

## **The Secret Gospel of Mark Revisited**

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The argument of my book, *The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled*, is summarized on pp. 1-2 of the handout. It begins with observation that the Mar Saba text published by Morton Smith, a purported letter from Clement of Alexandria, reports five streams of tradition: (1) Mark's Roman account of "the Lord's doings . . . those he thought most useful for increasing the faith of those who were being instructed" that is, the catechumens; (2) the "more spiritual Gospel for the use of those who were being perfected" or initiated, consisting of Mark's "own notes and those of Peter, from which he transferred to his former book the things suitable to whatever makes for progress toward knowledge (gnosis)" (3) "the things not to be uttered (*aporrhēta*), . . . the hierophantic teaching of the Lord," which Mark did NOT divulge; (4) the ritual use of these gospels in "the church in Alexandria," when in Alexandria "it even yet is most carefully guarded, being read only to those who are being initiated into the great mysteries"; we are told that Mark, "as a mystagogue," had added to the second gospel stories and sayings "of which he knew the interpretation would . . . lead the hearers into the innermost sanctuary of that truth hidden by seven veils. . . ."; (5) the Carpocratian gospel and its interpretations.

Most accessible to critical evaluation is stream 4, wherein the two recensions of Mark's gospel were read to people at different stages of initiation. Contrary to what some reviewers wrote, I did NOT say that the author of Longer Mark intended to describe a baptism. I said that the author of the letter placed both gospels within a process of initiation specific to Alexandria; the original recipient of the letter was evidently unfamiliar with it. From the writings of Justin Martyr we know that the Christian initiatory process had already received its basic shape by the early second century: a long preparatory period of teaching, fasting, and prayer led up to water immersion, often combined with anointing, and culminating in the neophyte's first reception of the eucharist [Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) 237-44.] If the Mar Saba letter was written at any time in the pre-Nicene period, it would be a unique and invaluable source, the only source to specify which texts were read to the candidates. But in fact the text cannot be describing pre-Nicene Alexandria. Its most notable features are a Lazarus-like Resurrection story, 6 days of teaching prior to an enigmatic nocturnal "mystery of the kingdom of God" in which the candidate wears a linen cloth, and the unexplained rejection of a group of women. This is most unlike the

early Alexandrian practice, where baptism was celebrated on Epiphany and commemorated Jesus' baptism by John, not on Eastern commemorating the Resurrection. In the genuine writings of Clement, discussions of baptism assume Jesus' own baptism as the model, and the imagery of Clement's Prophetic Eclogues ranges from the light and waters of creation to John's promise of baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire. The other Alexandrian groups that Clement tells us about also practiced Epiphany baptism commemorating John baptizing Jesus in the Jordan, not Easter baptism with Resurrection themes. Similarly, Thomas Talley's theory that the early Egyptian church read a story resembling the raising of Lazarus shortly before Easter can be shown to be incorrect. What the Mar Saba text resembles much more is the construction of early Christian initiation that was taught to Episcopal seminarians of Smith's generation, based on patristic sermons of the fourth and fifth centuries..

This is true even though the Mar Saba letter is full of mystery/initiation vocabulary that frequently echoes Clement's undisputed writings, including his most famous passages on baptism, illumination, and being perfected. Clement's letter, in fact, is constructed in much the same way as the two excerpts of longer Mark, which echo phrasing and vocabulary from the canonical gospels and apocryphal references to Salome. In turn, both resemble Smith's technique of "scattered indications," amassing details from a broad range of ancient texts, wrenched out of context and often twisted beyond recognition, re-assembling them into imaginary rituals that Smith described as "magic," with no regard for differences among the religions from which they were excerpted.

Beyond their patchwork construction, the other feature shared by the gospel, the letter, and Smith's writings is the pervasive hinting that the supposed magic involved ritualized homosexual acts. These hints occur in the two excerpts from longer Mark, in the letter's condemnations of the Carpocratians, and in many of Smith's own constructions of what he thought "magic" involved. Yet the Mar Saba text seems out of step with late antique writings about homosexuality. Though I was accused of assuming that Jesus would have known and followed the customs of 4<sup>th</sup>-century BC Athens, what I actually demonstrated was that the Platonic philosophers of Clement's time looked to Plato's writings for their understanding of what homosexuality is. Longer Mark was, after all, asserted to have been written in Alexandria, not in Palestine. And yet the Mar Saba text misunderstands the relationship between older man and young beloved depicted in the Symposium and other ancient Greek texts.

On the other hand, English universities of the Victorian era were home to a homosexual subculture that identified itself with Plato and with ancient heresies, but was also given to constructing fanciful early Christian liturgies, and reassembling Biblical passages into unheard-of humorous narratives. A central text in this milieu was Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*, and if she is identified with the Salome in the Mar Saba text, it comes alive with vivid characters and a clear message, overturning the remarkably rigid morality that Smith himself upheld during his brief career as a priest. Clement, who had been cited in Catholic-Anglican polemic as saying it was morally acceptable to lie for the good of the Church, instructs Theodore to lie about the "fact" that Alexandria had a secret initiatory tradition going back to Mark, which was actually little different from the frankly homosexual rites of the Carpocratians. As a hypocritical Christian clergyman,

Clement exalts heterosexuality as the ideal, pointing to the seven-veiled truth that is actually Salomé, who caused the death of Jesus' cousin, and who, in Smith's opinion, was described in ancient apocryphal gospels as attempting to seduce Jesus. Thus the 4<sup>th</sup> stream of tradition only validates the claims of the 5<sup>th</sup> stream, that Jesus's own initiations were homosexual. This in turn validates the hints of homosexuality in the second stream, longer Mark. And the Victorian background identifies the third stream of unwritten teaching as homosexuality, "the love that dare not speak its name." The word *aporrhēta*, after all, can refer both to things that are unspeakable because they are ineffable and to things that are unspeakable because they are obscene. In short, the correct literary genre for the Mar Saba text is what folklore researchers call "extended double entendre," since the position identified with the Carpocratians represents the author's true loyalty, and conventional Christian heterosexual morality is being ridiculed in the person of the hypocritical, lying Clement. Since folklore research is surprisingly little known in Biblical Studies, I include a classic example of an extended double entendre at the bottom of p. 2.

The major criticisms of my book boil down to five, which are listed in the handout with quotations and rebuttals. The first objection is that I only disproved Smith's theory that Jesus practiced homosexual initiation rites; I did not discredit the Mar Saba text itself. But no one who has made this argument has come up with a more compelling interpretation than mine—the only one that accounts for every single feature of the text. The one who has tried the hardest, Scott G. Brown, has actually demonstrated that, to shoehorn this text into the early Christian period, one basically has to destroy it: it was not a secret gospel, it was not controversial, it does not describe an initiation process, it adds no value to canonical Mark, because it says nothing that is not already found in canonical Mark, and so on. You cannot say my interpretation is wrong if you can offer none of your own. I admit it would have been helpful for me to give a more detailed comparison with Clement's writings; but my study of the rituals of Clement's church requires so much background and comparison with other ancient texts that I could not see how to fit it all into the same book as the Mar Saba letter. Therefore I've listed some details on p. 3 of the handout.

The second objection, made by Brown, is that Clement of Alexandria's use of mystery language refers only to allegorical interpretation of the scriptures, not to rituals or sacraments. But on this topic Brown is completely out of his depth. As recounted in Jonathan Z. Smith's book *Drudgery Divine*, there are thousands of publications since the 17<sup>th</sup> century on the Christian use of mystery language, and most of them are distorted either by a Protestant polemic that seeks to depict sacramental Catholicism as a paganizing corruption of Christianity, or a rationalist polemic that wants to present the Christ of faith as a Hellenistic apotheosis of the historical Jesus, a simple Galilean peasant notable only for his ethical teaching. Brown's limited and outdated bibliography presents the sacramental use of mystery vocabulary as a late development, too late for Clement of Alexandria. But Clement's writings are actually central to this development; in them we can witness the coalescence of four kinds of mystery vocabulary, laying the groundwork for the more developed theological language of Chrysostom and the Pseudo-Areopagite, as I have shown in an article I summarized on p. 4. Clement uses the mystery vocabulary of Jewish apocalyptic to refer to the presence of the incarnate Logos in the communal reading and exposition of the scriptures and in the rites of initiation that

culminate in the eucharist. He uses the vocabulary of the ancient mystery cults to describe their defiling sexual rites. He uses the Platonic, Philonic philosophical vocabulary of mystery to describe the spiritual growth of the gnostic Christian, who feeds on the scriptures but also on the eucharistic sacrifice, described as an epoptic vision like the mysteries of Eleusis. And, following Philo, he applies typological reinterpretation of Old Testament priestly rituals to Christian worship. Clement of Mar Saba utilizes this fourth vocabulary when he speaks of “the adyton of that seven-veiled truth.” But he has no sense of the apocalyptic-incarnational vocabulary and little sense of the philosophical. But mostly he follows the usage of the Protrepticus, turning the tables on the real Clement of Alexandria by implying that Christian rites are just as sexual and defiling. The Alexandrian’s descriptions of baptism as perfecting and illuminating are referenced in Mar Saba, but other baptismal terminology such as “the seal” sphragis is not.

The third objection is that I grossly exaggerated the alleged homosexuality in the text, which is really limited to one offhand joke by Morton Smith. But this argument is simply not sustainable: Smith’s writings are full of jocular proposals that Jesus practiced ritualized homosexuality with his disciples, as discussed on pp. 5-6.

More interesting are the letters between Smith and Gershom Scholem, newly published by Guy Stroumsa. Stroumsa argues tautologically that if we take Smith’s statements about the Mar Saba text at face value, we will see that Smith was sincere. But in fact the letters reveal three new bits of information: (1) Smith was studying Clement as early as 1948, and was writing a book about Mark in 1955-56, as shown in quotations K, L, M, N. (2) Smith’s understanding of the Carpocratians as “libertines” came about by reading Scholem’s view of the Frankists, a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish heresy, into the writings of Clement and Irenaeus. (3) The letters also begin to answer the important question of where Smith got his idiosyncratic understanding of magic and shamanism. A huge bibliography on these topics was available in Smith’s time, but he rarely mentioned it, and then only to ridicule it, as in quotation O on p. 7. But quotation P shows that in 1945, while he was still active as an Episcopal deacon, Smith was enthusiastically reading Aleister Crowley, well known for incorporating masturbation, heterosexual intercourse, and anal intercourse into the 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> degrees (out of 12) of initiation into his *Ordo Templi Orientis*. [*Magical Diaries of Aleister Crowley: Tunisia 1923*, ed. Stephen Skinner (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1999) 26, 51, 67, 69, 93, 95-96, 98, 102, 107, 182-83, 204, 205, 219, 241.] This organization still exists, but according to its web sites the 11<sup>th</sup> level of initiation is now optional (<http://oto-usa.org/init.html> , <http://lib.oto-usa.org/libri/liber0194.html> ). Particularly notable is Smith’s appreciation of Crowley’s play *Mortadello*, since it has a central character who resembles Oscar Wilde’s Salomé: a religious hypocrite named Monica who, while pretending to be a pious virgin, schemes to seize the throne of Venice by murder and seduction, ultimately dancing a veiled oriental dance to entice Count Mortadello, by then her fiancé, into drinking poison. Her reign is then endorsed by the Papal legate, a clerical hypocrite to rival Clement of Mar Saba. I have more unpublished letters from Smith, discovered in the past month, transcribed on the last two pages of my handout; we can discuss them later in the session.

Finally, some people were offended that I raised questions about Smith’s mental health, though I was hardly the first person to do so. Everyone has mental health issues, and it is appropriate to consider them when writing about any historical figure. Smith’s

writings, especially *The Secret Gospel*, his account of how he discovered the text, are full of deceptions and contradictions, euphoric bouts of amnesia, musings on the fallibility of memory, ferocious savaging of people who can't understand him because they are blinded by religious or scholarly orthodoxies, scornful jeering at psychiatry, and assertions that mental illness is a mere social construct, except in the case of early Christianity, which was a veritable stampede of lunatics infected by a flu-like epidemic of schizophrenia—though in fact schizophrenia is not an infectious disease. See quotations S, T, U, V. Surely all this should factor into any decision whether to trust what Smith tells us about his discovery. Yet I wasn't playing psychiatrist, as some of my critics claimed, nor throwing in the kitchen sink in a desperate attempt to discredit him by all available means. In fact I exercised considerable restraint. I refrained from publishing any of the remarkable stories I heard from people who knew Smith, though some of them, if true, would be quite revealing. Rather than try to verify any of these tales, I deliberately restricted myself to what is found in Smith's own writings. And, since I never met him and am not a mental health professional, I did not publish my opinion as to what his diagnosis probably was. The members of the present panel, most of whom are active in the Psychology and Biblical Studies Section, are better qualified than I to discuss these issues. Let us hear what they have to say.

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