



Type: Book Chapter

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## "... But Unto Them It Is Not Given"

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Source: *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed.

Published: Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Foundation for  
Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1988

Page(s): 84–110

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## 4

### “ . . . But Unto Them It Is Not Given”

#### How Things Get Lost

When Eusebius, early in the fourth century, set his hand to the work which was to earn him the title “The Father of Church History,” he was appalled at the dearth of materials available to work with. He found himself, so he says, walking an untrodden path in an empty desert; the voices of the ancient church came to him, as he puts it, feebly and fitfully over a vast empty gulf.<sup>1</sup> A century earlier when Origen, the greatest theologian of the church, sought to present a clear and unequivocal explanation of the first principles of the gospel to his perplexed and wrangling generation, he had to confess that he could discover no authoritative statement of *any* of those principles in the literature of the church.<sup>2</sup>

From such sad cases it would appear that the early church either kept no records or else that they were lost. Today we know what happened: The early literature of the church was entirely lost and in its place another literature was substituted. As a result of recent discoveries, the student is now confronted with two quite distinct bodies of early Christian teaching. Just as pilgrims to the Holy Land have for many generations accepted Ommiad and Norman buildings and sixteenth-century Turkish walls and gates as the authentic settings of biblical history, since the originals had long since ceased to exist, so the Christian world as a

whole has long accepted as the voice of the original church, documents which have nothing to do with that church, but are later substitutes for a literature that disappeared at an early date. "The original literature," writes Schneemelcher, "was supplanted [*abgelöst*] by another literature very strongly influenced by the non-Christian environment."<sup>3</sup>

Why so? Because the original literature was a strange and disturbing thing that the world could not stomach: "Early Christian literature had no literary predecessors and no successors, but appears as a completely alien intrusion into the Classical tradition, an incongruous and unwelcome interruption, an indigestible lump which, however, disappears as suddenly as it came, leaving the schoolmen to resume operations as if nothing had happened."<sup>4</sup> By the time "classical" Christian literature of the schoolmen was just beginning, all the forms of the original old Christian literature, according to Overbeck, had ceased to exist.<sup>5</sup> The transition took place roughly in three steps. Our Synoptic Gospels are a product of the first of these steps. The fact that there are three gospels instead of one and that each of these is full of variant readings in the earliest texts shows that we have here not the original New Testament but the results of "altering, eliminating . . . expanding" of earlier texts.<sup>6</sup> Until the middle of the fourth century other gospels, such as those of the Hebrews and Egyptians, were accepted by the churches on an equal footing with those writings which later became canonical; that is to say, our synoptic gospels have behind them a still older Christian background literature which became lost, but today is being rediscovered.<sup>7</sup>

The second step away from the original Christian literature was the systematic corruption of the record by the so-called Gnostics. These people made a practice of claiming to be the unique and secret possessors of the earliest Christian writings. To make good their claims, they did not hesitate to practice forgery, and they borrowed freely from any

available source. Available sources included some genuine old Christian writings along with all the other stuff, and so it happens that while the Gnostic writings are patently fraudulent, they nonetheless preserve a good deal of valuable material. The sifting of the wheat from the chaff in the Gnostic writings is a process that may go on for years to come.<sup>8</sup>

In the third phase of displacement, caution was thrown to the winds as Christian writers adopted the principle that any story that was edifying, whether true or not, could be safely treated as if it were true. Pseudoacts and pseudo-gospels were mass-produced by borrowing freely from popular pagan myths and legends, while the earlier Apocrypha were supplanted by new and sensational miracle-tales.<sup>9</sup> At every step of the development, the process was the same, namely the elimination of certain elements followed by the introduction of others to take their place. The impoverishment of the early heritage was quickly corrected by the process of "enriching" the remainder through a transfusion of new but very different material, which from then on was represented as the old original Christian heritage but was in reality what Schneemelcher calls "a literary fiction in the service of propaganda."<sup>10</sup> One is reminded of the enterprise which removes certain vitamins from flour by one process and replaces them by another; only in this case instead of the original value being restored, something very different was substituted in its place, so that Christian literature from the third century can rightly be designated as an *Ersatz*.<sup>11</sup>

In the second century, Clement of Alexandria commented on the ways in which teachings of the early Church unavoidably and inevitably became lost. First of all, he says, things were lost through failure to write them down. Clement is aware, as Eusebius is, that the ancient apostles didn't need to write everything down because "the blessed men of old possessed a marvelous power," but, significantly enough, this power is no longer had in the church, and so

what is not written is lost. Tradition preserves such things for a time, but not indefinitely: "Things there are which though not noted down still remained for a while, but they are now being lost. Some of these things are now completely extinguished, having faded away in the mind from sheer neglect and lack of exercise."

But even things which are written down and carefully transmitted get lost, "for they undergo a process of constant change," and have to be continually interpreted. Interpreted by whom? "Either by the one who wrote the scripture," says Clement, "or by another who has followed in his footsteps."<sup>12</sup> But where do we find such a one? Clement notes that there are things in his own writings which different readers are bound to interpret in different ways, making him say things he never intended—and there is nothing he can do about it.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, Clement himself intends to play safe in high and holy matters by simply refusing to write what he knows, "fearing to write down the things I have kept myself from speaking; not that I begrudge anything—for that would not be right—but simply that I am afraid they might fall into the wrong hands and lead people into further error: it would be as the proverb has it, 'like giving a sword to a baby,' that is, we might well be guilty of inciting them."<sup>14</sup>

### **The Secrets of the Kingdom**

The deliberate reticence of the early Fathers is the continuation of a policy observed by the Lord and the apostles before them. It has significant implications, for it not only shows us how precious things could be lost, but refutes the stock argument of the churchmen that God simply would not permit really serious losses to take place. On the contrary, it was by his command that the most precious teachings were withheld from the post-apostolic ages.

A conspicuous aspect of most of the recently discovered Christian writings, as well as of the early Apocrypha in

general, is the frequent insistence in them on secrecy. At present anthropologists are becoming increasingly aware that the deliberate suppression of information by the native peoples among whom they work is far more general, far-reaching, and significant than they hitherto have been willing to admit. As a recent study points out, there are two main kinds of reticence: "a whole body of material was secret in the sense that it was to be kept from the outsider . . . the non-Aborigine. There was also secret information which was to be kept from the uninitiated. . . . I refer to the former as dissembled culture."<sup>15</sup>

Latter-day Saint missionaries laboring among native peoples have long noted the existence among them of both genuine secrets, that is, things too sacred to be mentioned to anybody outside of a particular time, place, and religious occasion, and on the other hand of an extensive daily dissembling to keep unqualified outsiders from meddling with things they would not understand or appreciate. Both types of reticence are conspicuous in the early Jewish and Christian literature. In the Dead Sea Scrolls the people of the community are instructed not to discuss their doctrines and doings with "the people of the pit," i.e., the outside world;<sup>16</sup> but aside from that they are put under specific oaths of secrecy regarding certain specific things.<sup>17</sup>

When Jesus instructed Peter, James, and John to tell no man of what they had seen on the Mount of the Transfiguration, he was withholding sacred things from the uninitiated;<sup>18</sup> when on the other hand he parried tricky questions of the Pharisees by asking them counter questions and then telling them that if they could not answer him he would not answer them (Mark 11:33), he was simply evading them. In the *Clementine Recognitions*, when Peter refuses to tell Clement about salvation for the dead until Clement himself has received certain ordinances, he is withholding secret teachings,<sup>19</sup> but when he refuses to discuss the nature of the Godhead with Simon Magus, he explains

that he is deliberately evading the man because Simon has no real desire to learn about the Godhead and only wants to cause trouble.<sup>20</sup>

Recently Professor Goodenough of Yale, after long years of searching among the earliest archaeological remains of Judaism, has been able to show that there has existed through the centuries not one but two distinct types of Judaism, the one following what he calls "the horizontal path," the other "the vertical path."<sup>21</sup> The former type, variously designated as rabbinic, halachic, normative, or Talmudic Judaism, is the only Judaism known to our histories today. This is because its representatives have, by years of determined struggle, either stamped its rival out entirely where they could, or forced it underground. "The final victory of rabbinic Judaism over its ancient mystic rival," writes Goodenough, "makes it hard to convince modern Jews of . . . mystical tradition."<sup>22</sup>

The old submerged Judaism has been called Hasidic, cabbalistic, *ma'asimic*, and Karaitic, but none of these terms is very satisfactory since each designates only some particular underground movement in Judaism. Seeking an overall term, Goodenough refers to the "vertical" tradition (i.e., seeking direct as against historical contact with heaven), and cautiously uses the word "mystic" to describe it. It is not surprising that, in order to survive, "later teachers of this tradition developed a 'secret teaching' (I dare not say Mystery) . . . characterized by a succession of heavens, thrones of triumph, blessed meals with the Messiah."<sup>23</sup> This preliminary glimpse should suffice to indicate that what all "vertical" Jews had in common was secrecy and emphasis on Messianic and prophetic teachings – teachings which the doctors of the schools (the "horizontal" tradition) disliked intensely and opposed with all their might.

Just as Goodenough distinguished between two conflicting traditions of Judaism on the basis of recent archaeological findings, so H.J. Schoeps, on the basis of new

manuscript discoveries, distinguished between two like levels of Christianity and even goes so far as to suggest that the old original Christianity was actually stamped out by the latter type,<sup>24</sup> which was intellectually oriented and strongly opposed to the old Messianic-millennialist tradition.<sup>25</sup> The resemblance between the corresponding schools of Jewish and Christian thought is not accidental.

The Christian doctors got their doctrine and philosophy from the same Alexandrian fount from which the Jewish doctors got theirs, both being dedicated to the allegorical interpretation of the scriptures and the basic proposition that revelation and prophecy had forever ceased. Students have long been aware that primitive Christianity was a carrying forward of the old "vertical" Jewish tradition, from which it inherited the apocryphal writings which were so despised by the Jewish and Christian doctors alike.<sup>26</sup> "Legalistic Pharisaism," wrote R.H. Charles many years ago, "in time drove out almost wholly the apocalyptic [i.e., prophetic,] element . . . and became the parent of Talmudic Judaism" whereupon Judaism became "almost wholly bereft of the apocalyptic wing which had passed over into Christianity."<sup>27</sup> It was because it represented that other tradition, as Professor Torrey has shown,<sup>28</sup> that early Christianity was so intensely unpopular with the Jewish scribes and Pharisees; everything in the Christian teaching suggested to their minds the old vertical Messianic Judaism—Justin Martyr insists on bringing the identity of the two to the attention of the resentful Jew Trypho again and again.

"If we had only the traditions of the Jews themselves, . . ." Goodenough assures us, "we should hardly have suspected the existence of the whole body of apocryphal and pseudepigraphical literature, for these, I repeat, have survived thanks only to Christian copyists."<sup>29</sup> But these writings which the Jewish doctors had rejected and the early Christians accepted were in time rejected by the



Christian doctors also,<sup>30</sup> and so were lost both to the Jewish and the Christian worlds, their very existence denied by "official" Judaism and Christianity, and sank out of sight until their rediscovery in our own day.

The recognition of the "underground" nature of vertical Judaism and Jewish Christianity supplies the student with valuable clues to understanding the real background of the Bible, of which one begins to think now more than ever in terms of hidden treasures. Only consider the illusive nature of the Bible through the ages: why has it ever been a subject of the widest disagreement, as St. Augustine notes with sorrow, among even the most pious, devout, and learned men? If such men cannot agree, Origen pointed out in the third century, lesser men such as ourselves can never be perfectly sure of what the Bible means.<sup>31</sup>

### The Policy of Reticence

In all the scriptures and apocryphal writings one finds frequent indication of the careful rationing out of the teaching as people were able to receive it. It was not a matter of secrecy. The word "secrecy" has connotations which can be misleading here. There is nothing whatever in the secret teachings of the early Christians which seeks to beguile or mystify, nor is there the hush-hush and top-secret mentality of the later Gnostics.

On the contrary, the rationing of information by and among the early saints was in accordance with a clearly stated policy by which no one was to be denied any teaching which he was ready to receive. And when was one ready to receive information? As soon as one sincerely sought and asked for it. When the Lord warned the disciples against giving their treasures to those who, like domestic animals, would not know how to appreciate them or what to do with them, he immediately added instructions as to who *should* receive, namely, "*every one that asketh*" (Matthew 7:6-8; italics added). A more magnanimous policy could not

be imagined, giving freely to all who ask and withholding only from those who do not want holy things and would accordingly be harmed by them.

The policy is familiar from the early Jewish writings as well. The so-called Manual of Discipline warns the faithful: "Do not give these things to the Children of the Pit, *because* they do not study them, neither do they seek them."<sup>32</sup> There is no snobbishness here: Israel has lost the secret things, the Dead Sea Scrolls repeatedly observe, because Israel has fallen away and lost interest in them. Likewise, these things are secrets kept from the world simply because the world will not receive them. Neither the early sectarians nor the Christians wanted or expected high and holy things to become the property of a humanity that remained recalcitrant and unregenerate. "The belief in secret lore entrusted only to the few initiated was persistently maintained throughout the centuries," according to Kohler.<sup>33</sup> The Scrolls constantly speak of the knowledge possessed by the saints as "the secret counsel" or "the secret plan of God" kept secret because only faithful Israel was worthy or able to receive it, and in the Scrolls faithful Israel is but a small remnant.<sup>34</sup> It has long been known that the terms Nasoraean, Zaddikim (also Zadokites, sons of Zadok), and Hasidim all refer to "those who keep the secret" or "those who abide by the covenant," the two concepts being virtually identical.<sup>35</sup>

A few well-known quotations from the New Testament should be enough to establish the reality of reticence as an essential principle of the gospel teaching. Consider such phrases as the following:

"It is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given" (Matthew 13:11).

"They have ears to hear, and hear not" (Ezekiel 12:2; cf. Matthew 13:15-16).

"As they did not *like* to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind" (Romans 1:28; italics added).

"All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given" (Matthew 19:11).

"He taught them many things by parables, . . . as they were able to hear it" (Mark 4:2, 33).

"And they understood none of these things: and this saying was hid from them" (Luke 18:34).

"If I tell you, ye will not believe" (Luke 22:67).

"If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?" (John 3:12).

"This is an hard saying; who can hear it? . . . Doth this offend you?" (John 6:60-61).

"Why do ye not understand my speech? even because ye cannot hear my word" (John 8:43).

"My sheep hear my voice" (John 10:27).

"I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now" (John 16:12).

"We cannot tell what he saith" (John 16:18).

"The time cometh, when I shall no more speak unto you in proverbs, but I shall shew you plainly of the Father" (John 16:25).

"The light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not" (John 1:5).

"As yet they knew not the scripture" (John 20:9).

He appeared "not to all the people, but unto witnesses chosen" (Acts 10:41).

"They . . . were forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia" (Acts 16:6).

"Hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand" (Matthew 13:14).

"I . . . could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, . . . I have fed you with milk, and not with meat" (1 Corinthians 3:1-2).

"Unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter" (2 Corinthians 12:4).

"By revelation he made known unto me the mys-

tery; . . . which in other ages was not made known" (Ephesians 3:3-5).

"The mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints" (Colossians 1:26).

"Many things . . . hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing" (Hebrews 5:11).

"Many things . . . I would not write with paper and ink; but I . . . come unto you and speak face to face" (2 John 1:12).

In each of these sayings (and there are many others) it is apparent that something is being withheld, and it is also apparent that it is being held back not arbitrarily but for a good reason, namely, that people are not ready to receive it. It is also apparent that people are to be given knowledge as they are able to receive it, so that the mysteries of the kingdom are imparted by degrees. There are, as it were, automatic safeguards built into the teaching to protect sacred things from common misunderstanding and to protect the unworthy from damaging themselves with them. God, accordingly to Justin Martyr, has hidden the truth from the smartest doctors of the Jews whose own warped minds render them incapable of grasping it.<sup>36</sup> When John the Baptist was hailed before the Jewish doctors, according to Josephus, he told them: "I will not reveal to you the secret that is among you, *because you have not desired it*"<sup>37</sup> (italics added). One receives as one is able to receive.

An interesting variation of this theme is the teaching that Jesus appears in different ways to different people. Origen knows the doctrine, but it is more fully developed in ancient *Logia* and the newly discovered Gospel of Philip, which tells us that to angels Jesus appears as an angel but to men as a man, since everyone "comprehends" only what he is like.<sup>38</sup> Hence, another early writing reminds us, we can understand God only to the degree to which we are like God.<sup>39</sup> This is close to the teaching of the apostles, that

the time shall come when we shall see God as he is, for we shall be like him (1 John 3:2; 1 Corinthians 13:12), and to the doctrine of eternal progression: As God is, man may become. The fullest exposition of the doctrine, however, is to be found in the 19th chapter of 3 Nephi, which is closely matched by the 14th and 15th chapters of John.

### Techniques of Concealment

The earliest Christian Apocrypha, especially those dealing with the Lord's teachings after the resurrection, are represented as extremely secret, but always with the understanding that they are to be given without hesitation to those who really want them. Thus in an early text Peter explains his policy in dealing with Simon Magus, who wants to discuss the mysteries with him: "It is important to have some knowledge of the man. . . . If he remains wrapped up and polluted in obvious sins, it is not proper for me to speak to him at all of the more secret and sacred things of divine knowledge, but rather to protest and confront him, that he cease from sin, and cleanse his actions from vice. But if he insinuates himself, and leads us on to speak what he, as long as he acts improperly, ought not to hear, it will be our part to parry him cautiously."<sup>40</sup>

Simon is to be told nothing until he has learned repentance. This, it will be recalled, was the policy of John the Baptist in dealing with the men who came out from the schools to heckle him and of Jesus when the schoolmen laid clever traps for him (Matthew 3:9-12; 21:23-27). Accordingly, when Simon Magus insists on discussing the mysteries of the godhead, Peter remarks, "You seem to me not to know what a father and a God is: but I could tell you both whence souls are, and when and how they were made; but it is not permitted to me now to disclose these things to you."<sup>41</sup> Peter explains that because of the wickedness of men, "God has concealed his mind from men," and that the Christians are under obligation "to honor with

silence the very highest teachings."<sup>42</sup> Even when the sincere investigator Clement asks Peter about the fate of his parents who never heard the gospel, Peter remarks, "Now, Clement, you are forcing me to discuss things we are not allowed to talk about," but offers to explain things "so far as it is allowed,"<sup>43</sup> with the understanding that "with the passing of time the more secret things will be disclosed to you."<sup>44</sup> When Clement ventures a bit of learned speculation about the anointing of Adam to be a high priest, Peter becomes angry and rebukes him "for thinking we can know everything before the proper time."<sup>45</sup>

A well attested *Logion* preserved in the Clementine writings quotes Peter as saying, "Let us remember that the Lord commanded us saying, 'Guard those secret things [*mystēria*] which belong to me and the sons of my house.'"<sup>46</sup> A variation of this, "Keep my secret, ye who are kept by it!" was often quoted by the church fathers and is found in the very early Odes of Solomon.<sup>47</sup> Commenting on it, Lactantius wrote, "We do not make a practice of defending and discussing this thing publicly, because, with the help of God, we quietly keep his secret to ourselves in silence . . . for it is proper to withhold and conceal the mystery with all possible care—especially so for us who bear the name of believers."<sup>48</sup> We have cited the Clementine Peter here as representative of all the early apocryphal teachings regarding the secrecy and reticence of the preaching. "Nothing is harder," he says to Clement, "than to reason about the truth in the presence of a mixed multitude of people. . . . I try for the most part, by using a certain circumlocution, to avoid publishing the chief knowledge concerning the Supreme Divinity to unworthy ears."<sup>49</sup> This recalls the Lord's admonitory introduction to teachings of particularly momentous import: "Who hath ears to hear, let him hear."<sup>50</sup> "The Mysteries of the Faith," says Clement of Alexandria, "are not to be disclosed indiscriminately to everyone, since not all are ready to receive the truth."<sup>51</sup>

There is a sound pedagogical principle involved here: "The teaching of all doctrine," says Peter in the *Recognitions*, "has a certain order, and there are some things which must be delivered first, others in the second place, and others in the third, and so all in their order; and if these things be delivered in their order, they become plain; but if they be brought forward out of order, they will seem to be spoken against reason."<sup>52</sup> That is why he rebuked the youthful Clement for wanting "to know everything ahead of time." Elsewhere he explains that the Lord "has commanded us to go forth to preach, and to invite you to the supper of the heavenly king . . . and to give you your wedding garments, that is to say, the privilege of being baptized. . . . You are to regard this as the first step of three, which step brings forth thirty commandments, as the second step does sixty and the third one hundred, as we shall explain to you more fully at another time."<sup>53</sup> This reminds one of Paul's rationing of the teaching to the saints,<sup>54</sup> but the three steps are significant. Papias says that the apostles taught that the 30, 60, and 100 "are the gradation and arrangement of those that are saved, and that they advance through steps of this nature," referring definitely to three degrees of glory.<sup>55</sup> The very early Testament of Our Lord Jesus Christ opens with the admonition that the document is to come into the hands "only of proven saints who dwell in the third order [or level] next to the mansion of my Father who sent me."<sup>56</sup> Here we see the teachings rationed with respect not merely to outsiders but within the Church itself. At the beginning of the second century, Ignatius wrote to the Saints at Tralles who had asked him for a letter about the mysteries: "I would like to write to you of heavenly things [or of things more full of mystery], but I fear to do so, lest I should inflict injury on you who are but babes. . . . You would be strangled by such things."<sup>57</sup> In the same spirit Clement of Alexandria, as we have seen, refused to commit certain things to writing

because giving them to the churches of his day would be like giving a sword to a baby.

Nearly all the earliest Christian writings are addressed "to secret societies of initiates," usually with strict instructions that their circulation be carefully limited.<sup>58</sup> Typical is the newly found Apocryphon of James, which begins: "Since you have asked me to send you a secret book of revelation, which was given to me and to Peter by the Lord, I cannot refuse to be silent. . . . But I . . . sent it to you and to you alone. . . . Take care not to let this book of the Lord be communicated to many. The Savior did not want it transmitted to all the Twelve."<sup>59</sup> In one Clementine writing, Clement is ordered by Peter "to hide this revelation in a box, [so] that foolish men may not see it."<sup>60</sup> And in a Clementine epistle, Peter writes to James: "Please do not give over any of the writings I send to you to the gentiles; transmit them only to those who have been tried and proven." Specifically they are to be given to "the seventy" just as Moses shared his revelations with a like number of elders. This is interesting because Eusebius quotes an authentic statement of Clement, that the Lord after the resurrection gave the Gnosis only to Peter, James, and John, who in turn passed it down "to the other Apostles, who in turn transmitted it to the Seventy."<sup>61</sup>

The circulation of early teachings was further limited by the difficulty of the idiom in which they were originally written, as Chrysostom noted long ago.<sup>62</sup> But to make things still more difficult, they were often written in a special jargon, a "special language," in fact, which is now coming in for a good deal of attention.<sup>63</sup> Persecuted minorities have a way of shutting themselves in and developing a secret idiom of their own to circumvent the watchful malice of their oppressors.<sup>64</sup> Some of the writings in the Dead Sea Scrolls, for example, "may be said, with some slight exaggeration, to have been written in code," just as were such important Jewish Apocrypha as Daniel, Enoch, the Testa-



ment of the Twelve Patriarchs, and the Sibylline Oracles.<sup>65</sup> The important Odes of Solomon have been described by one of their editors as a cipher within a cipher!<sup>66</sup> Indeed, the original meaning of "Apocrypha" is secret writing—writing too holy to be divulged to a cynical and unbelieving world: "An apocryphal book," writes M.R. James, "was—originally—one too sacred and *secret* to be in every one's hands: it must be reserved for the initiate, the inner circle of believers."<sup>67</sup> The theory was that "all these things [were] hidden from ordinary mortals; they were known to the great national heroes of the past, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and others, having been revealed to them by angels."<sup>68</sup>

A.D. Nock finds in the New Testament itself "writings by men of esoteric piety addressed only to their spiritual brethren,"<sup>69</sup> and Riesenfeld now maintains that the Gospel of John consists largely of Jesus' "meditations" uttered confidentially in the circle of his apostles.<sup>70</sup> "When we open the Septuagint and the New Testament," writes Nock, "we find at once a strange vocabulary, . . . the product of an enclosed world living its own life, a ghetto culturally and linguistically if not geographically; they belong to a literature written entirely for the initiated."<sup>71</sup> It is this which has rendered "the strange world of the New Testament" so "baffling" and "exotic," according to Professor Cross.<sup>72</sup> The peculiarity consists not in the invention of new words but in the use of familiar words in a new and unfamiliar context, "to express a new category" of things.<sup>73</sup> An exact parallel to this is the Latter-day Saint adoption of such legal and specialized words as testimony, endowment, sacrament, conference, sealing, etc., in contexts which the outside world does not understand.<sup>74</sup>

The special interpretation which the sectaries and the early Christians put on familiar words must not be confused with the later practice of allegorical interpretation, Cullmann reminds us. John's writings especially, he points out, are full of double meanings, but in John this is no mere

literary conceit but the conveying of information to those who have ears to hear.<sup>75</sup> A recent find illustrates this principle by the best-known of all parables, that of the Good Samaritan. To an outsider this is a story of the loftiest humanitarian and moral purpose, completely satisfying in itself. Yet it would now appear that no early Christian could possibly have missed the real significance of the wine and the oil that heal the wounded man as standing for the sacrament and the anointing that restore the ailing human soul to a healthy state, thanks to the intervention of the Lord, who is the Good Samaritan.<sup>76</sup>

The newly discovered apocryphal writings, both Jewish and Christian, refer with surprising frequency to the plan of salvation as a hidden or buried treasure. They accept the doctrine, as expressed by Lactantius, that "God . . . has hidden the treasure of wisdom and of truth," so that the wise men of the earth have never been able to find it by their own effort.<sup>77</sup> Down through the ages God has opened his treasury to the faithful few who have proven true to the covenant and permitted them to share the secret knowledge of his plans: "The treasury of the holy King is flung open, and they who worthily partake of the good things therein do rest, and resting they shall reign."<sup>78</sup> In the *Recognitions*, Peter explains that God has always concealed the kingdom, like a rich treasure, "yet he has caused the report of it, under various names and opinions, to be spread abroad through successive generations, to the hearing of all." All men, that is, have at some time or other received some inducement to take at least a preliminary step in the direction of searching for the gospel; all men are accordingly under obligation to look further—none is without some report of the treasure, no matter how distant, "so that whosoever should be lovers of what is good, hearing the report might be led to inquire."<sup>79</sup> The parallel to Alma 32 is striking. It is Christ who moves men to seek, according to Peter, and it is to him directly that they should turn for guidance

in their search, being moved "not from themselves, but from Him who has hidden it, and they should pray that the success and the way of knowledge might be given to them: which way is open to those only who love truth above all the good things of this world; and on no other condition can any one even begin to understand it."<sup>80</sup> Again the free and liberal access to all men, and again the foolproof built-in controls against those who do not seek with pure intent. A famous *Logion* of Jesus, now attested in the Gospel of Thomas, enjoins all to be diligent seekers: "Let not him who seeks the Father cease until he finds him; and having found him, let him be amazed; and being amazed he shall reign, and reigning he shall rest."<sup>81</sup>

### Denial of Loss

As soon as the restraining influence of living apostles was withdrawn from the Church, large numbers of quacks and pretenders began to capitalize on the secrecy of the early teachings, each one pretending that he alone had the Gnosis which the Lord imparted secretly to the disciples after the resurrection.<sup>82</sup> The simplest refutation of such claims was to insist that there never had been any secret teaching or any holding back of any doctrine whatever. Such is the position that Irenaeus takes, but even for him it proves quite untenable, and later fathers of the church agree that there was indeed a *disciplina arcana* or secret unwritten teaching of the apostles handed down to certain leaders of the church.<sup>83</sup> However, the easy and convenient abuse of the tradition of reticence by unprincipled individuals has made it possible for churchmen down to the present to label as misleading and spurious the very idea that there ever was any secret teaching.<sup>84</sup>

The doctors have welcomed this way out and made the most of it, for the idea that any Christian teaching might have escaped them both alarms and puzzles them. It alarms them because unless the information available to theolo-

gians is complete and final, they are forced to live with an element of uncertainty which is intolerable to their vanity and fatal to the finality and neatness which theological systems prize above all else. And it puzzles them because, like the schoolman Celsus in the second century, they cannot understand "why, if Jesus was sent to give a message he insisted on concealing the message." To Celsus, Origen replied that Jesus did not conceal his message from those who sincerely sought it,<sup>85</sup> but Celsus is not satisfied and asks why Jesus showed himself to so few people after the resurrection, when he had a wonderful chance of converting the world and proving the resurrection by appearing to those who had put him to death. This forbearance of the Lord has always puzzled the doctors of the church.<sup>86</sup> The great Catholic scholar J.P. Migne was greatly puzzled that the Lord should insist on keeping his true mission and his true identity a secret from the world which he was sent to redeem.<sup>87</sup> This is "the Messianic secret" which has always perplexed scholars of Judaism and Christianity. In our own day Albert Schweitzer notes that while it cannot be denied that Jesus insisted on making important aspects of his ministry a secret, one is at a loss to explain why he did it.<sup>88</sup>

At the present time Roman Catholic scholars are laying considerable emphasis on the phrase "from the housetops," which signifies, according to them, that there was to be nothing whatever kept secret or held back from the public in the teachings of Jesus.<sup>89</sup> In the face of innumerable indications to the contrary, it is hard to see how such an interpretation can be put on a passage which is a mysterious one to begin with: The Lord had just told the apostles that their teaching would receive no better reception than his had (Matthew 10:25). Then he adds that they should not be afraid, "for there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be known" (Matthew 10:26). Isn't he talking about the machinations of the enemy here? Jesus continues: "What I tell you in darkness, *that*

speak ye in light; and what ye hear in the ear, *that* preach ye upon the housetops" (Matthew 10:27). The peculiar phrase "in the ear" is explained by a newly discovered *Logion* of Jesus: "What you hear in the *other* ear preach from the housetops."<sup>90</sup> This is akin to another *Logion*: "These teachings are only for the tried and worthy: preach *other* words to the churches."<sup>91</sup> There is thus no contradiction between a command to preach from the housetops and the injunction to keep holy things from unworthy ears: some things were to be divulged generally, others not.

"These things preach openly," says 4 Ezra, "but these things keep secret," explaining that there are twenty-four sacred books for public teaching but seventy others which are reserved only "for the wise among thy people."<sup>92</sup> "Paul did not divulge all his revelations," says Chrysostom, "but concealed the greater part of them; and though he did not tell everything, neither was he silent about everything, lest he leave an opening for the teachings of false apostles."<sup>93</sup> J. Jeremias has recently shown how such a policy explains the apparent contradiction in ordering the apostles to preach in all the world while at the same time commanding them not to go outside of Israel: the general preaching, Jeremias explains, was for a later dispensation, the limited preaching for the present time.<sup>94</sup> Jesus' order, "What I tell you in darkness, that speak ye in light," plainly refers to such a double preaching. Granted that some things *are* to be preached from the housetops, there is nowhere even the vaguest indication that *all* things are to be so broadcast, as the Catholic scholars now maintain. Such a concept would be contrary to the basic principle that to those who have, more will be given (Matthew 13:12) and to the progressive steps of enlightenment that are basic in the Christian teaching.<sup>95</sup> "We believe," wrote Tertullian, "that the apostles were ignorant of nothing, but that they did *not* transmit everything they knew, and were *not* willing to reveal everything to everybody. They did not preach everywhere nor

promiscuously . . . but taught one thing about the nature of Christ in public and another in secret: some things about the resurrection they taught to everyone, but some things they taught only to a few."<sup>96</sup>

There is a type of secrecy which the churchmen condone and practice. It is that air of mystery and aloofness which St. Augustine describes as such an important part of higher education in his day.<sup>97</sup> Paul of Samosata and Simon Magus are classical examples of schoolmen seeking to heighten their prestige, overawe the general public, beguile and intrigue the youth, silence criticism, abash the insolent, and attract an audience and a following by cultivating an atmosphere of recondite, even supernatural, learning and an attitude of lofty superiority to the ignorant masses. This is still the secret of success in most graduate schools throughout the land. But this was not the kind of secrecy practiced by the Christians, a thing which the learned men of their day simply could not understand.

Learned Romans like Caecilius, Celsus, Pliny, and Tacitus were convinced that the Christians kept their doctrines and ordinances secret because they were ashamed of them; they note that this secrecy only causes misunderstanding and arouses the worst suspicions and wildest speculations—why do the Christians insist on spoiling their case by clinging to it?<sup>98</sup> It is significant that the Christians never deny this secrecy, but defend themselves by replying that other religions and even the schools of philosophy all have their secrets, and as is well known they were willing even to suffer death rather than betray it.<sup>99</sup>

### **The Unwritten Tradition**

Recently Roman Catholic scholars have pointed out that however much knowledge and wisdom their church may have acquired through the centuries, the fact remains that the apostles, who were nearer to the Lord in every way than any other men could ever be, possessed a knowledge

of Christ and his teachings which was necessarily unique and unequalled in following ages.<sup>100</sup> If that is so, who can deny that something vital and important was lost with the passing of the apostles? Along with that we must consider the idea of the *disciplina arcana*, the existence in the church of an *unwritten* tradition handed down from the time of the apostles.<sup>101</sup> Certain fathers of the church laid great stress on this, especially St. Basil. Where in the scriptures, he asks, do you find the prayer on the sacrament? Where do you find a description of the baptismal rite? Where do you find such tokens as the sign of the cross? "Do not all these things come from the unpublicized and unutterable (secret) teaching which our fathers preserved for us in silence?"<sup>102</sup> Why in silence? Why unwritten? To keep them from falling into the hands of the unworthy by assuring the strictest secrecy of transmission.<sup>103</sup> As late as the fourth century, Athanasius warns, "One must not recite the mysteries to the uninitiated, lest outsiders who do not understand them make fun of them while they perplex and scandalize investigators."<sup>104</sup>

Basil calls this "the secret tradition" and insists that the written and the unwritten traditions must go together and be treated with equal respect since the one cannot be understood without the other.<sup>105</sup> Noted theologians through the centuries have not been averse to abetting their prestige by claiming the possession of such knowledge, and indeed there is no objection whatever to admitting the existence of secret, unwritten teachings going back to the apostles, provided only that we credit the church with possessing them — as long as they are the property of the churchmen, the churchmen are willing to admit their existence. The only trouble here is that when those who claim these treasures are asked to produce them, they can only do as the ancient Gnostics did under like circumstances: instead of producing the genuine old Christian or Jewish teachings, they simply fob off on the public the philosophy of the

schools dressed up in a little reverential jargon. Basilides, for example, claimed that he had been secretly instructed by the Apostle Matthew in things which that disciple in turn had received in confidence from the Savior, but when he tried to produce some of this marvelous teaching, all he could come up with was the borrowed Categories of Aristotle.<sup>106</sup> Just so, the schoolmen of the Middle Ages thought they were delving to the heart of the Christian mystery when they were expounding scholastic philosophy.<sup>107</sup> They admitted the existence of the mystery, and they diligently sought for it, but they never came anywhere near it.

To explain the existence of an "arcane discipline" in the church while insisting at the same time that the Lord commanded that nothing be held back from the public, it has been found convenient to argue that there was indeed a secret teaching but that it was first introduced into the church by the catechetical schools of the third century.<sup>108</sup> If, however, we consult the men responsible for introducing it into these schools, we learn from them that they were not inventing the thing at all, but consciously and carefully following what they believed to be the old apostolic secret teaching that went back to the beginning of the church. Clement of Alexandria explains that in concealing certain things from the general public, he is merely following the practice and instruction of the apostles themselves.<sup>109</sup> And indeed, there is no shortage of examples of secrecy in the church *before* the third century. The vast majority of examples, in fact, come from the earlier period. We have quoted a number of them above.<sup>110</sup>

To the argument that the Lord enjoined secrecy upon the apostles only until the resurrection should have taken place, we have the reply of the scriptures and of the large "forty-day" apocryphal literature, i.e., the earliest of all Christian literature, that the emphasis on secrecy after the resurrection was if anything even greater than before.<sup>111</sup>

No one has ever denied that the basic rites and ordi-



nances of the early church—baptism and the Lord's Supper—were originally secret ordinances from which the general public was rigidly excluded.<sup>112</sup> So secret were they, in fact, that no certain knowledge of them has come down to the Christian world, whose ritual and liturgy had to be devised accordingly at a later date. As early as the fourth century, Basil noted that no written account had come down from ancient times prescribing how any ordinances should be performed.<sup>113</sup> Today even the Roman church is making drastic changes in rites and ordinances hitherto believed by most Catholics to have been the original, pristine Christian rites, descended without change or alteration from the time of the apostles.

Why should the Roman church have taken this dangerous and unprecedented step? It is partly because the discovery of ancient documents in our own day has forced the Christian world to recognize that the practices of ancient times were really quite different from what they have heretofore been taught. We now see that in Origen, Hippolytus, Clement, Justin, and the Didache, we have brief and tantalizing glimpses of "*a later forgotten aspect of the early Christian sacrament.*"<sup>114</sup> Scholars are just beginning to realize, for example, to what an extent the early Christians were attached to the temple, as when the Gospel of Philip says that the Christians are instructed by "hidden types and images that are behind the veil," so that "by these despised symbols we enter into a knowledge of salvation."<sup>115</sup> Christian scholars are rightly exercised to know what it is talking about.

### The Last the Best?

Implicit and explicit in the concept of a gospel taught by degrees instead of all at once—"line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little, and there a little" (2 Nephi 28:30)—is the idea that the most important, the highest, and the holiest teachings come *last*.<sup>116</sup> This is the exact op-

posite of the reasoning of the Christian world today, that the most important teachings must have come *first*, so that everything essential is known, while anything that may have escaped is not really vital. Few would dispute that the higher and holier a teaching is, the fewer are qualified to hear it: One need only recall the Lord's practice of discussing "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" only with his disciples behind closed doors, and of selecting only a few chosen apostles to share in the still greater mysteries such as the transfiguration. All Christians, indeed, agree that the most glorious manifestations are reserved for the end. But the importance of a teaching is not measured by its depth and wonder but by the particular need of the person receiving it. God does give people at all times what are *for them* the most important teachings that could possibly be given.

For an unbaptized person nothing could be more important than baptism; for a sinful world, repentance is a teaching of transcendent importance. The Catholic theologians are quite right in saying that the Christian world today possesses all that is essential for it to know, for what is essential is simply that which is sufficient to lead men to the next step. Such essentials and fundamentals have always been available to the human race, but they are not, on grounds of their importance, to be confused with great and glorious things promised as the reward of faith in ages and worlds to come. John Chrysostom constantly explained to his perplexed congregations that they should not be upset because the church no longer had spiritual gifts and powers as it did in the days of the apostles, because the important thing was not to heal the sick and speak in tongues, etc., but to live an upright life. Thus by deliberately confusing what is *important* with what is high and holy, he beclouded the issue and made it seem that nothing important had been lost after all. "Are we today not just as good as the apostles?" he asks. ". . . But they had signs and wonders,

you say. But that was not what made them great. How long will we go on excusing our own indifference by appealing to their signs and wonders?"<sup>117</sup> This sensible argument still does not explain away the lack of those spiritual manifestations which were the glory of the early church.<sup>118</sup> "The more exalted, glorious teachings of the gospel," writes Origen, "have always been kept from the vulgar."<sup>119</sup>

To illustrate: We have in the New Testament only the teachings given by the Lord to the apostles before the resurrection. Yet we are emphatically told that these teachings had not been enough to give these men faith or understanding of the resurrection, so that they flatly refused to believe the report of the resurrection when it was given to them by reliable persons, and when the Lord himself appeared to them, they tried to run away in terror. Now, if we possess only a very small part of the words of Jesus to the disciples before his death, how can we from them alone acquire a faith and understanding which the apostles failed to get from the Lord himself? The standard explanation is that the apostles reread the things they had not understood at first, which now in the light of the resurrection and the effusion of the Spirit became clear: These teachings "they now transmitted to the church—the words and deeds of Christ, plus the intelligence which they had received through the illuminating action of the Spirit."<sup>120</sup> That sounds nice, but it is not what the record reports. The mere fact of the resurrection, though it made everything appear in a new light, was apparently not sufficient to give the apostles what they needed. In an instant the doubting Thomas accepted the resurrection, as the others had at an earlier meeting, and yet the Lord had to spend forty days off and on teaching the disciples "the things of the kingdom" before they were ready to go out on their mission.<sup>121</sup> What he taught them was not, as is commonly maintained, simply a repetition of what they had heard before — far from it. All are agreed that at that time the apostles heard very

secret things which they had never heard before; they asked the questions which they had never dared ask before and cried in wonder, "These things are more marvellous than what we were taught before." Now for the first time they learned "the ultimate secrets," "the highest knowledge."<sup>122</sup> "Now," they cried, "he teaches us things which we had not known before, great, and amazing things."<sup>123</sup>

What were these things? If the story of Christ's return after the resurrection were only a myth or wishful thinking, we would find either total silence on the matter or else the usual gnostic-philosophic claptrap masquerading as deep mysteries. Instead of that, we find, if we bring the records together, a remarkably consistent exposition of doctrines heretofore unrecognized by the Christian world.