THE SECRET GNOSIS OF ALEXANDRIA: MEDIUM OR MESSAGE?

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The Word that Jesus spoke became "incarnate" and grew in different historical cultures and traditions. Sometimes, however, the culture in which the Truth is expressed becomes so blended with it that the medium itself is hard to distinguish from the message. When that happens it is difficult from within the tradition to evaluate the different parts critically, for cultural traditions can be so strong that even when the content of the tradition is denied it has to be rejected in terms drawn from the tradition itself. The history of the Homeric poems is an example of this. Pythagoras and later philosophers denied the theology of the poems but they did so in Homeric terms, which had become the conventional images of the day.¹

The followers of Pythagoras continued to read Homer and Hesiod, but in the new light of their master's teaching. If, as some commentators suggest, this was "simply the desires of speculative thinkers to appropriate for their own use some at least of the mythical traditions",² one would still need to ask why the philosophers needed to use that tradition. It certainly witnesses to the continuing strength of Homer's influence.³ To evaluate a tradition one needs to stand outside it to see more clearly and objectively. The Renaissance

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¹ Pythagoras claimed he went down to Hades and saw the souls of Homer and Hesiod in torment because of their false narratives about the Gods. Diog. Laert. 8.21.
³ "How often do Plato and the early Aristotle borrow the language and symbols (of the mysteries) to give colour and form to their own religious feeling!" W. Jaeger, Aristotle, tr. R. Robinson, (2nd ed. Oxford 1962), pp.160-161. For Plato's mystical language on initiation to the beautiful, see Symp. 210a-212c, for initiation to the truth, see Phaedr. 249a-250c. "The transforming of the mysteries, discernible already in Plato, into mysterious teachings which elevate the soul to union with the divine has had a long subsequent history by way of Alexandrian theology and Neo-Platonism to early mediavel mysticism." Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, IV, pp. 808-809.
and the Reformation provided just such a critique for the theology of the High Middle Ages.

Much of the intellectual heritage of the Middle Ages was mediated through Alexandria. When Bernard of Clairvaux interpreted the Scriptures allegorically and Thomas Aquinas reflected on the nature of biblical inspiration they did so as heirs to a tradition of Biblical interpretation that had become dominant both in East and West, but had its origins in the Hellenistic tradition of Alexandria. This is true not only in theology but in literature as well. Dante almost canonised Virgil — all because of the fourth Eclogue (the so called *Messianic Eclogue*) that foretells the birth of a child in a Golden Age. If Dante almost canonised Virgil, the author of the *Dies Irae* certainly canonised the Sibyl. Ever since the time of Augustine the Sibyl had been venerated in the Latin West because of her association with Virgil in the Messianic Eclogue. He refers to the Sibyl as the authority for his prophecy, but whether this was the Hebrew Sibyl is much debated among scholars. The debate, however, is beside the point for our purposes, for Christians in fact thought that he had read the Hebrew Sibyl and interpreted him accordingly, thus making him into a messianic prophet.

The reference to the Sibyl occurs in the first stanze of the *Dies Irae* —

"Dies Irae, dies illa,  
Solvet saeculum in favilla,  
Teste David cum Sybilla"

(Day of Wrath and Doom impending  
David's word with Sibyl's blending.)

It seems strange to us that the pagan Sibyl should be called upon as a witness in the same breath as David, representing Hebrew prophecy. Both, of course, represent ancient traditions, but in Alexandria these traditions had become almost inextricably intertwined, or *blended* as the English translation says so aptly. It is this *blending* that we shall now examine.

The Sibyline tradition in Greece and Asia goes back beyond historic times. In Greek the Sibyl is first mentioned by Heraclitus in a fragment

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preserved by Clement of Alexandria. What is important for our purposes is that they were regarded as divinely inspired prophetesses who spoke in riddles. Even in the time of Socrates and Plato they were consulted both on private business and state affairs. In the *Phaedrus* Socrates spoke of the oracles with the greatest respect, for many benefits had come to individuals and the state through the Oracles of the Sibyl, and those at Delphi and Dodona, but they were benefits conferred when the prophetess was out of her mind, possessed by divine madness:

διὰ μανίας θελα μέντοι δόσει διδομένης

(through madness given by divine gift)

Virgil translated the verb μαίνεσθαι by *inspirare*, and *inspiration* is probably the best English translation. Socrates speaks quite typically of the benefit to mankind of prophetic inspiration, and he does so in terms that could just as easily be spoken by a Jew, for there are examples of the same prophetic frenzy in the Old Testament, and of prophets possessed by the Divine Spirit, so that this explanation of Socrates was to become part of the Christian tradition on inspiration, though mediated through Philo Judaeus.

Because of the similarity between the Sibylline oracular tradition and their own Hebrew prophecy the Jews of the Diaspora made use of the Sibyl to promote their own religion and traditions in Alexandria. An apologetic literature grew up called the *Sibylline Oracles* where the Sibyl claims to be the daughter-in-law of Noah and praises the Jews for the purity of their religion and adoration of the one true God. These were later added to in Christian times and Clement of Alexandria refers to this Sibyl as the prophetess of the Hebrews "divinely taught", one of our own poets, and Origen calls her "the noblest of the Hellenes". Thus the Jews appropriated for themselves, for apologetic purposes, what was useful in the Greek Tradition.

With Clement of Alexandria the process was analogous but contrary. Whereas the Jews and the Christian apologists had searched the Greek

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5 Diels-Kranz, 92.
6 *Phaedr.* 244a.
7 Str. VI, 5: Protr. ii, viii etc.
8 *Contra Cels.* vii, 56.
tradition for what was useful to their propaganda, Clement came to Christianity with all the wealth of Greek culture behind him and interpreted Christianity in that light. Just as Clement was able to accept the prophecy of the Sibyl, so he did not see the Greek tradition as foreign and incompatible with Christianity, for Greek Philosophy had been revealed by God to philosophers such as Plato and Socrates, as the Law had been revealed to the Hebrews. Both were a preparation for Christ, and both were covenants with God.\(^9\) He had no difficulty, therefore, in accepting the divine inspiration of the Oracles or the Socratic explanation of inspiration which he received from Philo. In fact it was Clement's Hellenistic approach to the inspired word that was for many centuries to become the norm for Christian interpretation of the Bible.

What were the influences on Clement? Let us return briefly to the Oracles. If we accept the evidence of Plutarch\(^10\) the Oracles of the Sibyl were the first examples of inspired utterance in Greece. They were enigmatic and so required interpretation. This twofold fact, inspiration and interpretation of a hidden meaning, was to have far reaching effects later for the interpretation of inspired texts. More immediately, it had a profound effect on philosophy. Heraclitus was aware of the equivocation of the Delphic Oracle:

"The Lord, to whom belongs the Delphic Oracle
neither speaks nor conceals, but indicates."\(^11\)

He seems to have modelled his own philosophic utterances on this. "To speak plainly about a subject would be to falsify it in the telling, for no genuine understanding would be communicated."\(^12\) Socrates, too, accepted that there was an undersense, υπονοία, in these Oracles that had to be looked for. In the Apology (33c) the Delphic Oracle is reported to have said

\(^9\) Str. 1, 7; 1,5; VI,6,13,17; VII, 2. Admittedly, elsewhere Clement says that the Greeks stole their philosophy from Moses, something he had learned from Hebrew apologetic, but the effect is the same, for it is still of divine origin. Str.V,14.

\(^10\) Plutarch, de Pyth. Or. 561.

\(^11\) ὁ ἄναξ οὐ τὸ μαντεῖον ἐστὶ τὸ ἐν Δελφοῖς, οὔτε λέγει οὔτε κρύπτει ἀλλὰ σημαίνει. DK., 22, 93.

that Socrates was the wisest of men. He did not dispute this, but sought rather to find out what the Oracle actually meant, for only a fool would accept the words at face value. The Philosophers saw this search for the hidden truth as of the greatest importance. From this developed the concept of the philosophic myth; there are truths too great to be successfully encapsulated in precise definitions.

The Greeks also regarded the poets as inspired, especially Homer. For them his poetry was almost oracular. When people could no longer accept these poems at face value, they began to treat them like the Oracles and to look for a hidden meaning, but there was this difference: with the Oracles the hidden meaning, once exposed, was obviously contained in the literal sense, but with Homer they read the meaning into the text. This was quite arbitrary. Allegorical interpretation had begun.

There is one further influence on Clement of Alexandria and Alexandrian Christianity that we must discuss; the influence of the mystery religions. It is surprising to see them flourishing in the Hellenistic age of rationalism, but they were able to do so for the same reason that the poetry of Homer flourished, because of the Greek desire to look for a deeper meaning in language and symbol. In fact there is a close connection between symbolic language, allegory, gnosis and the mystery religions. These religions were based on myths which were deeply embedded in the Greek consciousness, but they naturally understood them according to the culture of their time. Put simply, the mystery religions were the re-enactment of an archetypical event belonging to the past, but in essence eternal. By means of images, signs and words, a new understanding of the myth was conveyed to the initiate which was inaccessible to rational cognition and expression, for mystical experiences cannot be conveyed simply by language; one needs images and signs as well as words, and these three are the elements of allegory. Of course no two generations would have viewed these mysteries in the same way. Each person brought his cultural conditioning with him. The rise of the mystery cults indicated an important change in religious thinking. It was not an understanding of the myths that the initiates were seeking, but the experience of them. It was the opinion of Aristotle that those being initiated


were not required to grasp anything with the understanding, but to experience something and to have certain dispositions of mind.\textsuperscript{15}

It is easy to see in the mysteries the genesis of gnosticism, both heretical and Christian, with the emphasis on degrees of initiation according to the capacity of the initiate to receive them.\textsuperscript{16} There was also what Hugo Rahner called the "sociological law of concealment". "The deeper and more fervent religious experience becomes, the more men tend to safeguard it from the profane".\textsuperscript{17} Much of what happened in these mystery religions was done symbolically, and the experience, conveying something beyond the capacity of language or symbol, made the use of allegory more natural. "It lies in the very nature of the symbolic word and the symbolic action that a spiritual meaning can never be fully and exhaustively expressed in sensuous terms. The symbol always retains its mysterious background; it is a garment that reveals, and at the same time masks, the form of the body".\textsuperscript{18}

There is a long-standing connection between Alexandria and Eleusis,\textsuperscript{19} and Clement of Alexandria in the second chapter of the Protrepticus shows a close acquaintance with these mysteries. In fact Clement enjoins silence on the true gnostic in much the same words as are found in Iamblichus:

"For it is not right to offer to anyone who comes what has been obtained with so much struggle nor to expose to the profane the mysteries of the Word."\textsuperscript{20}

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\textsuperscript{15} Fr. 15, in Aristotelis qui ferebantur librorum Fragmenta, Valentinus Rose (ed.), (Stuttgart 1967).
\textsuperscript{16} It is the Christian's "lesser mysteries", like the spring initiation of the Lesser Mysteries at Agrae, preparatory to the Greater Mysteries of Eleusis in Autumn. "And He, receiving you who have been trained up in excellent discipline, will teach you the oracles". Paed. iii, XII, 98,1, cf. Prot.8,12; Str.vXI, 70ff. J.C. McLelland, God the Anonymous, Patristic Monograph Series 4, (Philadelphia 1976), p.49.
\textsuperscript{17} H. Rahner "The Christian Mystery and the Pagan Mysteries", in The Mysteries, cit.supra, p.364.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p.365.
\textsuperscript{20} Str.v,9,57,2. cf. what Iamblichus says in Vita Pythagori 75.
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Thus the supreme mysteries, in order to be protected, must be passed on in veiled form. This veiled form is allegory. For Philo and the later Alexandrians the book of mysteries is the Bible and only the initiated can penetrate to its truths. They do this by means of allegorical interpretation. Rahner explains this clearly:

"This Greek mysticism of the symbolic word was the basis for the allegorical exegesis developed in Alexandria. The divine word of Scripture is a mystery, and behind the audible meaning of its words and images, of its whole historical narrative, are concealed unknown realms of the spirit and unsuspected possibilities of ascent to the imageless truth. For those endowed with an eye for this, that which is perceptible to the senses is only a kind of extension, jutting into this dark world, of a more real, transcendent realm, a miniature sketch of the vast divine ideas that are the source and ultimate goal of all created thought. The man endowed with this eye is the true "gnostic", who is "initiated" into the mystery of the divine word."\(^{21}\)

Rahner here implies, and later commentators make it more explicit, that this "endowment" of the eye is the allegorical method itself. It unlocks these mysteries hidden in the text and is therefore itself part of the Secret Gnosis that has been handed down. R.P.C. Hanson says that Clement, basing his argument on the Epistle of Barnabas's allegorization of the Old Testament, especially the Law-books, believed that "Barnabas received a special secret tradition through the apostles from Christ. The main content of this tradition Clement apparently believed to be the allegorization of the Old Testament . . . and he persuaded himself that this supposed secret teaching of Barnabas had been maintained independently of the New Testament up to his own day".\(^{22}\)

\(^{21}\) Rahner, op.cit. p.366. Italics mine.

Thus the philosophic and religious atmosphere of Alexandria favoured this connection between \( \gamma \nu \omega \sigma \varsigma \) and \( \mu \upsilon \sigma \tau \eta \rho \iota \omicron \nu \) :

"The idea that the highest doctrines (namely the doctrines concerning the highest divinity, the origin of the world and of man, and the destiny of the human soul after the death of the body) represent a \textit{secrectum arcanum} which can be revealed only to very few initiated is characteristic of the Jewish-Alexandrine philosophy, of Middle Platonism, Neoplatonism, and also of the heretical Christian Gnosticism which Clement knew very well and which in some sense he wanted to emulate."  

Clement saw this connection between \( \gamma \nu \omega \sigma \varsigma \) and \( \mu \upsilon \sigma \tau \eta \rho \iota \omicron \nu \) very clearly. "The secret character of the doctrines of \textit{gnosis}", Lilla writes, "explains why Clement often calls them \( \mu \upsilon \sigma \tau \eta \rho \iota \alpha \), represents the study and apprehension of them as a process of initiation\(^{24}\) (\( \mu \nu \epsilon \iota \sigma \theta \alpha \iota \)) and considers those who have attained a knowledge of the higher truth as \( \mu \upsilon \sigma \tau \alpha \iota \)."\(^{25}\) Clement regards true gnosticism as a charism which grants to the initiated knowledge of mysteries forbidden to the ordinary Christian, a knowledge which transforms their moral and religious life, and makes them friends of closely bound, although a familiar feature of Alexandrian philosophic teaching, and already applied to the Old Testament by Philo the Jew, was something entirely new in Christian thought. One can detect in Clement's writings a certain anxiety to avoid the charge of innovation .. . It is the use of the word (i.e. \( \mu \upsilon \sigma \tau \eta \rho \iota \omicron \nu \)) which is all important for his purpose, conveying as it does the suggestion that the Scriptures recognise such a practice by which divine truth is concealed from unworthy seekers". H.G. Marsh, "The Use of Mysterion in the Writings of Clement of Alexandria with special reference to his Sacramental Doctrine", \textit{Journal of Theological Studies}, Vol.37, 1936, p.65. See also H.A. Echle, "Sacramental Initiation as a Christian Mystery - Initiation according to Clement of Alexandria", in \textit{Von Christlichen Mysterium} ed. B. Neunheuser, (Dusseldorf 1951), p.54.


\(^{24}\) Lilla refers to \textit{Str. V, II, 70,7}.

\(^{25}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p.146. Lilla gives a list of passages where Clement uses these terms.
God equal or even superior to the angels.26 Clement describes these gnostics in the same terms as the Stoics used for their truly wise man.27

Some have attributed these ideas to the influence of heretical gnosticism,28 but this is an assumption that no-one has tried to prove. I suggest that the sources of both true and false gnosticism are to be found in the Greek tradition we have been examining, that finds its expression in Socrates, Plato, the Stoics and the Mystery Religions. All that we find in Clement can be explained from this source without recourse to heretical gnosticism. It is what we would expect to find in the teaching of a Hellenistic Christian. In fact Clement appeals to Plato29 to justify this elitism.30

There are, then, two streams of culture which meet in Clement, the Jewish and the Greek, and it is the latter which predominates. Clement believed that God had ordained three covenants, the Law for the Jews, Philosophy for the Greeks and a Christian covenant which combines and transcends both. Thus Clement and the Alexandrian Church were able to draw on a much wider field for theological speculation. Not only did he recognise the Sibylline Oracles as inspired, Greek philosophy too was revelation, so that he could draw on it for insights into the nature of God, his infinity and immutability.31 This is true especially of his Negative Theology which is Neoplatonic.32 For example in describing the processes of abstraction required for the human mind to come to some remote concept of God he draws on Euclid's definition of a point.33 We cannot predicate

26 Str. VII, 10, 57.
28 Cf. Lilla, cit. supra, n.23.
29 Ep 11, 312D, 314 B.C.
30 Str.V.10.
32 "Clement, in fact, was the first to point out clearly that man never hope to understand or fully reach God and that his mystical search for Him is in effect an infinite quest". B.Otis, "Cappadocian Thought as a Coherent System", Dumbarton Oaks Papers, Vol. 12, 1958, p.108.
33 Str. V.11, 71,2.
anything of God, for none of the logical categories of Aristotle applies to him. This attitude carries over to our relationship with God, for Clement says that God is to be worshipped in silence.\textsuperscript{34} This is very different from the Old and New Testament teaching on God, and quite different from the non-Alexandrian Christian writers such as the Apologists. They tended to follow the Jewish tradition of apologetic, setting Christianity in opposition to Greek culture, and castigated the philosophers for their concept of the deity, though they approved of what was good in Greek philosophy. Thus there was a fundamental difference between the Alexandrian Church and the rest of Christianity, where even those who were born Greek tended to see Greek culture as exterior and somewhat alien. In Alexandria the Greek tradition was perfectly at home with Christianity, just as much as the Jewish tradition, with which it was blended.

The instrument that was used to blend these cultures was allegorical exegesis. This secret gnosis enabled Clement, as a true gnostic, to see Greek philosophy as a revelation latent in sacred scripture. In fact it is this manner of interpreting scripture that shows most clearly the difference between Alexandria and the other Churches, and the extent of Alexandria's dependence on Greek thought. The other Churches, more closely dependent on the Jewish heritage, interpreted the Bible typologically. But typology, which has been defined as prophecy in action, is in fact foreign to the Greek way of thinking, for it depends on a real evaluation of history. This point is important, for Clement was a child of his culture. He thought in Greek terms and hardly ever used typology, though it was known to him from the New Testament. When he did use it he allegorized it. The great typological themes of the Bible are missing in his writings. There is no typology of the creation and the Garden of Paradise; there is no mention of the Exodus, nor indeed of the types common to the Palestinian tradition, the brazen serpent, Moses's outstretched arms and the Paschal Lamb, which can be traced back through Cyprian, Irenaeus and Justin to Jewish testimonia collected and used

\textsuperscript{34} Str. VII, 1,2,3. cf. R. Mortley, "The Theme of Silence in Clement of Alexandria", \textit{Journal of Theological Studies}, Vol. 24, pt.1, 1973, pp.199-200. With Clement there is a connection between silence and Mystery: "Like the initiate in the Mysteries, Clement hesitates to reveal explicitly the essentials of Christian doctrine. Hence the need for a treatise that will possess a double character: it must reveal without diverging from the necessity to conceal." \textit{ibid.}, p.201.
Clement relied on Philo for his interpretation of the Old Testament, as Christians elsewhere depended on Palestinian Jewish sources, and there is no typology in Philo. It is Clement's approach to history that makes typology impossible, for, in imitation of Philo, he even allegorized events that he knew were historical facts, seeing a hidden meaning even in the account of human actions. Clement did not seek correspondences between the Old and New Testament. He sought rather the Platonic correspondence between the earthly and heavenly. If he had any typology at all it was vertical. Drawing his inspiration from Plato he saw, for example, an analogy between the earthly hierarchy of bishops, priests and deacons, and the angelic glory of the heavenly world. Even when he read typology in the New Testament and in writers such as Justin, it would have been unconsciously filtered out by his Greek mentality. How else can we explain that he was totally uninfluenced by Justin's exegesis, which was typological, though in other matters he was undoubtedly influenced by Justin? The same can be said for Barnabas. Clement refers to these letters eight times and uses them "mainly as a mine for suggestions about allegorizing the Old Testament Law". Though the work is rich, even exuberant, in its typology, Clement does not seem to have noticed that at all.

Other Churches looked at Greek culture and learning from the outside, that is, they assimilated it, borrowing what was useful in order to explain Revelation. Alexandria tended to do the opposite; it absorbed Revelation and understood it in terms of its philosophy, which was mostly Platonic, but with some dependence on the teaching of Aristotle. Because of the influence of Augustine the Platonic tradition continued in Western theology, whereas the works of Aristotle were mostly neglected until the time of Aquinas. It is not surprising that, with the renaissance of Aristotelian studies, theologians such as Aquinas should find Aristotle's philosophy so congenial. It was for them, in a sense, a homecoming — a rediscovery of some of the roots of Western theology, because Aristotle's philosophy was implicit in much of

the Church's teaching about God and in its doctrine of the Natural Law. This philosophy still underpins our theology, but perhaps some of these presuppositions need to be reassessed for, in the course of time, part, at least, of the medium had subtly become the message.