

The 'Secret' Gospel of Mark

F.F. Bruce

*Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis
in the University of Manchester*

**The Ethel M. Wood Lecture
delivered before the University of London
on 11 February 1974**

[p.3]

I. Secret Writings

All the world loves a mystery, and there is something about the announcement of a 'secret' Gospel which attracts instant attention.

In Judaism of the closing centuries B.C. and early centuries A.D. there was a number of apocalyptic writings, bearing the names of authors long since deceased—Enoch, Noah, the Hebrew patriarchs, Ezra and so forth. If it was asked why there was such a time-lag between their alleged date of composition and their publication, the answer was that the works were 'sealed', kept secret by heavenly direction, until the time to which they pointed forward had arrived; then their contents might be divulged. A New Testament example of this is the sealed scroll in the Apocalypse, containing a record of the divine purpose for the world, which could not be put into effect until someone appeared with the requisite authority to break the seals and expose the contents.

In Judaism, again, by contrast with those works which were suitable for public reading in synagogue (the canonical books of the Hebrew Bible) there were others which were 'hidden', withdrawn from public circulation, and reserved for the eyes of those with sufficient maturity to profit by them. According to one rabbinical tradition, the canonical book of Ezekiel was at one time in danger of being 'hidden' in this sense of being withdrawn from public currency because of theological difficulties raised by some of its contents (TB *Shabbat* 13 b).

The Greek adjective *apokryphos*, which was used for such 'hidden' or 'secret' books, is the word from which our adjective 'apocryphal' is derived. We, however, have come to use this adjective of those Old Testament books which, while they were not included in the Hebrew Bible, came to be recognized as canonical or deuterocanonical over wide areas of the Christian church. This usage goes back to Jerome, who used the Latin

[p.4]

adjective *apocryphus* to denote those books which were suitable for reading in church to inculcate ethical lessons but were not to be used for the establishment of doctrine (*Prologues* to

Samuel and to the Solomonic books). But there was never anything 'hidden' or 'secret' about most of those books.

In Gnosticism, however, the idea of secret writings, containing truth for the spiritual *élite*, enjoyed a fresh and vigorous lease of life. In addition to his public teaching, preserved in the church's gospel tradition, whether oral or written, it was maintained that Jesus had imparted private teaching to his disciples which was not to be blazed abroad to the world at large but communicated to a minority of favoured souls who had proved themselves worthy to receive it. If New Testament writers like Paul and John refuse to countenance the idea that there is any Christian teaching which may not be imparted to Christians as a whole, this simply proves that already in the first century the idea of an esoteric teaching for the spiritual *élite* was gaining currency.

If, as Luke says, Jesus spent the interval of forty days between his resurrection and ascension telling his disciples 'the things concerning the kingdom of God' (Acts 1: 3), what were those things? The New Testament writings do not go into much detail about them, but the second century was very willing to make good the deficiencies of the first. The gnostic compilation *Pistis Sophia*, for example (known only from a fourth-century Coptic manuscript), purports to record teaching given by Jesus to his disciples over a period of *twelve years* between his resurrection and final ascension. The *Secret Book (Apocryphon) of John* tells how the exalted Christ appeared to John some time after his ascension, in the role of the gnostic Redeemer, and promised to be with John and his fellow-disciples always (cf. Matt. 28: 20). The same literary device could be used quite early in anti-gnostic circles, as is seen possibly in the *Didache* ('The Teaching of the Lord through the Twelve Apostles to the Gentiles') and certainly in the *Epistle of the Apostles*, a second-century treatise extant in Coptic and Ethiopic versions.

The gnostic library from near Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt, discovered about 1945, includes among its forty-nine treatises (contained in thirteen leather-bound papyrus codices) several

[p.5]

whose titles proclaim their 'secret' character. Such are the *Secret Book (Apocryphon) of John* (already mentioned), the *Secret Book (Apocryphon) of James* and (best known of all) the compilation called in its colophon the *Gospel according to Thomas*, which begins: 'These are the secret words which Jesus the Living One spoke and Didymus Judas Thomas wrote down'. Despite the designation of the following contents as 'secret words', there is nothing particularly secret about the 114 real or alleged sayings of Jesus which this work comprises; perhaps it was their interpretation that was secret. When the first popular English edition of the *Gospel of Thomas* was published—the excellent edition by R. M. Grant and D. N. Freedman—its public appeal was no doubt enhanced by its title: *The Secret Sayings of Jesus* (Collins, 1960).

Irenaeus speaks of his gnostic opponents as adducing 'an indescribable multitude of apocryphal and spurious scriptures' (*Heresies* i. 20.1), and elsewhere says that 'those who separate Jesus from the Christ, holding that the Christ remained impassible, while Jesus suffered, prefer the Gospel according to Mark' (*Heresies* iii. 11.7)—from which Irenaeus's editor W. W. Harvey inferred that another Gospel assigned to Mark, in addition to the well-known one, was current in

F.F. Bruce, *The 'Secret' Gospel of Mark*. The Ethel M. Wood Lecture delivered before the University of London on 11 February 1974. London: The Athlone Press, 1974. Pbk. pp.20.

Alexandria, although he was disposed to identify this other Gospel with the *Gospel of the Egyptians* (to which reference will be made later).

It is in the context of this wealth of esoteric gospel-literature that we have to evaluate the 'secret' Gospel of Mark to which our attention has been drawn in recent years by Professor Morton Smith, of the Department of History in Columbia University, New York City.

II *The Clementine Letter and the Expanded Gospel*

In 1958 Professor Smith was engaged in cataloguing the contents of the library of the ancient monastery of Mar Saba, in the wilderness of Judaea, some twelve miles south of Jerusalem, when he came upon a copy of Isaac Voss's edition of six Letters of Ignatius, printed and published at Amsterdam in 1646. On the end-papers of this volume was a copy, in what seemed to be a mid-eighteenth century hand, of a Greek letter, purporting to be the work of Clement the *stromateus*, meaning most probably

[p.6]

'the author of the *Styomateis*'—i.e. Clement of Alexandria (who flourished between A.D. 180 and 200). The letter launched an attack on the followers of the heretic Carpocrates and embodied an account (unfortunately broken off short at the end) of an expanded text of part of the tenth chapter of the Gospel of Mark.

Professor Smith reported his discovery to the Society of Biblical Literature at its ninety-sixth meeting in December 1960. He indicated that he was disposed to accept the ascription of the letter to Clement of Alexandria, but he submitted the text to the judgment of a few other scholars, specially competent in the Greek patristic field, some of whom agreed with him while others preferred a different origin. A. D. Nock was moved by 'instinct' to disagree with the ascription, although he wished to date the letter not later than the fourth century; J. Munck argued that the letter showed dependence on Eusebius and therefore could not be earlier than the fourth century. But the majority of the scholars consulted accepted the ascription to Clement; these included H. Chadwick, R. M. Grant and G. W. H. Lampe. We too may safely accept it as a working hypothesis.

The text of the letter was not published until the summer of 1973; it appeared, together with a translation and an exhaustive treatment of its literary, historical and religious implications, in Professor Smith's book *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Harvard University Press). At the same time he published a shorter and more popular—not to say sensational—volume entitled *The Secret Gospel* (Harper and Row, New York).

To evaluate Professor Smith's conclusions would take us far beyond the limits of an hour's lecture. Suffice it here to present an English translation of the document, based on Professor Smith's *editio princeps* of the Greek text, and discuss some of the issues which it raises.

The letter runs as follows:

From the Letters of the most holy Clement, author of the Stromateis.

To Theodore:

You have done well in muzzling the unmentionable doctrines of the Carpocratians. It is they who were prophetically called 'wandering

[p.7]

stars' [Jude 13], who stray from the narrow way of the commandments into the fathomless abyss of fleshly sins committed in the body. They have been inflated with the knowledge, as they say, of 'the deep things of Satan' [Rev. 2: 24]. They cast themselves unawares into the gloom of the darkness of falsehood [cf. Jude 13]. Boasting that they are free, they have become the slaves of lusts that bring men into bondage. These people must be totally opposed in every way. Even if they were to say something true, not even so would the lover of truth agree with them; everything that is true is not necessarily truth. Nor should one prefer the apparent truth which is according to human opinions to the real truth which is according to faith. But of the matters under dispute concerning the divinely-inspired Gospel according to Mark, some are utterly false and some, even if they contain certain things that are true, are not so truly delivered; for the things that are true are corrupted by those that are fictitious, so that, as it is said, 'the salt has lost its savour' [Matt. 5: 13 || Luke 14: 34].

Mark, then, during Peter's stay in Rome, recorded the acts of the Lord, not however reporting them all, for he did not indicate the mystical ones, but selected those which he thought most useful for the increase of the faith of those undergoing instruction.

When Peter had borne his witness (i.e. suffered martyrdom), Mark arrived in Alexandria, taking his own and Peter's memoirs. From these he copied into his first book the things appropriate for those who were making progress in knowledge but compiled a more spiritual Gospel for the use of those who were attaining perfection. Yet not even so did he divulge the unutterable things themselves, nor did he write down the Lord's hierophantic teaching. But adding to the previously written acts others also, he presented, over and above these, certain oracles whose interpretation he knew would provide the hearers with mystical guidance into the inner shrine of the seven-times-hidden truth. Thus, then, he made advance preparation—not grudgingly or incautiously, as I think—and on his death he left his composition to the church in Alexandria, where even until now it is very well guarded, being read only to those who are being initiated into the great mysteries.

But abominable demons are always devising destruction for the human race, and so Carpocrates, having been instructed by them, used deceitful devices so as to enslave a certain elder of the church in Alexandria and procured from him a copy of the mystical Gospel, which he proceeded to interpret in accordance with his own blasphemous and carnal opinion. Moreover, he polluted it further by

[p.8]

mixing shameless falsehoods with the holy and undefiled sayings, and from this mixture the dogma of the Carpocratians has been drawn out. To these people, then, as I have said already, one must never yield, nor must one make any concession to them when they pretend that their tissue of falsehoods is the mystical Gospel of Mark, but rather deny it with an oath. It is not necessary to speak *all* the truth to everyone; that is why the wisdom of God proclaims through Solomon: 'Answer a fool according to his folly' [Prov. 26: 5]—meaning that from those who are spiritually blind the light of the truth must be concealed. Scripture also says, 'From him who has not will be taken away' [Mark 4: 25] and 'Let the fool walk in darkness' [Eccles. 2: 14]. But we are sons of light, having been illuminated by 'the dayspring from on high' of the Spirit of the Lord [cf. Luke 1: 78], 'and where the Spirit of the Lord is', Scripture says, 'there is liberty' [2 Cor. 3: 17]; for 'to the pure all things are pure' [Tit. 1: 15]. To you, then, I will not hesitate to give an answer to your questions, exposing their falsehoods by the very words of the Gospel.

Thus far Clement's preamble (to some points in which we must come back); from now on he gives an account of the expanded text of Mark 10: 32ff. in the second edition of the Gospel to which he has referred:

Immediately after the section which begins *And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem* and continues to *after three days he will rise* [Mark 10: 32-4], there follows, as the text goes: 'And they come to Bethany, and there was a woman there whose brother had died. She came and prostrated herself before Jesus and says to him: "Son of David, pity me". The disciples rebuked her, and Jesus in anger set out with her for the garden where the tomb was. Immediately a loud voice was heard from the tomb, and Jesus approached and rolled the stone away from the entrance to the tomb. And going in immediately where the young man was he stretched out his hand and raised him up, taking him by the hand. The young man looked on him and loved him, and began to beseech him that he might be with him. They came out of the tomb and went into the young man's house, for he was rich. After six days Jesus laid a charge upon him, and when evening came the young man comes to him, with a linen robe thrown over his naked body; and he stayed with him that night, for Jesus was teaching him the mystery of the kingdom of God. When he departed thence, he returned to the other side of the Jordan'.

After this there follows *And James and John come forward to him*

[p.9]

and all that section [Mark 10: 35-45]. But as for 'naked to naked' and the other things about which you wrote, they are not to be found.

After the words *And he comes to Jericho* [Mark 10: 46a] it adds only: 'And there was the sister of the young man whom Jesus loved and his mother and Salome; and Jesus did not receive them'. But as for the many other things which you wrote, they are falsehoods both in appearance and in reality. Now the true interpretation, which is in accordance with the true philosophy...

F.F. Bruce, *The 'Secret' Gospel of Mark*. The Ethel M. Wood Lecture delivered before the University of London on 11 February 1974. London: The Athlone Press, 1974. Pbk. pp.20.

—and there the writing breaks off. Probably the scribe who copied the text on to the endpapers of the Ignatius volume found that his exemplar failed him at that point, so he could copy no more.

III Clement and the Gospel Text

That, then, is the text: what are we to make of it?

No letters by Clement of Alexandria have been preserved, but two or three citations from letters ascribed to him appear in the compilation of biblical and patristic maxims called *Sacra Parallela*, traditionally attributed to John of Damascus (c. 675-c. 749)—who himself, coincidentally, spent some time at Mar Saba. (Even if the *Sacra Parallela* be not his, some letters ascribed to Clement were apparently known to the real author, whoever he was.)

Towards the end of the newly-published document the letterwriter quotes the opening words of Mark 10: 46 in the form 'And he comes to Jericho'. This is the Western reading, in place of the majority text 'And they come to Jericho'; the use of the Western text could be a pointer to Clement as the author.

The letter-writer commences his account of the expanded text by saying that it comes immediately after the section which begins, 'And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem...' (Mark 10: 32). Immediately before that section comes the incident of the rich man who asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life (Mark 10: 17-31). This incident provides the subject-matter for Clement's homily, *Who is the Rich Man who is to be saved?*—a homily which includes a quotation *in extenso* of these fifteen verses of Mark. This quotation contains no esoteric or other expansion, but presents some

[p.10]

textual peculiarities, on which the redoubtable J. W. Burgon animadverted in a famous passage in *The Revision Revised* (London, 1883), pp. 326ff.:

I request that the clock of history be put back seventeen hundred years. This is A.D. 183, if you please; and—(indulge me in the supposition!)—you and I are walking in Alexandria. We have reached the house of one Clemens,—a learned Athenian, who has long been a resident here. Let us step into his library,—he is from home. What a queer place! See, he has been reading his Bible, which is open at S. Mark x. Is it not a well-used copy? It must be at least 50 or 60 years old. Well, but suppose only 30 or 40. It was executed therefore *within fifty years of the death of S. John the Evangelist*. Come, let us transcribe two of the columns... as faithfully as we possibly can, and be off... We are back in England again, and the clock has been put right. Now let us sit down and examine our curiosity at leisure ... It proves on inspection to be a transcript of the 15 verses (ver. 17 to ver. 31) which relate to the coming of the rich young Ruler to our LORD.

We make a surprising discovery... *It is impossible to produce a fouler exhibition of S. Mark x. 17-31 than is contained in a document full two centuries older than*

F.F. Bruce, *The 'Secret' Gospel of Mark*. The Ethel M. Wood Lecture delivered before the University of London on 11 February 1974. London: The Athlone Press, 1974. Pbk. pp.20.

either B or Aleph,—itself the property of one of the most famous of the ante-Nicene Fathers... The foulness of a Text which must have been penned within 70 or 80 years of the death of the last of the Evangelists, is a matter of fact,—which must be loyally accepted, and made the best of.

Dean Burgon was concerned to make the point that the most ancient manuscripts of the New Testament are not necessarily the purest. The text of Mark 10: 17-31 as quoted by Clement in this treatise is rather heavily contaminated by the texts of the Matthaean and Lukan parallels. But it is not at all certain that, if we could visit Clement's study and look at his scroll or (more probably) codex of the Gospel of Mark open at this place, we should find the text which is reproduced in his treatise. He may have quoted it in part from memory, and when we depend on memory for a text which appears in all three Synoptic Gospels we are apt to produce a very mixed text, as Clement does here. (Dean Burgon himself gives evidence of such reliance on his memory when he speaks of 'the rich young Ruler'; it is Matthew, not Mark, who says that he was young.) Clement gives evidence

[p.11]

of memory quoting later in the same treatise when he comments on the words of verse 21, 'sell what things you have' (*hosa echeis*), which he has quoted above in their Markan form, quoting them the second time in the more familiar form of Matt. 19: 21, 'sell your property' (*ta hyparchonta*). If one Alexandrian writer was able to produce such a contaminated Gospel text, we need not be surprised if the author of the additional pericope quoted by our letter-writer amplifies his Markan phrases occasionally by means of their Matthaean parallels.

IV The Expanded Text

The pericope inserted between verses 34 and 35 of Mark 10 is Markan in diction, for the simple reason that it is largely a pastiche of phrases from Mark ('contaminated' by Matthaean parallels), coupled with some Johannine material. The story of Jesus' raising of the young man of Bethany from the tomb at his sister's entreaty is superficially similar to the incident of the raising of Lazarus in John 11: 17-44; but our present story, far from presenting the features of an independent Markan counterpart to the Johannine incident, is thoroughly confused: in view of the loud voice which was heard from the tomb as Jesus approached, it is doubtful if the young man was really dead. In this story Jesus himself rolls away the stone from the entrance to the tomb, whereas in John 11: 39 he commands the bystanders to remove the stone which covered the tomb of Lazarus.

The young man's sister makes her plea to Jesus after the example of the Syrophoenician woman who fell at Jesus' feet (Mark 7: 25), saying 'Pity me, son of David' (Matt. 15: 22), and like her she incurs the disciples' disapproval (Matt. 15: 23). (We may compare the similar plea of blind Bartimaeus in Mark 10: 47f., and his refusal to be silenced by the rebukes of those around.) Jesus' anger is matched by his reaction to the leper's plea in the Western text of Mark 1: 41, and by his indignation at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11: 33,

38) 'The garden where the tomb was' is a detail borrowed from John's account of the burial of Jesus (John 19: 41).

Jesus' action in taking the young man by the hand and raising him up comes not from the account of the raising of Lazarus but from the raising of Jairus's daughter (Mark 5: 41) or, even more

[p.12]

closely, from the healing of Simon Peter's mother-in-law (Mark 1: 31). The statement that 'the young man looked on him and loved him' reverses that of Mark 10: 21, where Jesus looked on the rich man and loved him. The young man who is here raised from the tomb was also rich. When he began to beseech Jesus that he might be with him, he followed the example of the cured Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5: 18). The time-note 'after six days' was the interval between the Caesarea Philippi incident and the transfiguration (Mark 9: 2). The linen robe thrown over the young man's naked body reminds us of the young man similarly attired at the scene of Jesus' arrest (Mark 14: 5 1). The statement that 'he stayed with him that night' may recall John 1: 39, 'they stayed with him that day'.

The reference to the young man's sister and mother in the amplified form of Mark 10: 46 is probably meant to integrate the incident of the young man with its general context. Curiously, however, the young man is now identified as the one 'whom Jesus loved'; we have reverted to the situation of Mark 10: 21—although, since the verb 'loved' is in the imperfect tense here (*ēgapa*), in contrast to the earlier aorist (*ēgapēsen*), we may detect the influence of the Johannine references to 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' (John 13: 23, etc.). It is not clear what Salome is doing in this company, but she figures as a somewhat self-assertive disciple of Jesus in a number of gnostic texts; we may recall, too (if she is to be identified with the mother of the sons of Zebedee, as a comparison of Mark 15: 40 with Matt. 27: 56 might indicate), that she figures in the Matthaean counterpart to the incident of Mark 10: 35-45, for in Matt. 20: 20f. it is the mother of James and John who takes the initiative in asking for them the places of highest honour in the coming kingdom. Jesus' declining to grant this request may lie behind the statement at the end of our writer's quotation that he 'did not receive' the three women who met him at Jericho.

The fact that the expansion is such an obvious pastiche, with its internal contradiction and confusion, indicates that it is a thoroughly artificial composition, quite out of keeping with Mark's quality as a story-teller. Morton Smith indeed argues that it is no mere pastiche or cento, but I find his arguments unconvincing. That the letter-writer was disposed to acknow-

[p.13]

ledge it as part of a fuller edition of Mark's Gospel, written by the evangelist himself, is quite in line with evidence which we have of Clement's credulity in face of apocryphal material. He treats the work entitled the *Preaching of Peter* as a genuine composition of

the apostle Peter (*Strom.* ii. 15.68; vi. 5.39ff., etc.) and he similarly accepted the authenticity of the *Apocalypse of Peter* (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* vi. 14.1). And we shall see how readily he acknowledged as dominical sayings ascribed to Jesus in the *Gospel of the Hebrews* and the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, explaining them in terms of his own philosophy.

V Mark and Alexandria

The information that Mark came from Rome to Alexandria is otherwise known to us from Eusebius. Johannes Munck concluded for this reason that our letter could not be earlier than Eusebius. But Eusebius did not originate the story of Mark's coming to Alexandria; he received it from others. After telling of Mark's association with Peter in Rome, he goes on: 'They say that this man [Mark] was the first to be sent to Egypt to preach the gospel, which he had also written down, and that he was the first to establish churches in Alexandria itself' (*Hist. Eccl.* ii. 16.1). Then he says that the success of Mark's preaching may be gauged by the quality of the Therapeutae described by Philo (*De vita contemplativa*, 2ff.), whom he takes—quite wrongly and indeed anachronistically—to have been a Christian community. Later he says that in Nero's eighth year (A.D. 61/62) one Annianus succeeded Mark in the ministry of the Alexandrian church (*Hist. Eccl.* ii. 24).

We can but guess the source from which Eusebius derived this information—or misinformation—but some awareness of the situation at Alexandria keeps him from using the term *episkopos* of its leading minister in earlier days.

At any rate the story of Mark's founding the church of Alexandria is of most questionable authenticity. If it has any historical basis, that may be found in the coming of a codex of the Gospel of Mark to Alexandria, soon after its publication in Rome (cf. C. H. Roberts, 'The Christian Book and the Greek Papyri,' *JTS* 50 [1949], pp. 155ff.; L. W. Barnard, 'St. Mark and Alexandria,' *HTR* 57 [1964], pp. 145ff.). Even more

[p.14]

questionable is the whole succession—list of Alexandrian church leaders from Mark and his alleged successor Annianus on to the last decade or two of the second century. The first bishop of Alexandria of whom we can speak with confidence is Demetrius (c. 190-233), first the friend and then the enemy of Origen. It is difficult to refute the argument of Walter Bauer in *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (E.T. Philadelphia, 1971), pp. 44ff., that Alexandrian Christianity in its earliest generations was predominantly gnostic or gnosticizing, and that not until the last quarter of the second century did the 'orthodox' interpretation of the gospel begin to gain the upper hand. In this later development the catechetical school founded by Pantaenus, Clement's teacher, played an important part. It is not without significance that Pantaenus was a Sicilian by birth, while Clement probably came from Athens. But even the orthodoxy of the catechetical school was suspect in the eyes of later theologians; its leaders indulged too daringly in speculation.

The picture of Mark as the founder of Alexandrian Christianity represents an attempt to provide the church of that city with an orthodox pedigree, one moreover which linked it closely with the Roman church, the pillar and ground of orthodoxy, and incidentally gave it quasi-apostolic status. For if Mark's association with Peter gave apostolic authority to the gospel which he penned, equally it gave apostolic lineage to the church which he founded.

In the New Testament, however, Alexandria figures as the home of the associate of another apostle—Apollon, the friend and colleague of Paul, who (according to the Western text of Acts 18: 25) had been instructed in Christianity in his native city. Could he not have provided the church of Alexandria with apostolic prestige? Evidently not—perhaps because it is made so plain in Acts 18: 24-26 that Apollon's original understanding of Christianity was defective, so that he had to be taken in hand by Priscilla and Aquila (foundation-members, perhaps, of the Roman church) and taught the way of God more accurately. (Not all Alexandrian Christians were Gnostics or gnosticizers, of course; the Letter to the Hebrews and the Letter of Barnabas may both have been written by Alexandrian Christians, and neither of them bears a gnostic stamp.)

[p.15]

Our letter, however, does not say that Mark planted the church of Alexandria, but that he came to Alexandria after Peter's martyrdom (not several years before it, as Eusebius implies) and continued there the literary activity which he had begun in Rome. This is an earlier form of the story of his connexion with Alexandria than Eusebius reports, but it provided a basis for the later account, which Eusebius may have derived from the *Chronicle* of Sextus Julius Africanus, who visited Alexandria when Demetrius was bishop and Heraclas, Origen's successor, was head of the catechetical school, and probably learned it from them.

The kind of Gospel literature that was current in Egypt in the generation before Clement is exemplified by the *Gospel of the Hebrews* and the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, which Bauer supposes were used respectively by the Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians of Alexandria. Clement was acquainted with both of these documents. From the *Gospel of the Hebrews* he quotes the logion, 'He who seeks shall not desist until he finds; when he has found he will marvel; when he has marvelled he will attain the kingdom; when he has attained the kingdom he will rest' (*Strom.* ii. 9.45; v. 14.96). Another form of this Greek logion appears in the Oxyrhynchus Sayings (P. Oxy. 654.2) and, in a Coptic version, in the *Gospel of Thomas* (logion 2). Clement characteristically interprets the saying of the true (Christian) philosopher.

From the *Gospel of the Egyptians* Clement quotes an alleged saying of Jesus, 'I came to destroy the works of the female', and illustrates it by a conversation between Jesus and Salome. In reply to Salome's question, 'How long will death prevail?' he said, 'As long as you women give birth to children'. 'Then', said she, 'I have done well in bearing none'. 'Eat every herb', said he, 'except that which has a bitter fruit'. When she pressed

her original question again, he replied more fully: 'When you tread underfoot the garment of shame, when the two become one and the male with the female neither male nor female' (*Strom.* iii. 6.45; 9.63ff.; 13.91ff.). This expresses a Valentinian theme, that death entered into human life with the separation of the female from the male—death being included, along with conception and birth and the other phases of the biological cycle, among

[p.16]

'the works of the female'—and that the state of perfection and immortality would be attained when the female was reabsorbed with the male into the complete human being. This view was unacceptable to Clement but, as he did not wish to give up Jesus' reported words to Salome as unauthentic, he replaced their proper gnostic sense with an ethical allegorization, in which the 'female' whose works are to be destroyed is concupiscence and 'neither male nor female' means neither anger nor concupiscence.

When the author of the letter says that Mark, after publishing his first book, 'compiled a more spiritual Gospel', it is impossible not to be reminded of Clement's statement that, after the first three Evangelists had published their works, 'John last of all, conscious that the "bodily" facts had been set forth in those Gospels, urged by his disciples and divinely moved by the Spirit, composed a "spiritual" Gospel' (*ap. Euseb. Hist. Eccl.* vi. 14.7). By the 'bodily' facts in the Synoptic record Clement appears to mean the outward historical details, whereas John's Gospel is 'spiritual' in the sense that he brings out their allegorical significance. Presumably Mark's 'more spiritual Gospel' was one which brought out the allegorical significance of his first edition, but we are not told what the allegorical significance of the extract we are given from the amplified edition might be. If the letter-writer is Clement, he may well have given it a moralizing interpretation such as he gives to the conversation with Salome in the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, and he might be just as far astray from the true sense.

In fact we might ask what there is of a 'secret' or 'hierophantic' character about the pericope quoted by the letter-writer from the amplified Gospel of Mark—unless, as with the *Gospel of Thomas*, it was the interpretation and not the written text that was regarded as esoteric. And this brings us to what the letter says about Carpocrates and his followers.

VI *The Carpocratians and the 'Secret' Gospel*

Carpocrates was an Alexandrian Platonist of the earlier part of the second century; he flourished two generations before Clement. According to Irenaeus (*Heresies* i. 25. 1f.), he taught that the world was created by angel-archons, not by the supreme

[p.17]

God, and (like the Ebionites) held that Jesus was a man, the son of Joseph by natural generation, on whom the divine power descended. The same power might be received

by the souls of all who, like Jesus, set the archons at naught and conquered the passions which exposed men to their penalties. He also appears to have taught metempsychosis for all who were enslaved to the archons; only by defying and overcoming them, as Jesus did, could men be released from the necessity of successive reincarnations. Pythagorean influence may be indicated here, and it is perhaps relevant that, according to Irenaeus (*Heresies* i. 25.6), the Carpocratians venerated images of Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle along with images of Jesus.

The followers of Carpocrates are charged by Irenaeus (*Heresies* i. 25.3ff.) and Clement (*Strom.* iii. 2.5-11) with ethical neutralism and specifically with the practice of sexual promiscuity at their love-feasts—with the same kind of conduct, in fact, as was alleged in a number of pagan circles against Christians in general (cf. the 'Oedipodean intercourse' of which the churches of the Rhone valley were accused, according to their letter preserved in Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* v. 1.14). While we should not swallow uncritically what is said of the Carpocratians by their orthodox opponents, it is to be observed (i) that such charges are not levelled against all gnostic groups indiscriminately and (ii) that a philosophical defence of promiscuity by Epiphanes, the son of Carpocrates by a Cephallenian woman, is quoted by Clement (*Strom.* iii. 2.6). Cardinal Jean Daniélou, who regards Carpocrates himself as an exponent of what he identifies as Jewish Gnosticism, holds that Epiphanes hellenized his father's system, 'just as Valentinus did Samaritan Gnosticism and Justin the orthodox gnosis of the same period' (*The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, E.T. [London, 1964], pp. 84f.).

Whereas Tertullian could say, 'we have all things in common, except our wives' (*Apology* 39.11), probably implying that private property was a sign of sinful covetousness, Epiphanes and the Carpocratians appear to have gone farther and said, 'we have all things in common, including our wives'. Epiphanes justified this policy by an appeal to the principles of divine righteousness or equity as embodied not in the law of Moses but

[p.18]

in the law of nature. He pointed to the example of the animal creation, and thus incurred the rebuke of Jude: 'by those things that they know by instinct, as irrational animals do, they are destroyed' (Jude 10). It was evidently predecessors of the Carpocratians, if not the Carpocratians themselves, whom Jude denounced so unsparingly for following the precedent of the disobedient angels and the men of Sodom. Indeed, Clement himself, in his account of the Carpocratians, expresses the opinion that 'it was of these and similar heresies that Jude spoke prophetically in his epistle' (*Strom.* iii. 2.11). He further links them with the Nicolaitans of Rev. 2: 6, 14f., and the author of our letter links them with those who explore 'the deep things of Satan'—i.e. the adherents of 'that Jezebel of a woman denounced in the letter to the church of Thyatira, whose tenets were practically identical with those of the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2: 20ff.).

For our present purpose it is particularly interesting that, on the testimony of Irenaeus, the Carpocratians emphasized the statements of Mark 4: 11, 34, that Jesus explained the mystery of the kingdom of God privately to his disciples, while speaking to the general public in parables; they claimed also that the disciples were authorized to deliver this private teaching 'to those who

were worthy and who assented to it' (*Heresies* i. 25.5). They themselves, in other words, were the custodians of Jesus' private teaching—of the 'messianic secret', so to speak. But whereas the historical 'mystery of the kingdom' or 'messianic secret' was concerned with the nature of the kingdom, of the God whose kingdom it was and of the messianic ministry by which it was being inaugurated, it was reinterpreted—or rather misinterpreted—among the Carpocratians and in other gnostic schools in terms of mystical initiation. The letter-writer himself uses the language of mystical initiation with regard to the mature Christian (as Clement does with regard to his 'true Gnostic'), but with him (as with Clement) this is but a figure of speech.

It was evidently the Carpocratians' claim to be the recipients and transmitters of Jesus' esoteric doctrine that moved Theodore to write to Clement (if we accept the attribution of the letter). They appealed to an edition of Mark's Gospel which,

[p.19]

they maintained, vindicated their assertion that Jesus taught conventional morality in public but communicated a more uninhibited ethic to select souls in private. Theodore evidently asked Clement about this 'secret' Gospel of Mark. Clement knows about it, but denies that it supports Carpocratian doctrine: Carpocrates procured a copy, he says, by underhand means, and his followers have perverted its interpretation, putting a libertine construction, for example, on the incident of the young man 'with a linen robe thrown over his naked body', as though the impartation of the mystery of the kingdom of God involved complete physical contiguity. When Clement says that the phrase 'naked to naked', about which Theodore had asked, is not found in the text of the 'secret' Gospel, we should probably infer that this phrase summed up the Carpocratians' interpretation of the incident, which they probably invoked in defence of their own 'sacramental' practice.

That there was an extreme libertine tradition in early Christianity as well as an extreme ascetic tradition is plain to readers of the New Testament, especially of the Pauline letters. Paul himself, like Jesus before him, taught a way of holiness which did not belong to either of these extreme traditions. As for the libertine tradition, Professor Smith finds it so firmly embedded in early Christianity that he concludes it must have gone back to Jesus' esoteric teaching, as the more ascetic tradition went back to his public teaching. But such evidence as we have points to a Gentile origin for the libertine tradition. We cannot be sure about the Nicolaitans of the Apocalypse, whether or not they were called after Nicolaus the proselyte of Antioch (Acts 6: 5), as Irenaeus believed (*Heresies* i. 26.3); perhaps they and kindred groups simply wished to relax the terms of the apostolic decree of Acts 15: 28f. But Paul's Corinthian correspondence gives us a clear enough line: the libertines in the Corinthian church were the 'spiritual' men who had come to regard all bodily activities as morally indifferent, and devised a theological defence of their continued indulgence in the besetting sin of Corinth, even after their conversion to Christianity. They probably maintained that they were carrying to its logical conclusion Paul's gospel of freedom from the law. It was men of this outlook who regarded the cohabitation of one

[p.20]

of their number with his father's wife as a fine assertion of Christian liberty (1 Cor. 5: 1ff.). Epiphanes, who had learned from his father Platonism with a dash of

F.F. Bruce, *The 'Secret' Gospel of Mark*. The Ethel M. Wood Lecture delivered before the University of London on 11 February 1974. London: The Athlone Press, 1974. Pbk. pp.20.

Pythagoreanism, devised a more sophisticated philosophical defence for this kind of conduct.

As for the 'secret' Gospel of Mark, it may well have come into being within the Carpocratian fellowship, or a similar school of thought. That Clement thought it went back to Mark himself is neither here nor there, in view of his uncritical acceptance of other apocrypha. The raising of the young man of Bethany is too evidently based—and clumsily based at that—on the Johannine story of the raising of Lazarus for us to regard it as in any sense an independent Markan counterpart to the Johannine story (not to speak of our regarding it as a source of the Johannine story). Since this conclusion is so completely at variance with Professor Smith's carefully argued case, one must do him the justice of giving his case the detailed consideration which it deserves. But for the present I have given my initial assessment of the document which he has discovered and published.

© 1974 Continuum (<http://www.continuumbooks.com>). Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in July 2006 by Robert I Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>
