Abstract:

Scholars have debated for years over the complex nature of Clement of Alexandria’s *Stromateis*. This study intends to show that Clement did precisely what he claimed he would do: he has used philosophical/theological/ethical categories to hide an oral tradition in order to keep it safe. The truly valuable concept he wants to convey in this work is *theoria*, what can be translated as contemplative prayer. This study shows that *Stromateis* comes to a climax in Book VII with treatise on prayer. Clement uses the Platonic category *theoria* to bridge the transcendental nature of *theos* in Middle Platonism with the immanence of Jesus Christ.

Keywords:

contemplative prayer, christian spirituality, clement of alexandria, stromateis, theoria
Prayer and Contemplation: The Hidden Teaching in Clement of Alexandria’s *Stromateis*

Studies on Clement of Alexandria have historically neglected prayer and contemplation and studies on prayer and contemplation tend to gloss over Clement. More recent studies\(^1\) have given focus to this aspect of Clement’s writing, and this study will directly address this gap in research.

The thesis here is quite simple: Clement’s *Stromateis* was written exactly as he intended. *Stromateis* opens with a promise: Clement is the recipient of an oral tradition and he intends to write that tradition down. But he warns the reader that he will *hide* this tradition so that only the diligent seeker of truth will find it.\(^2\)

*Stromateis* is known for being difficult to read; Clement has purposed to make it this way.\(^3\) The opening chapter of *Stromateis* is loaded with terms such as κρύψις, παραβολή, ἀγραφος, παράδοσις, μυστήρια, and ἀπόρρητος.\(^4\)

Throughout this work Clement uses a *conceal/reveal* methodology and when we simply take Clement at face value we see that prayer, specifically contemplative prayer (θεωρία), is the hidden teaching of *Stromateis*.

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4. All references here are to section numbers from *Strom*. I.1: κρύψις: 1.3 (2x); 13.3 (3x); 18.1; παραβολή: 2.1; ἀγραφος: 7.1; 10.1; 14.2; παράδοσις: 11.3; 12.1; 13.3; 13.4; 15.2 (2x); 16.2; μυστήρια: 13.1; 13.4 (2x); 15.3 (2x); ἀπόρρητος: 13.2; 14.2; 15.1.
Almost all Clementine studies focus on theological and/or philosophical issues. While most studies mention Clement’s views on prayer, spirituality and even on his use of the Platonic term θεωρία, these were not the major issues addressed. From the late 19th century the opinion voiced by Bigg held the day: Clement had a mystical/spiritual side, but this aspect of early Christianity was not developed until Origen came along. Thus, Clementine studies continued to develop mainly along theological, philosophical, ethical and literary critical lines.

While many studies on Clement note his use of contemplation (θεωρία), most fail to discuss it in any significant way. Comments about his mysticism, spirituality or prayer almost always mention this Platonic category, but either admit difficulty in knowing exactly what Clement means by the term, or simply do not discuss it. A few examples will suffice,

And it seems, if you count all the doctrines of Clement’s gnosis, that it is a charisma composed of access to superior vision, a certain contemplation (θεωρία) of truth, a wiser intellectual knowledge of things, and in a sense, mystical...

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7 Mondésert (*Clément*, p.111 n4), my translation.
He uses the word gnosis for various activities of spiritual life which are connected with each other, but culminate in the contemplation of God, of truth, etc. More than one investigator has made the complaint that Clement does not give a clear definition of such contemplation...  

Wytzes compounds the difficulty by asserting a synonymous relationship between γνῶσις and θεορία.  

One of the latest monographs in Clementine studies is Andrew Itter, *Esoteric Teaching in the Stromateis of Clement of Alexandria*. Itter acknowledges that Clement uses categories such as philosophy and cosmogeny to “hide,” or throw the reader off track (p.142), but in my opinion he falls into the same trap as others, focusing too much attention on these categories which were presented by Clement to be distractions. In the conclusion of Chapter 1 as Itter affirms the method of Clement to use intellectual categories to hide his esoteric teaching, he urges the scholar to remember, 

“...that we are not initiates and this position itself precludes certain insights into Clement's works. For instance we are not undergoing the training in virtues...nor are we as easily convinced by scanty evidence; such evidence may be transformative to the initiate, but grounds for scepticism (sic) for the scholar. This puts the scholar on awkward ground when trying to establish how the Stromateis functions.” (p. 31)
After discussing many of the theological/philosophical categories, Itter comes back to this thinking in Chapter Six (mainly in 6.5.4. *The Restoration of Hope*) and in the Conclusion. Unfortunately, his conclusions seem as allusive as his reading of *Stromateis*.

While Clementine studies have overlooked prayer and spirituality, studies on mysticism and spirituality have either wholly ignored or given a poor representation of Clement’s place in the development of prayer and θεορία (contemplation).\(^{11}\)

Clement of Alexandria’s *Stromateis* marks an important stage in the development of Christian spirituality. He is the first Christian writer to present a synthesis of the Platonic concept of θεορία with New Testament spirituality. Clement includes contemplation (θεορία) as an essential aspect of the gnostic,

These three things, therefore, our philosopher attaches himself to: first, speculation (θεορίας); second, the performance of the precepts; third, the forming of good men;--which, concurring, form the Gnostic.\(^{12}\)

In this study I will show that θεορία, in addition to an immaterialist aspect, includes a practical spirituality; Clement’s gnostic interacts with an immanent God in space and time.

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\(^{12}\) *Strom*. II.10.46,1. There are three other texts: *Strom*. VII.1.4,2; VII.3.19,2 and VII.7.44,6-8. Although θεορία does not occur in two of these texts (VII.1.4,2 and VII.3.19,2) it appears from the other two texts to be a similar listing. Clement’s use of γνώση here seem to be allusions to θεορία. All citations come from William Wilson’s translation in the *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, Vols. 4 and 12 (Edinburgh 1867 and 1869); Stählin’s GCS has served as my critical edition.
Clement of Alexandria is part of the Middle Platonic tradition of the second century. One tenet Clement holds, common among later Middle Platonists, is utter transcendence. He believes all language falls short, not only in explaining God, but in any kind of designation to the divine being. In a radical move, against the philosophical setting of the day, Clement presents this Platonic category as a means for the Christian to experience an immanent God. For Clement, Christ the Logos has revealed God. For Clement to claim utter transcendence while also holding to immanence causes both theological and philosophical difficulties. Many scholars have commented on these difficulties, but few have captured Clement’s thinking as well as Eric Osborn. Osborn is correct in his willingness to take Clement at face value, accepting seemingly contradictory positions which point to Clement’s willingness to be patient with such complexities and subtleties. This quality is what makes Clement special, all the more so because he is an early Christian writer:

You have, in brief, the professed aim of our philosophy; and the learning of these branches, when pursued with right course of conduct, leads through Wisdom, the artificer of all things, to the Ruler of all,--a

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13 See Dillon, Middle Platonists and Armstrong, A.H., The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy (Cambridge 1970); also Hägg, Henny Fiskå, Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Apophaticism (Oxford 2006).
14 R.P. Casey’s discussion on the concept of transcendence in Clement is still one of the best, (HTR 1925, pp.39-101); Hägg, Apophaticism, Chapter 4.
15 Osborn, E.F., The Beginning of Christian Philosophy (Cambridge 1981), p.241. Osborn is most critical of Lilla because he “breaks a writer up into single propositions or phrases and looks for verbal coincidences....With this verbal atomism, it has even been argued that nothing new happens after Philo [taking aim at Wolfson]....Where there are so many verbal parallels it is probable that the idea was so widespread that the search for literary source is superfluous. (p.241-242) Osborn’s humor is both insightful and biting, see p.242 n1. Not only do I agree with Osborn, but I think this focus on the minutia has been part of our problem with the study of Clement.
16 Osborn’s first work also has this characteristic; see Osborn, E.F., The Philosophy of Clement (Cambridge 1957), especially Chapter 3, “The Logos.” Again, he comments on this theme, “Clement was concerned to maintain a distinction between Father and Son, to emphasize the transcendence of the former and the immanence and condescension of the latter,” p.40.
Being difficult to grasp and apprehend, ever receding and withdrawing from him who pursues. But He who is far off has--oh ineffable marvel! - come very near. “I am a God that draws near,” says the Lord. He is in essence remote; “for how is it that what is begotten can have approached the Unbegotten?” But He is very near in virtue of that power which holds all things in its embrace. “Shall one do aught in secret, and I see him not?” For the power of God is always present, in contact with us, in the exercise of inspection, of beneficence, of instruction.\textsuperscript{17}

This immanence is not just manifested through Christ the Logos, but is also \textit{experienced} by Clement’s designation for the truly spiritual man, the \textit{gnostic}. More than this, Clement presents his \textit{gnostic} as one who experiences an intimate contact with \textit{ὁ θεὸς}, the transcendent One.

The focus here will be \textit{Stromateis} VII, which Clement says is his clearest presentation of the \textit{gnostic}.\textsuperscript{18} Immediately we have difficulty with nomenclature; finding a term which will fully capture the concept presented by Clement in Book VII will not be easy. He does not use any particular term which we could adopt. One comment which could serve as a purpose statement for Book VII is far too general,

...our purpose at present [is] to describe the life of the Gnostic, not to present a system of dogmas.\textsuperscript{19}

“Life” seems far too general, but it does indicate what we see in \textit{Strom} VII: “life” as experienced on this earth, by the senses, in agreement with the physical

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Strom.} II.2.5.3-5.
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Strom.} VI.1.1-4; VII.1.1-2.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Strom.} VII.10.59.7.
body. Against the general understanding of an “other-worldly” experience, in Strom VII Clement’s main message is not the afterlife, nor immateriality which is important in other parts of his system. Rather, Book VII reveals the very tangible, “down to earth” life which he expects the gnostic to experience. Because of this, adjectives will be used to capture the experience of the gnostic in space and time.

Stromateis is sprinkled with texts about an immanent God who interacts with the gnostic. Most of these texts, until we come to Book VII, simply make mention of the concept without any discussion: God is mentioned as a friend, or one who can be known. When we come to Book VII the intensity of this immanent contact increases, both in frequency and in tone. There are more occurrences of immanent contact in Book VII than in the first six books combined; and most of these are in Chapter 7. Indeed, what we find when we study Book VII of Stromateis is that Chapter 7 is unique, containing the most lengthy discourse on the gnostic’s experience with the immanent ὅ θεός — it covers almost the entire chapter.

What we also find is even after Clement promises to write in clear terms, Book VII continues to be a combination of concealing and revealing. After opening Book VII with his most lengthy discourse on the Incarnation, sections 10-34 (basically Chapters 3-6) revert back to topics which Clement has worn out

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20 Adding to the text already mentioned: Strom. I.28.178,2; II.4.15,3; II.10.47,4; II.11.52,7; II.20.104,2; III.10.69,3-4; IV.3.9,1; IV.17.107,6-7; IV.23.152,1-3 (Christ as the subject of this text is debatable); V.1.54; V.4.25,3-26,2; VI.12.103,5-104,2 (it must be noted that this text is preceded by a strong statement of “the Son of God,” 102,2); VI.14.113,3. All texts in bold typeface indicate the use of ὅ θεός.

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with discussion in Books I-VI; this is part of his *concealment* strategy. The casual seeker, having had his attention gained by the opening promise of clarity, would probably find this continued *concealment* somewhat discouraging.

Then in *Strom.* VII.7 Clement finally begins to speak clearly, setting forth in beautiful language the “life” of the *gnostic*. The first thing to notice in Chapter 7 is the frequency and intensity of prayer. Over 60% of all references to prayer in *Stromateis* occur in Book VII and almost 40% of these occur in VII.7. In effect, this is the first Christian treatise on prayer. Beyond the frequency, we want to notice how Clement refers to the prayer of the *gnostic*.

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...The Gnostic, then, is very closely allied to God...

Prayer is, then, to speak more boldly, converse (ὁμιλία) with God. Though whispering...and not opening the lips we speak in silence, yet we cry inwardly.

For God hears continually all the inward conversation.  

Here we have the *gnostic* living in close communion with God. Clement speaks in first person plural four times in this chapter which is very uncharacteristic for him.

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21 These texts are all from Book VII (citations list chapter and section numbers only): 3.13,2-4; 3.19,2; 7.35,4-6 (strong statement of Christ in 35,1); 7.39,6; 7.40,3; 7.41,3-6; 7.42,1; 7.43,3-5; 7.44,5; 7.48,1-2; 7.49,1; 7.49,7-8; 8.51,7; 11.68,3-4; 12.73,1; 14.88,3.

22 References for pray/prayer can be found in Stählin (Band 4): αἰτέω (pp.213-214), αὐτίμωα (p.214), αἰτησις (p.214), δέησις (p.323), εὐχή (p.438), εὐχομαι (p.439), παρατεύομαι (p.623), προσεύχομαι (p.681), συνεύχόμαι (p.731), ύπερεύχομαι (p.771). Some instances may have been missed. If we look at the frequency of prayer in *Stromateis* we find it fairly consistent until Bk VII, which has around 60% of the occurrences:

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Then a chapter by chapter breakdown of Book VII reveals an interesting frequency:

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Clearly the topic of prayer is critical in this clear presentation of the *gnostic*.  

23 *Strom.* VII.7.35,6; 39.6.
And again, these citations refer to the *gnostic* interacting with ὁ θεός; Clement is separating himself from Middle Platonism in this move. His *gnostic* interacts with the divine being.

Secondly, the *gnostic’s* relationship with God is expressed with the word ὄμιλια, a very corporeal term. Six times Clement refers to the *gnostic* having “converse” (ὄμιλία) with God. Prior to Book VII Clement uses this term 37 times in *Paidagogus* and *Stromateis*, mainly referring to social interaction between people, and is even used for sexual intercourse. Yet seven times in Book VII, Clement uses this word to describe the *gnostic’s* relationship with God.24 So ὄμιλία, a term for interaction between two people is being used to describe the *gnostic’s* interaction with God.

Clement is the first Christian writer to use ὄμιλια in this way.25 Prior to Clement the word is used to refer to social interaction and sometimes to sexual intercourse. There is an interesting text in Plato’s *Symposium* which makes Clement’s “converse with God” all the more contrasting,

God with man does not mingle: but the spiritual is the means of all society and converse (ὅμιλίας) of men with gods and of gods with men, whether waking or asleep. Whosoever has skill in these affairs is a spiritual man...26

24 Social interaction: *Paid*. II.4.43,1; II.7.60.5; III.11.68,1; 11.80,2; *Strom*. II.21.130.8; VI.6.52.3; VII.7.49,7. Sexual intercourse: *Paid*. II.10.88.3; 10.94,2; *Strom*. III.12.82.6; III.13.91.2; III.17.104.1; IV.18.116,1. Treatise or address: *Strom*. I.1.16,2; IV.13.89.2. As a conjunction: *Paid*. III.11.62,1. Somatic relationship with God: *Strom*. VI.12.104,1; VII.3.13,2-3; VII.7.39,6 (2x); 7.42,1; 7.49,1; VII.12.73.1.

25 Origen and Evagrius were influenced by Clement. Evagrius followed Clement’s use of *homilia*: Hägg, “Seeking the Face of God,” p.132.

Plato says God does not mingle with man. Clement not only disagrees, he does so while using the very term (ὁμιλία) Plato has reserved for spiritual beings (daemons). These spirits convey messages and prayers between men and the gods; in the Christian tradition these spirits are seen as angels. Clement’s gnostic has this same direct contact with the transcendent One.

Next we must note the use of Moses. Clement uses Moses to illustrate the spiritual man in at least ten passages which span almost every book of Stromateis. Not surprisingly, Clement most often cites the account in Exodus where Moses ascends Mt Sinai to receive the Law, speaks with God face to face as with a friend, and consequently has the glory of God reflected on his face — all of this is corporeal. Most of these passages in Stromateis do occur within sections where Clement is presenting God as transcendent, yet are rather enigmatic because he uses Moses precisely to illustrate just the opposite — how a person can somehow make contact with God — Moses is the prototypical gnostic!

The gnostic, like Moses, is a practitioner of θεορία (contemplation). The following text is an example of how Clement uses the glowing face of Moses as an example of the physical presence of God being with the gnostic.

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27 Strom. II.2.5,5-6,1; II.5.20,3; IV.3.9,1-2; IV.18.117,1; IV.19.118,1-3; V.1.7,3-7; V.11.71-74; V.12.78,1-4; VI.12.103.5-104.2; VI.15.132,5. We could probably count Clement’s version of the life of Moses in Book I.

28 Exodus 19:3,18-20; 20:21; 33:11,18; 34:29-35.


30 Strom. IV.18.117,1; VI.11.103.5-104.2; VI.15.132,5.
Then our Gnostic is revealed in righteousness already right here, as Moses, glorified in the face of the soul...the body bearing the stamp of the righteous soul....And as in the case of Moses, from his righteous conduct, and from his uninterrupted intercourse (ὅμιλία) with God, who spoke to him, a kind of glorified hue settled on his face; so also a divine power of goodness clinging to the righteous soul in contemplation (θεωρία) and in prophecy...impresses on it something...like a solar ray, as a visible sign of righteousness, uniting the soul with light, through unbroken love, which is God-bearing and God-borne.31

This text, which occurs towards the end of Book VI, has many of the elements we see in Book VII. It is a foreshadow of Book VII. Interestingly, in his “clearest” presentation of the gnostic Moses fails to appear. In Book VII Clement only refers to Moses once, and only in a nominal way.32 When we look closely at Clement’s description of the gnostic in VII.7 we see that he uses the same language, but he has dispensed with Moses – the gnostic is the new Moses.

The Gnostic, is a lover of the one true God, the really perfect man and friend of God, and is placed in the rank of son. [This is] perfection in the contemplation of God; the gnostic soul receives this crowning step of advancement, when it has become quite pure, deemed worthy to behold God

31 Strom. VI.12.103,5-104,2.
32 Strom. VII.3.16,4.
Almighty “face to face.”  

There is no longer any need for the example of Moses. The gnostic speaks with ὁ θεός “face to face,” and θεορία is his kingly crown. Clement first uses Moses to illustrate the intimate contact the gnostic has with God, then his portrait of the gnostic outshines the great OT figure.

**Theoria is a form of prayer**

Just as we have seen a concentration of prayer in *Strom.* VII, the frequency of θεορία also increases.  Although θεορία does include an immaterialist aspect, we see a change in the way Clement uses this term in Book VII. Θεορία is used in conjunction with prayer and, in this key text, takes on the same corporeal characteristics we see Clement emphasizing throughout *Strom.* VII. 7,

...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 the night. By these he unites

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33 *Strom.* VII.7.36.2 and 11.68.3.

34 Almost twice as many occurrences in Book VII as in any other Book:

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These numbers include the use of ἐποπτεῖα which Clement uses in a synonymous fashion. In *Stromateis* there are 13 occurrences of ἐποπτεῖα, eight of which are linked with θεορία: *Strom.* I.1.15.2; I.28.176.2; II.10.47.4; IV.23.152.3; V.10.66.2; VI.14.108.1; VII.10.57.1; VII.11.68.4. Four of these clearly show the two words used synonymously (*Strom.* II.10.47.4; IV.23.152.3; VI.14.108.1; VII.10.56.5-57.1), two seem to use ἐποπτεῖα to modify (strengthen) θεορία (*Strom.* I.1.15.2; V.10.66.2). Van den Hoek refers to his use of these two words as “synonymous,” Supplements to VC 3 (1988), p.157; also, see Daniélou, *Gospel Message,* pp.315, 341, 450 and 453 where he translates ἐποπτεῖα in various forms as “contemplation.”
himself to the divine choir...engaged in everlasting contemplation
(θεωρίαν).\textsuperscript{35}

Here we see \(\text{θεωρία} \) clearly linked to structured times of prayer, what could be seen as an early reference to the offices of prayer.

Book VII is indeed the clearest discussion of the \textit{gnostic} in \textit{Stromateis}, and Chapter 7 (§35-50) is the clearest discussion of prayer. Clement’s description of prayer and \(\text{θεωρία} \) in Chapter 7 are practical and portray the \textit{gnostic} firmly located in space and time.

Many scholars, focusing on the philosophical/theological aspects of Clement’s system, have misread his \(\text{θεωρία} \), placing far too much emphasis on immateriality. Meredith’s treatment of Clement reflects this trend.\textsuperscript{36} Meredith almost completely misses the nature of contemplative prayer in this all important section of \textit{Strom.} VII,

Clement seems to dispense with the need both for vocal and religious prayer...Above all there is an absence of any invitation to petitionary prayer or to the sacraments...there is little in Clement’s conception of perfect prayer to distinguish it from the private intellectual contemplation outlined by Plato in \textit{Republic}... \textsuperscript{37}

Although one can find textual evidence throughout \textit{Stromateis} to support this statement, \textit{Strom.} VII.7 certainly refutes it. Clement \textit{does} strongly affirm silent prayer, but he also affirms vocal and religious prayer (\textit{Strom.} VII.7.35,6; 40,4;

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Strom.} VII.7. 49,3-4.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., p.115.
Clement certainly does encourage petitionary prayer; Meredith cites §41,5 without acknowledging that this is the end of a polemical attack on those who hold “the doctrines about there being no necessity to pray…” (41,1). In addition, *Strom.* VII.7 ends with a text which stands in juxtaposition to almost everything Meredith says,

Accordingly 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.\(^{38}\)

The gnostic has an obligation to pray with and for others.\(^{39}\) Though the sacraments are missing in *Stromateis,* Clement does not neglect them – *Paidagógus* serves as “a kind of handbook for catechumens and the recently baptized.”\(^{40}\)

**CONCLUSION:**

Clement cannot divorce himself from the philosophical milieu of second century Egypt, but neither can he separate himself from his biblical faith. One demands utter transcendence, the other posits an immanent God revealed through Christ. Clement shows in the life of his gnostic that the transcendent God can be touched; he uses the philosophical concept of θεοπρασία to bridge this

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\(^{38}\) *Strom.* VII.7.49,2.

\(^{39}\) This is most clearly seen in *The Rich Man’s Salvation* where Clement instructs the rich believers to provide financially for the “soldiers” of God (QDS 35,1); they will be “able to beg your life from God…to weep and lament in sympathy on your behalf.” (QDS 35,1-2) The gnostic is enjoined to give pastoral care to others, including prayer.

gap. Θεωρία develops in Stromateis from an incorporeal concept of the mind into a practical and corporeal spirituality which is expressed in and through prayer.

Clement’s audience for Stromateis is both the Greek, familiar with philosophy, and the simple Christian, who is familiar with the Scriptures. There were probably many reasons for Clement to write Stromateis and to craft it the way he did. One was to persuade the Greek that his gnostic (the philosophically minded Christian) was the truly pious man because he alone lives Plato’s life of contemplation. In addition, he wants the simple believer to recognize that his gnostic has an intimate and direct contact with Almighty God through the practice of the philosophical category of θεωρία.

Clement has made the philosophical move, through θεωρία, from an utterly transcendent to a radically immanent God.