

REVIEW ESSAY

Second Thoughts on the Secret Gospel

ROBERT M. PRICE
JOHNNIE COLEMON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

As I write, it is thirty years since the appearance of Morton Smith's twin volumes, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* and *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel according to Mark*. It is also the thirtieth anniversary of the paperback publication of Irving Wallace's novel *The Word*, already a phenomenal best seller in hard cover the previous year. What might the one author's work have to do with the other's, you ask? Simply this: from the beginning, a number of Smith's colleagues and critics suspected, even charged him with forging the document as a hoax, which is exactly what happens in Wallace's immensely enjoyable novel. Some said Smith, once an Episcopal priest, had a poisonous hatred for the Christian religion, especially for its historic homophobia, and that *The Secret Gospel* was an attempt toward evening the score.

TANTRIC MESSIAH

As most readers surely know by now, the fragmentary quotation from this hitherto-unknown gospel, contained in an ostensible letter from Clement of Alexandria, made brief but suggestive reference to the possibility that Jesus practiced a libertine ritual of homosexual initiation with his disciples. Clement warns his correspondent, Theodore, that the specific passage in question was a heretical interpolation by the trouble-making Carpocratian Gnostics, but, as Smith knew, this only means that Clement would have found such a passage objectionable, though he liked the rest of the text. Classifying a bad passage as secondary was an old trick: Jeremiah had already used it in Jer 7:22 and 8:8. So did the Ebionites, who believed Jesus

had come to identify false pericopes in the Torah so the faithful could henceforth disregard them. Smith himself professed to think the Clementine letter as well as the underlying Markan apocryphon authentic and thus sources unlocking the mysteries of Christian origins.

Smith ventured that Jesus was a kind of antinomian Gnostic who led his disciples into a trance ecstasy, experiencing the Kingdom of God on earth, much as Irenaeus tells us that Markos the Magician used to teach wealthy New Age matrons how to speak in tongues and prophesy. Smith said that, yes, this initiation included homosexuality as a rite of liminality, betokening the transcendence of this world by the holy-minded transgression of its categories and its laws. Such notions are common to Tantric Hinduism and Buddhism, though for Smith to claim Jesus and the first Christians indulged in such adventurous pieties is rather like John Allegro's theory that the early Christians were a mushroom cult like the Brahmin priests with their sacred Soma.¹ Both theories are possible, however offensive they may strike us. But what good is a Christianity that does not offend? The relevant question is whether there is sufficient evidence for one's proposals.

Smith has, to one degree or another, managed to persuade writers as diverse as the anonymous author of the July 4, 1973, *Advocate* article "Jesus Christ . . . Supergay?" and John Dominic Crossan (*The Historical Jesus*).² Others still harbor doubts, not necessarily because they balk at full-fledged acceptance of the Gay Jesus hypothesis, since one is certainly free to accept Smith's case at any of three different levels. One might buy the whole store, Gay Jesus and all. Or one might simply accept the genuineness of the Clementine letter, in which case Secret Mark must be accepted as a genuine ancient document, whether authentic or pseudepigraphical. Again, one might accept the Secret Gospel as genuinely Markan but follow Clement in excising the juicier portions.

THE LITTLE MANUSCRIPT THAT WASN'T THERE

No, the doubts stem from the elusive character of the original manuscript that Smith claimed he discovered written onto the end pages of a bound book in the library of the Mar Saba monastery near Jerusalem in 1958. Edgar J. Goodspeed had long ago warned that, in the absence of supposed originals, one must always suspect any new Gospel discovery claim (of which there have been very many) to be imposture. For instance, Nicolas Notovitch's *Unknown Life of Jesus*

1. Allegro, *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970).

2. See Ronald M. Enroth and Gerald E. Jamison, *The Gay Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 58; Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

Christ, allegedly based on an old Tibetan codex, foundered on such an embarrassment.³ Quentin Quesnell charged that Smith's "discovery" failed this test, too.

But Goodspeed did allow that facsimile photographs might be good enough, and as it happens, Smith had indeed provided photographs of the text. He explained, however, that he did not and could not bear away the originals. Subsequent attempts by other researchers to gain access to them have proved fruitless, with a single exception. As Charles W. Hedrick explains in his article "Secret Mark,"⁴ in 1977 the Archimandrite Kallistos Dourvas, a monastery librarian, made a set of color photographs of the manuscript pages, which had been removed from the printed book. The pages themselves have since been mislaid. Perhaps they will one day come to light. In the meantime, Hedrick argues persuasively that certain matching stain marks shared by the last page of the printed book and the (photographed) pages of the Clement manuscript prove beyond reasonable doubt that the pages all originated in the same bound book, just as Smith claimed.

Is this the end of the story? I must confess that I remain unconvinced. Unlike love, I do not believe all things. It occurs to me that there is still a forgery scenario that remains untouched by Hedrick's research. Suppose Smith found some blank pages at the end of that library book, and they spoke eloquently to him nonetheless, whispering to him of an opportunity for a rich joke. And then perhaps he got to work composing the Clement piece with its implied homosexual evangel. If so, he would have been following the precise strategy employed by the scheming forger of the Gospel according to James in Wallace's *The Word*, who visited several manuscript collections, absconding with blank pages that he then filled with spurious but ancient-seeming writing about Jesus. To be sure that Smith had not done the same, though leaving the pages in the bound volume in which he found them, we would need to examine what we do not have: the manuscript leaves themselves. We would need to test the ink. The paleographers, on the other hand, could save themselves the trouble: if anyone could mimic the handwriting style of a desired period, it would be the erudite Smith.

SPEAKING IN TONGUES IN CHEEKS

If Smith had forged the text, a few items would make additional sense. For one, it would be a bit less surprising to see that Smith presumed to

3. Goodspeed, *Famous Biblical Hoaxes: Or, Modern Apocrypha* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956) 11.

4. Charles W. Hedrick with Nicolaos Olympiou, "Secret Mark: New Photographs, New Witnesses," *The Fourth R* 1315 (September-October 2000) 8

print his name on one of the previous printed pages! "Smith" along with the manuscript number he assigned it, 65, is plainly visible in the photographs. Was he signing his own work?

And I confess that I wonder, with all the warnings of Clement to his reader to beware of Gnostic forgeries, whether Smith is not winking to his readers to beware of his own hoax! This almost qualifies as a form-critical feature of Gospel hoaxes. I call it "the wink statement." Sometimes it is an instance of "protesting too much." For example, *The Gospel of the Holy Twelve* (1924) opens anticipating skepticism: "It is a faithless and perverse generation, as of old, that asks for a sign, and there shall no sign be given; for if the very writers of the Aramaic original were raised from the dead, and testified to their authorship, unbelieving critics would still ask for a sign; and the more signs they were given, the more they would ask for in the hardness of their hearts." Others come very near to admitting the true, recent, authorship, as in the Foreword to *The Love Letters of Saint John* (1917): "it may be that the letters were written by some unknown hand, or under the influence of some teacher long forgotten. What does it matter?" In my inscribed copy of *The Long-Lost Second Book of Acts* (1904), "discoverer" Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie has written, "If every word of ours were inspired, would we not be prophets? Having prayer, whose fault is it if we are not?" Using Clement's elbow, is Smith similarly poking us in the ribs?

In 1985 I asked Morton Smith how he responded to charges of forgery, recently renewed in Per Beskow's excellent book *Strange Tales about Jesus: A Survey of Unfamiliar Gospels*.⁵ He told me the now-familiar story of the custodians of the manuscript secreting it away out of embarrassment at the notoriety that Smith's book *Secret Gospel* had brought them, henceforth wanting to suppress the evidence. He asked, furthermore, what business Beskow had in condemning all the more-recent New Age Gospels as spurious: if they embodied someone's faith, weren't they authentic Gospels, no matter who wrote them or when? Later I wondered if his words did not apply equally, even especially, to his own Secret Mark!

But why would Smith, if he created the whole thing, not have written up something more overtly spectacular? Why settle for what appears to be a simpler version of Lazarus's resurrection, the only episode related in the "quoted" text? He knew the psychology of critics: the new text would be especially attractive to many, not least conservatives, if it seemed to draw John closer to the Synoptics, in this case seeming to supply a missing link between them. Many reject the Johannine Lazarus story (John 11), pointing out that such a public spec-

5. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983.

tacle, if real, could not have escaped mention by the other evangelists, who must have known and reported it if it happened. But if one accepted the Secret Gospel, one might retain the credibility of John, and to some this might not seem too high a price to pay.

Then why would Smith have had Clement reject as an interpolation the homosexual element, which must have been the real barb of his hoax, if that is what it was? Simple: it is a teaser, a distancing device, not unlike the initial skepticism of the onlookers in a Gospel miracle story. Smith thus places the thinnest of veils over the shocking vision, as if to disguise the fact that his main goal is to show it off.

RETURN TO MAR SABA

If Secret Mark is Morton Smith's own creation, where might he have derived the idea for it? This question brings me at last to a chance discovery of my own, the event that caused me to reassess the whole question after I thought Professor Hedrick had laid it to rest. Two years ago, I was in Detroit on a speaking tour and chanced to be poring over the shelves of a large but lackluster second-hand bookstore. My eye fell upon the title of one worn-looking volume, *The Mystery of Mar Saba*. Thinking instantly of Morton Smith's fateful visit there, I picked up the book with mild curiosity, thinking, "What if it turns out to be one of those 'lost Gospel' novels?" Son of a gun, it did!

The Mystery of Mar Saba by J. H. Hunter was issued in 1940 by Evangelical Publishers in New York and Canada and reprinted each of the next six years. Guess what happens in it? A delver in none other than the monastery of Mar Saba announces the discovery of an ancient document, the Shred of Nicodemus. It reads: "I, Nicodemus, in company with Joseph of Arimathea in the early morn of the first day of the week removed the body of Jesus. Coming forth we found the tomb opened and the stone rolled away after the earthquake. We left the linen clothes in the tomb, and carried Him forth lest profane hands desecrate His body. We buried Him in the sepulchre near the garden over the Kedron where standeth the pillar Absalom reared for himself in the King's Dale." As might be imagined, the announcement shocks the world, undermining faith in the resurrection. But it turns out that the Shred of Nicodemus is a hoax engineered by its "discoverer," a hater of the Christian religion. Does any of this sound familiar?

WAG THE DOGMA

Morton Smith might easily have become familiar with this popular novel, and I cannot help wondering if it gave him the idea for a hoax of his own, meant to undermine the Christian faith that he found to

be oppressive. One thinks of President Clinton's comments following his order to bomb what turned out to be an aspirin factory in Sudan. He recalled that he pondered long and hard over the decision, which many suspected of being a "wag the dog" scheme to divert public attention from the Monica Lewinsky business. He confided that he had to try to choose a time for the raid when there was not likely to be some innocent custodian sweeping out the building. His words strikingly paralleled an almost identical speech in the recent movie *The American President*, which he had surely screened in the White House. Whom did he think he was fooling? Whom did Morton Smith think *he* was fooling? A public unfamiliar with an ephemeral novel of 33 years previous? Short of yet another manuscript discovery, this time perhaps a confession among Smith's own papers, we will never know.