

A New Reading of one of the Earliest Christian Letters Outside the New Testament and the Dangers of Early Christian Communities in Egypt

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ABSTRACT: The letter of Ammonius to Apollonius, preserved in an Oxyrhynchus papyrus and datable to the end of the I or the beginning of the II century AD, contains a superlinear stroke over the X of the initial XAIPEIN, which is the sign of a *nomen sacrum* that, together with many other clues in this *epistolê kekhiasmênê*, points to the Christianity of the writer and the addressee. In this new framework, many details of the letter become intelligible and the whole document, with an emphasis on the necessity of a circumspect behaviour and the use of a cryptic communication code, attests to the critical situation of the Christian communities in those days, when Christianity was a *superstitio illicita* and Christians had to try not to be denounced. I propose an analysis of the letter in this light: many aspects in its language, lexical choices, and rhetoric are telling. The new Christian reading of this letter allows us to recover one of the earliest Christian letters known and provides precious documentation of the birth of Christianity in Egypt, perhaps in Alexandria itself, from which the “Secret Gospel of Mark” also stems.

KEYWORDS: Alexandria, papyrus letters, Christogram/Staurogram, Clement, Secret Gospel of Mark, early Christianity, *epistolê kekhiasmênê*, Christian Communities in Egypt, *nomina sacra*.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Alejandría, papiro, cartas, Cristograma/Estaurograma, Clemente, Evangelio secreto de Marcos, Cristianismo primitivo, *epistolê kekhiasmênê*, comunidades cristianas en Egipto, *nomina sacra*.

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Una nueva lectura de una de las más antiguas cartas cristianas fuera del Nuevo Testamento y los peligros para las primitivas comunidades cristianas en Egipto

RESUMEN: La carta de Amonio a Apolonio, conservada en un papiro de Oxirrincos que se puede datar hacia finales del siglo I o inicios del siglo II d. C., presenta un trazo horizontal encima de la X del XAIPEIN inicial, que es la marca de un *nomen sacrum* que, junto con muchas otras claves de esta *epistolê kekhiasmênê*, apunta al carácter cristiano tanto del escritor como del destinatario. En este nuevo marco, muchos detalles de la carta se vuelven inteligibles y el documento entero, con un énfasis en la necesidad de un comportamiento circunspecto y en el uso de un código comunicativo críptico, da testimonio de la situación crítica de las comunidades cristianas de aquellos días, cuando el cristianismo era una *superstitio illicita* y los cristianos tenían que tratar de no ser denunciados. Propongo un análisis de la carta bajo esta luz: muchos aspectos de su lenguaje, de sus elecciones léxicas y de su retórica resultan reveladores. La nueva lectura cristiana de esta carta nos permite recuperar una de las más antiguas cartas cristianas conocidas y proporciona una documentación preciosa sobre el nacimiento del cristianismo en Egipto, quizá en la misma Alejandría, de la que proviene también el “Evangelio secreto de Marcos”.

A New Reading of one of the Earliest Christian Letters Outside the New Testament and the Dangers of Early Christian Communities in Egypt¹

Ilaria L. E. RAMELLI

To the memory of Orsolina Montevocchi
(† 1st February 2009 at 97)

The letter of Ammonius to Apollonius, preserved in an Oxyrhynchus papyrus,² was written by one single hand, in a clear and semi-literary fashion and, from the palaeographical point of view, is datable to the end of the first or the beginning of the second century A.D., and probably came from Alexandria.³ It contains a superlinear horizontal stroke, very clearly visible from the examination of the papyrus, over the X of the initial word of greetings, XAIPEIN, which is probably the sign of a *nomina sacrum*, that of Christ.⁴ At that time, such abbreviations for *nomina sacra* were just beginning to be used;⁵ this would

¹ This article is a revised and much expanded version of the paper I delivered at the FIEC Congress Berlin 24-29 August 2009, Recent Discoveries panel. I am very grateful to all friends and colleagues who commented on it before, during, and after the congress.

² A good survey of Christian letters in the Oxyrhynchus papyri is now offered by Luijendijk, *Greetings*.

³ Letter writing was part of everyday life in Hellenistic Egypt. See Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, pp. 127-128.

⁴ See the argument adduced in the diptych Ramelli, *Una delle più antiche lettere*, pp. 169-188, and Montevocchi, *THN ΕΠΙΣΤΟΛΗΝ ΚΕΧΙΑΣΜΕΝΗΝ*, pp. 189-192.

⁵ *Nomina sacra* in early Christianity are studied by Paap, *Nomina Sacra*; Roberts, *Nomina Sacra*, and Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, pp. 95-134. The abbreviation for Χριστός is usually a superlinear stroke over XC, XP, or XPC,

be one of the very first attestations. Indeed, a notable parallel for this same period may be a leather fragment which was recently discovered in a cave in Wadi Murabba‘at: it stems from the end of the first or the beginning of the second century —just like Ammonius’s letter— and seems to contain the first attestation of Christ’s monogram.⁶

This remarkable element, which also explains the reason for a cryptical reference to an ἐπιστολή κειχασμένη, together with many other clues, which I shall point out, suggests that the writer and the addressee were Christians. This letter was first published by P. J. Parsons in 1974 in P. Oxy. XLII 3057, then it was republished by Llewelyn and Kearsley in Volume 6 of the *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*,⁷ and I myself have offered an edition and translation, with commentary.⁸ This is the transcription (in which I preserve the original division of the lines) and my new English translation of the letter:

[recto:] AMMΩΝΙΟΣ ΑΠΟΛΛΩΝΙΩΙ ΤΩΙ
 ΑΔΕΛΦΩΙ ΧΑΙΡΕΙΝ
 ΕΚΟΜΙΣΑΜΗΝ ΤΗΝ ΚΕΧΙΑΣΜΕΝΗΝ ΕΠΙΣΤΟΛΗΝ
 ΚΑΙ ΤΗΝ ΙΜΑΤΟΦΟΡΙΔΑ ΚΑΙ ΤΟΥΣ ΦΑΙΝΟΛΑΣ ΚΑΙ ΤΑΣ
 ΣΥΝΡΙΓΓΑΣ [sic] ΟΥ ΚΑΛΑΣ ΤΟΥΣ ΔΕ ΦΑΙΝΟΛΑΣ ΟΥΧ ΩΣ
 ΠΑΛΛΙΟΥΣ ΕΛΑΒΟΝ ΑΛΛ ΕΙ ΤΙ ΜΕΙΖΟΝ ΕΣΤΙΝ ΚΑΙ-
 ΝΩΝ ΔΙΑ ΠΡΟΑΙΡΕΣΙΝ ΟΥ ΘΕΛΩ ΔΕ ΣΕ ΑΔΕΛΦΕ ΒΑ-

attested in papyri of the New Testament: P¹ (P. Oxy. 2), A.D. 250; P⁴ (Suppl. Gr. 1120), A.D. 67 to 175; P⁹ (P. Oxy. 402), A.D. 200-300; P¹⁵ (P. Oxy. 1008), A.D. 250-300; P¹⁶ (P. Oxy. 1009), of the same period; P¹⁸ (P. Oxy. 1079), of the same period; P³⁸ (P. Mich. Inv. 1571), A.D. 175 to 225; P⁴⁰ (P. Heidelberg G. 645), A.D. 200-300; P⁴⁵ (P. Chester Beatty I), A.D. 200; P⁴⁶ (P. Chester Beatty II + P. Mich. Inv. 6238); P⁴⁷ (P. Chester Beatty III), A.D. 250-300; P⁴⁹ (P. Yale 415 + 531), A.D. 250; P⁶⁵ (PSI XIV 1373), A.D. 250; P⁷² (P. Bodmer VII and VIII), A.D. 250-300; P⁷⁸ (P. Oxy 2684), of the same period; P⁹¹ (P. Mil. Vogl. Inv. 1224 + P. Macquarie Inv. 360), A.D. 250; P⁹² (P. Narmuthis 69.39a + 69.229a), A.D. 250-275; P¹⁰⁶ (P. Oxy. 4445), A.D. 200-250.

⁶ See Thiede, *Jesus*, p. 113.

⁷ *New Documents* by Llewelyn and Kearsley, pp. 169-177.

⁸ In the aforementioned study in *Aegyptus*.

ΡΥΝΕΙΝ ΜΕ ΤΑΙΣ ΣΥΝΕΧΕΣΕΣΣΙ ΦΙΛΑΝΘΡΩΠΙΑΙΣ
 ΟΥ ΔΥΝΑΜΕΝΟΝ ΑΜΕΙΨΑΣΘΑΙ ΑΥΤΟ ΔΕ ΜΟΝΟΝ
 ΗΜΕΙΣ ΠΡΟΑΙΡΕΣΙΝ ΦΙΛΙΚΗΣ ΔΙΑΘΕΣΕΩΣ ΝΟΜΙ-
 ΖΩΜΕΝ ΠΑΡΕΣΤΑΚΕΝΑΙ ΣΟΙ ΠΑΡΑΚΑΛΩ
 ΔΕ ΣΕ ΑΔΕΛΦΕ ΜΗΚΕΤΙ ΛΟΓΟΝ ΠΟΙΕΙΣΘΑΙ ΠΕ-
 ΡΙ ΤΗΣ ΚΛΕΙΔΟΣ ΤΗΣ ΜΟΝΟΧΩΡΟΥ ΟΥ ΓΑΡ ΘΕ-
 ΛΩ ΥΜΑΣ ΤΟΥΣ ΑΔΕΛΦΟΥΣ ΕΝΕΚΑ ΕΜΟΥ Η ΑΛ-
 ΛΟΥ ΔΙΑΦΟΡΑΝ ΤΙΝΑ ΕΧΕΙΝ ΟΜΟΝΟΙΑΝ ΓΑΡ ΚΑΙ
 ΦΙΛΑΛΛ...ΑΝ ΕΥΧΟΜΑΙ ΕΝ ΥΜΕΙΝ ΔΙΑΜΕΝΕΙΝ
 ΙΝ ΗΤΕ ΑΚΑΤΑΛΗΡΗΤΟΙ ΚΑΙ ΜΗ ΗΤΕ ΟΜΟΙΟΙ
 ΗΜΕΙΝ Η ΓΑΡ ΠΕΙΡΑ ΕΠΑΓΕΤΑΙ ΜΕ ΠΡΟΤΡΕΨΑΣ-
 ΘΑΙ ΥΜΑΣ ΕΙΡΗΝΕΥΕΙΝ ΚΑΙ ΜΗ ΔΙΔΟΝΑΙ ΑΦΟΡ-
 ΜΑΣ ΕΤΕΡΟΙΣ ΚΑΘ ΥΜΩΝ ΠΕΙΡΑΣΑΙ ΟΥΝ ΚΑΙ ΔΙ
 ΕΜΕ ΤΟΥΤΟ ΠΟΙΕΙΝ ΧΑΡΙΣΑΜΕΝΟΣ ΜΟΙ Ο ΜΕ-
 ΤΑΞΥ ΕΠΙΓΝΩΣΗ ΑΓΑΘΟΝ ΤΑ ΕΡΙΑ ΑΝ ΗΣ ΕΙΛΗ-
 ΦΩΣ ΠΑΡΑ ΣΑΛΒΙΟΥ ΠΛΗΡΗ ΚΑΙ Η ΣΟΙ ΑΡΕΣ-
 ΤΑ ΑΝΤΙΓΡΑΨΟΝ ΜΟΙ ΓΕΛΟΙΑ ΔΕ ΣΟΙ ΓΕΓΡΑΦΑ
 ΔΙΑ ΤΗΣ ΠΡΟΤΕΡΑΣ ΕΠΙΣΤΟΛΗΣ Α ΠΑΡΑΔΕΞΗ
 Η ΓΑΡ ΨΥΧΗ ΑΝΕΙΜΕΝΗ ΓΕΙΝΕΤΑΙ ΟΤΑΝ ΤΟ
 ΣΟΝ ΟΝΟΜΑ ΠΑΡΗ ΚΑΙ ΤΑΥΤΑ ΟΥΧ ΕΘΟΣ ΕΧΟΥ-
 ΣΗΣ ΗΡΕΜΕΙΝ ΔΙΑ ΤΑ ΕΠΕΡΧΟΜΕΝΑ ΑΛΛ ΥΠΟ-
 ΦΕΡΕΙ ΛΕΩΝΑΣ ΑΣΠΑΖΟΜΑΙ ΣΕ ΔΕΣΠΟΤΑ ΚΑΙ ΤΟΥΣ
 ΣΟΥΣ ΠΑΝΤΑΣ ΕΡΡΩΣ Ο ΤΙΜΙΩΤΑΤΕ
[verso:] ΑΠΟΛΛΩΝΙΩΙ ΑΠΟΛΛΩ ΕΠΙΣΚΕ? ΑΔΕΛ?

[recto:] Ammonius to his brother Apollonius: greetings! [χαίρειν]

I received the letter marked with the X sign [τὴν κεχιασμένην ἐπιστολήν],⁹ the mantel carrier, the travel mantels, and the inexpensive pipes. And, as for the travel mantels, I did not receive them as old, but, if possible, better than the new ones, thanks to (your) intention [προαίρεσις]. But I do not want, brother, that you oppress me with your continual acts of kindness [φιλανθρωπίαι], because I cannot return them; we should think that we have of-

⁹ The translation of *κεχιασμένην* (*ἐπιστολήν*) is hotly debated in that this expression is a *unicum*; both Parsons and Llewelyn prudentially translate “crossed”, in a rather generic way, just like James Harrison (*Paul’s Language*, pp. 82-83). See below, where I fully explain the reason why I translate “marked with X”, meaning with the Greek letter X.

ferred you only this: the intention [προαίρεσις] to demonstrate our affection [διάθεσις φιλική].

On the other hand, I exhort you, brother, not to concern yourself any more about the key of the one-room apartment: for I do not want that you, brothers, make any difference between me and another person.¹⁰

Indeed, I pray that concord and reciprocal love [ὁμόνοια, φιλαλληλία] remain among you, that you may not be an object of malevolent voices, and may both be like us [*sc.* that what has happened to us may not happen to you as well]. For my experience induces me to urge you to remain in peace without giving others any chance against you. Thus, please, endeavour to do this also for my sake, doing something for which I would be grateful [χαρισάμενος] in that which you certainly recognize as good [ἀγαθόν].

If you receive all the wool from Salvius, and it pleases you, write this to me in your reply; indeed, in my former letter I wrote you funny things, which you will admit.¹¹ For my soul becomes serene whenever your name is present, and this although it is not accustomed to be tranquil, because of what is happening [διὰ τὰ ἐπερχόμενα], but it endures [ὑποφέρει].

I, Leonas,¹² greet you, o master, and all of your household / community. Be well, o most honourable [τιμιώτατε].

[*verso*:] To Apollonius, son of Apollo, inspector (?) [ἐπισκε-] brother.

Many problems arise with the translation and, even more, with the interpretation of this letter. Parsons,¹³ after offering a

¹⁰ Or else: “I do not want you, my brothers, to be in disagreement because of me or anyone else”. The Greek οὐ γὰρ θέλω ὑμᾶς τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς ἔνεκα ἐμοῦ ἢ ἄλλου διαφορᾶν τινα ἔχειν allows for both translations.

¹¹ Or “you will receive”, a medial future from παραδέχομαι.

¹² My translation follows the punctuation suggested by Bülow Jacobsen (cf. BL VIII 265 with a reference to P. Oxy. XLIX 3505, note to the lines 24-25), which also implies that Leonas is the scribe and a slave. Parsons and Llewlyn, on the other side, both read ἐπερχόμενα· ἀλλ’ ὑποφέρει Λεωνᾶς· ἀσπάζομαί σε, “... because of what is happening. But Leonas endures with perseverance. I greet you, o lord, you and all of your household”.

¹³ Parsons, “The Earliest Christian Letter?”, p. 289.

few parallels in thought between this and two later Christian letters,¹⁴ observes that “The date of POxy 3057 rests entirely on the hand-writing. Either this paleographical date is too early ... or this letter is the earliest Christian document surviving in Egypt”. The paleographical date is clear, and the possible Christian character of the letter is no reason to suppose that this date must be too early. Moreover, the presence of ascript *iota* in this letter, in the names that appear in the initial greetings and in the final ones (whereas *iota* is entirely omitted in verbal forms) confirms the early dating proposed by Parsons himself.

So, why was Parsons so full of doubts concerning the date that he himself had established on firm paleographical ground? Because he sensed — albeit offering very scarce proofs — that this letter might be Christian, and supposed that this automatically must imply a late dating.

In addition to Parsons, other scholars studied this letter, immediately after its first publication, among whom the late Orsolina Montevocchi in a very brief note in 1975 (*Aegyptus* 55, p. 302), in which she analyzed some formal details therein, such as the passage from the appellative “brother” to “lord”, according to an alternative reading and rendering which I have discussed in a note to my translation. In 1984 Stanton studied the theme of fraternity and reciprocal love in this letter,¹⁵ and rightly warned that the presence of this theme *per se* is not enough to establish that this letter is Christian. And Judge’s remarks are on the same line.¹⁶ Hemer¹⁷ stated that there are no explicit signs of Christianity, and Llewellyn¹⁸ prudently thinks that “the letter gives no indication that

¹⁴ One was addressed by Constantine to Chrestus, bishop of Syracuse, and another by the same to Elaphius, vicar of Africa, both stemming from A.D. 313-314.

¹⁵ Stanton, *The Proposed Earliest Christian Letter*, pp. 49-63.

¹⁶ Judge, *Rank and Status*, pp. 20-23.

¹⁷ Hemer, *Ammonius to Apollonius*, pp. 84-91.

¹⁸ *New Documents ... VI*, p. 177.

the correspondents were Christians, but equally no evidence stands in the way of its being so accepted”.

None of these scholars considered the presence of the superlinear stroke over the X of the initial XAIPE, which may be a particular, cryptical mark of a *nomen sacrum*, and the pun with the expression ἐπιστολή κεχιασμένη, which strongly reinforces the probability that this letter is Christian, one of the earliest Christian letters outside the New Testament.¹⁹ Indeed, this letter does not seem to have been studied again at depth, until the double contribution by Montevecchi and myself in 2000,²⁰ and of myself in 2001,²¹ which adduced important evidence in order to ascribe this letter to a Christian author (and a Christian recipient). Our proposal also allows for a satisfactory interpretation — so far missing — of the reference to an ἐπιστολή κεχιασμένη, formerly sent to Ammonius, probably by Apollonius. This syntagm is a *unicum* and has presented scholars with remarkable difficulties. The perfect participle derives from χιάζω, which means “I mark with a X form”, that is, with a crossed sign; this is attested for example in Diodore II 58. In the medical field, the verb was used to indicate the act of making an incision which had the form of a X (Oribasius 44, 20, 31). The verb also had a philological meaning, as is attested for example by scholia to Sophocles and Euripides; the meaning was “I mark with a X sign” in order to call attention to a specific passage or to mark a spurious verse. Of course, neither the medical nor the philological meaning are probable in the case of the letter between friends to which Ammonius refers.²²

¹⁹ Klauck, *Ancient Letters*, provides a precious survey on ancient letter writing and especially the early Christian epistolary literature in its ancient literary and socio-cultural context.

²⁰ Ramelli, *Una delle più antiche lettere cristiane*, and Montevecchi, *Tèn Epistolèn Kekhiasménen*.

²¹ *Nota per le fonti*, pp. 59-67.

²² If one considers literary attestations, both the perfect participle κεχιασμένη (-ος, -ον) and the noun χιασμός or χιάσμα are almost exclusively attested in pagan

Papyri usually mention, for instance, an ὄνη κεχιασμένη, a contract cancelled by means of a series of signs in the form of a X, or else with one big X, in order to indicate that it was annulled or fulfilled. Known attestations of this expression in papyri are at least seven, six of which dating to the late first century A.D. and one to the second, thus all very close to our letter from the chronological point of view. These are:

- 1) P. Oxy. II 266, 15, from A.D. 96, contemporary with our letter: this is a dowry contract that was cancelled;
- 2) P. Oxy. X 1282, 35, from A.D. 85 d.C., again contemporary with our letter; here, too, the expression refers to the cancellation of an act;
- 3) PSI XII 1235, 21, also from the first century A.D., where the question is of a chirographic document concerning a bank receipt which involved a general and a library functionary; this was annulled in that the payment had taken place;
- 4) PTurner 1, 17, from Oxyrhynchus, from A.D. 69, and also roughly contemporary with our letter; this is a cancelled contract;
- 5) PYale I 63, 11, from Oxyrhynchus, from A.D. 64, likewise roughly contemporary with Ammonius' letter; it deals with a cancelled chirographic document;
- 6) SB VIII 9765, 16, from Oxyrhynchus, from A.D. 81 or shortly later, and therefore contemporary with Ammonius' letter; this too is an invalidated contract;
- 7) SB XVIII 13122, 7, of uncertain provenance, dating to the second century A.D.

The eighth occurrence of κεχιασμένη is in Ammonius' letter, but in reference to another, previous private letter between

authors. The only Christian who uses χίασμα in the first centuries A.D. is Justin *Apol.* 60, 5, according to whom Plato mistook for a simple χίασμα one of the pre-figurations of the cross of Christ. As for the participle, it is only attested in pagan authors, in technical senses, e.g. in Nicomachus, *Theologoumena arithmeticae*, p. 24, 7 in a geometrical-astrological context (= Iamblichus, *Theologoumena arithmeticae*, p. 24, 7); *Hippiatrica Berolinensia*, 26, 4 and 117, 1, in a medical sense; likewise Ps. Galen, *De fasciis*, vol. 18a, p. 803, 9 Kuhn.

friends, probably a reply to a previous letter by Ammonius himself (which Ammonius mentions here as well as προτέρα ἐπιστολή), and not to a contract or any act.

Apart from Ammonius' letter, there is no other known occurrence of the expression ἐπιστολή κεχιασμένη. Parsons²³ observed that in our letter this participle may indicate the cancellation of a contract, in which case the X signs could be many, and reciprocally joined so as to create a reticulum; it may also indicate that the writer wished to fill in a blank line in order to prevent non-authorized additions (e.g. in P.Mich. inv. 239). However, Parsons himself recognized that in the case of a private letter between friends who esteemed and loved each other —and moreover were extremely generous with each other, I would add— this possibility is very remote and is probably to be ruled out.

Sometimes, a X sign was traced on the back of the letter, after rolling it up, with its writing inside; the X indicated the spot of the seal. But this reference also is to be excluded in our case, since, as Parsons rightly objected, “the usage should be too common for comment”.²⁴ Only later did he change his mind and, to compensate the lack of more plausible explanations, put forward the following hypothesis, based on the aforementioned meaning of the verb: “Ammonios may have wished to inform Apollonios that his letter was received in its sealed state. In other words, he wished to assure him that the letter had not been opened and read by someone else”.²⁵ Letters frequently transmitted secret information, intended for a restricted audience, as is stressed by Patricia A. Rosenmeyer.²⁶

I find that it is much more resolute to take the participle κεχιασμένη as a reference to Christ and his Cross. Par-

²³ *POxy XLII*, pp. 144-146.

²⁴ Parsons, *POxy XLII*, p. 145.

²⁵ Parsons, *New Documents*, p. 173.

²⁶ *Ancient Epistolary Fiction*, p. 27.

sons, when he first published this letter, indeed suggested that *κεχιασμένη* might include a possible reference to the Christian cross, but this intuition, which was not supported by the realization that there is a *nomen sacrum* in this letter, was subsequently put aside by him.²⁷ But it should have been developed. What is crucial is that the initial *X* of the opening greeting formula *ΧΑΙPEIN* has a superlinear stroke over it, according to the use of *nomina sacra*, which began precisely at that time. Hence, it indicates Christ. There are very few cases of letters on papyri in which the formula *ΧΑΙPEIN* is abbreviated as a *X* with a superlinear stroke, or better with a decoration on the right upper side of *X*, such as P.Mich. inv. 238, of the second century A.D. (Τακουις Σαυινωι τωι αδελφωι χ), and P.Tebt. 0568, of the second-third century A.D. (τω αδελφω χ), but in these cases the abbreviation is not a *nomen sacrum*, but simply indicates that *X* must be read as *ΧΑΙPEIN*.²⁸ The case of Ammonius' letter is very different: here *ΧΑΙPEIN* is not abbreviated, which means that the very clear superlinear stroke over *X* must be the abbreviation of something else that is not written in extenso. The “letter marked with the *X* sign” that Ammonius received, probably from Apollonius, and which is probably identifiable with the reply to the *προτέρα ἐπιστολή* in which Ammonius had written “funny things” to Apollonius, was therefore —like that which he is sending to Apollonius— a letter that was cryptically marked as Christian. Cryptically and symbolically. It is likely that in their correspondence Ammonius, Apollonius, and their “brothers” used this sacred sign, which was not easily recognizable by others, who could only see a tiny stroke, but was very significant to them.

²⁷ Parsons, *POxy XLII*, pp. 144-146; Id., *The Earliest Christian Letter*, p. 289; Llewelyn does not express any opinion on this point: *New Documents ... VI*, p. 172.

²⁸ In P.Tebt. 0470 (A.D. 112) what might appear as a superlinear stroke on *ΧΑΙREIN* is not such, but a sign in the papyrus, which is badly preserved and is destroyed exactly on the left of *ΧΑΙREIN*.

In this new framework, many details of the letter become intelligible and the whole document, with an emphasis on the necessity of a cautious and circumspect behaviour and the use of a cryptic communication code, attests to the critical situation of the Christian communities in those days, when Christianity was a *superstitio illicita* and Christians had to try not to be denounced. Thus, I propose an analysis of the letter in this light: many aspects in its language, lexical choices, and rhetoric are telling. The new Christian reading of this letter allows us to recover one of the earliest Christian letters known and provides precious documentation of the birth of Christianity in Egypt, perhaps even in Alexandria itself, where Christianity in fact entered very early.

First of all, it is evident that Ammonius constantly addresses Apollonius with the appellative “brother”.²⁹ Ἀδελφός is used thrice, and once in the initial greeting formula, and ἀδελφοί is employed once to indicate the community to which the addressee, Apollonius, belongs. This linguistic use, to be sure, is not exclusive of Christians, but is attested since the very beginning of Christianity, already in the New Testament, especially in the Acts of the Apostles and in the Letters of Paul and of James, then in Clement of Rome, in Polycarp’s letter to the Philippians, in Barnaba’s Letter and in the epistles of Ignatius. Sometimes, this can constitute a criterion to establish whether a Christian was addressing other Christians.³⁰ This form of address transcending bodily kinship, however, is also found in both pagan and Jewish texts (see e.g. *AI XIII 45*), is typical of associations of the Greek East,³¹ and it is rather widespread precisely in the papyri, already in the Ptolemaic

²⁹ Indeed, it was immediately noticed by Parsons in his edition, London, 1974, 144-146, who put this in relationship with Christianity.

³⁰ See my *Alcune osservazioni sulle origini del Cristianesimo in Sicilia*, “Rivista di Storia della Chiesa in Italia”, 53 (1999), 1-15.

³¹ PHarland, *Familial Dimensions*, pp. 491-513.

age: usually this term designated a colleague, or else kins belonging to the same generation.³² Llewelyn pointed out a parallel which, however, is not close from the chronological point of view:³³ ἀγαπητὸς ἀδελφός is found in documents belonging to the so-called archive of Theophanes (*P. Herm. Rees* 4 and 5), a member of a pagan circle, who adored Hermes Trismegistus.³⁴ But it is possible to go back a long time: in the fourth century B.C., a decree from Entella³⁵ established an “adoption into brotherhood” (ἀδελφοθετία)³⁶ which seems to be a *unicum* in the Greek world,³⁷ since it was only in the Roman world that the *adoptio in fratrem* was widespread.³⁸

The presence of the ἀδελφός language is no evidence of Christianity per se, but it certainly becomes meaningful in connection with many other clues. The insistence on concord and reciprocal love that must obtain in Apollonius’ community, likewise, is certainly no evidence of Christianity per se, but it is very interesting. In addition to φιλαλληλία, Ammonius recommends that in Apollonius’ community ὁμόνοια be always preserved. Of course, the fact that also in New-Testament letters a similar concern about the concord within the Christian community appears is not enough, per se, to make scholars conclude that Ammonius and Apollonius were Christians. But what is most interesting is the motivation that Ammonius adduces: Ammonius and his community should behave in this

³² Cf. Stanton, *The Proposed*, pp. 49-63; Judge, *Rank and Status*, pp. 20-23. Likewise Tibiletti, *Le lettere private*, pp. 31-32.

³³ Llewelyn, *New Documents*, pp. 175.

³⁴ For Hermeticism in Egypt see Ramelli, *Corpus Hermeticum*, Integrative Essay.

³⁵ Amiotti, *Un singolare istituto*, pp. 119-126.

³⁶ See Nenci, *Sei decreti inediti*, 1271-1275; Id., *Considerazioni*, pp. 1069 ff.; Id., *Nuove considerazioni*, pp. 997-1001.

³⁷ Cf. Asheri, *Osservazioni*, p. 707.

³⁸ Cf. Amiotti, *Un singolare istituto*, p. 123. See Tac., *Ann.*, XI 25: “primi Aedui senatorum in urbe ius adepti sunt. Datum id foederi antiquo, et quia soli Gallorum *fraternitatis* nomen cum populo Romano usurpant”.

way in order to avoid malevolent voices and the consequences that these have already had on Ammonius's community.

Around Apollonius's community, as results from this letter, there was a hostile climate, just like around that of Ammonius, and internal division within these communities would have called attention and attracted external hostility. Such was the situation of two Christian communities whose faith was officially considered to be a *superstitio illicita* — such as it had been probably since a *senatus consultum* under Tiberius.³⁹ Moreover, Christians were accused of *flagitia*, as is attested by Tacitus (*Ann.*, XV, 44) for the time of Nero and for the second century by apologists such as Justin and Tertullian, and by pagan authors such as Apuleius.⁴⁰ After that of Nero, toward the end of the first century there was that of Domitian; then there was peace for the Christians under Nerva, and immediately after this Trajan's rescript established that Christians *conquirendi non sunt*, but, if denounced by anyone, they had to be put to trial, and, if *perseverantes*, they had to be condemned to death. A more favourable interpretation of this rescript — whose ambiguity was denounced by Tertullian, who spoke of it as a *sententia necessitate confusa* — was offered by Hadrian.⁴¹ Now, those who denounced Christians, putting them at the risk of death, mostly were private citizens, enflamed by hostility: hence it is clear why Christian communities had to endeavour to attract no notice. It was vital for them not to offer anyone a chance of suspicion, hostility, and malevolence. This is why Ammonius is so worried and places such an emphasis on his recommendations, all the more so in that his community has already experienced external hostility: “Indeed, I pray that concord and reciprocal love remain among you, that you may not be an object of malevolent voic-

³⁹ See my *Il senatoconsulto del 35*, pp. 59-67.

⁴⁰ See my *Elementi comuni*, pp. 245-274; Ead., *Cristiani e vita politica*, pp. 35-51; *Apuleius and Christianity*.

⁴¹ See my *Nuove osservazioni per lo studio del rescritto di Adriano*, pp. 137-148.

es, and that what has happened to us may not happen to you as well. For my experience induces me to urge you to remain in peace without giving others any chance against you". Ammonius returns again to this dangerous situation of hostility at the end of his letter: "For my soul becomes serene whenever your name is present, and this although it is not accustomed to be tranquil, because of what is happening, but it endures". He is clearly referring here to a dangerous situation in which his community and that of Apollonius are involved, which is very well explained by the risks that Christian communities were running in the age of Domitian or of Trajan. Christians were continually at risk from denunciations. The same context of internal dissension and persecutory attacks from outside is found in a contemporary document, the letter of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians, who also employs the same couple of terms, εἰρήνη and ὁμόνοια, which is used by Ammonius. The situation depicted is much the same.

The use of προαίρεσις, which occurs twice in Ammonius's letter, is also interesting. This term is attested not only in literary texts, but also in inscriptions and papyri,⁴² one already in the first half of the second century A.D.,⁴³ and is also typical of the philosophical terminology, especially Stoic, between the end of the first and the beginning of the second century A.D., the period in which Ammonius wrote his letter and Epictetus lived. In Epictetus's works (*Diss.* I 30, 3-4; II 23, 5-19; III 1, 40; IV 5, 32) this term indicates the fundamental choice and intention that characterizes the whole ethical life of a person.⁴⁴ In Ammonius's letter it denotes the intention

⁴² Of course, this term is also widely attested in literary sources, for instance in the rhetorical, historical, and medical fields. See Llewelyn, *New Documents*, p. 174, n. 189.

⁴³ P. Giss. 68, 10. For this papyrus and the presence of προαίρεσις in papyrus letters see Tibiletti, *Le lettere private*, pp. 37, 42-43, 83, 104, 110.

⁴⁴ Pohlenz, *Die Stoa*, I, pp. 332 ff.; Reale, *Storia*, IV, pp. 115 f.; Id., *Storia della filosofia greca e romana*, VI, pp. 344-352; cf. Giannantoni, *La ricerca filosofica*, I, p. 275. See also SVF, III 173; Sorabji, *Emotion*, pp. 301 ff. and *passim*.

that makes a gift or a thought welcome and appreciated, in that it indicates a friendly attitude and generosity. The connection between προαίρεσις and φιλία is especially clear in the syntagm προαίρεσις φιλικῆς διαθέσεως.

It is notable that Hellenistic moral philosophy, particularly Stoic, and its lexicon are especially typical of the so-called Pastoral Epistles in the New Testament,⁴⁵ which are contem-

⁴⁵ Usually they are thought to stem from A.D. 120s-140s. They seem to have been absent from the earliest copy of Paul's collected letters, P⁴⁶, and from Marcion's canon in 130s-140s. They are first quoted by Irenaeus about A.D. 180. Fiore, *The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 13 suggests a dating around A.D. 80-90 and a setting involving Ephesus and Crete; Bassler, *I Timothy*, pp. 20 and 24-25, and Quinn, *The Letter to Titus*, p. 20 propose a date around A.D. 100 and Ephesus as the most probable place of composition; MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle*, p. 54 also advocates Asia Minor and a still later date, A.D. 100-140, and Koester, *Introduction*, p. 305 indicates A.D. 120-160 as the most probable chronological range. The following scholars also consider the Pastoral Epistles to be pseudoepigraphical: Collins, *Letters that Paul Did Not Write*; Quinn, *The Epistle to Titus*; Van Neste, *Cohesion and Structure*; Meeks and Fitzgerald, *The Writings of St. Paul*, pp. 303-318. Their vocabulary and style is different from those of Paul's authentic letters; most of the exhortations they include reflect Hellenistic mentality and philosophical commonplaces. Their background in respect to heresy, Church order and organization, and authority, seems to reflect an early-second-century situation rather than the time of Paul. They contrast Paul's asceticism and appreciation of women also as Church leaders. According to Fiore, *The Pastoral Epistles*, pp. 71-79, an adaptation to the cultural context is precisely found in the prohibition against women teaching in 1 Tim 2:12 and in the restrictions imposed on widows, aimed at excluding women from public ministries under the influence of cultural prejudices, opposite to Paul's praxis. Such prohibitions confirm that in Pauline communities women were leaders, involved in teaching, with positions of responsibility. The Pastorals, on the contrary, 'domesticate' Paul's views along the lines of a traditional Hellenistic household: so also Krause, *I Timothy*. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, p. 233 finds that the injunctions of the Pastorals are further developments of the argument in 1 Cor 14:34-36; the Pastorals identify patriarchalism with the structures of the Christian community (p. 266); they were concerned with showing that Christians did not disrupt the Greco-Roman order of the patriarchal house and state. Richards, *Difference*, shares the *communis opinio* that the Pastorals are pseudepigraphical, but he does not think that they are due to a single author; Collins, *I & II Timothy and Titus* also endorses the thesis of pseudepigraphy: he presents it as the scholarly consensus and claims that the "Pastor," their author, manifests a concern to proclaim the Gospel message in the language of late first-century Hellenism. According to Stepp, *Leadership Succession*, in the Pastorals the core issue is the succession in

porary with Ammonius's letter, and which respond to the same concerns that are expressed by Ammonius. Christians felt the need to adhere to the moral conventions of the Greco-Roman world in order to avoid being judged badly and arousing suspicions and accusations; this is also why, notably, women are confined again to marriage, care for children and the house, and submission, whereas in Pauline communities they were respected leaders and apostles. This, of course, risked to enhance pagan hostility in a very dangerous period, and thus Christians such as the author(s) of the Pastorals preferred to sacrifice women and to contravene Jesus's and Paul's indications and praxis in order to be accepted by pagans, adhering to their moral standards. This sacrifice, however, was pretty much useless, as it did not prevent persecutions.

Ammonius's *διάθεσις φιλική* toward Apollonius is also interesting, in that it belongs to the *φιλία* terminology, which is a feature of this letter. Moreover, it offers a precise syntactical and lexical parallel with a Christian papyrus dating to the sixth century (P. Cairo Maspero III 6731), which mentions a

the leadership of Pauline churches. Ageson, *Paul, the Pastoral Epistles, and the Early Church*, Peabody: Hendrickson, 2008, p. 87 considers the Pastorals to be pseudo-Pauline and compares them with Paul's Phil, Gal, and 1Cor; his conclusion (p. 154) is that the Pastorals stand closer to the Church of the Apostolic Fathers than to Paul's. Indeed, von Campenhausen, "Polykarp von Smyrna", pp. 10-252 proposed Polycarp as the author of the Pastorals; Merz, *Die fiktive Selbstausslegung*, esp. section 2, after analyzing echoes of the Pastorals in Polycarp, concluded that Polycarp was using these letters in the conviction of being using Paul; she also contended that Ignatius employed them as a model, thus placing their composition around A.D. 100 or shortly after; she agrees with most scholars on their double pseudonymity, of both the author and the recipients, and sees them as an interpretation of Paul. Marshall, "I Left You in Crete", pp. 781-803, refers to the author of the Pastorals as "Pseudo-Paul"; they were written as a unity and none of them ever had an independent existence: the original audience was a congregation in Asia Minor. Marshall thinks that both the author ("Paul") and the recipients ("Timothy", "Titus") are pseudonymous, like Bassler, *1 Timothy*, pp. 20 and 24, Fiore, *The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 21 and *passim*, and like Klauck, *Ancient Letters*, p. 324, according to whom the Pastorals are "doubly pseudonymous," meaning that both the sender and the recipient are fictitious. Wilson, *Luke and the Pastoral Epistles*, suggested that their author is the author of Luke-Acts.

φιλικήν καὶ εἰρηνικὴν διάθεσιν.⁴⁶ This expression does not appear in other occurrences of the noun διάθεσις in papyri.⁴⁷

As to the other term, εἰρήνη, in our letter, too, the exhortation to maintain peace is well present, along with that to feel reciprocal love, which is complementary. A compound with φιλ- occurs again twice to indicate the reciprocal relationships that unite Ammonius and Apollonius and also involve their community. At first, Apollonius is paradoxically reproached by Ammonius because he “oppresses” him with his continual demonstrations of kindness and generosity. To oppress through kindness is obviously an oxymoron, which also reveals Ammonius’ rhetorical culture. These acts of kindness and generosity are indicated by Ammonius with the term φιλανθρωπία: “I do not want, o brother, you to oppress me with your continual acts of kindness, which I am unable to return”. This sentence, which further excludes that the ἐπιστολὴ κεχιασμένη may have been a contract, shows that Ammonius could not return Apollonius’s acts of generosity, and this is what worries Ammonius, who clearly deemed reciprocity necessary in a mutual relationship of φιλανθρωπία.

But the most important term of the rich⁴⁸ φιλία lexicon⁴⁹ used by Ammonius is φιλαλληλία, which indicates reciprocal affection and love. In this case, however, the relationship does not involve only Ammonius and Apollonius, but the whole community of the addressee: “I pray that concord and re-

⁴⁶ I found this occurrence with a combined research of διάθεσις and φιλική in the papyri and the inscriptions of the *CD-Rom PHI 7*, and this seems to be the only occurrence.

⁴⁷ Cf. Tibiletti, *Le lettere private*, pp. 41-42, 91.

⁴⁸ In private papyrus letters of the first four centuries A.D., especially Christian, terminology related to the φιλ- root is rich: see Tibiletti, *Le lettere private*, pp. 28-29, 32, 43-44, 93, 98, 127, 178 and *passim*.

⁴⁹ Of course this, per se, does not at all prove that the letter was Christian, as was rightly noted by Llewelyn, *New Documents ... VI*, p. 175, and Judge, *Rank and Status*, pp. 20-23. In particular concerning φιλαλληλία, see Stanton, *The Proposed*, pp. 49-63.

reciprocal love remain among you". A perfect parallel, already indicated by Parsons,⁵⁰ is found in a Christian text, Nilus Ancyranus, *PG* 79, 144a: τὴν ὁμόνοιαν⁵¹ καὶ τὴν φιλαλληλίαν. Stanton⁵² also devoted attention to the term φιλαλληλία, and I myself have searched both the literary Greek corpus and the corpus of inscriptions and papyri. From this investigation it emerged that φιλαλληλία is a *unicum* in the papyri, at least as far as we know at present. Precisely its relative rarity can also explain a possible mistake in our text, φιλαλληλία, to be corrected into φιλαλλη<λ>ία. It seems to me remarkable that this noun, which is unattested elsewhere in papyri, in literary texts⁵³ is attested only in Christian authors and in Hesychius. Furthermore, it is notable that in Nilus of Ancyra not only does this term appear, but the whole expression ὁμόνοια καὶ φιλαλληλία exactly corresponds to that of Ammonius's letter.

Notwithstanding the doubts manifested by Parsons,⁵⁴ it seems to me that there is indeed no valid reason to maintain that, if the palaeographic dating is between the first and the beginning of the second century, this dating must be erroneous, and in particular too early, if the letter is Christian. On the contrary, the parallels which I have highlighted with Clement of Rome and with some New-Testament letters and the probable historical context which I have advocated, between the time of Domitian and Trajan, seem to confirm the early paleographical dating and, at the same time, the fact that Ammonius and Apollonius were Christian. The latter conclusion is further corroborated by the use of a *nomen sacrum* to indi-

⁵⁰ Parsons, *POxy XLII*, pp. 144-146.

⁵¹ As for the corresponding verb, ὁμονοεῖν, the most ancient attestation seems to be found in P. Oxy. XLII 3065, 21-22 (III cent.), with ὁμονοοῦντα. Cf. Tibiletti, *Le lettere private*, p. 63, n. 7; p. 148, n. 22.

⁵² Stanton, *The Proposed*, pp. 49-63.

⁵³ For technical uses of this word, in the mathematical and philosophical fields, see Stanton, *The Proposed...*, p. 61; Llewelyn, *New Documents*, p. 174.

⁵⁴ *The Earliest Christian Letter*, p. 289, cf. *supra*.

cate Christ and by the reference to this symbolism contained in the Sibylline expression ἐπιστολή κεχιασμένη. Indeed, this is probably one of the most ancient Christian epistolary documents outside the New Testament, perhaps the most ancient known together with Clement of Rome's letter to the Corinthians. It is a letter marked with Christ's *nomen sacrum*, and inserted in a correspondence between two men belonging to two communities, which seem to be Christian communities. The situation that emerges from the letter is characterized by internal division and external hostility, suspicions, and malevolence; Ammonius and Apollonius feel in danger. Ammonius even attests that serious consequences have already occurred in his community, and he hopes that at least the community of Apollonius will be spared. This is why he warmly recommends them internal unity and concord, in order to offer no occasion to their enemies. This was the situation of Christian communities between the end of the first and the beginning of the second century, in that Christianity was a *superstitio illicita* and its members could be denounced by anyone who happened to be hostile to them, especially because accusations of *flagitia* were widespread against them. This was the context of the persecution of Domitian and of Trajan's legislation regarding the Christians; even though Trajan did not allow anyone to seek Christians out, nevertheless, if they were denounced by anyone, they were put to trial, and, unless they apostatised, underwent capital punishment.

This explains very well the Christians' need to use cryptic formulas, which could be confused by non-Christians with others frequently used in the pagan world (for instance, *collegia* sometimes hid churches).⁵⁵ One of these ambiguous formulas was the X equipped with a superlinear stroke; a pagan would not have found it suspect, as it was simply the initial

⁵⁵ Cf. e. g., with bibliographical references, Ramelli, *Cristiani e vita politica*, and now Osiek-MacDonald, *A woman's place*.

of *χαίρειν*. But a Christian could read in it the abbreviation of the name of Christ, and would refer the expression *ἐπιστολή κεχιασμένη* precisely to this cryptic sign, whereas this expression was altogether neutral for a pagan, who could think of a cancelled contract, a sealed letter, and so forth.

It was precisely in Egypt, and in the first decades of the second century —therefore, in the same place and time as Ammonius’s letter was composed— that Papyrus Rylands 457 was written. It is kept at the J. Rylands Library in Manchester and contains passages from the Gospel of John (18, 31-33 and 37-38). After being published in 1935 it allowed scholars to fix the composition of the Gospel itself to some decades before A.D. 125 ca.⁵⁶ In the time of Ammonius’s letter, in Egypt, the Gospel of John was read and copied in Christian communities, among which there probably were those of Ammonius and Apollonius.

Probably they were in Alexandria, which was the main Christian center, where Christianity entered already in the first century. Their location there is suggested both by their culture and by their extreme caution. Of course danger was maximum in such a large center, in which moreover disorders and hostilities were frequent and the Jewish community was very big. They, or at least Ammonius, also travelled, as is indicated by the references to travel mantels, the key of the very little apartment, etc. It is in these same decades that the so-called Secret Gospel of Mark took shape. When Clement of Alexandria refers to it in the second half of the second century, he presents it as established in Alexandria for many decades. Clement recounts that this Gospel was written by Mark in Alexandria after writing the Gospel that is known to us as the Gospel of Mark.⁵⁷ Mark, after publishing his first book, “com-

⁵⁶ Cf. Passoni, pp. 67-68; Méléze Mondrzejewski, *Les Juifs d’Egypte*, p. 186.

⁵⁷ Clement did not accept other Gospels outside the four (only the Apocalypse of Peter [Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* vi. 14.1] and the Khrygma Petrou [*Strom.* ii. 15.68; vi. 5.39 ff.]), but when he cites Mark 10: 17-31 in *Quis dives salvetur* he proves

posed a more spiritual Gospel”, the so-called Secret Gospel of Mark, which needed to be read and interpreted. Indeed, the Gospel of Mark seems to have known different redactions.⁵⁸

According to Eusebius, Mark was the first apostle of Egypt and founder of Christian communities in Alexandria itself: “They say that this man [Mark] was the first to be sent to Egypt to preach the gospel, which he had also written down, and that he was the first to establish churches in Alexandria itself” (*Hist. Eccl.* II 16, 1). Then Eusebius observes that the success of Mark’s preaching around Alexandria may be inferred from the excellence of the Therapeutae described by Philo (*De vita contemplativa* 2 ff.), whom he mistakes for a Christian community. Eusebius also reports that in Nero’s eighth year (A.D. 61/62) Annianus succeeded Mark in the ministry of the Alexandrian church (*Hist. Eccl.* II 24). The Acts of the Apostles associate with the earliest spread of Christianity in Alexandria Apollo, who then became a friend of Paul. According to the Western text of Acts 18:25, he first received a Christian instruction in Alexandria, where he lived. Then, Prisca and Aquila gave him a more precise instruction. Already at mid first century A.D. Christianity was preached and taught in Alexandria. This is also the background of Ammonius’s letter, which was written some decades later.

Moreover, this Gospel of Mark, too, had a characterization of secrecy. According to Clement, it was reserved only to initiates because it could easily lead to misunderstandings,⁵⁹

to have a text of Mark very different from ours, contaminated by the Matthaean and Lucan parallels, but he might have cited by heart. On Clement’s quotations from the Gospels see Cosaert, *The Text*, from whose analysis it emerges that in Alexandria in the second half of the second century the text of the Gospels was still in transition.

⁵⁸ See the preceding note and Mitchell, “Patristic Counter-Evidence”, p. 76, who accepts the authenticity of the “Secret Mark”; she also shows that the text of Mark knew a very different redaction – and with archaic forms of *nomina sacra*.

⁵⁹ After Mark, who came to Alexandria after being in Rome with Peter, Eusebius records some bishops of the decades between the end of the first and the be-

as in the case of the Carpocratians. This is Clement's account on the Secret Gospel of Mark in the writing found by Morton Smith⁶⁰ in 1958 while he was cataloguing manuscripts in the library of the Greek Orthodox monastery of Mar Saba,⁶¹ near Jerusalem, in an eighteenth-century copy of a letter of Clement to a certain Theodore⁶² concerning the Gospel of Mark and

gining of the second century, thus contemporary with Ammonius and Apollonius: Cerdo (A.D. 98-108; *HE* 2.21), Primus (A.D. 108-120; *HE* 4.1), Justus (A.D. 120-131; *HE* 4.4-5), and Eumenius (A.D. 131-144; *HE* 2.6 and 4.5.5). On the origin of Christianity in Egypt and Alexandria, and the story of Mark, see Pearson, "Earliest Christianity in Egypt", especially pp. 137-145; Id., "Further Observations", pp. 97-112. See also Pericoli Ridolfini, "Le origini della Chiesa di Alessandria", pp. 308-343; Hardy, *Christian Egypt*; Chadwick, *Alexandrian Christianity*; Grant, "Early Alexandrian Christianity", pp. 133-144; Trevijano, "The Early Christian Church in Alexandria", pp. 471-477; Martin, "Aux origins de l'église copte", pp. 35-56; Pearson-Goering, *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity*; Griggs, *Early Egyptian Christianity*; Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism*; Dorival, "Les débuts du christianisme à Alexandrie", pp. 157-174; Jakab, *Ecclesia Alexandrina*, pp. 45-49; Mimouni, "À la recherche", pp. 137-163; Rinaldi, *Cristianesimi*, pp. 473-474.

⁶⁰ His scholarly book on the subject is *Clement of Alexandria*. See also Smith, Reply to Joseph Fitzmeyer, pp. 64-65; Id., "Merkel on the Longer Text of Mark"; Id., "On the Authenticity", pp. 196-199; Id., "A Rare Sense of *prokoptô*"; Id., *Jesus the Magician*; Id., "Clement of Alexandria and Secret Mark", pp. 449-461.

⁶¹ In 1977 Archimandrite Melito brought Vossianus codex, with the letter of Clement still attached, to the Patriarchate library from Hagios Sabbas. The transfer was described by Kallistos as part of a general transfer of manuscripts from Mar Saba to the Patriarchate library in order to better provide for their care. That same year (1977), Kallistos removed the Clement manuscript from the printed Voss edition of Ignatius to photograph it, and then for shelving along with other manuscripts in the Patriarchate library, in keeping with his original plan for distributing the library holdings.

⁶² Attribution of the letter to Clement is commonly accepted, but Clement's attribution of the gospel to Mark is rejected. Only Criddle, "On the Mar Saba Letter", argues that the Clement letter is spurious and that Secret Mark is therefore of dubious authenticity. His argument is based on a model of vocabulary statistics and an analysis of quantitative rhythms. In favour of the authenticity of Clement's letter also Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria*, pp. 135-140. Guy (Gedaliahu) Stroumsa recounted that he too once saw the manuscript of the Mar Saba letter together with David Flusser and others: Stroumsa, "Comments on Charles Hedrick's Article", pp. 147-153; Brown, "The Letter to Theodore", pp. 535-572, supports the authenticity of Clement's letter against the arguments adduced by Carlson, *The Gospel Hoax*, ch. 4: each feature of the letter that Carlson deems suspicious is

the refutation of the Carpocratians' doctrines and found on the last leaves in the back of a collection of Ignatius of Antioch's epistles, published by Isaac Voss in 1646 (*italics mine*):

From the letters of the most holy Clement, the author of the *Stromateis*. (Letter) to Theodore.

You did well in reducing the unspeakable teachings of the Carpocratians to silence. For these are the "erring stars" referred to in the prophecy, who wander from the narrow road of the commandments into a boundless abyss of carnal and bodily sins. Indeed, priding themselves in knowledge, as they say, "of the profundities of Satan", they do not know that they are casting themselves away into "the lower world of the darkness" of falsity, and, boasting that they are free, they have become slaves of servile desires. Such people are to be opposed in all ways and completely, as, even in case they should say something true, one who loves the truth should not agree with them. For not all true things are the Truth, nor should that truth which merely seems true according to human opinions be preferred to the true Truth, that according to the faith.

Now of what they continue to maintain about the divinely inspired Gospel according to Mark, some are total falsifications, and others, even if they contain some true elements, nevertheless are not reported in an accurate way. For the true things being mixed with inventions, are falsified, so that, according to the saying, even the salt loses its savour. As for Mark, then, during Peter's stay in Rome he wrote an account of the Lord's deeds, not, however, declaring all of them, nor yet hinting at the secret ones, but selecting what he thought most useful for increasing the faith of those who were being instructed.⁶³ But *when Peter died as a*

consistent with Clement's style. Jay, "A New Look", pp. 573-597 analyzes Clement's letter from the epistolary point of view, pointing out many similarities with other ancient letters that addressed similar circumstances and endorsing the thesis of the letter's authenticity. Jeffery, *The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled*, is against the authenticity of the letter and negative on Smith. But see the review article by Scott G. Brown in RBL September 2007; J. Harold Ellens in RBL June 2009, on the contrary, agrees with Jeffery.

⁶³ See Ramelli, *Fonti note e meno note*, pp. 171-185.

martyr, Mark came over to Alexandria, bringing both his own notes and those of Peter, from which he transferred to his former book the things suitable to whatever makes for progress toward knowledge. Thus he composed a more spiritual Gospel for the use of those who were being perfected. Nevertheless, he did not yet divulge the information that was not to be revealed, nor did he write down the hierophantic teaching of the Lord, but to the stories already written he added others and, moreover, introduced certain sayings of which he knew the interpretation would, as a mystagogue, lead the hearers into the innermost sanctuary of that truth hidden by seven veils. Thus, in sum, he prepared matters, neither grudgingly nor incautiously, in my opinion, and, dying, he left his composition to the church in Alexandria, where it even yet is most carefully guarded, being read only to those who are being initiated into the great mysteries.⁶⁴

But since the foul demons are always devising destruction for the race of men, Carpocrates, instructed by them and using deceitful arts, so enslaved a certain presbyter of the church in Alexandria that he got from him a copy of the secret Gospel, which he both interpreted according to his blasphemous and fleshly doctrine and, furthermore, polluted, mixing with the spotless and holy words utterly shameless lies. From this mixture is drawn off the teaching of the Carpocratians.

Therefore, as I said above, one should never yield to them; nor, when they put forward their falsifications, should one concede that the 'secret Gospel' is by Mark, but should even deny it on oath, as not all true things are to be said to all people. For this

⁶⁴ Humphrey, *From Q to Secret Mark*, pays special attention to Clement's account concerning the "Secret Gospel of Mark". Mark, an educated and wealthy man from Alexandria (p. 84, n. 30) who was Peter's interpreter in Rome and then the founder of the Alexandrian church, composed segments of our present gospel for different situations, over several decades. Clement indicates that Mark wrote different works. According to Humphrey, there was a narrative version of the Q tradition ("QN"), comprising most of Mark 1-13, and a Passion Narrative ("PN", most of Mark 14-16); subsequently these were blended by Mark himself into the Gospel that we have today. The final Gospel was edited in Alexandria in the Fifties; what Clement calls Mark's "secret gospel" was "secret" because it "disclosed the 'secret' of God's plan for Jesus and for all humankind: the complete giving of self" (p. 35).

reason the Wisdom of God, through Solomon, advises, “Answer the fool from his folly”, teaching *that the light of the truth should be hidden from those who are mentally blind*. Again it says, “From him who has not shall be taken away”, and, “Let the fool walk in darkness”. But we are “children of light”, having been illuminated by “the dayspring” of the spirit of the Lord “from on high”, and “Where the Spirit of the Lord is”, it says, “there is liberty”, for “All things are pure to the pure”.

Thus, I shall not hesitate to answer the questions you asked, refuting the falsifications by the very words of the Gospel. For example, after “And they were in the road going up to Jerusalem”, and what follows, until “After three days he will rise”, the secret Gospel brings the following material word for word:⁶⁵

And they come to Bethany. And a woman whose brother had died was there. And, coming, she prostrated herself before Jesus and says to him: Son of David, have mercy on me. But the disciples rebuked her. And Jesus, being angered, went off with her into the garden where the tomb was, and straightway a great cry was heard from the tomb. And going near Jesus rolled away the stone from the door of the tomb. And straightway, going in where the youth was, he stretched forth his hand and raised him, seizing his hand. But the youth, looking upon him, loved him and began to beseech him that he might be with him. And going out of the tomb they came into the house of the youth, who was rich. And after six days Jesus told him what to do and in the evening the youth comes to him, wearing a linen cloth over his naked body. And he remained with him that night, for Jesus taught him the mystery of the kingdom of God. And thence, arising, he returned to the other side of the Jordan.

⁶⁵ This is another version of the resurrection of Lazarus (narrated only by John), inserted between Mark 10:34 and 35. According to Brown, *Mark's Other Gospel*, esp. pp. 75-104, the “Secret Mark” preserves an independent version of the raising of Lazarus that lacks all trace of Johannine redaction and any certain indication of knowledge of Matthew and Luke; the gospel excerpts not only sound like Mark, but also employ Mark's distinctive literary techniques, deepening his theology and clarifying puzzling aspects of its narrative. The “Secret Mark” represents Mark's response to the Alexandrian tendency to discover philosophical truths under the literal level.

After these words follows the text, “And James and John come to him”, and all that section. But “naked man with naked man”, and the other things about which you wrote, are not found therein.

And after the words, “*And he comes into Jericho*”, the secret Gospel adds only: “And the sister of the youth whom Jesus loved and his mother and Salome were there, and Jesus did not receive them”.⁶⁶ But the many other things about which you wrote seem to be, and are, forgeries. Rather, the *true explanation and that which is in agreement with the true philosophy*...⁶⁷

Clement, as is evident, used secrecy and cryptic language and allegorical interpretation to contrast, not possible pagan persecutors, as Ammonius did some decades earlier, but heretics, in particular the Carpocratians. Whether Mark is the author

⁶⁶ Inserted into Mark 10:46.

⁶⁷ The publication of Smith’s book immediately stimulated a lot of scholarship, reviews, and reactions. See e.g. Scroggs, and Groff, “Baptism in Mark”, pp. 531-548; Stagg, Review of Smith’s *Clement*, pp. 108-110; Trocmé, “Trois critiques”, pp. 289-295; Yamauchi, “A Secret Gospel”, pp. 238-251; Achtemeier, Review of Smith, pp. 625-628; Beardslee, Review of Smith, pp. 234-236; Brown, “The Relation”, pp. 466-485; Bruce, *The ‘Secret’ Gospel of Mark*; Fitzmyer, “How to Exploit a Secret Gospel”, pp. 570-572; Id., Reply to Morton Smith, pp. 64-65; Friend, “A New Jesus?”, pp. 34-35; Fuller, *Longer Mark*; Grant, “Morton Smith’s Two Books”, pp. 58-65; Hanson, Review of Smith, pp. 513-521; Reese, Review of Smith, pp. 434-435; Richardson, Review of Smith, *Clement*, pp. 571-577; Merkel, “Auf den Spuren des Urmarkus?”, pp. 123-144; Petersen, Review of Smith, pp. 525-531; Parker, “On Professor Morton Smith’s Find”; Kolenkow, Response to Reginald Fuller, pp. 33-34; Clark Kee, Review of Smith, pp. 326-329; Quesnell, “The Mar Saba Clementine”, pp. 48-67, and “A Reply to Morton Smith”, pp. 200-203; *Longer Mark*; van der Horst, “Het geheime Markusevangelie”; Koester, Review of Smith, pp. 620-622; Id., “History and Development”, pp. 35-57; Osborn, “Clement of Alexandria”, pp. 219-244; Schenke, “The Mystery”; Crossan, *Four Other Gospels*; Id., *The Historical Jesus*; Mann, *Mark*; Prophet, *The Lost Years*; Levin, “The Early History”, pp. 4270-4292; Schmidt, *The Gospel of Mark*; Bauckham, “Salome the Sister of Jesus”, pp. 245-275; Patterson and Koester, “The Secret Gospel of Mark”, pp. 402-405; Funk, Hoover and The Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels*; Eyer, “The Strange Case”, pp. 103-129; Hedrick, “The Secret Gospel of Mark”, pp. 133-145; Ehrman, “Response to Charles Hedrick’s Stalemate”, pp. 155-163; Foster, “Secret Mark”, pp. 46-52; Piovaneli, “L’Évangile secret de Marc trente trois ans après”, pp. 52-72, 237-254; Pantuck-Brown, “Morton Smith as M. Madiotes”, pp. 106-125, against Stephen C. Carlson’s thesis that Smith invented a pseudonymous twentieth-century man, ‘M. Madiotes’, as a deliberate clue that he himself had forged the letter of Clement.

of this Gospel, which according to Clement stems from the late Sixties of the first century, or not —the latter is the thesis generally embraced by scholars—, there are some features in it that seem to me to point to a clearly Aramaic syntax. In particular, the expression $\delta\upsilon\upsilon$ Ἰησοῦς ἡγάπα αὐτόν is no Greek at all, but it is Hebrew and Aramaic syntax. Such a turn of words is no more present either in Mark's canonical gospel or in John, where syntax appears more refined according to the *koine*. Moreover, the “disciple whom Jesus loved” is John in the gospel of John; however, in this gospel John reports that Jesus loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus.

Moreover, the insistence on the motif of secrecy is not only in Clement, who was very sensitive to the notion of ‘gnostic’ teaching to be reserved only to those who were advanced in knowledge,⁶⁸ such as the readers or hearers of the “Secret Mark” themselves, but also in the bit that he quotes from this gospel itself. Jesus is there portrayed as privately explaining the secrets of the kingdom of God to his disciples. The secrecy motif was vital for Mark and the community he led in Egypt, because they perceived themselves as persecuted by Jewish neighbors and Roman authorities and in constant danger. For them, too, the situation I have depicted above was a reality: they always risked to be denounced and put to a trial that would have led them either to apostasy or to death.

Clement himself, as results from *Strom.* 6.15.124.6-125.2; 6.15.126.2-3, 127.1, 129.4-130.1 (cf. 1.12.56.2), thought that Jesus taught the great mysteries of theology in parables so that the unworthy would not understand them, but explained these mysteries privately to his disciples, creating an oral tradition of the true exposition of Scripture.⁶⁹ The notion of secrecy and cryptic communication was central to his thought.

⁶⁸ On Clement's attention to the progression in knowledge see Kovacs, “Divine Pedagogy”, pp. 3-25, also with wide-ranging documentation.

⁶⁹ See Itter, *Esoteric Teaching*; Ramelli, *Mystérion negli Stromateis*, pp. 83-120.

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