"Dear reader, do not be alarmed at the parallels between... magic and ancient Christianity. Christianity never claimed to be original. It claimed . . . to be true!" With these words in the New York Times Book Review, Pierson Parker reassured the faithful American public that it need not be concerned with the latest news from the obscure and bookish world of New Testament scholarship.[1] It was 1973, and the Biblical studies community, as well as the popular press, was in a stir over a small manuscript discovery that--to judge from the reactions of some--seemingly threatened to call down the apocalypse. A newly-released book by Columbia University's Morton Smith, presenting a translation and interpretation of a fragment of a newly-recovered Secret Gospel of Mark, was at the center of the controversy.

The Discovery:1958-1960

In the spring of 1958 Smith, then a graduate student in Theology at Columbia University, was invited to catalogue the manuscript holdings in the library of the Mar Saba monastery, located twelve miles south of Jerusalem. Smith had been a guest of the same hermitage years earlier, when he was stranded in Palestine by the conflagrations of the second World War.

What Smith found during his task in the tower library surprised him. He discovered some new scholia of Sophocles, for instance, and dozens of other manuscripts.[2] Despite these finds, however, the beleaguered scholar soon resigned himself to what looked like a reasonable conclusion: he would find nothing of major importance at Mar Saba. His malaise evaporated one day as he first deciphered the manuscript that would always thereafter be identified with him:

[. . . O]ne afternoon near the end of my stay, I found myself in my cell, staring incredulously at a text written in a tiny scrawl. [. . . I]f this writing was what it claimed to be, I had a hitherto unknown text by a writer of major significance for early church history.[3]

What Smith then began photographing was a three-page handwritten addition penned into the endpapers of a printed book, Isaac Voss' 1646 edition of the Epistolae genuinae S. Ignatii Martyris.[4] It identified itself as a letter by Clement of the Stromateis, i.e., Clement of Alexandria, the second-century church father well-known for his neo-platonic applications of Christian belief. Clement writes "to Theodore," congratulating him for success in his disputes with the Carpocratians, an heterodoxical sect about which little is known. Apparently in their conflict with Theodore, the Carpocratians appealed to Mark's gospel.

Clement responds by recounting a new story about the Gospel. After Peter's death, Mark brought his original gospel to Alexandria and wrote a "more spiritual gospel for the use of those who were being perfected." Clement says this text is kept by the Alexandrian church for use only in the initiation into "the great mysteries."

However, Carpocrates the heretic, by means of magical stealth, obtained a copy and adapted it to his own ends. Because this version of the "secret" or "mystery" gospel had been polluted with "shameless lies," Clement urges Theodore to deny its Markan authorship even under oath. "Not all true things are to be said to all men," he advises.

Theodore has asked questions about particular passages of the special Carpocratian Gospel of Mark, and by way of reply Clement transcribes two sections which he claims have been distorted by the heretics. The first fragment of the Secret Gospel of Mark, meant to be inserted between Mark 10.34 and 35, reads:

They came to Bethany. There was one woman there whose brother had died. She came and prostrated herself before Jesus and spoke to him. "Son of David, pity me!" But the disciples rebuked her. Jesus was angry and went with her into the garden where the tomb was. Immediately a great cry was heard from the tomb. And going up to it, Jesus rolled the stone away from the door of the tomb, and immediately went in where the young man was. Stretching out his hand, he lifted him up, taking hold his hand. And the youth, looking intently at him, loved him and started begging him to let him remain with him. And going out of the tomb, they went into the house of the youth, for he was rich. And after six days Jesus gave him an order and, at evening, the young man came to him wearing nothing but a linen cloth. And he stayed with him for the night, because Jesus taught him the mystery of the Kingdom of God. And then when he left he went back to the other side of the Jordan.
Then a second fragment of Secret Mark is given, this time to be inserted into Mark 10.46. This has long been recognized as a narrative snag in Mark's Gospel, as it awkwardly reads, "Then they come to Jericho. As he was leaving Jericho with his disciples..." This strange construction is not present in Secret Mark, which reads:

Then he came into Jericho. And the sister of the young man whom Jesus loved was there with her mother and Salome, but Jesus would not receive them.

Just as Clement prepares to reveal the "real interpretation" of these verses to Theodore, the copyist discontinues and Smith's discovery is, sadly, complete.

Smith stopped briefly in the Hebrew University in Jerusalem to share his discovery with Gershom Scholem.[5] He then returned to America where he sought the opinions of his mentors Erwin Goodenough and Arthur Darby Nock. "God knows what you've got hold of," Goodenough said.[6] "They made up all sorts of stuff in the fifth century," said Nock. "But, I say, it is exciting."[7]

At the 1960 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Morton Smith announced his discovery to the scholarly community, openly presenting a translation and discussion of the Clementine letter. A well-written account of his presentation, with a photograph of the Mar Saba monastery, appeared the next morning on the front page of The New York Times.[8] A list of the seventy-five manuscripts Smith catalogued appeared the same year in the journal Archaeology[9] as well as the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate journal, Nea Sio.[10] And Morton Smith embarked on a decade of meticulous investigation into the nature of his find.

The Reaction (1973–1982)

While there may seem nothing particularly scandalous about the apocryphal episodes of Secret Mark in and of themselves, the release of the material to the general public aroused a great deal of popular and scholarly derision. Smith wrote two books on the subject: first, the voluminous and intricate scholarly analysis Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark, and then The Secret Gospel, a thin and conversational popular account of the discovery and its interpretation. The first book was delivered to the Harvard University Press in 1966, but was very slow at going through the press.[11] Smith's popular treatment, however, was released by Harper and Row in the summer of 1973. This is the version that most scholars had in their hands first. What did it say that was so shocking?

Smith's analysis of the Secret Mark text—and consequently the wider body of literature bearing on the history of early Christianity—brought him to consider unusual possibilities. Because Secret Mark presents a miracle story, this meant a particular concentration upon material of a like type. Smith was working outside of the traditional school of Biblical criticism which automatically regarded all miracle accounts as mythological inventions of the early Christian communities.[12] Instead of taking as his goal the theological deconstruction of the miracle traditions, Smith asked to what degree the miracle stories of the gospels might in fact be based upon actions of Jesus, much in the same way scholars examine the sayings traditions.

It has been typical for critical scholars of the Bible to reject any historical foundation for the "miracle-worker" stories about Jesus. Because such tales would tend to rely on the supernatural, and scholars seek to understand the origins of the Bible in realistic terms, it is more plausible for the modern critic to propose reasons for which an early Christian community might have come to understand Jesus as a miracle-worker and subsequently engage in the production of mythologies depicting him in that mold. Smith's understanding of the kingdom language in the Christian writings, with its well-known ambivalent eschatological and yet emphatically present or "realized" tendencies, evolved to the conclusion that:

[Jesus] could admit his followers to the kingdom of God, and he could do it in some special way, so that they were not there merely by anticipation, nor by virtue of belief and obedience, nor by some other figure of speech, but were really, actually, in.[13]

Smith held that the best explanation for the literary and historical evidence surrounding the miracles of Jesus was that Jesus himself actually performed—or meant to and was understood to have performed—magical feats. Among these was a baptismal initiation rite through which he was able to "give" his disciples a vision of the heavenly spheres. This was in the form of an altered state of consciousness induced by "the recitation of repetitive, hypnotic prayers and hymns," a technique common in Jewish mystical texts, Qumran material, Greek magical papyri and later Christian practices such as the Byzantine liturgy.[14] This is a radical departure from the mainstream scholarship which seeks to minimize or eliminate altogether any possible "supernatural" elements attached to the Historical Jesus, who is most often understood as a speaker on social issues and applied ethics . . . an Elijahform social worker, if you will.

Morton Smith did not begin with that assumption, nor did his reinterpretation of Christian history arrive at it. Thus, the new theory summarized in his 1973 book for general readership displeased practically everyone:

[. . . F]rom the scattered indications in the canonical Gospels and the secret Gospel of Mark, we can put together a picture of Jesus' baptism, "the mystery of the kingdom of God." It 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. This certainly occurred in many forms of gnostic Christianity; how early it began there is no telling.[15]

In an interview with The New York Times just before his books were released onto the market, Smith noted with appreciation, "Thank God I have tenure."[16]
The Inquisition: Let's Begin

Not a moment was lost in the ensuing backlash. Smith had laid aside the canon of unwritten rules that most Biblical scholars worked by. He took the Gospels as more firmly rooted in history than in the imagination of the early church. He refused to operate with an artificially thick barrier between pagan and Christian, magic and mythology. And he not only promulgated his theories from his office in Columbia University via obscure scholarly periodicals: he had given them to the world in plain, understandable and all-too-clear language. Thus there was no time for the typical scholarly method of thorough, researched, logical refutation. The public attention span was short. It was imperative that Smith be discredited before too many Biblical scholars told the press that there might be something to his theories. Some of the high-pitched remarks of well-known scholars are amusing to us in retrospect:

Patrick Skehan: "...a morbid concatenation of fancies..."[17]
Joseph Fitzmyer: "...venal popularization..."[18] "...replete with innuendos and eisegesis..."[19]
Paul J. Achtemeier: "Characteristically, his arguments are awash in speculation."[20] "...an a priori principle of selective credulity..."[21]
William Beardslee: "...ill-founded..."[22]
Pierson Parker: "...the alleged parallels are far-fetched..."[23]
Hans Conzelmann: "...science fiction..."[24] "...does not belong to scholarly, nor even...discussable, literature..."[25]
Raymond Brown: "...debunking attitude towards Christianity..."[26]
Frederick Danker: "...in the same niche with Allegro's mushroom fantasies and Eisler's salmagundi."[27]
Helmut Merkel: "Once again total warfare has been declared on New Testament scholarship."[28]

The possibility that the initiation could have included elements of eroticism was unthinkable to many scholars, whose reaction was to project onto Smith's entire interpretive work an imaginary emphasis on Jesus being a homosexual:

[...T]he fact that the young man comes to Jesus "wearing a linen cloth over his naked body" naturally suggests implications which Smith does not fail to infer.[29]

Hostility has marked some of the initial reactions to Smith's publication because of his debunking attitude towards Christianity and his unpleasant suggestion that Jesus engaged in homosexual practices with his disciples.[30]

Many others cited rather prominently the homoerotic overtures of Smith's thesis in their objections to his overall work.[31] Another criticism, which holds more weight from a scholar's standpoint, was Smith's rejection of the form and redaction critical techniques preferred by the reviewer.[32]

Two scholars, embarassingly, found a flaw in Smith's use of what they considered too much documentation, as a ploy to confuse the reader.[33]

Many scholars felt that the Secret Mark fragments were a pastiche from the four gospels, some even suggesting that Mark's style is so simple to imitate the fragment must be a useless pseudopigraphon.[34]

In reaction to Clement's claim to perform initiation rites, some scholars simply dogmatized that Alexandrian Christians only used words like "initiation" and "mystery" in a figurative sense, therefore the letter must not be authentic.[35]

Finally, some reactions truly border on the petty. Two scholars held that Morton Smith didn't really "discover" the Secret Gospel of Mark at all. Because the letter only contains two fragments of it, Smith is described as dishonest in his subtitle "The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel of Mark."[36] Worst of all is Danker, who complains that the Smith's first, non-technical book does not include the Greek text. "The designer of the jacket, as though fond of palimpsests, has obscured with the book title and the editor's name even the partial reproduction of Clement's letter," and that while there is another photo inside the book, "the publishers do not supply a magnifying glass with which to read it."[37] All this just to tell us that, after he and a companion had painstakingly transcribed the Greek text, Smith's transcription and translation are "substantially correct."[38] He deceptively omits that Smith's Harvard edition includes large, easily legible photographic plates of the original manuscript, alleging that Smith was "reluctant...to share the Greek text"[39] he had discovered.

Only one reviewer, Fitzmeyer, saw it worthwhile to point out that Morton Smith was bald. Whatever importance we may attach to the thickness of a scholar's hair, it seems that detached scholarly criticism fails when certain tenets of faith--even "enlightened" liberal faith--are called into question.

Is the Ink Still Wet? The Question of a Forgery

Inevitably a document which is so controvertial as Secret Mark will be accused of being a forgery. This is precisely what happened in 1975 when Quentin Quesnell published his lengthy paper "The Mar Saba Clementine: A Question of Evidence" in the Catholic Biblical Quarterly. In this article he brings to bear a host of objections to Smith's treatment of the document.

Foremost is the lack of the physical manuscript. Smith left the manuscript in the tower at Mar Saba in 1958 and had been working with
his set of photographs ever since. Quesnell regards this as a neglect of Smith's scholarly duties.[40] Perhaps those duties might be assumed to include the theft of the volume a la Sinaiticus or the Jung Codex. In fact, even Smith's publication of photographic plates of the ms. are considered sub-standard by Quesnell. They "do not include the margins and edges of the pages," they "are only black and white," and are in Quesnell's eyes marred by "numerous discrepancies in shading, in wrinkles and dips in the paper."[41] Quesnell calls into question all of Smith's efforts to date the manuscript to the eighteenth century. Although Smith consulted many paleographic experts, Quesnell feels this information is to be useless compared to a chemical analysis of the ink, and a "microscopic examination of the writing."[42]

Then he asks the "unavoidable next question"[43]: was the letter of Clement a modern forgery? He remarks that Smith "tells a story on himself that could make clear the kind of motivation that might stir a serious scholar even apart from any long-concealed spirit of fun."

[44] Pointing out Smith's interest in how scholars tend to fit newly-discovered evidence into their previously-held sacrosanct interpretive paradigms,[45] and how Smith requested scholars in his longer treatise to keep him abreast of their research,[46] Quesnell asks if it might not be that a certain modern forger who shall not be named might have "found himself moved to concoct some 'evidence' in order to set up a controlled experiment"?[47]

Quesnell raises still more objections, and representative of them is his claim that the mass of documentation Smith brought to bear in Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark is really a ploy to distract the reader. "[. . .] It is hard to believe that this material is included as a serious contribution to scholarly investigation," Quesnell suggests.[48] In fact, he insinuates that its function is really to "deepen the darkness."[49]

Quesnell did not feel that scholarly discussion could "reasonably continue" until all these issues--and more--were resolved.[50]

Smith's answer to the accusation of forgery was published in the next volume of the Catholic Biblical Quarterly. Humorously he advised his detractor that "one should not suppose a text spurious simply because one dislikes what it says."[51]

"Not at all," was Quesnell's reply. "I find it quite harmless."[52]

Quesnell's arguments were still echoed in 1983 by Per Beskow, who wrote that Smith "can only present some mediocre photographs, which do not even cover the entire margins of the manuscript."[53] While the photographic plates in the Harvard volume do not extend to the margins due to the cropping of the publishers,[54] Smith's photographs are printed elsewhere and do include the margins of the pages. Furthermore, they are quite in-focus and cannot be described as mediocre.

The Popular Response

The religious right was particularly displeased with the new Secret Gospel of Mark. Even without the magical interpretation of earliest Christianity Smith promulgated in his two books, the discovery of another apocryphal gospel only spells trouble for conservative theologians and apologists. What information about Secret Mark made it past the blockade into the evangelical press? There was Ronald J. Sider's quick review in Christianity Today.

Unfounded . . . wildly speculative . . . pockmarked with irresponsible inferences . . . highly speculative . . . operates with the presupposition that Jesus could not have been the incarnate Son of God filled with the Holy Spirit . . . simply absurd! . . . unacceptable . . . highly speculative . . . numerous other fundamental weaknesses . . . highly speculative . . . irresponsible . . . will not fool the careful reader.[55]

Evangelical scholarship has since treated Secret Mark as it traditionally has any other non-canonical text: as a peculiar but ultimately unimportant document which would be spiritually dangerous to take seriously.

Secret Mark and Da Avabhasa's Initiation to Ecstasy

Perhaps the strangest chapter in Secret Mark's long history was its appropriation by the Free Daist Communion, a California-based Eastern religious group led by American-born guru Da Avabhasa (formerly known as Franklin Jones, Da Free John, and Da Kalki). In 1982, The Dawn Horse Press, the voice of this interesting sect, re-published Smith's Harper and Row volume, with a new foreword by Elaine Pagels and an added postscript by Smith himself.

In 1991 I made contact with this publisher in order to ascertain why they were interested in Secret Mark. I was answered by Saniel Bonder, Da Avabhasa's official biographer and a main spokesman for the Communion.

Heart-Master Da Avabhasa is Himself a great Spiritual "Transmitter" or "Baptizer" of the highest type. And this is the key to understanding both His interest in, and The Dawn Horse Press's publication of, Smith's Secret Gospel. What Smith discovered, in the fragment of the letter by Clement of Alexandria, is--to Heart-Master Da--an apparent ancient confirmation that Jesus too was a Spirit-Baptizer who initiated disciples into the authentic Spiritual and Yogic process, by night and in circumstances of sacred privacy. This is the single reason why Heart-Master Da was so interested in the story. As it happened, Morton Smith's contract with a previous publisher had expired, and so he was happy to arrange for us to publish the book.[56]

Because of the general compatibility of Smith's interpretation of the historical Jesus and the practices of the Da Free John community, the group's leader was inclined to promulgate Smith's theory. It is difficult to judge the precise degree of ritual identity which exists between Master Da and Jesus the magician. Some identity, however, is explicit, as revealed in Bonder's official biography of Master Da:

Over the course of Heart-Master Da's Teaching years, His devotees explored all manner of emotional-sexual possibilities, including celibacy, promiscuity, heterosexuality, homosexuality, monogamy, polygamy, polyandy, and many different kinds of living arrangements
The parallel between the Daist community during this time and the libertine Christian rituals described by Smith is made stronger by the spiritual leader's intimate involvement with this thorough exploration of the group's erogeny. "Heart-Master Da never withheld Himself from participation in the play of our experiments with us." [58] Georg Feuerstein has published an interview with an anonymous devotee of Master Da who describes a party during which the Master borrowed his wife in order to free him of egotistical jealousy. [59]

Like the Carpocratians of eighteen-hundred years ago, and the Corinthian Christians of a century earlier still, the devotees of the Daist Communion sought to come to terms with and conquer their sexual obstacles to ultimate liberation not by merely denying the natural urges, but by immersing themselves in them.

For many years Da Avabhasa himself was surrounded by an "innermost circle" of nine female devotees, which was dismantled in 1986 after the Community and the Master himself had been through trying experiences. [60] In 1988 Da Avabhasa formally declared four of these original nine longtime female devotees his "Kanyakas," the significance of which is described well by Sanjel Bondar:

Kanyadan is an ancient traditional practice in India, wherein a chaste young woman...is given...to a Sat-Guru either in formal marriage, or as a consort, or simply as a serving intimate. Each kanya thus becomes devoted...in a manner that in unique among all His devotees. She serves the Sat-Guru Personally at all times and, in that unique context, at all times is the recipient of His very Personal Instructions, Blessings, and Regard. [61]

As a kanyada "kumari," a young woman is necessarily "pure"--that is, chaste and self-transcending in her practice, but also Spiritually Awakened by her Guru, whether she is celibate or Yogically sexually active. [62]

The formation of the Da Avabhasa Gurukala Kanyadan Kumari Order should be seen against the background of sexual experimentation and confrontation through which the Master's community had passed in the decade before, and in light of the sexuality-affirming stance of the Daist Communion in general. The Secret Gospel presented a picture of Jesus as an initiator into ecstasy and a libertine bearing more than a little resemblance to the radical and challenging lessons of Master Da Avabhasa, in place long before 1982 when The Dawn Horse Press re-issued the book. [63]

Where Are We Now? (Scholarly Interest from 1982 to the present)

For scholars the problem remains unsettled. While even the most acid of reviews often ended with a statement to wit that a real conclusion would require an in-depth treatment of Smith's books, none came. In 1982 Smith commented wryly on the rhetoric of the reviews which made work on the Secret Mark problem almost impossible in the 1970s:

For example, Achtemeier's review, of which the predemndedly factual statements are often grossly inaccurate. Though worthless as criticism, it cannot confidently be described as "useless." It probably pleased Fitzmyer, who was then editor of The Journal of Biblical Literature, and thus may have helped Achtemeier get the secretaryship of the Society of Biblical Literature. That both names rhyme with "liar" is a curious coincidence. [66]

Some important Catholic scholars, including Achtemeier, Fitzmyer, Quesnell, Skehan and Brown, have tended to ignore Secret Mark or dismiss it as worthless. C.S. Mann's Anchor Bible commentary on Mark, published in 1986, represents the whole controversy as finished, a matter of "mere curiosity." [67] With the blessing of the Imprimatur behind him, John P. Meier advised in 1991 that Secret Mark, the Gospels of Thomas and Peter, the Egerton Gospel and all other non-canonical Jesus material were worthless and might simply be thrown "back into the sea." [68]

At the same time, there has been an increase in the number of scholars producing Secret Mark studies since 1982. That "Morton Smith seems quite alone in his view that the fragment is a piece of genuine Gospel material," as claimed in 1983 by Beskow is manifestly false. [69] Smith's work in the early 70s was greeted with more-or-less positive reviews by a small number of important scholars including Helmut Koester, Cyril Richardson, George MacRae, and Hugh Trevor-Roper. Some scholars did not write reviews but openly expressed the notion that Smith's work was meritorious. When asked by the New York Times about Smith's interpretation of Jesus as a magician, Kristler Stendhal tactfully replied, "I have much sympathy for that way of placing Jesus in the social setting of his time." [70]

While that sympathy does not remain particularly widespread, accepting Smith's magical Jesus has nothing to do with taking Secret Mark seriously. The two issues may be discussed seperately: the argument for magical practises in early Christianity may certainly be made without reference to Secret Mark, and Secret Mark may be discussed as a text with no more magical implications than we find in
In Thomas Talley's 1982 article on ancient liturgy, he describes his own attempt to physically examine the Secret Mark manuscript. As his is the last word on the physical artifact in question, it is fortuitous to quote him at length:

Given the late date of the manuscript itself and the fact that Prof. Smith published photographs of it, it seemed rather beside the point that some scholars wished to dispute the very existence of a manuscript which no one but the editor had seen. My own attempts to see the manuscript in January of 1980 were frustrated, but as witnesses to its existence I can cite the Archimandrite Meliton of the Jerusalem Greek Patriarchate who, after the publication of Smith's work, found the volume at Mar Saba and removed it to the patriarchal library, and the patriarchal librarian, Father Kallistos, who told me that the manuscript (two folios) has been removed from the printed volume and is being repaired.

Although one wishes this document were available for the examination of Western scholars, it is no longer reasonable to doubt the existence of the manuscript itself. That it represents an authentic tradition from Clement of Alexandria is disputed only by a handful of scholars and, as Talley also points out, the letter has itself been included in the standard edition of the Alexandrian father's writings since 1980.

Taking on the pressing question of Secret Mark's textual relationship with the version of Mark in our New Testament, Helmut Koester has published two intriguing studies arguing that the development of Mark was an evolutionary process. First came the version of Mark known by Matthew and Luke, the proto-Mark or Urkarkus long known to scholars of the synoptic problem. After this original version of Mark was published, the expanded version used by the Alexandrian church in Christian mysteries was made (and from that, its gnostized Carpocratian version). Soon afterward or simultaneously, a mostly expurgated version of Secret Mark was published widely and became canonical Mark. The original Urmarkus, lacking anything not found in Matthew or Luke, went the way of the sayings source and was not preserved.

Koester's view has made some inroads. Hans-Martin Schenke adopts it with the modification that Carpocratian Mark predates the Secret Mark of the Alexandrian Church. John Dominic Crossan developed a theory like Koester's in his 1985 Four Other Gospels. Secret Mark has been included in the texts being translated as part of the Scholars Version project, and is described as an early gospel fragment in material that the Jesus Seminar has been making available to popular audiences. None of these treatments is significantly affected by one's assessment of the magical Jesus suggested by Smith.

Still, Jesus as magician is not a dead issue. John Dominic Crossan's very intriguing book on The Historical Jesus has an extended discussion of the topic. He argues that Jesus may indeed be understood as a magician. He rejects an artificial dichotomy between magic and religion, saying, "the prescriptive distinction that states that we practice religion but they practice magic should be seen for what it is, a political validation of the approved and the official against the unapproved and unofficial."[75]

Conclusion: Where No Secret Gospel Has Gone Before

Secret Mark's plight constitutes a warning to all scholars as to the dangers of allowing sentiments of faith to cloud or prevent critical examination of evidence. When seen in light of the massive literature which has been produced by the other major manuscript finds of our century, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Nag Hammadi codices, the comparative dearth of good studies on this piece in particular cannot be explained in any other way that a stubborn refusal to deal with information which might challenge deeply-held personal convictions. It is good to keep in mind an unofficial directive of the Jesus Seminar: "Beware of finding a Jesus entirely congenial to you."[76]

"It is my opinion," writes Hans Dieter Betz, "that Smith's book and the texts he discovered should be carefully and seriously studied. Criticizing Smith is not enough."[77] Certainly it is reasonable to concur. After twenty years of confusion, it must be time to set aside emotionalism and approach both this fragment and Morton Smith's assessment of the role of magic in early Christianity with objective and critical eyes. However that question is ultimately to be resolved, Secret Mark provides yet another fascinating window into the remarkable ritual diversity we may identify in the first phases of the development of Christianity.

Footnotes
1 Parker, "An Early Christian Cover-up?", 5.
2 Smith, "Monasteries and their Manuscripts."
3 Smith, The Secret Gospel, 12.
4 Smith, Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel according to Mark, 1.
6 ibid., 24.
7 ibid., 25.
8 Knox, "A New Gospel Ascribed to Mark."
9 Smith, "Monasteries and their Manuscripts."
10 Smith, "Hellenika Cheirographa en tei Monei tou Hagiou Sabba."

11 Smith, The Secret Gospel, 76.

12 Smith, Jesus the Magician, 3-4.

13 Smith, The Secret Gospel, 94.

14 ibid., 113n1.

15 ibid., 113-114.

16 Shenker, "A Scholar Infers Jesus Practiced Magic."

17 Skehan, review of Smith's work in Catholic Historical Review, 452.

18 Fitzmyer, "How to Exploit a Secret Gospel," 572.

19 Fitzmyer, "Mark's 'Secret Gospel?'", 65.

20 Achtemeier, review of Smith in Journal of Biblical Literature, 626.

21 ibid.

22 Beardslee, review of Smith in Interpretation, 234.

23 Parker, "An Early Christian Cover-Up?", 5.

24 Conzelmann, "Literaturbericht zu den Synoptischen Evangelien (Fortsetzung).", 321. (Translation from Schenke, "The Mystery of the Gospel of Mark," 70-71.)

25 ibid., 23. (Translation from Schenke, "The Mystery of the Gospel of Mark," 70-71.)


27 Danker, review of Smith in Dialog, 316.


31 Including Fitzmeyer, "How to Exploit a Secret Gospel"; Parker, "An Early Christian Cover-Up?"; Skehan, review of Smith in Catholic Historical Review 60(1974); Gibbs, review of Smith in Theology Today 30(1974); Grant, "Morton Smith's Two Books"; Merkel, "Auf den Spuren des Urmarkus?"; Kummel, "Ein Jahrzehnt Jesusforschung"; and Beskow, Strange Tales about Jesus. Anitra Kolenkow's comments on this bias are salient: "We know that the gospel of John long has been known as possibly containing both gnostic and homosexual motifs. John may have been written at approximately the same time as Mark. What difference does it make to us if Jesus is not separated from a homosexual situation?" (Quoted from Kolenkow's response to Reginald Fuller, Longer Mark, 33.)

32 Examples are Achtemeier, review of Smith in the Journal of Biblical Literature 93(1974); MacRae, "Yet Another Jesus"; Gibbs, review of Smith in Theology Today 30(1974); and Fuller, Longer Mark: Forgery, Interpolation, or Old Tradition?

33 See the statements to this effect in Quesnell, "The Mar Saba Clementine," and Hobbs (response in Fuller, Longer Mark: Forgery, Interpolation, or Old Tradition?).

34 Such scholars included Pierson Parker, Edward Hobbs and Per Beskow.


37 Danker, review of Smith in Dialog, 316.

38 ibid.

39 ibid.

40 Quesnell, "The Mar Saba Clementine," 49.

41 ibid., 50.

42 ibid., 52.
43 ibid., 53.
44 ibid., 57.
46 Smith, Clement of Alexandria, ix.
47 Quesnell, "The Mar Saba Clementine," 58.
48 ibid., 61.
49 ibid., 60n30.
50 ibid., 48.
53 Beskow, Strange Tales about Jesus, 101.
55 Sider, "Unfounded 'Secret'," 160.
56 Private correspondence with Saniel Bonder.
57 Bonder, The Divine Emergence of the World-Teacher, 234.
58 ibid., 235.
60 ibid., 94.
61 Bonder, The Divine Emergence of the World-Teacher, 287.
62 ibid., 288.
63 It is necessary to stipulate that nothing in the above discussion of the Free Daist Communion should be read as derogatory. The purpose is simple description. Despite the controversy which has sometimes surrounded this movement, the author does not feel that its practices are in any way fraudulent or abusive. Scholars should consider the possibility that examination of modern new religious movements such as the Da Avabhasa sect might be extraordinarily helpful in our understanding of the community dynamics of early libertine Christians such as the Carpocratians.
65 Prophet, The Lost Years of Jesus, 9. Most interestingly, in her notes Prophet quotes a 1984 telephone interview with scholar Birger A. Pearson, in which he says that "many scholars, maybe even most, would now accept the authenticity of the Clement fragment, including what it said about the Secret Gospel of Mark." (434n16)
67 Mann, Mark (The Anchor Bible), 423.
68 Meier, A Marginal Jew, 140.
69 Beskow, Strange Tales about Jesus, 99. One wonders what a "genuine piece of gospel material" might be. Are gospel additions such as the second ending of Mark (16.9-20) and the famous story of the adulterous woman (John 8.53-9.11) "genuine gospel material," even if we know they were not originally part of the gospels in which they are found?
70 Shenker, "Jesus: New Ideas about his Powers."
71 Talley, "Liturgical Time in the Ancient Church," 45.
72 ibid.
74 Schenke, "The Mystery of the Gospel of Mark," 76.
75 Crossan, The Historical Jesus, 310.
Bibliography


