

# Method and Doctrine: Esoteric Teaching in the Writings of Clement of Alexandria

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## Introduction

The Christian Platonist Clement of Alexandria (c.150 – 215 C.E) was one of the first Christian writers to offer an in-depth synthesis of Greek and Jewish ideas for the construction of a peculiarly Christian philosophy. Clement became head of the so-called catechetical school of Alexandria in 190, which was run very much in the tradition of the Greek *paideia*, fusing Judaeo-Christian teaching with studies in Greek culture and the various schools of philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Clement also claimed to be privy to the secret teachings passed down through the apostolic tradition.<sup>2</sup> These teachings became the focus of his pedagogy at Alexandria and are particularly noticeable in the most esoteric of his extant works, the *Stromateis*, or as this word is commonly rendered, *Miscellanies*. These books are of immense erudition and are specifically designed for the purposes of training Christians in the mysteries of the true philosophy that was brought into the world with the coming of Christ.

Clement's stance on a number of issues is difficult to reconstruct given the miscellaneous and unsystematic method he chose for the

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<sup>1</sup> There have been some studies written on this relationship between Christian catechism and the Greek *paideia*. See most notably W. Jaeger, *Early Christianity and the Greek Paideia*, Cambridge, Harvard, 1961; G. Bardy, 'Aux Origines de l'École d'Alexandrie', *Recherches de Science Religieuse*, Vol. 27, 1937, pp. 65-90; J. Whytes, 'Paideia and Pronoia in the Works of Clement of Alexandria', *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 9, 1955, pp. 148-58; R. Wilken, 'Alexandria: A School for Training in Virtue', in Patrick Henry (ed.), *Schools of Thought in the Christian Tradition*, Fortress, Philadelphia, 1984, pp. 15-18; See A. van den Hoek's article, 'The Catechetical School of Early Christian Alexandria and its Philonic Heritage', *Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 90, 1997, pp. 59-87, n1 59-60 for a more thorough bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> *Str.* 1.11.3. See E.L. Fortin, 'Clement and the Esoteric Tradition', *Studia Patristica*, Vol. 9, 1966, pp. 41-56.

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writing of the *Stromateis*. With such a carefully chosen genre as the *Miscellanies*, one has to pay attention not only to the subject matter, the content of the doctrine under discussion, but also the method, the composition of the writing through which this content is conveyed. For Clement the process by which one reconstructs the meaning of an idea or doctrine through such a method is crucial to teaching Christians in the highest reaches of knowledge. Doctrine and method become inextricably entwined in such an exercise.

One such esoteric doctrine is that of the origin of the world. By 200 C.E. the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* had been widely accepted amongst Christians,<sup>1</sup> but Clement was never so categorical when it came to such issues, particularly where his firm conviction in the truth of Greek philosophy was concerned. For Clement, Greek philosophy as well as the Hebrew Law, was given as a covenant by God in preparation for receiving the Gospel.<sup>2</sup> As a result he was assured of the validity of Greek views of the eternity of matter, but was faced with the task of harmonising it with the gradual emergence of a Christian view of creation from nothing. For Christians, matter was created by God and could therefore in no way be considered co-eternal or uncreated with him. Such a view would force us to believe that God and matter constitute two first principles rather than one, which was clearly unacceptable to monotheistic creationism.

For Clement these views are not mutually exclusive.<sup>3</sup> Rather, they create a tension in the human mind that directs it to transcend such confines and harmonise them within itself. This *coincidentia oppositorum* assures the initiate that he/she has become Christ-like, a state of being where all contraries are resolved as complementaries within the eternal Word of God, most clearly expressed in Christ as Alpha and Omega. This is a marked feature of mystical experience, and Clement's method and doctrine are specifically designed to bring

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<sup>1</sup> For the most comprehensive account of the development of this doctrine up until the present, see G. May, 'Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of "Creation from Nothing"', in *Early Christian Thought*, trans. A.S. Worrall, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> *Str.* 6.42.1; 44.1.

<sup>3</sup> May, *op. cit.*, 74.

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this about in the mind of the initiate; in the person Clement calls the Gnostic.<sup>1</sup>

### **Method: The Didactic Composition of the *Stromateis***

According to Clement the divine *Logos* manifests itself in three phases corresponding with the level of spiritual attainment achieved by the Christian initiate. 'Eagerly desiring, then, to perfect us by a gradation conducive to salvation, suited for efficacious discipline, a beautiful arrangement is observed by the all-benignant Word (λόγος), who first exhorts (προτρέπων), then trains (παιδαγωγῶν), and finally teaches (ἐκδιδάσκων).'<sup>2</sup> Firstly, the Word as *Protreptikos* converts heathens to the Christian faith; secondly, as *Paidagogos* it cures the passions of the soul; and thirdly, the soul having passed through these initial stages of training in the virtues, the *Logos* as *Didaskalikos* teaches the Christian to ascend to the 'theoretical' (μεθοδικός) and 'intellectual life' (ἐπιστημονικός βίος) of spiritual perfection. This threefold phase ostensibly corresponds with three works of Clement: the *Protreptikos*, the *Paidagogos*, and the *Didaskalikos*, or as Clement calls it, the *Stromateis*.<sup>3</sup>

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Not to be confused with the heretical Gnosticism with whom Clement entered into debate. His use of the word γνῶσις was an attempt to restore its meaning and to ensure that Gnostic heresy did not discredit it with their doctrines. Clement was acutely aware of the necessity for Christians to develop philosophically and to ensure that they did not remain in the sphere of intellectual indefensibility, not only where sophistry was concerned, but also because he was convinced of the need for philosophy as one of the paths to God, and indeed the supreme path. See F. Schuon's crucial chapter 'Gnosis, Language of the Self' in *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, trans. G. E. H. Baker, Perennial Books, Middlesex, 1990 ed., pp. 65-77.

<sup>2</sup> *Paid.* 1.3.3. Also *Paid.* 1.1.4-2.1; 1.8.3; 3.97.3. Translation is taken from W. Wilson, in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, Vols. II & VIII, Hendrikson, Massachusetts, 1995 ed. Clement's works will be indicated thus: *Protreptikos* (*Protv*); *Paidagogos* (*Paid.*); *Stromateis* (*Str.*); *Eclogae Propheticae* (*Ecl.*); *Excerpta ex Theodoto* (*Exc.*); *Quis Dives Salvatur?* (*Q.D.S.*).

<sup>3</sup> The *Stromateis* also have a long title: the *Miscellany of Gnostic Notes according to the True Philosophy*. It must be pointed out however, that some controversy has surrounded the identification of the *Stromateis* with Clement's proposed treatise emulating the third phase of the divine pedagogy, the *Didaskalikos*. The

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According to E. F. Osborn, the style and thought of the *Stromateis* are deliberately unsystematic in order 'to hide the meaning from the unworthy and to reveal it to the worthy. The sophistic quibblers, for whom Clement had little time, would not get very far with the *Stromateis*'.<sup>1</sup> As Clement claims: 'such were the impediments in the way of my writing, and even now I fear, as it is said, "to cast the pearls before swine, lest they tread them under foot"...But there is an outline in the memoranda, which have the truth sowed sparse and scattered, that it may escape the notice of those who pick up seeds like jackdaws'.<sup>2</sup> Sophists wishing to take a glance at the work in order to discredit Christian teaching will not get to the heart of what is being communicated because of the sheer measure of consideration that must be devoted to it. The sparsity of explicit doctrines contained within them provides an effective stumbling block for such techniques. Clement's ultimate concern is with the progress of those who wish to progress through the 'mystic stages of advancement'.<sup>3</sup>

Let these notes of ours, as we have often said for the sake of those who consult them carelessly and unskilfully, be of varied character - and as the name itself indicates, patched together (διδασκωμένα) - passing constantly from one thing to another, and in the series of discussions hinting at one thing and demonstrating another. 'For those who seek for gold', says Heraclitus, 'dig much earth and find little gold'. But, those who are of the truly golden race, in mining for what is allied to them, will find the much in little. For the word will find one to understand it.<sup>4</sup>

The Gnostic is of this golden race, and, in the search for *gnosis*, will persevere through the variegated collection of notes, this written labyrinth, in accordance with their ability to receive its teachings.

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controversy is expressed with clarity and brevity in E. F. Osborn, *The Philosophy of Clement of Alexandria*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1957, pp. 5-7 and also A. Méhat, *Étude sur Les 'Stromates' de Clément d' Alexandria*, Patristica Sorbonensia, Vol. 7, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1966, pp. 15-41, 71-95.

1 Osborn, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

2 *Str.* 1.55.3.

3 *Str.* 7.57.1.

4 *Str.* 4.4.1-2.

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Osborn believes that, like the 'streams of consciousness' of modernist writing, the *Stromateis* function through the effective association of disparate ideas rather than through an ordered and systematic teaching.

The aim is to say something which the ordinary forms of connected description could not say. The technique gives a greater insight into the mind of the writer than any ordinary technique can give ... His *Stromateis* go beyond the usual disciplines of study and thought and depend upon his fertile imagination as well as on his logical faculty. He wishes to say something which the normal disciplines of thought have failed to say. We learn a lot more about the mind of Clement in the *Stromateis* than we could in a more systematic work.<sup>1</sup>

This statement gets to the heart of Clement's methodology. It is not that Clement's writing is befuddled, or that he could not produce a systematic treatise on the higher reaches of Christian teaching, as some scholars believe.<sup>2</sup> Rather, it is exactly these higher reaches that determine the mode of composition, the form and content of which are conducive to teaching esoteric concepts.

Clement discusses the relationship of writing and teaching in another work entitled the *Eclogae Propheticae*:

Now the more ancient men (πρεσβύτεροι) did not write, as they neither wished to encroach on the time devoted to attention bestowed on what they handed down (παραδόσεως), in the way of teaching, by the additional attention bestowed on writing, nor spent the time for considering what was to be said on writing. And, perhaps convinced that the function of composition (συντακτικὸν) and the department of teaching (διδασκαλικὸν) did not belong to the same cast of mind, they gave way to those who had a natural turn for it. For in the case of a

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<sup>1</sup> Osborn, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> J. Ferguson, *Clement of Alexandria*, Twayne, New York, 1974, p. 106. For another negative view of the *Stromateis* see S. R. C. Lilla, *Clement of Alexandria: a Study in Christian Platonism and Gnosticism*, Oxford University Press, London, 1971, p. 189, n4.

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speaker, the stream of speech flows unchecked and impetuous, and you may catch it up hastily. But that which is always tested by readers, meeting with strict examination, is thought worthy of the utmost pains, and is, so to speak, the written confirmation of oral instruction (εἰπεῖν ἔγγραφος διδασκαλίας βεβαίωσις), and of the voice so wafted along to posterity by written composition. For that which was committed in trust to the elders, speaking in writing, uses the writer's help to hand itself down to those who are to read it. As, then, the magnet, repelling other matter, attracts iron alone by reason of affinity; so also books, though many read them, attract those alone who are capable of comprehending them.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that Clement regards himself as one of those who have a 'natural turn' for teaching through 'written composition'. This in turn entails the close connection between the 'function of composition' and the 'department of teaching'. These things are bound together when writing to teach people in the higher mysteries of Christian philosophy.

The purpose of the *Stromateis* then, is to reveal, 'so truth when sought through and gained through hard work seems a sweet thing'. But its purpose is also to conceal, 'because great is the danger in betraying the truly ineffable word of the real philosophy to those who wish to speak recklessly and unjustly against everything, and who hurl forth quite inappropriately all sorts of names and words, deceiving themselves and bewitching their followers'.<sup>2</sup> The composition of the *Stromateis*, not only ensures that the truth is hidden from those who seek to profane it, but also ensures that the difficulty of the search, through these barriers of concealment, brings about a sweeter result for the initiate.<sup>3</sup> Those who take the time to look will be rewarded with the depth and richness of the true philosophy.

Osborn makes a further claim then, that Clement's *Stromateis* are not so much unsystematic, as they are 'multi-systematic'. Clement, he

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<sup>1</sup> *Ecl.* 27.1-5.

<sup>2</sup> *Str.* 1.20.4-21.3. Osborn's translation, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Str.* 5.56.5. 'Besides, all things that shine through a veil show the truth grander and more imposing; as fruits shining through water, and figures through veils, which give added reflections to them'.

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says, ‘will give several different solutions to a specific problem and not indicate an exclusive preference for any’.<sup>1</sup> In the end, this preference is up to the student who has worked through Clement’s teachings. As the student sets about associating ideas, harmonising seemingly incongruous material, such discipline increases the mind’s scope as it begins to incorporate the entirety of philosophic speculation. ‘As we might expect, then, the generative power of the seeds of doctrines comprehended in this treatise is great in small space, as the “universal herbage of the field,” as Scripture says. Thus the *Stromateis* of notes have their proper title’.<sup>2</sup> Like the ‘all wise’ (πάνσοφος) Moses,<sup>3</sup> Clement’s initiates aim at universal wisdom comprehending within them selves the seeds of doctrines scattered throughout the *Stromateis*. The Gnostic, having trained in the virtues through instruction,<sup>4</sup> learns through practiced meditation and abstraction,<sup>5</sup> to contemplate the doctrines in the hope of sprouting them within, until such time as the soul has assimilated the knowledge completely.

E.L. Fortin believes that Clement was indeed concealing esoteric teachings in his work. He describes one of Plato’s methods for communicating arcane ideas, particularly where students with a high capacity to receive them are involved, a method that he believes is taken up by Clement:

A presentation of this kind is accomplished precisely by means of ‘slight indications’ (μικρά ἔνδειξις) of which Plato speaks and which are both necessary and sufficient for students such as these.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Osborn, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Str.* 4.6.1-2.

<sup>3</sup> *Str.* 5.78.1-2.

<sup>4</sup> This is the work of the *Paidagogos*. It is easy to neglect the importance of the preliminary disciplines set out in this work in preference for the more intriguing issues addressed in the *Stromateis*. As Clement explains throughout his works this is like eating meat before one can drink milk. The life of virtue – of controlling the passions of the soul – as it is set out in this treatise is there exactly for the purposes of preparing the soul to receive the higher teaching set out in the more esoteric work of the *Stromateis*.

<sup>5</sup> See in particular *Str.* 5.71.2-3 for Clement’s method of abstraction that takes the soul into the plenitude or greatness of Christ (τὸ μέγεθος τοῦ Χριστοῦ).

<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Epistle* 7.341e.

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Any genuine interpretation of a book written in this manner must of necessity be based on a minute scrutiny of the text and all its peculiarities. The full meaning of that text will reveal itself only if one consents to read it with the 'third eye', (*tertius oculus*) to adapt an expression from Origen,<sup>1</sup> that is to say, only if one pays the closest attention not only to what the characters say, but to everything they do and for that matter to all the other details of the narrative.<sup>2</sup>

Here Fortin argues for a meticulous attention to detail when studying Clement's writings, based upon the notion that esoteric ideas are communicated through 'slight indications'. Such accounts, however brief, carry with them a sufficient cognitive note to be stored in the memory and associated with others of the same nature where and when ever required. Such is the natural process of learning and memory, but in Clement's case, as with Plato's, something more significant occurs in the recollection of ideas or doctrines that direct the mind toward the divine.

Indeed it is here that Clement displays all the qualities of a masterful didactic, one who always allows students to make the discoveries of knowledge themselves, and never for them. As 'is the case of people who are setting out on a road with which they are unacquainted, it is sufficient merely to point out the direction. After this they must walk and find out the rest for themselves'.<sup>3</sup> The mention *en passant* of so many doctrines with only slight consideration causes the keen student to speculate all the more, and such exercise is conducive to spiritual growth. For others, perhaps sceptical, it simply means that Clement busily put down what he did not have time to give full consideration to, and the seeds of truth go unattended. As Osborn claims, 'the *Stromateis* are a record of teaching', this 'studied disorder...has something of the impressionist about it', and, moreover, that they

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1 Origen, *Contra Celsus*, 6.8.

2 Fortin, *op. cit.*, p. 52. Greek and Latin added by author.

3 *Str.* 4.4.3.

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‘fulfil’ all that was predicted of the third phase of the divine pedagogy, the *Didaskalos*.<sup>1</sup>

More recently, J. L. Kovacs has also discussed the divine pedagogy of Clement, paying attention to his ability to teach at many different levels simultaneously.<sup>2</sup> Like the parabolic and symbolic nature of Scripture, Clement’s works can be understood at various levels by varying degrees of Gnostic sensibility. Ultimately however, they are capable of communicating the highest truths for those students capable of apprehending them.<sup>3</sup>

As the *logos* has carefully designed the literal and symbolic levels of Scripture so that the same text can simultaneously teach students on quite different levels, so Clement chooses the versatile genre of the miscellany. This form allows him to move from topic to topic in an endless variety, in its variegated chapters nourishing different sorts of students, while dropping hints about the highest lessons that only the most advanced students will notice and pursue further.<sup>4</sup>

With this view predominating in modern times, Clement’s works, like Scripture, need considerable interpretative attention. Whilst the revealed nature of Scripture precludes any comparison, the point suffices once again to raise the question of Clement’s apostolic authority. Did Clement receive the secret and oral teaching from the apostles as he claims to have? If so then the *Stromateis* constitute a vital link in the Christian esoteric or mystical tradition.

When we try to extricate one particular doctrine from Clement’s miscellaneous material we begin to understand how his didactic

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<sup>1</sup> E. F. Osborn, ‘Teaching and Writing in the First Chapter of the *Stromateis* of Clement of Alexandria’, *Journal of Theological Studies*, Vol. 10, pp. 342-43. Strangely enough Osborn takes Mondésert’s view that in Clement ‘there is no esoteric doctrine’. Cf. C. Mondésert, *Clément d’Alexandrie, Introduction à l’étude de sa pensée Religieuse à partir de l’Écriture*, Théologie 4, (Thèse) Université de Paris, Paris, 1944, p. 61. Fortin agrees with Osborn’s conclusions for the most part, but comments that despite Osborn’s sympathetic approach, he ‘makes no attempt ... to come to grips with the central issue of the nature of Clement’s real or hypothetical secret teaching’, Fortin, *op. cit.*, p. 43, n1.

<sup>2</sup> J. L. Kovacs, ‘Divine Pedagogy and the Gnostic Teacher according to Clement of Alexandria’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2001, pp. 3-25.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9. Cf. Plato. *Republic*, 7.535a-536d.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

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methodology operates in its actual content. Three crucial things have been discussed concerning Clement's methodology. 1) The unsystematic, or rather 'multi-systematic' way in which he expounds a doctrine. 2) The many 'slight indications' he gives to hide a doctrine from those who have no intention of developing it within themselves, but also to incite the minds of those who do. These in turn lead to 3) the technique of explicating a doctrine without actually giving a full account of its logical outcome, preferring to allow students to learn this for themselves.<sup>1</sup> We will attempt to indicate where these methods are employed by Clement when treating of one particular esoteric teaching: that of the origin of the world.

### **Content: The Doctrine of the Origin of the World**

At different times Clement promises to give some account of the various Greek views on the first principles of the universe, indicating that he will then refute them by recourse to the true philosophy.<sup>2</sup> He draws upon the philosophies and symbolic language of various Greek thinkers and on the Hebrew Scriptures<sup>3</sup> to indicate how God's creative activity operates:

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- <sup>1</sup> In the space allocated for this paper we must pass over the fourth point mentioned in the previous section concerning Kovac's view that Clement's writings teach at many different levels simultaneously.
  - <sup>2</sup> *Str.* 2.37.1; 4.3.1-2; 6.4.2; *Q.D.S.* 26.8. See Lilla's useful account on Clement's view of the origin of the world (*Clement*, pp. 189-99). He makes the important point that for Clement the study of the origin of the world is an important factor in attaining *gnosis* (*Str.* 1.15.2), and also clearly demonstrates Clement's acceptance that matter is both eternal and yet created. However, he does not go on to demonstrate as we hope to do here, *how* the acceptance of certain contradictions inherent in the doctrine is crucial to esotericism, and therefore to *gnosis*.
  - <sup>3</sup> It must be pointed out that the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is peculiar to Christianity at this period. The *novelty* of the doctrine sets Christians apart from both Greeks and Hebrews. However, despite claiming the peculiarity of Christianity in its fulfilment of the two previous covenants of God, Clement wishes to demonstrate that its validity lies not in its novelty, but in its antiquity, its reiteration of the most ancient tradition (*Str.* 1.12.1; 7.107.5). We are mainly concerned here with the Greek view because Clement is more concerned with bringing Greek philosophy into the fold, so to speak. The *locus classicus* of the

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[T]he philosophers, the Stoics, and Plato, and Pythagoras, nay more, Aristotle the Peripatetic, suppose the existence of matter (ὕλην) among the first principles (ἀρχαίς); and not one first principle. Let them then know that what is called matter by them, is said to be without quality (ἄποιον), and without form (ἀσχημάτιστον),<sup>1</sup> and more daringly said by Plato to be non-existence (μὴ ὄν). And does he not say very mystically, knowing that the true and real first cause is one, in these very words: ‘Now then, let our opinion be so. As to the first principle or principles of the universe, or what opinion we ought to entertain about all these points, we are not now to speak, for no other cause than on account of its being difficult to explain our sentiments in accordance with the present form of discourse’.<sup>2</sup> But undoubtedly that prophetic expression, ‘Now the earth was invisible (ἀόρατος) and formless (ἀκατασκεύαστος)’, supplied them with the ground of material essence (ὕλικῆς οὐσίας).<sup>3</sup>

Here we see Clement’s multi-systematic approach to explicating a doctrine, culminating in a minor indication of what is meant by the various views of the Greek philosophers. Indeed, one could venture to say that Clement’s implication is obscurer than that which he is trying to clarify. Nevertheless, he supposes that Plato’s expression of doubt about first principles (ἀρχαί), does not preclude that he believed there to be only one first principle (ἀρχή).<sup>4</sup> Clement takes the Greek view

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Hebrew view of a pre-existent and formless matter, besides Gen. 1.2 to be discussed in this paper, is Wis. 11.17. See May, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-26; and D. Winston, ‘The Book of Wisdom’s Theory of Cosmogony’, *History of Religions*, Vol. 11, 1971, pp. 191-92. For a contrary view of this see J. Goldstein, ‘The Origins of the Doctrine of Creation *Ex Nihilo*’, *Journal of Jewish Studies*, Vol. 35, 1984, pp. 127-35.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Plato, *Timaeus* 51a. Primal matter, or what Plato calls the receptacle of becoming which receives the imprint of the eternal and intelligible ideas, is described as ἀνόρατον εἶδος τι καὶ ἄμορφον. See also Aristotle, *Physics* 191a 10. ἡ ὕλη καὶ τὸ ἄμορφον ἔχει πρὶν λαβεῖν τὴν μορφήν

<sup>2</sup> *Timaeus*, 48c.

<sup>3</sup> *Str.* 5.89.5-90.1.

<sup>4</sup> Clement’s logic appears to be false here since Plato clearly does not state that he believes there to be only one first principle. For Plato it is a moot point given the

of matter as a first principle, and places it firmly in the context of Scripture. As a first principle, 'material essence' is none other than the earth as it is described in Genesis 1.2.

This passage begins a patchy account of what various Greeks say about the creation of the cosmos.<sup>1</sup> Having learnt from Moses, says Clement, the Greek philosophers posit that the world was in fact created, contrary to what detractors of Greek philosophy had claimed, and, moreover, that it was done so out of non-existence as Christians had come to believe.

Nay, the philosophers having so heard from Moses, taught that the world was created (γενητόν). And so Plato expressly said, 'Whether was it that the world had no beginning of its existence, or derived its beginning from some beginning? For being visible, it is tangible; and being tangible, it has a body'.<sup>2</sup> Again, when he says, 'It is a difficult task to find the Maker and Father of this universe',<sup>3</sup> he not only showed that the universe was created, but points out that it was generated by him as a son, and that he is called its father, as deriving its being from

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'present form of discourse'. The unusual reasoning underlying Clement's view here probably lies in the next quote treating of Plato's statement that it is a 'difficult task to find the Maker and Father of this universe'. Clement most likely takes it that Plato's difficulty in explaining his views on first principles stems from the difficulty in finding the Maker and Father of the universe. He therefore concludes that Plato 'mystically' claimed that there is only one first principle, since the Maker and Father are clearly one in Clement's view. Wolfson claims that Clement found Plato to be uncertain as to the origin of pre-existent matter as a first principle, H. A. Wolfson, 'Plato's Pre-existent Matter in Patristic Philosophy', in *The Classical Tradition*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1966, pp. 413-414. However, Lilla disagrees (*Clement*, p. 193, n1).

- 1 In order to show the primacy and antiquity of the Hebrew Scriptures throughout this section, Clement attempts to demonstrate that the Greeks plagiarised many of their ideas from Moses. See for example *Str.* 5.90.1 & 90.4.
- 2 *Timaeus*, 28b-c. The logical extrapolation, as Plato goes on to tell, is that the world has therefore 'come to be' and is 'begotten' (γεννόμενα καὶ γεννητά).
- 3 *Timaeus*, 28c. Theophilus seems to have missed this crucial passage from Plato when he categorically stated that Plato saw matter as uncreated. *Adversus Autolyicum*. 2.4.

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him alone and from non-existence (μη ὄντος).<sup>1</sup> The Stoics, too, hold the tenet that the world was created.<sup>2</sup>

Thus Plato believed that the world is begotten as a son. We are to infer from this passage that although Plato and the Stoics believed in the eternity of the world, they also did not preclude the possibility of it having also been created. More interestingly, this passage identifies the father, who begot the creation as a son, with the non-existence from which creation came. Not much is made of this, since it is once again only a small clue. In fact it is a significant point that is being considered here and one that requires some attention. Not only is God being identified with non-existence as the source from which creation comes, but, by extension from what has previously been said, is also the 'material essence', or the 'formless and void' of Genesis 1.2.

This is confirmed by Clement further on in an account that centres on how the Stoics define nature, and also how a new world is generated through a creative fire. 'The Stoics, accordingly, define nature (fu/sin) to be designing fire (πῦρ τεχνικόν),<sup>3</sup> advancing systematically to generation (γένεσιν). And God and His Word are by Scripture figuratively (ἀλληγορεῖται) termed fire and light'.<sup>4</sup>

Methodologically speaking, Clement sets before us something of a puzzle, indicating that there is a similarity that exists between Stoic notions of nature, a designing and self-generating fire, and certain Scriptural accounts concerning God and his Word. Fire in this case is the figurative or allegorical expression for God the Father, and, in its connection with the Word as light and the generation of the world,

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<sup>1</sup> Lilla points out that this association of μη ὄντος or ἀνουσι/ατοῖς with the highest divinity communicable to humanity features in much mystical thinking. This 'does not imply the denial of [God's] existence, but simply the fact that he cannot be considered as a 'real being' since he is beyond (or above) οὐσία' (Clement, p. 196 n6). Cf. Plotinus *Enneads*, 5.4.1; *Corpus Hermeticum* 2.5; Basilides as cited in Hippolytus' *Refutatio Omnium Haeresium*, 7.21; Dionysius the Areopagite, *De Divinis Nominibus*, PG. 3. 588B.

<sup>2</sup> *Str.* 5.92.1-4. For the Stoic view mentioned at the end of this quote see *Str.* 5.100.4 cited below.

<sup>3</sup> See H. von Arnim, *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, 4 vols, Irvington, New York, 1986 abbr. *SVF*. See especially 2.1027. οἱ Στωικοὶ νοερὸν θεὸν ἀποφαίνονται, πῦρ τεχνικὸν ὁδῶ βαδίζον ἐπὶ γενέσει κόσμου.

<sup>4</sup> *Str.* 5.100.4.

recalls the *fiat lux* that creates the world from the formless and void in Genesis 1.3. Identifying God with nature and the element of fire is dangerous ground for a Christian. If this was all Clement had to say on the subject, then he could well be charged with Stoic pantheism: a view that identifies God with matter, and posits nothing outside of the material universe.<sup>1</sup>

However, scattered throughout his works, Clement makes some qualifications to this association of the Father with the natural order, with fire, matter, or similarly, non-existence. For Clement, humanity is never capable of comprehending or participating in God, as he is in essence (οὐσία), but only as he is expressed by his power (δύναμις),<sup>2</sup> a power that is no more evident than in his consuming fire. Clement, drawing on Proverbs 8.22, claims that this power of God, in which we all participate, is also the Wisdom of God that arose ‘before heaven and earth and all existences’.<sup>3</sup> The power of God as it is expressed by

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<sup>1</sup> We must remember that Clement is working at a time where no such doctrine of creation had been formalised, and indeed was free to contemplate such issues in a much more liberal frame of reference than his successors. Yet given his concern for preserving the ancient ways of knowing such a doctrine, both Hebrew and Greek, he was, perhaps paradoxically, freer to express his views in accordance with ancient authorities than later Christian theologians who had to work within much more legalistic confines.

<sup>2</sup> This distinction of God in essence and in power, becomes crucial to the later Byzantine mystical tradition. Ostensibly it is very close to emanationism in that the two are distinguished in the way that the source of light is distinct from its rays. The rays are not other than its source as light, but distinct in that they are not the source. The source is utterly transcendent as is expressed through the ‘inaccessible’ or ‘unapproachable light’ (τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀπρόσιτον) of 1 Tim. 6.16. This is the ‘advent of divine power’ (ἐπιφασίς ἐστὶ θείας δυνάμεως) which, for the Gnostic, becomes the object of an ‘insatiable contemplation’ (ἀκόρεστος θεωρία) according to Clement. See *Str.* 6.32.3-4; 6.75.1-2; *Frag. of Cassiodorus. Comm. 1<sup>st</sup> Ep. of John* 1.5. On the distinction of essence and power see G. Florovsky, ‘The Idea of Creation in Christian Philosophy’, *Eastern Church Quarterly*, Vol. 8, 1949, esp. pp. 67-68 in connection with the doctrine of creation. In general see the works of V. Lossky, *The Vision of God*, trans. A. Moorhouse, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, New York, 1983 and *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, James Clark & Co., Cambridge & London, 1957.

<sup>3</sup> *Str.* 6.138.4. Clement follows Wis. 7.22, ‘Wisdom is the artificer (τεχνίτης) of all things’ in connection with the origin of the world. See also *Str.* 2.5.2-3; 5.89.4;

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wisdom<sup>1</sup> is closely connected with fire and is a prominent feature in Clement's works. However, it comes to be associated more with the Holy Spirit than with the Father. For instance working from Luke 3.16 in the *Eclogae Propheticae*, Clement demonstrates the operation, not only of water, but also fire and spirit in baptism. He concludes that these things all discern that which has become carnal or material in the soul, and destroy it in order to restore the soul to its pristine state.<sup>2</sup> The fire that consumes is therefore called intelligent<sup>3</sup> by Clement since it discerns and separates out what it is in the soul that needs to be destroyed. This 'wise fire' (πῦρ φρόνιμος),<sup>4</sup> as it comes to be called, is then associated with the 'consuming fire' (πῦρ καταναλίκον) of God, 'a mighty and resist-less power (δύναμις), to which nothing is impossible, but which is able to destroy'.<sup>5</sup>

Hence, a number of things have been closely associated and harmonised when speaking about God's power in which we all have the ability to participate. It is first of all the pre-existent Wisdom of God that is communicated to all things as they come to be. It is intelligent in the sense that it discerns that which has become gross in the soul and destroys it, whilst conserving, nurturing, and restoring all things to their primal state in God. Finally it is most supremely expressed by the symbol of fire, the element that Clement sees as superior to the others<sup>6</sup> and which is most significantly manifested as God's all-consuming fire.<sup>7</sup> Clement's debt to the Pre-Socratics and the Stoics is obvious:

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. 1 Cor. 1.24.

<sup>2</sup> *Ecl.* 25.1-4.

<sup>3</sup> As opposed to the gross and visible fire of the physical realm (*Str.* 7.34.4).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Str.* 7.34.4 and *Paid.* 3.44.2. See W. C. van Unick, 'The "Wise Fire" in a Gnostic Eschatological Vision', in P. Granfield & J. A. Jungman (eds), *Kyriakon: Festschrift Johannes Quasten*, Aschendorff, Munster, 1970, pp. 277-88.

<sup>5</sup> *Ecl.* 26.1-4 citing Deut. 4.24/Heb. 12.29.

<sup>6</sup> *Ecl.* 26.1.

<sup>7</sup> This fire is communicated to all as a 'spark' or 'living fire' (ζώπυρα) that is present in the soul. It is for Clement the 'seed of true wisdom' (ἀλήθειαν φρονήσεως) by which the soul can restore itself to God (*Protr.* 24.3). 'The heavenly and truly divine love comes to men thus, when in the soul itself the spark of true goodness, kindled (ἀναζωπυρούμενον) in the soul by the Divine Word, is able to burst forth into flame' (ἐκλάμπειν) (*Protr.* 117.2). See also *Paid.* 2.18.1; 2.103.5; *Str.* 1.10.4; *Str.* 1.14.3 is significant in that it speaks of rekindling

indeed, they inform his entire theology of immanence. Fire is the crucial and irreducible symbol for God's unspeakable and inexpressible power operating in the cosmos.

To return to the *Stromateis*. Clement draws on the Pre-Socratic and Stoic accounts of the conflagration of the world to demonstrate an underlying fiery substance that is, from one point of view eternal and uncreated, but from another, created and perishable.

I do not pass over Empedocles, who reminds us of the physical renewal of all things (τῶν πάντων ἀναλήψεως), as consisting in a transmutation into the essence of fire (πυρρός οὐσίαν), which is to take place. And most plainly of the same opinion is Heraclitus of Ephesus, who considered that there was a world everlasting (κόσμον αἰδίον), and recognised one perishable – that is, in its arrangement, not being different from the former, viewed in a certain aspect. But that he knew the eternal world (αἰδίον κόσμον) which consists of the universal essence (ἀπάσης οὐσίας) to be of a certain nature, he makes clear by speaking thus: 'The same world of all things, neither any of the gods, nor any one of men, made (οὔτε...ἐποίησεν). But there was, and is, and will be ever-living fire (πῦρ αἰείζωον), kindled according to measure, and quenched according to measure'.<sup>1</sup> And that he taught it to be generated and perishable, is shown by what follows: 'There are transmutations of fire—first, the sea; and of the sea the half is land, the half fiery vapour'.<sup>2</sup> For he says that these are the effects of power (δυνάμει). For fire is, by the Word (λόγου) of God which governs all things, changed by the air into moisture, which is, as it were, the germ (σπέρμα) of cosmic change; and this he calls sea.<sup>3</sup> And

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the spark through the recollections contained in the *Stromateis*; *Str.* 1.33.3; 1.35.1; 1.87.1; 4.169.1; 6.2.2; 6.116.2; 7.110.4. hence despite there being no ontological continuity between creator and created, this uncreated spark is the very means by which one can restore itself to the Wisdom of God. It has to be ignited in the soul through the recollection of the seeds of doctrines contained in the *Stromateis* – a Christian *anamnesis*.

<sup>1</sup> Heraclitus. *frag.* 30.

<sup>2</sup> Heraclitus. *frag.* 31.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Philo, *De Aeterniti Mundi*, 18. See *SVF* 1.103-104 and Virgil's *Eclogues*, 6.31-34. 'The seeds of earth and breath and sea and liquid fire (*liquidi ignis*) were

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out of it again is produced earth, and sky, and all that they contain. How, again, they are restored (ἀναλαμβάνεται) and ignited (ἐκπυροῦται), he shows clearly in these words: 'The sea is diffused and measured according to the same word (λόγον) which subsisted before it became earth...' The most renowned of the Stoics teach similar doctrines with him, in treating of the conflagration (ἐκπυρώσεως) and the government of the world (κόσμου διοικήσεως).<sup>1</sup>

Various Pre-Socratic and Stoic notions are put up for consideration in this passage, with another slight intimation from Clement as to what he believes they amount to. The universal or fiery essence constitutes an eternal world from one point of view, but from another it can be seen as undergoing elemental transmutations that are constantly creating and passing away. Hence it is both eternal and uncreated on the one hand, and created and perishable on the other.<sup>2</sup> The underlying eternal chaotic flux is represented by water, or sea, which is separated into earth and sky as a new and ordered cosmos by the Word of God.<sup>3</sup> The Logos governs the world in such a way as to bring it into being from chaos or non-existence, but does so through the power of God the Father. Hence this chaos is seen not so much as non-existent and therefore an unreality, but quite the opposite: it is non-existent and therefore the highest reality in which humanity can participate. It is, in a sense, both prior and posterior to the existent, or rather, eternally present in it as the underlying reality.

This brings us to a crucial point not readily apparent in Clement's writings. We can determine that at its conception and at its destruction the cosmos is essentially non-existent. What we loosely term pre-existent matter cannot, in Clement's thinking, be distinguished at this point from the power of God as it is expressed by fire. God is not however, exhausted by material essence as the Stoic pantheists

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forced together...From these first things all else, all, and the cosmos' globe grew of itself'.

1 *Str.* 5.103.6-105.1.

2 Cf. Philo, *De Aeternitate Mundi*, 8-9.

3 Clement elsewhere speaks of the 'waters above the heaven'. *Ecl.* 8.1. See the whole section of *Ecl.* 2.1-8.2 in this connection.

believed, for God and matter are utterly distinct.<sup>1</sup> Matter can in this sense be described as something that is not other than God. Since God is all in all, that which pre-exists is nothing other than God's ipseity. Yet when the world is created it has the status of a contingent reality. The world, visible to us, comes to be from nothing and therefore has some ontological status, then proceeds through time until it returns to nothing as fuel for the flames. The wisdom of the consuming fire of God discerns what has become gross in the world and destroys it.

Hence the initiate is confronted with two seemingly opposed doctrines concerning the origin of the world, which are, in Clement's view, essentially harmonious. The compossibility of the eternal and uncreated with the perishable and created, brings the human mind to the brink of what it is capable of comprehending. It is with this non-existent chaos, or conflagration, that the mind is faced with something incapable of logical demonstration. For Clement, however, it is the Word of God, in its eternal power to create that this non-demonstrability is brought to order.

God, then, being not a subject for demonstration (ἀναπόδεικτος), cannot be the object of science. But the Son is wisdom, and knowledge, and truth...He is also susceptible of demonstration (ἀπόδειξις) and of description. And all the powers of the Spirit (δυνάμεις τοῦ πνεύματος), becoming collectively one thing, terminate in the same point – that is, in the Son... Whence also He is all things. For He is the circle of all powers rolled and united into one unity. Wherefore the Word is called the Alpha and the Omega, of whom alone the end becomes beginning, and ends again at the original beginning without any break.<sup>2</sup>

All things, all oppositions are brought together in Christ as Alpha and Omega, the incommensurable principle in which all duality ceases to exist. Since human thought operates in such dualities, such a state is beyond cognition. For Clement, God's non-demonstrability is therefore, the cognitive and ontological non-existent from which the

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<sup>1</sup> *Str.* 2.74.1.

<sup>2</sup> *Str.* 4.156.1-157.1.

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ordered and intelligible creation comes through the work of the Son. Not only does the Word of God bring the creation into being as the light to the world, but it also demonstrates, proves, exhibits (ἀπόδειξις) the non-demonstrability of God the Father.

Clement demonstrates this eternal paradox in terms of God simultaneously at work and at rest.

Thus the Lord Himself is called ‘Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end’, ‘by whom all things were made, and without whom not even one thing was made’. God’s resting is not, then, as some conceive, that God ceased from doing (πέπαυται ποιῶν ὁ θεός). For, being good, if He should ever cease from doing good, then would He cease from being God, which it is sacrilege even to say. The resting is, therefore...that the order (τάξις) of created things should be preserved inviolate, and that each of the creatures should cease from the ancient disorder (ἀταξία).<sup>1</sup>

God is eternally both at rest and at work. It is only, ‘as some conceive’ – that is through the limitations of certain people’s thinking – that God at some point does not create, or that he therefore at some point came to create. We must be taught, says Clement that ‘the world was originated (γενητόν), but not suppose that God made it in time...The expression ‘in the day that God made’...points out the activity exerted by the Son...For the Word that throws light on things hidden, and by whom each...created thing came into life and being, is called day (ἡμέρα)’.<sup>2</sup> Creation is the eternal activity, the indefinite and dateless work of the Son as the light of the *fiat lux*, the first and eternal day of creation.

That God is simultaneously at work and at rest is clearly a contradiction to human logic, yet it lends itself to reason beyond what can sufficiently be expressed or thought. The Gnostic, whose intention it is to perfect him or herself in the image and likeness of God, is asked to transcend such confines and to pass into the cognitive darkness that surrounds God:

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<sup>1</sup> Str. 6.141.7-142.1. Clement is following Philo in this account. *Legum Allegoriae*, 1.5 παύεται γὰρ οὐδέποτε ποιῶν ὁ θεός.

<sup>2</sup> Str. 6.145.4-6.

## *Method and Doctrine*

You have, in brief, the professed aim of our philosophy. And the learning of these branches, when pursued with right course of conduct, leads through Wisdom, the artificer of all things, to the Ruler of all – a Being difficult to grasp and apprehend, ever receding and withdrawing from him who pursues. But He who is far off has – oh ineffable marvel! – come very near. ‘I am a God: that draws near’, says the Lord. He is in essence (ὄυσίαν) remote; ‘for how is it that what is begotten can have approached the Unbegotten?’ But He is very near in virtue of that power (δυνάμει) which holds all things in its embrace...For the power of God is always present, in contact with us, in the exercise of inspection, of beneficence, of instruction. Whence Moses, persuaded that God is not to be known by human wisdom, said, ‘Show me Thy glory’; and into the thick darkness where God’s voice was, pressed to enter – that is, into the inaccessible and invisible ideas respecting Existence. For God is not in darkness or in place, but above both space and time, and qualities of objects. Wherefore neither is He at any time in a part, either as containing or as contained, either by limitation or by section...And though heaven be called His throne, not even thus is He contained, but He rests delighted in the creation.<sup>1</sup>

Here then is the darkness of ignorance that obscures the eternal and uncreated light of God. Such a vision as Moses attained is esoteric precisely because the multitude is incapable of comprehending and assimilating the oppositions inherent in it yet resolved in the eternal. This then is the object of esoteric teaching for the Christian initiate, the Gnostic elect, who follows Clement’s curriculum.

There are ... the elect of the elect ... drawing themselves, like ships to the strand, out of the surge of the world and bringing themselves to safety ... hiding in the depth of their mind the ineffable mysteries ... whom the Word calls ‘the light of the world, and the salt of the earth’. This is the seed (σπέρμα), the image and likeness of God, and His true son and heir (κληρονόμον), sent here as it were on a sojourn, by the high administration and suitable arrangement of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Str.* 2.5.2-6.4. See also *Str.* 5.78.1-2.

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Father, by whom the visible and invisible things of the world were created ... and all things are held together so long as the seed remains here; and when it is gathered, these things shall be very quickly dissolved (*λυθήσεται*).<sup>1</sup>

Hence for Clement the doctrine of creation is one that demonstrates the inadequacy of categorically positing either that the world was uncreated and eternal and therefore not created and perishable, or that it was created and perishable and therefore not co-eternal and uncreated as a principle in opposition to God. As mutually exclusive, both views are fraught with difficulty. The doctrinal formulation of one element of this doctrine leads to the exclusion of the mystical possibilities inherent in it, the mystical experiences of those who resolve the contradictions within themselves as complementarities, perfecting themselves in the image and likeness of God through Christ as Alpha and Omega. *Contraria sunt complementa*: the differing views are therefore mutually inclusive in the Gnostic's mystical experience. One who passes through the 'nocturnal day' of the soul<sup>2</sup> and who beams forth the uncreated light of God. This is done by successfully gathering the seeds of doctrines dispersed throughout the enigmatic work of the *Stromateis*, and to seek to recollect the Wisdom of God through igniting the living fire of knowledge. In comprehending the seeds of doctrines, the Gnostic becomes that seed, the seminal word of Christ, and co-administrator in God's eternal creative activity.

### **Conclusion**

The process of resolving the opposition between creation and eternity, and between the divine and the non-existent are crucial to the doctrine

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<sup>1</sup> *Q.D.S.* 36.1-3.

<sup>2</sup> A term that Clement borrows from Plato (*Republic*, 7.521c) to describe the soul ascending to this inexpressible and incomprehensible state. See *Str.* 5.105.2 and especially 5.133.5. 'Rightly therefore Plato "accustoms the best natures to reach the study that we said before is the most important, namely, to make the ascent and see the good (7.519c)...The turning round of the soul from a nocturnal day to that which is a true return to that which really is, which we shall assert to be the true philosophy." Such as are partakers of this he judges to belong to the golden race'.

of the origin of the world. The seeds of doctrine not only contain the subject matter, but also the means by which to realise them through. For Clement this was the teaching communicated by the Word of God. As method, the 'Teaching' is the way one comes to knowledge: as doctrine, the 'Teaching' is what one comes to knowledge of. One must always take account of the form in which secret and oral teachings convey content. The miscellaneous nature of the *Stromateis* creates the labyrinth through which the true initiate has to pass. To enter the 'thick darkness' is to learn, as Pseudo-Dionysius did, that one has to 'unknow' one's own thought processes.<sup>1</sup> Such a doctrine as the origin of the world presents the mind with the conditions through which to do this. This involves the entire being, not just one's rational faculty; it is the experiential side of an abstract doctrine.

Indeed, Clement's promise of the attainment of knowledge to the initiate is a large one. His works are a noble and demanding exercise in spiritual teaching. However, this is a view that requires that they be given considerably more credit than has sometimes been granted by scholars in the past. Clement's profundity is easily overlooked if one reads his works as a befuddled and primitive stage in the development of doctrine. Clement is not essentially a doctrinal theologian, but a metaphysician, a skilled spiritual teacher, a mystagogue, concerned not only with doctrines themselves, but also with the method of rekindling them to life in the Christian, in their fullest sense. Without the method, the doctrines, the 'ancestral and apostolic seeds' (προγονικὰ καὶ ἀποστολικὰ σπέρματα) that he claims to have received through the 'blessed tradition' (μακάρια παράδοσις) of the apostles,<sup>2</sup> cannot be brought to fruition. Hence, the modern student of Clement is left with a stark realisation that, as Fortin claims: 'either the secret tradition exists or it does not. If it exists and if it represents Clement's best thinking on the most important theological matters, the present-day

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<sup>1</sup> *De Mystica Theologica*, 1001A. 'Here being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing (μηδὲν γινώσκειν)'.

<sup>2</sup> *Str.* 1.12.1.

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reader, having no access to this tradition, is doomed to remain forever in the dark as to its content'.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fortin, *op. cit.*, p. 42.