THE MIRROR AND 1 COR. 13,12 IN THE EPISTEMOLOGY
OF CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

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It is well known that the epistemology of Clement of Alexandria has a strong Neoplatonist flavour, in that it stresses the need for a transcendent and extra-corporeal vision of the divine. However, unlike Plotinus, Clement uses the language of gnosticism to convey the fundamental aspects of his theory of knowledge. Again unlike Plotinus, and unlike Irenaeus, the first great Christian adversary of the gnostics, Clement's own polemic against gnostic speculation is mitigated by a genuine interest in this particular branch of heterodox Christianity: he even chooses to build his own theology around its key term, \( \gamma \nu \delta \sigma \tau \zeta \). On the level of terminology this marks a clear break with earlier representatives of Christian thought, such as Paul, for whom the idea of \( \pi \iota \sigma \tau \varsigma \) was the cornerstone of religious epistemology. Statistically speaking \( \gamma \nu \delta \sigma \tau \varsigma \) is a minor term in Pauline vocabulary, whereas a glance at Stählin's index\(^1\) shows it to be the principal technical term used by Clement.

Clement's gnosis can of course be considered in two ways: as a body of esoteric teachings, or as a manner of grasping the deity. Clement may well have envisaged a detailed system of gnostic teaching, as is suggested by Daniélon,\(^2\) but it is certain that the term designates a certain kind of approach to God. The true gnostic is destined to become a celestial creature, to gaze upon God face to face and to enter into a form of ontological union with this highest form of reality. Subjection to the body and to its imperatives was to be overcome in order to free the mind from the shackles which would mar its perception of supra-terrestrial reality. Accordingly ordinary human concepts are considered inadequate


\(^2\) J.Daniélon, Message évangélique et culture hellénistique aux ii\( ^{e} \) et iii\( ^{e} \) siècles (Tournai 1961) 416.
and even misleading, since the nature of God is totally other: his “other-
ness” implies his ineffability and incomprehensibility. Negative theology
replaces cataphatic, or propositional, theology. Within this perspective,
the ethical side of early Jewish Christianity is lost within a general epist-
temological approach to religion, since the flesh and sins of the flesh are
simply considered to be impediments to the ἐπιστήμη, or the mystic
contemplation of the divine. The Stoic ideal of impassivity (ἀπάθεια) is
pressed into the service of a theory of knowledge; he who is free from
the passions is more alive to the appreciation of higher forms of existence.

Between these two extremes lies the possibility of an intermediate or
preparatory form of knowledge, and in fact Clement did accept the need
for props in the course of the soul’s pilgrimage. I have shown elsewhere
that he looked to secular culture for certain insights, and of course the
catechetical teaching of the early church fell into this category of initial
intellectual training. This partial apprehension of true reality is often
expressed by Clement through the image of the mirror, in most cases by
means of an interpretation of 1 Cor. 13,12: ΒΑΘΩΥΤ ὁ νῦν ἀνίματι, τότε δὲ πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον.

The mirror was a frequently used instrument of divination in Hellenistic
culture: Clement himself condemns it at one point, together with a num-
ber of other objects (dice, ball, hoop, apples, top, and a tuft of wool) as
an element of pagan divination rites. To this passage may be added
a number of others collected by Netoliczka in Pauly-Wissowa, Reitzen-
stein, Dupont, Hugé and others. A good example of such practices
may be found in a text of Zosimus dating from the early fourth century
and describing a special metal based on a compound of silver and gold,
supposedly invented by Alexander and used by him for the fabrication
of mirrors which possessed certain magical properties: such mirrors could
deflect lightning, protect from demons, and had the power to transform

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3 Connaissance religieuse et herméneutique chez Clément d’Alexandrie (Leiden 1973);
4 Protrepticus 2,18,1.
5 Pauly’s Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft, herausgegeben
von G. Wissowa (Stuttgart 1893 sq.) art. κάτοπτρον.
6 Historia Monachorum und Historia Lausiaca (Berlin 1916) 251 (see 242–255).
7 J. Dupont, Gnosis. La connaissance religieuse dans les Épitres de Saint Paul
(Louvain/Paris 1949) 121ff.
8 N. Hugé, La métaphore du miroir dans les Épitres de Saint Paul aux Corinthiens
9 Syriac text translated by Berthelot, La chimie au moyen âge, ii (Paris 1893) 260–
266.