

BEYOND SUSPICION: ON THE AUTHORSHIP OF THE MAR SABA LETTER AND THE SECRET GOSPEL OF MARK

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Abstract

The suspicion that the 'discoverer' of the letter from Clement of Alexandria to Theodore was in reality its author was raised shortly after its first publication in 1973, and has often been reasserted in the years since Morton Smith's death in 1991. Yet the fragments of the 'Secret Gospel of Mark' are often still interpreted on the provisional assumption that the letter containing them is genuine. This article enquires whether the long-standing *suspicion* of forgery—occasioned largely by the circumstances of the text's discovery—can be put *beyond reasonable doubt*. It proceeds by way of a close scrutiny of the letter itself against the double background of the undisputed writings of Clement of Alexandria on the one hand, and the published work of Morton Smith on the other. It is argued that the letter's internal anomalies are incompatible with Clementine authorship, as are certain compositional techniques; and that it is the product of interests and influences that predate its supposed discovery at the Mar Saba monastery.

ON 7 December 1975, a Colloquy was held in Berkeley, California, to consider the excerpts from a 'Secret Gospel of Mark' embedded within a recently published letter from Clement of Alexandria to a certain Theodore. The letter had been discovered by Morton Smith at the Mar Saba monastery, near Jerusalem, in 1958, but it was published for the first time only in 1973—in the double context of a dauntingly complex scholarly monograph and a popular narrative account of the process of discovery, authentication, and interpretation.¹

¹ Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973); *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel according to Mark* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973). Smith's photographs of the manuscript are reproduced in *Clement of Alexandria*, pp. 249, 251, 253; see also *Secret Gospel*, p. 38. Colour photographs dating from c.1977 are reproduced in Charles W. Hedrick (with Nikolaus Olympiou), 'Secret Mark: New Photographs,

In one of the earliest significant responses to the startling new text, Reginald Fuller opened the Colloquy with a paper entitled, 'Longer Mark: Forgery, Interpolation, or Old Tradition?'² True to his form-critical roots, Fuller sought to distinguish an early oral form of the main Secret Gospel narrative from redactional features acquired when it was incorporated into the text of Mark. Thus the newly available material was both 'old tradition' and 'interpolation'. The paper said nothing about the remaining possibility highlighted in its title: 'forgery'. This possibility was clearly on Fuller's mind, however. According to the edited transcript of the ensuing conversation, he began, unusually, by reporting a dream: 'In this dream, Professor Smith met the man responsible for the Piltdown skull. Then Professor Smith broke down and admitted that he himself had written the supposed letter from Clement.'³ The reported dream is left hanging. Evidently no one wished to discuss it. Participants in the Colloquy did not ask themselves whether the dream disclosed a simple truth that their combined interpretative labours served only to conceal.⁴

The possibility that the discoverer of this text was also its author has been widely canvassed only since Smith's death in 1991. Yet, in spite of suspicions, the gospel fragments in particular have continued to attract serious scholarly attention. Smith's possible authorship hovers on the margin of scholarly

New Witnesses', *The Fourth R*, 5 (2000), pp. 3–16, at 11, 14–15. These photographs were taken by the librarian of the Jerusalem Patriarchate after the manuscript had been torn from the volume in which it was written. It was subsequently lost, concealed, or destroyed.

² Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, *Colloquy 18* (1976), ed. W. Wuellner, pp. 1–11. Written and oral contributions to the Colloquy were typed up and reproduced for circulation to subscribers. The Center was founded in 1969 by Edward Hobbs and Dieter Georgi, and was intended as an interdisciplinary forum for scholars at the Graduate Theological Union, the University of California Berkeley, and other local universities.

³ *Colloquy 18*, p. 56.

⁴ The Colloquy did discuss forgery, but only in the 'safe' contexts of the ancient world or the eighteenth century, the presumed period of the Mar Saba manuscript. The participant who raised this issue (the classicist Charles Murgia) states bluntly in the conversation: 'I do not see any way Smith could have forged it. First, his knowledge of Greek seems inferior to that of the author. Second, upon analysis, Smith's book does not seem to have any of the formal elements of fraud. It does give evidence which allows his thesis to be refuted' (*Colloquy 18*, p. 60).

consciousness like a remembered dream, but interpretative activity proceeds on the assumption that the letter may 'provisionally' be attributed to Clement of Alexandria.⁵

Where the attribution to Clement has been challenged, the most significant questions have been concerned not so much with the content of the letter as with the circumstances of its discovery. Why did its discoverer fail to ensure that the manuscript was made accessible for independent scholarly investigation?⁶ Does the supposedly eighteenth-century handwriting attested in his photographs betray telltale signs of forgery, both in the extreme care of the letter formation and in possible resemblances to Smith's own Greek script?⁷ Or is all this an unwarranted slur on the memory of a distinguished and blameless scholar?⁸ Still more importantly: does the climate of scepticism about Smith's story threaten to deprive us of a uniquely valuable

⁵ The extraordinary range of this interpretative activity is conveniently illustrated by Scott Brown's annotated bibliography of 'Works that discuss Longer Mark' (*Mark's Other Gospel: Rethinking Morton Smith's Controversial Discovery* [Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005], pp. 284–300). The bibliography lists works by many of the best-known figures in the gospels scholarship of the past few decades.

⁶ This question was first raised by Quentin Quesnell ('The Mar Saba Clementine: A Question of Evidence', *CBQ* 37 [1975], pp. 48–67). Quesnell's article is a *tour de force*, but it has created the unfortunate impression that the forgery issue can only be settled if the original manuscript is rediscovered.

⁷ Stephen C. Carlson, *The Gospel Hoax: Morton Smith's Invention of Secret Mark* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2005), pp. 23–47. See also the responses by Scott G. Brown: 'Reply to Stephen Carlson', *ExpT* 117 (2006), pp. 144–9; 'Factualizing the Folklore: Stephen Carlson's Case against Morton Smith', *HTR* 99 (2006), pp. 291–327, esp. pp. 298–306. In Smith's *Tannaitic Parallels to the Gospels* (JBLMS 6; Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1951¹; 1968²), Greek words are handwritten, and the letter formation can therefore be compared with that of the manuscript. Carlson analyses the formation of the letters *theta*, *lambda*, and *tau*; other letters (e.g. *epsilon*) may also be worth investigating. He also finds an indication of forgery in the fact that the writing process was slow and laborious, in spite of the cursive style. It is interesting that, in Smith's brief analysis of the handwriting, the 'haste' or 'speed' of the copyist is emphasized on five occasions (*Clement of Alexandria*, pp. 3–4). The writing process may, however, have been hindered by factors such as the absorbency of the paper.

⁸ So Charles W. Hedrick, 'The Secret Gospel of Mark: Stalemate in the Academy', *JECs* 11 (2003), pp. 133–45, at 136; Guy G. Stroumsa, 'Comments on Charles Hedrick's Article', *JECs* 11 (2003), pp. 147–53, at 148; but see also Bart Ehrman's 'Response to Charles Hedrick's Stalemate', *JECs* 11 (2003), pp. 155–63.

testimony to the early development and reception of Christian gospel literature?⁹

Circumstantial evidence for the forgery hypothesis is far from negligible. But whether it is conclusive is another matter. If the forgery hypothesis is to be substantiated, it must be on the basis of the internal evidence of the Clementine letter, read against the double background of the undisputed work of Clement (and Mark) on the one hand, and Smith's own work on the other. Careful analysis of the letter within the appropriate contexts may reach more nearly definitive results than can be achieved by analysing Smith's handwriting, raising questions about his conduct, or speculating about his psychological development.¹⁰ Such considerations may create *suspicious*, which may well be warranted. But the question is whether it is possible to put Smith's authorship of the (pseudo-)Clementine letter *beyond reasonable doubt*. To do so would be to bring to a close the interpretative debate inaugurated by participants in the 1975 Colloquy and their colleagues elsewhere.

Resolving the authorship question is a matter of some importance. Like a computer virus, a forgery rapidly impairs and corrupts the work of its many victims—who include those who *suspect* that something may be wrong as well as those who assume that all is well. A suspected forgery has less impact than an unsuspected one, but it remains damaging even where it has attained a merely provisional place within the field in question. Like a virus, a forgery needs to be clearly identified as such, in order then to be eliminated.

Perhaps this enigmatic text actually *solicits* its own exposure? It allures its reader with the prospect of entering 'the innermost sanctuary of that truth hidden by seven veils' (I.26). Is the innermost truth of this text that it enacts precisely the falsification of truth it pretends to denounce? If these suspicions are to be substantiated, a way must be found through its multiple concealments.

⁹ Compare Scott Brown, *Mark's Other Gospel*, pp. 235–38. Here and in a series of articles, Brown has mounted a sustained defence of Smith and the letter he discovered; but he has also sought to detach the letter and the gospel excerpts from Smith's interpretation of them—rejecting, for example, Smith's translation of *μυστικὸν εὐαγγέλιον* as 'Secret Gospel' (*Mark's Other Gospel*, p. xi).

¹⁰ There is rather too much of such speculating in Peter Jeffery's recent book *The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled: Imagined Rituals of Sex, Death, and Madness in a Biblical Forgery* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007).

I. CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA AND THE LETTER TO THEODORE

Clement's letter to Theodore may be analysed as follows:

1. *Editorial Introduction* (I.1)¹¹2. *Against the Carpocratians* (I.2–15)

2.1. Theodore's resistance to the heretics is commended; resistance is absolutely necessary (I.2–8).

2.2. This is the case even where what they say is partially true—as with their claims about the Gospel of Mark (I.8–14).

3. *The Origin and Falsification of the Secret Gospel of Mark* (I.15–II.10)

3.1. Mark's first gospel was intended to be useful only to catechumens (I.15–18).

3.2. Arriving in Alexandria with his own and Peter's notes, Mark incorporated them into a longer, 'more spiritual' gospel for the benefit of those progressing in *gnosis*. In this he acted commendably (I.18–27).

3.3. Since Mark's death, the Secret Gospel has been carefully preserved in the church at Alexandria, where it is 'read only to those who are being initiated into the great mysteries' (I.27–II.2).

3.4. At the instigation of demons, Carpocrates obtained a copy of the Secret Gospel, which he both misinterpreted and corrupted by inserting falsehoods of his own. The blasphemous Carpocratian doctrines stem from this corrupted text (II.2–10).

4. *The Need for Secrecy* (II.10–19)

4.1. The truth about the Secret Gospel must at all costs be kept secret (II.10–12).

4.2. Scripture confirms the need to withhold truth from the unworthy; it also speaks of the freedom and purity of the enlightened (II.12–19).

5. *The Content of the Secret Gospel* (II.19–III.17)

5.1. Clement indicates his willingness to answer Theodore's questions. He will refute the Carpocratian falsifications by giving the authentic text in its exact wording (II.19–21).

5.2. The first passage is located after the occasion where, on the road to Jerusalem, Jesus predicts his suffering and resurrection (II.20–2; Mark 10:31–4). The passage falls into

¹¹ References are to the pages and line numbers of the Greek manuscript. I = folio 1 recto; II = folio 1 verso; III = folio 2.

two main parts. First, it tells how Jesus raised a young man from the dead and received hospitality from him (II.23–III.6). Second, it tells how, six days later, the young man came to Jesus at night, ‘wearing a linen cloth over his nakedness’, and was initiated into ‘the mystery of the kingdom of God’ (III.6–11).

5.3. The text continues with the pericope about the request of James and John (Mark 10:35–45). The expression ‘naked man with naked man’ does not occur, and nor do any of the other additions Theodore has noted in the Carpocratian gospel (III.11–14).

5.4. The second passage from the authentic Secret Gospel is located almost immediately afterwards, following the reference to Jesus’ arrival in Jericho (Mark 10:46a). It tells how Jesus was approached by the mother and sister of the young man, together with Salome, and how he refused to receive them. Neither here nor anywhere else does the Secret Gospel include the other material Theodore has identified, all of which is manifestly false (III.14–17).

6. *Exegesis of the Secret Gospel* (III.17–18)

[The text breaks off at this point.]

Could Clement of Alexandria have written this remarkable text? An initial step is to correlate each of its six main sections with relevant material from elsewhere in the corpus of his writings (and to follow a similar procedure in the case of Mark). The question is whether related material provides a convincing *parallel* to the letter to Theodore, or whether it is more likely to be a *source* or *model* for a later writer—perhaps a modern one.

I. *Editorial Introduction* (I.1)

The Mar Saba manuscript opens with the words: ‘From the letters of the most holy Clement the Stromatist: to Theodore’ (I.1). Similarly, the *Sacra Parallela* of John of Damascus introduce a citation with the words ‘From the twenty-first letter of Clement the Stromatist’.¹² According to Smith, this suggests that a collection of Clement’s letters was known to John of

¹² *Clemens Alexandrinus*, ed. O. Stählin, 4 vols. (GCS; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1905–36), 3.223 (cited by Smith, *Clement of Alexandria*, p. 6). Smith uses the second edition of vol. 1 (1936), the third of vol. 2 (1960), and the first of vols. 3 and 4 (1909, 1936); see *Clement of Alexandria*, p. 441. I have consulted the third edition of vols. 1 and 3 (ed. U. Treu, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1970–2), and the first edition of vols. 2 and 4 (1906, 1936).

Damascus, resident at the Mar Saba monastery c.716–49.¹³ A priori, Mar Saba would be a more likely location than most for the discovery of a Clementine letter. In addition to the reference to ‘Clement the Stromatist’, the word ‘from’ (ἐκ) is common to both passages. In the *Sacra Parallela*, the ἐκ indicates that a passage is to be extracted from a single letter: ‘From the twenty-first letter...’. In the Mar Saba text, it indicates that a particular letter is to be extracted from a collection: ‘From the letters...’. A similar formula is put to a different use. Is the more limited formulation the model or template for the broader one?

2. *Against the Carpocratians (I.2–I.5)*

Irenaeus and Clement provide the main patristic evidence for the beliefs and practices of this group.¹⁴ Irenaeus ascribes to the Carpocratians the view that the soul must acquire for itself every possible form of human experience in order to escape the cycle of reincarnation.¹⁵ Like the Ebionites, they reject the virginal conception and regard Jesus as the son of Joseph; unlike the Ebionites, they believe that Jesus was hostile to the Jewish law.¹⁶ This antinomian tendency is also evident in Clement’s citations from a Carpocratian treatise, *On Righteousness*, which presents laboured arguments from the natural order in support of the proposition that ‘women should be held in common’.¹⁷ As Clement caustically remarks, those who take this view ‘sacralize fleshly and sexual intercourse and suppose it will get them into the kingdom of God’.¹⁸ Clement sees in the Carpocratians a fulfilment of the prophetic warnings of the Epistle of Jude (vv. 8–16),¹⁹ and the letter to Theodore selects a single image from this same passage, that of the ‘wandering stars’ (ἀστέρες πλανήται) of Jude 13 (I.3). Theodore’s Carpocratians too are addicted to ‘fleshly and bodily sins’ (I.4).

¹³ *Clement of Alexandria*, p. 6. For the relevance of this point for the history of the text, see *ibid.*, pp. 285–90; *Secret Gospel*, pp. 143–8.

¹⁴ Smith provides an extended discussion of patristic evidence relating to Carpocrates and the Carpocratians, although with surprisingly few references to the letter to Theodore (*Clement of Alexandria*, pp. 266–78). The letter is mentioned on pp. 268, 272, 273 (twice), 274, each time only in passing.

¹⁵ Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* i.25.4.

¹⁶ *Adv. Haer.* i.25.1.

¹⁷ *Strom.* iii.2.5.1, 6.1–9.3.

¹⁸ *Strom.* iii.4.27.5.

¹⁹ *Strom.* iii.2.11.2.

In the third book of the *Stromateis*, Clement criticizes not only antinomian sects such as the Carpocratians but also encratite groups who enjoin strict sexual abstinence. In particular, he engages with the views of Julius Cassianus, author of a treatise on self-control.²⁰ According to Clement, one of the key texts to which this work appeals is to be found ‘not... in the four gospels handed down to us [ἐν τοῖς παραδιδόμενοις ἡμῖν τέτταρσιν εὐαγγελίοις]... but in the one according to the Egyptians’.²¹ The text in question is a dialogue between Jesus and Salome, in which the Saviour announces: ‘I came to destroy the works of the female.’²² In spite of its non-canonical status, Clement does not reject the Gospel of the Egyptians but provides a non-encratite interpretation of the passage in question.²³ The analogy with the Secret Gospel of Mark is clear—although the letter to Theodore breaks off just as the non-Carpocratian interpretation is about to begin.²⁴ In both cases, heretics appeal to a non-canonical gospel which Clement chooses to reinterpret rather than to reject. There is no reason in principle why Carpocrates and his followers should not have had their own preferred gospel just as Julius Cassianus and his followers did. And if they did have their own gospel, it would surely have been a scandalous one.

It is just such a gospel that the letter to Theodore supplies. But the scandalous element is different from that of the treatise *On Righteousness*. From the Carpocratians’ gospel, we learn that they have added the love of ‘naked man with naked man’ (III.13) to the heterosexual licence of which Clement otherwise speaks. And at this point the critical question is unavoidable. Should we recall Irenaeus’ claim that *every* kind of experience was necessary to liberate the Carpocratian soul? Or does the homosexual orientation of the Carpocratian Secret Gospel represent an

²⁰ *Strom.* iii.13.91.1. The treatise was entitled Περὶ ἐγκρατείας, and was also known as Περὶ εὐνουχίας, with an allusion to Matt. 19:12.

²¹ *Strom.* iii.13.93.1. Clement’s quotations from this text are collected in *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation Based on M. R. James*, ed. J. K. Elliott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999²), pp. 18–19.

²² *Strom.* iii.9.63.2.

²³ *Strom.* iii.6.45.3; iii.9.63.1–66.3; iii.13.92.1–93.3.

²⁴ Smith has almost nothing to say about the Gospel of the Egyptians, noting only that both gospels refer to Salome (*Clement of Alexandria*, pp. 90, 190, 270, 281).

anachronistic attempt to make it relevant for the mid-twentieth century?²⁵

3. *The Origin and Falsification of the Secret Gospel of Mark* (I.15–II.10)

Clement provides Theodore with a remarkably detailed account of the origin of the Gospel of Mark in its public, secret, and Carpocratian forms, and this may be compared with what Clement of Alexandria says elsewhere about the Gospel of Mark.²⁶ According to Eusebius, Clement claims in the sixth book of his *Hypotyposesis* that the two gospels containing genealogies (Matthew and Luke) were written first, and were followed by Mark and finally by John:

That which is according to Mark had this occasion. As Peter preached the gospel publicly in Rome and declared the gospel by the Spirit, many who were present asked Mark, who had followed [ἀκολουθήσαντα] him for a long time and remembered his sayings [μνημονεύοντων τῶν λεχθέντων], to write what had been said. Having done so, he gave the Gospel to those who had requested it. When Peter learned of this, he neither explicitly forbade nor encouraged it. But last of all, John, perceiving that the external facts [τὰ σωματικά] had been made plain in the gospels, being urged by his associates and

²⁵ As argued by Stephen Carlson (*Gospel Hoax*, pp. 65–71) and Peter Jeffery (*Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled*, pp. 185–239). This view is rejected by Scott Brown ('Factualizing the Folklore', pp. 313–22; 'The Question of Motive in the Case against Morton Smith', *JBL* 125 [2006], pp. 351–83, at 353–73). Brown argues both that there is no basis for a 'gay reading' of the Secret Gospel story, and that Smith himself did not read it along these lines: the story is about baptism, not homosexuality. But for Smith the two are not mutually exclusive. In Jesus' initiatory rite, 'Freedom from the law may have resulted in completion of the spiritual union by physical union' (*Secret Gospel*, p. 114). In baptism the disciple was united with Jesus; and 'the union may have been physical' (*Clement of Alexandria*, p. 251). Thus physical union may have taken place in the initiatory baptisms that Jesus performed both in the rich young man's home and in Gethsemane, where another young man, 'wearing a sheet over his naked body, was (almost) caught with Jesus late at night' (p. 209; cf. Mark 14:51). 'When the guards fell asleep and the police arrived unexpectedly they surprised both Jesus and the initiate' (p. 237). The choice of terminology hardly suggests that 'Smith rejected a gay reading of Mark 14:51–2', as Brown insists ('Factualizing the Folklore', pp. 321–2; italics original).

²⁶ On this see C. Clifton Black, *Mark: Images of an Apostolic Interpreter* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), pp. 137–45. Like other New Testament scholars, Black is overly impressed by the fact that 'many patristic scholars tend to concur with Smith that the letter was, indeed, written by Clement' (p. 139).

inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel [*πνευματικὸν ποιῆσαι εὐαγγέλιον*].²⁷

Elsewhere, Eusebius provides his own summary of this passage, in which, however, Peter *commends* Mark's action.²⁸ This is followed by the claim that, according to tradition, 'this Mark was the first that was sent to Egypt, and that he proclaimed the gospel he had written and first established churches in Alexandria'.²⁹ A briefer but otherwise similar account of Markan origins occurs in a comment on 1 Peter 5:13, also probably from the *Hypotyposesis* and preserved in Cassiodorus' Latin translation.³⁰ In both passages, Mark puts into writing the preaching of Peter.

In contrast, the letter to Theodore views the canonical gospel as independent of Peter (I.15–16). This work was written 'during Peter's stay in Rome' (I.15), but Mark writes on his own account and is no longer the follower who recalls the apostle's teachings and is prevailed upon to put them into writing. The Secret Gospel too is dated in relation to Peter, i.e. to his martyrdom, but it also echoes the tradition of a link between Mark and Alexandria, attested in Eusebius. Oddly, the new Alexandrian version of Mark is said to incorporate material from Peter's notes (*ὑπομνήματα*) as well as Mark's own (I.18–19). Why has precisely the secret material been preserved in the form of written notes, when no such source is mentioned in connection with the canonical gospel? Even here, Mark's notes are given priority over Peter's, confirming the independent authority of the evangelist. Scepticism about the traditional link between Mark and Peter is also characteristic of *modern* scholarship. The question therefore arises: does Mark's independence in relation to Peter suggest the modernity of the letter to Theodore?

Clement's claim that the synoptic gospels were succeeded by a 'spiritual gospel' is echoed in the '*more* spiritual gospel' (*πνευματικώτερον εὐαγγέλιον*) of the letter to Theodore. In both cases, the (more) spiritual gospel follows on directly from the production of canonical Mark; and this again suggests the use of an authentic passage as a model or template for a later imitation. Could Clement have spoken of one gospel as more or less 'spiritual' than another, as though on a sliding scale? Or is the idea of a

²⁷ *HE* vi.14.6–7.

²⁸ *HE* ii.15.1–2.

²⁹ *HE* ii.16.1.

³⁰ *Clemens Alexandrinus*, ed. Stählin, 4.197–8, 206.

'more spiritual gospel' succeeding canonical Mark an imitation of the 'spiritual gospel' of which Clement himself speaks?³¹

4. *The Need for Secrecy (II.10–19)*

The contents of Clement's letter to Theodore are to remain strictly confidential. When the Carpocratians proclaim their falsehoods, misinterpreting the authentic Secret Gospel and appealing also to their own corrupt additions, Theodore is not to concede that Mark actually wrote the Secret Gospel (τοῦ Μάρκου εἶναι τὸ μυστικὸν εὐαγγέλιον, II.11–12). In other words, he is to deny that any such authentic text exists at all, insisting that Mark wrote only the canonical gospel.³² In contrast, Clement of Alexandria holds that the existence of a written text makes secrecy impossible: 'Things that are written cannot fail to become known, even if I leave them unpublished.'³³

References to secrecy about a text's existence are more characteristic of pseudepigraphy. Thus Daniel is instructed to 'shut up the words and seal the book, until the time of the end' (Dan. 12:4). According to one commentator of Smith's generation, 'Sealing and concealing are necessary parts of the fiction of attributing a prophecy pseudonymously to some figure of the past'.³⁴ A new text can be made to seem old if its readers can be persuaded that it has long been hidden and has only now come to light. Smith employs an updated version of precisely this argument:

The letter presents this [*sc.* information about Mark's secret Gospel] as confidential and even directs that Markan authorship of the secret

³¹ See Smith's comments on the relationship between this passage and Eusebius (*Clement of Alexandria*, pp. 32–3).

³² Brown translates: 'nor, when they put forward their falsifications, should one concede that it is Mark's mystic Gospel, but should even deny it on oath' (*Mark's Other Gospel*, p. xx). This contrasts with Smith's 'that the secret Gospel is by Mark', according to which Theodore is instructed to *lie*, if necessary on oath. Brown's interpretation would require a different Greek text: the insertion of ταῦτα to give the sense 'these are' rather than the awkward 'it is', and a change in the word-order, from τοῦ Μάρκου εἶναι τὸ μυστικὸν εὐαγγέλιον to εἶναι τὸ τοῦ Μάρκου μυστικὸν εὐαγγέλιον. Brown insists that Smith's emphasis on secrecy is fundamentally mistaken (pp. 29–30), but gives no reason to reject Smith's translation as a rendering of the Greek text.

³³ *Strom.* i.1.14.4. On this see Eric Osborn, 'Teaching and Writing in the First Chapter of the *Stromateis* of Clement of Alexandria', *JTS*, NS 10 (1959), pp. 335–44.

³⁴ Norman W. Porteous, *Daniel: A Commentary* (OTL; London: SCM, 1965), p. 171.

Gospel (or at least of the Carpocratian secret Gospel) is to be denied on oath... Therefore, if Clement *were* the author of the letter we should *not* find this information in his published works.³⁵

Here, as in the pseudonymous Daniel, the secrecy injunction explains why an ancient text could not have come to light before now. Is the secrecy surrounding the Secret Gospel an indication that the letter is a modern fabrication?³⁶

5. *The Content of the Secret Gospel (II.19–III.17)*

It has often been suggested that Clement's excerpts from the Secret Gospel are a mere mosaic or collage, drawing from mainly Markan phraseology to create a new narrative loosely related to the Lazarus story. Consider the following examples:

Secret Gospel

And they come to Bethany...

And there was there a *woman*...

'Son of David, have mercy on me!'

And his disciples rebuked *her*...

And *Jesus* came and rolled away the stone from the door of the tomb...

He raised *him*, taking *him* by the hand...

looking at him he loved him, and *began to beg* him that he might be with him

Synoptic Gospels

And they come to Bethany.

(Mark 8:22)

And there was there a *man*... (Mark 3:1)

'Son of David, have mercy on me!' (Mark 10:47)

And his disciples rebuked *them*. (Mark 10:13)

And *he* came and rolled away the stone from the door of the tomb. (Matt. 28:2)³⁷

He raised *her*, taking *her* by the hand. (Mark 1:31)

looking at him he loved him (Mark 10:21)³⁸ and *begged* him that he might be with him... (Mark 5:18)

³⁵ *Clement of Alexandria*, p. 82; italics original.

³⁶ On this note the comments of Charles Murgia: 'To me it seems that every sentence of the letter, other than the actual quotation, is admirably designed to provide a *seal of authenticity* for the passage of Secret Mark. Great care is taken to convince the modern reader of why he has never heard of this gospel before. It is only known at Alexandria, it is carefully guarded, it is read only to the initiates, its very existence should be denied in public, and even perjury should be committed to maintain the secret of its existence' ('Secret Mark: Real or Fake?', in *Colloquy 18*, pp. 35–40, at 38).

³⁷ 'From the door of the tomb' is, however, a minority reading here.

³⁸ In the Secret Gospel, this is reapplied to the young man's love for Jesus. The later reference to 'the young man whom Jesus loved [him]' (III.15) shows that love was reciprocated.

for he was rich.	for he was <i>very</i> rich (Luke 18:23)
And after six days...	And after six days... (Mark 9:2)
And when it was evening [he]	And when it was evening he
comes...	comes (Mark 14:17)
dressed in a linen garment over	dressed in a linen garment over
his nakedness...	his nakedness (Mark 14:51)
the mystery of the kingdom of	the mystery of the kingdom of
God...	God (Mark 4:11)
And leaving there he <i>returned</i> to	And leaving there he <i>comes</i> to the
across-the-Jordan.	<i>regions of Judea and</i>
	across-the-Jordan (Mark 10:1)

The Secret Gospel passages comprise 14 sense-units (phrases or sentences) distributed evenly throughout the pericope. The Markan and other synoptic parallels have contributed 66 of its 157 words, in sequences of between three and ten words. A minimum of 32 of the remaining words are employed to complete the sense-units in question. That leaves just five sentences out of account, which tell of Jesus' departure to the tomb; the voice heard from the tomb; Jesus' entry into the tomb and his stretching out his hand; the departure to the young man's home; and the night spent together. These sentences are full of synoptic language, but they are not dependent on synoptic word-sequences. Their affinities are with the Johannine stories of the raising of Lazarus (John 11) and, in the last case, with the night-time visit of Nicodemus (John 3). Indeed, it is these Johannine or pre-Johannine stories that provide the initial framework for the whole pericope, within which the sense-units drawn from the synoptics find their place.³⁹ Yet the dependence on Mark and the other synoptists is of a different order from the dependence on John or Johannine tradition. The pericope would seem to be the work of an author determined to pattern his own work on mainly Markan phraseology.

³⁹ For comparison between the Secret Gospel story and John 11, see Michael Labahn, *Jesus als Lebensspender: Untersuchungen zu einer Geschichte der johanneischen Tradition anhand ihrer Wundergeschichten* (BZNW 98; Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1999), pp. 442–9. Labahn argues that the two resurrection stories stem from a common tradition, rejecting the view of Brown and others that the Secret Gospel story is dependent on John as well as the synoptists (R. E. Brown, 'The Relation of the "Secret Gospel of Mark" to the Fourth Gospel', *CBQ* 46 [1974], pp. 466–85). As Labahn's discussion illustrates, a 'genuine' Secret Gospel, dating back to the second century, would be of particular interest to Johannine scholars.

That, at least, has been a widely held view since the Secret Gospel was first studied by scholars other than Smith in 1960.⁴⁰ Those who maintain that canonical Mark is secondary to the Secret Gospel are in a minority.⁴¹ More recently, attempts have

⁴⁰ See the catena of opinions cited by Scott Brown (*Mark's Other Gospel*, p. 10); Robin Scroggs's assessment of the new material as 'a crude collage of phrases found elsewhere in the Gospel of Mark' is representative. Although Brown rejects this assessment, Smith himself could speak of the deuterio-Markan passages as 'an amateurish imitation of Mk full of phrases found in the gospels' ('On the Authenticity of the Mar Saba Letter of Clement', *CBQ* 38 [1976], pp. 196–203, at 197). On this occasion Smith's view seems to me exactly right. Elsewhere, however, he views this dependence on canonical Mark as a secondary phenomenon, hypothesizing that 'an original Aramaic gospel had been twice translated into Greek; John had used one translation, Mark another...Mark was then variously expanded—by Matthew, by Luke, and by the author of Secret Mark, who imitated Mark's style, but added episodes from the old Greek translation, inserting them where they had stood in the original outline' ('Clement of Alexandria and Secret Mark: The Score at the End of the First Decade', *HTR* 75 [1982], pp. 449–61, at 452). This seems to mean that Secret Mark presents pre-Markan stories in a style influenced by canonical Mark—as though it were simply a matter of 'style' rather than whole phrases and sentences. Thus secondary, post-Markan characteristics actually conceal the truth of the story's early origin. Indications of secondariness are further eroded in Smith's elaborate and obfuscatory 'Synthesis of findings' (*Clement of Alexandria*, pp. 122–46), which concludes merely that 'the evidence slightly—but not decisively—inclines to the side of early imitation' (p. 138), i.e. of canonical Mark by Secret Mark. Smith here explains away most of the parallels, which are said to result from the 'contamination...of the western text of Mk. by the influence of the longer text (5 possible instances)' (p. 137), or to represent 'phrases fixed in the usage of certain early Christian circles' (p. 138). Among the fixed phrases that Secret Mark probably does *not* derive from the canonical gospel are *νίε Δαβίδ ἔλεησόν με, τὸ μυστήριον τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ, ὃν ἠγάπα αὐτὸν ὁ Ἰησοῦς*, and *περιβεβλημένος σιδόνα ἐπὶ γυμνοῦ*, although it is conceded that 'ἐμβλέψας αὐτοῦ ἠγάπησεν αὐτόν' remains a problem' (p. 138). If all that were true, rather than confused nonsense, the evidence for early imitation would indeed be indecisive.

⁴¹ Most notably Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), pp. 295–303; John Dominic Crossan, *Four Other Gospels: Shadows on the Contours of Canon* (Sonoma: Polebridge, 1992), pp. 72–83. Koester argues that several features common to canonical and Secret Mark were absent from the original version of Mark used by Matthew and Luke: the singular 'mystery' (Mark 4:11), Jesus' love for the rich man (Mark 10:21), and the young man in a linen cloth (Mark 14:51). These are therefore features introduced by the redactor of Secret Mark along with the new stories; canonical Mark has deleted some but not all of this supplementary material (pp. 296–8). Koester here revives the old proto-Mark hypothesis, which was in turn devised to protect the Q hypothesis from dangers posed by the many agreements of Matthew and Luke against Mark. According to Crossan, 'canonical Mark eliminated both *SGM* 2 and 5 [i.e. the two passages quoted by Clement]', and then 'scattered the

been made to interpret the two new Markan fragments within the Markan narrative as a whole.⁴² But the series of precise verbal parallels, drawn from a variety of largely unrelated contexts, cannot be so easily explained away. The question is unavoidable: is it easier to attribute such a compositional procedure to a second-century scribe or to a mid-twentieth-century scholar?⁴³

6. *Exegesis of the Secret Gospel (III.17–18)*

As it stands, Clement's letter to Theodore is incomplete. Its final extant words are 'Now the true exegesis that accords with the true philosophy ...' (III.18), to which we may conjecturally add 'is as follows'. Whether by accident or design, the fragment closes by indicating a transition between the introduction to the Secret Gospel and the interpretation that is supposed to have followed. A similar format may be seen in Clement's treatise on the salvation of the wealthy (*Quis dives salvetur*). Here too,

dismembered elements of those units throughout his gospel' in order 'to offset future Carpocratian usage' (p. 73). 'Once canonical Mark was accepted, *SGM* 2 and 5 would therefore read like units composed from words, phrases, and expressions of that gospel' (pp. 73–4). In other words, the dismemberment was intended to make the objectionable primitive material *look* secondary, a devious strategy that successfully deceived most of the Secret Gospel's scholarly readers from 1960 onwards. While Crossan's theory is worthy of *The Da Vinci Code*, he has recognized—as Koester has not—that the links with canonical Mark require a highly unusual compositional procedure of one kind or another.

⁴² So Eckhard Rau, *Das geheime Markusevangelium: Ein Schriftfund voller Rätsel* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 2003), pp. 39–83; Marvin Meyer, *Secret Gospels: Essays on Thomas and the Secret Gospel of Mark* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), pp. 109–79; Scott Brown, *Mark's Other Gospel*, pp. 163–214.

⁴³ A second-century dating has been widely assumed. Thus, according to H. Merkel, the Secret Gospel fragments recall 'eine Reihe neutestamentlicher Ausdrücke und Gegenbenheiten', suggesting that the text 'ist aus Reminiscenzen an die kanonischen Evangelien zusammengesetzt worden' ('Auf den Spuren des Urmarkus? Ein neuer Fund und seine Beurteilung', *ZTK* 71 [1974], pp. 123–44, at 130–1). In consequence, the text is judged to be a typical product of those late second-century groups, 'die ihre theologischen Intentionen in Neuzählungen evangelischer Berichte kleideten, wobei sie einen Grundtext mit willkürlich herbeigeholten Ornamenten aus anderen Texten versahen' (pp. 138–9). Texts cited by Merkel include *P. Egerton* 2, the *Gospel of Peter*, and the *Protevangelium of James*—none of which offers a real analogy to the Secret Gospel. Like many scholars, Merkel is highly critical of Smith's interpretation of the Secret Gospel material, but feels compelled to accept the authenticity of the Clementine letter.

a problematic Markan text is cited in full—including the offensive claim that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.⁴⁴ Here too, the citation is followed by the promise of an interpretation that follows the mystical rather than the carnal interpretation of the scriptural words. Clement writes:

δεῖ δὲ σαφῶς εἰδότας ὡς οὐδὲν ἀνθρωπίνως ὁ σωτήρ, ἀλλὰ πάντα θεία σοφία καὶ μυστικῆ διδάσκει τοὺς ἑαυτοῦ, μὴ σαρκίνως ἀκροάσθαι τῶν λεγομένων...

Knowing well that the Saviour teaches his own nothing in a merely human way but everything with divine and mystic wisdom, we are not to take what is said in a carnal manner...⁴⁵

Has this text provided a model for the letter to Theodore, where the problem of a truly ‘carnal’ interpretation returns in still more acute form? That might explain why the letter is oddly reminiscent of modern studies of the gospels in discussing issues of provenance, purpose, authenticity, and text-form as preliminary to detailed exegesis.

In each of its six sections, the letter to Theodore can be correlated with the work of Clement of Alexandria (or Mark the evangelist). Yet there are indications that the closest analogies *may* simply reflect the use of sources and models by a modern author. Indications of modernity may be seen in the possible use of an old introductory formulation as the template for a new one, the homosexuality theme, the detachment of Mark’s gospel from the teaching of Peter, the apparent modelling of the ‘*more* spiritual gospel’ on Clement’s ‘spiritual gospel’, the appeal to keep the letter’s very existence a secret, the bizarre compositional technique evidenced in the Secret Gospel fragments, and the attention to issues of provenance as preliminary to exegesis. These possible indications of modernity fall into two broad categories: first, apparent imitations of clearly identifiable exemplars not only in the gospel material but also in the letter; and second, traces of modern scholarly emphases and social concerns.

Ever since Smith first solicited scholarly assessments of the letter to Theodore, there has been a reluctance to question its attribution to Clement. Following publication, Smith’s *interpretation* of the letter and its significance was sharply criticized, but

⁴⁴ *Quis dives* 4.4–10 (Mark 10:17–31).

⁴⁵ *Quis dives* 5.2.

the letter itself survived the critical assault relatively unscathed. Thus Smith could claim in 1982 that

most scholars would attribute the letter to Clement, though a substantial minority are still in doubt. No strong argument against the attribution has been advanced, and those who have denied it have either ignored or resorted to fantastic conjectures to explain away the strong evidence presented in *Clement* from the letter's content and style, which attest Clement's authorship.⁴⁶

If the primary aim is to establish the letter and the gospel material as authentic traces of early Christian history, then it hardly matters for Smith if his interpretations of them are rejected.⁴⁷ The crucial point has been established: 'If Clement wrote the letter, the gospel fragments quoted in it must be considerably earlier than his time.'⁴⁸ The authenticity of the letter serves to validate the Secret Gospel. To question the authenticity of the letter is allegedly to part company with scholarly reason and consensus and to abandon oneself to 'fantastic conjectures'.

The arguments presented so far do not as yet amount to a *proof* that Smith was the author of the letter. But they are hardly 'fantastic conjectures'. They make it impossible to dismiss the question of authenticity with the bland assurance 'that a number of scholars increasingly seem inclined to accept the text as an ancient letter of Clement'.⁴⁹ The debate about this text should rest on something more substantial than impressionistic observations about what other scholars seem inclined to accept.

II. THE ANOMALIES OF THE CLEMENTINE LETTER

The letter and its contents must be read against the double background of the late second and mid-twentieth centuries, since these are the most likely dates for its composition. Before proceeding to further investigation of relevant twentieth-century factors, however, the letter must be read more carefully in its own terms. Is the history it presupposes coherent? Does it contain specific features that *require* the later rather than earlier dating?

⁴⁶ Smith, 'Clement of Alexandria and Secret Mark', pp. 451–2.

⁴⁷ The contrast between 'the general rejection of Smith's magical and sexual interpretation' and 'the widespread acceptance of the Secret Gospel as a genuine ancient writing' is rightly noted by Jeffery (*Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled*, p. 32).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 452.

⁴⁹ Marvin Meyer, *Secret Gospels*, p. 136.

1. *The Real Purpose of the Letter*

The Clementine letter purports to respond to the ‘questions’ (τὰ ἠρωτημένα, II.19) put to the author by one Theodore, currently embroiled in controversy with followers of Carpocrates who have ‘wandered...into a boundless abyss of the carnal and bodily sins’ (I.4). Although the author commends his correspondent for ‘silencing’ the Carpocratians’ ‘unspeakable teachings’ (I.2), Theodore has in fact been seriously unsettled by his opponents and has written to Clement for advice. He finds that the Carpocratians keep appealing to the Gospel of Mark to justify their licentious beliefs and practices (I.11–12); but the text to which they appeal is significantly different from the one with which he is familiar. Theodore’s letter evidently listed the most important differences (III.13, 17), some of which occurred in connection with two passages in particular. Clement cites these two passages in what he claims is their authentic form, with the Carpocratian falsifications removed. Theodore is already familiar with these additional Markan narratives, although he knows them only in the longer Carpocratian versions.

In the first of the additional narratives, Jesus raises a young man from the dead at the request of his sister. Finding himself grasped by Jesus’ hand, and gazing into his face, the young man immediately loves him (III.3–4). It is as though the miracle is Jesus himself, rather than his own resurrection. Six days later he comes to Jesus by night, wearing only a linen cloth over his naked body. Throughout that night, ‘Jesus was teaching him the mystery of the kingdom of God, naked man with naked man [γυμνὸς γυμνῶ]’ (III.9–10, 13). This last phrase is the only one of the scandalous Carpocratian additions to the authentic story that Clement acknowledges, but Theodore seems to have listed a number of others (III.13). Clement’s ‘Secret Mark’ is long in relation to the canonical Mark but short in relation to the Carpocratian one that has caused Theodore such anxiety.⁵⁰

The second additional passage incidentally confirms that the young man’s love for Jesus was reciprocated (III.15), and describes an encounter with three women: the young man’s

⁵⁰ According to Smith, ‘Clement does not explicitly say that the additional material [i.e. γυμνὸς γυμνῶ] was sexually offensive, and he would hardly have missed the chance to say so if it had been’ (*Clement of Alexandria*, p. 185). This is an astonishing statement, in view of the Carpocratians’ reputation for sexual license (cf. I.3–7) and Theodore’s anxiety. If Smith forged the Clementine letter, of course, critical judgements such as this cannot be taken at face value.

sister and mother, together with Salome. According to Clement Jesus did not receive them (III.15), but the Carpocratian version known to Theodore told a different and fuller story.⁵¹ Did Jesus perhaps teach Salome the mystery of the kingdom of God, as he had taught the young man? It is on such stories as these that the Carpocratians base their 'dogma' (II.10), their 'unspeakable teachings' (I.2). Their version of the Gospel of Mark provides warrant for their promiscuity: in acting as they do, they imitate Jesus himself. Perhaps the Carpocratians claim, as Clement does, that Mark composed a second, longer, more spiritual version of his gospel when he came to Alexandria after the death of Peter (cf. I.15–22). Or perhaps they claim that their version is the original one, composed by Mark himself, and that crucial passages were later excised by those who took offence at Jesus' radical disregard for conventional morality. It is not surprising that Theodore is worried by this unfamiliar longer version of Mark, and that he has taken the trouble to list its deviations from canonical Mark and to seek Clement's opinion on them.

This reconstruction of the immediate context of Clement's letter derives from its references to Theodore's struggle with the Carpocratians (I.2), his questions about their appeal to Mark (II.19), and his listing of additional passages that include longer and more scandalous versions of the two passages cited by Clement himself (III.13, 17). Set against this background, Clement's response betrays three major anomalies.

First, the letter is an inappropriate response to Theodore's concerns. Theodore seeks reassurance from Clement that the longer Carpocratian Mark is simply a perversion of the familiar canonical gospel. According to his opponents, the authentic Markan gospel is one in which Jesus is found in compromising positions with young male and female admirers. Theodore hopes to hear from Clement that there is absolutely no substance to such claims. Instead, he learns that the Carpocratian view of Mark is largely true. There is indeed a longer and definitive version of this gospel, Mark was indeed its author, and, yes, it does in fact contain a story about the mutual love of Jesus and a scantily clad young man, who passed the night alone with him and who was initiated into the mystery of the kingdom of God.

⁵¹ This is evident from Clement's insistence that, after 'he comes into Jericho' (Mark 10:46a), the authentic secret gospel adds 'only' (*μόνον*) the passage he cites (III.14). The Carpocratian version of this story included some at least of the 'many other things' about which Theodore wrote (III.17).

The only reassurance Clement can offer is that the authentic longer Mark does *not* say that Jesus and the young man were both naked. It says *only* that the young man was scantily clad when he arrived in Jesus' room for their nocturnal rendezvous. The authentic Secret Mark is only slightly less prurient than the falsified one. To complete his correspondent's discomfiture, Clement informs him that this secret text continues to play a crucial role in the church of Alexandria, where it is read with great solemnity to those who (like the nearly naked youth) are being 'initiated into the great mysteries' (II.1–2).⁵²

Second, Theodore is instructed to make absolutely no use of his new-found knowledge of the authentic Secret Mark. Faced with the Carpocratians' claims for their longer text, Theodore is *not* to point out to them that the words 'naked man with naked man' are absent from the true, Alexandrian version of this text, which corresponds to the Markan autograph. He must resist the temptation to parade his new text-critical knowledge. On the contrary, he must continue to do what he has presumably been doing all along, which is to deny that Mark ever wrote a secret gospel (II.10–12). Thanks to Clement, Theodore now knows that his denial is a falsehood. But he must continue to deny, even, if necessary, on oath. His new knowledge is for himself alone. For all practical purposes, it is useless.

Third, Clement goes to considerable lengths to inform his correspondent of what he already knows. Theodore's letter has already listed the additions he has found in the Carpocratian gospel, including the longer forms of the encounters with the young man and with the women. Yet Clement not only cites the authentic form of these stories in full, he also tells his correspondent exactly where to find them. The first one occurs between the third passion prediction (Mark 10:31–4) and the discussion about true greatness (Mark 10:35–45); the second is to be inserted after Mark 10:46a, 'And he comes into Jericho...' (II.20–2; III.14). In sharp contrast to this excess of detail, the 'many other things' listed by Theodore are dismissed without further consideration as blatant forgeries (III.17).

⁵² 'Theodore has been bothered by claims of the Carpocratians to have the real teaching of Mark. He is assured, not that all the additions of their version are lies, but in effect that most of them are genuine. Theodore, who has clearly never been allowed to read the secret gospel, is left to wonder whether he is missing more by not listening to the Carpocratians' (Charles Murgia, 'Secret Mark: Real or Fake?', p. 38).

The real intention of the letter is evidently to disclose the existence and content of the Secret Gospel, not to respond appropriately to Theodore.⁵³ If that is the case, however, then Clement's role as revealer of the Secret Gospel is parallel to Morton Smith's as its discoverer. Clement's text aims not to assist the embattled Theodore but to divulge the shocking fact that the Carpocratian claim about the two versions of the Gospel of Mark is largely true. There is indeed a Secret Gospel, and the addressee must come to terms with it. That is also the message of Smith's two books on the Secret Gospel. Clement is concerned to establish the authenticity of the Secret Gospel, and that is also Morton Smith's concern as he labours to establish the authenticity of Clement. What Smith argues *about* the letter is what Clement argues *within* it.

2. *An Aid to Composition*

Clement provides Theodore with a full account of the circumstances in which the Gospel of Mark was composed, in its first (canonical), second (secret), and third (heretical) editions (I.15–II.10). This passage is obviously related to Papias's statements about the origins of the Gospel of Mark and of Matthew, as preserved in Eusebius. The question is whether the links with Papias are conceivable for Clement, or whether they betray the work of a modern forger who has used the Papias excerpts as a template for his own work.

According to the letter to Theodore, the first, canonical edition of Mark was composed in Rome. Links with Papias are indicated by the inserted Greek phraseology:

As for Mark, then, during Peter's stay in Rome he wrote an account [ἀνεγράψε] of the Lord's doings [τὰς πράξεις τοῦ κυρίου], not, however [οὐ μέντοι], declaring all of them, nor yet [οὐδὲ μὴν] hinting at the secret ones, but [ἀλλ'] selecting what he thought most useful for increasing the faith of those who were being instructed.⁵⁴

⁵³ 'Clément a beau répondre à Théodore, qui lui posait des questions sur les enseignements secrets des Carpocratians (I, 1–3). Il a beau dire que les Carpocratians enseignent des choses fausses alors qu'il va rétablir la vérité. En fait, le texte qui est mis sous son nom vise à assurer la valeur de l'évangile secret de Marc' (Pierre Grelot, *L'Origine des Évangiles: Controverse avec J. Carmignac* [Paris: Cerf, 1986], p. 85).

⁵⁴ I.15–18.

The verbal and structural similarities to Papias are striking, especially in view of the quite different *content* of the two passages. According to Papias,

Mark, as the interpreter of Peter, wrote [ἔγραψεν] accurately—not however [οὐ μέντοι] in order—what he remembered of the things said or done by the Lord [τὰ ὑπὸ τοῦ κυρίου ἢ λεχθέντα ἢ πραχθέντα]; for neither [οὔτε γάρ] did he hear the Lord nor [οὔτε] follow him, but later [ὔστερον δέ], as I said, Peter...⁵⁵

If the shared or similar Greek phraseology is extracted from these passages, a common sequence also comes to light (although the single transposition should be noted). Yet the elements of this common sequence are treated in two very different ways. In the first half, the letter makes a straightforward allusion to Papias (*AI*, 2). In the second, Papias provides (pseudo-) Clement with the structural framework for his own quite different claims (*BI*, 2):

AI Clement: ἀνέγραψε τὰς πράξεις τοῦ κυρίου,

A2 Papias: ἔγραψεν... <τὰ ὑπὸ τοῦ κυρίου ἢ λεχθέντα ἢ πραχθέντα... >

BI Clement: οὐ μέντοι... οὐδὲ μὴν... ἀλλ'...

B2 Papias: οὐ μέντοι... οὔτε γάρ... οὔτε... ὔστερον δέ...

In *AI*, Clement abbreviates Papias's statement about the content of the canonical Gospel of Mark: Mark wrote 'the deeds of the Lord', echoing 'the things said or done by the Lord'.⁵⁶ In *BI*, however, Clement's compositional procedure is highly unusual. Papias makes a series of negative statements about what is *not* to be found in Mark, and why that is so. Mark did *not* write in order, because he himself did *not* hear the Lord, *nor* was he among the Lord's followers—*rather*, at a later stage, he was a follower of Peter. According to Clement, Mark did *not* narrate all the deeds of the Lord, *nor* did he reveal those with a concealed meaning—*rather*, he chose to tell only those stories that would be useful for beginners in the Christian faith. In both cases, an initial reference to the contents of Mark's Gospel is followed by negative statements that specify its limitations.

⁵⁵ Eusebius, *HE* iii.39.15.

⁵⁶ Smith identifies Papias only as one of several possible sources for *πράξεις* (I.16), reading τὰ ὑπὸ τοῦ Χριστοῦ λεχθέντα ἢ πραχθέντα, rather than τὰ ὑπο τοῦ Κυρίου... (*Clement of Alexandria*, p. 23). τοῦ Κυρίου is traced only to Clement's own usage (*ibid.*). In consequence, the link with Papias is played down.

In reading Mark's Gospel, we are to be aware that its author was *not* a disciple of the earthly Jesus (Papias), or that he did *not* include material unsuitable for beginners (Clement).

The author here derives from Papias both phraseology and a template for his own very different account of the limitations of Mark's Gospel. This 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.⁵⁷

The author of Clement's letter continues to depend on Papias as he divulges the existence of a second, secret edition of Mark. Of this he writes:

... Thus he composed [συνέταξε] a more spiritual gospel for the use of those who were being perfected. Nevertheless [οὐδέπω], he did not divulge the things not to be uttered, nor [οὐδέ] did he write down the hierophantic teaching of the Lord, but [ἀλλά] to the stories [πράξεσιν] already written he added yet others and, moreover, brought in certain sayings [λόγια] of which he knew the interpretation [τῆν ἐξηγήσιν] would, as a mystagogue, lead the hearers into the innermost sanctuary of that truth hidden by seven veils.⁵⁸

Here, the sequence οὐδέπω... οὐδέ... ἀλλά... closely resembles the previous sequence (οὐ μέντοι... οὐδέ μὴν... ἀλλ'...), both in its construction and its content. In the first version of his gospel, Mark did not narrate all the deeds of the Lord or reveal those with a hidden meaning; in the second, Mark did not narrate the secret things or report the Lord's hierophantic teaching. So far, the two gospels sound very similar. The reuse of the Papias template corresponds to a certain poverty of invention, although the reference to *ιεροφαντικὴ διδασκαλία* is an impressively portentous touch.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ If so, the debt has been carefully concealed. Smith states that, while the two phrases are attested individually, 'οὐ μέντοι... οὐδέ μὴν I have not found in Clement' (*Clement of Alexandria*, p. 24). Instances are given in which Clement uses ἀλλά '[f]or emphasis after a string of negatives' (p. 25).

⁵⁸ I.21–5.

⁵⁹ *ιεροφαντικός* (I.23) occurs just once in the undisputed works of Clement, one of nine such words within 36 lines (I.4–II.11)—a remarkable concentration of vocabulary otherwise unique to Clement, to which should be added the four words unattested elsewhere in Clement. On this see A. H. Criddle, 'On the Mar Saba Letter Attributed to Clement of Alexandria', *JECs* 3 (1995), pp. 215–20. Drawing on Smith's own vocabulary list (*Clement of Alexandria*, pp. 380–9), Criddle argues that the number of words in the letter attested once elsewhere (nine) is disproportionate to the number of words unique to the letter (four). At least equally striking is the presence of 13 unique or otherwise

Interestingly, the account of the Secret Gospel also draws on Papias's statement about the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew, says Papias, 'compiled the sayings [τὰ λόγια συνετάξατο] in the Hebrew language, and each one interpreted them [ἡρμήνευσεν δ'αὐτά] as he was able'.⁶⁰ Since this statement concerns Matthew and not Mark, there is no reason whatever why Clement should allude to it as he introduces his correspondent to Secret Mark. And yet the allusions are clear. Like Papias's Matthew, Secret Mark is said to have been 'composed' or 'compiled' (συνετάξατο, συνέταξε: the use of middle or active forms makes no difference to the sense).⁶¹ Thus the verbs used to describe the composition of each of two gospels are very similar: ἔγραψεν or ἀνέγραψε in the case of canonical Mark, συνετάξατο or συνέταξε in the case of its successor. Like Papias's Matthew, Secret Mark focuses especially on Jesus' λόγια, which—for different reasons—cannot be straightforwardly understood and require to be *interpreted*.⁶² That is to say, a third party must mediate between author and hearer or reader if the text's otherwise concealed sense is to be brought to light. Papias's statement on Matthew provides the Clementine author with a second template alongside the Markan one.

It is hard to imagine why Clement of Alexandria should depend so heavily on the wording and structure of Papias's statements about two successive gospels. It is all too easy to imagine a modern author gratefully availing himself of Papias's assistance as he laboriously crafts his pseudo-Clementine fictions.

In Clement's authentic account of Markan origins, as preserved in Eusebius, echoes of Papias are perceptible but faint.⁶³ Although informed by the tradition derived from Papias, Clement tells his story in his own words and his own way. Unlike his imitator, he needs no model for his composition.⁶⁴

unique words out of a total word-count of 351 words for the 36 lines in question; that is, one for every 27 words.

⁶⁰ Eusebius, *HE* iii.39.16.

⁶¹ Smith again fails to note the link with Papias, commenting on *συνέταξεν* only that 'Clement regularly uses this for the composition of books' (*Clement of Alexandria*, p. 31).

⁶² Smith notes two passages in which Clement speaks of τὰ λόγια τοῦ κυρίου, but makes no reference to Papias (*Clement of Alexandria*, p. 39).

⁶³ *HE* vi.14.5–7. (1) ἀκολουθήσαντα, cf. Papias's παρηκολούθησεν. (2) μεμνημένον τῶν λεχθέντων, cf. Papias's ὅσα ἐμνημόνευσεν...ἢ λεχθέντα. On this passage see above.

⁶⁴ Smith cites the passages in Clement and Papias that relate to Mark, placing them in parallel columns, but without including the Secret Gospel material (*Clement of Alexandria*, pp. 20–1). This egregious failure to facilitate

3. *A Forger's Signature?*

As we have seen, the letter to Theodore opens with a polemical passage in which the addressee is initially commended for his resistance to the Carpocratians (I.2–8), but is then warned that their falsehoods are not without an element of truth (I.8–14). In the things they say about Mark, some are wholly false, others only partially so:

συγκεκραμένα γὰρ τᾶληθῆ τοῖς πλάσμασι παραχάσσεται ὥστε, τοῦτο δὲ τὸ λεγόμενον, καὶ τὸ ἅλας μωρανθῆναι.

For the true things being mixed with inventions are falsified, so that, as the saying goes, even the salt loses its savour.⁶⁵

This passage has been investigated by Stephen Carlson, who finds evidence of the modernity of the letter in the ‘image of mixing table salt with an adulterant that changes its flavor’.⁶⁶ Adulterated salt was unknown in the ancient world, whereas our own ‘free flowing salt was and continues to be mixed with other ingredients perceived as affecting its taste’.⁶⁷ Thus, this passage from Clement’s letter to Theodore presupposes a twentieth-century technology—a technology pioneered, as it happens, by a company called ‘Morton Salt’. Morton Salt, Morton Smith? Is this passage ‘a deliberately embedded clue’ to the true identity of its author?⁶⁸

Carlson assumes that the saying about adulterated salt determines the preceding reference to the mixing of truth with inventions or fabrications. Salt and truth are both alike corrupted by the addition of alien substances. But it is possible, and preferable, to assume a looser connection between the falsification of truth and the corruption of salt. The underlying image in the statement about falsification is that of *forgery*, as the verb *παραχάσσεται* indicates. This word means ‘to mark with a false stamp’ (*χάραγμα*), and thus ‘to forge’. The *παραχάραγμα* is the counterfeit coin and the *παραχάρακτης* is the counterfeiter or

a comparison between the new material and the old is of a piece with the brief and inadequate commentary that follows, where scant reference is made to the Clementine letter (p. 22). Smith notes Clement’s relative independence from Papias in the authentic material preserved by Eusebius and Cassiodorus, but ignores the crucial and obvious question of the relationship between Papias and the letter itself.

⁶⁵ I.13–15.

⁶⁶ *Gospel Hoax*, p. 59.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

forger. The mingling of truth and falsehood corresponds to the mixture of precious and base metal in the counterfeit coin. The Greek terminology can be used metaphorically to apply not only to coinage but to literary fabrications—as in the case of Clement's letter, where the falsification or 'forgery' in question is the Carpocratian version of the Secret Gospel. Additions like 'naked man with naked man' represent the debasing of precious metal.

While *παραχάρισσω* focuses on the act of imprinting a false image, the English equivalent, 'forge', has a broader background. The English word derives from the French *forger*, which itself derives from the Latin *fabricare*, to 'make' or 'manufacture'. The French and English derivatives refer specifically to the production of metal objects, which one 'forges' by heating the metal, hammering and stamping it, and so on. Thus 'forge' as a substantive can refer either to the fire and bellows that make the metal malleable or, by extension, to the workplace in which metal objects are 'forged'. Originally, the 'forger' is simply one who works at a 'forge' and so practises the art of 'forgery'. The forger *may* be involved in counterfeiting coinage, but he need not be. In more recent usage, however, the 'forger' has become detached from the 'forge' (his equipment or workplace) and has become synonymous with 'counterfeiter'. The counterfeit product 'forged' by the 'forger' is as likely to be literary as monetary.

In consequence of this change of usage, another word must now be employed to differentiate the sinister figure of the 'forger' from the innocent and useful worker at the forge. French marks this distinction in the words *forgeur* and *forgeron*. But English has long possessed precise Germanic parallels to the vocabulary in question. The forger is also a *smith*, the forge is also a *smithy*, and in forging a metal object one also *smiths* it. And so, when the forger becomes a counterfeiter, the worker in metal becomes a smith. Bearers of the family name 'Smith' are perhaps more likely than others to have noted its antecedents.

The use of *παραχάρισσω* with reference to heretical corruption of the truth is attested elsewhere in Clement. In itself, its value as evidence for Smith's forgery of the letter is minimal.⁶⁹ Yet the

⁶⁹ Note, however, Smith's own preoccupation with the forgery issue. 'A forger would have attempted something more spectacular...' (*Clement of Alexandria*, p. 77). 'Given the absence of any plausible explanation as to why this document would have been forged, and the absence of any strong evidence in the document itself to indicate forgery...' (p. 85). 'Almost any work of ancient literature can be supposed a forgery' (p. 88, note). 'Learned forgery was not rare in the eighteenth century, but was customarily edifying

forgery metaphor occurs not in isolation but in conjunction with a second metaphor, concerned with the corruption of salt. The Carpocratian Gospel is a forged production in which truth is mingled with falsehood—‘so that, as the saying goes, even the salt loses its savour [ὥστε... καὶ τὸ ἅλας μωρανθῆναι]’ (I.14–15).

If παραχαράσσω evokes the figure of the forger or ‘Smith’, does μωρ[αν]θῆν[αι] suggest ‘Morton’? In this mixed metaphor, has the true author of Clement’s letter to Theodore concealed his own signature? In the nature of the case, it is impossible to be sure of this. Yet this hypothesis might explain several surprising features of the salt metaphor. The introductory formula, ‘as the saying goes’, oddly suggests a popular proverb rather than a saying of Jesus. On three occasions elsewhere, Clement cites the first part of the Matthean version of the saying about salt: ‘You are the salt of the earth’ (Matt. 5:13a).⁷⁰ This is understood to refer to the church, or, more precisely, to the minority of truly spiritual Christians—whom Clement is not afraid to describe as ‘gnostics’,⁷¹ ‘the elect of the elect’.⁷² While Clement employs a range of colourful metaphors to depict heresy and its effects, the corruption of salt is not one of them. In the letter to Theodore, the salt saying has become detached both from its Matthean antecedent (‘You are the salt of the earth’) and from its sequel:

You are the salt of the earth. But if salt is corrupted [ἐάν δὲ τὸ ἅλας μωρανθῆ], how will it be salted? It is no longer good for anything... (Matt. 5:13)

Salt is good. But if even salt is corrupted [ἐάν δὲ καὶ τὸ ἅλας μωρανθῆ], how will it be restored? It is good neither for the land nor for the dungheap... (Luke 14:34–5)

...so that, as the saying goes, even the salt is corrupted [ὥστε... καὶ τὸ ἅλας μωρανθῆναι]’ (I.14–15).

and tendentious; this text is neither’ (p. 85, note). ‘Among the strongest reasons for thinking the Epistle to the Ephesians a forgery...’ (p. 138). ‘The similarities to Clement’s style are so close that they can be explained only in two ways: either this was written by Clement or it is a deliberate and careful imitation, not to say a forgery’ (*Secret Gospel*, p. 28). ‘[A] would be forger, who wanted to pass the letter off as Clement’s, would not have said such things...’ (p. 29). Smith’s concern to show that the letter to Theodore is *not* ‘forged’ is a mirror-image of the letter’s concern to show that material in the Carpocratian gospel is ‘forged’.

⁷⁰ *Paed.* iii.11.82.4; *Strom.* i.8.41.4; *Quis dives* 36.1.

⁷¹ E.g. *Strom.* vii.1.1.1, and frequently elsewhere.

⁷² *Quis dives* 36.1.

In the letter to Theodore, the inclusion of *καί* echoes the Lukan version (although this is textually uncertain). The omission of *ἐάν δέ* makes it possible for the clause that follows to function independently, as a self-contained proverb and not as part of a saying of Jesus.

Another intriguing difference is to be found in the aorist passive infinitive, *μωρανθήναι*. While this is grammatically correct after *ὥστε*, a finite verb-form could equally well have been selected,⁷³ and would have corresponded more closely to the synoptic *μωρανθῆ*. Why then the infinitive *μωρανθήναι*? The answer may lie in the ending, *-ναι*, and specifically in the *ν*. That *ν* is essential if *μωρ[αν]θῆν[αι]* is to mark the spot where the name 'Morton' lies concealed. Such an explanation of the aorist passive infinitive would also explain why the supposed proverb must be made independent of Jesus' salt-sayings. The reference to the corruption of salt *has to be* extracted from the synoptic conditional clause if it is to incorporate the required infinitive form. Thus Clement must quote it not as a saying of Jesus but as a free-standing proverb which Jesus himself is presumed to have known.⁷⁴

If all this is correct, the author of this wordplay will have appreciated the fact that *μωρανθήναι* usually means 'to be made foolish', 'to be made a fool of'—a concealed reference to those who are fooled (*Mortonized*, we might say) by this forged (*Smithed*) letter.⁷⁵

III. THE LETTER TO THEODORE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY CONTEXT

The twentieth-century context of greatest potential relevance for the letter to Theodore is the career of Morton Smith, especially prior to his second visit to Mar Saba in 1958. The question is whether there is evidence from this period that the

⁷³ As in II.6, *ὥστε παρ' αὐτοῦ ἐκόμισεν ἀπόγραφον τοῦ μυστικοῦ εὐαγγελίου*.

⁷⁴ In his comments on this passage, Smith mentions the gospel parallels but is more concerned to establish an implausible allusion to Jer. 28:17 LXX, which contains the word *ἐμωράνθη* but no reference to salt (*Clement of Alexandria*, p. 18). Thus the citation of the salt proverb becomes 'a multiple biblical allusion' which 'is typical of Clement and [which] would be very difficult for a forger to imitate' (pp. 18–19). As noted above in connection with Papias, there appears to be a tendency to divert readers from potentially incriminating evidence. See also Appendix G (pp. 370–9), where the parallels between the Secret Gospel fragments and the canonical gospels are presented in a format that seems designed to minimize them.

⁷⁵ Since *μωρανθήναι* is immediately preceded by the word 'salt', the Morton Salt connection may also be in play here.

'discovery' of a text with the relevant characteristics, and in a specific set of circumstances, may have been *planned in advance*. In the first instance, the case for Smith's authorship of the letter will be strengthened if the letter can be shown to reflect his own interests and concerns prior to its alleged discovery in 1958.

1. *Constructing the Secrecy Tradition*

How far does the letter attest a view of Christian origins that Smith already held before he found it? There will obviously be continuities between his prior views and his *interpretation* of the letter—a point that he himself acknowledges.⁷⁶ But it would be a remarkable coincidence if *the letter itself* anticipated views already held by its discoverer prior to his discovery. It is true that a discoverer *might* find confirmation in a discovery of what he or she had already surmised. If, however, the views in question are idiosyncratic and the correspondences precise, doubts about the genuineness of the discovery may be hard to suppress.⁷⁷

Morton Smith paid sustained attention to the Gospel of Mark in preparing a lengthy and hostile review of Vincent Taylor's commentary on this gospel. The commentary was published in 1952, the review in 1955.⁷⁸ Apart from a perfunctory opening paragraph and the conclusion, the review consists entirely in detailed criticism of points of exegesis, beginning from Mark 1:1–8 and concluding with Mark 16:15, extending over 40 pages. The aim of the criticism is to provide 'a clear picture not only of Taylor's book, but of the sort of NT scholarship it represents: the work of determined apologists'.⁷⁹ Taylor seeks to

⁷⁶ *Secret Gospel*, pp. 6–8, 25. Elsewhere Smith states that 'although my interpretation of the text followed the general lines of my earlier thought, the changes produced were enormous' ('On the Authenticity of the Mar Saba Letter', *CBQ* 38 [1976], pp. 196–203, p. 198).

⁷⁷ In connection with 'Smith's beliefs about Jesus and Mark's Gospel prior to 1958', the issue is *not* that 'Smith's writings prior to 1958 express views about Jesus and the reliability of the Gospel of Mark that are very different from those expressed in [*Clement of Alexandria*] and later in *Jesus the Magician*' (Brown, *Mark's Other Gospel*, p. 49). That is true but irrelevant. The issue is how far Smith's views prior to 1958 coincide with the contents of the letter to Theodore.

⁷⁸ Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan, 1952); Morton Smith, 'Comments on Taylor's Commentary on Mark', *HTR* 48 (1955), pp. 21–64. The potential significance of Smith's response to Taylor was first noted by Quesnell, 'Mar Saba Clementine', pp. 59–60; see also Carlson, *Gospel Hoax*, pp. 81–4.

⁷⁹ 'Comments', p. 63.

defend 'both the historical reliability of Mark and the liberal Protestant picture of Jesus',⁸⁰ by way of an emphasis on 'vivid eyewitness touches' in Mark's narrative, rationalistic explanations of Jesus' miracles, and so on. Many of Smith's criticisms therefore have to do with what he takes to be Taylor's uncritical attitude towards historicity. In Mark 1:1-8, for example, Taylor fails to notice that this is a polemical passage shaped by 'Christian propaganda against the followers of John'.⁸¹ Mark, after all, 'was writing, not a history, but an apologetic and polemic and missionary tract.'⁸² He

was remote from the historical situation [of Jesus' ministry], his interests were those of the Church of his day, and whatever did not serve those interests—e.g. whatever historical framework his sources may have contained—was just what he would leave out as uninteresting, *even if he did not deliberately censor it*.⁸³

Here, the possibility is envisaged that Mark's 'sources' may have contained genuine historical information about Jesus that the evangelist omitted because it conflicted with his and his community's image of Jesus. Thus reliable but irrelevant or problematic material in those sources may actually have been 'censored'.

In his only other reference to a Markan source, Smith is discussing the Johannine characteristics he finds in the controversy stories of Mark 2:1-3:6.⁸⁴ Here, as in John, Jesus openly speaks of himself as 'the Son of man' (Mark 2:10, 28; John 5, 6, *passim*); he possesses supernatural knowledge of the human heart (Mark 2:8; John 5:8); he demonstrates his divine commission by appeal to his miracles (Mark 2:10; John 5:36, etc.); and he thereby exposes himself to plots against his life (Mark 3:6; John 5:16-18). In connection with the healing of the paralytic in Mark 2:1-12, Smith comments: 'Using a miracle to break off an argument is just what one would expect of a source with other Johannine traits.'⁸⁵ The points of contact between John and this particular section of Mark may derive from a common source.

Already in 1955, Smith envisages the possibility that Mark may have 'deliberately censored' material in his sources that he finds problematic, and that at least one of those sources is

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 35; italics added.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

common to Mark and John. Precisely these points are attested in Clement's letter to Theodore. The Secret Gospel's story of the raising of the young man appears to be an earlier version of the extended Johannine account of the raising of Lazarus (John 11).⁸⁶ This story might well be regarded as problematic, in view of the intimacy of Jesus' relationship with the young man. For that reason, according to Clement, it belonged among the 'secret' deeds of Jesus that were omitted from the first, canonical version of Mark's Gospel.⁸⁷ 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.

The story of Jesus and the young man culminates in the all-night session in which Jesus initiated him into 'the mystery of the kingdom of God'.⁸⁸ It is therefore interesting to note the significance that Smith already finds in this expression in 1955, in his critique of Taylor. In Mark 4:11, Jesus tells his disciples that 'to you is given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but to those outside everything is in parables'. Taylor himself finds this saying problematic. On his view, Mark believes 'that Jesus used parables to conceal His meaning from "those without", whereas in fact, His purpose was to elucidate His message by prompting reflection'.⁸⁹ Thus Mark uses the word 'mystery' to refer to a knowledge of the kingdom of God that is granted to Jesus' disciples but withheld from outsiders. This is in line with usage elsewhere in the New Testament, where, according to Taylor, "'mystery" always 'means an "open secret" made known by God, and is used of the Gospel, or the inclusion of the Gentiles. There is no case in which it connotes secret rites or esoteric knowledge communicated to "initiates"'.⁹⁰

Smith disagrees fundamentally with Taylor's denial of esotericism, and outlines a secrecy tradition extending from Mark back to Paul and Jesus and forward into the second century:

In I Cor. Paul says plainly that there is a wisdom which he preaches among the 'initiate' (*τελειοις*), but which he cannot yet preach to the

⁸⁶ This has been disputed (R. Brown, 'The Relation of the "Secret Gospel of Mark" to the Fourth Gospel'; E. Rau, *Das geheime Markusevangelium*, pp. 51-4). But Smith himself claimed that the Secret Gospel material was pre-Johannine (*Secret Gospel*, pp. 52-62).

⁸⁷ I.16-17.

⁸⁸ III.9-10.

⁸⁹ *Mark*, p. 255.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Corinthians because they are still 'carnal'. Paul, therefore, claims to have a secret doctrine. As for Jesus, Mark, of course, represents him as teaching in secret and commanding secrecy on many occasions...[T]he early Church had a wide variety of motives for attributing secret doctrine to Jesus, and among them may well have been the recollection that Jesus (also for a wide variety of motives) practiced secrecy.⁹¹

When it is stated in Mark 4:34 that Jesus interpreted his parables only 'to his own disciples', the point is

to discredit outside teachers and justify the disciples' claim to a monopoly of the true, secret doctrine...; cf. Clementine Homilies II.37 and XVII.1, where St. Peter is planting spies in the circle of Simon Magus' disciples, to learn what Simon's doctrines really are and what arguments he intends to use in his next debate. Jesus might have had good reason to limit some of his teachings to a hand-picked group...⁹²

Contrary to Taylor, then, there is considerable evidence that the early church reckoned with 'esoteric knowledge communicated to "initiates".' A secret doctrine was taught by Jesus himself and by Paul. It is rightly ascribed to Jesus by Mark. Secret doctrine supposedly derived from Jesus was also taught by Simon Magus, according to the pseudo-Clementine literature. We have here the rudiments of a secrecy tradition.⁹³

Smith does not mention Clement of Alexandria in this context. In a 1958 article, however, presumably written before his discovery, Clement is cited precisely as a witness to a secrecy tradition, Jewish now as well as Christian.⁹⁴ In the course of a discussion of the image of God, Smith speculates about the existence of a tradition in which the tree of life in the Garden of Eden is understood as the divine throne and identified with the

⁹¹ 'Comments', p. 29.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁹³ Already in his Jerusalem doctoral dissertation, dating from 1944, Smith noted that 'an important part of primitive Christianity was a secret doctrine which was revealed only to trusted members'; Mark 4:11-12 and 1 Cor. 2:1-6 are cited (*Tannaic Parallels to the Gospels*, pp. 155-6).

⁹⁴ 'The Image of God: Notes on the Hellenization of Judaism, with Especial Reference to Goodenough's Work on Jewish Symbols', *BjRL* 40 (1958), pp. 473-512; repr. in M. Smith, *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh*, vol. 1: *Studies in Historical Method, Ancient Israel, Ancient Judaism*, ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen (Leiden: Brill, 1996), pp. 116-49. As Stephen Carlson has noted, Clement is cited four times in this article (*Gospel Hoax*, p. 75).

figure of the saint. If it be objected that the extant texts show no trace of such a doctrine, Smith replies:

We should not expect this doctrine to be developed in the preserved rabbinic literature, since the teaching about the throne of God is specified as that to be kept most secret of all, and quite possibly was not committed to writing.⁹⁵

To support these claims, footnote references are given to *mHagigah* 2:1 and Clement, *Stromateis*, i.1.13–14 ('etc.'), although the passages are not quoted. The Mishnaic passage counsels great caution in discussing, among other things, 'the chariot', i.e. the divine throne in Ezekiel 1. The Clement passage is concerned with the inappropriateness of committing divine mysteries to writing. But it also claims that Jesus himself taught esoteric mysteries, and refutes those who question this:

The Lord did not command us to abstain from doing good on the sabbath, but permitted us to impart the divine mysteries [τῶν θείων μυστηρίων] and their holy light to those able to receive. Indeed, he revealed things unsuited to the many not to the many but to the few... And if anyone should say that it is written, 'There is nothing hidden [κρυπτόν] that shall not be manifest or veiled [κεκαλυμμένον] that shall not be revealed', let him learn from us that it is the one who hears in secret to whom what is hidden shall be manifested... [W]hat is hidden from the many shall be manifest to the few.⁹⁶

According to Clement, Jesus practised an exemplary concealment of the divine mysteries. In the context of a discussion of rabbinic beliefs, Smith is not obliged to refer to this passage. That he does so, shortly before the Mar Saba discovery, is an indication of an ongoing fascination with the secrecy tradition he earlier identified in Jesus, Mark, and Paul, a tradition now extended to include Clement of Alexandria. The 'etc.' following the reference to *Stromateis* i.1 indicates that related material in Clement has already been identified—material directly relevant to the soon-to-be-discovered letter.

Before Smith left for his visit to Mar Saba in the summer of 1958, many of the elements that comprise the letter to Theodore were already present in his published work. These elements do not simply recur in Smith's *interpretation* of the letter, as one would expect; rather, they are embedded *within the letter itself*.

⁹⁵ 'Image of God', p. 145.

⁹⁶ *Strom.* i.1.13.1–3.

By 1958 Smith already saw Clement as articulating a tradition according to which Jesus taught higher truths in secret; a tradition summed up in the Markan 'mystery of the kingdom of God'. He had already surmised that Mark may have omitted or censored material present in the older authentic tradition he inherited—tradition shared in part with the Fourth Evangelist. In the letter to Theodore, all this finds its confirmation. Only in retrospect, in the light of the letter, can these undeveloped points from Smith's earlier work be reassembled into a pattern. Yet, given the content of the letter, the pattern is compelling evidence that the discoverer of this remarkable text is actually its author.

2. *The Two Mysteries of Mar Saba*

In *The Secret Gospel* (1973), Smith gives a narrative account of his early visit to Mar Saba in 1942, his return there in 1958, his discovery of the Clementine letter, and the laborious process of authentication and interpretation that followed. The narrative framework is maintained throughout the book.⁹⁷ Even in its second half, where the focus is on the letter itself, first-person narrative is rarely absent for long. Also common are passages in which scholarly conclusions are presented in the past tense, thereby highlighting the investigative process that led to them. The narrator tells how the mysterious text was slowly compelled to yield up its secrets by his own critical acumen:

What most concerned me was the secrecy of Jesus and particularly the mystery of the kingdom of God...⁹⁸ [S]ecrecy in general, in the teaching of Jesus, and in the New Testament, Jesus' relation to the kingdom of God and to the Baptist, 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... (p. 75). What was this mystery of the kingdom of God, and why should it be taught secretly, in a nocturnal initiation? These were the primary questions that had to be answered... (p. 78). I don't remember how many false starts I made through the labyrinth to this conclusion [i.e. that the mystery of the kingdom is a secret baptismal rite]. But I still remember my relief at reaching it... Once this question was clear, I knew what I was looking for... (p. 96). Once I had got at the secret of Jesus' magical practice it was easy to understand why there was a secret tradition in early Christianity... (p. 115).

⁹⁷ On the importance of close reading of Smith's own narrative, see Jeffery, *Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled*, pp. 2–13, 125–31.

⁹⁸ *Secret Gospel*, p. 74. Further references are given in the text.

This narrative framework is continuous with the earlier, more explicitly autobiographical chapters of *The Secret Gospel*:

'After the Christmas season,' Father Kuriakos said to me, 'I shall go down to Mar Saba for a few days. You must come too.' That was in 1941, when I was twenty-six... (p. 1).⁹⁹ I was shown the two libraries, as I was the other sights of the monastery, but at the time I paid them little attention... (p. 5). [Some years later,] I became interested in Greek manuscripts and manuscript hunting... (p. 8). By the spring of 1958 I was ready for a rest and remembered the tranquillity of Mar Saba... (p. 9). I had not expected much from the Mar Saba manuscripts... (p. 11). [O]ne afternoon near the end of my stay, I found myself in my cell, staring incredulously at a text written in a tiny scrawl... (p. 12). Even before I finished transcribing the text, I began to think it was too good to be true... Moments of wild excitement alternated with spells of profound pessimism... (p. 18). By the time I had worked my way through Thrace and Macedonia and so on to Athens, I was able to sit down calmly and assess the situation (p. 19).

In spite of its first-person narrative form, Smith's *Secret Gospel* is not simply autobiography. Attention is focused not on the narrator's life per se, but on the circumstances and means by which the unknown text was discovered and interpreted. Furthermore, discovery/interpretation is presented as a *single continuous process*, occupying, we are told, the years from 1958 to 1966 (pp. 76–7). Interpretation is given greater prominence than discovery because of this text's epoch-making significance, as Smith understands it. It was for him 'a discovery of extraordinary significance', containing 'new information about Jesus, a new miracle story, a quotation from a secret Gospel by St. Mark', and much else (p. 18). As Smith's narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that the 'new information about Jesus' is *crucial* information that shows Jesus to have been utterly different from the figure found in conventional Christian accounts, whether traditional or modern. As interpreted by Smith, the new text shows how an esoteric and intimate baptismal rite lay at the heart of Jesus' ministry, a rite which he called 'the mystery of the kingdom of God'. This was

a water baptism administered by Jesus to chosen disciples, singly and by night. The costume, for the disciple, was a linen cloth worn over the naked body. This cloth was probably removed for the baptism proper... After that, by unknown ceremonies, the disciple was possessed by Jesus' spirit and so united with Jesus. One with him, he

⁹⁹ The date seems to refer to the invitation rather than the visit, in which case the visit will have occurred in 1942 rather than 1941.

participated by hallucination in Jesus' ascent into the heavens, he entered the kingdom of God, and was thereby set free from the laws obtained for and in the lower world. Freedom from the law may have resulted in completion of the spiritual union by physical union. (pp. 113–14)

Smith does not dwell on the difference between his own account and conventional Christian ones. He does not need to. If any newly discovered text could ever bring about 'the downfall of Christianity', the letter to Theodore is that text—at least if interpreted along the lines proposed by its discoverer. Smith's mystery story has apocalyptic implications.

As it happens, 'The Downfall of Christianity' is a newspaper headline dating from 1936, announcing the publication of a papyrus manuscript in which the resurrection of Jesus is apparently discredited. According to the Gospel of John, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were together responsible for the burial of Jesus' body (John 19:38–42). Nothing more is heard of them thereafter—until the discovery of the new manuscript, apparently written by Nicodemus himself and named by its discoverer 'the Shred of Nicodemus'. In it Nicodemus tells how, following an earthquake that reopened Jesus' tomb, he and Joseph removed the body and reburied it at a new site in the Kidron valley. Christian proclamation of the risen Lord is therefore based on a simple mistake which, once established, could not be corrected.

All this is, of course, fictional. It stems from a popular novel by James H. Hunter, which went through a number of Canadian and American editions in the 1940s before going out of print in the following decade. This undistinguished though readable work is relevant here because the manuscript discovery—like Smith's, some years later—took place at the Mar Saba monastery. Hence the title of the novel: *The Mystery of Mar Saba*.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ James H. Hunter, *The Mystery of Mar Saba* (New York and Toronto: Evangelical Publishers). This successful work went through nine American and Canadian editions between November 1940 and January 1947. It was reissued by Zondervan in 1964, and again in paperback in 1970, 1972, and 1974. The author enjoyed less success with subsequent novels, such as *Thine is the Kingdom* (1951) and *How Sleep the Brave* (1955). *The Mystery of Mar Saba* would have been on sale in bookstores at the time of Smith's return from his prolonged stay in Jerusalem during the War. If he had seen it, the title and the picture of the monastery on the dust-jacket would surely have attracted his attention, in view of his own experience of the Mar Saba monastery. Given its subject-matter, there is not the least difficulty in 'picturing him reading an anti-intellectual evangelical Christian spy novel', as Scott Brown claims (*Mark's Other Gospel*, p. 59).

The parallel with Smith's story has been noted before, but it has not been adequately investigated.¹⁰¹

In the novel, the Nicodemus fragment is a forgery planted at the monastery by a Nazi agent, introduced as 'Professor Heimworth, noted German Higher Critic and archaeologist'.¹⁰² (The author's fundamentalist allegiances are everywhere apparent.) The actual forgery is carried out by a hapless Greek by the name of Peter Yphantis, whom the German has in his power; but his is a fairly minor role. The plan is to demoralize the British Empire by undermining its biblical and Christian basis, thereby advancing the cause of Nazi world-domination. The announcement of 'The Downfall of Christianity'¹⁰³ leads to precisely the social consequences intended by the Nazi mastermind—including a catastrophic Stock Market collapse. Fortunately, the plot is thwarted before still worse harm is done, as the British and American heroes of the novel prove the Shred to be a forgery.

Halfway through the novel, the reader is introduced to Sir William Bracebridge, a pious and learned archaeologist who has arrived in Jerusalem to hunt for manuscripts on behalf of the British Museum.¹⁰⁴ According to a local newspaper,

¹⁰¹ The parallel between *The Mystery of Mar Saba* and Smith's own story was noted by Philip Jenkins (*Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost Its Way* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2001], p. 102), and by Robert M. Price ('Second Thoughts on the Secret Gospel', *BBR* 14 [2004], pp. 127–32, at 131). In neither case is the point developed. Stephen Carlson provides a little more detail (*The Gospel Hoax*, pp. 19–20), Scott Brown more again (*Mark's Other Gospel*, pp. 57–9). 'There are', Brown predictably concludes, 'few parallels between Smith's story and Hunter's that do not depend upon a romantic desire to read Smith's popular book as if it were a mystery steeped in intrigue' (p. 58). But Smith's 'popular book' is 'a mystery steeped in intrigue', and already presents itself as such in its title and dedication ('For the One Who Knows!'). It requires no 'romantic desire' to notice the analogies with the other 'popular book', only a careful reading of both texts.

¹⁰² Hunter, *The Mystery of Mar Saba*, p. 11.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

¹⁰⁴ Hunter's imaginary manuscript hunting expedition of 1936 follows hard on the heels of the publication in 1935 of *Fragments of an Unknown Gospel*, ed. H. I. Bell and T. C. Skeat (London: Trustees of the British Museum). The 'Unknown Gospel' is now better known as the *Egerton Gospel*. The novel already reflects the combination of fascination and anxiety evoked by the 'unknown gospel' genre. Smith's gospel is not only contingently 'unknown' but also essentially 'secret'—like the Coptic Gospel of Thomas, which consists in 'secret sayings' and which was first published in 1956.

announcing his arrival, Sir William follows in the footsteps of a great nineteenth-century predecessor:

Ever since the discovery of the Codex Sinaiticus by Tischendorf at the monastery of St. Catherine, it has been felt by many authorities that other manuscripts of equal value may yet be found. Sir William is doubtful if any Codex of such importance as the Alexandrian, Vaticanus or Sinaiticus will be discovered, but freely concedes that some manuscript may be found that will shed a revealing light on early Christian history. Sir William has gone to the monastery of St. George in the Wady Kelt, and will visit among others Mar Saba.¹⁰⁵

Sir William does indeed find at Mar Saba a manuscript that sheds revealing light on early Christian history: the Nicodemus fragment secreted at the monastery by the scheming German professor. As a devout and conservative Christian, he is appalled by what he has found. As a scholar, he believes that the papyrus is authentic and that it is his duty to publish, whatever the consequences. Thus far, the parallel with Smith's Mar Saba discovery is intriguing but inexact.

On his return from Mar Saba with the potentially disastrous papyrus, a distressed Sir William explains why he visited the monastery and what he found there. The Mar Saba monastery is, we learn,

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.¹⁰⁶

This fictional visit to Mar Saba took place in 1936 and is recounted in a book first published in 1940. Morton Smith describes his return to Mar Saba in 1958 in strikingly similar terms:

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.¹⁰⁷

The fictional English scholar and the non-fictional American one visit the Mar Saba monastery with exactly the same expectation.

¹⁰⁵ *Mystery of Mar Saba*, pp. 166–7.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

¹⁰⁷ *Secret Gospel*, p. 11.

‘[B]ut I have always had the feeling that some might have been overlooked’ is interchangeable with, ‘But there was always the chance that something had been missed’.

The parallel between the two Mar Saba discoveries extends still further. The fictional archaeologist reports his sensational find to colleagues at the British Museum as follows:

You will recall, gentlemen, that when Tischendorf visited the monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai on his last journey in 1859, he was on the point of leaving, disappointed by his failure to find the remnant of the manuscript, some pages of which he had rescued from being burned some fifteen years previously. On his last evening there a young monk showed him a Greek manuscript which turned out to be the famous Sinaiticus, of which you are now the custodians for the people of the Empire and the world. I recall these facts to show how history has repeated itself in my case. I was prepared to leave Mar Saba, reconciled to the negative results of my search, when a monk told me he had certain manuscripts in his cell that had evidently been overlooked when the bulk of the documents were removed some years ago...¹⁰⁸

These manuscripts included copies of the *Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Epistle of Barnabas*.¹⁰⁹ They also included the Shred of Nicodemus. History repeated itself for Sir William Bracebridge, and it repeated itself yet again for the benefit of Morton Smith. As Smith’s three-week stay at Mar Saba drew to a close,

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 I had not even tried to read in the tower when I picked out the book containing it.¹¹⁰

The Nicodemus fragment and the letter to Theodore are discovered in similar circumstances narrated in similar language. On the eve of their great discoveries, one visitor to the monastery recalls that ‘I was prepared to leave Mar Saba, *reconciled* to the negative results of my search...’, the other that ‘I was gradually *reconciling myself* to my worst expectations...’. The two statements are again interchangeable.

The two Mar Saba discoveries are also similar in content. In both cases, a short but sensational excerpt of an early text is

¹⁰⁸ *Mystery of Mar Saba*, p. 293.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 279; the parallel with Tischendorf is noted, p. 278.

¹¹⁰ *Secret Gospel*, p. 12.

discovered, together with a text or texts dating from the second century (manuscripts of *Hermas* and *Barnabas*, and of the letter to Theodore, respectively). In the novel, the role of the later texts is to lend credibility to the early one. Asked whether the Shred may not be a forgery, Sir William replies:

I have considered that possibility. The same objection might be raised to the other two parchments, but who would be likely to go to the trouble and expense of forging such manuscripts for no particular purpose we can see?¹¹¹

The manuscripts of the second-century texts serve to authenticate the first-century one. If only the Nicodemus fragment had been discovered, the likelihood of a forgery would have been greater than it actually is, given the association with manuscripts of *Hermas* and *Barnabas*, which it would be far more laborious to forge. The association with these other manuscripts diminishes the likelihood of forgery. Smith makes a related if more elaborate point about the relationship of the Secret Gospel fragments to the letter within which it is embedded:

The secret Gospel passages are largely made up of phrases which coincide almost word for word with phrases of Mk. If an imitation, it is an imitation of the simplest and most childish sort... On the other hand, Clement's style is often very difficult... Without profound study it could not be imitated with assurance of accuracy...¹¹²

In other words, the production of the earlier text—the Secret Gospel material, which imitates Mark—would be a far easier undertaking than the production of a convincing imitation of Clement. The embedding of the new Markan material within a Clementine letter serves to authenticate it—for, as Bracebridge had already pointed out, ‘who would be likely to go to the trouble and expense of forging such [a] manuscript...?’

The parallelism between the two Mar Saba discoveries extends even into the construction of the Greek texts of the Nicodemus and Secret Gospel fragments. Like Smith, the novelist provides a picture of the manuscript in question, although this is an artist's illustration rather than a photograph.¹¹³ The illustration depicts a papyrus fragment, torn across the top and bottom

¹¹¹ *Mystery of Mar Saba*, p. 286.

¹¹² *Clement of Alexandria*, p. 76.

¹¹³ The illustration faces the title page, and is accompanied by a translation but no transcription. The illustrator was B. Templeton. Smith's photographs, transcription, and translation appear at the end of *Clement of Alexandria* (pp. 446–53).

edges, with eight lines of legible Greek uncial lettering. What Smith says of the secret Gospel passages is also applicable here: the Shred is 'largely made up of phrases which coincide almost word for word with phrases of Mk.'—and John, and the Septuagint. This too 'is an imitation of the simplest and most childish sort'. The Greek text of the *Shred of Nicodemus* is as follows:¹¹⁴

- 1 ἐγὼ δὲ Νικόδ<η>μος σὺν Ἰωσήφ ὁ ἀπὸ Ἀριμαθαίας
- 2 πρῶτῃ τῇ μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων τὸ Ἰησοῦ σῶμα μετέθηκα
- 3 ἔλθοιτες οὖν εὐρήκαμεν τὸ μνημεῖον ἀνεωγμένον
- 4 καὶ τὸν λίθον ἀνακεκλι<σ>μένον μετὰ τὸν σεισμόν. τὰ θε[ό]νια
- 5 ἐν τῷ μνημείῳ καταλεπτον [sic] τε σαυτὸν ἐξηγέκαμεν
- 6 ἵνα μὴ βεβήλαι χεῖρες τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ μι[ι]αίνωσι. [ἐθάψαμεν] αὐτὸν
- δὲ ἐν
- 7 τῷ μνημείῳ παρὰ τῷ κήπῳ πέραν τ[οῦ Κεδρ]ῶν ὅπου ἐστι ἡ στήλη
- 8 ἣν Ἀβεσσαλωμ ἐν τῇ κοιλάδι τοῦ βασιλέως ἔστησε [ἐαυτῷ]

The following English translation is supplied by the author:

I, Nicodemus, in company with Joseph of Arimathea in 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 cloth[e]s 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.¹¹⁵

This twentieth-century forgery is as good as it needs to be in the context of a popular novel; only a fictional scholar would be deceived by it. Yet the parallels between the two Mar Saba fragments are intriguing. They share a preoccupation with death, burial, and the removal of stones from tombs. In both, the Johannine association of Joseph of Arimathea's tomb with a 'garden' is extended to another tomb in another garden.¹¹⁶ Another shared Johannine motif is the link with Nicodemus, who 'came to [Jesus] by night' just as the 'young man' did in

¹¹⁴ Mistakes apparently due to the illustrator have been corrected. < > indicates that an incorrect letter has been replaced; [] indicates accidentally omitted material, restored on the basis of the English translation.

¹¹⁵ The translation is found on the frontispiece, below the illustration, and again on p. 283. [] indicates a textual variant.

¹¹⁶ John 19:41; *SMk.* II.26; *ShrNic.* 6–7.

the Secret Gospel, and who is allegedly the author of the earlier Mar Saba text.¹¹⁷

Like the Secret Gospel, the Nicodemus fragment is heavily dependent on phraseology drawn from canonical literature:

Shred of Nicodemus

Joseph of Arimathea [Ἰωσήφ ὁ ἀπὸ Ἀριμαθαίας]¹¹⁸
in early morn on the first day of
the week [πρωτὶ τῆ μιᾶ τῶν
σαββάτων]
the stone rolled away [τὸν λίθον
ἀνακεκύλισμένον]

near the garden over the Kedron
where [παρὰ τῷ κήπῳ πέραν τοῦ
Κεδρῶν ὄπου]
standeth the pillar [ἡ στήλη]
Absalom reared for himself in
the King's Dale [ἐν τῇ κοιλάδι
τοῦ βασιλέως ἔστησε ἑαυτῷ]

Mark, John, Old Testament (KJV)

Joseph of Arimathea [Ἰωσήφ ὁ ἀπὸ
Ἀριμαθαίας] (Mark 15:43; John 19:38)
And very early in the morning the
first day of the week [πρωτὶ τῆ μιᾶ
τῶν σαββάτων] (Mark 16:2)
the stone was rolled away
[ἀνακεκύλισται τὸ λίθον] (Mark
16:4)¹¹⁹

over the brook Kedron, where was a
garden [πέραν τοῦ... Κεδρῶν, ὅπου
ἦν κήπος] (John 18:1)
[Absalom] reared up for himself a
pillar, which is in the King's Dale.
[ἔστησεν ἑαυτῷ τὴν στήλην... ἐν τῇ
κοιλάδι τοῦ βασιλέως] (2 Kgdms.
18:18)

Like the Secret Gospel material, the Nicodemus fragment was probably composed in Greek and then translated into English.¹²⁰ It contains 71 Greek words, of which 28 occur in five phrases of three or more words drawn from Mark, John, or the Septuagint. The first Secret Gospel fragment contains 157 words, of which 66 occur in thirteen phrases of three or more words drawn from Mark or the other synoptists. In view of the other parallels between the work of the popular novelist and the biblical scholar, it is likely that the author of one text is familiar with the other, finding in it the inspiration for his own production. The parallels are such that the question of dependence is unavoidable.

¹¹⁷ John 3:2, 19:39; *SMk.* II.7–9; *ShrNic.* 1.

¹¹⁸ The name is given in different forms in Matt. 27:58, Luke 23:50. The article is omitted in Westcott and Hort, but noted as a textual variant for Mark 15:43 (*The New Testament in the Original Greek*, rev. by B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort [Cambridge and London: Macmillan, 1891], *ad loc.*). The Westcott and Hort edition is relevant as a possible source for Hunter's Greek text, just as the King James Version is relevant for his English translation.

¹¹⁹ The verb is read by Westcott and Hort in preference to ἀποκεκύλισται (Nestle–Aland); cf. Mark 16:2, Matt. 28:18, Luke. 24:2; John 20:1 has ἠρμένον.

¹²⁰ Correspondences between the Greek parallels are closer than between the English ones.

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), both in its account of the immediate circumstances of the discovery and in the rationale, content, and construction of the controversial Greek fragment. But *The Mystery of Mar Saba* was first published in 1940, eighteen years before the second Mar Saba 'discovery'. There is no alternative but to conclude that Smith is dependent on the novel, and that he himself is the author of the fragments of the Secret Gospel of Mark together with the pseudo-Clementine letter in which they are embedded.

IV. CONCLUSION

The author of the Mar Saba letter cannot have been Clement of Alexandria. (1) When correlated with material from Clement's authentic writings, the most closely related passages may constitute not so much a parallel as a source. (2) While the ostensible purpose of the letter is to assist its addressee in his struggles with heretics, its real purpose is to divulge the existence of the Secret Gospel of Mark and to establish its authenticity. (3) In its account of the various editions of the Gospel of Mark, the letter uses passages from Papias as aids to composition in a way that is inconceivable for Clement.

For these three reasons, the letter is manifestly pseudonymous. In its own language, its contents 'both seem to be and are falsifications' (III.17). For a further three reasons, it is clear that the author of this letter is Morton Smith, who claimed to have discovered it. (4) In the mixed metaphor of the forgery and the salt, the real author may secretly have signed his own work. (5) The letter itself—and not just its interpretation—is imbued with Smith's own concerns and interests prior to its discovery. (6) The elaborate discovery story re-enacts the plot of a forgotten novel; and precise correspondences come to light when the two 'discoveries' are compared with each other.

The pseudo-Clementine letter invites its reader to penetrate 'the innermost sanctuary of that truth hidden by seven veils' (I.26). As the first three veils are removed, it becomes clear that the figure they conceal is not that of Clement of Alexandria. As the next three fall to the ground, it becomes equally clear that the author of this text is also its discoverer. It is true that the manuscript itself remains unavailable for scientific scrutiny. The last of the seven veils remains. But its wearer is already clearly recognizable. There is no need to expose his nakedness.