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

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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 eighth part discusses the loss of priesthood authority in the primitive church.

SINCE CUMORAH

NEW VOICES FROM THE DUST

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PART 3 SECRECY IN THE PRIMITIVE CHURCH (CONTINUED)

● *Denial of Loss.* As soon as the restraining influence of living Apostles was withdrawn from the Church, large numbers of quacks and pretenders began to capitalize on the secrecy of the early teachings, each one pretending that he alone had the Gnosis which the Lord imparted secretly to the disciples after the resurrection.⁶⁶ The simplest refutation of such claims was to insist that there never had been any secret teaching or any holding back of any doctrine whatever. Such is the position that Irenaeus takes, but even for him it proves quite untenable, and later Fathers of the Church agree that there was indeed a *disciplina arcana* or secret unwritten teaching of the Apostles handed down to certain leaders of the Church.⁶⁷ However, the easy and convenient abuse of the tradition of reticence by unprincipled individuals has made it possible for churchmen down to the present to label as misleading and spurious the very idea that there ever was any secret teaching.⁶⁸

The doctors have welcomed this way out and made the most of it, for the idea that any Christian teaching might have escaped them both alarms and puzzles them. It alarms them because unless the information available to theologians is complete and final, they are forced to live with an element of uncertainty which is intolerable to their vanity and fatal to the finality and neatness which theological systems prize above all else. And it puzzles them because, like the schoolman Celsus in the second

century, they cannot understand "why, if Jesus was sent to give a message he insisted on concealing the message." To Celsus, Origen replied that Jesus did not conceal his message from those who sincerely sought it,⁶⁹ but Celsus is not satisfied and asks why Jesus showed himself to so few people after the resurrection, when he had a wonderful chance of converting the world and proving the resurrection by appearing to those who had put him to death. This forbearance of the Lord has always puzzled the doctors of the church.⁷⁰

The great Catholic scholar J. P. Migne was greatly puzzled that the Lord should insist on keeping his true mission and his true identity a secret from the world which he was sent to redeem.⁷¹ This is "the Messianic secret" which has always perplexed scholars of Judaism and Christianity. In our own day Albert Schweitzer notes that while it cannot be denied that Jesus insisted on making important aspects of his ministry a secret, one is at a loss to explain why he did it.⁷²

At the present time Roman Catholic scholars are laying considerable emphasis on the phrase "from the housetops," which signifies, according to them, that there was to be nothing whatever kept secret or held back from the public in the teachings of Jesus.⁷³ In the face of innumerable indications to the contrary, it is hard to see how such an interpretation can be put on a passage which is a mysterious one to begin with: The Lord had just told the Apostles that their teaching would receive no better reception than his had. (Matt. 10:25.) Then he adds that they should not be afraid, "... for there

is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be known." (*Ibid.*, 10:26.) Isn't he talking about the machinations of the enemy here?

Jesus continues: "What I tell you in darkness, that speak ye in light; and what ye hear in the ear, that preach ye upon the housetops." (*Ibid.*, 10:27.) The peculiar phrase "in the ear" is explained by a newly discovered *Logion* of Jesus: "What you hear in the *other* ear preach from the housetops."⁷⁴ This is akin to another *Logion*: "These teachings are only for the tried and worthy: preach *other* words to the churches."⁷⁵ There is thus no contradiction between a command to preach from the housetops and the injunction to keep holy things from unworthy ears: some things were to be divulged generally, others not.

"These things preach openly," says 4 Ezra, "but these things keep secret," explaining that there are twenty-four sacred books for public teaching but seventy others which are reserved only "for the wise among thy people."⁷⁶ "Paul did not divulge all his revelations," says Chrysostom, "but concealed the greater part of them; and though he did not tell everything, neither was he silent about everything, lest he leave an opening for the teachings of false Apostles."⁷⁷ J. Jeremias has recently shown how such a policy explains the apparent contradiction in ordering the Apostles to preach in all the world while at the same time commanding them not to go outside of Israel: the general preaching, Jeremias explains, was for a later dispensation, the limited preaching for the present time.⁷⁸ Jesus's order, "What I

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Forty miles east of Qumran are the remains of this religious community, probably related to those on the Dead Sea. Only the early Moslem and Byzantine buildings, erected for late pilgrims to the shrine, have now been excavated. What lies beneath is a fascinating question.

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Since Cumorah

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tell you in darkness, that speak ye in light," plainly refers to such a double preaching. Granted that some things are to be preached from the housetops, there is nowhere even the vaguest indication that all things are to be so broadcast, as the Catholic scholars now maintain. Such a concept would be contrary to the basic principle that to those who have, more will be given (Matt. 13:12) and to the progressive steps of enlightenment that are basic in the Christian teaching.⁷⁹

"We believe," wrote Tertullian, "that the Apostles were ignorant of nothing, but that they did not transmit everything they knew, and were not willing to reveal everything to everybody. They did not preach everywhere nor promiscuously . . . but taught one thing about the nature of Christ in public and another in secret: some things about the resurrection they taught to everyone, but some things they taught only to a few."⁸⁰

There is a type of secrecy which the churchmen condone and practise. It is that air of mystery and aloofness which St. Augustine describes as such an important part of higher education in his day.⁸¹ Paul of Samosata and Simon Magus are classical examples of schoolmen seeking to heighten their prestige, overawe the general public, beguile and intrigue the youth, silence criticism, abash the insolent, and attract an audience and a following by cultivating an atmosphere of recondite, even supernatural, learning and an attitude of lofty superiority to the ignorant masses. This is still the secret of success in most graduate schools throughout the land. But this was not the kind of secrecy practised by the Christians, a thing which the learned men of their day simply could not understand.

Learned Romans like Caecilius, Celsus, Pliny, and Tacitus were convinced that the Christians kept

their doctrines and ordinances secret because they were ashamed of them; they note that this secrecy only causes misunderstanding and arouses the worst suspicions and wildest speculations—why do the Christians insist on spoiling their case by clinging to it?⁸² It is significant that the Christians never deny this secrecy, but defend themselves by replying that other religions and even the schools of philosophy all have their secrets, and, as is well known they were willing even to suffer death rather than betray it.⁸³

(To be continued)

FOOTNOTES

⁸⁰Discussed in *The Improvement Era*, 68 (1965), p. 37ff.

⁸¹Irenaeus, *adversus Haereses*, III, iv, in *Patrologia Graeca* 7:855; cf. 885-9 for his feeble arguments. Rules for dealing with arcane teachings were set forth by Innocent III, in *Patrologia Latina* 214:696.

⁸²It was not until about 400 AD that the doctors of the church, to discredit all secret teachings, gave to the word "Apocrypha" a bad meaning, according to W. Schneemelcher, *N. T. Apocryphen*, I, 5.

⁸³Origen, *Contra Celsum*, II, 70, in *Patrologia Graeca* 11:905.

⁷⁹John Chrysostom, *Homily on Acts* I, 4, in *Patrologia Graeca* 60:19, gives an amazing explanation for it, which was officially adopted by other churchmen, e.g., Oecumenius, *Comment on Acts*, I, 3, in *Patrologia Graeca* 118:45.

⁷¹J. P. Migne, *Scripturae Sacrae Cursus Completus* (Paris, 1840) 21:823-4.

⁷²A. Schweitzer, *Geschichte der Lebensjesu Forschung*, I, 396. C. A. Bugge, in *Zeitschrift für New Testamente Wissenschaft* 7 (1906), p. 97, says we cannot even be sure whether there was a Messianic secret or not.

⁷³So J. de Manasse, in *The Mysteries* (Bollingen Series XXX, 2, [New York, 1955]), pp. 139f, and H. Rahner, *ibid.*, pp. 357ff.

⁷⁴*Gospel of Thomas* 87:10-12.

⁷⁵*Testament of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, (ed. Rahmani), p. xviii.

⁷⁶4 Ezra 14:6f, 44-46.

⁷⁷John Chrysostom, *De laudibus S. Pauli*, *Homil V*, in *Patrologia Graeca* 50:500.

⁷⁸J. Jeremias, *Jesu Verheissung für die Völker* (Stuttgart, 1956), 15f, 61f.

⁷⁹John 1:5, 10-12 illustrates the principle of reciprocity—God gives only as man receives.

⁸⁰Tertullian, *De praescriptionibus*, c. 25f.

⁸¹St. Augustine, *Confessions*, I, 3.

⁸²The fullest discussion is in Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, pp. 8-11; cf. P. C. Tacitus, *History*, XV, 44; Pliny, *Epistle to Trajan*, X, 34; Origen, *Contra Celsum*, I, 1, 1ff.

⁸³Origen, *op. cit.*, I, 7, 12, 14, in *Patrologia Graeca* 11:667, 677, 685f. Tatian, *Adv. Graecos*, c. 27.