

EARLY CHRISTIAN APOCRYPHA AND THE SECRET BOOKS OF ANCIENT EGYPT

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In his recent book on the multiplicity of the earliest forms of Christianity, Gerard Luttikhuisen has reminded us again that the original meaning of the word ‘apocryphal’ is not so much ‘uncanonical’, but rather ‘hidden’, ‘secret’, referring to the secret or esoteric character of the composition to which this term is applied.¹ Thus the opening lines of *The Apocryphon of John* state that this book contains ‘the teachings and the sayings of the Saviour’ which he revealed to John ‘as a mystery (μυστήριον) which is hidden in silence (ἡετρηπ ῶν ογμῆτ-καρωϭ)’.² These full and definitive teachings of the risen Jesus³ are only to be passed on ‘secretly’ (ῶν ογῶπ) to John’s fellow believers,⁴ and at the end of the text there is a strict prohibition on divulging this μυστήριον to the uninitiated: ‘Cursed is anyone who will give it away for a present or for food or drink or clothing or any other such thing’,⁵ a prohibition also found in *The Book of the Great Mysterious Logos* in the Codex Bezae Cantabrigiae, where Jesus says:

These mysteries which I will reveal to you, safeguard them and do not give them away to anybody unless they are worthy of them. Do not give them away to father or mother, brother or sister or (any other) relatives, not for food or drink, nor for the sake of a woman, nor for gold or silver, or for anything at all in the world.⁶

In the *Apocryphal Epistle of James* the author speaks of a ‘secret text’ (ἀπόκρυφον) written in Hebrew script which the recipient of the letter is urged not to divulge to the masses since the Saviour himself did not

¹ Luttikhuisen 2002, 34-7. On the various meanings of the word ‘apocryphal’ see e.g. Frey 1928, 355; Schneemelcher 1991, 13-15.

² Krause and Labib 1962, 109 (Nag Hammadi Codex II) and 201 (Codex IV).

³ As opposed to the incomplete and provisional teaching before his death and resurrection, see Luttikhuisen 1988, 161-2.

⁴ Krause and Labib 1962, 198.

⁵ Krause and Labib 1962, 198-9 (Codex II); Till 1955, 193 (Codex Bezae Cantabrigiae).

⁶ Schmidt 1892, 100 (text), 194 (translation).

even reveal it to all of his disciples, but only to John and Peter.⁷ The two books ascribed to Thomas are both said to contain ‘the hidden (ε-θηη) sayings which the living Jesus (var. the Saviour) spoke’; the *Gospel of Thomas* even assures the reader that ‘whosoever will find the explanation (ἐρμηνεία) of these sayings will not taste death.’⁸

In early Christian literature this type of statement appears to be limited to documents found in Egypt written in either Greek⁹ or Coptic. Gnostic texts in particular appear in this respect to continue the tradition of Egyptian Hellenistic ‘secret’ books, the most famous of which is the *Corpus Hermeticum*,¹⁰ and the Greek magical papyri.¹¹ The tradition of secret religious texts in Egypt is much older than Hellenistic times, however, and goes back as far as the age of the pyramid builders. It is to these Ancient Egyptian ‘apocrypha’ that the following brief remarks are devoted, in the hope that they will please the learned dedicatee of this volume.

The Egyptian equivalent of the Coptic word ρωπ ‘be hidden’, ‘hide’¹² used in some of the texts quoted above is *h3p*. In a religious context this word is often used to describe the mummification and burial of Osiris who is hidden in the mysterious abode (*št3w*) of the underworld. The ritual texts which are meant to revivify him are also ‘hidden’; thus *The Book of Breathing* ‘made by Isis for her brother Osiris in order to revivify his body and rejuvenate all his limbs’, the oldest manuscripts of which date from the third century BC, addresses its owner: ‘Keep it secret! Keep it secret! (*h3p h3p*) Do not let anybody else read it! It is effective for a man in the netherworld so that he will live again. Proven truly efficacious a million times.’¹³ Far more common in religious texts than *h3p*, however, are the adjective *št3* ‘secret’, ‘mysterious’, ‘hidden’, the verb *sšt3* ‘hide’, ‘conceal’, and the noun (*s*)*št3(w)* ‘secret’, ‘mystery’. This word has become obsolete in Coptic, where it survives only in the name for the planet Jupiter (ϩ(Δ)Ρ-ϩΩΤ), *hrw-*

⁷ Rouleau 1987, 32-3.

⁸ Nag Hammadi Codex II, 32 and 138, resp.; cf. Meyer 1986, 32 and 41.

⁹ Cf. Luttikhuisen 2002, 161 note 98.

¹⁰ See Cumont 1937, 151-63, esp. 153 note 2, 154 note 1 and 155 note 2.

¹¹ Leipoldt and Morenz 1953, 92; Betz 1995. On the problem of survivals from Ancient Egypt in Coptic texts in general see the excellent survey in Behlmer 1996.

¹² Crum 1939, 695a; Černý 1976, 290.

¹³ Coenen and Quaegebeur 1995, 72-3. A copy of this book (Pap. Joseph Smith I) became the fanciful *Book of Abraham* of the Mormons.

ⲡⲗ-ⲥⲧⲗ ‘Horus the Mysterious One’) and in some other etymologically related words;¹⁴ indeed, in Coptic texts the meaning of ⲥⲧⲗ(*w*) appears to be covered by the Greek μυστήριον and by various derivations of the verb (ἀπο)κρύπτειν.¹⁵ This is not the place to examine the wide range of meanings of the word ⲥⲧⲗ and its derivations in detail, however; references to the relevant pages of the *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache*¹⁶ and to the lemma ‘Geheimnis’ in the *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*¹⁷ will suffice to give the interested reader an idea.

Secrecy is a phenomenon found in many religions,¹⁸ and Ancient Egypt is no exception. The main purpose of the official cult in the state temples, in which the divine king plays a central role, is the maintenance of the cosmic order (*mꜣt*) which had been established at the beginning of time by the creator god by means of a perpetual cycle of daily rituals. These rites are a secret affair and the temples in which they are performed are accessible only to the king and the initiated priests who replace him, not to the ordinary Egyptians. Not only these rites are ⲥⲧⲗ, ‘secret’, but so are the gods themselves, their images, shapes and forms, their names and their nature. The rituals perpetually re-enact the daily cycle of death and rebirth of the sun-god on his journey along the heavens and through the underworld, and this journey as well as the roads, portals and localities which he passes are all frequently called ‘mysterious’ or ‘secret’. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the ritual texts recited in the temple cult and the hymns sung for the gods as well as the papyrus rolls and writing boards on which they have been inscribed are also called secret. Thus the walls of the temple of Hibis, which dates from the time of Darius I, record ‘the great secret hymns to Amun which are on the writing boards of *nebes* wood’ and ‘the great and secret hymn to Amun-Re spoken by the Eight Primaeval Gods’.¹⁹ In Edfu, specialized priests were in charge of ‘the secret spells of your majesty (i.e. the god Horus)’;²⁰ when the rituals in the roof kiosk were performed they recited ‘the

¹⁴ Westendorf 1965-77, 328-30; Černý 1976, 254-5.

¹⁵ Cf. Rudolph 1995, 271.

¹⁶ *Wb.* IV, 296-300 (*sšṯ*) and 551-5 (*sšṯ(w)*).

¹⁷ Altenmüller 1977. See also Schott 1990, 514 s.v. *sšṯ* and 521 s.v. *šṯ*.

¹⁸ See for the ancient Mediterranean world the essays collected in Kippenberg and Stroumsa 1995 and for the role of secret books in these cultures Leipoldt and Morenz 1953, 88-114.

¹⁹ Davies 1953, pls. 31-32. On ‘secret’ hymns see Assmann 1995.

²⁰ Rochemonteix and Chassinat 1897, 568 [112].

secret spells for ascending the roof of the temple²¹ and the rites of ‘overthrowing the enemies’ were also performed according to ‘the secret book of rituals’.²²

Actual copies of such books of overthrowing the enemies have survived in several papyri dating from about the fourth century BC. They almost certainly originally belonged to a temple library, but they derive from tombs and must at some stage have been appropriated by private individuals for their use in the hereafter. One of these compositions, written in the classical Middle Egyptian language which even at this late time was still used for sacred texts, is accompanied in one copy by a ‘translation’ or ‘explanation’ in Late Egyptian. This book is entitled ‘The Explanation of *The Secrets of the Ritual of Repulsing the Evil One* which is performed for the Temple of Osiris, Foremost of the West, the Great God, Lord of Abydos, in order to repulse Seth in his rage, in order to keep Seth away from Osiris’.²³ A similar composition, one of several texts preserved in the Bremner-Rhind Papyrus, is *The Secret Book of Overthrowing Apophis*, the primaeval archenemy of the sun-god Re. This book also explains the reason why it is secret: it deals with the mystery of the daily rebirth of the sun-god and his creation which Apophis is trying in vain to prevent: ‘It is beneficial for a man when he knows this nature of Re and his transformations;²⁴ he will triumph over his enemies. It is a secret book of the House of Life (the temple scriptorium) which no eye is allowed to see, the Secret Book of Overthrowing Apophis.’²⁵

This connection between secrecy and the mystery of creation and the renewal of life is made even more explicit in another famous papyrus from the same period, Papyrus Salt 825. The daily rebirth of the sun-god is the result of his mysterious unification with the body of the god Osiris which he encounters during his nocturnal voyage through the underworld. The mutual embrace of the two gods results in the resurrection of Osiris in the form of his son Horus and in the rebirth

²¹ Rochemonteix and Chassinat 1897, 567-8 [101-102].

²² Rochemonteix and Chassinat 1897, 557 [53].

²³ Schott 1929, 61.10-13; see also Schott 1954, especially 38-53 (‘Die Übersetzung als Deutung’).

²⁴ The *Book of Caverns*, inscribed on the walls of the royal tombs of the New Kingdom, which describes the nocturnal journey of the sun-god through the underworld, is called ‘The Secret Book of Transformations’, Piankoff 1944, pl. 60.III.

²⁵ Faulkner 1933, 73.15-74.2; Faulkner 1938, 42; Gardiner 1938, 169 (36).

of the sun-god, who emerges from the underworld in the morning as Re-Horakhty, 'Re-Horus-of-the-Horizon'. This one might call the central dogma of Egyptian religion on which the continued existence of the universe and of all human life depends, a matter of life and death. One of the compositions contained in Papyrus Salt 825 is a book with the somewhat obscure title *The End of the Work*. It begins as follows:

The magical book *The End of the Work*. First month of the inundation season, day 20. The day on which books are received and books are sent and on which life and death emerge. One prepares the book *The End of the Work* on it, the secret book of counteracting magic, of tying knots and fastening knots, and of casting fear among the entire universe. Life is in it and death is in it. Do not reveal it, for whoever will reveal it will die a sudden death through being assassinated at once. You must keep well and truly away from it, for life and death are in it.²⁶

Further on, the papyrus states that 'the mysteries of the writings of *The End of the Work*' are designed 'to rescue him' (the god and/or the user of the text) from his enemy,²⁷ and at the end of the text it is said that 'he who will reveal it will die by being assassinated, for it is a great mystery, it is Re, it is Osiris'.²⁸

With these temple rituals reused for funerary purposes we enter the vast repertoire of Ancient Egyptian funerary literature. The texts from which we have just quoted were able to be reused by private individuals because the deceased constantly identifies himself with both Re and Osiris: Re's rebirth is his own rebirth, Osiris's resurrection is his resurrection and the gods' enemies are his enemies who threaten to prevent the perpetual renewal of his life after death. The funerary spells found in collections like *The Book of Leaving (the Underworld) by Day*, commonly known as the Book of the Dead, are frequently called 'secret'. Even during the Old Kingdom, when identification of the deceased with Re or Osiris appears to have been restricted to the divine king, we hear of 'the lector-priest who will perform for me the rites through which the blessed spirit is glorified according to that secret writing of the art of the lector-priest',²⁹ and 'the lector-priest who will read (litt.

²⁶ pSalt 825, V.9-VI.3; Derchain 1965, 139.

²⁷ pSalt 825, XIV.8-9; Derchain 1965, 142.

²⁸ pSalt 825, XVIII.1-2; Derchain 1965, 144.

²⁹ Sethe 1933, 186.14-15; cf. Junker 1947, 119. Similarly in the tomb of Ankhmahor at Saqqara, Sethe 1933, 202.15-16. Cf. Weber 1969, 113-14.

“see”) the secret words of the divine writings’.³⁰ In the tomb of the lector-priest Khentika Ikhekhi he says: ‘I was initiated into every secret of the House of the Sacred Books of the *smw*[*t*-shrine]’ as well as ‘into every secret of the work of the embalmer.’³¹ A colophon added to an obscure spell from the Middle Kingdom Coffin Texts also refers to these secret rituals: ‘This spell is to be written inside (the coffin?), for the benefit of (??) the Hidden One (*sšz*, i.e. the deceased), being a secret (*šz*) of the senior lector-priest.’³²

The deceased for whom the lector-priest recites his secret spells becomes an *šh*, a ‘blessed spirit’ who is ‘well-equipped’ (*pr*) with religious knowledge and ‘able’ (*ikr*) to act on behalf of those who live on earth.³³ The summary version of the *Book of the Hidden Room* (Amduat), the illustrated description of the journey of the sun-god through the underworld inscribed inside the royal tombs of the New Kingdom, is called

The exclusive guide, the secret book of the underworld, which no-one knows except the happy few. This image is made accordingly in the concealment of the underworld, not to be seen, not to be beheld. He who knows these secret images is a well-equipped spirit. He is able to leave the underworld and come back to it and to speak to the living.³⁴

Spell 148 in the Book of the Dead of Queen Nodjmet is also called ‘A Book of Secrets of What is in the Underworld (and of) making the blessed spirit able in the heart of Re’. On earth ordinary human beings had no access to the gods in the temples, which were the exclusive domain of king and priests, but in the hereafter the undivided world which existed at the beginning of creation is restored and the deceased is united with the gods. The spells in the Book of the Dead are meant to initiate the deceased into this ‘secret’ world, just as priests on earth had to be initiated before they could serve the gods in their temples. Thus Spell 15B is called a ‘secret spell of the Underworld, a secret initiation in the god’s domain, seeing the sun-disk when he sets (in life) in the West and when he is being adored by the gods and the blessed spirits of the Underworld, making the blessed deceased able

³⁰ Junker 1944, 233; cf. a similar text on p. 235.

³¹ James 1953, pl. V, A9 and B11-12, resp.

³² De Buck 1956, 194h-j (rubric of Spell 578); the spell is inscribed on the bottom of the coffin.

³³ See on these notions Demarée 1983, 189-278.

³⁴ Hornung 1967, 26, 35.

in the heart of Re'. One manuscript replaces the beginning of this title with 'a spell for leaving (the underworld) by day', the title often given to the whole of the Book of the Dead.

The exclusive, restricted nature of this initiation is stressed in several spells. Spell 101 is 'a book for understanding the words (of the House of Life) ... to be hung around the neck of this blessed deceased without letting the word go round, not letting the mob know it, not letting an eye see it or an ear hear it'. The colophon of Spell 137A warns: 'Be very careful not to use it (i.e. the spell) for anyone except yourself, not even for your father or your son,³⁵ for it is a great secret of the West, a mystery of the underworld', it is 'to be used in the concealment of the underworld', being 'a secret of the underworld, a secret initiation in the god's domain'.³⁶ An appendix to Spell 148 which also occurs as a separate spell (Spell 190) further specifies the people who are not allowed to know or use these secret texts:

Use it without letting anybody see (read) it except your truly trusted friend and the lector-priest who is with you, without letting any other person see it, let alone the servant who comes from outside (*ḫr.w m rwy*), for it is a truly secret book which is not to be known to the mob of all people for ever.

A Ptolemaic addition to Spell 161 also says that 'he who is from outside (*nty m rwy*) is not allowed to know (this spell), for it is a secret, which the mob is not to know. Do not use it for anybody else, not even your father or your mother, except yourself. It is a real secret, nobody is allowed to know it.'³⁷ The mob (*h3w-mr*) are the great unwashed, the uninitiated rank and file of the populace, but 'he who is from outside' is even more sinister: this term refers to the enemies of the god and of the deceased, who belong to the chaotic world outside the created universe and who constantly threaten to upset the order of creation.³⁸

³⁵ In the Book of the Dead of Any these words are inserted in the colophon to Spell 133.

³⁶ Cf. also Spell 144: 'use this book without letting anyone see it'; Spell 147: 'Do not use (it) for anyone (else)! Be very careful!'; Spell 156: 'Do not let anybody else see (= read) it, for there is nothing like it'. Similar statements can also be found in magical texts for use on earth, e.g. Pap. Chester Beatty VIII vs. 7.7 ('take good care of this book ... do not let someone else peruse it') or Mag. Pap. Harris VI.10 ('do not reveal it to other people, for it is a secret of the House of Life'), but they are not nearly as common as one might expect, perhaps because such restrictions are not very practical in spells against snakes, scorpions or crocodiles.

³⁷ Allen 1960, 284, pl. 49, col. clvi.9–12.

³⁸ Heerma van Voss 1973.

These phrases are echoed in the passage in the Codex Brucianus from which we quoted at the beginning of this article, where it is said that it is forbidden to reveal the mysteries even to one's father or mother, brother or sister, and which then continues: 'do not reveal it ... to any human being who is an adherent of the belief (πίστις) in the seventy-two archontes or to those who serve them, and do not reveal it to those who serve the Eighth Power (δύναμις) of the Great Archon', who claim that they possess the true knowledge and revere the true god, but whose god is evil.³⁹

Revealing the mysteries to the enemies of creation would threaten its very existence and safeguarding these secrets is therefore essential. Another Ptolemaic addition to the Book of the Dead, this time to Spell 162, says: 'This is a book great of secrets. Do not let anyone see it, for that is taboo. He who knows it and keeps it secret (*h3p sy*) will live again.'⁴⁰ The deceased who follows these directions 'shall not perish forever, his Ba shall live on for ever' (BD 137A), he 'shall exist there (i.e. in the hereafter) as Lord of Eternity in one body with Osiris' (BD Spell 147). These passages again refer to the mystery of the nocturnal unification of Re and Osiris, and the privileged knowledge of this great secret enables the deceased to gain eternal life, or, as the Gospel of Thomas says, 'he who knows its explanation will not taste death'.

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³⁹ Cf. note 6 above.

⁴⁰ Allen 1960, 285, pl. 49, col. clvii.38-39.

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