

Morton Smith and the Secret Gospel of Mark:
Exploring the Grounds for Doubt

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In 1958 Morton Smith (1915–1991) visited the Greek Orthodox Mar Saba Monastery in the Judean desert.¹ Among other things, he catalogued a number of old books and documents. At the 1960 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature Smith announced that during his brief visit to Mar Saba he had found three pages of Greek written on the endpapers of a seventeenth-century edition of the letters of Ignatius.² These pages comprise a letter attributed to Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215), in which a mystical, or secret, version of the Gospel of Mark is discussed. What makes the find controversial is that in one of the passages quoted from this Gospel Jesus teaches a naked young man the “mystery of the kingdom of God.” The passage, along with the discussion in the letter, could imply a homosexual encounter.

Smith published his find in two books, both released in 1973, one a lengthy and learned volume by Harvard University Press and the other a briefer, popular version by Harper & Row.³ Almost immediately there were suspicions of a hoax. An early and penetrating review was written by Quentin Quesnell, who complained of the lack of testing and several other unanswered questions.⁴ Although Smith shot back,⁵ many

¹ Established some 1500 years ago, the Mar Saba Monastery is one of the oldest continuing monasteries in the world. It is situated on the south bank of the Kidron Valley, approximately equidistant from Jerusalem to the west and the Dead Sea to the east. The name is derived from Saint Sabba (Greek: *Hagios Sabbas*; Arabic: Mar Saba), whose remains, it is believed, are preserved at the monastery. Smith visited in the summer, for three weeks.

² Isaacus Vossius, *Epistolae genuinae S. Ignatii Martyris* (Amsterdam: J. Blaeu, 1646).

³ Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973); idem, *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel according to Mark* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973). Smith supplies black and white photographs of the three pages of Greek text. For color photographs, see Charles W. Hedrick, “Secret Mark: New Photographs, New Witnesses,” *The Fourth R* 13/5 (2000): 3–16.

⁴ Quentin Quesnell, “The Mar Saba Clementine: A Question of Evidence,” *CBQ* 37 (1975): 48–67. See also Herbert Musurillo’s review in *Thought* 48 (1973): 327–31.

scholars have expressed doubts about the find. In time, two camps formed. One camp contends that not only is the Clementine letter genuine but the longer version of Mark discussed in the letter actually existed and could be the original Mark, which if so means the Gospel of Mark in today's New Testament is an abridged edition. The other camp either rejects outright the Clementine letter or regards as spurious its claim of a longer version of Mark.

If Morton Smith's Mar Saba find is genuine, then it truly is a significant discovery. At the very least we have recovered a lost letter of an important father of the church, Clement of Alexandria. The Mar Saba letter to Theodore, then, would be the only surviving letter of Clement. This letter, moreover, adds to our knowledge of the Carpocratians, supplementing what Clement says about them elsewhere. Perhaps most important of all, we have evidence of a different, longer edition of the Gospel of Mark, in circulation at least as early as the second century. Accordingly, if genuine, Smith's discovery represents a significant contribution to New Testament and patristic studies. But was his discovery genuine?

Recent studies have reignited the controversy surrounding the authenticity of Smith's find. Arguing on the basis of handwriting analysis and a number of coincidences Stephen Carlson concluded in 2005 that the Clementine letter and its quotation and discussion of a longer version of Mark (a.k.a. Secret Mark) are a hoax and the hoaxer is Morton Smith.⁶ The same year Carlson's book appeared Scott Brown published his doctoral dissertation, in which he defends the authenticity of Smith's find and offers several interpretations that differ from Smith's interpretation of the find.⁷ In a book that appeared in 2007 Peter Jeffrey came to the conclusion reached by Carlson, though he pursued different lines of

Musurillo too suspected the Mar Saba find was a modern forgery.

⁵ Morton Smith, "On the Authenticity of the Mar Saba Letter of Clement," *CBQ* 38 (1976): 196–99. See the rejoinder by Quentin Quesnell, "Reply to Smith," *CBQ* 38 (1976): 200–203.

⁶ Stephen C. Carlson, *The Gospel Hoax: Morton Smith's Invention of Secret Mark* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005).

⁷ Scott G. Brown, *Mark's Other Gospel: Rethinking Morton Smith's Controversial Discovery* (Studies in Christianity and Judaism / Études sur le christianisme et le judaïsme 15; Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005). The dissertation is "The More Spiritual Gospel: Markan Literary Techniques in the Longer Gospel of Mark" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Toronto, 1999).

evidence and nuanced some of the overlapping points of the argument somewhat differently as well. Jeffrey believes he can find ecclesiastical and personal issues of importance to Smith echoed in various ways in the Clementine letter.⁸ In 2007 Pierluigi Piovaneli also joined the debate. He too expresses doubts about the authenticity of the find.⁹ Brown has responded to the books by Carlson and Jeffrey with lengthy and very negative reviews.¹⁰ And in 2010 Francis Watson published a learned study that offers fresh arguments for concluding that Smith is indeed the author of the Clementine letter.¹¹

The controversy has been such that in recent annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature special sessions have been convened to explore and debate the matter further. At one of these meetings Harvard alumnus and distinguished scholar of Gnosticism Birger Pearson stated that he now believes the Clementine letter to be a hoax.¹² Harvard alumna and distinguished Markan scholar Adela Yarbro Collins has also concluded that in all probability Secret Mark is a hoax.¹³ However, Pearson's and Collins's distinguished Doktorvater Helmut Koester, who has made extensive use of Smith's find,¹⁴ continues to regard the letter as genuine.

⁸ Peter Jeffrey, *The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled: Imagined Rituals of Sex, Death, and Madness in a Biblical Forgery* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007). Jeffrey contends that what is depicted in the Mar Saba Clementine “cannot be made to fit at any point in the history of the Alexandrian liturgy” (p. 90).

⁹ Pierluigi Piovaneli, “L’*Évangile Secret de Marc* trente-trois ans après,” *Revue biblique* 114 (2007): 52–72, 237–54.

¹⁰ Scott G. Brown, “Factualizing the Folklore: Stephen Carlson’s Case against Morton Smith,” *HTR* 99 (2006): 291–327; idem, Review of Jeffrey, *The Secret Gospel of Mark*, in *RBL* (posted 15 September 2007): 1–47. A second review, by J. Harold Ellens, in *RBL* (posted 1 June 2009): 1–9, is strongly supportive of Jeffrey’s book and critical of Brown’s review. Also positive of Jeffrey’s study are the reviews by Robert L. Webb, in *JSHJ* 5 (2007): 216; Paul Foster, in *ExpTim* 119 (2007): 50–51; William V. Harris, “A Bible Fantasy,” in *Times Literary Supplement* 5455 (19 October 2007): 23; and Maxwell E. Johnson in *Worship* 82 (2008): 85–89.

¹¹ Francis Watson, “Beyond Suspicion: On the Authorship of the Mar Saba Letter and the Secret Gospel of Mark,” *JTS* 61 (2010): 128–70.

¹² Pearson’s 2008 SBL presentation has been published as “The Secret Gospel of Mark: A 20th Century Forgery,” *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 4 (2008), article 6, pp. 1–14. It is available online.

¹³ See A. Y. Collins, *Mark* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 486–93.

¹⁴ H. Koester, “From Mark to Secret Mark,” in Bruce C. Corley (ed.), *Colloquy on New Testament Studies: A Time for Reappraisal and Fresh Approaches* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1983), 35–58; idem, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and*

In recent issues of the *Biblical Archaeology Review* the question of the authenticity of Morton Smith's controversial Mar Saba find has been revisited.¹⁵ Hershel Shanks and some of the contributors argue that Morton Smith was probably telling the truth, that he in fact did find three pages of Greek written in the back of an old book and that he was not himself the author of these pages, nor was he party to their composition. In short, the late professor of ancient history at Columbia University was not in any way involved in a hoax.

Notwithstanding the position taken in the *Biblical Archaeology Review*, several scholars remain quite skeptical of the authenticity of the Mar Saba find. I too remain skeptical, although as recently as fifteen years ago I assumed that the Clementine letter was genuine and that there may well have been a different edition of the Gospel of Mark circulating in the second century. So why now am I so skeptical, even after some recent and not insignificant support for the authenticity of the Mar Saba find?

The Amusing Agraphon

Let me explain my position by calling attention to an unusual study that appeared in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* in 1950. Princeton University Associate Professor of Latin Paul Coleman-Norton published a leaf of Greek text that he says he found sandwiched between pages of an old Arabic book in a mosque in North Africa, where he was stationed in 1943, while serving in the US Army during World War II. Coleman-Norton tells us that he copied the Greek text and then left the mosque. Later he returned with a camera, hoping to make a photograph of the text and the old book in which it was found, but he was unable to do so. Eventually he was transferred and so never had another opportunity to see or photograph the text. A few years after the war Professor Coleman-

Development (London: SCM Press; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 293–303.

¹⁵ “‘Secret Mark’: A Modern Forgery?” *BAR* 35/6 (2009): 43. There are several essays on the topic in this issue of *BAR*: Charles W. Hedrick, “An Amazing Discovery,” 44–48, 86; Hershel Shanks, “Morton Smith—Forger,” 49–53, 86, 88; Helmut Koester, “Was Morton Smith a Great Thespian and I a Complete Fool?” 54–58, 88; Hershel Shanks, “Restoring a Dead Scholar’s Reputation,” 59–61, 90, 92. Further discussion will be found in *BAR* 36/6 (2010): 6–7, 66.

Norton transcribed the text, translated it, and added a number of philological notes and comments. He submitted his brief study to Arthur Darby Nock, editor of the *Harvard Theological Review*, who forwarded it to Bruce Metzger for evaluation. Metzger recommended that the study not be published, unless a photograph could be provided. Coleman-Norton next submitted the study to Philip Hyatt, editor of the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, who likewise forwarded it to Metzger for evaluation. Metzger again recommended that the study not be published, unless a photograph could be provided. It was submitted to the *Journal of Religion* and was again rejected, this time by editor Amos Wilder. A year or so later the study appeared, as already mentioned, in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*.¹⁶

Coleman-Norton's Greek text is an instance of what scholars call an agraphon, that is, a saying attributed to Jesus *not written* (Greek: *a-graph*) in the New Testament Gospels. Coleman-Norton calls this non-canonical saying an "amusing agraphon" and it is not hard to see why. After Jesus warns that the wicked will be cast into outer darkness, where they will weep and gnash their teeth (Matt 25:30), a thick-headed disciple asks Jesus how the toothless will be able to gnash their teeth. To this disciple Jesus replies, "Teeth will be provided."

I doubt many readers of Coleman-Norton's study have entertained the possibility that this agraphon might constitute an authentic utterance of Jesus. Coleman-Norton himself entertained the possibility but did not press it.¹⁷ The question here concerns the authenticity of the find itself, not the authenticity of the humorous saying. In other words, did Coleman-Norton find an ancient text as he claims, or has he perpetrated a hoax?

Some twenty years after the publication of Coleman-Norton's study Bruce Metzger gave the presidential lecture at the 1971 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, entitled "Literary Forgeries and Canonical Pseudepigrapha."¹⁸ He began his

¹⁶ Paul R. Coleman-Norton, "An Amusing Agraphon," *CBQ* 12 (1950): 439–49.

¹⁷ Coleman-Norton, "An Amusing Agraphon," 444–45. As to the original of the agraphon Coleman-Norton could only think of two possibilities: "either an ancient wag has been at work here or the incident occurred substantially as recorded" (p. 444). Conspicuously absent is mention of a third possibility: a *modern* wag has been at work.

¹⁸ Bruce M. Metzger, "Literary Forgeries and Canonical Pseudepigrapha," *JBL* 91 (1972): 3–24; reprinted in Metzger, *New Testament Studies: Philological, Versional, and Patristic* (NTTS 10; Leiden: Brill, 1980), 1–22. More personal details will be found in

address by discussing Coleman-Norton's study, declaring that he firmly believes that the text is a modern forgery and that the story of its being found in North Africa in 1943 is a hoax. Metzger takes this negative position because he remembers Coleman-Norton, years before the Second World War, regaling his Princeton students (of which Metzger was one) with a witticism in which Jesus assures his disciples that the damned who are toothless will receive a set of dentures so that in hell they may weep and gnash their teeth.¹⁹ Metzger's recommendation that the respective editors of the aforementioned journals require a photo was a delicate way of handling a potentially awkward situation. Instead of accusing Coleman-Norton, his former professor, of perpetrating a hoax, he simply suggested to the journal editors that he provide evidence. Of course, Metzger knew that none could be provided. Unfortunately for *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* the editor did not contact Metzger and so Coleman-Norton's spurious study was published.

Metzger rightly regarded the amusing agraphon a modern forgery primarily because Coleman-Norton possessed knowledge of its distinctive elements (i.e., the problem of toothless wicked and the punch line "teeth will be provided") *before making the discovery*. For detectives of forgeries and hoaxes this is the prime criterion: Is there evidence that the discoverer possessed knowledge of distinctive features of the discovery *before* the discovery was made? If the discoverer did possess such knowledge prior to the discovery, it is almost always assumed that forgery is involved.²⁰ A second, closely related criterion, asks if the discovery reflects the interests of the discoverer, interests in evidence prior to the discovery? If it does, forgery is suspected.

To the best of my knowledge all competent biblical scholars agree with Metzger's judgment: Professor Coleman-Norton was the author of the amusing agraphon. He not only composed the Greek text, he also fabricated the entire story of finding a leaf of Greek inserted into an old book amongst old books in a mosque in North Africa while

Bruce M. Metzger, *Reminiscences of an Octogenarian* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 136–39.

¹⁹ The agraphon reads: "‘Rabbi, how can these things be, if they be toothless?’ And Jesus answered and said: ‘O thou of little faith, trouble not thyself; if haply they will be lacking any, teeth will be provided’" (Coleman-Norton, "An Amusing Agraphon," 443 n. 18).

²⁰ See Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 72, in reference to both Coleman-Norton and Smith.

stationed there in 1943. None of it happened; the entire story is fiction.²¹

Coleman-Norton's fictional story of a find may owe its inspiration to another fiction, a novel published in 1940 entitled *The Mystery of Mar Saba*.²² This story is set in Palestine in the late 1930s, with the European war approaching. To undermine the morale of the British Empire the Nazis plant a leaf of Greek text amongst the rare books in the Mar Saba Monastery's collection, a text that an honest British scholar would subsequently discover. The Greek text, dubbed the *Shred of Nicodemus*,²³ states that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea removed the body of Jesus from the tomb and reburied it elsewhere. The implication is that Jesus was not resurrected after all; the empty tomb discovered Easter Sunday signified nothing. With faith in the resurrection dashed, the British would have little motivation and courage to fight the Nazis. Fortunately, the nefarious plot was exposed and the Greek leaf was demonstrated to be a forgery.

The Mystery of Mar Saba may well have provided Coleman-Norton with the scenario needed to introduce his spurious agraphon to the public (at least to a public somewhat

²¹ For a review of other biblical hoaxes and forgeries, see E. J. Goodspeed, *Strange New Gospels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1931); reprinted as *Famous Biblical Hoaxes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1956). For other examples, see J. A. Farrer, *Literary Forgeries* (London: Longmans, Green, 1907). Two of the forgeries reviewed by Goodspeed may be mentioned. One is known as *Acts 29*, supposedly translated by C. S. Sonnini, from a "Greek manuscript found in the Archives at Constantinople." Publisher T. G. Cole tells us that the text was found "interleaved in a copy of Sonnini's *Travels in Turkey and Greece* [*sic*], and purchased at the sale of the library and effects of the late Right Hon. Sir John Newport, Bart., in Ireland" (p. 59). The alibi is clever, for Charles Sigisbert Sonnini (1751–1812) was a real person, who in fact published *Voyage en Grèce et en Turquie* (Paris: F. Buisson, 1799), which appeared in English as *Travels in Greece and Turkey* (London: Longman & Rees, 1801). Copies of this book will be found in Harvard University's Hollis Library. Cole's tale of a Greek text, probably composed in the nineteenth century by an adherent of the British-Israel movement, found "interleaved" in an old (genuine) book matches Coleman-Norton's story. Goodspeed also tells us of a long, lost *Second Book of Acts*, translated and published in 1904 by Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie (1871–1940), who published a number of books on Philo, Plotinus, and neo-Platonism (again, see the holdings of Hollis Library). *Second Acts* narrates Paul's departure from Rome and return to Palestine. It is not clear what the original language was or where the text was supposedly found. Goodspeed (p. 101) rightly regards the work as a modern hoax, whose purpose is to prove that Jesus taught reincarnation.

²² James H. Hunter, *The Mystery of Mar Saba* (New York and Toronto: Evangelical Publishers, 1940). The book was reprinted numerous times on into the 1960s and 1970s.

²³ See Hunter, *Mystery of Mar Saba*, frontispiece, for facsimile and English "translation."

wider than his Princeton class room). Coleman-Norton chose North Africa, instead of Mar Saba, for the setting because that was where he was stationed in 1943. But the rest of the details are a match with the novel: Greek text, offering new material relating to Jesus, found in an old book amongst rare books in a religious establishment.

The Professor who Knew Too Much

My brief summation of the novel *The Mystery of Mar Saba* probably brought to the minds of most readers Morton Smith's account of his discovery of three pages of Greek text penned in the back of an old book amongst a number of old and rare books and papers in a religious establishment, this time the very establishment and setting of the novel, the Mar Saba Monastery. In the real-life story the discovery is made by *Professor Morton*. In the novel the truth of the discovery is made by Scotland Yard inspector *Lord Moreton*. Just as the Greek text in the novel embarrassed the Christian Church (in supposedly proving that the resurrection did not take place), so Morton Smith's Greek text embarrassed the Christian Church (in supposedly hinting at Jesus' homosexual orientation).

As interesting as these parallels are, and there are more, what I find most troubling is that themes of interest to Professor Smith, as seen in his publications *before* the finding of the Clementine letter, are found in the Clementine letter. And these are not just themes of interest to Professor Smith, they are quite unusual themes and, apart from Professor Smith himself, they are themes advanced by no one else. In what follows two unusual themes will be explored: (1) The "mystery of the kingdom of God" and prohibited sex, and (2) Markan materials omitted from Mark that exhibit Johannine traits.

(1) In his doctoral dissertation, written in Hebrew and defended in 1944 and then published in English in 1951,²⁴ Professor Smith linked Mark 4:11 ("To you is given the

²⁴ Morton Smith, *Tannaitic Parallels to the Gospels* (JBLMS 6; Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1951; corrected reprint, 1968). Below the Preface (p. vii) Smith provides two dates: 1944 and 1950. The latter refers to the English version, which appeared in 1951 as noted. The 1944 date refers to the original Hebrew version of the dissertation, *Makbilot ben ha-Besorot le-sifrut ha-Tana'im* ("Parallels between the Gospels and the Literature of the Tannaim"), to which Hollis Library of Harvard

mystery of the kingdom of God . . .”) with secrecy and forbidden sexual activity:

. . . an important part of primitive Christianity was a secret doctrine which was revealed only to trusted members. Such a doctrine is suggested by the words put in the mouth of Jesus, speaking to his disciples: ‘To you is given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but to those outside all things are in parables, that they may surely see and not perceive,’ etc. . . . A similar distinction was recognized by the Tannaïm between material suitable for public teaching and that reserved for secret teaching, as we learn from Hagigah T 2.1 (233): ‘The (passages of the Old Testament dealing with) forbidden sexual relationships are not to be expounded to three (at a time) . . .
 ,²⁵

I have quoted about one half of a lengthy paragraph. It is part of Smith’s discussion of human comprehension and what can and cannot be taught openly. The paragraph that has been partially quoted explores the idea that the early Church seems to have held to a doctrine of secrecy. Evidence of this, Smith thinks, is found in Mark 4:11, where Jesus explains to his disciples, “To you is given the mystery of the kingdom of God . . . ,” and in Paul, who says that he and other Christian leaders “speak wisdom among the perfect [or mature] . . . the wisdom of God in a mystery” (1 Cor 2:6–7).²⁶ Following these two New Testament citations Smith suggests a comparison with the rabbinic distinction “between material suitable for public teaching and that reserved for secret teaching.” The secret teaching includes forbidden sexual relationships and Ezekiel’s vision of God’s chariot throne. The paragraph concludes with a further comparison with the Torah, which according to the rabbis was to be taught openly, and the teaching of heretics, which was to be taught secretly. Smith believes the evangelists Mark and John edited and presented the teaching of Jesus in response to this rabbinic teaching.

University assigns the date 1945. The doctoral degree was conferred in 1948.

²⁵ Smith, *Tannaitic Parallels*, 155–56. See the discussion of this passage in Carlson, *The Gospel Hoax*, 71–72. The phrase “not to be expounded to three” means not to expound the teaching to groups of people. Secret teaching may be taught to one or two.

²⁶ Smith (*Tannaitic Parallels*, 156) references 1 Cor 2:1–6, but he actually quotes portions of 1 Cor 2:1–7.

Smith's linkage of the saying about the "mystery of the kingdom of God" (Mark 4:11) to secrecy and teaching regarding forbidden sexual relationships is to the best of my knowledge unique. Gospel scholars agree that Mark 4:11 fits awkwardly in its context and debate what the original meaning was. But only Smith links it to sex; I know of no commentator prior to the time of Smith (or after, for that matter) who has done this. Smith finds the linkage between secrecy and prohibited sex in the Tosefta tractate *Hagigah* 2.1, which discusses forbidden sexual relationships, as found in Lev 18:6–30.²⁷ Among these forbidden sexual relationships is homosexual activity (cf. Lev 18:22 "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination").

In his 1955 review of Vincent Taylor's commentary on the Gospel of Mark²⁸ Smith vigorously challenges Taylor's denial that Mark 4:11 envisioned secret rites.²⁹ Against Taylor, Smith reminds us that Mark represents Jesus "as teaching in secret and commanding secrecy on many occasions," which is based on the "recollection that Jesus (also for a wide variety of reasons) practiced secrecy."³⁰ The first part of Smith's statement will elicit no objection from those persuaded by William Wrede's interpretation of Mark (wherein the point of secrecy was to hide the messianic identity of Jesus),³¹ but the second part of Smith's statement is quite another matter. Jesus "practiced

²⁷ Although Smith references "Hagigah T 2.1," which is supposed to refer to the Tosefta (as explained in *Tannaitic Parallels*, xi), he seems actually to have quoted the parallel passage from the Mishnah, i.e., the first half of *m. Hag.* 2:1. It should be pointed out that *m. Hag.* 2:1 is partially quoted and expanded upon in *t. Hag.* 2.1–7. The latter passage is concerned with things that should be kept secret from the public. For English translation of this passage, see J. Neusner, *The Tosefta* (6 vols., New York: Ktav, 1977–86), 2:312. For an English translation of *m. Hag.* 2:1, see H. Danby, *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1933), 212–13. That the rabbinic passages in the Mishnah and Tosefta are referencing Lev 18:6–30, see Danby, *Mishnah*, 212 n. 20; Neusner, *Tosefta*, 2:312.

²⁸ V. Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan, 1952); M. Smith, "Comments on Taylor's Commentary on Mark," *HTR* 48 (1955): 21–64. Here as well as elsewhere I am indebted to Francis Watson's recent study, which I shall discuss more fully below.

²⁹ Taylor, *Mark*, 255: ". . . it means 'open secret' . . . There is no case in which it connotes secret rites or esoteric knowledge communicated to 'initiates.'"

³⁰ Smith, "Comments," 29.

³¹ W. Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien: Zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Markusevangeliums* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901); ET: *The Messianic Secret* (Cambridge and London: James Clarke, 1971).

secrecy,” we are told, “for a wide variety of reasons.”³² What could Smith have had in mind? Could one of those reasons have had to do with teaching regarding prohibited sexual activities, as perhaps hinted at in his dissertation? And as hinted at in subsequent publications, not to mention his remarkable discovery at Mar Saba?

In an article that appeared in March of 1958, just a few months before Smith visited Mar Saba, Smith once again mentions the *Hagigah* passage from the Tosefta. This time, however, he also mentions Clement of Alexandria and cites his work *Stromateis*.³³ This interesting article calls for a few more comments. Twice Smith mentions *Hagigah*, one time in reference to the story of the Jewish sage Aher, who “used the spiritual power acquired by his mystical experience to lead good Jews into heresy.”³⁴ Smith mentions *Hagigah* a second time in reference to “the teaching about the throne of God,” which was “to be kept most secret of all.”³⁵ Smith adds that this teaching “quite possibly was not committed to writing.” In a footnote to this final part of the statement Smith references Clement of Alexandria,³⁶ where in *Strom.* 1.1.13–14 he discusses secrecy, the secret elements of Jesus’ teaching, and how it is incumbent on him (Clement) to omit some of the teaching, and to impart what teachings he thinks he is permitted to impart cautiously, lest his readers “stumble by taking them in a wrong sense.” Here we have echoed themes articulated in the paragraph from the 1951 dissertation quoted and discussed above.

To return to the interesting 1958 essay, Smith also talks about the initiate’s union with with his god. Smith speaks of magical prayers and Jewish mystics, whose favorite prayer was the Qedusha, all of which suggests that “the recitation of the Qedushah was conceived as a means of invoking the deity or a result of union with him.”³⁷ In another

³² Smith (“Comments,” 29) criticizes the Messianic Secret hypothesis because it tries to explain all of the secrecy phenomena in reference to one motive, the secrecy of Jesus’ messiahship. Smith believes that there were additional motives.

³³ Morton Smith, “The Image of God: Notes on the Hellenization of Judaism, with Especial Reference to Goodenough’s Work on Jewish Symbols,” *BJRL* 40 (1958): 473–512, here 507 n. 4 (for the reference to *Hagigah*) and n. 5 (for the reference to Clement of Alexandria and *Stromateis*). This passage is also discussed by Carlson, *The Gospel Hoax*, 72.

³⁴ Smith, “Image of God,” 505 n. 1. Here the reference is to *t. Hag.* 2.3.

³⁵ Smith, “Image of God,” 507. In footnote 4 on this page Smith cites *t. Hag.* 2.1.

³⁶ Smith, “Image of God,” 507 n. 5.

³⁷ Smith, “Image of God,” 480 n. 1.

context Smith speaks of God uniting with the holy person.³⁸ In a reference to the magical papyri, Smith cites E. R. Goodenough's discussion of a charm in which appeal is made to the god Eros.³⁹ This leads Smith to engage A. D. Nock, who doubts that a charm that invokes Eros could be Jewish.⁴⁰ Smith counters Nock by remarking: "If a Jew could be supposed to invoke Beelzebub, he could be supposed to invoke Eros."⁴¹ Smith's "Jew" here, of course, is Jesus, whose critics claimed that he had accessed the power of Beelzebub (cf. Matt 12:24; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15), while "Eros" refers to the Greek god of sexual love.

To conclude, Smith's linkage of Mark's "mystery of the kingdom of God" to secret teaching, teaching that may have included prohibited sexual activity, is highly unusual. It is most unlikely that these words, "the mystery of the kingdom of God," however they were understood by early Christians, had anything to do with sexual activity, prohibited or otherwise. There is no evidence that anyone in the history of the Church thought this. No modern commentator has ever thought this—only Smith. That Smith a few years later at Mar Saba would actually stumble upon a text, an unknown letter of Clement, that also makes this connection is highly suspicious.

(2) The second unusual feature that Smith surmised was that the evangelist Mark may well have omitted materials that contained Johannine traits. In his 1955 review of Taylor's commentary Smith speaks of the possibility that the evangelist Mark may have omitted material.⁴² This, of course, is the point at issue in Clement's Mar Saba letter—

³⁸ Smith, "Image of God," 508 n. 3: "when He is united with his saint." On "initiates," see Smith's discussion of E. R. Goodenough on p. 488: "To describe this salvation they certainly used the language of the mystery religions and to achieve it, he thinks, they may have adopted some of the mystery rites . . . and called those who agreed with them 'initiates' . . ." One might also look at Smith's review of Taylor's commentary on Mark, where Smith refers to τέλειοι as "initiates" ("Comments," 30). See also *Tannaitic Parallels*, 156 and 160 n. 8.

³⁹ E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, vol. 2 (Bollingen Series 37; New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), 200–202. On the presence of pagan elements in Jewish charms, see Goodenough's discussion on pp. 153–55.

⁴⁰ A. D. Nock, "Religious Symbols and Symbolism I," *Gnomon* 27 (1955): 558–72, here 570. Nock concedes (and this concession is quoted by Smith) that the Eros charm "might be the work of a Jew who had wholly or partly abandoned tradition."

⁴¹ Smith, "Image of God," 485 n. 1.

⁴² Smith, "Comments," 35: Whatever did not serve Mark's interests, "he would leave out

material omitted from the Markan Gospel. Smith also discusses Mark's use of a source with "Johannine traits."⁴³ This is precisely what the first and long quotation of Secret Mark is—a passage with Johannine traits (cf. John 11, the raising of Lazarus) that had been omitted from public (i.e., canonical) Mark.⁴⁴ Watson comments: "Clement's letter confirms Smith's surmise that Mark may have 'deliberately censored' his source-material, and that this source-material may have included proto-Johannine elements."⁴⁵ Quite so. Watson, of course, also draws attention to Smith's fascination with secrecy and initiation, which has been reviewed above.

In discussing various bodies of evidence (such as biblical literature, Jewish literature, testimonia, and archaeology), Smith reminds us in his publication that appeared in 1958, written before making his Mar Saba find, that

the preserved material—even when accessible—represents only a small part of what once existed. By their very existence, they demonstrate how much has been lost; by the variety of the material they preserve, they prove the extent of our ignorance and tacitly warn of the danger of supposing that what is not to be found in them was never to be found at all. This supposition . . . is especially dangerous in the study of Judaism, because Jewish material has come down to us heavily censored. . . . What, then, would have been the testimony of the material which has disappeared? We cannot be sure.⁴⁶

The Mar Saba Clementine, with its quotations and discussion of a longer edition of the Gospel of Mark, vindicates Smith's assumption of lost, censored items. What "would have been the testimony of the material which has disappeared?" In one case we no

as uninteresting, even if he did not deliberately censor it." Recall also "Image of God," 487, where Smith speaks of material that "has come down to us heavily censored."

⁴³ Smith, "Comments," 26: ". . . what one would expect of a source with other Johannine traits" (and earlier on this page: "They have many points of contact with Jn.").

⁴⁴ See Smith, *The Secret Gospel*, 45–62. Smith places the long quotation from Secret Mark, in which Jesus raises the dead youth, alongside John 11, where Jesus raises the dead Lazarus. Smith acknowledges that as soon as he read the quotation from Secret Mark he recognized it as "a variant of the story of Lazarus" (p. 45).

⁴⁵ Watson, "Beyond Suspicion," 157–58, with quotation from 158.

⁴⁶ Smith, "Image of God," 486–87.

longer need to ask this question. We now know. The Mar Saba Clementine provides us with some potentially shocking testimony, which almost disappeared, had it not been for Smith's amazing discovery.

To sum up: Prior to the discovery of the Clementine letter at the Mar Saba Monastery Smith had published three studies (1951, 1955, 1958) in which he discusses (1) Mark 4:11 ("the mystery of the kingdom of God"), (2) secrecy and initiation, (3) forbidden sexual relationships, including union with a god, (4) omitted Markan material with Johannine traits, and (5) Clement of Alexandria, usually in reference to his *Stromateis*, who believed it was necessary to omit some of Jesus' secret (potentially offensive) teaching. It should also be noted that while at Drew University in 1956–57 Smith worked with one of the writings of Hippolytus, the *Philosophumena* (or *Refutation of All Heresies*), which includes criticism of the Carpocratians, a Gnostic group notorious for its sexual libertarianism, who are also discussed in the Mar Saba Clementine.⁴⁷

Smith's provocative ideas were hardly mainstream in the 1950s. But his two suggestions—that the saying in Mark 4:11 may have had something to do with secret teaching involving prohibited sex and that the evangelist Mark may have omitted material containing Johannine traits—were especially eccentric and, so far as I have been able to ascertain, wholly unique. Yet, not long after the publication of these strange ideas Smith found the Clementine letter at Mar Saba, in which are combined the five elements delineated in the preceding paragraph.⁴⁸ The key passage in the Mar Saba Clementine letter is the first and longer of the two quotations of the longer edition of the Gospel of Mark. The quotation reads as follows:

⁴⁷ Some of this work was published in Morton Smith, "The Description of the Essenes in Josephus and the *Philosophumena*," *HUCA* 29 (1958): 273–313. On Carpocrates and his following, see Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1.25; Hippolytus, *Philosoph.* 7.20; Clement, *Strom.* 3.2–6.

⁴⁸ These coincidences are dismissed too quickly in E. Rau, "Weder gefälscht noch authentisch? Überlegungen zum Status des geheimen Markusevangeliums als Quelle des antiken Christentums," in J. Frey and J. Schröter (eds.), *Jesus in apokryphen Evangelienüberlieferungen: Beiträge zu außerkanonischen Jesusüberlieferungen aus verschiedenen Sprach- und Kulturtraditionen* (WUNT 254; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010) 139–86, here 150. Rau is responding to Quesnell's review, which did not take into account the full evidence of Smith's prior interest in the themes found in the Mar Saba Clementine.

¹ And they come into Bethany. And a certain woman whose brother had died was there. ² And, coming, she prostrated herself before Jesus and says to him, “Son of David, have mercy on me.” But the disciples rebuked her. ³ And Jesus, being angered, went off with her into the garden, where the tomb was; ⁴ and immediately a great cry was heard from the tomb. And approaching, Jesus rolled away the stone from the door of the tomb. ⁵ And immediately, entering where the youth was, he stretched forth his hand and raised him, seizing his hand. ⁶ But the youth, looking upon him, loved him and began to beseech him that he might be with him. ⁷ And going out of the tomb they came into the house of the youth, for he was rich. ⁸ And after six days Jesus gave him instruction, and in the evening the youth comes to him, wearing a linen cloth over his naked body. ⁹ And he remained with him that night, for Jesus was teaching him “the mystery of the kingdom of God.” ¹⁰ And thence, arising, he returned to the other side of the Jordan.

In this passage and in the discussion relating to it in the Mar Saba Clementine letter we find all five elements that had appeared earlier in Smith’s publications:

First, we have a verbatim quotation of part of Mark 4:11: “The mystery of the kingdom of God” (τὸ μυστήριον δέδοται τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ). All that is missing in the quotation is the verb (δέδοται), which does not fit the grammatical context in the Clementine letter.

Second, we find the element of secrecy, which is found explicitly in the word secret or mystery (μυστήριον) in the quotation of Mark 4:11, and also elsewhere in the Clementine letter. For example, we are told that the evangelist Mark did not declare all of Jesus’ teachings, nor did he even “hint at the secret ones [μυστικὰς]” (or “mystical ones”). We are further told that Mark “did not divulge the things not to be uttered”; neither did he “write down the hierophantic teachings of the Lord.” The deeper truths were to be “read only to those who are being initiated into the great mysteries [μεγάλα μυστήρια]” (or “great secrets”). Indeed, “Not all true things are to be said to all men.” Mark’s longer Gospel, the one quoted in the Clementine letter, is twice called a “secret” or “mystical Gospel” (μυστικὸν εὐαγγέλιον). Accordingly, Clement enjoins that “the light of the truth should be hidden from those who are mentally blind.”

Third, forbidden sexual activities are hinted at throughout the Clementine letter,

including and especially the first quotation of the longer edition of Mark. Clement complains of the “unspeakable teachings of the Carpocratians,” who have fallen into an “abyss of the carnal and bodily sins.” They “have become slaves of servile desires.” According to the Mar Saba letter, a certain elder of the church in Alexandria, having obtained a copy of the longer version of Mark, has interpreted it “according to his blasphemous and carnal doctrine.” In the context of the letter it is clear that the passage so interpreted is the one quoted above, in which the young man comes to Jesus at night, wearing nothing but a linen cloth over his naked body. After the quotation Clement insists that the words “naked man with naked man” do not occur in the text, thus suggesting that this was the “blasphemous and carnal” interpretation of the elder in the church in Alexandria: Carnal in that the reference is to sexual activity, blasphemous in that it is suggested that Jesus was sexually involved with the young man. (Later in the letter, he is described as the “youth whom Jesus loved.”)

Fourth, according to Clement’s letter the longer quotation from Secret Mark is an example of omitted Markan material, which as it turns out possesses Johannine traits.

Fifth, the Mar Saba find claims to be a letter penned by Clement of Alexandria, as the preface makes clear: “From the letters of the most holy Clement, author of the *Stromateis*.” Smith’s references to Clement in his earlier publications, as we have seen, also are to Clement’s *Stromateis*.

Accordingly, we find all five elements—and they are unusual elements—in the Mar Saba find, which Smith himself had discussed in no fewer than three pre-find publications.⁴⁹ But there are other remarkable coincidences that call for comment and here I depend on Francis Watson’s recent and stimulating contribution to the debate that in important respects has broken new ground.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ See also Smith’s description of his interests, in his struggle to “interpret” his find: “What concerned me most was the secrecy of Jesus and particularly ‘the mystery of the kingdom of God,’ since that phrase appeared in the text. . . . Pauline baptism and the magical background of its peculiarities, the libertine tradition and the Carpocratians—all these subjects, I could see, were directly relevant to my problem.” See Smith, *The Secret Gospel*, 74–75. These were Smith’s interests *prior* to the Mar Saba find. There may be allusions to some of these themes in Smith’s correspondence and unpublished papers. On this point, see Pierluigi Piovanelli’s contribution in the present volume.

⁵⁰ Watson, “Beyond Suspicion.” See n. 11 above.

The Case of the Mar Saba Mystery

Watson observes interesting parallels between Smith's personal narrative of his thoughts relating to his Mar Saba visit and the thoughts of the fictional British archaeologist "Sir William Bracebridge" in James Hunter's Mar Saba novel. In the novel Sir William explains why he visited the Mar Saba monastery:

This monastery . . . is one of the oldest religious institutions of its kind in the world, and at one time housed many *manuscripts*. *Most of these were removed*, but I have always had the feeling that *some might have been overlooked and hidden away*. My supposition proved correct. (emphasis added)⁵¹

Smith's explanation and hopes for visiting the monastery are essentially the same:

I had not expected much from the Mar Saba *manuscripts*, since I knew that *almost all of them had been carried off* to Jerusalem in the past century and were listed in the catalogue of the Patriarchal library. But there was always the chance that *something had been missed*, or that other manuscripts had been brought in by monks coming from other monasteries. (emphasis added)⁵²

The parallel is amazing, both in substance and in language. As Watson remarks: "The fictional English scholar and the non-fictional American one visit the Mar Saba monastery with exactly the same expectation."⁵³ And, of course, they meet with the same results. Each finds something that had been "overlooked." There are still more parallels.

Watson notes that both the fictional scholar and Morton Smith braced themselves for disappointment. The novel's "Sir William" explains: "I was prepared to leave Mar Saba, *reconciled* to the negative results of my research, when a monk told me he had certain

⁵¹ Hunter, *The Mystery of Mar Saba*, 279. Also see Watson, "Beyond Suspicion," 165.

⁵² Smith, *The Secret Gospel*, 11. Also cited by Watson.

⁵³ Watson, "Beyond Suspicion," 165.

manuscripts in his *cell* that had evidently been overlooked . . . ” (emphasis added).⁵⁴ Similarly, Smith tells us: “I was gradually *reconciling* myself to my worst expectations and repeating every day that I should discover nothing of importance. Then, one afternoon near the end of my stay, I found myself in my *cell*, staring incredulously at a text written in tiny scrawl . . . ” (emphasis added).⁵⁵ There is more.

Both Sir William and Professor Smith wonder if what they have found could be a forgery, but the documents found alongside their respective and surprising discoveries weigh against forgery. Sir William not only found the embarrassing *Shred of Nicodemus*, he also found copies of the *Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Epistle of Barnabas*. The finding of the latter two manuscripts, in addition to the *Shred*, leads Sir William to ask “who would be likely to go to the trouble and expense of forging such manuscripts for no particular purpose we can see?”⁵⁶ For this reason he concludes that the *Shred* is probably authentic. Smith reasons the same way. He concedes that the long quotation from Secret Mark, made up of words and phrases from canonical Mark and reflective of Johannine traits, if an imitation, “it is an imitation of the simplest and most childish sort.” However, the presence of the quotation in the *Clementine letter* argues for its authenticity, for “Clement’s style is often very difficult . . . Without profound study it could not be imitated with assurance of accuracy . . . ”⁵⁷ That is, the not-easily-imitated Clementine text argues for the authenticity of the texts quoted in the letter, that is, the passages from Secret Mark.⁵⁸

And finally, Watson shows that the Greek text of the novel’s *Shred of Nicodemus* is made up of words and phrases from Mark, along with a few Johannine traits, such as reference to a garden (John 18:1) and the involvement of Nicodemus in the burial of Jesus (John 19:39). Even the respective percentages of words drawn from Mark, found in Secret Mark and the *Shred*, are comparable. Watson concludes: “In view of the other parallels between the work of the popular novelist and the biblical scholar, it is likely that the author of the one text is familiar with the other, finding in it the inspiration for his

⁵⁴ Hunter, *The Mystery of Mar Saba*, 293.

⁵⁵ Smith, *The Secret Gospel*, 12.

⁵⁶ Hunter, *Mystery of Mar Saba*, 286.

⁵⁷ Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, 76.

⁵⁸ Watson, “Beyond Doubt,” 167.

own production.”⁵⁹ Watson draws a further inference: “Had *The Mystery of Mar Saba* been first published in *c.* 1975, the analysis presented here would show it to be heavily dependent on *The Secret Gospel* (1973)” and on Smith’s account of his visit to Mar Saba and his find.⁶⁰ Of course, we know that Hunter’s novel was published in 1940, long before Smith’s 1958 “discovery.” Since Hunter’s dependence on Smith is not an option, Smith’s dependence on Hunter appears to be the unavoidable conclusion.

Disputed Science

The debate over handwriting analysis requires a few comments. In his 2005 publication Stephen Carlson, assisted by a professional handwriting expert,⁶¹ concluded that Morton Smith penned the three pages of Greek text found at the back of the seventeenth-century edition of the letters of Ignatius. Other scholars have challenged these findings.

Dismissing Carlson’s analysis, Hershel Shanks asked two Greek-speaking handwriting experts to compare samples of Smith’s Greek with the Greek of the Mar Saba find. One expert concluded that Smith did not write the Clementine letter. The other expert concluded that he did. The former submitted a written report, which Shanks has posted on the Biblical Archaeology Society web page. The latter expert has not yet submitted a written report.⁶² The appeal to native Greek-speakers has not resolved the controversy.

Although Carlson does not regard himself as a handwriting expert *per se*, his expertise

⁵⁹ Watson, “Beyond Doubt,” 169.

⁶⁰ Watson, “Beyond Doubt,” 170.

⁶¹ She is Julie C. Edison, described as a “professional forensic document examiner who has given courtroom and deposition testimony” in various jurisdictions. See Carlston, *Gospel Hoax*, 112 n. 9.

⁶² Hershel Shanks, “Handwriting Experts Weigh In on ‘Secret Mark’,” *BAR* 36/3 (May/June 2010): 18, 79. Venetia Anastasopoulou has concluded that Smith did not pen the Mar Saba letter. Agamemnon Tselikas has concluded that Smith did pen the letter. Peter Head has raised questions about the credentials of Ms Anastasopoulou, which are rather thin. In contrast, Mr Tselikas has authored more than 150 articles on Greek paleography. Moreover, Peter Jeffrey faults Anastasopoulou’s report for not taking into account important factors that feature prominently in the analysis of Carlson and Edison, such as the appearance of “forger’s tremor” and the similarities between some of the letters (esp. theta, lambda, and tau) in the Clementine letter and samples of Smith’s Greek.

in evaluating documents, as well as procuring assistance and expert advice, should not be quickly dismissed (as I think Shanks has done). *Novum Testamentum*, a highly respected international journal devoted to the critical study of the New Testament, recently published an article, in which Carlson's conclusion that "Archaic Mark" (Greek NT ms 2427 = Chicago ms 972) is a modern forgery has been vindicated.⁶³ This manuscript, written on what at one time was believed to be 14th century parchment, deceived the likes of Edgar Goodspeed, Ernest Cadman Colwell, Kirsopp Lake, and Kurt and Barbara Aland, scholars well versed in ancient Greek manuscripts and hands. "Archaic Mark," under the number 2427, appears in the list of miniscules in the two standard critical editions of the Greek New Testament. In these editions it is dated to the 14th century, evidently on the basis of the presumed age of the parchment, as well as the paleography.⁶⁴ Carlson, however, concluded that although the parchment is old, perhaps dating to the 14th or 15th century, the handwriting is modern and the forger, who imitated 14th century Greek penmanship remarkably well, used Philipp Buttmann's 1860 edition of the Greek New Testament as his base text.⁶⁵ As reported in the recent issue of *Novum Testamentum*, scientific testing has confirmed Carlson's conclusion. The ink was found to contain a chemical that was not in use prior to 1874 and Carbon 14 has dated the parchment to the 16th century. It is now believed that the manuscript was produced in the early 20th century. Once again handwriting analysis was at best uncertain. Internal considerations, including evidence of anachronism, pointed to forgery.⁶⁶ Scientific testing provided confirmation.

Where does this leave us with regard to Smith's Mar Saba find? With uncertain and

⁶³ Margaret M. Mitchell, Joseph G. Barabe, and Abigail B. Quandt, "Chicago's 'Archaic Mark' (ms 2427) II: Microscopic, Chemical and Codicological Analyses Confirm Modern Production," *NovT* 52 (2010): 101–33. See Stephen C. Carlson, "'Archaic Mark' (MS 2427) and the Finding of a Manuscript Fake," *SBL Forum* (2006); posted online.

⁶⁴ See B. Aland, K. Aland, J. Karavidopoulos, C. M. Martini, and B. M. Metzger (eds.), *The Greek New Testament* (4th ed., Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993), 18*; B. Aland and K. Aland (eds.), *Novum Testamentum Graece* (27th ed., Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993), 17*.

⁶⁵ Philipp Buttmann (ed.), *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1860). Buttmann's text is based primarily on Codex Vaticanus.

⁶⁶ In her part of the study, Mitchell ("Chicago's 'Archaic Mark'," 123) praises Carlson's "keen detective work" and finds "his thesis convincing."

conflicting handwriting analysis. Carlson and two handwriting experts, one English-speaking and one Greek-speaking, think Smith wrote the document in question. Another Greek-speaking handwriting expert thinks he did not. Which conclusion is correct? One is reminded of the sensational scandal involving the notorious Hitler diaries, which came to public attention in 1983. Three handwriting experts and at least one Hitler scholar argued for the authenticity of the more than 60 volumes of diaries.⁶⁷ Had the matter been left to handwriting “experts,” it would have been necessary to rewrite history.

Fortunately, the diaries, initially hailed as the “biggest literary discovery since the Dead Sea Scrolls,”⁶⁸ were subjected to scientific study and were shown to be forgeries, mostly produced in the 1970s. Perhaps in this connection readers need to be reminded that Smith’s three pages of text have never been subjected to scientific testing, which might be able to determine the age of the paper when the ink was applied and whether the ink dates to the eighteenth century or the twentieth century. In any event, handwriting analysis does not appear to be conclusive.

Whatever the handwriting analysis shows, the remarkable coincidence of the five elements Smith brought together in earlier publications also appearing together in Smith’s *Mar Saba* find justifies suspicion. The additional parallels adduced by Francis Watson add to this suspicion. Some may even say these remarkable parallels and coincidences justify more than suspicion; perhaps they call for a conclusion.

⁶⁷ The handwriting experts were Max Frei-Sulzer (Switzerland), Ordway Hilton (USA), and Kenneth Rendell (USA). Hugh Trevor-Roper (UK), an expert on Hitler, also declared the diaries authentic. Curious anachronisms and inconsistencies gave rise to suspicion, but it was the chemical analysis of the paper and bindings, which revealed the presence of whitener and inks not in use until the 1950s, that proved conclusively that the diaries and other documents were forgeries. Eventually career-forger Konrad Kujau confessed that he was the author of the diaries. The astounding story is recounted in Robert Harris, *Selling Hitler: The Story of the Hitler Diaries* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986; paperback reprint, 1991). I thank Bart Ehrman for calling my attention to this book. For a summary of the scientific evidence, see *Selling Hitler*, 354–55. For a photo of one of the pages of the diaries, with the notation that three handwriting experts were deceived by it, see plate 4 (following p. 194). Hitler scholar Trevor-Roper declared: “I *know* Hitler’s handwriting. I *know* his signature” (Trevor-Roper’s emphasis). He said this even when serious doubts about the diaries’ authenticity were being raised. As it turned out, he was quite mistaken. See *Selling Hitler*, 302. See also B. D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 67–89.

⁶⁸ Harris, *Selling Hitler*, 331.

These parallels and coincidences notwithstanding, several scholars continue to defend Smith. They remain convinced that the Mar Saba find is genuine. I wonder what kind of evidence would it take to persuade them that suspicions are fully justified? It is natural and understandable to assume that our colleagues are completely honest and would never take part in a hoax. Unfortunately, as Christopher Rollston has recently reminded us, this charitable assumption is naïve.⁶⁹ Suspicious coincidences need to be taken very seriously.

The Criterion of Knowing the Find before Making the Find

Let's return to Coleman-Norton's amusing agraphon. What evidence is there that Coleman-Norton is the author of this agraphon? All we have is Bruce Metzger's claim that he heard Coleman-Norton utter something very similar several years before making the find. For most scholars—perhaps all scholars—this is enough. Coleman-Norton's knowledge of the contents of the agraphon before he allegedly discovered it in North Africa provides more than enough evidence for Metzger to judge it a hoax. But in the case of the Mar Saba find we have the testimony of Morton Smith himself, who writes of the very elements that he later discovers in his Mar Saba find. In this case we do not have to rely on the memory of a former student, who says he heard his professor say such-and-such many years ago. In the case of the Mar Saba find we actually have the publications of Professor Smith—still available for study—publications that we know appeared *before* he made his discovery.

For scholars who remain unconvinced of the probative value of prior knowledge and coincidence as evidence of hoax, and therefore continue to urge us to accept Smith's Mar Saba find as genuine, I suggest they also accept Coleman-Norton's find. After all, the only weighty objection to its acceptance is Bruce Metzger's claim that Coleman-Norton knew the contents of the agraphon *before* he found the agraphon.

Not only does Smith's scholarly discussion of matters that would *later* be discovered

⁶⁹ C. A. Rollston, "Non-Provenanced Epigraphs I: Pillaged Antiquities, Northwest Semitic Forgeries, and Protocols for Laboratory Tests," *Maarav* 10 (2003): 135–93. After discussing the Coleman-Norton hoax, Rollston states that "to assume that bright, well-trained people are always characterized by professional ethics is belied by 'epigraphic history'" (pp. 192–93).

in the Mar Saba find trouble me, his non-usage of his discovery in *subsequent* research, which would have and should have benefited from it, also troubles me. Here I have in mind the arguments, conclusions, and insinuations of his book *Jesus the Magician*.⁷⁰ In this work Smith suggests that the historical Jesus was recognized by his contemporaries as a magician, whose practices included “union”—spiritual and/or physical—with his followers.⁷¹ In his two books on Secret Mark, Smith discusses secret rituals and union of Jesus with his followers. Yet Smith’s *Jesus the Magician* does not depend on the Mar Saba find in any significant way.⁷² This curious feature has been remarked upon by scholars, some of whom see it as one more indication that Smith knew perfectly well that the Mar Saba find was not authentic and therefore did not make use of the find in his later, serious work.⁷³

At the 2008 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature some of Smith’s surviving correspondence was discussed.⁷⁴ It was noted that nowhere does Smith hint at his involvement in a hoax. I am not sure how significant this observation is, given the fact that Smith gave instructions in his will to have all of his correspondence destroyed after his death.⁷⁵ Accordingly, we really don’t know what may or may not have been hinted at

⁷⁰ Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978).

⁷¹ Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, 122–23, 146, 152. On p. 123 Smith speaks of the believer who “will be united with” Jesus “in love” and of Christians who “adapted his magical rite of union so as to make it also a ritual expression of libertine teaching.” Here one would expect some discussion of the Mar Saba Clementine and the passage quoted from Secret Mark. Yet, strangely, there is no discussion and not even a reference in the footnotes.

⁷² In a response to a reviewer of his Mar Saba Clementine books (i.e., *Clement of Alexandria* and *The Secret Gospel*), Smith makes it clear that his *Jesus the Magician* does not depend on longer Mark. See Morton Smith, “In Quest of Jesus,” *The New York Review of Books* 25/20 (21 December 1978): The “fragment of secret Mark plays no substantial part” in the argument of *Jesus the Magician*. Smith adds that reviewer Frank Kermode’s claim “that *Jesus the Magician* rests on the secret gospel fragment is utterly untrue.” Kermode’s review appeared as “The Quest for the Magical Jesus,” *The New York Review of Books* 25/16 (26 October 1978). The review and replies are available online.

⁷³ See the discussion in Brown, *Mark’s Other Gospel*, 53, 251 nn. 133–34; Carlson, *The Gospel Hoax*, 77–78. Smith’s virtual non-usage of the Mar Saba find is inconsistent with the usual vanity seen in scholarship, where scholars as much as possible in their footnotes call attention to their previous publications.

⁷⁴ See also Allan Pantuck’s contribution to the present volume.

⁷⁵ William M. Calder III, “SMITH, Morton,” in William W. Briggs, Jr. (ed.),

in his correspondence. All that survives is a small sample.⁷⁶

In any case, why should we expect Smith to drop any hints or make admissions during or after the commission of a hoax, assuming Secret Mark is a hoax? Bruce Metzger tells us that Paul Coleman-Norton never acknowledged his hoax. Indeed, according to Metzger, years later Coleman-Norton complained of the way his transcription of the Greek text of his amusing agraphon was presented in its published form. He gave no indication to Metzger that his North African find was bogus. Yet Metzger had no doubt whatsoever that Coleman-Norton's text and story of its finding were fraudulent.⁷⁷

Before concluding this part of the discussion, let me assure readers that I do recognize that innocent coincidences sometimes occur. In 1960, when Morton Smith announced his Mar Saba discovery, Professor A. H. M. Jones, a distinguished British scholar of Roman history, published an essay, in which he argued that the rank of Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea and Samaria, was that of prefect, not procurator, as is stated by early second century Roman historian Tacitus, in his *Annals* 15.44.⁷⁸ The very next year a stone slab was uncovered during an excavation at Caesarea Maritima, on which were inscribed the words: "Pontius Pilate, prefect of Judea."⁷⁹ This remarkable coincidence aroused no suspicion for at least three reasons: (1) The Pilate inscription was discovered during a controlled dig; (2) Professor Jones did not discover the inscription, nor was he present at the excavation; and (3) the inscription confirmed a plausible hypothesis, viz., that Pilate's rank was prefect. Not one of these "innocent" details applies to Smith's Mar Saba find.

Biographical Dictionary of North American Classicists (Westport CT: Greenwood, 1994), 600–602, here 602: Smith's "personal and scholarly correspondence was destroyed by Smith's literary executor, David Smith, in accord with his wishes in 1991." For a friendly biography of Smith, see Albert I. Baumgarten, "Smith, Morton," in John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow (eds.), *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 1235–37. Baumgarten summarizes the debate concerning the authenticity of the Mar Saba Clementine, but takes no position.

⁷⁶ Although from time to time, thanks to the diligence of Allan Pantuck and others, additional items come to light. For discussion of some of these other items, which may have a bearing on this strange case, see the chapter by Pierluigi Piovanelli.

⁷⁷ Metzger, *Reminiscences of an Octogenarian*, 139.

⁷⁸ A. H. M. Jones, "Procurators and Prefects in the Early Principate," in *Studies in Roman Government and Law* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1960), 117–25.

⁷⁹ See Antonio Frova, "L'iscrizione di Ponzio Pilato a Cesarea," *Rendiconti dell'Istituto Lombardo* 95 (1961): 419–34.

Curious Features about the Find Itself

Finally, there are a few other details that raise troubling questions. I begin with some oddities about the old Voss edition, in which Smith says he found the Clementine letter. *First*, Isaac Voss's 1646 edition of the genuine epistles of Ignatius stands out among the old books at the Mar Saba monastery. Smith lists ten old printed books, ranging in date from 1628 to 1805. Nine of these books were published in Venice and in the Greek language. But Voss's book was published in Amsterdam and in the Latin language. As Carlson remarks, it "sticks out like a sore thumb." Smith too apparently sensed this problem, offering wholly gratuitous speculations, none of them convincing, that attempt in one way or another to link the book to Venice.⁸⁰ Why did he do that? Perhaps because he recognized the non-Greek, non-Venetian publication of the book as a problem, a problem that needed to be mitigated in some way. Would an authentic find occasion this kind of embarrassment?

Second, there is no evidence that the book was at Mar Saba prior to Smith's visit in 1958. It is not listed in the monastery's 1910 catalogue of books. *Third*, I find it odd that Smith worked on the Clementine letter for some fifteen years (1958–73) and never returned to Mar Saba to examine Voss's book itself. Smith was content to work from his black and white photographs. Why did Smith make no effort to subject the book to scientific analysis?⁸¹ And fourth, there is the striking coincidence of the subject matter of the Clementine letter and the last printed page of Voss's book, the printed page that lies opposite the first handwritten page. Clement's letter is concerned with inauthentic interpolations in the Gospel of Mark. So is Voss, with respect to the letters of Ignatius and the pseudepigraphal letter of Barnabas, into which "impudent fellows" insert "all kinds of nonsense."⁸² Bart Ehrman has called our attention to this interesting coincidence.⁸³ On the assumption that Smith forged the Clementine letter, his choice of

⁸⁰ Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 38–39.

⁸¹ This question is raised by Bart D. Ehrman, "Response to Charles Hedrick's Stalemate," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11 (2003): 155–63, here 160.

⁸² Vossius, *Epistolae genuinae S. Ignatii Martyris*, 318.

⁸³ Ehrman, "Response to Charles Hedrick's Stalemate," 162.

Voss's book was brilliant. Selecting the Voss book, because of its last page, was a humorous, almost poetic touch.

There are also internal oddities. Skeptical scholars have remarked that the vocabulary of Secret Mark is too Markan and the vocabulary of the Clementine letter is too Clementine, which suggests the composer of the letter, who probably made use of Otto Stählin's concordance of Clement's vocabulary,⁸⁴ overdid his imitation.⁸⁵ Charles Murgia has compared the Clementine letter to other forgeries of antiquity and concludes that the Mar Saba document reads as an autograph, not as a copy.⁸⁶ If it is an autograph, then it cannot be a copy of an authentic letter of Clement. Watson has also observed in the Mar Saba Clementine dependence on the language and syntax of the Papias fragments concerned with the authorship of the Gospels of Mark and Matthew. Clement does this nowhere else. Indeed, as Watson remarks, "The compositional procedure is more plausibly ascribed to a modern author than to a second-century one. Clement of Alexandria would not require this degree of assistance from Papias. A modern author might well."⁸⁷ On top of this, as Ehrman and others have noted, the Mar Saba letter at

⁸⁴ See Otto Stählin, *Clemens Alexandrinus* (4 vols., Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1905–36). Smith's personal volumes of this work were among the books he donated to Jewish Theological Seminary. The volumes are heavily annotated by Smith. Volume 4, which appeared in 1936, is a concordance of Clement's vocabulary, thus greatly facilitating efforts to imitate Clement, should anyone wish to do so. In "Image of God," 482 n. 2 Smith references Clement of Alexandria and cites Stählin's work.

⁸⁵ For example, see E. Best, *Disciples and Discipleship: Studies in the Gospel according to Mark* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), 199–205, as well as the comments in Ehrman, "Response to Charles Hedrick's Stalemate," 161. Ehrman appeals to A. H. Criddle, "On the Mar Saba Letter Attributed to Clement of Alexandria," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3 (1995): 215–20. Some of the early reviewers of Smith's books made similar observations.

⁸⁶ Charles E. Murgia, "Secret Mark: Real or Fake?" in Reginald H. Fuller (ed.), *Longer Mark: Forgery, Interpolation, or Old Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: Center for Hermeneutical Studies, 1976), 35–40. Murgia observes that the Mar Saba Clementine seems to exhibit trademarks of literary forgeries. His argument is accepted by Ehrman, "Response to Charles Hedrick's Stalemate," 156, 161; and Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, 54–55.

⁸⁷ Watson, "Beyond Suspicion," 148–51, with quotation from 150. I find Watson's observations and reasoning here especially compelling. He remarks that these parallels "betray the work of a modern forger who has used the Papias excerpts as a template for his own work" (p. 148). And later: "The reuse of the Papias template corresponds to a certain poverty of invention" (p. 150). Watson finds it odd too that in his learned and detailed *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* Smith did not reference the

points actually contradicts the authentic Clement.⁸⁸

Finally, I find it unlikely that a different edition of Mark, whether a second-century expanded edition, or a first-century edition perhaps expanded by the Markan evangelist himself, could leave no traces in the ms tradition. I also find strange the absence of discussion, polemic, and apologetic related to the passage from longer Mark that is quoted in the Mar Saba Clementine, the only letter of Clement to have survived. It is hard to believe that a story (no matter how secret it was supposed to be) in which Jesus (in the nude?) instructs a new convert did not generate controversy, controversy that would have left traces in the writings of the Fathers. It is very curious that such a story managed to survive only in a letter written in the back of a seventeenth-century book, which Morton Smith, whose previous publications showed interest in this very topic, just happened to find in the Mar Saba Monastery.

Conclusion

Although not the intention of its author, the novel *The Mystery of Mar Saba* seems to have spawned at least two Gospel-related hoaxes that more or less adapted the setting and circumstances of the hoax described in the novel. In the case of the first, the best that the hoaxer (Coleman-Norton) could do was “find” a page of Greek in an uncatalogued rare book in a mosque in North Africa. In the case of the second, the hoaxer (Smith) could do better; he could “find” pages of Greek in an uncatalogued rare book in the very monastery in the Judean wilderness, the monastery in which the novel’s fraudulent page of Greek was planted. To be sure, the sites actually visited by the hoaxers placed limits on where they could make their respective “finds.” The first hoaxer had visited North Africa (but not Palestine); the second had visited Palestine, the location of the Mar Saba Monastery.

parallels with Papias. See “Beyond Suspicion,” 151 n. 61.

⁸⁸ Ehrman, “Response to Charles Hedrick’s Stalemate,” 160–61. Ehrman cites discrepancies in attitudes toward and understanding of gnosis and in telling the truth. The latter point is especially pertinent, for in the Mar Saba letter Clement urges Theodore to deny, “on oath,” the existence of Secret Mark. Where in the genuine writings of Clement do we find Clement urging the faithful to swear falsely, in flat contradiction to the teaching of Jesus (cf. Matt 5:33–37)?

In my opinion Morton Smith's Mar Saba discovery is a hoax. I cannot prove this, of course, so I concede the point made by Hershel Shanks in his summation in *Biblical Archaeology Review*.⁸⁹ In my view the evidence that Smith possessed knowledge of distinctive elements of the Mar Saba find, prior to his finding it, is more than sufficient for viewing the find with grave suspicion.⁹⁰ The same can be said with respect to Coleman-Norton's amusing agraphon. No one can prove that Coleman-Norton perpetrated a hoax. But most would agree that he probably did. The reason most regard it as a hoax is that before making the find he had spoken in jest of dentures being supplied to the toothless damned, so that they might gnash their teeth. The reason many New Testament scholars, perhaps even *most* New Testament scholars, will continue to view Smith's find as a hoax is that before making his find at Mar Saba he too spoke of the mystery of the kingdom of God, secrecy, prohibited sexual relationships, and Clement of Alexandria. That this unusual combination of elements just happens to appear in a document that Smith himself found should serve as a warning to scholars that in the case of the Mar Saba Clementine and its quotations and discussion of a longer edition of the Gospel of Mark we may well be dealing with a hoax.⁹¹ However, we should speak

⁸⁹ Shanks, "Restoring a Dead Scholar's Reputation," 90. Shanks calls into question, perhaps even refutes, some of the arguments put forward by Carlson and Jeffrey.

⁹⁰ Shanks makes this point in a cordial note sent to me 22 October 2009: "To my mind you may have ground for suspicion, but not proof of a very serious crime." There is indeed ground for suspicion. Rau ("Weder gefälscht noch authentisch?" 186) believes that the available evidence is ambiguous and that not until the actual document is properly tested can a firm decision be reached. Perhaps in a scientific sense, then, "proof" is still lacking. But Watson, as the title of his recent study reflects, believes the internal evidence and parallels are "beyond suspicion." He is convinced that Smith's Mar Saba find is a hoax.

⁹¹ Historians who are not biblical scholars have reached the same conclusion: Donald H. Akenson, *Saint Saul: A Skeleton Key to the Historical Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 87: "Secret Mark is a forgery . . ."; 89: ". . . Morton Smith . . . has to be the most likely prankster, and he could only have enjoyed watching the most powerful figures in the liberal wing of the Quest establishment . . . take the bait."; 89: ". . . there exist many very solid scholars who are not besotted with the gimcrack false-antiquities of the sort exemplified by Secret Mark . . ."; Philip Jenkins, *Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost Its Way* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 102: ". . . there are unresolved rumors of forgery. The location of the find is fascinating, since this was the scene of the forgery described only a few years before in the then-popular novel *The Mystery of Mar Saba*." Akenson is Professor of History at Queen's University,

cautiously in this matter, not simply out of fairness to the late Morton Smith but also out of professional courtesy for our colleagues who have reached a different conclusion.⁹²

Kingston, Ontario, Canada. Jenkins is Distinguished Professor of History and Religious Studies at Pennsylvania State University. Evidently Metzger also regarded the Mar Saba find as a hoax, for he placed his discussion of it in the chapter entitled “Literary Forgeries.” See Metzger, *Reminiscences of an Octogenarian*, 128–32.

⁹² I wish to add that if conclusive evidence should finally materialize that proves Smith’s Mar Saba find is indeed a hoax and that Smith is himself the hoaxer, this does not make Professor Helmut Koester or any other scholar a fool. Koester, like many of us, was willing to give Smith the benefit of the doubt and, like many of us, finds it difficult to imagine someone expending so much energy in the commission of such a grotesque hoax.