**Hidden Meanings**

*After Jesus Before Christianity*

Excerpts and comments by Robert Traer

The authors of AJBC suggest that “the hidden transcript” was a major strategy for resisting Roman aggression. This concept refers to telling alternative stories that are hidden within the more obvious meaning of stories, but discernible for those who know how to interpret what is hidden.

“More than a decade’s worth of research shows how many oppressed peoples and groups around the world create ‘a secret’ language that makes fun of those dominating them and helps them process some of their loss and trauma.

“Although many of the early stories and writings about the many Jesus clubs, groups, schools, and movements of the first two centuries portrayed in the previous chapters are read today as ‘holy’ and ‘solemn’ literature, it seems likely that ancient readers saw some of them as comical, irreverent, and resistant hidden transcripts—potentially carnival-like in their disdain for authority. (AJBC, 268-269)

A story of Jesus casting out a demon from a crazy man is one example. This story is reported first in the Gospel of Mark 5:1-20, and then is repeated with minor variations in the Gospels of Matthew 8:28-34 and Luke 4:31-44.

AJBC explains, “The story is set in northern Israel, not far from where a Roman military unit called a legion is stationed.” In the gospels Jesus crosses the Sea of Galilee to side where Decapolis cities have been built. There he casts out an “unclean spirit” from a man, who says his name is “Legion, for we are many.” The man asks Jesus to send the unclean spirits into a herd of pigs, and after Jesus does this the herd rushes into the sea and many of the pigs drown.

ALBC suggests, “The hidden transcript within this story proposes, subtly, that this man’s possession comes mostly from the presence of the occupying Roman army around the Sea of Galilee, where the man lived.” Once the “Legion” is removed, the man is healed and no longer “possessed.”

“The story accurately addresses the profound damage an occupying army can do to the population it controls. It gives such a population a way to think about how to cope, escape some of the pain, express anger, and even laugh a bit when it portrays the similarities between that occupying army and a group of pigs—animals considered unclean in Hebrew writings. Any suspicions Roman authorities might have about the story’s strange mix-up of pigs and armies would be hard to prove.” This is not a story of rebellion, but a humorous way of dealing with occupation and Roman control. Those suffering and fearing the Roman army “can tell the story of the pigs drowning and laugh at the way it links pigs and soldiers.”

“The cleverness of these ancient stories was by and large so successful that their subtle meanings and hidden messages about violence are easily lost to the modern reader.” (AJBC, 267-272)

“The first sentence of the mid-century Gospel of Truth is ‘The good news of truth is joy’ (1:1). This text discovered in the Egyptian desert with other Nag Hammadi documents, shows awareness of roman violence but in surprising ways resists and copes with fear and loss. “It fills readers with joy and beauty. It overflows with a sense of fulfillment and sensuousness, sounding alternately like a poem, a letter, or an ecstatic sermon.” Under the surface “of its lush language are signs of trauma and violence.

. . . as if they were sleeping and found themselves in disturbing dreams—running someplace or powerless while pursued, coming to blows or themselves beaten, falling

from heights or flying through air without wings. Or sometimes as if people are trying to

kill them or killing their neighbors, smeared with the blood. Those in the midst of all this confusion see nothing for these things are nothing . . . the beloved Child . . . spoke new things . . . He did away with torture and torment for they caused those needing compassion, those in transgression and bonds, to stray from his face. He dissolved them with power and reproached them with knowledge. He became a way for those who were ignorant, discovery for those searching and strength for those who were shaken, purity for those who were defiled. (14:12-15; 16:2, 6, 8-10)

“Here the hidden transcript is the imperial violence, silently breathing its threat, through the fragrance of all people and the strength of the beloved Child. ‘The Father’s children are his fragrance, for they are from the beauty of his face. Because of this, the Father loves his fragrance and discloses it everywhere’ (19:4-5). God’s children are everywhere, and they are the actual fragrance of God and light.

Say then from the heart that you are the perfect day and within you dwells the light that never ends. Speak of the truth with those who seek it and of knowledge of those who have sinned through their transgressions. Strengthen the feet of those who stumble and stretch your hands to those who are week. Feed those who are hungry and give rest to the weary. Raise those who wish to arise and awaken those who sleep—for you all are understanding drawn forth. If strength does these things, strength become stronger. (17:10-16)

“This is almost, but not quite, the same art of resistance to Roman violence as seen in Luke’s ‘The Man Goes Crazy.’ The hidden transcript of the Gospel of Truth, however, differs from Luke’s story in that the transcript is almost double hidden: the Gospel of Truth has power and beauty around every corner, and violence is hidden in the past or in dreams.” (ALBC, 272-275)

The authors of AJBC suggest, “A song that imagines that Rome is on fire and all its power has been destroyed offers another, very different hidden, though much less hidden transcript. The song, from the Revelation to John, was probably written several decades after Rome was damaged by a fire set perhaps by those against Roman rule and centuries before Rome was destroyed. Our shortened telling is from chapters 17 and 18 of this late-first-century vision. Although written near the height of Roman domination the story is told in far-off Babylon, destroyed and rebuilt repeatedly during the centuries before the Common Era. The composer of this song imagines that Babylon stood on seven hills, just like ancient Rome.

“The song can be summarized as follows: one of seven angels takes a dreamer to a lonely place and points out a giant sex worker riding on a monster. The angel says to the dreamer that the giant woman is Babylon the Great and that the seven heads of the monster on which she rides are seven hills. The angel identifies the giant woman as the great city that holds sway over all the rulers of the earth. Then another angel descends from the sky and sings of how Babylon the Great has fallen. All the wealth that she had now is destroyed. In a single hour all the ships carrying great commerce have been destroyed. Another voice from the sky announces that God has remembered the cruelty of Babylon in order to destroy it and will reward the dreamer and his people to make up for all the torture and misery they have experienced.

“The song rages against the violence of this great city that rules over all the earth. It promises revenge and reward for those who have been tortured and are in misery. The song continues: ‘She has fallen. She has fallen . . . Alas! Alas! Great city! City clothed in fine linen, and purple and scarlet cloth! City adorned with gold ornaments, and precious stones, and pearls! In a single hour your vast wealth has vanished!’ (Rev. 18:2, 16-17)

“There is little, if any, sign in the late first century that Rome can be destroyed or punished. Only in the eye of this dreamer can the people Rome pillaged be restored. Nevertheless, the song paints a massive tableau in which the reigning city is annihilated and the dreamer’s people are saved.”

“These two chapters in Revelation may be the closest that any writings of the first two centuries come to calling for an attack against Rome. The voice of the dreamer claims that he has been punished for his teachings. On the other hand, the song does not present an explicit attack on Rome but focuses instead on the much more ancient city of Babylon in a faraway time and place. Rather than humor and healing, the response to violence in this writing is anger, fantasy, and outrageous hope. It is a hidden transcript because it calls this imagined destroyed city ‘Babylon’ but its location on seven hills clearly marks its setting as Rome.” (AJBC, 276-277)

In the first two centuries after Jesus, “instead of reducing the meaning of Jesus’s experiences of violence and death to a sacrifice for sins, a wide range of writings see his death as an effort to make sense of people’s pain and loss, sometimes through such hidden transcripts. These hidden transcripts about violence become a cipher for understanding the trauma in people’s lives and their attempt to find a voice in a landscape of violence.

“Such hidden transcripts, however, do not provide a standard or single correct interpretation of what to do with violence. In the story of the crazy man, the ‘demoniac’ in the tombs, the way to face violence is by cleverly associating the villainous, violent soldiers with pigs, laughing darkly about the story and celebrating a recovery (at least a temporary one) from the violence. The subtle merging of sweet fragrance and horrible nightmares in the Gospel of Truth holds in tension the ingenuity of the Anointed movements and the violence of Rome. In the case of the dreamer in the Revelation to John, the strategy of facing violence has to do with being angry at Rome and having confidence in God’s revenge.

“In no case does one find a tragic approach to violence among the various Jesus peoples. And in no case is violence completely and successfully solved. What this group of movements, schools, and clubs share is a courageous and clever response to and plan for experiencing almost inevitable violence. All of these expressions about the experience of violence make some kind of provisional advance in the ongoing struggle.” (AJBC, 283-284)