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WORKING FOR THE SECRET EVANGELIST

A Review and Memoir

Lee T. Percy

Discussed in this essay:

Stephen C. Carlson, *The Gospel Hoax: Morton Smith's Invention of Secret Mark* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005).

Peter Jeffrey, *The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled: Imagined Rituals of Sex, Death, and Madness in a Biblical Forgery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

In 1968-69, my senior year at Columbia, I worked as research assistant to Professor Morton Smith of the History Department. One afternoon each week I took the subway from Morningside Heights down to his apartment near Lincoln Center. Sometimes Prof. Smith gave me a list of books or articles, with instructions to find them and verify references; later in the year, he began to ask me to read and summarize articles or chapters from books. More often, though, I spent the afternoons at the big work table in Smith's living room taking care of the necessary, routine chores of scholarship: filing note cards, compiling lists of secondary works, and the like. While I worked, Smith sat in a chair, reading, or moved from bookshelf to bookshelf in his apartment. Books were everywhere, even in the otherwise nearly empty kitchen cabinets.

Although I am grateful to Morton Smith for what I now realize was an important part of my apprenticeship in the profession I now practice, I did not find it easy to work for him. He was a thin, austere man with a deep voice like rusted machinery, who hardly ever smiled

or spoke except to give me instructions. He avoided the Columbia campus, but he did sometimes ask me about events there in that tumultuous year. His political opinions were reactionary even for a time when political discourse in liberal arts colleges and universities included conservative voices that are now mostly absent, and I found that the best policy was to say as little to him as he preferred to say to me. I wish, also, that I could remember what books and articles he asked me to find. Four years later, in 1973, Smith published two books that remain controversial, and he may have been working on them in 1969.

Both books tell the same story. In 1958, Smith visited for the second time the Greek Orthodox monastery of Mar Saba in the Judean desert about twelve miles southwest of Jerusalem. He was there to prepare a catalogue of the manuscript material in the monks' library. Although most of the Mar Saba manuscripts had been moved to the Patriarchal library in Jerusalem for safe-keeping in the nineteenth century, a few scraps remained, and a few later manuscripts, mostly from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, had been added in the intervening years. Some of these were copied onto endpapers or blank leaves of printed books. In the back of one of these, a seventeenth-century edition of the letters of Saint Ignatius the Martyr,¹ Smith found a manuscript copy in what appeared to be eighteenth-century handwriting of a previously unknown letter of Clement of Alexandria. In the letter, Clement refers to and quotes passages from a longer version of Mark's gospel than the one in the Christian canon and discusses its use in Christian worship in second-century Alexandria, both in Clement's church and among the Carpocratian heretics, whose libertine interpretation Clement condemns.

Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973) is a full scholarly treatment of the discovery, with all the evidence

for Smith's discovery and his interpretation of it. *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel According to Mark* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973) is a shorter account for general readers. Although *Jesus the Magician* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978) hardly mentions Smith's discovery, it develops one line of argument in the earlier books and provides the historical and cultural background that some reviewers had found wanting in them.

In the two books from 1973, Smith argues that Clement's letter preserves an authentic, very early Christian testimony about Jesus and his teachings, particularly his practice of baptism. To explain similarities between the ordering of events in John and in the expanded version of Mark but differences of wording between them, Smith supposed that an original gospel in Aramaic had been translated twice into Greek. John used one translation and Mark the other. Mark was then expanded, not only by the other synoptic evangelists, but also by the author of the version that Clement's letter cites.

Smith's discovery immediately became controversial. Not only did it seem to supply two new fragments of a canonical gospel embedded in the only surviving letter from a major church father, but also it presented a radically different picture of one of the central sacraments of Christianity. The Mar Saba letter quotes a long passage from the secret version of Mark; here is Smith's translation:

And they come into Bethany. And a certain 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, for he 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.²

Smith read this text against the differences between the baptismal practices of John the Baptist and Paul. Bringing in scattered indications from the canonical Gospels, shamanism, and magical practices of the Greco-Roman world, he offered a new interpretation of baptism as Jesus practiced it. Jesus' baptism, in Smith's words,

. . . was a water baptism administered by Jesus to chosen disciples, singly and by night. The costume, for the disciple, was a linen cloth worn over the naked body. This cloth was probably removed for the baptism proper, the immersion in water, which was now reduced to a preparatory purification. After that, by unknown ceremonies, the disciple was possessed by Jesus' spirit and so united with Jesus. One with him, he participated by hallucination in Jesus' ascent into the heavens, he entered the kingdom of god, and was thereby set free from the laws ordained for and

in the lower world. Freedom from the law may have resulted in completion of the spiritual union by physical union.³

Jesus, that is, was a kind of gay guru who initiated his disciples into a liberated world of sensuality, the Kingdom of God.

Smith's discovery and its interpretation became immediately controversial, and not simply because of the Mar Saba letter's sensational picture of Christian baptism as homoerotic initiation rite. Smith's Jesus was not the rabbi of the synoptic Gospels, offering moral instruction and example to his disciples; instead, as Smith argued in *Jesus the Magician*, Jesus of Nazareth was a *goês*, a magician. Not his teaching but his magic tricks, which believers call miracles, explained his fame. Another meaning for *goês* in Liddell and Scott's *Greek Lexicon* is "a juggler, a cheat." The orthodox were not pleased.

It did not take long for the suggestion to emerge that Smith had forged the document. In 1975 Quentin Quesnell published an article claiming just that, and Smith responded.⁴ The controversy continued, with other scholars weighing in, and Smith summed up the state of the question ten years later: "[T]he recent 'provisional' inclusion of the letter in the Berlin edition of Clement's works adequately indicates its actual status."⁵ There the controversy remained and remains still. Some scholars accept the authenticity of letter and secret gospel, others deny it, and most accept it "provisionally;" that is, they take it into account in their arguments but avoid basing any conclusions on it.

Now two books reopen the question. Both argue that the Clement letter and the secret version of Mark that it quotes are bogus, the work of Morton Smith himself. Each argues from a very different perspective, and one is more persuasive than the other.

Peter Jeffrey wins the prize for lurid title. *The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled: Imagined Rituals of Sex, Death, and Madness in a Biblical Forgery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) sets out to demonstrate not only that Smith forged the Mar Saba Clement letter, but that he was a sloppy scholar to boot. Jeffrey takes his departure from the correct observation that forgeries eventually reveal themselves as creations of their time and place. Renaissance forgeries of Etruscan documents now plainly declare their origins,⁶ and it seems incredible that some Victorian fakes fooled anyone. They evoke nothing so much as the social divisions and artistic taste of the Old Queen's era.⁷ It stands to reason that a mid-twentieth forgery by one Morton Smith should show more signs of its true era the farther we get from its moment of creation.

Jeffrey is an expert in the liturgies of the Christian church, and he finds anachronism in three elements of the Mar Saba manuscript's account of Jesus and the rich young man. Resurrection themes, instruction ending in a vigil preceding baptism, and the wearing of white garments "are much easier to place in the fourth or fifth century" (p. 62), according to Jeffrey, than in the second; further, exactly these three elements appear in the baptismal liturgy advocated by mid-twentieth-century Anglican liturgiologists like Gregory Dix and Massey Shepherd as a reconstruction of the early Church's practice. In addition, the Mar Saba letter seems to contradict what we know about baptismal practice and lectionaries in the Alexandrian church.

Jeffrey's deep knowledge of the history of Christian worship informs some of the strongest arguments in his book. If he is correct, then the Clement letter reveals an anachronistic view of early Christian baptism that points to its creation in the mid-twentieth century, when Morton Smith claimed to have discovered it. But if the Mar Saba manuscript

is what Smith said it is, then it may be telling us something that we did not know about early Christian practice. Jeffrey's argument from anachronisms may tilt the balance of proof, but it cannot make it swing decisively.

Unfortunately, once Jeffrey moves beyond liturgy into other aspects of Smith's discovery, it becomes increasingly clear that his project is motivated by an animus toward Morton Smith, or to the Morton Smith that Jeffrey has constructed—as Jeffrey acknowledges, they never met (p. 236). This Morton Smith is a tormented soul who deserves prayers (p. ix), a priest of the Protestant Episcopal Church who lost his faith but never gave up his priestly status (pp. 149-150), a failed pastor whose advice, if taken, would do serious harm to his flock (pp. 151-155) and whose rigid views conflicted with the doctrine and best teachings of his church (pp. 155-174), and a misogynist homosexual who hated Christianity so much that he used his scholarly craft to plant a forged "obscene gospel" (p. 250) into its heritage. This Morton Smith is also an unscrupulously careless scholar.

Most of these charges may well be true, but Jeffrey has not proven the last one. Further, some of the scholarly charges which he makes against Smith can be turned against his own work. Jeffrey, for example, reproaches Smith for uncritically lumping together unrelated phenomena. A sentence will give the flavor of this accusation: "Instead [of giving a detailed account of Secret Mark's relation to Jewish hymnody or to the orthodox Christian mainstream], he lumped them all together as if they were all the same sort of thing—'mainly the recitation of repetitive, hypnotic prayers and hymns'—supplemented by heavy breathing, manipulation, and . . . we all know where that leads" (p. 102). Only two pages after this innuendo-laden indictment, Jeffrey quotes a paragraph from an article that Smith published ten years before *Secret Gospel* and *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark*.⁸ In

it Smith argues for a relationship between magical ascents to heaven in Mithraism and the Jewish hekhalot tradition, based on elements they share: “the contrast between mortal and immortal beings, *the jealous guards mastered by the use of magic names*, the entrance of the heavenly realm, when the *hostile guards stare at the intruder*, the thunder *from the heaven above these inferior deities and the opening of the fiery doors and the vision of the world of the gods within and, finally, the fiery god from whose body the stars stream forth*—all these characteristics are common to the Jewish and the magical material.”⁹

Jeffrey dismisses this with a wave:

But most of these are commonplaces that occur widely in folklore and imaginative literature. A distinction between mortal and immortal beings who live in different realms? Magic names? Threatening figures that must be placated to secure entrance? Thunder, fire, visions, stars? One can find them all in Grimm’s Fairy Tales. The “common ancestor” is *Homo sapiens*.

In the quotation from Smith above, I have added emphasis to the elements not mentioned by Jeffrey. Selective omission allows him to—well, to lump Grimm’s fairy tales in with Mithraism and the hekhalot tradition, and so to do what he accuses Smith of having done.

Jeffrey also accuses Smith of pushing even his forged evidence too far. He notes that Smith could have used the Nag Hammadi treatise called *Zostrianos* to show that Secret Mark reflected Gnostic ideas of initiation, a very adequate and reasonable conclusion. Instead Smith went farther and argued that Secret Mark revealed the actual practice of Jesus of Nazareth. In his eagerness to prove that Smith is all that he says he is, Jeffrey pushes his

own evidence, Smith's actual words, farther than their evident meaning and even rewrites Smith's translation of Secret Mark to suit his case. He mounts, for example, an elaborate argument for a series of *doubles entendres* in the English version of Secret Mark's account of the Lazarus-like resurrection miracle at Bethany. The woman who, "coming, prostrated herself before Jesus," as Smith translated it, is engaging in orgasmic, oral sex (pp. 92-93). To support this interpretation, Jeffrey has to, as he says, "slightly shift the translation of a single word" in Smith's version. Smith translated *proskynese* correctly as "prostrated herself before" Jesus, but Jeffrey wants it to mean "bent down to kiss," and so that is how he renders it. There is more. The tomb represents the closet out of which the "anguished young man" emerges for "his first homosexual encounter" (p. 92). After the woman approached Jesus, in Smith's version, "the disciples rebuked her. And Jesus, being angered, went off with her into the garden where the tomb was." Jeffrey wants Smith's Jesus to be as misogynist as Smith was, and so he assumes that Jesus' anger is directed at the woman. The natural interpretation of Secret Mark's "being angered" however, is that Jesus is angry at the disciples for their rebuke of a suppliant, as he is at Mark 10:14. Smith himself noted the parallel in his commentary.¹⁰

The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled taught me a great deal about liturgical performance as textual interpretation, and it pointed up several disturbing anachronisms in the liturgical contexts of the Mar Saba letter. It is possible that with the passing of time, others will emerge, until Clement's letter looks as bogus as Victorian versions of Boccaccio. Jeffrey's book did not, however, convince me that Morton Smith forged the Mar Saba Clement letter, or persuade me to change my juvenile impression that Smith was a careful, exact scholar.

Stephen C. Carlson's *The Gospel Hoax: Morton Smith's Invention of Secret Mark* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005) is a very different book. Carlson, an attorney by profession, makes a lawyer's case against Smith. He focuses on physical evidence, and on means, motive, and opportunity, all of which Smith had.

The physical evidence, however, presents a problem. Eighteen years after Morton Smith photographed the text at Mar Saba, the Clement manuscript was transferred to the library of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem, where it was removed from the volume of St. Ignatius' letters and photographed again, this time in color. It has not been seen since. Thus the only evidence for the appearance of the manuscript is two sets of photographs. Until someone finds the lost pages, there can be no decisive analysis of ink or paper.

Photographed handwriting will have to do. Carlson does the best he can to show that the handwriting of the Mar Saba manuscript bears the characteristic signs of a forgery: shaky strokes from the so-called "forger's tremor," blunt line ends from the forger's habit of drawing rather than writing letters, and pen lifts in the middle of strokes. His analysis is careful, thorough, and as convincing as it can be given that it has to be based on photographs. (To what Carlson offers I can add only the trivial observation that the Mar Saba manuscript seems to have been written with a dip pen, since the photographs show a slight fading of the ink every three lines or so.) Carlson also argues that the handwriting of the Mar Saba Clement resembles Morton Smith's own Greek hand in several respects, as indeed it does.

Carlson calls attention to some of the same suspicious elements of Smith's published story that Jeffrey raises; for example, the dedication of *Secret Gospel* to "the one who knows" or the fact that Smith took pains to send photographs of the Mar Saba manuscript to

ten scholars and ask their opinion of the date of the handwriting. Is this scholarly caution in the face of a discovery certain to be controversial, or a goetic forger covering his tracks by misdirecting the audience's attention?

Hoaxers often cannot resist planting clues that point to their work, and Carlson thinks that he has discovered Smith's confession. Among the other manuscripts at Mar Saba catalogued by Smith was one, number 22, whose binding consisted of a number of different manuscript fragments pasted together. The first blank leaf of this manuscript contained, according to Smith, notes by previous users, and he confidently dated their handwriting without referring to experts. Anobos, a monk of the Holy Sepulcher, wrote in what seemed to be an eighteenth-century hand. The Archimandrite Dionysios had handwriting of the nineteenth century. Finally, one M. Madiotes wrote a few lines in what Smith identified as clearly twentieth-century handwriting.¹¹ M. Madiotes has no ecclesiastical title and seems to have been a twentieth-century visitor to the monastery, as Smith was. His name suggests a modern Greek word for "bald" which has a secondary meaning of "trickster." Carlson has taken the trouble to verify that Morton Smith was bald at least as early as 1960. M. Madiotes used a fine nib, as did the writer of the Clement manuscript, but other eighteenth-century manuscripts at Mar Saba are written with broad nibs. According to Carlson, the letters *tau*, *rho*, *pi*, and the *omicron-epsilon* ligature in the hand of "Bald Trickster" resemble that of the Clement manuscript, and the hand of the Clement manuscript resembles Morton Smith's Greek hand.

Carlson has other arguments, which convince in varying degrees; he thinks, for example, that the forger of the Mar Saba letter left another clue to his identity in this passage: speaking of the Carpocratians' mingling of true doctrines with false, Clement writes, "For the

true things being mixed with inventions, are falsified, so that, as the saying goes, even the salt loses its savor.” Salt in the ancient world, Carlson asserts (pp. 60-61), came in cakes or lumps. Mixing it with other substances to improve its pouring or remedy iodine deficiency is a twentieth-century invention—of the *Morton* Salt Company.

The salt argument is clever rather than convincing, but the rest of Carlson’s case is powerful. It convinced me that the Mar Saba Clement letter bears the footprints of forgery, and that the footprints lead to Morton Smith.

Twenty years after I worked for Prof. Smith, my wife and I were at the annual meeting of the American Philological Association in New York. In the coffee area next to the book display, we saw Prof. Smith sitting alone at a table. I went up, made introductions, and sat down. There had been, I said, a tall filing cabinet for three-by-five cards, and most of my job had been to file cards and keep them up to date; was it still there? The cabinet had been a kind of index to Smith’s mind; entries on “Paris, Gallo-Roman” would be lumped with entries for “Paris, restaurants in.” Yes, said Smith, the filing cabinet was still there. When Morton Smith died in 1991, he left his library to the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. His will instructed his executor to destroy all personal papers and notes. In them “There was nothing,” the executor wrote, “that would indicate or imply that he forged the Secret Gospel.”¹²

¹ Isaac Voss, *Epistulae Genuinae S. Ignatii Martyris* (Amsterdam: J. Blaeu, 1646) .

² Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark*, 447.

³ Smith, *Secret Gospel* 113-114.

⁴ Quentin Quesnell, "The Mar Saba Clementine: A Question of Evidence," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 37(1975), 48-67; Morton Smith, "On the Authenticity of the Mar Saba Letter of Clement," *CBQ* 38(1976), 196-199.

⁵ Morton Smith, "Clement of Alexandria and Secret Mark: The Score at the End of the First Decade," *HTR* 75(1982), 449-461; quoted words appear on 452.

⁶ See Edith Rowland, *The Scarith of Scornello: A Tale of Renaissance Forgery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Anthony Grafton, *Forgers and Critics: Creativity and Duplicity in Western Scholarship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

⁷ On forgeries and copies in the 19th century, see Aviva Briefel, *The Deceivers: Art Forgery and Identity in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

⁸ Morton Smith, "Observations on Hekhalot Rabbati," *Biblical and Other Studies*, ed. Alexander Altman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 142-160.

⁹ Smith, "Observations," 159. Italics added.

¹⁰ Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark*, 104.

¹¹ Morton Smith, "Monasteries and their Manuscripts," *Archaeology* 13, no. 3 (1960), 175.

¹² Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Morton Smith and Secret Mark," *Ioudaios*, July 11, 1995, n.p., <ftp://ftp.lehigh.edu/pub/listserv/ioudaios-1/archives/9507b>. Accessed June 14, 2007.