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Abstract Review of *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism* (1996), by Guy G. Stroumsa.

“THEM SNEAKY EARLY CHRISTIANS”

Barry R. Bickmore

Introduction

When our neighbors approach the Latter-day Saint religion, they are often struck by the extent to which *secrecy* plays a part in our faith and practice. Indeed, Latter-day Saints themselves sometimes feel vaguely uncomfortable with what seems to be some sort of counterculture phenomenon. How could the religion some have called the quintessential American faith be so deeply involved with something that seems so . . . un-American? It must be remembered, however, that Mormonism claims primarily to be a restoration of primitive Christianity¹—not some peculiarly concentrated distillation of the American ethos. Indeed, upon turning to the available early Christian documents, Mormons and non-Mormons alike might be shocked by how many esoteric doctrines and rituals extensively permeated the ancient religion of Jesus’ followers.

1. For comparisons of Mormonism with early Christianity, see Barry R. Bickmore, *Restoring the Ancient Church: Joseph Smith and Early Christianity* (Ben Lomond, Calif.: The Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, 1999); Hugh Nibley, *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987); Hugh Nibley, *The World and the Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987).

Review of Guy G. Stroumsa. *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism*. Leiden: Brill, 1996. xii + 195 pp., with index. \$74.50.

Professor Guy G. Stroumsa, chairman of the Department of Comparative Religion at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, has recently produced what may be the most comprehensive study to date on early Christian secrecy in his book *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism*. This is an understudied phenomenon, however, so rather than presenting a synthetic treatment of the subject, Stroumsa opts for a series of smaller studies on various aspects of the problem. These he calls “forays—or *Vorarbeiten*—to check the terrain” (p. ix).

Stroumsa’s book in its entirety will be of intense interest to many Latter-day Saints. However, in this review I will concentrate on showing LDS readers how “the terrain” of early Christian esotericism might be viewed through the lens of our unique perspective on Christian history, relying heavily (but not exclusively) on Professor Stroumsa’s work. I trust that Latter-day Saints will find themselves looking upon familiar territory.

Esotericism among the Early Christians and Latter-day Saints

The Background of Early Christian Esotericism

Latter-day Saints have long recognized that a symptom of the apostasy from primitive Christianity was some degree of theological drift, exacerbated by the adoption of Greek philosophical tenets.² On the other hand, traditional Christian scholarship has historically seen the genesis of Christian esotericism within the Greek mystery cults.³ The reasons for this emphasis are summarized by Stroumsa:

2. For example, the Gentile Christians adopted first an essentially Middle Platonist view of the nature of God, and later a Neoplatonist view, in place of a more anthropomorphic theology espoused by the ancient Jews and the first Christians. For an excellent treatment of this subject, see the following book by a Cambridge professor of divinity: Christopher Stead, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

3. For an excellent example of this tendency, see Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages upon the Christian Church* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1895), 283–309.

For Catholics, for whom secrecy is associated with heresy and perceived to be in opposition to the openness and the public nature of the tradition of the Great Church, the existence of such traditions is difficult to accept. For Protestants, the traditions of the Catholic Church, which is suspected of being tainted with esoteric doctrines, reflect a degeneration of the pristine *kerygma* [preaching] of Jesus and of his apostles. To both denominations, secret doctrines seem alien to the spirit of a religion which offers salvation to all human-kind through a simple act of faith. (pp. 1–2; cf. 29)

Stroumsa argues that a more objective approach to the documents demonstrates that the early Christians inherited their esoteric traditions directly from their Jewish background (see pp. 41–45).⁴ For instance, Joachim Jeremias notes that the “whole environment of primitive Christianity knows the element of the esoteric.” He cites in particular the Essenes, who apparently required that, at admission, a new member would swear terrible oaths never to reveal the secret teachings of the order to outsiders.⁵ John J. Gunther describes the sort of thing the Essenes kept secret.

In the Qumran writings there are many references to the mysteries or secrets (*raz*) which have been revealed. Some are recorded on heavenly tablets (Cave 4 fragments). The basic *raz* concerns the wonders of God: His grace, mercy, wisdom and truth. These attributes are expressed through the mysteries of the divine plan of history.⁶

4. Stroumsa extends this even to Gnosticism, which he says “should to a great extent be understood as an outburst of esotericism in early Christianity, mainly through Jewish-Christian traditions” (p. 133). “One could even say that Gnosticism is Jewish-Christianity run wild” (p. 106).

5. Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 125–30.

6. John J. Gunther, *St. Paul's Opponents and Their Background: A Study of Apocalyptic and Jewish Sectarian Teachings* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 289–90.

Gunther also quotes Pliny to show that the Essenes instructed their initiates in the mysteries “in accordance with an ancient method of inquiry . . . by means of symbols.”⁷

Morton Smith mentions “a large body of secret traditions and practices” among the priests of the temple at Jerusalem and the Samaritan priests. Even the Pharisees had a body of secret doctrines which they were sworn to keep secret not only from outsiders, but from less reliable members of their own sect.⁸ Stroumsa cites R. P. C. Hanson⁹ to show that in two-thirds of the cases where the third-century Christian theologian Origen uses the word *paradosis* (“tradition,” usually meaning an oral tradition not meant to be written down), “it denotes an ancient Jewish or rabbinic tradition” (p. 41).

An astute reader of the New Testament will also note that Jesus’ mortal ministry was permeated by esotericism. Consider, for instance, Jesus’ stated reason for preaching in parables, as cited by Stroumsa (pp. 160–61).

When He was alone, the Twelve and others who were round him questioned him about the parables. He replied: “To you the mystery of the kingdom of God has been given; but to those who are outside everything comes by way of parables, so that (as Scripture says) they may look and look, but see nothing; they may hear and hear, but understand nothing; otherwise they might turn to God and be forgiven. (Mark 4:10–12)¹⁰

Paul wrote that the apostles, the “stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Corinthians 4:1), “speak wisdom among them that are perfect¹¹: yet not the wisdom of this world. . . . But we speak the wisdom

7. *Ibid.*, 296–97.

8. Morton Smith, *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel according to Mark* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 84.

9. R. P. C. Hanson, *Origen's Doctrine of Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1954), 73.

10. For more information on esotericism in Jesus’ ministry, see Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, 125–30.

11. A fourth-century Mesopotamian Christian document divides members of the church into the “just” and the “perfect.” Stroumsa takes it for granted that “each category of believers receives a different type of teaching” (p. 31 n. 13; cf. p. 156).

of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory” (1 Corinthians 2:6–7). Stroumsa notes that the precise nature and origin of Paul’s “spiritual” teachings “are still in need of clarification,” but he insists that both this text and the one from Mark “seem to allude to esoteric doctrines, to be shared only within a small and exclusive group of direct disciples, but to remain hidden from the majority” (p. 161). This is clearly the case with Paul’s comments to the Corinthians, who had been Christians for years. “I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able” (1 Corinthians 3:2). Stroumsa continues,

Yet a long exegetical tradition, already in Patristic hermeneutics of the first centuries, and up to modern New Testament research, has attempted to explain away such verses or minimize their significance. Two main reasons are responsible for this fact. The first is related to the cultural weight of theological perceptions, while the other reflects the ignorance of Jewish sources on the part of many scholars. (p. 161)

Esoteric Doctrines

For Stroumsa, the earliest Christian esotericism had to do primarily with doctrine, and indeed, the higher teachings appear to have normally been protected through oral transmission or were left to be revealed to the individual. In addition, a large number of apocryphal (hidden) books, which generally saw only limited circulation, were extant. Papias (ca. A.D. 100) wrote that he inquired diligently about the oral teachings of the apostles: “For I imagined that what was to be got from books was not so profitable to me as what came from the living and abiding voice.”¹² Ignatius of Antioch (ca. A.D. 110) rebuked those who insisted on an early variant of *sola scriptura*,

12. Papias, *Fragment 1*, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885–96), 1:153, hereafter cited as *ANE*; cf. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 85.

“For the archives ought not to be preferred to the Spirit.”¹³ As late as the fourth century, Basil of Caesarea could write, “Of the beliefs and practices whether generally accepted or publicly enjoined which are preserved in the Church some we possess derived from written teaching; others we have received delivered to us ‘in a mystery’ by the tradition of the Apostles.”¹⁴ Against the pagan Celsus, who around the year A.D. 170 criticized the Christians as a secret society, Origen wrote,

In these circumstances, to speak of the Christian doctrine as a *secret* system, is altogether absurd. But that there should be certain doctrines, not made known to the multitude, which are (revealed) after the exoteric ones have been taught, is not a peculiarity of Christianity alone, but also of philosophic systems, in which certain truths are exoteric and others esoteric.¹⁵

Latter-day Saint writings allude to a similar practice. Consider the following passages from the Book of Mormon prophet Alma and the apostle Joseph Fielding Smith:

And now Alma began to expound these things unto him, saying: It is given unto many to know the mysteries of God; nevertheless they are laid under a strict command that they shall not impart only according to the portion of his word which he doth grant unto the children of men, according to the heed and diligence which they give unto him. And therefore, he that will harden his heart, the same receiveth the lesser portion of the word; and he that will not harden his heart, to him is given the greater portion of the word, until it

13. Ignatius, *Philadelphians* 8, in *ANF*, 1:84. The Dead Sea Scrolls describe the attitude of the Essene Jews toward personal revelations in this way: “The counsels of the Spirit concerning the Mysteries are to be kept secret.” 1QS 4.6, quoted in Gunther, *St. Paul’s Opponents*, 293.

14. Basil of Caesarea, *Treatise De Spiritu Sancto* 27, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (hereinafter cited as *NPNF*), Series 2 (New York: Christian Literature, 1890–1900), 8:40–41.

15. Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.7, in *ANF*, 4:399.

is given unto him to know the mysteries of God until he know them in full. And they that will harden their hearts, to them is given the lesser portion of the word until they know nothing concerning his mysteries. (Alma 12:9–11)

Some of [the revelations] were for the Church and not for the world, and therefore, are given only to the saints. But many revelations have been given to the Church since the death of Joseph Smith. Some of these have been published; some have not. It has been my privilege to read and handle a number of them that are still in the manuscript and have not as yet been given to the world for a wise purpose in the Lord. But they are on file and will be preserved.¹⁶

Likewise, LDS and early Christian writings express similar *motivations* for keeping doctrines secret. As the above quotations from the Book of Mormon and Elder Smith explain, some revelations are for the world, some for the Saints, and some for a select few. Similarly, the early Jewish Christian *Clementine Recognitions* says, “For the most sublime truths are best honoured by means of silence.”¹⁷ A related document, the *Clementine Homilies*, says that “it would be impious to state the hidden truths” to the wicked.¹⁸

Joseph Smith expressed concern that revealing everything would actually harm the Saints. “I could explain a hundred fold more than I ever have of the glories of the kingdoms manifested to me in the vision, were I permitted, and were the people prepared to receive them.”¹⁹ And he told Brigham Young, “If I was to reveal to this people what the Lord has revealed to me, there is not a man or woman would stay with me.”²⁰ Similarly, Ignatius told the Roman Christians, “I am able to write to you of heavenly things, but I fear lest I should do you an injury. Know me from myself. For I am cautious lest ye

16. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 1:280.

17. Peter, in *Clementine Recognitions* 1.23, in ANF, 8:83.

18. *Clementine Homilies* 19.20, in ANF, 8:336.

19. *History of the Church*, 5:402.

20. Joseph Smith, quoted by Brigham Young in *Journal of Discourses*, 9:294.

should not be able to receive [such knowledge], and should be perplexed.”²¹ The *Clementine Recognitions* advocated using a “certain circumlocution” (rather than direct explanations) to hide the holiest truths from the profane, who would weary God’s servants with their worldly arguments.

But if he set forth pure truth to those who do not desire to obtain salvation, he does injury to Him by whom he has been sent, and from whom he has received commandment not to throw the pearls of His words before swine and dogs, who, striving against them with arguments and sophisms, roll them in the rand of carnal understanding, and by their barkings and base answers break and weary the preachers of God’s word.²²

Esoteric Rites

The most well-known aspect of LDS esotericism is the ritual secrecy surrounding the temple, and in particular the endowment ceremony. Thus Latter-day Saints will naturally be interested in the ritual aspects of early Christian secrecy. Unfortunately, Stroumsa does not concentrate on this issue and in fact downplays the significance of secret rituals in earliest Christianity and Judaism (see pp. 151, 154), but he still confides, “In fact there is a manifest connection between ritual and doctrine” (p. 33).

The first thing we notice when we peruse the sources is that the early Christians were much more secretive about their rituals than even the Latter-day Saints. For instance, even baptism and the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper (Eucharist) were strictly forbidden to outsiders. J. G. Davies reports that prior to the turn of the third century, Christian writers give a number of references to baptism and the Eucharist but leave no detailed descriptions because “the observance of the *disciplina arcani* [secret discipline] inhibited full descriptions

21. Ignatius, *Romans* 9, in *ANF*, 1:104, brackets in original.

22. *Clementine Recognitions* 3.1, in *ANF*, 8:117.

of these rites.”²³ The *Epistle to Diognetus* (second century) warns, “You must not hope to learn the mystery of [the Christians’] peculiar mode of worshipping God from any mortal.”²⁴ And Tertullian refuted charges of immorality in Christian meetings by saying that since no Christian would reveal what goes on there, strangers must be making the charges.²⁵

Just as with the Latter-day Saints, some early Christians also had more advanced rituals, beyond baptism and the Eucharist, which were used as vehicles to teach the secret doctrines. Hippolytus of Rome (ca. A.D. 200) referred in veiled terms to such a rite, which he called “the white stone”:

But if there is any other matter which ought to be told, let the bishop impart it secretly to those who are communicated. He shall not tell this to any but the faithful and only after they have first been communicated. This is the white stone of which John said that there is a new name written upon it which no man knows except him who receives.²⁶

Commenting on this passage, Hanson writes that it “is not clear what the matter delivered through this secret rule was. It obviously could not have had any reference to baptism and Eucharist.”²⁷

In a recently discovered letter to one Theodore, Clement of Alexandria (ca. A.D. 200) wrote of a *Secret Gospel of Mark*, an expanded version of the canonical Gospel, intended for “those who are being perfected . . . being read only to those who are being initiated into the great mysteries.”²⁸ What were the “great mysteries,” and what form did the initiation rite take? This question is a difficult one to answer, given the esoteric nature of the rites. However, certain comments in Clement’s writings may give us clues about some elements of the Alexandrian ritual.

23. John G. Davies, *The Early Christian Church* (New York: Anchor Books, 1965), 102.

24. *Mathetes to Diognetus* 4, in ANF, 1:26.

25. Tertullian, *Apology* 7, in ANF, 3:23.

26. Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 23.14, in R. P. C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 32.

27. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church*, 33.

28. *The Secret Gospel of Mark*, in Smith, *The Secret Gospel*, 15.

Clement quotes the following passage from the *Secret Gospel of Mark*, which undoubtedly indicates that the ritual included a symbolic clothing in linen garments. "And after six days Jesus told him what to do and in the evening the youth comes to him, wearing a linen cloth over [his] naked [body]. And he remained with him that night, for Jesus taught him the mystery of the Kingdom of God."²⁹

In a passage in his *Stromata*, Clement represents the mysteries as being taught "only after certain purifications and previous instructions."³⁰

Clement's *Exhortation to the Heathen* contains the following passage in which the mysteries are said to be presented in the form of "dramas of truth" and the initiate is introduced by the hierophant (teacher of mysteries) into the presence of the Father:

Come, O madman, not leaning on the thyrsus, not crowned with ivy; throw away the mitre, throw away the fawn-skin; come to thy senses. I will show thee the Word, and the mysteries of the Word, expounding them after thine own fashion. This is the mountain beloved of God . . . consecrated to dramas of the truth,—a mount of sobriety, shaded with forests of purity. . . .

O truly sacred mysteries! O stainless light! My way is lighted with torches, and I survey the heavens and God; I become holy whilst I am initiated. The Lord is the hierophant, and seals while illuminating him who is initiated, and presents to the Father him who believes, to be kept safe for ever. Such are the reveries of my mysteries. If it is thy wish, be thou also initiated; and thou shalt join the choir along with angels around the unbegotten and indestructible and the only true God, the Word of God, raising the hymn with us.³¹

E. Louis Backman sees the last sentence of the above passage as referring to a ritual ring dance, in which a hymn and prayer were offered around the altar in conjunction with a sort of dance.

29. Ibid., in Smith, *The Secret Gospel*, 17, brackets in original.

30. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 5.4, in ANF, 2:449.

31. Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathen* 12, in ANF, 2:205.

Let me first emphasize that the closing words [of the hymn] must not be regarded as referring only to that which awaits in the future a person inducted into the Christian mysteries. These remarkable final words should also, perhaps mainly, be interpreted quite literally. If you are inducted into the Christian mysteries, then you must perform a ring-dance round the altar . . . not only with the other novitiates but also with the angels! For they are present and participate in the mystery.³²

Backman³³ cites a passage from the *Stromata* in which Clement reveals that the initiates raised their hands in prayer during the dance: "So also we raise the head and lift the hands to heaven, and set the feet in motion at the closing utterance of the prayer."³⁴ Similar descriptions of the ring dance/prayer circle are found in the writings of Gregory Thaumaturgus (A.D. 210–60) and Basileios of Caesarea (A.D. 344–407), as well as in the Gnostic *Acts of John*.³⁵ Gregory relates a curious legend about the rite: "Today (Christ's birthday) Adam is resurrected and performs a ring dance with the angels, raised up to heaven."³⁶

Gregory's comment seems to indicate that the ring dance was somehow connected with the ascension of Adam to heaven, and hence we might infer that the "great mysteries" included the theme of ascension. Professor Stroumsa notes that Clement wrote that the secret tradition "began with the creation of the world, and only later became the subject of theology" (p. 42). He goes on, "At the end of a study of the 'secret traditions of the Apostles,' Jean Daniélou concluded that the secret doctrines attributed to the Apostles by the Apocrypha and the traditions of the presbyters referred primarily to

32. E. Louis Backman, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine*, trans. E. Classen (1952; reprint, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977), 19; see also Hugh W. Nibley, "The Early Christian Prayer Circle," in *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, 45–99.

33. Backman, *Religious Dances*, 22.

34. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 7.7, in *ANF*, 2:534.

35. Backman, *Religious Dances*, 22–25; Max Pulver, "Jesus' Round Dance and Crucifixion according to the Acts of John," in *The Mysteries*, ed. Joseph Campbell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 173–93.

36. Gregory Thaumaturgus, *Four Sermons* 10.1146, quoted in Backman, *Religious Dances*, 22.

the theme of the celestial voyage” (p. 43; cf. p. 156). Could the “dramas of truth” have been used to present various doctrines relating to the creation, theology, and the journey from earth through the heavens?³⁷

Certainly this reconstruction of the “great mysteries” of the church at Alexandria is tentative, incomplete, and in some respects speculative. However, this discussion should have been sufficient to establish some probability that this rite was in some ways quite similar to the modern LDS endowment, both in content and form. Several of these correspondences can be publicly mentioned. For instance, the first phase of the endowment rite consists of “washings” and “anointings” (D&C 124:37, 39), followed by a symbolic clothing in a white garment.³⁸ The endowment includes instruction relating to the creation, theology, and ethics,³⁹ and as a whole is meant to represent “the step-by-step ascent into the eternal presence.”⁴⁰ Finally, it includes a symbolic “prayer circle,” which, along with the rest of the endowment “precedes the symbolic entrance into the celestial world and the presence of God.”⁴¹

37. Several apocryphal texts describe journeys through the heavenly spheres (usually three or seven among the Jews and Jewish Christians). A representative example of what was supposed to have gone on in these journeys appears in a Jewish Christian text called *The Ascension of Isaiah*:

And then many of the righteous will ascend with him, whose spirits do not receive their garments till the Lord Christ ascends and they ascend with him. Then indeed will they receive their garments and thrones and crowns when he shall have ascended into the seventh heaven. . . . And again I beheld when he descended into the second heaven, and again he gave the password there, for the doorkeepers demanded it and the Lord gave it. *The Ascension of Isaiah*, in *The Other Bible*, ed. Willis Barnstone (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 527, 529.

38. Boyd K. Packer, *The Holy Temple* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 155.

39. James E. Talmage, *The House of the Lord* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1962), 99–100.

40. David O. McKay, quoted in Allen C. Rozsa, “Temple Ordinances,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4:1444.

Let me give you the definition in brief. Your endowment is, to receive all those ordinances in the House of the Lord, which are necessary for you, after you have departed this life, to enable you to walk back to the presence of the Father, passing the angels who stand as sentinels, being enabled to give them the key words, the signs and tokens, pertaining to the Holy Priesthood, and gain your eternal exaltation in spite of earth and hell. (Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 2:31)

41. Todd Compton, “Symbolism,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 3:1430.

Esotericism and Apostasy

In the LDS view, the loss of the original esoteric traditions and attitudes in Christianity was a symptom of the general apostasy. Thus Latter-day Saints will also be interested in why these traditions were lost and how this loss further catalyzed the theological drift that characterized the first Christian centuries.

The Gnostics and the Decline of Esotericism

For Stroumsa, in a concrete historical sense, the most important reason behind the decline of Christian esotericism was the struggle between Catholicism and Gnosticism.

Various Gnostic groups seem to have accepted and developed, sometimes in baroque fashion, early Jewish-Christian esoteric traditions. The appropriation of these traditions by the Gnostics made them suspect for “orthodox” Christian intellectuals. In their merciless fight against the Gnostics, the Church Fathers felt the need to reject these esoteric traditions, which had accompanied Christianity since its beginning, but which had become an embarrassing burden. Victory over Gnosticism thus meant the eradication of esotericism from Christian doctrine. (p. 157; cf. p. 106)

The Christian intellectuals gradually downplayed or denied the esotericism of the first centuries (see pp. 6, 39, 158) and transformed it into the mysticism of the Middle Ages. “‘Mystery,’ in its Christian garb, has now become something ineffable, which cannot be fully expressed by words, rather than something which must remain hidden. In other words, we witness here the end of ancient esotericism” (p. 168; cf. p. 62).

One factor that likely exacerbated the conflict was the lack of a central authority in second-century Christianity to replace the apostles of the first century.⁴² The Gnostic teachers claimed to possess the

42. Catholic scholar and apologist Michael Winter admits, “In the first place it appears, from the records which have survived, that of the thirteen bishops who ruled in Rome from the death of St. Peter until the end of the second century, only two of them exerted their authority

secret traditions passed down directly from the apostles. This claim opposed the authority of the local ecclesiastical hierarchies, and hence we can readily see why the Catholic intellectuals tended to downplay all esotericism as a result. It was not enough to appeal to some universally held version of the secret tradition taught by all the bishops, because, as Jean Daniélou has observed, in the late second century “the situation, so far as ideas about tradition were concerned, was . . . extremely confused. The word . . . was fashionable enough; but it meant something different to almost everyone who used it.”⁴³ As Catholic belief became standardized through the various councils, the secret tradition was internalized into the sort of ineffable mysticism that is difficult for heretics to exploit.

In contrast, why has the esoteric element within Mormonism remained relatively robust, despite cultural pressures? I believe the answer lies in the church’s maintaining a central spiritual authority, with explicitly stated power to define and control doctrine. The Latter-day Saints are heavily oriented toward personal revelation, which might tend toward fragmentation, except that the apostles have kept strict control over which teachings are to be official public doctrine. Consider the following comment by Brigham Young:

Here let me give you one lesson that may be profitable to many. If the Lord Almighty should reveal to a High Priest, or

outside the city in a manner which could be called papal.” Michael M. Winter, *Saint Peter and the Popes* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1960), 113. The two popes here referred to were Clement of Rome (ca. A.D. 96), who wrote a letter exhorting the Corinthians not to eject their priesthood officers, and Victor (ca. A.D. 190), who threatened to excommunicate the Asian churches for refusing to follow the Roman tradition of when to celebrate Easter. However, Clement claimed only the authority of the Holy Spirit in his letter (see *1 Clement* 63, in *ANF*, 10:248), and the Asians paid no attention to Victor’s threats. Funk-Hemmer, *Histoire de l’Eglise* (Paris, 1904), 1:294, 194; translated in James L. Barker, *The Divine Church: Down through Change, Apostasy Therefrom, and Restoration* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1951), 1:170. Winter goes on, “In the face of this strong probability of a popedom, the events of the first two centuries present an unexpected enigma. It must be admitted that the activities of the early bishops of Rome do not harmonize with this expectation.” Winter, *Saint Peter and the Popes*, 116. That is, it seems probable that if a central authority existed in the New Testament church (Peter), one should likewise have been in the post-apostolic church, so the fact that no one exerted or even claimed such authority during this period is baffling.

43. Jean Daniélou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture*, trans. John A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), 140.

to any other than the head, things that are, or that have been and will be, and show to him the destiny of this people twenty-five years from now, or a new doctrine that will in five, ten, or twenty years hence become the doctrine of this Church and kingdom, but which has not yet been revealed to this people, and reveal it to him by the same Spirit, the same messenger, the same voice, and the same power that gave revelations to Joseph when he was living, it would be a blessing to that High Priest, or individual; but he must rarely divulge it to a second person on the face of the earth, until God reveals it through the proper source to become the property of the people at large. Therefore when you hear Elders, High Priests, Seventies, or the Twelve, (though you cannot catch any of the Twelve there, but you may the High Priests, Seventies, and Elders) say that God does not reveal through the President of the Church that which they know, and tell wonderful things, you may generally set it down as a God's truth that the revelation they have had, is from the devil, and not from God. If they had received from the proper source, the same power that revealed to them would have shown them that they must keep the things revealed in their own bosoms, and they seldom would have a desire to disclose them to the second person. That is a general rule, but will it apply in every case, and to the people called the kingdom of God at all times? No, not in the strictest sense, but the Spirit which reveals will impart the proper discretion.⁴⁴

For this reason it has proven extraordinarily difficult for Mormon schismatics and heretics to gain a significant following. As Rodney Stark recently observed, most of the LDS break-offs are either already defunct or "barely exist, consisting only of several families who maintain a postal box and who have filed articles of incorporation to gain tax exempt status."⁴⁵

44. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 3:318.

45. Rodney Stark, "E Contrario," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998): 259-67.

Esotericism and Elitism

Professor Stroumsa does not see the Catholic/Gnostic power struggle as a complete explanation for the disappearance of early Christian esotericism. He writes:

There is also a deeper intellectual cause of the phenomenon: the very *ethos* of Christianity is inherently refractory to esoteric doctrines. There is one single salvation, offered to all and sundry, on the condition that one believe in Christ's salvific sacrifice. In this context, the undeniable esoteric elements in the earliest stages of Christianity were an anomaly, condemned to disappear within a short time. (pp. 157–58; cf. p. 146)

Here he looks beyond the mark. His opinion may indeed represent a valid conclusion within the framework of a Christianity stripped of its Semitic core and crammed into the mold of Greek philosophy and culture. However, in its original Jewish form, the inner logic of Christianity would not have precluded secret traditions.

First, as Stroumsa recognizes, the Jews placed much more emphasis than their cultural neighbors upon concrete religious *knowledge*.

In effect the Christians inherited a conception of religion from the Jews which was unique in the ancient world, for *knowing*, the very process of learning the truth, was an integral part of the religiosity itself. Whereas in Greece intellectual reflection upon religion is the task of philosophers, only Jews and Christians developed the idea of religious thought, theological reflection at the core of the religion. In the words of Arnaldo Momigliano, among the Greeks, the more one knows, the less one believes. Among the Jews, the more one knows, the more religious one is. (p. 33)

And despite the modern liberal ideal of free access to any and all knowledge, the fact is that some of it can be terribly misused by those who neglect to gain the proper background. A physics professor once told me that the teaching of science is like a series of lies, each one

“more true” than the last. Indeed, one simply cannot properly understand quantum mechanics without a solid background in Newtonian mechanics, and one cannot fathom the import and limitations of such a theory without some understanding of what a scientific theory *is*. However, one *can* produce a smarmy New Age metaphysical philosophy based on the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle and $E=mc^2$, as a trip to the local bookstore will abundantly show.

Those instructed in the mysteries swore never to cast their pearls before swine, not because of any sense of elitism, but out of a sense for the holy and a concern for the welfare and future development of unbelievers and new converts. God “wills all men to be saved,” but Jesus described the journey to salvation as a “strait and narrow *path*,” and the early Christians recognized that a path must be traveled one step at a time.

Stroumsa cites Augustine’s *Sermons on the Gospel of John*, chapters 96–98, as the longest and most important discussion of the dangers of esotericism in Patristic literature (see pp. 132–46). Augustine, of course, cited the misuse the heretics made of their secret traditions and correctly pointed out that the esoteric should not contradict the exoteric. But for Augustine, the “milk and the meat” were simply different levels of understanding applied to the very same public preaching. Consequently, “there seems to be no necessity for any matter of doctrine being retained in silence as secrets, and concealed from infant believers, as things to be spoken apart to those who are older, or possessed of a ripper understanding.”⁴⁶

To me, however, Augustine’s pious reflections represent nothing more than the sort of elitism Stroumsa sees as antithetical to the fundamental Christian message. “Whatever there is in the word of God that cannot, when taken literally, be referred either to purity of life or soundness of doctrine, you must set down as figurative.”⁴⁷ In this way Augustine justified his rampant allegorizing of scripture to make it conform to his Neoplatonic presuppositions. His take on the doctrine of the Trinity is most illustrative. “What three? human language labors altogether under great poverty of speech. The answer, however,

46. Augustine, *Sermons on the Gospel of John* 98.3, in *NPNF* Series 1, 7:377.

47. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 3.10, in *NPNF* Series 1, 2:560.

is given, three 'persons,' not that it might be [completely] spoken, but that it might not be left [wholly] unspoken."⁴⁸ Here we find no concrete knowledge about God, no deeper understanding from our theological virtuoso. Rather, we observe a logically absurd statement upon which mystics may ponder—an admittedly meaningless set of words, to which all Christians must assent or be cut off. This is elitism, to force assent to statements the spiritual authorities proscribe, but which no ordinary person can possibly understand.

Another aspect of esotericism that cannot be neglected is covenant-keeping. For the Hebrews, a fundamental aspect of religiosity was the kind of integrity that forbade one to break a vow (see Ecclesiastes 5:5). Hugh Nibley explains this principle in relation to the LDS temple rite:

Even though everyone may discover what goes on in the temple, and many have already revealed it, the important thing is that *I* do not reveal these things; they must remain sacred to *me*. I must preserve a zone of sanctity which cannot be violated whether or not anyone else in the room has the remotest idea what the situation really is. . . . No matter what happens, it will, then, always remain secret: only I know exactly the weight and force of the covenants I have made—I and the Lord with whom I have made them—*unless* I choose to reveal them. If I do not, then they are secret and sacred no matter what others may say or do. Anyone who would reveal these things has not understood them, and therefore that person has not given them away. You cannot reveal what you do not know!⁴⁹

In this context, secret traditions take on an added meaning. They become a test of integrity and motivation. Will the initiate keep sacred things to herself, even in the face of lies and derision? Or does she have so little regard for God's holy truth that she would cast her

48. Augustine, *On the Trinity* 5.9, in *NPNF* Series 1, 3:92.

49. Hugh W. Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 64.

pearls before swine in order to win some petty argument? Demonstrated integrity builds faith and cultivates confidence before God.

Finally, while the earliest Christians primarily taught “one single salvation, offered to all and sundry,” they recognized that some would not fully reach that goal. This understanding manifested itself in the belief in multiple heavens, usually three (see 2 Corinthians 12:1–4) or seven.⁵⁰ An integral part of climbing the rungs of Jacob’s Ladder was gaining spiritual knowledge, and this necessarily occurred by degrees. For instance, commenting on the comparison of the heavenly bodies with resurrected bodies in 1 Corinthians 15:40–42, Origen wrote:

Our understanding of the passage indeed is, that the Apostle, wishing to describe the great difference among those who rise again in glory, i.e., of the saints, borrowed a comparison from the heavenly bodies, saying, “One is the glory of the sun, another the glory of the moon, another the glory of the stars.”⁵¹

Clement of Alexandria gave this interpretation of one of Jesus’ statements: “Conformably, therefore, there are various abodes, according to the worth of those who have believed. . . . These chosen abodes, which are three, are indicated by the numbers in the Gospel—the thirty, the sixty, the hundred.”⁵²

Clearly, esotericism can be understood as an integral and practical aspect of the Christian message, when understood in the proper context.

“Plain and Precious Things” Lost

It is an article of faith for Latter-day Saints that many “plain and precious” parts of the gospel were lost to Christianity because of the apostasy, including “many covenants of the Lord” (1 Nephi 13:26–32). This brings up important questions. What sorts of doctrines

50. Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*, 176.

51. Origen, *De Principiis* 2.10.2, in *ANF*, 4:294.

52. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 6.14, in *ANF*, 2:506.

and practices were lost when the esoteric traditions were rejected, and would any of these also be familiar to Mormons? In this section we will briefly examine a few early Jewish Christian doctrines, known to be more or less part of the secret tradition, which also happen to be distinctively LDS.

Commenting on several passages in Hebrews 5–10, Stroumsa writes that “Paul knows that the secrets of the divine nature belong to the *Arkandisziplin*, of which it undoubtedly forms the center” (p. 70). As an example, he cites a passage from the Jewish Christian *Clementine Homilies* (17:10:1), which speaks of “the mystery of the Hebdomas,” which “deals with the physical—but incorporeal—aspect of God, his ‘most beautiful form’” (p. 76). Indeed, the theology of the *Homilies* is explicitly anthropomorphic. “And Simon said: ‘I should like to know, Peter, if you really believe that the shape of man has been moulded after the shape of God.’ And Peter said: ‘I am really quite certain, Simon, that this is the case. . . . It is the shape of the just God.’”⁵³ This belief appears to have been common, especially among the Jews and Jewish Christians. As Origen testified, “The Jews indeed, but also some of our people, supposed that God should be understood as a man, that is, adorned with human members and human appearance. But the philosophers despise these stories as fabulous and formed in the likeness of poetic fictions.”⁵⁴ Note that he appealed not to Christian tradition, but to the philosophers, to make his point.

The doctrine of premortal existence of the soul seems also to have been part of the secret tradition. In the *Clementine Recognitions*, Peter tells Clement, “after all these things He made man, on whose account He had prepared all things, whose internal species is older, and for whose sake all things were made.”⁵⁵ And yet, when confronted by the heretic Simon Magus about the same question, Peter responded quite differently. “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

53. *Clementine Homilies* 16.19, in ANF, 8:316.

54. Origen, *Homilies on Genesis* 3.1, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 89.

55. *Clementine Recognitions* 1.28, in ANF, 8:85.

and how they were made; but it is not permitted to me now to disclose these things to you, who are in such error in respect of the knowledge of God.”⁵⁶ Similarly, R. G. Hammerton-Kelly traces the concept of preexistence in the Bible and finds that it is everywhere presupposed in Paul’s writings but nowhere made explicit. “Although Paul would never have used the term ‘pre-existence’, the concept which it describes is constitutive of his whole soteriological scheme.”⁵⁷

The *Recognitions* also allude to an esoteric tradition regarding salvation for the dead:

When he had thus spoken, I answered: “If those shall enjoy the kingdom of Christ, whom his coming shall find righteous, shall then those be wholly deprived of the kingdom who have died before His coming?” Then Peter says: “You compel me, O Clement, to touch upon things that are unspeakable. But so far as it is allowed to declare them, I shall not shrink from doing so . . . for not only shall they [the righteous dead] escape the pains of hell, but shall also remain incorruptible, and shall be the first to see God the Father, and shall obtain the rank of honour among the first in the presence of God.”⁵⁸

What about the practice of “baptism for the dead,” alluded to by Paul (see 1 Corinthians 15:29) and adopted by the Latter-day Saints (see D&C 127–28)? In another passage, Peter intimated that the unbaptized righteous would obtain some reward in the present life but that future rewards were reserved for those who preserve righteousness *through baptism*. “But so well pleasing . . . is chastity to God, that it confers some grace in the present life even upon those who are in error; for future blessedness is laid up for those only who preserve chastity and righteousness by the grace of baptism.”⁵⁹

56. *Ibid.*, 2.60, in *ANF*, 8:114.

57. Robert G. Hammerton-Kelly, *Pre-Existence, Wisdom, and the Son of Man: A Study of the Idea of Pre-Existence in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 152.

58. *Clementine Recognitions* 1.52, in *ANF*, 8:91.

59. Peter, in *Clementine Recognitions* 7.38, in *ANF*, 8:165.

Conclusions

Latter-day Saints will find *Hidden Wisdom* to be readable, useful, and fascinating, given our religious understanding of Christian history. Further study of the secret traditions of the early Christians may well provide an important key to our understanding of the dynamics of the apostasy from the pure Christian faith, both in terms of *what* was lost and *how* it was lost. Latter-day Saint scholars and others who wish to examine the historical underpinnings of our faith cannot afford to overlook an important study such as this.