

Judith L. Kovacs (Virginia)

PAIDEIA, THE CARE OF THE SOUL, AND CONCEALMENT IN CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

The topic of this conference invites us to reflect on the heritage of ancient Greece in a new time, at the beginning of the second millenium after Christ. My paper concerns another turn of the ages--early in the first millenium, when the new Christian religion had to define itself vis-a-vis the ancient wisdom, the traditions of both Jews and Greeks. My specific subject is the writings of the first Christian thinker to fully engage with Greek *paideia*, Clement of Alexandria, who taught in this ancient center of learning around the year 200. A polymath and Middle Platonist philosopher, Clement converted to Christianity and then proceeded to travel around the Mediterranean world in search of wisdom.¹ His travels ended in Egypt, where he found the teacher Pantainos, whom he describes as: "the true Sicilian bee" who "plucking the flowers of the prophetic and apostolic meadow, engendered in the souls of his hearers a pure substance of knowledge."²

As this quotation illustrates, Clement is fond of describing the Biblical message as *sophia* and *gnosis*, "wisdom" and "knowledge." His most important work, the *Stromata*, or Miscellanies, has the subtitle "Gnostic Notes in accordance with the True Philosophy." This title expresses Clement's belief that the Bible, correctly interpreted, is the culmination of the Greek philosophical tradition. His two other major works are called the *Protrepticus*, a title that recalls Aristotle's invitation to philosophy, and the *Paedagogus*, which presents Christ as the perfect Educator. Werner Jaeger, in *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia*, comments on this title:

The very choice of the title *Paedagogus*, which shows Christ in a new role, points, of course, to the relation of Christianity to Greek culture, since for the Greek-speaking world this was *paideia*, an ideal of human existence to which every educated man and woman and every civilized nation had aspired ever since the idea was launched by the century that produced Plato and Isocrates. The presentation of Christ as the Paedagogus implies a program. What it signifies can be fully understood only against the historical backtground of the entire Greek *paideia* tradition.³

Clement views Christian salvation as a complex process of education. Christ, the Logos, is both instructor (*paidagogos*) and teacher (*didaskalos*), and he has a carefully designed plan for the education all humankind. Clement describes this plan as follows:

It is [the nature of the Son] which arranges everything according to "the will of the Father" (John 6.40) and steers the whole world in the best way, performing all things with untiring, limitless power [He] has been entrusted with the sacred management of the divine plan. . . . He is the Teacher, who educates the Gnostic by mysteries, the believer by good hopes and the hard of heart by corrective discipline, which works through the senses. He is the source of providence, operating for the individual, for the community, and for the whole universe. (*Strom.* VII 2, 5.3-6.1).⁴

Clement views providence in terms of education. The divine *oikonomia*, or plan for salvific education, is both comprehensive and flexible. Its all-encompassing nature is revealed in the course of human history. Building on New Testament teaching that the revelation to the Jews given in the Old Testament was a preparation for the superior teaching of the gospel, Clement argues that the divine teacher has not neglected the other nations, but has provided them with Greek learning, especially phi-

¹ Clement describes his travels and his various teachers in *Stromateis* I 1, 11.2-3.

² *Strom.* I 1, 11.2.

³ Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1961) 133, n.29. Jaeger refers here to his 3 volume work, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture* (Oxford and New York: Oxford Press, 1939-1944).

⁴ Translations from Clement's works and from Plato are my own.

losophy, as a parallel way of preliminary instruction.⁵ In addition to giving these different revelations in history, the Logos oversees the education of each individual, adapting his teaching in order to give gradual training in the mysteries of God. Those who are not eager learners – the hard of heart – he treats as “servants,” teaching them through the elementary method of disciplinary punishment. More receptive students, called “faithful servants,” are motivated through teaching about eschatological rewards. The most mature students, who are motivated not by fear of punishment or hope of reward, receive *gnosis*, instruction in the divine mysteries.⁶

In this ambitious system of *paideia* the Logos has helpers, both angelic and human.⁷ As we have seen, Clement had great reverence for his own teacher Pantainos, and he thinks that Christians who advance to the higher stages of education are obligated to teach others. Distinguishing two types of Christians, the simple believers and the more advanced, called “Gnostics,” or “knowing ones,” he says that teaching others is an essential characteristic of the Gnostic.⁸ Many texts in Clement’s *Stromata* describe the Gnostic, the ideal Christian who by a gradual process of education achieves godlike status. These passages give an idea of how Clement understands his own calling as a Christian teacher. The Gnostic, Clement claims, is a “living image of the Lord” who mimics the creative work of the Logos and shares in the execution of the divine plan of salvation.⁹

Clement makes a number of specific comparisons between the *paideia* of the Logos and that of the Gnostic teacher. These include spiritual direction, or care for the individual soul, and the use of concealment. The concern of ancient philosophy for psychagogy, the care of the soul, has received considerable attention in the last several decades, for example in the writings of Paul Rabbow, Michel Foucault and Pierre Hadot.¹⁰ These scholars call attention to the differences between ancient and modern ideas of education. In the ancient Greek world, the work of the philosophical teacher was not limited to conveying intellectual content; it also involved the moral and psychological formation of one’s students. Hadot says that the main purpose of ancient philosophical discourse, in contrast to modern philosophy, is not to transmit information but to produce a psychic effect, “to form rather than to inform.”¹¹ Teachers such as Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus seek to lead their disciples to a new orientation, in which their vision of the world and their personalities are transformed.¹² Similarly for Clement moral training and the education of the mind are closely linked, and the ultimate aim of both is to achieve direct knowledge of God. Quoting the Platonic saying that “like is dear to like,”¹³ Clement says that only the pure and righteous soul can hope to know God. The Gnostic teacher, imitating the divine Logos, not only trains the intellect but also cares for the heart and soul of his student.

In his *Paedagogus* Clement presents the divine Instructor (*paidagogos*) as a model for this kind of teaching. The Logos sympathizes with the nature of each person (*Paid.* I 8, 62.2). Like a doctor, he uses many methods of care, including persuasive words, threats, and punishments (I 7, 61.1-3).¹⁴ In one passage Clement interprets the punishments described in the Old Testament as the work of the divine surgeon:

For many of the passions are cured by punishment, and by the institution of the sterner commandments, and especially by the teaching of certain principles. For reproof is, as it were, the surgery of the passions of the soul. (*Paed.* I 8, 64.4).¹⁵

⁵ *Strom.* I 5, 28.1-3.

⁶ See *Strom.* VII 2, 5.3-6.1 cited above.

⁷ For the role of the angels in the divine *paideia* see, e.g., Clement’s *Eclogae propheticæ* 56 and *Strom.* VII 1, 3.4.

⁸ *Strom.* II 10, 46.1; VII 1, 4.2.

⁹ *Strom.* VII 52.1-3.

¹⁰ Paul Rabbow, *Seelenführung: Methodik der Exerzitien in der Antike* (Munich: Im Kösel, 1954); Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self (History of Sexuality, vol. 3; transl. Robert Hurley; New York: Pantheon, 1986)*; Pierre Hadot, *Exercices Spirituels et Philosophie Antique* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1987), English translation (with additional essays and introductory essay by Arnold I. Davidson): *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson (Oxford: Blackwells, 1995).

¹¹ Hadot’s views as summarized by Arnold Davidson in his introduction to *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 19-20.

¹² Davidson, 21; see also Hadot, “Exercices Spirituels,” 14.

¹³ *Gorg.* 478c-d, quoted in *Paed.* I 6, 28.2; see also *Strom.* VII 3, 13.2.

¹⁴ On the use of medical imagery in Hellenistic philosophy, see Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton, 1994), especially pp. 13-14; 48-53; 115-39; 316-17; 328-29; 417-18.

¹⁵ Marrou and Harl, *Le Pédagogue*, Livre 1 (*SC* 70), 226, n. 1, call attention to parallels in Plato, *Laws* XI 934a; *Gorg.* 478d and Philo *Qu. Gen.* I 89. In this section of the *Paedagogus* Clement’s main concern is to defend the Old Testament against those who criticize its use of punishments and threats; see I 8, 62.1. For further examples of medical imagery see *Strom.* II 16, 69.2, where Clement says that the Lord prescribes many modes of “therapy” to cure different types of sins; *Paed.* I 1, 3.1-3; *Strom.* I 27, 171.1-4; VII 7, 48.4; 15, 90.4; *Ecl. Pr.* 9.1.

Clement also sees evidence of this divine care of the soul in the New Testament. He interprets Jesus' parable of the vine in John 15 as a symbol of the divine "therapy, which assumes many forms and benefits in many ways" (*Paed.* I 8, 66.4). He compares the work of the Logos to that of a gardener: For the vine that is not pruned becomes woody. It is similar with the human being. The Logos – the knife – removes the wild shoots; compelling the impulses of the soul to bear fruit, not to indulge in lust. Now reproof addressed to sinners aims at their salvation, the word being adapted to the each person's conduct, just as the strings of a musical instrument are sometimes tightened and sometimes relaxed. (*Paed.* I 8, 66.4-5)

Clement uses the same images to describe the careful way the Gnostic teaches his students. Noting that "the body is improved by medicine and the soul by philosophy," Clement says that the Gnostic serves God by teaching human beings the "contemplation that makes them better."¹⁶ He also likens the ideal teacher to a gardener:

For as the treatment of plants is best which produces and harvests fruit through skill and experience in gardening, thereby providing to men the benefit that comes from plants, so the piety of the Gnostic gathers to itself the fruit of all those who believe through him, and, as more come to understanding and thus are saved, it reaches an excellent harvest by its skill. (*Strom.* VII 1, 3.5-6)

The divine *paideia* also involves the use of concealment. Both the divine Logos and the Gnostic teacher conceal certain teachings until they judge their students are ready to receive them. This is why Jesus spoke in parables and why the Scriptures contain so many enigmas, sections that advanced students must learn to interpret through allegorical exegesis.¹⁷ Clement says repeatedly that he is concealing his highest teaching, and he chooses the unusual literary genre of the *Stromata* partly because its miscellaneous form allows him to scatter "seeds of *gnosis*" without fully revealing it. Like the heretodox gnostics, he speaks of an esoteric oral tradition reserved for the few, which supplements and interprets the plain teaching of Scripture.¹⁸ There are no doubt several different reasons for this emphasis on secrecy, including a desire to show that his ecclesiastical Gnostic is not inferior to the heterodox gnostics, who claimed secret revelations.¹⁹ But Clement's own justifications of the practice of concealment emphasize its pedagogical function.

Speaking of the Gnostic teacher, Clement emphasizes again and again that he must carefully scrutinize his students, to see if they are fit to receive the more advanced Gnostic instruction.²⁰ This recalls classical ideas about *paideia*: The ideal system of education outlined by Plato in the *Republic* and in the *Laws* involves an extended, carefully-ordered course of study reaching from earliest childhood to the contemplation of the Good, which cannot be attained before the age of fifty. A long course of preliminary studies is required before students are judged ready for the study of philosophy, and this study is reserved for an elite group of gifted students who are tested before being allowed to proceed to the higher studies.²¹

Clement even allows that this pedagogically motivated concealment will sometimes necessitate telling a lie, or at least misrepresenting the truth.²² In the following text he uses the example of a doctor to justify lying:

¹⁶ *Strom.* VII 1, 3.2-4. For comparison of the Gnostic teacher with a doctor, see also *Strom.* VII 9, 52.2.

¹⁷ On Jesus' uses of parables see the quotation of Matt. 13.13 in *Strom.* I 1, 2.3 and Matt. 13.34, in *Strom.* VI 15, 125.1. The practice of concealment in the Scriptures is one of the major themes of Book V of the *Stromata*, discussed in chapters 4-10 (#19.1-66.4).

¹⁸ See, e.g., *Strom.* I 1, 13.2.

¹⁹ On Clement's esoterism see André Méhat, *Étude sur les 'Stromates' de Clément d'Alexandrie* (Patristica Sorbonensia 7; Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966), 492-99; Guy G. Stroumsa, "From Esoterism to Mysticism in Early Christianity," in Hans G. Klippenburg and Guy G. Stroumsa, *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religion* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 296; *idem*, "Moses' Riddles: Esoteric trends in Patristic Hermeneutics," in *Interpretation in Religion*, ed. Schlomo Biderman and Ben-Ami Scharfstein (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), 229-48; E. L. Fortin, "Clement of Alexandria and the Esoteric Tradition," *Studia Patristica* 9, Vol. 3 (TUGAL 94; Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1966), 41-56; Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1973); J. L. Kovacs, "Concealment and Gnostic Exegesis: Clement of Alexandria's Interpretation of the Tabernacle," *Studia Patristica* 31, (ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone; Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 414-37.

²⁰ See, e.g., *Strom.* I 1, 9.1; 2, 12.3; 13, 1; V 8, 54.2-4; VI 15, 115.1, 6; 116.3; VII 9, 53.1.

²¹ See *Repub.* VII 539d-540b; Jaeger, *Paideia*, II 76-370 and III 182-262; Henri-Irénée Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 69-78. Compare also *Repub.* VII 535a-536d.

²² For a brief discussion of this theme in Clement and Origen see David Satran, "Pedagogy and Deceit in the Alexandrian Theological Tradition," *Origeniana Quinta*, ed. Robert J. Daly (Leuven: University Press, 1992), 119-124.

The exalted position of the Gnostic is extended further by the one who has undertaken to superintend the teaching of others and accepted the management (*oikonomia*) in word and deed of the greatest good on earth, through which he mediates union and fellowship with the divine. . . . Whatever [the Gnostic] has in his mind, that is also on his tongue--to those who by virtue of their assent are worthy to hear it -- since he both speaks and lives out of his understanding. For he thinks what is true and also speaks it, except, on occasion, in a medicinal way, as a doctor does to those who are sick, he will lie or speak an untruth -- as the sophists say -- for the deliverance of those who are ill. (*Strom.* VII 9, 53.1-2)

As an example of such benevolent deception Clement cites an action of saint Paul described in Acts 16.3: Paul's decides to circumcize his companion Timothy, even though he knows that circumcision carries no benefit (see Rom 2.25). Paul does this, Clement says, out of concern for Jewish Christians who were not yet ready to receive his full teaching.²³ Clement's discussion of lying calls to mind Plato's statement in the *Republic* that the rulers who govern according to philosophy may lie for the benefit of the state.²⁴ Plato compares the philosopher kings to doctors, who sometimes lie in order to bring about a cure. So for Clement the Gnostic teacher will only lie or mislead out of the highest of motives, out of love for his neighbor, that is, because of a pedagogical concern to foster a student's continued progress in the faith.²⁵

This pedagogical motive is made clear in an allegorical exegesis of a law about covering a pit from the book of Exodus. According to Exodus 21.33-34 if an animal falls into an uncovered pit, the owner of the pit is liable for damages. Clement interprets the owner as a symbol of the Gnostic teacher, who must carefully guard his advanced teaching ("the depths of *gnosis*") lest a simple Christian "fall" into it and "drown" -- that is lest his misunderstanding of advanced teachings causes him to lose his faith. Should this happen, Clement says, it is the teacher who will pay the penalty. This exegesis pictures vividly Clement's sense of the awesome responsibility of the Gnostic teacher.

There is much more that could be said about Clement's view of the *paideia* of Christ, the Logos. I hope that what I have said has been enough to make clear two points. The first is the extent to which he found classical ideas about *paideia* useful in articulating the new Christian faith. The time-honored concept of *paideia* provided an overarching category for his attempt to give a coherent account of the immense variety of teaching found in Old and New Testaments. The second point is the great seriousness with which Clement takes his own vocation as a Gnostic teacher. Regarding this as a sacred, awe-inspiring task, requiring prayer, he models his own teaching not only on that of Pantainos but also on the greatest of all teachers, the divine Logos.²⁶

²³ *Strom.* VII 9, 53.3-5.

²⁴ *Repub.* III 389b-c: "It is appropriate then for the rulers of the city, if for anyone, to lie, where either enemies or citizens are concerned, in order to benefit the city."

²⁵ Compare Origen's reflections on God's use of deception discussed by Joseph Trigg in "Divine Deception and the Truthfulness of Scripture," in *Origen of Alexandria: His World and His Legacy*, ed. C. Kannengiesser and W. L. Peterson (UNDPress, 1988), 147-64.

²⁶ See *Strom.* I 1, 6.1-3; 9.2-3. The sense of teaching as a sacred responsibility is perhaps best conveyed by Clement's use of 1 Cor 11.27-28 in *Strom.* I 1, 5.1. In this text Paul warns of grave consequences for those who do not examine themselves before partaking of the Eucharist; Clement applies these words to the Gnostic teacher, who must examine himself to see if he is worthy to speak and to write. For the teacher's prayer that he may be found worthy, see *Strom.* I 1, 7.1-8.4; 9.2.