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***The Secret Gospel and Alexandrian Baptism (a response to Peter Jeffery's *The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled*)***

Although honored, I am surprised to find myself on the dais of a meeting of the Psychology and Biblical Studies section of the SBL. As an historian of early Christian art and liturgy, I am way off my usual turf.

I believe my invitation was prompted by a serendipitous conversation I had with Peter Jeffery a year and a half ago – at a conference on Medieval Christianity, sponsored by New York's Museum of Biblical Art. Prof. Jeffery's brilliant wife and I were among the presenters. Arriving early to load and check our powerpoint presentations, I met Peter. Our conversation turned to his work on Morton Smith and the Secret Gospel, and I mentioned that I had been one of Smith's graduate students, at Columbia in the years 1983-1985.

In the interest of accuracy, although I went to Columbia in order to study Hellenistic Religions with Smith, I changed direction and finished my dissertation with a member of Columbia Art History department and a historian of ancient Christianity. Nevertheless, I have vivid memories of late afternoons spent in Smith's office, undergoing an exercise that most of his students were subjected to – being asked to read out and translate an ancient text that he would select at random from a shelf behind his desk.

I was not a stellar student during these twice-weekly one-on-one sessions. My Latin was not anywhere good enough for him and he was especially vexed at my old-school pronunciation of Greek.

That said, Smith was unfailingly gracious toward me. He probably did not judge me his most promising student, but he never humiliated me, no matter how exasperated he got. In our second year together, I was pregnant with my first child – an increasingly obvious state that elicited a sweet side to his character. As the fall term days grew shorter and colder, Smith insisted on escorting me to Columbia's Broadway gates after our evening sessions, lest I slip on some ice. He would don his leather coat and wool beret, offer me his arm, and we would ceremonially process out of Fayerweather Hall, down the stairs of the Low Library, and along College Walk. Once we arrived safely at the gates, he would

release me, bow, and wait until I was out of sight before he went his own way (inevitably to the faculty club for dinner).

That semester I also served as Smith's teaching assistant. He taught an introduction to Christianity to Columbia undergraduates, all of them male and more than half of them Jews and disaffected Gentiles. Here I experienced the sardonic and even derisive Smith. He enjoyed mocking traditional Christian beliefs and found an appreciative audience in this gathering of self-styled young sophisticates. However, I caught him winking at me from time to time, when class members guffawed at a particularly scornful crack and then realized that he saw it all as a game. Although the students never caught on, his wink suggested to me that he actually despised the lions far more than the Christians. And, as we know now, he never renounced his ordination – dying as an Anglican priest (even if a conflicted one).

However, Smith was an enigma. He was brilliant, cagey, and thoroughly enjoyed a prank. He could be nasty, but he could also be gratuitously generous. He would have been a good double agent. Two things I am sure of: he was smart enough to fool almost any living soul, and he took immense pleasure in trapping fools. If the innocent sometimes got hurt, he might have judged that collateral damage with a jaded Darwinian eye. I say this with affection and guarded appreciation, not with pity or condemnation.

These stories are, perhaps, part of why I was invited to be here today. But I was also asked to comment on whether the *Secret Gospel's* account of baptism can be squared with what we know about the liturgical or sacramental context of Alexandria in the first or second century – that is either in Mark's time or in Clement's. To quote Peter Jeffery: "How these early Christian sacraments were actually administered ought to be a central issue in the debate over what to make of the Mar Saba fragment (17)."

In general, early Egyptian baptismal practice is a mystery. Historians of liturgy tend to avoid it, not so much from neglect as from a dearth of documentary or material data. Georg Kretschmar produced the only really extensive work in the early 1960s, followed by Maxwell Johnson and Paul Bradshaw in the 1980s and 1990s, and (most recently) Everett Ferguson (2009).

Most scholars concur with Jeffery's assertion that, in their eagerness to renew the church's rituals in the mid-twentieth century, liturgists rashly assumed that baptism was anciently, commonly (and normatively) administered during the Paschal vigil. In fact, our only pre fourth-century evidence for Easter baptism comes from a single line of Tertullian, which identifies Easter as *one* of the more appropriate times for administering the rite, along with Pentecost. After that, it says all other days, hours, or seasons were equally suitable (*De Baptismo* 19).

The *Apostolic Tradition* traditionally assigned to Hippolytus (and a key source text for the liturgical renewal movement) is irrelevant to resolving the question. Not only are the origins and date of the baptismal section of that document disputed, but also it never clearly asserts that baptism took place at Easter.

The question of Easter baptism is crucial because the *Secret Gospel of Mark* was a key piece of evidence for Thomas Talley's, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (1986). Talley (then teaching at New York's General Theological Seminary) used *SM* to explain the links between an ancient baptismal practice in Alexandria and Holy Week commemorations in Jerusalem.

Very briefly, Talley wished to explain how different regional patriarchates reconciled the scriptural account of Jesus' fasting for forty days *after* his baptism with the practice of an ascetic, fast-oriented preparation of baptismal candidates *before* their initiation. He also noticed that there were two distinct baptismal times in Constantinople, one just before Easter, and one during the Easter Vigil.

The practice of Alexandria was critical to his argument, since surviving festal letters of Bishop Athanasius give the first evidence for a pre-Easter (Lenten) fast of forty days some time around the mid 330s. It seems that Lent began in Alexandria – but did not conclude with a baptism at the Easter Vigil until the late fourth century.

Prior to this, Alexandrian catechumens began their preparatory fast immediately after the festal observance of Jesus' baptism (Epiphany = January 6<sup>th</sup>) and were baptized some time *before* Holy Week, on a day that must have had particular significance. Talley thought that the *Secret Gospel* provided the missing link – that baptism was administered following a liturgical reading of this esoteric Markan account of Jesus' initiation of "an unknown youth" (presumably John's Lazarus) – a reading shared only with those "being perfected."

*SM*'s discovery allowed Talley to account for an ancient practice of baptizing candidates a week before the Easter Vigil – on the "Saturday of Lazarus" in Constantinople. It also explained the observance of that Lazarus feast in fourth-century Jerusalem (attested by Egeria and others). Talley argued that Alexandrian practice influenced Constantinople, which then contributed to shaping Holy Week observances in Jerusalem.

As I noted, Talley's analysis of the question relies upon the authenticity (and antiquity) of the *Secret Gospel*. Smith's manuscript had to reflect Alexandrian tradition in Clement's time, if not an authentic gospel tradition:

We should, therefore, look for the account of Jesus' performance of initiatory rites at some later point in the narrative of his ministry, not immediately at the conclusion of the presumably brief account of his fast in the wilderness. The account of his fast, we may suppose, would be read at the outset of the church's imitation of it, but during the six weeks of that commemorative fast the narrative of Christ's ministry would continue to unfold, coming to some sort of climax at the end of those six weeks . . . that would suggest a proximity to the account of his entry into Jerusalem.

For Talley, this climax was a reading of *SM*, and the baptism of catechumens just before the commencement of Holy Week.

Talley aside, I think the more important liturgical calendar for our consideration is not that observed in fourth century (or in Constantinople), but that of early second in Alexandria— when and where Clement was supposedly writing his letter to Theodore.

As scholars (including Jeffery) know, none of Clement's (other) surviving works refer to the story of Lazarus (or another unknown youth) in connection with baptism or with baptism at paschal-tide. One could argue that the silence was a means of protecting the secret of the *Secret Gospel*, but reticence is actually not typical of Clement, who discusses the meaning of the baptismal rite in some detail in several of his treatises.

Yet, three themes in Clement's writing may be relevant to our discussion of the authenticity of the *Secret Gospel*, however:

1. Clement mentions certain "libertines" who have a baptism (or washing = απολουοντες) that condones amoral (or immoral) behavior: "they have a washing with a view to licentiousness and are baptized from self-control into fornication" (Strom. 3.18.109).

2. Clement routinely uses the idea of regeneration for baptism. The ritual, for him, has much to do with the movement from death to life (cf. Quis div., 32.2; Paed. 1.6.32). Baptism is a resurrection – and so the Lazarus story makes sense as a figure of baptism (and its reading as an occasion for the ritual).

3. Clement also speaks of baptism as "perfection" – "When we are baptized, we are illuminated; and when we are illuminated, we are adopted, and when we are adopted, we are perfected, and when we are perfected we are made immortal" (Paed. 1.6.26.1-27.2). Clement's differentiation between the uninitiated and the illuminated or "gnostic" Christians squares with *SM's* claim that it is given only to those being "perfected."

Finally, based on slightly later documents, Alexandrian does seem to have been a ritual that was performed upon nude adults in some kind of natural setting. <sup>1</sup> To be sure, Clement provided no step-by-step summary of the ritual, but we may surmise some of these detail. However, they do not distinguish Alexandrian baptism in any significant sense from baptism elsewhere.

These themes or details are potentially significant in that that their correspondence with the details of *Secret Mark* is either evidence of its authenticity or of Smith's subtlety. Because of them the *SM* has the "ring of truth" and may just "feel right" to those familiar with Clement's writings and theological stances.

From my personal experience of him, Morton Smith would have known all of Clement's works, in their various editions and in their original languages. If he was so very learned, and if he forged this document himself, what could he have gotten wrong that would exposed him now, many decades later?

Perhaps the telling error was his assuming that baptism was a ritual associated primarily with the paschal season in second-century Alexandria. This association cannot be demonstrated anywhere prior to the mid fourth century.

However, it was popularly assumed by many scholars and liturgists around the time that Smith “found” the *SM* manuscript.

Art historians who study forgeries know that this kind of mistake is exactly the sort of thing that exposes a counterfeit, but that such errors are not easily be detected until many years later (retrospectively). A typical forger unconsciously includes clues to his/her own cultural context into the work – clues that are missed by those in the same cultural context. Fortunately (or unfortunately) these initially invisible errors are glaringly obvious after some passage of time – when the bogus item suddenly looks patently wrong.<sup>2</sup>

That is, I believe, the case here. I find the hints at Jesus’ homosexuality, or secret rituals almost as culturally captive to the 1970s as an old episode of *MASH*. Furthermore, their prurient nature reminds me of those immature Columbia undergraduates who would have reacted to the idea of Jesus with an erection as deliciously scandalous.

If Morton Smith did forge this document, he pulled off an amazingly successful hoax. From what I knew of him, such a hoax was at least partly intended to teach us not to be too sure of our evidence. If this was his aim, he has accomplished it. In death as in life, my old teacher still teaches.

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<sup>1</sup> See Origen, *Lev. 10.2*; *Canons of Hippolytus* 12, 19.

<sup>2</sup> See a similar point, Jeffery, 43.