

‘My Mystery is for Me’: a Saying of Jesus?

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For it is not in the way of envy that the Lord proclaimed in a certain Gospel (τινι εὐαγγελίῳ), ‘My mystery is for me, and for the sons of my house’ (μυστήριον ἐμὸν ἐμοὶ καὶ τοῖς υἱοῖς τοῦ οἴκου μου).¹

So says Clement of Alexandria (ca.150-215) in a passage of the *Miscellanies* (*Stromateis*) on the opinions of the Apostles regarding the veiling of the mysteries of faith. But which Gospel could be the source of this saying (henceforth ‘the Mystery Saying’)? It is not found in the canonical Gospels. In the same passage Clement quotes extensively from the canonical New Testament (e.g. Eph. 3:3-5; Col. 1:9-11, 25-27; Heb. 5:12-14, 6:1), and from the *Epistle of Barnabas*. Also he often cites the lost *Gospel of the Hebrews* and the *Gospel of the Egyptians*. The former is cited also by Didymus the Blind, Jerome and Origen, and only Origen wrote of it disapprovingly.² Fragments of the *Gospel of the Egyptians* survive only in Clement, who notes in one passage how it is misused by heretics, probably Gnostics.³ But these numerous citations make it unlikely that either of these extra-canonical texts is the unnamed ‘certain Gospel’. Ehrmann and Pleše follow the scholarly tradition of classifying the Mystery Saying as an agraphon, an ‘unwritten thing’: that is, words ascribed to Jesus which have been transmitted outside the canonical Gospels.

Many agrapha are found in only a single source, e.g. ‘It is more blessed to give than receive’ (Acts 20:35), or ‘In whatever circumstances I overtake you, in those I will also judge you.’⁴ But the Mystery Saying is attested nine times: in

¹ Clement, *Miscellanies* V.10; translation from A. Roberts & J. Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Christian Library* vol. 12 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1869), p. 259 (I have adapted Roberts’ and Donaldson’s ‘to’ to ‘for’); B. Ehrman & Z. Pleše, *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations* (Oxford: OUP, 2011), pp. 362-63.

² Ehrman & Pleše, *The Apocryphal Gospels*, pp.216-221; cf. Origen, *Commentary on John* 2.12.

³ Clement, *Miscellanies* III.63 (9); see Ehrman & Pleše, *The Apocryphal Gospels*, pp. 223-29.

⁴ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 47.5; Ehrman & Pleše, *The Apocryphal Gospels*, p. 361.

addition to Clement of Alexandria, it is found in slightly differing forms in the *Clementine Homilies*, John Chrysostom, twice in Theodoret of Cyr, in the *Testamentum Domini* (a Christian apocryphon/church order) and once in a *dubium* of John Damascene. A very similar saying is found in the *Odes of Solomon* and the Gnostic *Acts of John*. This article will address two inter-related questions: is this saying authentic, and what mystery could Jesus be talking about? We will proceed by examining the sources chronologically, placing each citation in its literary, historical and theological context. Owing to the unusually high number of citations detailed analysis will not be possible, and therefore the conclusions are necessarily provisional. It is to be hoped that specialists will be able to take the question further.

The earliest citation apart from Clement (and possibly earlier than him) is in the *Odes of Solomon* (1st to 3rd centuries CE). The *Odes*' emphasis on knowledge⁵ and their cosmological references⁶ did lead some scholars to posit a Gnostic origin. However, they are now generally agreed to be Christian.⁷ They bear a strong structural resemblance to the hymn-like passages of the Pauline Epistles (Eph. 1:3-10; Phil. 2:6-11; Col. 1:12-20; 1 Tim. 3:16). The Mystery Saying comes in an Ode in which Christ gives the knowledge of the Most High:

Hear the word of truth,
And receive the knowledge of the Most High [...]
Keep my mystery (*ṭarw 'rāzy*), you who are kept by it:
Keep my faith, you who are kept by it.
And understand my knowledge, you who know me in truth;
Love me with affection, you who love...⁸

Knowledge of what? There is some reference to cosmology, but perhaps the point is that the knowledge is kept hidden: the silence is implicit.⁹

⁵ E.g. *Odes* 7.7; 12.3-4; 17.13; in J.H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985), pp. 740, 746, 751.

⁶ E.g. *Odes* 26.5-7, Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, p. 759.

⁷ See E. Nazar (ed.), *Les Odes de Salomon, Sagesses chrétiennes* (Paris: Cerf, 1996), p.40 and n. 2; Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, pp. 726-27.

⁸ *Odes of Solomon*, 8.10; Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, p. 742. Syriac text: J.H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Odes of Solomon* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977), p. 40. I am indebted to Robert Hayward for his transcription.

⁹ Charlesworth proposes a comparison with the Dead Sea Scrolls (Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, p.742, n.): 1QH 11.10 (nothing very obvious) and 1Q27: '...knowledge shall fill the world and folly shall exist no longer' (1Q27.6, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, tr. G. Vermes, (London: Penguin Books, 1997) p. 389).

The Gnostic *Acts of John* date from ca.150-200, so are roughly contemporary with Clement and the *Odes*. The *Acts* replace the Last Supper and the Passion Narrative with an initiatory hymn and dance led by Jesus himself, which may be of Valentinian origin.¹⁰ In this hymn, Jesus teaches his Apostles: ‘Now if you respond to my dancing, see yourself in me who speak; and when you have seen what I do, keep silence about my mysteries (τὰ μυστήριά μου σίγα)! You who dance, perceive what I do; for yours is this passion of mankind which I am to suffer!’¹¹

It is very unlikely that Clement took the Mystery Saying from this Gnostic text, given his opposition to heretics, who were very probably the Gnostics. In any case, the *Acts of John* are not called a Gospel. In fact, the Gnostics were not very inventive: their teachings on the cosmic symbolism of the Cross and multiple heavens were more likely taken from the Apostles’ oral teachings and distorted.¹² And Augustine points out that most of the elements of the ‘Hymn of Jesus’ in the *Acts of John* are taken from canonical Gospels (e.g. ‘I want to save, and I want to be saved’: cf. Tit. 3:5, 1 Thess. 5:19).¹³ If anything, this strengthens the case for the authenticity of the Mystery Saying.

The Clementine Homilies. A kind of early Christian novel, the *Clementine Homilies* and *Recognitions*, collectively known as the *Clementines* and traditionally attributed to Clement of Rome, have been dated to between the 2nd and the 4th centuries. They consist largely of stories about Peter’s preaching, especially his debates and duels with Simon Magus. In the context in which the Mystery Saying appears, Peter is debating with Simon about wicked actions, especially in the light of cultural difference (e.g. incest). Peter shows how bad custom can make one race sin, contrary to the custom of the whole human race:

‘If, then, no one were at all ever to confess that these are sins, it is right even then to look forward of necessity to a judgement in regard to sins.’
When Peter said this, Simon answered: ‘Does this, then seem to you to be the truth in regard to the wicked one? Tell me.’

¹⁰ The hymn has strong parallels with a Gnostic initiation rite of the Valentinian Mark the Magus: Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* I.13.2, 3; *Acta Johannis*, ed. & tr. E. Junod & J.-D. Kaestli, CCSA, 1 (Brépols-Turnhout, 1983), vol. 2, p. 650.

¹¹ *Acts of John* 96, in *The Apocryphal New Testament: a Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation*, ed. & tr. J.K. Elliott (OUP, 1993), p. 319. Greek text: *Acta Johannis*, ed. & tr. E. Junod & J.-D. Kaestli, vol. 1, p. 205.

¹² D. White, ‘Contemporary Spiritualities and Christianity: Is There an Authentic Christian Gnosis?’ *New Blackfriars* 93 (September 2012), pp. 580-97.

¹³ Augustine, *Letter 237*, in Augustine, *Letters 211-270 and 1* to 29**, tr. R. Teske, *The Works of Saint Augustine: a Translation for the 21st Century*, vol. II/4 (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 2005), pp. 136-41.

And Peter said: ‘We remember that our Lord and Teacher, commanding us, said, “Keep the mysteries for me and the sons of my house” (τὰ μυστήρια ἔμοι καὶ τοῖς υἱοῖς τοῦ οἴκου μου φυλάξατε). Wherefore also He explained to His disciples privately the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. But to you who do battle with us, and examine into nothing else but our statements, whether they be true or false, it would be impious to state the hidden [truths] (τὰ ἀπόρρητα λέγειν ἀσεβεῖν ἔστιν). But that none of the bystanders may imagine that I am contriving excuses, because I am unable to reply to the assertions made by you, I shall answer you by first putting the question, if there had been a state of painlessness, what is the meaning of the statement, “The evil one was?”’¹⁴

The private explanation of the Mysteries of Heaven clearly refers, as the translators point out, to Mk. 4:34. And it seems that teachings on the Evil One, Satan, are restricted or reserved. Clement of Alexandria says right at the beginning of his *Miscellanies*, a text concerned largely with authentic Christian knowledge (γνῶσις), that Jesus had given secret teachings:

Thus the Lord did not hinder from doing good while keeping the Sabbath; but allowed us to communicate of those divine mysteries, and of that holy light, to those who are able to receive them... But secret things (τὰ δὲ ἀπόρρητα) are entrusted to speech (λόγῳ πιστεύεται), not to writing, as is the case with God...¹⁵

The *Miscellanies* see Christian initiation as twofold: Baptism/Confirmation and Eucharist, and then further teaching which will deepen the neophytes’ knowledge of what they have already received. Though Clement’s language is different, this is no different from the teaching of Paul (e.g. 1 Cor. 2:6-7) and indeed the whole liturgical tradition of Initiation and Mystagogy. Writing, as I said, probably against the Gnostics, Clement seeks to teach his audience an authentic Christian gnosis which we might reasonably read in the context of the Spirit’s gift of knowledge (cf. Is. 11:2). Later in the same text Clement says that the gnosis was ‘the knowledge and apprehension of things present, future, and past... which has descended by transmission to a few, having been imparted

¹⁴ *Clementine Homilies* 19.19-19.20.1. Greek text: B. Rehm (ed.), *Die Pseudoklementinen*, I Homilien, GCS 42 (Akademie-Verlag Berlin, 1969), p. 263; translation, ANCL vol. 17, ed. & tr. A. Roberts & J. Donaldson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1870), p. 305 and n. 4.

¹⁵ Clement, *Miscellanies* in Clement, *Opera Quae Exstant Omnia...* PG vol. 8, ed. N. Le Nourry (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1857), vol. 8, 701; ANCL vol. 4, ed. & tr. A. Roberts & J. Donaldson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1867), p. 356.

unwritten by the apostles.’¹⁶ In a lost work, the *Hypotyposes* (‘Outlines’), quoted by Eusebius, Clement says that these few were ‘James the righteous, John, and Peter... entrusted by the Lord after his resurrection with the higher knowledge (γνώσιν). They imparted it to the other apostles, and the other apostles to the Seventy, one of whom was Barnabas.’¹⁷ The Christian gnosis has a strongly cosmological content, including teachings on the angels of God and the fallen angels (basically, the stuff of apocalyptic), as found in Christian apocrypha and Irenaeus.¹⁸ And the question ‘What is the meaning of the statement, ‘The evil one was?’’ which Peter is unwilling to answer in the *Clementine Homilies*, deals precisely with ‘a thing past’ and a fallen angel.

In his seventh homily on the First Letter to the Corinthians, John Chrysostom (ca. 347-407) cites the Mystery Saying as τὸ μυστήριόν μου ἔμοι καὶ τοῖς ἔμοις.¹⁹ Chrysostom says this appears ‘somewhere’ (ἀλλαχοῦ). The editor, de Montfaucon, refers the reader to Is. 24.7, which would seem to be an error, as there is nothing there which could be read as ‘mystery’ – it should be Is. 24:16 (see below, on Theodoret). Chrysostom is commenting on 1 Cor. 2:6-7, in which Paul explains that ‘we’ do impart wisdom to the mature, ‘a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification.’ The commentary tries to strike a balance between Paul’s argument that there are hidden mysteries, and Christ’s command to proclaim on the rooftops what they have heard whispered (Mt. 10:27). Chrysostom’s argument is that for unbelievers the mysteries of faith are like letters on a page for someone who cannot read – so it is as if they have not heard them. He cites the Mystery Saying along with 2 Cor. 4:3 (the Gospel is only veiled to those who are perishing) and 1 Cor. 15:51 (the mystery of the believers’ resurrection). So Chrysostom is reading the Mystery Saying as evidence that unless one is ‘one of Christ’s’, one cannot understand his mysteries. That is a very different reading, indeed almost opposite, to the injunction to believers to hide the mysteries of faith (by implication, *for fear* that the unbelievers know what they should not) which we found in Clement of Alexandria and the *Clementine Homilies*.

Theodoret of Cyr (ca.393-ca.457) cites the Mystery Saying twice, first in reference to Ps. 24 (25):14:

¹⁶ Clement, *Miscellanies* VI.7/ANCL vol. 12, p. 339.

¹⁷ Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, tr. G.A. Williamson, rev. & ed. A. Louth (London: Penguin, 1989), II.1.2/p. 36.

¹⁸ D. White, ‘Contemporary Spiritualities and Christianity’ (see n. 12 above).

¹⁹ John Chrysostom, *Homiliae XLIV in Epistolam primam ad Corinthios*, PG vol. 61, ed. B. de Montfaucon (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1862), 7.2/56.

Now, it is possible to hear the Lord himself speaking through the prophet Isaiah, ‘My mysteries are for me, and for mine’ (τὰ μυστήριά μου ἐμοὶ, καὶ τοῖς ἐμοῖς) he reveals them not simply to all but to those who fear him, and gives a glimpse of the purpose of his divine sayings.²⁰

Schulze notes ‘Is. 24:16 (according to certain old books).’²¹

The second citation is in reference to Ps. 65(66):16:

Come, listen, and I shall recount to you, all you who fear God, everything he did for my soul – I beg you who entertain reverence for God to come to know. He spoke in this fashion also in the twenty-first psalm: ‘I shall pay my vows before those who fear him’ (Ps. 22:25). Now, in these ways we are taught to share with them and to recount the divine doings to them in particular: ‘Do not give holy things to dogs, nor cast your pearls before swine.’ (Mt. 7:6), and, ‘My mysteries for me and for mine.’²²

(In spite of the difference of translation, the Greek is the same in both.²³)

At first sight this appears to have nothing to do with Is.24.16. In the RSV we have:

From the ends of the earth we hear songs of praise,
of glory to the Righteous One.
But I say, ‘I pine away, I pine away (רָזִי־לִי רָזִי־לִי).
Woe is me!
For the treacherous deal treacherously,
The treacherous deal very treacherously.’

רָזִי־לִי רָזִי־לִי is translated in the New Jerusalem Bible as ‘What an ordeal, what an ordeal’, and the RSV ‘I pine away, I pine away.’ But if we read רָז as Aramaic, the verse can indeed be translated as ‘My *mystery* is for me, my *mystery* is for me’ – just like ‘*rāzy* in the *Odes of Solomon*. This is followed by the Vulgate,

²⁰ Theodoret of Cyr, *Commentary on the Psalms, Psalms 1-72*, tr. Robert C. Hill, *The Fathers of the Church* vol. 101 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), ps.24/25: 7, p. 166. Greek text: Theodoret, *In Psalmos*, ed. J.L. Schulze, PG vol. 80 (Paris: 1860), 1041.

²¹ Theodoret, *In Psalmos*, ed. J.L. Schulze, PG vol. 80, 1041 n. y (my translation).

²² Theodoret of Cyr, *Commentary on the Psalms, Psalms 1-72*, tr. Hill, ps.65/66: 9, p. 375.

²³ Theodoret, *In Psalmos*, ed. J.L. Schulze, PG vol. 80, 1041, 1369.

Secretum meum mihi, secretum meum mihi,²⁴ which suggests that the ‘mystery’ reading was common around this time (Jerome was from the generation preceding Theodoret).

Hill reads Theodoret’s citation as ‘Isa. 24:16, in some Greek versions.’²⁵ In fact Is. 24:16 LXX says, ‘O Lord God of Israel, from the ends of the earth we have heard wonderful things *and there is* hope to the godly: but they shall say, Woe to the despisers, that despise the law.’ But one version of the LXX, C. Marchalianus, has the marginal note, *καὶ εἶπεν τὸ μυστήριον μου ἐμοὶ τὸ μυστήριον μου ἐμοὶ*, some manuscripts adding *καὶ τοῖς ἐμοῖς* (*sic*, without breathings or accents).²⁶ Kaiser re-reads Is. 24:16:

From the ends of the earth
we hear songs of praise,
splendour to the righteous!
And I said,
It is my secret! It is my secret!
Woe <to the false> who deal falsely
The false who falsely work falsehood!²⁷

He thinks this draws on a Targum,²⁸ which he does not specify, but it is probably the *Targum of Isaiah*:

The prophet said, The mystery of the reward of the righteous has been shewn (*sic*) unto me; the mystery of the punishment of the wicked has been revealed to me. Woe to the oppressors, for they shall be oppressed, and to the spoiling of the spoilers, for behold they shall be spoiled.²⁹

²⁴ *Biblia sacra juxta Vulgatae*...ed. A.C. Fillion, 5th edition (Paris: Letouzey & Ané, 1887). Note that the KJB gives ‘My leanness, my leanness’, but in a marginal note, ‘Heb. *Leanness to me, or My secret to me*’ (*The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible: with the Apocrypha, King James Version*, ed. D. Norton (CUP: 2005), p. 916).

²⁵ Theodoret of Cyr, tr. Hill, p. 375 n. 11.

²⁶ See A. Rahlfs (ed.), *Septuaginta, id est vetus testamentum graece juxta lxx interpretes*, vol. 2, *Libri poetici et prophetici*, 5th edn (Stuttgart: Privilegierte Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1935), vol. 2 p. 597 n. 16.

²⁷ O. Kaiser, *Isaiah 13-39: a commentary*, tr. R.A. Wilson (London: SCM, 1974), pp. 186, 189.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 189 n. a.

²⁹ *The Targum of Isaiah*, ed. & tr. J.F. Stenning (Oxford: Clarendon, 1949), p. 76.

Margaret Barker thinks that the background to this Targumic expansion is probably Ps. 73 (74):12-20, showing that these visions of the fate of the wicked were given in the sanctuary.³⁰

To return to Theodoret, the words, ‘My mystery is for me and for those of my house’ found in the version of Isaiah 24:16 that he knew, may be read as the Lord speaking. Jesus need not have said these words himself. Theodoret’s way of reading Scripture seems much the same as Augustine’s: because Christ is the Word of God, we can and should hear him speaking in every word of Scripture³¹ (hence the ‘Fifth Gospel’ interpretation of Isaiah that became so popular). Jeremias clearly interprets the Mystery Saying this way, as he considers it inauthentic.³² He compares two other apparent agrapha in Clement of Alexandria: ‘[The Lord], about to pour himself out as a libation, gives us a new testament: “I give my love to you”’,³³ and ‘To the judge, He says, “Do not accept persons in judgment; for gifts blind the eyes of those who see, and changes just words.”’³⁴ The editors of these texts compare the first with Jn. 13:34 and 14:27³⁵ and the latter with Deut. 16:19.³⁶

An elegant solution. But perhaps a bit simplistic? Just because a saying attributed to Jesus is also found in similar form in the Old Testament does not mean that he never said it. Not only did Jesus quote Scripture frequently, but he often gave it new interpretations which astonished or discomfited his hearers, such as his gloss on Ps.110.1, ‘The Lord said to my lord’, in Mt. 22:44. Furthermore, as we have just seen, the translation ‘mystery’ requires מֵסֵת to be read as Aramaic – which was the language of Jesus. We also have the fascinating possibility that Jesus not only quoted an older version of Isaiah which is now lost, but one which is preserved in a variant of the LXX.

But another possibility is that a scribe wrote the Mystery Saying in the margin (note that it is a marginal addition) as a gloss, and Theodoret was working from a copy of Isaiah in this textual tradition. This would make sense of και ειπεν το

³⁰ Personal email, 6 August 2012.

³¹ E.g. Augustine’s *Exposition on Psalm 3*.

³² Joachim Jeremias, *Unknown Sayings of Jesus*, 2nd edn, tr. R.H. Fuller (London: SPCK, 1964), p. 20 n. 6.

³³ Jeremias, op.cit.; Clement of Alexandria, *Quis Dives Salvetur*, ed. Otto Stählin, GCS vol. 17, Clemens Alexandrinus, vol. 3 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag-Berlin, 1970). 37.4/p. 184. My translation.

³⁴ Jeremias, op.cit.; Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus (Christ the Educator)*, tr. Simon P. Wood, *The Fathers of the Church: a New Translation*, vol. 23 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1954), III.12.91.3/p. 268.

³⁵ Clement, *Quis Dives Salvetur* p. 184.n.

³⁶ Clement, *Paedagogus* p. 268 n. 31.

μυστηριον μου εμοι το μυστηριον μου εμοι [και τοις εμοις], ‘And [Jesus] said, ‘My mystery is for me, my mystery is for me [, and for mine].’ In other words, the scribe would have recognised a parallel between Is. 24:16 and the Mystery Saying attributed to Jesus, but Theodoret reads Is. 24:16 either as Jesus quoting it or as simply ‘the Word of the Lord’.

The *Testamentum Domini* (TD) is best described as a cross between a Christian apocryphon and a church order/liturgical constitution. It survives in a 7th-century Syriac translation³⁷ of a Greek text of which only fragments remain.³⁸ An Ethiopic translation manifests variants.³⁹ The Arabic MS is as yet mostly unedited. The TD has an opening apocalyptic section in which Jesus appears to several of the disciples on Easter Sunday evening and gives a prophecy of persecution, followed by a long and detailed church order/liturgical constitution. The opening section is cognate with the Christian anti-Gnostic apocryphon *The Epistle of the Apostles* (pre-180), while the church order/liturgical constitution is comparable with, but much longer and wider-ranging than, the *Apostolic Tradition*, the *Didascalia* and similar texts. The Greek original of the TD has been dated to around the late 5th century (with origins postulated in Egypt, Asia Minor or Syria).⁴⁰ The opening apocalyptic section, if it refers to the persecution of Christians under the rising Sassanid Empire, could date to as early as the 3rd century (though it probably has a separate origin from the church order/liturgical constitution which it prefaces).⁴¹ The TD claims an origin which is given in the text’s full title: ‘The Testament, or words which our Lord, when He rose from the dead, spake (*sic*) to the holy Apostles, and which were written in eight books by Clement of Rome, the disciple of Peter.’⁴² MS S gives ‘the first book of Clement’, but Clement is not mentioned at all in MS C.⁴³ Although these variants are not without significance, TD forms the first two books of the

³⁷ *Testamentum Domini Nostri Jesus Christi* Ed. et tr. (into Latin), Ignatius Rahmani (Mainz: Kirchheim, 1899); *The Testament of Our Lord*, tr. J. Cooper & A.J. Maclean (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1902). There are partial translations by P. Bradshaw & H.W. Attridge in *The Apostolic Tradition: a commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), and by G. Sperry-White (*The Testamentum Domini: a text for students, with introduction, translation and notes*, Alcuin Club booklet no. 19 (Bramcote: Grove Press, 1991), but these do not include the Mystery Saying passage.

³⁸ B. Gain, ‘Fragments grecs inédits du *Testamentum Domini* attribués à Saint Basile’, *Augustinianum* 32, 1992, pp.261-277; S. Corcoran & B. Salway, ‘A Newly Identified Fragment of the Testamentum Domini’, *JTS* n.s. 62/1 (April 2011), 118-35.

³⁹ *Testamentum Domini Éthiopien*, ed. & tr. (into French) R. Beylot (Louvain: Edition Peeters, 1984).

⁴⁰ S. Corcoran & B. Salway, op.cit. p.133.

⁴¹ A.C. Stewart, ‘The Apocalyptic Section of the *Testamentum Domini*: an Attempt at Dating’, *JTS* n.s. 62/1 (April 2011) 136-143.

⁴² *The Testament of Our Lord*, tr. J. Cooper & A.J. Maclean, p. 49.

⁴³ Ibid.

Clementine Octateuch, eight works traditionally attributed to Clement of Rome. These include the *Clementine Homilies* and *Recognitions*, where the Mystery Saying is also found. The entire Octateuch is included in the ‘Broader Canon’ of the Ethiopian Orthodox Bible.⁴⁴ It is also striking, if baffling, that at the very end of TD we read that John, Peter and Matthew wrote down the Lord’s oral testament, and distributed copies to the churches through Dosithaeus, Silas, Magnus and Aquila.⁴⁵ Is this an appeal to eyewitnesses from a much earlier version of what is manifestly a late document (it refers to subdeacons,⁴⁶ *inter alia*), or merely a literary/rhetorical device?

Whatever the case, the Mystery Saying appears in the transition section of TD between the apocalypse and the church order/liturgical constitution. Effectively this represents an expansion of the Mystery Saying and of Mt. 7:6:

But because in the midst of the assembly of the people [there are], more and more, many carnal desires, and the labourers are feeble and few, only My perfect labourers shall know the multitude of My words, and all also which at times (or, ‘many times’) I spake to you in private before I should suffer, and which ye know: ye both have them and understand them. For My mysteries (lit., ‘mystery’ singular) are given to those who are Mine (*Raze ger dily l’haleyn dily y’hibin*⁴⁷), with whom I shall rejoice and be glad with My Father.

But these remaining words, determining and appointing them, speak ye in the Churches [...]

See that ye give not My holy things to the dogs, and cast not pearls before swine (Mt. 7:6), as I have often commanded you. Give not my holy thing[s] to defiled and wicked men who do not bear My Cross, and are not subject [to Me]; and My commandments shall be for derision among them.⁴⁸

Note that the ‘mystery’ is *raz*, just as in Is.24.16 and the *Odes of Solomon*. It is also interesting that TD places so close together the Mystery Saying and Mt.7.6:

⁴⁴ R. W. Cowley, ‘The Biblical Canon of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church Today’, *Ostkirchliche Studien* 23 (1974) 318-323.

⁴⁵ TD II.27.

⁴⁶ TD I.44.

⁴⁷ I am most grateful to Rev. Dr. Anthony Gelston for his transcription and vocalisation of the Syriac.

⁴⁸ TD I.18; Cooper & Maclean, p. 61f. *Testamentum Domini Ethiopien*, 8/p. 155f.

a similar juxtaposition was found in Theodoret,⁴⁹ above. We cannot deduce from this that the author/editor/compiler of TD knew Theodoret, however, nor that Theodoret knew TD and thus that TD is older than supposed: quite simply the two sayings have a similar meaning and thus, to one familiar with the Scriptures and the oral tradition, one recalls the other. If anything, the expanded, almost midrashic context in TD suggests that it postdates Theodoret.

The expansion and context might shed more light on what the ‘mystery/mysteries’ were. As Jesus says these words just before embarking on the church order/liturgical constitution (the first item will be the architecture of the sanctuary),⁵⁰ the mysteries are clearly associated with the liturgy. Later, in the instruction on the ordination and duties of the bishop, we read,

On the eve (of the Offering, i.e. the Eucharist) let him (the bishop) instruct and teach these things in the manner of a mystery (*‘razanaith*; Ethiopian: ‘let him tell the mysteries’) [and] to those whom he hath tested (or, ‘testeth’) as having ears to hear.⁵¹

‘These things’ or ‘the mysteries’ would seem to be what has been described in the preceding sections, that is the construction of the place of worship and the liturgy, and the apocalypse that preceded these. However, just after the above citation we read that the bishop should teach the ‘meditations and admonitions’ of the prophets to the catechumens, and then teach the faithful, again, ‘after the manner of a mystery... and after the instruction in the mysteries let him offer, so that knowing in what mystery they are taking part, they may offer with fear.’ And ‘if he knoweth what he saith’, these mysteries are to include the ministry of the Father, Christ’s incarnation, passion and death, the Resurrection and the breaking of the chains of hell and the crown and strength of angels.⁵²

Many of these, then, are the central mysteries of the Christian faith as they have come down to us. The bishop will be expanding on what the initiates would have proclaimed in their profession of faith. The reference to the crown and strength of angels has an extra-biblical and cosmological reference, however – as per the reserved doctrine referred to in the *Clementine Homilies* above. Furthermore, in the context of the Mystery Saying in the TD Jesus distinguishes between the carnal among the Christian assembly and ‘My perfect labourers’ who ‘shall know the multitude of My words’, which they have already heard

⁴⁹ See n. 22 above.

⁵⁰ TD I.19.

⁵¹ TD I.22; Cooper & Maclean, p.68f.; *Testamentum Domini Éthiopien*, 15/p. 164f. My thanks again to Anthony Gelston for his transcription and vocalisation of the Syriac.

⁵² TD I.22; Cooper & Maclean, p. 69.

from him. This prepares the citation of the Mystery Saying. The clearest solution to this difficulty is to say that the Mysteries as a whole contain both the central mysteries of faith *and* related deep insights which only the perfect labourers have received and can understand. As Anthony Gelston has pointed out to me, ‘in the way of a mystery’ probably translates the Greek μυστικῶς.⁵³ Μυστικῶς is how Clement of Alexandria says that secret things are properly transmitted,⁵⁴ and for Basil of Caesarea (to whom some fragments of TD have previously been attributed) this refers to the liturgy, the proper means of transmitting the knowledge (γνώσις) of dogma.⁵⁵

Sacred Parallels, a work dubiously attributed to *John Damascene* (d.749),⁵⁶ has the Mystery Saying as τὸ μυστήριόν ἐμοὶ καὶ τοῖς ἐμοῖς – similar to Theodoret but different yet again, because it omits *emou*. It comes as the first citation under the heading of ‘On the divine mystagogy’.⁵⁷ The referencing would appear to have been done by the editor, Lequien, whose Latin translation ascribes the saying to Is. 24:16. It is grouped together with Mt. 7:6 (pearls before swine, cf Theodoret), Lk. 5:37-38 (no one puts new wine in old wineskins) and citations from Basil, Gregory of Nazianzen and Philo on holy mysteries. It would seem that the compiler is defending the veiling of mysteries, like Clement of Alexandria and the *Clementines*. It is significant that John Damascene’s version of the Mystery Saying is different from those of Clement and John Chrysostom, given that he frequently cites both of them in the *Sacred Parallels*. This suggests that he received the saying independently, quite possibly by oral tradition.

No two citations of the Mystery Saying are identical *across* the eight sources. If we follow Bauckham’s ‘Eyewitness Testimony’ theory, slight but not substantial variations between reports are actually a mark of authenticity, because it indicates that there are different witnesses, not just one.⁵⁸ For example, in Matthew, Mary Magdalene ‘and the other Mary’ went to see the tomb of Jesus on Easter morning (Mt. 28:1), but Luke’s witnesses are Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James (Lk. 24:9). Both accounts

⁵³ Personal email, 28 August 2012.

⁵⁴ See n. 16.

⁵⁵ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 27.66. On the attribution of TD fragments to Basil, see B. Gain, ‘Fragments grecs inédits du *Testamentum Domini* attribués à Saint Basile’ (n. 39).

⁵⁶ ‘It is probable that he had a hand in structuring the collection of maxims and devotional texts known as the *Sacra Parallela*’ (B. Kotter, ‘John Damascene, St.’ in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd edition, vol. 7 (Detroit: Gale, 2003), p. 952.

⁵⁷ John Damascene (attr.), *Sacra Parallela*, ed. M. Lequien, PG vol. 96 (Paris: J.-P. Migne), VIII (Theta).1/9-10.

⁵⁸ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: the Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2006), ch.10.

tell us that the tomb was empty, but in Luke's account there are two angels, in Matthew's, only one. In terms of the transmission of testimony, we need only think of when we quote someone – we seldom quote verbatim, but others who heard them speak will correct us if we are mistaken about the substance of what was said. Furthermore, the strong variation between sources disallows any hypothesis of a textual transmission of the Mystery Saying from source to source. Therefore it is much more likely that the Mystery Saying belongs to the oral tradition – perhaps in relation to a traditional reading of Is. 24:16.

Yet there are also interesting parallels between the sources: Clement of Alexandria and the *Clementine Homilies* have 'the sons of my house'; the *Odes of Solomon* and the *Clementine Homilies* say 'keep my mystery'; the *Acts of John* and Theodoret have 'mysteries' plural. The saying was obviously well known enough to exist in a variety of versions. Although there are different contexts and interpretations (especially John Chrysostom's), all the sources acknowledge that the saying is pertinent to Christian mysteries. The citation in the *Clementine Homilies* shows that the author applied this saying of Jesus to the authentic gnosis which Clement of Alexandria said Jesus had handed down to the few. The Clementine passage does not of course have to narrate an actual historical event: but it does show how *gnosis* was viewed by a Christian source of the 2nd to 4th centuries; and it is a source which, far from being marginal, became well known and accepted in the mainstream Christian tradition. All this supports a Dominical provenance for the Mystery Saying.

But let us not forget that that Clement, our first source, said the Mystery Saying came from 'a certain Gospel.' He may simply have been mistaken – unable to remember where he had heard it, he may have assumed it came from a gospel (almost certainly local, not one of the Four). It may have been included in Papias' now-lost collection of the Jesus' sayings. If it did come from a Gospel, though, I suggest that we avoid Q, in view of its irreducibly hypothetical nature. But a real possibility might be the *Gospel of the Nazarenes*, which is sometimes confused with the *Gospel of the Hebrews*.⁵⁹ Both of these works survive only in quotations, and both are Jewish. 'My mystery is for me and for the sons of my house' might have been invoked in support of keeping the ministry and leadership of the Church to Jesus' blood relatives. But Margaret Barker has suggested to me that rather than a blood kinship, this may refer to the Christian priesthood which Jesus passed down.⁶⁰ For example, Origen, in his fifth *Homily on Numbers* reflects on the ministry of the sons of Kohath in the Tent of Meeting (Num. 4:1-20) as follows:

⁵⁹ See Ehrman & Pleše, op.cit. pp. 201-209.

⁶⁰ Margaret Barker, personal email of 31 July 2012.

Moreover, in the ecclesiastical observances there are some things of this sort [things requiring the understanding of the Spirit], which everyone is obliged to do, and yet not everyone understands the reason for them [... e.g. turning to East to pray]. And yet, we carry all these things on our shoulders, though they are covered and veiled, when we fulfil them and follow them in such a way that we have received them as handed down and commended by the *great high priest and his sons*. So when we carry out all these things and things similar to these, and yet do not follow the reason for them, we raise to our shoulders and carry *divine mysteries* that are concealed and covered...⁶¹

The words I have italicised, taken together, carry more than a hint of the Mystery Saying. They also open the more uncomfortable possibility that the Gnostic schism could have been triggered in part by Jesus' spiritual sons failing or refusing to teach the mysteries to the mature who were capable of receiving them (cf. John Chrysostom and TD).

According to Eusebius, quoting a letter of Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus, to Bishop Victor of Rome, 'John, who leant back on the Lord's breast, [...] became a priest wearing the mitre,'⁶² while Epiphanius says the same of James.⁶³ The Greek for mitre is *πέταλον*, which is also the gold plate which the Jewish High Priest wore on his forehead (LXX Ex. 28:36).⁶⁴ Of course, we can read in all this the unbridled enthusiasm of the Fathers for Old Testament typology, exemplified by Ambrose's *On the Mysteries*. But in the light of the Mystery Saying and the recovery of the authentic Christian gnosis, the Fathers may have understood the Christian Liturgy as the successor and fulfilment of the cosmic mysteries of the Temple.

Finally, a comment on the Mystery Saying and Qumran. In her book *Creation: a Biblical Vision for the Environment*, Margaret Barker points out that at the time of Jesus, the Qumran texts were exhorting contemplation of "the mystery

⁶¹ Origen, *Homilies on Numbers*, tr. T.P. Scheck (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2009), V.1.4/p. 17f. Cf. Basil, *On the Holy Spirit*, tr. D. Anderson (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), 27.66.

⁶² Eusebius op. cit. 3.31/p.94; Greek text, *Eusebiuswerke: Die Kirchengeschichte*, ed. T. Mommsen, GCS 9/1 (Eusebius vol. 2) (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1903), p. 264.

⁶³ Epiphanius, *Ancoratus und Panarion*, ed. K. Holl, GCS 25 (Epiphanius vol. 1) (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1915) II.29.4.4/p.324; *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, ed. & tr. F. Williams, Book I (Sects 1-46), (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987), p. 114.

⁶⁴ Compare Rev. 22:4.

of existence”, if that is what the phrase *raz nihyeh* means.⁶⁵ Vermes translates *raz nihyeh* as ‘the approaching mystery’ (see below). נִהְיֶה is the niph’al of הָיָה, ‘to be’, so has a reflexive sense, something like ‘happening’. Clines reads *raz nihyeh* in its DSS contexts as ‘mystery of existence/the future’.⁶⁶ Barker now prefers ‘the mystery of becoming’, which embraces both the senses of ‘existence’ and ‘future’.⁶⁷

Whatever the correct meaning(s), from its contexts the *raz nihyeh* seems to have been concerned with three things. First, ethical behaviour; second, eschatology (‘Gaze upon the *raz nihyeh* and understand the birth-time/sources (or: begetters) of salvation who is to inherit glory and trouble/injustice’⁶⁸), which fits very well with the Targum of Is. 24:16 above. The third concern is creation, if one follows Barker’s translation of 4Q418.43, ‘Gaze upon the *raz nihyeh* and know the paths of everything that lives.’⁶⁹ In fact the whole poem is concerned with the *raz nihyeh*. One verse proclaims:

Then you will know the difference between good and evil (cf. Gen. 3:5) relating to their deed. For the God of knowledge is the foundation of truth, and through the approaching mystery He set apart its foundation, the work of [His hands]...

Notice that knowledge of the creation (‘the work of [His hands]’) and ethical behaviour (‘their deed’) as inseparable. This is not the spiritual elitism of the Gnostics, who selfishly pursue their search for knowledge, stealing indeed from the tree; rather, it is firmly in the tradition of Enoch, who was shown the mysteries of the heaven that he desired to know, *because he was just*.⁷⁰

Is. 24:16, which Theodoret understands either as the Lord speaking or as quoted by Jesus in his Mystery Saying, begins with ‘From the ends of the earth we hear songs of praise’, which hints at the cosmic liturgy. And it was in the liturgy that

⁶⁵ Margaret Barker, *Creation: a Biblical Vision for the Environment* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), p.69. An earlier view, which she expressed in *Christmas: the Original Story* (London: SPCK, 2008), p.49, was that the Mystery Saying referred to the Creed, the Incarnation and Nativity of Christ, which, Barker argues, were foreshadowed by the priestly mysticism of the Holy of Holies.

⁶⁶ D.J.A. Clines (ed.), *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), p.88 (הָיָה).

⁶⁷ Margaret Barker, personal email, 1 August 2012.

⁶⁸ 4Q417.1, tr. Barker, *Creation* p.69/Vermes, op.cit. p.403.

⁶⁹ Barker, *Creation* p.69. Vermes has ‘look... at the approaching mystery and know the heritage of all the living’ (p.409). Cf. D.J. Harrington, *Wisdom Texts from Qumran* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.83.

⁷⁰ *I Enoch* 60.10; 1.2, 46.3; cf. Gen.5.24.

Basil understood the *gnosis* to be handed down.⁷¹ Finally, in the *Odes of Solomon*, the themes of light, knowledge and justice abound.⁷² And in 1QS XI.3, 5-6 we have ‘For my light has sprung from the source of His knowledge; my eyes have beheld His marvellous deeds, and the light of my heart, the *raz nihyeh*.’⁷³

I am not arguing for a special connection between the Mystery Saying and Qumran or indeed between Jesus and Qumran. Rather, Jesus, like the teachers of the Qumran strand of Judaism, taught knowledge of creation – that is, God’s gift to humankind of his knowledge of his creation. This was a knowledge which was intimately connected with liturgy and its contemplative dimension. It is a dimension of the Scriptures, and of the liturgy, which we have forgotten.

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⁷¹ See n. 56.

⁷² *Odes* 7; 8; 10.1; 17; 38.

⁷³ Barker, *Creation* p.78; Vermes p.115.