
Afterword

*Prepared by
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More than 30 years after the original publication of *The Secret Gospel*, the controversy over Morton Smith's research continues unabated. By 2003, the mystery of what had happened to the original manuscript of Clement's letter (after Smith's discovery of it in 1958) was finally settled, at least to some degree—through the testimony of two men who had seen the manuscript in the intervening years. However, opinions continue to be divided relative to (a) the authenticity of the document and (b) the history and significance of the secret Mark fragments.

In 1980, the authenticity of the letter was given a strong “vote of confidence” by the scholarly community when the letter was reprinted in the standard edition of the works of Clement of Alexandria.¹ Accepting Smith's identification of the letter as genuine, the editors of this definitive compilation added the letter to the accepted canon of Clement's works. Nevertheless, some scholars still maintain that the possibility of forgery (even by Smith himself) cannot be ruled out.

1. Otto Stählin and Ursula Treu, *Clemens Alexandrinus, vol. 4.1: Register*, 2d ed. (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1980), XVII–XVIII.

There continue to be a variety of hypotheses relative to the textual history of canonical Mark and secret Mark. The current spectrum of scholarly opinion has recently been summarized by Scott Brown (of the University of Toronto Department for the Study of Religion):

I, for one, side with Clement, who believed that Mark himself created the Secret Gospel in Alexandria by adding more stories to the version of his gospel that is found in the New Testament. A small number of scholars, mostly in America, contend that the Secret Gospel was an earlier form of the canonical gospel. The majority believes that the Secret Gospel is an imitation of Mark from the second century.²

Worthy of note is the relative lack of investigation (by subsequent writers) into the nature of Jesus' overnight spiritual instruction, as briefly recounted in secret Mark. Controversy over Smith's speculation that the event could have involved "physical union" has tended to overshadow the truly significant reality—the evidence that Jesus may have reserved certain esoteric (or secret) teachings about "the mystery of the kingdom of God" for those few disciples who were spiritually prepared to receive them. (Another instance of such esoteric instruction—given at night in order to ensure secrecy—is the canonical account of Nicodemus' visit to Jesus, when Jesus declared that, in order to "enter the kingdom of God", a person must be "born again", "of the Spirit".) Smith's proposal of a magical-shamanic interpretation of this event of secret instruction certainly deserves a full scholarly response. However, on the issue of whether or not secret Mark suggests a sexual aspect to the event, the weight of scholarly opinion is in clear disagreement with Smith. As Smith himself indicates, the

2. Scott Brown, "The Secret Gospel of Mark: Is It Real? And Does It Identify 'Bethany Beyond the Jordan?'," *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 31:1 (January/February 2005): 44–49, 60. Brown is also the author of a forthcoming book on secret Mark, *Mark's Other Gospel: Rethinking Morton Smith's Controversial Discovery* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press).

practice of naked baptism was already well established in Jesus' time—and current scholarship, in general, concludes that the mention of nakedness in secret Mark has no other significance.³

For many years, perhaps the single most grievous point of contention relative to secret Mark was that no one other than Morton Smith had ever seen Clement's letter—or so it was believed. It was only in recent years that the truth finally came to light: A group of four thoroughly reputable scholars had seen the letter in the mid-1970s, and the document had been transferred (at that time) to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate library in Jerusalem.

The group of four scholars saw the letter in 1976—18 years after Smith had originally discovered it. But it was not until 2003—another 27 years later—that Guy G. Stroumsa, one of the four, finally published the story:

In the spring of 1976, a party of four, including the late David Flusser, Professor of New Testament, the late Shlomo Pines, Professor of Medieval Arabic and Jewish philosophy, both at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Archimandrite Meliton, from the Greek Patriarchate in Jerusalem (at the time a research student at the Hebrew University) and myself (then a graduate student at Harvard University) drove (in my car) from Jerusalem to Mar Saba monastery, in the Judean wilderness, in the quest for Clement's letter. Together with Flusser and Pines, I had been intrigued by Morton Smith's sensational description of his find, and we wanted to see the text with our own eyes. Archimandrite Meliton had agreed to accompany us. When we reached the monastery, with the help of one of the monks, we began searching for Isaac Vossius' edition of the *Letters* of Ignatius on the very dusty shelves of the library in the monastery's tower. . . . We did not put our expectations too high, but at some point, the monk did

3. See, for example, Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity International Press, 1990), 302.

find the book, with “Smith 65” inscribed on its front page, and the three manuscript pages of Clement’s letter written on the blank pages at the end of the book, exactly as described by Smith. The book had obviously remained where Smith had found it and had replaced it, after having photographed the manuscript letter.⁴

Why had Stroumsa waited 27 years to make this crucial fact public? Stroumsa says it was only then that he realized he was the “last living Western scholar” to have seen the Clement manuscript, and that he therefore had “a duty to testify in front of a skeptical scholarly world.”⁵

The story did not end there, however. Having found the letter, Stroumsa and the others in his party were keen to have it scientifically dated, so they secured permission from the monks at Mar Saba to take the book to the Patriarchate library in Jerusalem. Their hope was to have the ink tested, in order to determine whether the copy of the letter actually dated to the eighteenth century (as had been concluded by the expert paleographers Smith consulted). However, when it turned out that only the police department had the ability to perform such a test, the Patriarchate librarians chose not to allow the manuscript to leave their hands.⁶

Although there was no testing of the ink, one of the librarians did make color photographs of Clement’s letter—a fact that (once again) was not discovered until many years later. At a time previous to Stroumsa’s disclosure of the successful 1976 visit to Mar Saba, Charles W. Hedrick (professor of religious studies at Southwest Missouri University) and Nikolaos Olympiou (professor of Old Testament at the University of Athens) were attempting to

4. Gedaliahu A. G. Stroumsa, “Comments on Charles Hedrick’s Article: A Testimony,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11:2 (Summer 2003): 147–53.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 84.

solve the mystery of why no one seemed to know where Clement's letter was. In the process, they contacted Father Kallistos Dourvas, who had been one of the Patriarchate librarians at the time that the document was transferred from Mar Saba to Jerusalem. Father Kallistos not only told them about the color photographs he had taken (in 1976 or 1977) but allowed them to publish the photographs (in 2000).⁷

In the course of his conversations with Hedrick and Olympiou, Father Kallistos told the story of what had happened to Clement's letter, giving a possible reason why its current whereabouts are still a mystery. Together with the color photographs of Clement's letter, Hedrick and Olympiou published a summary of Father Kallistos' account:

Although [Archimandrite] Melito [sic] acted on his own initiative in bringing the single volume to the [Patriarchate] library [in Jerusalem], the transfer was described by Kallistos as part of a general transfer of manuscripts from Hagios Sabbas [Mar Saba] to the Patriarchate library in order to better provide for their care. Kallistos planned on shelving printed books in one location and manuscripts in another location, but that distribution of library holdings never occurred.

. . . Kallistos removed the Clement manuscript from the printed Voss edition of Ignatius for the purpose of photographing it, and then for shelving along with other manuscripts in the Patriarchate library, in keeping with his original plan for distributing the library holdings.

For as long as he was librarian (until 1990), the Clement letter was kept with the Voss edition, but as separate items. Kallistos does not know what has happened to the manuscript since he ceased being librarian. He does not recall whether or not he catalogued the Voss book and

7. Charles W. Hedrick and Nikolaos Olympiou, "Secret Mark," in *The Fourth R* 13:5 (2000): 3–11, 14–16.

the letter of Clement into the library. He thinks the reason the present staff cannot find the letter is that the Clement letter has nothing distinctive about it, and for that reason is difficult to locate. He says they frequently ask him where to find things.⁸

So the mystery goes on. Clement's letter may be altogether lost—or it may resurface at any time, raising the possibility of a definitive scientific dating.

Controversies over the secret gospel will no doubt continue for many years to come. But it is to be hoped that the scholarly discussion will give due weight to what is arguably the core statement in the secret gospel—the pronouncement that, when the young man came to see him, “Jesus taught him the mystery of the kingdom of God.” We will probably never know exactly what that teaching was. But this statement is one of the most significant surviving indicators that Jesus may have conveyed a secret profundity—a revelatory and transformative spiritual event—to those of his disciples who were prepared to receive it. Therein lies the extraordinary value of *The Secret Gospel*.

8. Ibid.