It was not uncommon for Jewish and Christian religious writers of antiquity to produce books which, according to modern terminology, could be characterized as esoteric. The secrecy of the books lay, for example, in the fact that understanding them required the application of a special type of interpretation. A good example of the demand for such a guarded hermeneutic is provided by the *Gospel of Thomas*, which begins with the words: “These are the secret sayings that the living Jesus spoke and Judas Thomas the Twin recorded. He said: Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not experience death.” The *Gospel of Judas* represents a further example of an early Christian text, which claims that its true message is hidden and can only be grasped with the help of Jesus’ specific guidance. The text is characterized as a “secret revelatory discourse” (πλογο[τ] εὐαγγελιον, 33,1–2), the true meaning of which is explained by Jesus to Judas through a series of dialogues.

Another reason ancient writers emphasized the esoteric character of a text was to show that it was meant to be read only by a select group of people. *4 Ezra* refers to seventy secret books, which were given to the wise among the Israelites, whereas twenty-four—presumably the texts of the Hebrew Bible—were made public to everybody (14:44–47). The *Apocryphon of James* (NHC I,2) is an example of a text, the content of which is only revealed to the two main disciples of Jesus, James and Peter.

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2 Cf. also the *Book of Thomas* (NHC II,7; esp. 138,1–7).
James writes it down in order to mediate it to another person\(^5\) who in turn is supposed to impart the text to its ultimate addressees, a special holy group, “who will be saved through the faith of this treatise” (1:27–28). The fictive author of the text, James, stresses that the content of the book should not be communicated to many people, since not even all of Jesus’ twelve disciples have had a share in it. Both in 4 Ezra and the Apocryphon of James the function of the secrecy motif has to do with an attempt by the author to give a rationale for why authoritative holy books have only found a limited audience. At the same time they also emphasize the privileged character of the readers.

A particular case of esoteric religious writing can be found in those texts—usually defined as apocalyptic books—which contain secret disclosures of the history of the world from primordial times to the last days.\(^6\) They claim to be composed by ancient religious authorities who have been commanded to communicate secret predictions to later righteous generations. In reality, the texts were produced by writers who lived near the time when the predictions were expected to take place and where the fictive ancient religious authorities had placed the eschaton. The actual readership of the texts is thus a special elect group who through the predictions are advised to recognize their crucial place in the history of the world. Classic examples of such texts are the Book of Daniel and 1 Enoch, apocalyptic works that contain “historical” descriptions of the past, often in the form of visions (Dan 7:1–12:13; 1 En. 85–90; 91:11–17; 93:1–10). Although these apocalyptic predictions are not necessarily called secret,\(^7\) in the context of the books as a whole they clearly become secretive. They are linked together with sections which emphasize the secrecy of the books, the content and the significance of which are disclosed to a special group of the righteous at the end of the age (e.g., Dan 12:4, 9–10; 1 En. 92:3; 107:1; 108:1–3).\(^8\) The fact that the fictive author is a spiritual hero from ancient times is also meant to enhance the value of the writings.

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\(^5\) Because of a lacuna, the name of the first addressee has not been preserved in its entirety. The most common restoration of the name is “[Cerin]thos” (so e.g. Judith Hartenstein and Uwe-Karsten Plisch, “Der Brief des Jakobus [NHC I,2],” in Nag Hammadi Deutsch: Studienausgabe [ed. Hans-Martin Schenke et al.; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007], 10) but it cannot be taken but as a possible conjecture.


\(^7\) In one of his visions, Daniel is ordered to keep it secret (Dan 8:26).

\(^8\) To be sure, the 1 Enoch is a composite work that consists of various originally independent parts; for this see E. Isaac, “1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch,” in Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments (vol. 1 of The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, ed. James H. Charlesworth;