CHAPTER 3

Secret Knowledge and Divine Revelation in Matthew’s Gospel

In 1955, the Chicago-based Urantia Foundation published a hefty volume entitled *The Urantia Book*.¹ It was translated into many languages. The book counts more than 2000 pages. It describes what it purports to be knowledge on the complex connections between man, the world, and God. I mention this book because its publishers claim that its content reflects revelations by celestial beings and thus discloses a higher form of knowledge. *The Urantia Book* was claimed not to be the work of one or more human authors; “instead it is written as if directly presented by numerous celestial beings appointed to the task of providing an ‘epochal’ spiritual revelation to mankind”.²

It is not a modern phenomenon that the source and genesis of particular writings are surrounded by mystery. In this way, *The Urantia Book* is similar to ancient holy writings from numerous religions, the authority of which has traditionally been explained by invoking their special origin: they are claimed to be the fruit of divine revelation to chosen and inspired human recipients. Sometimes these recipients must pass on the message as faithfully as possible to their fellow believers, sometimes they must record the message in books that are to be sealed and kept secret till further notice, or to be communicated only to a small, select group (e.g., Dan 12:4; 4 Ezra 14:46).

Examples of this abound. There are writings that have achieved canonical status within an established tradition. However, also extra-canonical texts command authority by tracing back their origins to God or other celestial beings. Their number has increased following the discovery of ancient texts. In Jewish and Christian circles, the Dead Sea scrolls and the Nag Hammadi library have fired the imagination. Some years ago, shortly before Easter 2006, the content of the Gospel of Judas was made known to the world, a Gospel that, in the opening sentence, is presented as “the secret account of the revelation that Jesus spoke in conversation with Judas Iscariot”. Judas, the disciple who turned Jesus in and who has become increasingly demonised in the course of the tradition, is described here as the bearer of special revelatory knowledge

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¹ *The Urantia Book* (Chicago, IL: Urantia Foundation, 1955).
² This quotation is from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Urantia_Book (accessed on 11 September 2010).
concerning the secrets of the kingdom. He is said to have received this knowledge directly from Jesus, whereas it was denied to the other apostles.

If a document from the distant past contains material that diverges from established religious views, it usually adds fuel to conspiracy theories like the ones found in Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code*, among other fact-fiction books. It is suggested that secret societies are bent on hiding the facts of the matter at all costs to safeguard the orthodoxy of the church.

Within this great variety of divine revelations and esoteric knowledge, I will focus in this chapter on one text, the Gospel of Matthew. The point of departure will be the question of whether, also in this canonical book, revelation and secret knowledge play a central role and, if so, how these notions are semantically coloured and what function they fulfill in the communication with the targeted readers. I will split this problem into a number of subquestions.

• In Matthew’s Gospel, does God reveal special knowledge to human recipients whom he has chosen?
• What is the nature and content of this secret knowledge?
• Who are in this Gospel the recipients of such revelations and what implications does their God-given position have for their relationship with God and for their position within the religious community?
• Are the revelations kept secret until the end of the age? Or are they uncovered in the meantime to people who are able to grasp their true meaning?
• Is possession of this knowledge necessary to inherit eternal life?

The way in which these questions are formulated expresses a particular interpretation of ‘revelation’. It is not the ordinary, everyday usage, in which ‘revelation’ often means a surprising discovery. The focal point is on revelation as a theological or religious-scientific construct. The meaning of this more specific use of the term ‘revelation’ is that special truths are made known, that these truths are concerned to knowledge that people cannot discover themselves by means of their intellectual powers, and that they have to rely on God or celestial beings for this knowledge. Revelation thus refers to “the communication of knowledge to people by divine agency” or to “the unveiling by God of knowledge previously hidden from the world.”

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