



Type: Magazine Article

Since Cumorah: New Voices from the Dust, Part III. Secrecy in the Primitive Church (Concluded)

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Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 68, No. 6 (June 1965)

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Page(s): 482–483, 574–576

Abstract: This series argues that the changing attitudes of biblical scholars toward basic questions about scripture allow room for claims made by the Book of Mormon. It discusses external evidences, the primitive church, Lehi, Zenos, the olive tree, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. The ninth part concludes the discussion of secrecy in the primitive church.

SINCE

NEW VOICES

PART THREE: SECRECY IN THE PRIMITIVE CHURCH (CONCLUDED)

The Secret Tradition. Recently two Catholic scholars in separate studies 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.⁸⁴ 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.⁸⁵ 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?"⁸⁶ Why in silence? Why unwritten? To keep them from falling into the hands of the unworthy by assuring the strictest secrecy of transmission.⁸⁷ As late as the fourth century, Athanasius warns, "One must not recite the



CUMORAH

FROM THE DUST BY HUGH NIBLEY, PH.D.

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mysteries to the uninitiated, lest outsiders who do not understand them make fun of them while they perplex and scandalize investigators.”⁸⁸

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.⁸⁹ 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.⁹⁰ 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.⁹¹ 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.⁹² If, however, we consult the men responsible for introducing it into these schools, we learn from them 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.⁹³ 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.⁹⁴

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.⁹⁵

No one has ever denied that the basic rites and ordinances of the early Church—baptism and the Lord’s Supper—were originally
(Continued on page 574)

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Since Cumorah
(Continued from page 483)

secret ordinances from which the general public was rigidly excluded.⁹⁶ 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.⁹⁷ 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."⁹⁸ 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."⁹⁹ 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—"precept upon precept; . . . line upon line; here a little, and there a little"—is the idea that the most important, the highest, and the



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holiest teachings come *last*.¹⁰⁰ This is the exact opposite 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 is 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*



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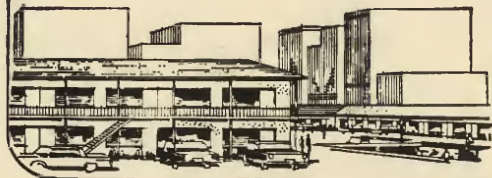
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with what is high and holy, he beclouded the issue and made it seem that nothing important had been lost after all. "Are we today not just as good as the Apostles?" he asks. ". . . But they had signs and wonders, you say. But that was not what made them great. How long will we go on excusing our own indifference by appealing to their signs and wonders?"¹⁰¹ This sensible argument still does not explain away the lack of those spiritual manifestations which were the glory of the early Church.¹⁰² "The more exalted, glorious teachings of the gospel," writes Origen, "have always been kept from the vulgar."¹⁰³

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."¹⁰⁴ 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 missions.¹⁰⁵ 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 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."¹⁰⁶ "Now," they cried, "he teaches us things which we had not known before, great, amazing, and real things."¹⁰⁷

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. It is to these that we next turn our attention.

(To be continued.)

FOOTNOTES

⁸¹R. Latourelle, S. J., in *Gregorianum*, 44 (1963), pp. 256-260.
⁸⁵Even the *Clementine Recognitions*, I, 21, speaks of "things which were clearly spoken, but were not clearly written down. . . ."
⁸⁶Basil, *De Spiritu Sancto*, c. 27, in *Patrologia Graeca* 32: 188.
⁸⁷"Why have you dared to repeat what is not written?" says a very early apocryphon, *The Revelation to Peter*, in *Zeitschrift die New Testamente Wissenschaft*, 23 (1924), p. 12.

⁸⁸Athanasius, *Apol. contra Arianos*, c. 11, in *Patrologia Graeca* 31:677.
⁸⁹His position is discussed by D. Thomas, *Dogmengeschichte der alten Kirche* (Erlangen, 1886), I, 209, 297f.
⁹⁰Hippolytus, *Philosophoumena*, VII, 20.
⁹¹M. Grabmann, *Geschichte der scholastischen Methode* (Graz, 1957), II, 94f, 97-100.
⁹²So H. Rahner, in *The Mysteries*, pp. 354f; J. H. Barnard, *Odes of Solomon*, (Cambridge University, 1912), pp. 23, 25.
⁹³Clement of Alexandria, *Stromat*, V, x, 94ff; IV, 161, 3; *In Levit. Homil.* 13:3f.
⁹⁴Thus of Peter, in the *Clementine Recognitions*, III, 74: "During the whole three months which he spent at Caesarea for the sake of teaching, whatever he discoursed of in the presence of the people in the daytime, he explained more fully and perfectly in the night, in private, to us, as more faithful and approved by him."
⁹⁵R. Eisler, *op. cit.*, II, 157, notes that the injunction to secrecy (e.g. Mark 9:1) was to be observed until the general resurrection, i.e., "until the second coming of the Redeemer in glory." Origen notes that the Lord's activities and teachings after the resurrection are "the deep and hidden teachings of the Church," *Contra Celsum* in *Patrologia Graeca* 11: 1029ff.
⁹⁶A. D. Nock, in *Mnemosyne*, Ser. IV, Vol. V (1952), pp. 185f, 192, 199f; H. V. Soden in *Zeitschrift für New Testamente Wissenschaft* 12 (1911), 188-227.
⁹⁷See above, note 86.
⁹⁸A. Adam, in *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, 88 (1963), pp. 10f.
⁹⁹*Gospel of Philip* 132:20-25; 133:15. A. Adam, *op. cit.*, p. 16, says that the real source of the Christian sacrament was the temple and not the pagan mysteries, this fact being concealed by the extreme secrecy of the temple ordinances.
¹⁰⁰Discussed by C. Schmidt, *Geschichte Jesu mit seinen Jungern*, . . . Vol. 43 of *Texte und Untersuchungen*, 1919, pp. 201ff.
¹⁰¹Chrysostom, *In Matth. Homil.*, 46, in *Patrologia Graeca* 58:479.
¹⁰²Nibley, *The World and the Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1957), pp. 3-5.
¹⁰³Origen, *Contra Celsum*, V, 19, in *Patrologia Graeca* 11:1208-9.
¹⁰⁴Latourelle, *op. cit.*, p. 257.
¹⁰⁵Acts 1:3, ". . . the apostles . . . understood the Master only gradually and slowly," Bo Reicke, in *Interpretation*, 16 (1962), p. 160. An extreme case is in the *Apocryphon of James* 7:8, 10; 8:30; 11:6, where the Lord must prolong his post-resurrectional stay for eighteen days because the Apostles simply cannot learn their lesson.
¹⁰⁶*Apocryphon of James*, 2:33-39; *Apocryphon of John*, 19-22; *Acts of Thomas*, c. 47; *Evang. Barthol.* (fragment), in *Revue Biblique*, 10 (1913), p. 185. Jerome, *Adv. Pelag.* 2:15, says that the Apostles after the resurrection asked the Lord to tell them what he had not told them before. So also in the *127 Canons of the Apostles*, Canon No. 12; *The Discourse on the Abbaton*, Sec. 480; the *Gospel of the Twelve Apostles*, in *Patrologia Orientalia* 2:135, 160f.
¹⁰⁷*Epistle of the Apostles* 3 (14), 5 (16), 11 (22).