



**PRAYER AND SPIRITUALITY**  
in the Early Church

*Edited by Pauline Allen, Wendy Mayer and Lawrence Cross*

**Volume 2**

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**The Secret Oral Tradition of Jesus  
in Clement of Alexandria's *Stromateis***

The Mar Saba fragment, discovered by Morton Smith and discussed in detail in his 1973 work, began a flurry of investigation and scholarly criticism.<sup>1</sup> This fragment is now referred to as *The Letter to Theodore* and is attributed to Clement of Alexandria. Although Smith offered strong internal evidence to show the authenticity of the fragment, the debate which followed questioned both the authenticity of the letter and the existence of a *Secret Gospel of Mark*, referred to in the fragment. The fragment is now generally accepted as Clementine and appears in the 1980 Stählin edition.<sup>2</sup>

More recently Guy Stroumsa published a collection of essays, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism*,<sup>3</sup> which has attracted some criticism as well (see discussion below). In this work Stroumsa has a section on Clement of Alexandria which builds on the work of

<sup>1</sup> M. Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Harvard 1973), contains the translation, critical analysis and notes as well as photographs of the fragment which is now referred to as the *Letter of Theodore* (hereafter, *Ltr. Theo.*). An exhaustive listing of the scholarly debate is not possible; the following articles provide a sample. R.P.C. Hanson, *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 25 (1974), 513, disputes the whole idea of secret knowledge in the early church. He does accept the Clementine authorship, but doubts the Markan authorship of the *Secret Gospel of Mark* (hereafter, *SGM*). He is also very critical of Smith's scholarship. H. Koester, "Apocryphal and Canonical Gospels", *Harvard Theological Review* 73 (1980), 105-130, assumes the *SGM* in his analysis. P. Sellew, "*Secret Mark* and the history of Canonical Mark", restates Koester's position in an excellent fashion, in B.A. Pearson (ed.), *The Future of Early Christianity* (Minneapolis 1991), 242-257. T. Talley, "Liturgical time in the ancient church: the state of research", *Studia Liturgica* 14 (1981), 34-51, ties the baptism account of *SGM* with an ancient Coptic baptismal tradition which had not been previously verified. T.Y. Mullins, "Papias and Clement and Mark's two Gospels", *VC* 50 (1976), 189-192, ties the account of Papias with the Mar Saba fragment, showing that they did not share a common tradition. G.G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, Studies in the History of Religions 70 (Leiden-New York 1996), says that "Smith shows beyond reasonable doubt the authenticity of the letter." (112, n.7) Lastly, see M. Smith's article, "Clement of Alexandria and Secret Mark: the score at the end of the first decade", *Harvard Theological Review* 75 (1982), 449-461, where he reviews some of the scholarship surrounding his initial work. It is crucial to realise that Smith's "discovery" of this document can be accepted without accepting all of his interpretations. As Sellew says, "Some of the more sensational suggestions about the *Secret Mark* text and its interpretation when first published have apparently clouded many scholars' perspectives..." ("*Secret Mark*", 253).

<sup>2</sup> O. Stählin, *Clemens Alexandrinus*, GCS (Berlin 1980, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn).

<sup>3</sup> See n. 1 above for the full reference on this work.

Morton Smith.<sup>4</sup> As the title suggests, Stroumsa intends to show that an oral tradition existed in the church of the first few centuries; he reviews a wealth of evidence drawn from the Patristic writings to show a general acknowledgement of this esoteric tradition.<sup>5</sup>

In a recent review of Stroumsa's work, Charles Kannengiesser complains that no evidence exists for these esoteric traditions:

The truth of the matter is that the present collection of popular essays demonstrates in perfect clarity, though unwillingly it seems, that a quest for proper esotericism in early Christianity leads nowhere. The author never tries to describe such traditions, nor does he suggest that they could be identified by noncomparative methods...

After all is said, these traditions remain so esoteric that their phantasmal existence best seems postulated only on the basis of proliferating studies about their pre-supposed "disappearance".<sup>6</sup>

In this paper I will attempt to do three things: firstly, to give a brief response to Kannengiesser's critique; secondly, to defend Stroumsa's thesis that an esoteric tradition existed; and finally, to provide some hard data which point to an early Christian esoteric tradition regarding spirituality and prayer, as revealed in Clement's *Stromateis*.

Let me say that Kannengiesser is correct on some points; his claim that Stroumsa does not give hard data showing the content of these esoteric traditions is right. In fact, Stroumsa admitted that to try to do so would be seen as "speculative".<sup>7</sup> The very nature of the subject makes this task highly problematic: finding hard data for a tradition which is both "secret" and "oral" is difficult. Although this argument does not satisfy the need and desire for hard

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<sup>4</sup> See Stroumsa, ch. 7, 111-117. Stroumsa first mentions Smith and the Mar Saba document on 40-41.

<sup>5</sup> See Stroumsa, ch. 2, "Paradosis: Esoteric Traditions", 27-45 for these citations, and see n. 9 below.

<sup>6</sup> *Journal of Religion* 78 (1998), 268-269.

<sup>7</sup> Stroumsa, 29. He then says: "Nevertheless it seems that one may not only attest to their existence, but also state their origin and contents with precision." Although he does give evidence for *paradosis* in the early Fathers, Stroumsa does not produce on the "contents" part of his claim (another point where Kannengiesser was correct). Even his best evidence, he admits (36), is "somewhat disappointing with respect to the content of the oral traditions, and that he [Basil] alludes only to doctrines which are on the whole quite trivial".

data, objectivity demands that in the face of solid circumstantial evidence the lack of hard data should not preclude the existence of these traditions.<sup>8</sup>

Stroumsa's circumstantial evidence was not vague; he cites numerous Patristic texts, from the Papias fragments to comments by Augustine, including references from Origen and Basil, all showing that some kind of esoteric oral tradition continued in the church at least through the fourth century.<sup>9</sup> Kannengiesser fails to comment on any of these texts, yet implies that Stroumsa's work is "entertaining [to] the less prepared reader". Unfortunately, some of Stroumsa's citations justify Kannengiesser's comment (see nn. 7 and 17), yet his overall presentation is solid. One wonders if Kannengiesser's basic problem with this study is that which Stroumsa addresses in his introduction when he states that both Catholic and Protestant scholars view esotericism with suspicion. From the beginning, secrecy was associated with heresy by Catholics, and Protestants have shunned Catholic traditions, suspecting them of being tainted with esoteric doctrines.<sup>10</sup> Our angle in this study will be to look at the evidence in *Stromateis*, but first I will comment on the existence of an esoteric tradition using some of Stroumsa's references.

The Papias fragments represent one of the earliest recordings of this oral tradition:<sup>11</sup>

...as the Presbyters who had seen John the Lord's disciple remembered that they had heard of him, how the Lord used to teach concerning those times...[a lengthy eschatological statement about blessings from God]...And

<sup>8</sup> Our evidence of the Gnostics (the heresiologists) prior to the Nag Hammadi texts was considered by some to be doubtful. We have seen many times that Patristic evidence cannot be easily dismissed, though admittedly this evidence can be prejudiced.

<sup>9</sup> See Stroumsa, ch. 2, "Paradosis: Esoteric Traditions", 27-45, for a discussion and citation of the following texts which are not addressed in this paper: Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 3.3.1; Tertullian, *Praescr. haer.* 41; Egeria, *Itin.* 46.2, 6; 47.2; Epiphanius, *Panar.* 42.3.3; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.* 5.12 (this reference does not seem to be very significant); John Chrys., *Hom. in I Cor.* 60.1; Basil, *De Spir. sancto* 27.66. See S. Lilla, *Clement of Alexandria: A Study in Christian Platonism and Gnosticism* (Oxford 1971), 144-158, for a similar discussion. Both Stroumsa and Lilla include a short discussion of the same esoteric tradition in Gnostic documents.

<sup>10</sup> Stroumsa, 1-2. Kannengiesser also points out that Stroumsa cites Morton Smith throughout the work (269); this might point to another reason for the negative review.

<sup>11</sup> For a review of the scholarship, see W.R. Schoedel, "Papias", in ANRW 27/1, 235-270. Schoedel reports the dating of these fragments from late in the first century to 140 AD, with the most accepted dating being around 110 AD (237, 261, 262).

these things Papias also, who was a hearer of John and companion of Polycarp, an ancient man, testifies in writing in the fourth of his books: for there are five books compiled by him.<sup>12</sup>

The content of this Papias witness is not critical for our purpose; the fact that he (Papias) relates an oral teaching originating from the apostles, and that Irenaeus does not seem to discredit this report, is central to our discussion. Irenaeus reports this oral tradition even though he argues against such tradition elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> Eusebius (quoting Papias) also reports that Papias claimed an oral tradition.<sup>14</sup>

But I will not hesitate also to set down for thy benefit, along with the interpretations, all that ever I carefully learnt and carefully recalled from the elders, guaranteeing its truth...For I supposed that things out of books did not profit me so much as the utterances of a voice which liveth and abideth.<sup>15</sup>

It appears from this entry that Eusebius had some of the Papias writings in front of him; Munck argues that because of his disagreement with the millennial view of Papias, Eusebius has chosen not to reproduce more of the writings. This evidence seems to show that the Eusebian witness is not simply dependent upon that of Irenaeus, but is an independent one.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 5.33.3-4. English trans. by J. Keble, Library of the Fathers (London 1872).

<sup>13</sup> Irenaeus opens his treatise with this statement: "Forasmuch as there are some, who, putting the truth away from them, introduce in its stead false tales...adulterating the oracles of the Lord" (*Adv. haer.* 1.1, preface). See Stroumsa, 35-38. Stroumsa only mentions this passage in passing while paying more attention to *Adv. haer.* 3.3.1 (35).

<sup>14</sup> J. Munck, "Presbyters and disciples of the Lord in Papias", *Harvard Theological Review* 52 (1959), 223-243, evaluates Eusebius' treatment of Papias. See 225, n. 10 for a good treatment of Eusebius' comment about Papias having low intelligence. See also A.F. Walls, "Papias and oral tradition", *VC* 21 (1967), 137-140, for a short, but incisive article showing that Papias is not denigrating written documents in this passage. See Schoedel, "Papias", for articles concerning Eusebius' theological criticism of Papias.

<sup>15</sup> Eusebius, *HE* 3.39.3-4. English trans. by H. Lawlor and J. Oulton (London 1954).

<sup>16</sup> See Munck, 223-243.

Stroumsa also cites a few passages from Origen which seem to give witness to an oral tradition. In *Contra Celsum*, arguing against the accusation that the Christian doctrine is secret, Origen makes the following statement:

Moreover, the mystery of the resurrection, because it has not been understood, is a byword and a laughing-stock with the unbelievers. In view of this it is quite absurd to say that *the doctrine is secret*. The existence of certain doctrines, which are beyond those which are exoteric and do not reach the multitude, is not a peculiarity of Christian doctrine only, but is shared by the philosophers. For they had some doctrines which were exoteric and some esoteric.<sup>17</sup>

It is very interesting that Origen makes this statement in the context of refuting a secret tradition, thus giving this reference an ambiguous tone.<sup>18</sup> Origen makes a much clearer statement for oral tradition in *Contra Celsum* 6.6:

Jesus, who was superior to all these men, is said to have spoken the Word of God to his disciples privately, and especially in places of retreat. But what he said has not been recorded. For it did not seem to them that "*these matters ought to be described at some length or orally for the masses*". And, if it is not an impertinence to speak the truth about such great men, I affirm that, because they received their thoughts by the grace of God, these men saw better than Plato what truths should be committed to writing, and how they should be written, and what ought under no circumstances to be

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<sup>17</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.7. I am using H. Chadwick's translation of *Contra Celsum* (Cambridge 1953). This passage is cited, with comments, by Stroumsa (32-33). It must be noted that Stroumsa's footnote on this passage (33, n. 20) wrongly gives *Contra Celsum* 2.60 (a simple typographical error which is meant to be 3.60) as a cross reference for Jesus speaking privately to his disciples. This is not the only such error in his citations of *Contra Celsum*; on 34 he gives *Contra Celsum* 3.60 as containing a similar reference to Mark 4:34. The passage he is attempting to point to is *Contra Celsum* 6.6, which he does ultimately cite (34). This may have been another concern of Kannengiesser although, as has been noted, he never mentions any specific citation.

<sup>18</sup> Just like that of Irenaeus. See Stroumsa's discussion on 35.

written for the multitude, and what may be spoken, and what is not of this nature.<sup>19</sup>

Here Origen is arguing against the same claim of Celsus that the Christian doctrines are secret. This time rather than trying to refute Celsus (while trying to avoid the denial of oral tradition), he takes the other side of the argument. He cites the biblical examples of Ezekiel, John, and Paul in support of keeping certain teachings unwritten, then brings Jesus into the argument. "But what he said has not been recorded..." is a clear reference to some kind of oral tradition.

This brings us to another set of data which reports esoteric oral traditions, the Gnostic writings. In the *Letter to Theodore*,<sup>20</sup> Clement is responding to questions asked of him about a secret gospel of Mark used by the heretical sect, the Carpocratians. According to Clement, this secret gospel was corrupted:

Carpocrates...so enslaved a certain presbyter of the church in Alexandria that he got from him a copy of the secret Gospel, which he both interpreted according to his blasphemous and carnal doctrine and, moreover, polluted, mixing with the spotless and holy words utterly shameless lies. From this mixture is drawn off the teaching of the Carpocratians.<sup>21</sup>

This evidence seems to agree with that of Irenaeus, who says of the Carpocratians:

...it is recorded in their writings, and they teach this, that Jesus, speaking privately to His disciples and apostles in mystery, persuading them to hand down these things to the worthy and to those who will be worthy...<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Chadwick, *Contra Celsum*, 320.

<sup>20</sup> The identity of this Theodore is unknown: Smith, 7. Citations from *Ltr. Theo.* will give the plate number and line number from the Greek text in Smith's work (448-452).

<sup>21</sup> *Ltr. Theo.* 2.3-10.

<sup>22</sup> *Adv. haer.* 1.25.5. Stroumsa (38) cites this text with comment, although he is not making this connection with the *Ltr. Theo.*

This evidence of a secret tradition in Gnostic circles is well documented,<sup>23</sup> and we must understand the problem which this presented to Irenaeus and the other Fathers. The Gnostic sects would make their claims to certain documents and the church fathers would then have to distance themselves from these documents. The same thing seems to have happened with respect to oral tradition: Irenaeus and Origen seem to be unwilling to deny such tradition, but are also wary of fully embracing it. This is Stroumsa's thesis (pp. 3-6) and the evidence he produces seems to make a good case. The only point which I would add to his argument is the development of the written New Testament. It seems that the more standardised the written record became, the less the oral tradition was needed. This is, in fact, the context of Eusebius' comments in *HE* 3.25.1-7.<sup>24</sup>

Clement seems to take a much different approach to this problem of shared points with the Gnostics:<sup>25</sup> he openly affirms an oral tradition belonging to the church.<sup>26</sup> In the opening chapter of *Stromateis*, Book 1, after claiming that he learned from men who had preserved oral tradition,<sup>27</sup> Clement says of Jesus:

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<sup>23</sup> The following references come from J.M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (Leiden 1977). The citations list the codex number, tractate number, page and line within the tractate, then the page number in this volume. *The Apocryphon of James* 1.2: 1.9-2.16 (30); *The Apocryphon of John* 2.1: 1.1-5 (99) and 31.29-32.3 (116); *The Book of Thomas the Contender* 2.7: 138.1-4 (188) and 138.21-25 (189); *The Gospel of the Egyptians* 3.2: 69.6-7 (205); *The Apocalypse of Adam* 5.5: 85.19-27 (264). It is common in these texts to declare their esoteric nature in the opening lines; see Stroumsa, 39-41 and Lilla, 150-154.

<sup>24</sup> Eusebius, *HE* 3.25.6, illustrates this point: "...those which the heretics put forward in the name of the apostles...Gospels of Peter and Thomas and Matthias...". Eusebius, *HE* 3.25.4, includes other works like *The Shepherd of Hermas*, *Epistle of Barnabas*, and *Didache*.

<sup>25</sup> Clement's approach to docetism is instructive: he engages in polemics against the docetists; *Strom.* 3.17.102ff.; 6.9.71.1-3; *Ex. Theo.* 4.1; 16; 19.1-5. It should be noted that in *Strom.* 6.9.71 Clement shows a docetic tendency, as he also does in *Strom.* 3.7.59.3. See H. Chadwick, *Alexandrian Christianity*, Library of Christian Classics 2 (London 1954), for notes and translation on *Strom.* 3 (31-32).

<sup>26</sup> In addition to the evidence which follows from *Strom.* see Eusebius, *HE* 2.1.3-5 (reference to *Hypotyposes*); 6.13.9 (reference to *On the Pascha*). A significant study on this issue of secret oral tradition should be consulted: R.P.C. Hanson, *Origen's Doctrine of Tradition* (London 1954). Though the study is mainly concerned with Origen, Hanson assumes a connection throughout the study between Clement and Origen; see ch. four, "Clement's Doctrine of the Rule of Faith and of Secret Tradition", 53-72. Hanson's position on Clement's oral tradition can be summarised thus: "It is not of course contended here that Clement really did possess a genuine continuous tradition of secret teaching...Clement's secret teaching did, as far as we can reconstruct it, consist of speculations, intuitions, and inspired (or not so inspired) theologizing, which had no connection with any oral teaching given by our Lord or his Apostles..." (71). This agrees with C. Mondésert, *Clément d'Alexandrie* (Paris 1944),

He did not...disclose to the many what did not belong to the many; but to the few...who were capable of receiving...secret things are entrusted to speech, not to writing...<sup>28</sup>

The evidence already given from the *Letter to Theodore* shows that Clement was aware of the *SGM*. Clement believes this gospel to have divine authority, but claims that the Carpocratians have added to it, thus making their copy useless. The authentic secret gospel "is carefully guarded", says Clement, "being read only to those who are being initiated into the great mysteries".<sup>29</sup> The secret nature of this gospel is emphasised when Clement warns that "when they put forward their falsifications, one should not concede that the secret Gospel is by Mark, but should even deny it on oath".<sup>30</sup> This is further evidence that Clement believed in an esoteric tradition; however, this "secret" gospel was only part of Clement's understanding of the guarded *γνώσις* which was to be committed to the advanced believers.

We must pause for a moment to ask the question: "Are we discussing *oral* tradition or *written* tradition?" It seems that Clement's esoteric tradition contains both oral and written elements. Clement mirrors the paradoxical claim of the Scripture: "...let him advance to the true light, to the truth, which shows by writing the things that are unwritten".<sup>31</sup> In his opening chapter of *Stromateis*, Clement clearly states that he is committing this esoteric oral tradition to writing, fearing that it would be forgotten otherwise:

For such a sketch as this, will, I think, be agreeable to a soul desirous of preserving from escape the blessed tradition...many things, I well know, have escaped us, through length of time, that have dropped away unwritten..."<sup>32</sup>

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whom Hanson cites many times. Mondésert's work covers this issue in ch. 2, "L'ésotérisme", 47-62.

<sup>27</sup> Other texts showing this oral tradition are *Strom.* 5.10 (entire chapter); 6.7.61.1-3; 6.8.68.1-3; 6.15.131.5.

<sup>28</sup> *Strom.* 1.1.13.2-3. English trans. of *Strom.* are taken from W. Wilson, Ante-Nicene Christian Library 4 and 12 (Edinburgh 1867 and 1869).

<sup>29</sup> *Ltr. Theo.* 2.1-2.

<sup>30</sup> *Ltr. Theo.* 2.10-14.

<sup>31</sup> *Strom.* 1.1.10.1. See also *Strom.* 5.10.

<sup>32</sup> *Strom.* 1.1.14.2. This text actually indicates that Clement believed some of this tradition to have already been lost. He continues: "There are then some things of which we have no

This intention of Clement is also recorded by Eusebius from the lost work, *On the Pascha*:

...he was compelled by his companions to commit to writing traditions that he had heard from the elders of olden time, for the benefit of those that should come after...<sup>33</sup>

Clement's intention is that this now written tradition would be continued by those who follow him. Twice he outlines three essential aspects of the *γνωστικός* (the spiritual man),<sup>34</sup> communicating this hidden *γνώσις* to others occurs in both of these texts. He also makes this intention clear in his opening chapter by quoting 2 Timothy 2:2 as his model, which is a call to continue oral tradition.<sup>35</sup> So Clement is leaving behind this tradition in *Stromateis*, yet makes it clear that he will do so in a way which will keep the unlearned from finding it. Though it is now written, he is following the ancient examples for keeping truth hidden.<sup>36</sup>

So far what I have described concerning *Stromateis* is fairly well agreed upon. I now want to proceed to my last point: that a secret teaching of spirituality and prayer is part of Clement's oral tradition.

Book 5.10 and Book 6.7<sup>37</sup> give us some evidence that this oral tradition includes contemplation (*θεωρία*), a mystical teaching of spirituality and prayer. In these sections Clement introduces his discussion on *θεωρία* with comments about oral tradition. Book 5 is Clement's clear presentation for hidden tradition.

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recollection; for the power that was in the blessed men was great. There are also some things which remained unnoted long, which have now escaped; and others which are effaced, having faded away in the mind itself, since such a task is not easy to those not experienced". (*Strom.* 1.1.14.3) See also 1.1.15.1. On the question whether *Strom.* represents *all* of Clement's oral tradition see *Strom.* 5.8.54.2-4. Based on the above passages and also in consideration of other Clementine fragments such as *Hypotyposes*, the *Extracts of Theodotus, On the Pascha* cited by Eusebius, and *Strom.* 8, it would seem that *Strom.* does not contain *all* of Clement's oral tradition.

<sup>33</sup> *HE* 6.13.9.

<sup>34</sup> *Strom.* 2.10.46.1; 7.1.4.2.

<sup>35</sup> *Strom.* 1.1.3.3-4.

<sup>36</sup> *Strom.* 1.1.14.3; 1.1.15.1; 1.12 (entire chapter); 7.18.110.4. Clement sees himself following in more ancient footsteps on this matter. In his discussions on the need to conceal *gnosis* Clement refers to OT examples (*Strom.* 1.1.1.3; 1.12.55.1) and to Plato (*Strom.* 5.10.65.1-3; 6.11), this entire chapter is a discussion of the mystical meaning found in mathematics, music, etc. This follows Plato, *Republic* 7.529 b.5. Cf. Clement's comment in 6.11.86.1.

<sup>37</sup> Any reference to book and chapter only will hereafter refer to *Strom.*

He shows that the Greeks and Egyptians used hidden language and symbols (ch. 4, 5, 7, 8), Moses hid truth in his presentation of the tabernacle (chapter 6), the New Testament teaching of the apostles purposes to hide truth (the end of ch. 8-10), and finally, a discourse on the apophatic nature of God (ch. 11 and 12). Quotations from the apostle Paul for a hidden tradition (5.10.65.4-66.1) introduce an interesting passage:

If, then, “the milk” is said by the apostle to belong to the babes, and “meat” to be the food of the full-grown, milk will be understood to be catechetical instruction—the first food, as it were, of the soul. And meat is the mystic contemplation (ἡ ἐποπτικὴ θεωρεῖα); for this is the flesh and the blood of the Word, that is, the comprehension of the divine power and essence...For the knowledge of the divine essence is the meat and drink of the divine Word.<sup>38</sup>

Three times in Book 5 he uses the analogy of “milk” and “meat”<sup>39</sup> to illustrate the two levels of believers, and now “meat” is “the mystic contemplation”. This is

<sup>38</sup> *Strom.* 5.10.66.2-3. This passage points to the theory that *Paedagogus* is Clement’s catechetical training and that *Strom.* is the training for the mature. See A. van den Hoek, “The ‘catechetical’ school of early Christian Alexandria and its Philonic heritage”, *Harvard Theological Review* 90 (1997), 59-87. Van den Hoek gives good support for taking the Eusebian record at face value by using the evidence within Clement and Origen. She is arguing against the view of R. van den Broek, “The Christian ‘school’ of Alexandria in the second and third centuries”, 197-205 in J.M. Robinson and H.J. Klimkeit (eds), *Studies in Gnosticism and Alexandrian Christianity*, Nag Hammadi and Manichaen Studies 39 (Leiden 1996).

<sup>39</sup> (1) *Strom.* 5.4.26.1-2 (a reference to 1 Cor. 3:1-3); (2) 5.10.62.2-4 (a reference to Heb. 5:12-6:1); (3) *Strom.* 5.10.66.1-2 (another ref. to 1 Cor. 3:1-3). D. Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford 1995), 178, wrongly says that Clement did not use these verses to distinguish between different kinds of Christians, but rather between Christians and non-Christians. He is correct with respect to *Strom.* 1.11.53.3, but not with respect to *Paed.* 1.6.34-45, and he seems to have missed the examples I have cited above. As J.L. Kovacs shows in her article, “Concealment and Gnostic exegesis: Clement of Alexandria’s interpretation of the Tabernacle”, *StP* 31 (1997), 414-437, Clement’s use of the “milk” text in *Paed.* 1.6 (as well as in the examples from *Strom.* 5 given above) is meant to be his defence of the “ecclesiastical Christians” (415) against Valentinian criticism (450f.). Clement is indeed using this “milk/meat” distinction as a way of showing the difference between Christians with πίστις and those with γνῶσις. Clement puts Valentinian ideas “to work in the service of his own ecclesiastical γνῶσις...he maintains that γνῶσις is built on the foundation of πίστις...[and] he substitutes the idea of two stages of salvation for their [the Valentinian] notion of two ways of salvation” (418-419).

how Clement ends chapter 10. Chapter 11 then begins with the following pronouncement:

Now the sacrifice which is acceptable to God is unswerving abstraction from the body and its passions...For he who neither employs his eyes in the exercise of thought, nor draws ought from his senses, but with pure mind itself applies to objects, [this man] practises the true philosophy.<sup>40</sup>

From the context of this passage, this appears to be Clement's definition of contemplation; his understanding of what it means to receive this spiritual meat. He then proceeds with a discourse on apophatic theory.<sup>41</sup> After an extended amount of wandering, he comes back to this theme of mystical contemplation (Book 6.7), again introducing it with a comment on oral tradition:

[Christ] Himself taught the apostles during His presence; then it follows that the *gnosis*...which is sure and reliable, as being imparted and revealed by the Son of God, is wisdom...the end of the wise man is contemplation...and the *gnosis* itself is that which has descended by transmission to a few, having been imparted unwritten by the apostles. Hence...knowledge and wisdom ought to be exercised up to the...habit of contemplation.<sup>42</sup>

So we see that the concept of contemplation is clearly introduced, or connected with, oral tradition in two major sections.

Finally we have Book 7, which according to Clement<sup>43</sup> is where he gives the clearest exposition of the *γνωστικός*. Although it contains digressions like the rest of *Stromateis*, it does have the clearest spiritual language, one where prayer has a central role. This is not regimented prayer, but free-spirited, spontaneous and mystical prayer:

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<sup>40</sup> *Strom.* 5.11.67.1-2.

<sup>41</sup> *Strom.* 5.11.68.1-3.

<sup>42</sup> *Strom.* 6.7.61.1-3.

<sup>43</sup> *Strom.* 6.1.1.1-2; 7.1.1.1-2.

Holding festival, then, in our whole life, persuaded that God is altogether on every side present, we cultivate our fields, praising; we sail the sea, hymning; in all the rest of our conversation we conduct ourselves according to rule. The Gnostic, then, is very closely allied to God, being at once grave and cheerful in all things.<sup>44</sup>

Now, if some assign definite hours for prayer—as, for example, the third, and sixth, and ninth—yet the Gnostic prays throughout his whole life, endeavouring by prayer to have fellowship with God.<sup>45</sup>

θεωρία also has a central role in Book 7. Of the more than seventy-five occurrences of θεωρέω/θεωρία in *Stromateis*, twenty-six of those are found in Book 7.<sup>46</sup> Let us look at one passage which will be instructive:

...the Gnostic will pray along with those who have more recently believed, for those things in respect of which it is their duty to act together. And his whole life is a holy festival. His sacrifices are prayers, and praises, and readings in the Scriptures before meals, and psalms and hymns during meals and before bed, and prayers also again during night. By these he unites himself to the divine choir, from continual recollection, engaged in contemplation (θεωρίαν) which has everlasting remembrance.<sup>47</sup>

This text shows that prayer is an integral part of Clement's concept of θεωρία. It also shows that prayer for Clement did include a structure; this text complements *Stromateis* 7.7.40.3, given above.<sup>48</sup> For Clement prayer must include θεωρία, which is the highest calling, the ὁ τὸ πάντων ἀγαθώτατον.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Strom.* 7.7.35.6-7.

<sup>45</sup> *Strom.* 7.7.40.3.

<sup>46</sup> O. Stählin, *Clemens Alexandrinus*, GCS 4 (Berlin 1936), 474-476.

<sup>47</sup> *Strom.* 7.7.49.3-4.

<sup>48</sup> Taken together, these two texts seem to be an early witness to the prayer office.

<sup>49</sup> *Strom.* 7.7.44.6.

### *Conclusion*

So we have seen that an esoteric oral tradition most surely existed in some form, both in the heretical sects and in some sectors of the church. We have also seen that Clement believed himself to be the recipient of a secret oral tradition from Jesus, and that he intended to commit at least some of this tradition to writing in *Stromateis*. Finally, it seems clear that the spiritual teaching of contemplation represents some of this oral tradition.

Many unanswered questions remain: did this oral tradition originate with Jesus as claimed by Clement? This seems to be a question which cannot be answered with certainty; there are not enough hard data. Is there any evidence in other orthodox second-century works for this oral tradition of contemplation? If such evidence could be found, it might corroborate this theory. On the other hand, the lack of such evidence might strengthen the argument: if Clement is making a bold effort to put this secret tradition into writing, it would imply that it had never been done before, or at least that Clement was not aware of it. It could also be an indicator that this tradition was only accepted (or known) by the Alexandrian church. This would be consistent with what we know of the second-century Egyptian church, which seems to have embraced many pseudo-orthodox traditions.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> This is reflected in the silence of Egyptian Christianity until the end of the second century, according to H. Lietzmann, *The Founding of the Church Universal* (London 1960), 275. He names Clement as the first representative of orthodox Christianity (276), and points to the famous study of W. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (London 1971). Bauer's argument can be summed up as follows: "Thus even into the third century, no separation between orthodoxy and heresy was accomplished in Egypt and the two types of Christianity were not yet at all clearly differentiated from each other. Moreover, until late in the second century, Christianity in this area is decidedly unorthodox. I avoid for the moment the term 'heretics' for the Egyptian Christians of the early period...because strictly speaking, there can be heretics only where orthodox Christians stand in contrast to them..." (59). Bauer has been challenged by many. Firstly by C.H. Roberts, *Manuscript, Society, and Belief in Early Christian Egypt* (London 1977), 1-25, whose evidence of the papyri clearly shows that the Gnostics were simply not the force in Egypt which Bauer made them out to be. Secondly by J. McCue, "Orthodoxy and heresy: Walter Bauer and the Valentinians", *VC* 33 (1979), 118-130, and B.A. Pearson, "Pre-Valentinian Gnosticism in Alexandria", in *The Future of Early Christianity* (as in n. 1 above), 455-466. Pearson has some very relevant comments on this discussion: "we know as little about pre-Valentinian Gnosticism in Egypt as we do about pre-Valentinian non-gnostic Christianity there..." (457); speaking of some of the writings which Bauer has called "gnostic", Pearson says: "[these] writings...can hardly be regarded as 'gnostic' in any meaningful sense" (457). Pearson shows that the sources for the Alexandrian heresiarchs included writings which would later become canonical; thus "Bauer's theory of

This study also raises relevant questions with respect to the history of spirituality in the church. It seems that Clement is the first church Father to embrace contemplation (θεωρία). His writings influenced Origen, who is typically seen as the first in the Christian mystical tradition.<sup>51</sup> It seems that Clement's writings influenced the Desert Fathers, the precursors of the monastic tradition and practitioners of contemplation.<sup>52</sup> Could it be that this teaching on spirituality and prayer was passed down through the centuries in the monastic tradition because it was seen as a secret Jesus tradition which had been "carefully guarded, being read only to those who are being initiated into the great mysteries"?<sup>53</sup> Stroumsa's study points to this theory.

Let me conclude with one final statement: I believe Clement of Alexandria has stood in the shadow of Origen long enough with respect to spirituality or mysticism. We need to acknowledge his contribution, without apology,<sup>54</sup> to the spiritual development of the early church. "Though the father of all the Mystics he is no Mystic himself."<sup>55</sup> This statement made by Charles Bigg at the end of the last century should be amended: Clement not only represents the beginning of the Christian mystical tradition, but he should be seen as a mystic as well.<sup>56</sup>

Prayer is, then, to speak more boldly, converse with God. Though whispering, consequently, and not opening the lips we speak in silence, yet we cry inwardly. For God hears continually all the inward converse...[the

Christian origins in Alexandria and his views regarding the numerical ratio of 'heretics' to 'orthodox' there have been found to be seriously defective" (466).

<sup>51</sup> See Chadwick, *Contra Celsum* (ix) for Clement's influence on Origen. Also A. Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition. From Plato to Denys* (Oxford 1981), 53-74, on the beginning of Christian mysticism.

<sup>52</sup> See O. Chadwick, *Western Asceticism*, Library of Christian Classics 12 (London 1958), 22. There is evidence that some of these anchorites were not only literate, but had writings such as Clement and Origen; see Palladius, *Lausiaca History* 11.4 and 60.2.

<sup>53</sup> *Ltr.Theo.* 2.1-2.

<sup>54</sup> There have been numerous studies which have shown the Platonic and Gnostic influences in Clement, but most continue to agree that he was first and primarily a defender of orthodoxy, at least what would have been called orthodoxy in second-century Egypt.

<sup>55</sup> C. Bigg, *The Christian Platonists* (Oxford 1886), 98.

<sup>56</sup> There have been some major works which do not agree with Bigg's assessment: see S. Lilla, *Clement of Alexandria: A Study in Christian Platonism and Gnosticism* (Oxford 1971), 142-189; J. Daniélou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture*, in *A History of Early Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicea*, vol. 2, ch. 19, "Gnosis in Clement of Alexandria" (London 1973), 447-464; A. van den Hoek, *Clement of Alexandria and His Use of Philo in the Stromateis*, VC Supp. 3 (Leiden-New York-Cologne 1988), 116-147.

Gnostic's] whole life is prayer and converse with God. And if he be pure from sins, he will by all means obtain what he wishes. For God says to the righteous man, "Ask, and I will give thee; think, and I will do".<sup>57</sup>

This surely is nascent Christian mysticism.

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<sup>57</sup> *Strom.* 7.7.39.6; 7.12.73.1.