). Such fragments may be successfully extracted by the fully actualized gnostic, who is able to separate the core of universal truth from the useless husk.³⁵ Indeed, those who are able to accomplish this task without falling away from the message of the church are commanded to do so on behalf of those who cannot: "he who culls what is useful for the advantage of the catechumens, and especially when they are Greeks... must not abstain from erudition... but must collect as many aids as possible for his hearers" (τω δ απανθιζομενω το χριωδες εις ωφελειαν των κατηχουμενων και μαλιστα Ελληνων... ουκ αφεκτεον της φιλομαθιας... πλειω δ ως ενι μαλιστα βοηθηματα τοις επαιουσιν ερανιστεον; 6.11.89.2-3).

The identical principle of gnostic exegetical ability illuminates Clement's occasional appropriation of early Christian texts and ideas identified as suspect or spurious by other authors. He quotes the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, which the ecclesiastical historian Eusebius of Caesarea lists among the "disputed books" (των αντιλεγομενων; *Ecc. Hist.* 3.15.6), on three occasions; he is also a principal extant source of the now-fragmentary *Gospel of the Egyptians* and the *Preaching of Peter*.³⁶ James A. Brooks holds that "it is possible—even probable—that Clement recognized as scripture four or five early Christian writings which failed to find a

³⁵ This metaphor is used by Clement himself at the beginning of the *Stromateis*, when he speaks of intellects "feeding on the Hellenic philosophy, the whole of which, like nuts, is not eatable" (αυξουσαι αι δε κατα την Ελληνικην νεμομεναι φιλοσοφιαν ης καθαπερ και των καρυν ου το παν εδωδιμον; 1.1.7.3-4).

³⁶ Brooks, "Clement of Alexandria as a Witness," 44-47.

place in the canon.”³⁷ Despite his forceful refutations of some interpretations of the heterodox circles which emerged under Basilides and Valentinus in Alexandria during the second century, Kovacs has shown that he often “accepts much of their exegesis” with little or no correction required.³⁸ Overall, Clement’s extensive, favorable use of a plethora of texts of numerous genres and characters strongly suggests that the emphasis is not restricted to the texts themselves, but also encompasses the state of the one who reads them. While the most prevalent portions of the emerging Christian canon are indisputably central, and represent the pedagogical key which one must possess in order to complete the journey to *γνωσις*, once enlightened the God-given essences of many notable writings may be exposed—even those unknown to almost all believers.

In addition to documents which possess elements of secrecy through multiple levels of interpretation, extreme erudition, or sheer obscurity, Clement recognizes the value of those which remain entirely hidden until the prospective reader has proven himself worthy. Kummel’s oft-repeated contention that the venerable father does not speak of “ecclesiastical archives holding secret writings” in any other known exemplar is, at present, accurate,³⁹ but he does speak approvingly of similar archives under the auspices of the renowned Greco-Roman philosophical schools. In the midst of the fifth book of the *Stromateis*, a book largely dedicated to the reclamation of esoteric terminology and categories from the followers of

³⁷ Ibid, 47. In the discussion immediately before this statement, however, only four proposed candidates are mentioned: the *Apocalypse of Peter*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, and the *Preaching of Peter*. Thus it is unclear if Brooks had another specific writing in mind, or if he simply wished to illustrate the influence of a number of ultimately extracanonical writings. While Brooks’ definition of scripture is not explicitly stated, it seems to denote books which were especially or supremely authoritative in the life and teachings of the church.

³⁸ Kovacs, “Concealment and Gnostic Exegesis,” 426. In particular, she points to a passage in *Exa.* 23.4-5 where Clement’s image of Christ has been adapted from the Valentinian doctrine of two separate salvific figures.

³⁹ Kummel, “Auf den Spuren des Urmarkus?” Quoted in Schenke, “The Mystery of the Gospel of Mark,” 70.

Valentinus,⁴⁰ he provides a catalog of the ways in which such groups protect their special knowledge. He quickly mentions that “the Epicureans too say that they have things that may not be uttered, *and do not allow all to peruse those writings*” (οἱ Ἐπικουρειοὶ φασὶ τίνα καὶ παρ αὐτοῦ ἀπορρητὰ εἶναι καὶ μὴ πᾶσιν ἐπιτρέπειν ἐντυγχάνειν τοῦτοις τοῖς γραμμασιν; *Strom*, 5.9.58.1; italics added). Similarly, “The Stoics also say that by the first Zeno [Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism; c. 334-c. 262 BCE] *things were written which they do not readily allow disciples to read, without their first giving proof whether or not they are genuine philosophers*” (οἱ Στωικοὶ λεγούσι Ζηνῶνι τῷ πρώτῳ γεγραφθῆναι τίνα ἃ μὴ ραδίως ἐπιτρέπουσι τοῖς μαθηταῖς ἀναγνώσκειν μὴ οὐχὶ πείραν δέδωκοσι πρότερον εἰ γνησίως φιλοσοποῖεν; 5.9.58.2-3; italics added). The proclivities of these groups are not invoked disapprovingly, but in conjunction with Clement’s development of a single program of progressive education and revelation as a rebuttal to the Valentinian proposal of two distinct salvific paths.⁴¹ The letter’s tale of an expanded, secret gospel of Mark limited to the eyes and ears of a chosen few who had successfully demonstrated their abilities (*Lett. Theo.* 1.21-2.2) is precisely in line with the approved safeguards of the Epicureans and the Stoics.

A final point which must be raised in an evaluation of Clement’s opinions on written sources does not concern written sources at all, but rather the role of oral transmission of tradition. As the product of a largely oral culture and an advocate of the seclusion of the highest levels of divine truth within deep mysteries as a check against the unworthy, Clement clearly believed that some knowledge was too powerful to be committed to written form, no

⁴⁰ Cf. Kovacs, “Concealment and Gnostic Exegesis,” 413, 418.

⁴¹ Ibid, 416-417, 428. The Valentinian school apparently established a sharp distinction between Christians possessing *πίστις* and those possessing *γνῶσις*; the latter were intrinsically superior to the former, and while salvation was made available to both, it was accomplished through different means. Clement, however, places the two in a progressive rather than apposite relationship. Kovacs provides a succinct summation of the project: “Clement has transformed the Valentinian idea of two ways of salvation into two stages of the one way of salvation and made it a central theme of his theology.”

matter how strongly its interpretive or physical access was restricted. The *Stromateis* begins with its author questioning whether “written compositions” (των γραμμάτων; 1.1.1.1) should even be produced, as “knowledge belongs not to all... yet written compositions are for the many” (ει δε μη παντων η γνωσις... τοις πολλοις τα συγγραμματα; 1.1.2.2).⁴² The danger of intellectual contamination is manifest. Ultimately the potential instructional value of quality literature justifies its creation and dissemination (e.g., 1.1.10.5), but Clement retains his privileged views of oral transmission despite drafting and publishing voluminously. Stroumsa rightly emphasizes that the esoteric expositions of the fifth book of the *Stromateis* contain a declaration that the fullness of the transcendent God cannot be encompassed by mere words and Platonic quotations favoring memorization over parchment in order to foster careful learning and to protect hidden truth.⁴³ Furthermore, the fountainhead of gnosis was an oral, not a written, source: the post-resurrection teachings given by Jesus to his brother James the Just, John, and Peter, and conveyed by them to the lesser ranks of the apostolic generation in turn.⁴⁴ Upon turning to the *Letter to Theodore*, one finds that the secret or mystical gospel of Mark, while powerful, is itself subordinate to “the things not to be uttered” and the “hierophantic teaching of the Lord” (τα απορρητα; την ιεροφαντικην διδασκαλιαν του κυριου; *Lett. Theo.* 1.22-24). In any case, a cursory yet representative review of Clement’s use of source materials reveals a scene of startling complexity which has not been fully appreciated by the scholars attempting to establish a discontinuity between the letter and the remainder of the corpus.

⁴² As the eleventh-century Codex Laurentianus, which contains the complete extant text of the *Stromateis*, has been mutilated, the actual opening lines of the treatise have been lost. This is the beginning of the remaining portion.

⁴³ Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 37. The statements regarding the fullness of God and the Platonic quotations are found in *Strom.* 5.10.75.3.

⁴⁴ This is the genealogy of transmission found in a fragment of Clement’s *Hypotyposes* preserved by Eusebius of Caesarea (*Ecccl. Hist.* 2.1.4); cited in Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 37.

As the prudent reader is doubtlessly aware, the need for brevity precludes any possibility of a comprehensive or definitive judgment here. The twin siren songs of groundbreaking discovery and personal prestige—the very motives occasionally ascribed to Morton Smith by proponents of forgery theories—have marred many admirable yet ultimately overreaching articles. It is possible, however, to present preliminary findings which will hopefully merit further attention from more brilliant and more innovative minds. The conclusions of Kummel, Osborn, Ehrman, and others that the ideological milieu of the letter is completely contrary to that of the acknowledged works of Clement are, at best, highly tenuous. Far from instituting a total injunction against deceit, the venerable theologian recognizes conditions under which those few Christians who have completed the journey to gnosis must act surreptitiously in order to contain the potentially explosive power entrusted to them. Moreover, the claim that the exclusive foundations of his gnosis are the publicly disseminated scriptures of the faith is overly simplistic; it obscures his obvious esoteric tendencies and explicit admiration of orally transmitted tradition as well as the ability of the wholly actualized gnostic to distill the divine essence from an astonishing range of written materials. Any future rejections of the authenticity of the letter on the grounds of thematic incongruity will thus require new supporting arguments.⁴⁵

Beyond its analytical deductions, this brief paper may potentially serve as a clarion call to the academic community, advocating renewed attention to an unforgivably overlooked text and condemning an unfortunate lack of interdisciplinary interest and the

⁴⁵ While the issues of lying and secret texts have been the most common and the most significant examples of substantive arguments against Clementine authorship of the *Letter to Theodore*, a few other candidates have begun to arise. Stephen Carlson (*The Gospel Hoax*, 57) suggests, for instance, that the quotations from the secret gospel are too literal to have come from the pen of Clement. While it is difficult to pursue this line of inquiry without any other surviving correspondence of Clement, any attention given to this long-ignored subject is a positive step. For a response to this and other aspects of his thesis, see Brown, “The *Letter to Theodore*: Morton Smith’s Case Against Clement’s Authorship,” in *JECs* 16.4 (2008), 535-572.

blithe acceptance of the research of previous scholars. Although Smith himself collected opinions from a number of eminent patristic specialists, including Henry Chadwick, Robert Grant, Cyril Richardson, and Arthur Darby Nock, in his initial quest to verify the origins of the manuscript,⁴⁶ the presence of the secret gospel excerpts attracted the interest of numerous authorities whose primary training was in biblical studies and therefore possessed varying degrees of competence and interest in later Christian literature and thought. When some mention of Clement was deemed necessary in the interests of completeness, the ad hoc arguments of Kummel, delivered less than a year after the publication of Smith's pair of books, were simply repeated—warmed over again and again in a kind of academic microwave without the benefit of any intervening advances concerning the world of the fathers. This unfortunate situation, combined with the larger public's concentration upon the more sensational aspects of the growing debate, virtually eliminated the question of substantive comparison from the scholarly docket. This problem must be rectified if the study of the *Letter to Theodore* is to proceed in a fresh and progressive way.⁴⁷ More than thirty years ago Hans Dieter Betz wisely opined that “Smith's book and the texts he discovered should be carefully and seriously studied. Criticizing Smith is not enough.”⁴⁸ These recommendations have been only partially met; much of the letter has been shunted aside and has retained its own secrets as a result. Until it is fully evaluated as a potential product of Clement of Alexandria, an entire dimension of this compelling story will remain shrouded in ignorance, misconception, and stagnation.

⁴⁶ Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, 6.

⁴⁷ One recent article which may be generally classified in this vein is that of Jeff Jay (“A New Look at the Epistolary Framework of the *Secret Gospel of Mark*,” in *J ECS* 16.4 [2008], 573-597). Although Jay does not conduct an assessment of the letter on Clementine grounds, his innovative epistolographic analysis, prompted by a desire to “step away from the gospel fragments” (576), represents a new contribution. Ultimately he finds significant continuities between the *Letter to Theodore* and the content and style of ancient letters, such that “[t]hose developing theories of forgery must thus posit a forger whose breadth of knowledge is becoming, we may say, superhuman” (597).

⁴⁸ Quoted in Fuller, *Longer Mark*, 18.