

**Raymond J. Lawrence**

**Peter Jeffery's *The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled: Imagined Rituals of Sex, Death, and Madness in a Biblical Forgery***

Two quite different conversations are ineluctably mixed into any review of Peter Jeffery's book. One conversation, the hot one, is focused on the question of the origins of the Mar Saba document, whether Morton Smith forged the document that he claimed to have found. The second conversation, less heated but perhaps more important, is on the question of the value of the Mar Saba fragment, assuming it were actually found by Morton Smith as he claims.

The second conversation has much more bearing on the soul of the original Jesus movement. My take is that the Mar Saba fragment, whatever its authorship, belongs in the big trash pile of the many far-fetched imaginary portraits of Jesus as magician guru who taught esoteric wisdom and performed various acts of hocus pocus, with implied divine assistance. If such a portrait of Jesus is accepted, we should reclassify the Jesus movement as just another irrelevant irruption of irrational and phantasmagorical thinking. But that discussion is for another day. This discussion focuses on the phenomenon of Morton Smith and whether he actually found the Mar Saba fragment as he claimed.

I believe the case for forgery is even stronger than Jeffery allows.

I come at this problem more from a clinical perspective than an academic or forensic one. Clinicians attend to the body in bed, as distinct from the world of theories and ideas. Of course, the boundary between the clinical and the academic or forensic is not a rigid one. Each informs the other. But there is a real difference.

Because I come to this from a clinical perspective, I am predisposed to look at the man. It could be said that clinicians are consistently *ad hominem*. I want to know Morton Smith's story. I would like to see a biography, or even better, an autobiography. I want to know his values and commitments. I believe all these have a strong bearing on the credibility of his ideas and theories, and perhaps more importantly, whether we can take him at his word. The latter is very important.

A biography or autobiography of Smith would be useful. If one exists I have not heard of it. Smith had all his personal papers burned at his death, so any

research into Smith's biography and personal character would not likely be rewarding at this juncture.

I think it does matter what kind of character Morton Smith was. Was he candid and consistently truthful? I don't think so. Neither does Jeffery, who takes him to be an anguished soul as well as a dishonest one. I regret that Jeffery decided to exercise "restraint by not publishing [his] personal opinion of what [Smith's] diagnosis was, or the many bizarre but revealing stories [he] heard about him from former colleagues and students." Though Jeffery is not explicit on the matter, I assume from innuendo that Smith's difficulties lay in part because he was a homosexual in an era in which it was considerably more difficult to be a homosexual than it is today. "Homosexuality was a subject of great personal importance to Smith," he writes. (121)

I think Smith's dishonesty is even more obvious than Jeffery allows.

I take a page from that great Freudian analyst, Sherlock Holmes, whose angle is that the criminal (or the case) always 'gives it away' in some obscure manner that only Holmes is savvy enough to pick up. The clue that solves the case is the proverbial dog that didn't bark.

Smith's self-presentation is buttressed by seeming candor and self-effacement that is disarming and tricky. He owns up to the fact that memory is unreliable, which is certainly true. But he is also telling us, disarmingly, that he himself is unreliable:

"No doubt if the past, like a motion picture, could be replayed, I should also be shocked to find how much of the story I have already invented. Memory is perhaps more fallacious than forgetfulness."

With further disarming candor, in what may have been his best line, Smith says, "Historians usually find what they are looking for---a fact that makes me uneasy." (p90 Smith 1973) That insightful fact also makes me uneasy, and I'm especially uneasy about the object of Smith's search. By his own account, Smith was looking for evidence that Jesus was a magician, hierophant, and mystagogue teaching secret wisdom to an inside group that was distinct from his larger public following. And we can assume that Smith was also looking for a homosexual Jesus. In the Mar Saba document he finds just that. Isn't this another dog that did not bark?

Of his discovery of the Mar Saba document Smith writes,

"I began to think it was too good to be true... Who...in a Greek monastery dedicated to the devotional life could have made up such a thing? What motive could there possibly have been for the invention of such a document?" (pp.17-18, Smith)

Smith gives himself away. He himself had abundant motives. Mar Saba presents just the kind of Jesus Smith openly acknowledged he was searching for, a hierophantic woman-hating homosexual.

Smith reveals himself to be even more deceptive when he takes his Mar Saba discovery to his mentor, the great history of religion scholar, A.D. Nock. Smith

sets him up by characterizing him as “a broad churchman and predisposed against a discovery that threatened to reveal an esoteric element at the root of Christianity.” Nevertheless, Nock is excited by Smith’s document, but believing it to be a forgery.

“Oh no, this is too much! No, my dear boy, this can’t be genuine. It must be something medieval; fourth or fifth century, perhaps. They made up all sorts of stuff in the fifth century...but it is exciting. You must do it up for an article for the *Review* [*Harvard Theological Review*].” (p.24 Smith )

Then Smith adds in conversation with Nock, “Maybe you’re right, but first of all I’m going to compare the language with that of Clement.” Now that’s quite deceptive on two counts. First, Smith already knows Clement and his language use. Second, any good forger would first study Clement in order to make the forgery appear authentic. As a scholar specializing in classical literature Smith already knew that. And of course, Mar Saba reads as they say more like Clement than Clement himself.

Smith then dismisses Nock (and another scholar he consulted) as a qualified scholar who when “confronted with important new evidence in the field of their special competence, and reaching immediately the conclusions compatible with their previous position... Consistency is a frightening virtue. If scholars [such as Nock] could react in this way, how far can I trust myself? Not far, I fear, but at least I’m aware of the problem.” (p 24 Smith) Again Smith makes a dramatic self-effacing admission. The reader is set up to think that no one with such humility would be lying!

“Who would have forged a letter to a nobody?” (p.25) Theodore? That too is deceptive. A letter forged to a nobody is much safer than one to a well-known person. When the addressee is a known quantity the possibilities of inconsistencies are increased.

Thus on balance I believe the case for a deceptive Morton Smith is even stronger than Peter Jeffery makes it.

#### *POSTSCRIPT:*

- Jeffery argues that Smith should have renounced his clerical orders in the Episcopal Church when he came to the point of no longer believing in its basic doctrines. I think that is unnecessarily rigid. The Anglican tradition, of which the Episcopal Church is a part, is extraordinarily permissive and has a very wide embrace which some think is commendable. Many persons remain Anglicans long after they have moved beyond its core teachings. Joseph Fletcher, the renowned theologian and pastoral clinician, told me about a conversation he had with his bishop after Fletcher had published an article late in life categorically denying the divinity of Jesus. Fletcher said he contacted his bishop and offered to renounce his clerical orders, but the bishop refused his offer. “A dying ember should be kept close to

the fire,” the bishop replied. Such a wonderfully wide embrace is an example of the best of Anglicanism.

- In a similar vein, Jeffery criticizes Smith for holding to a Thomist view of sex while being Anglican. (p. 156) But Anglicans hold to a wide embrace re theological positions, and Thomism is not grounds for defrocking.
- I am puzzled at Jeffrey’s seeming contention that Jesus and the early Christians prohibited sex outside marriage. (p. 199) Isn’t this a later construct?
- Does Jeffery subscribe to a literalist view of the Christian canon, that it was selected by God himself, as he implies on p. 36 ?
- Finally and quite tangentially, I am happy that this investigation has added to my collection of supporting data regarding my hypothesis some kind of sexual liberation movement was significant and persevered in early Christianity.