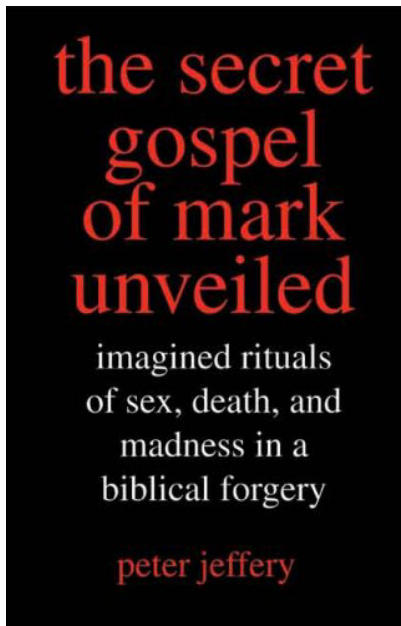


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Jeffery, Peter

The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled: Imagined Rituals of Sex, Death, and Madness in a Biblical Forgery

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J. Harold Ellens
University of Michigan-Ann Arbor
Ann Arbor, Michigan

Morton Smith, a noted New Testament scholar and an ordained Episcopal priest, announced in 1958 that he had discovered a manuscript that would change the root and ground of our understanding of the Gospel of Mark, of all the Synoptic Gospels, since they depend upon Mark, and, indeed, of Christianity itself. The manuscript was a second-century letter purportedly written by Clement of Alexandria that made reference to a version of Mark differing from the canonical Gospel. The letter quoted brief sections of what Smith claimed to be an extension of that Gospel. In it a secret initiation ceremony for new converts was described that suggested a sexual rite of some sort involving Jesus and the disciple. Since it referred only to male initiation and implied that Jesus had a rather diffident attitude toward the women in the narrative fragment, the sexual implications were taken by Smith and others to be most likely homosexual.

Smith did not publish the letter until 1973, when he set off an intense scholarly debate that continues today. One of the finest analyses of this controversy, and the publication that caused it, is Peter Jeffery's highly readable and profoundly analytic book, *The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled*. Jeffery is a professor at Princeton University who is thoroughly acquainted with the history of Christian liturgies, rites, and theology, as well as the ancient languages of the Bible and the early church. He raises the question of whether

Smith's interpretation of the supposedly ancient Clementine manuscript that he purportedly found is correct or a hoax.

Jeffery's sturdy scholarly analysis of Morton Smith's scholarship, life, and claims regarding Mark's Gospel has led him to discern that there are a number of empirical reasons why we must conclude that the letter is not an ancient document, particularly not, in any case, one written in the second century by Clement of Alexandria. Jeffery boldly concludes that it is a forgery and documents this conclusion with overwhelming empirical and phenomenological evidence and conclusive heuristic argument. The data of this matter, available to us today does not support of Morton Smith's claim. Indeed, Robert L. Webb noted, regarding Jeffery's book, that "This careful work ... provide[s] an extremely damaging case against Smith and his *Secret Mark*" (*JSHJ* 5 [2007]: 216). Similar observations followed by Paul Foster in the *Expository Times* (119.1) and W. V. Harris in the *Literary Times Supplement* 5455. However, Harris critically declares, "Peter Jeffery is probably the cleverest of Smith's assailants to date."

Jeffery's weighty volume has eleven page-turner chapters that address the following issues: (1) Smith's "extraordinary discovery"; (2) questions it raises; (3) the Secret Gospel and ancient Christian liturgy; (4) the Secret Gospel and ancient Alexandrian lectionaries; (5) the fragmentary nature of the document; (6) hypnotic hymns of the church; (7) Smith's notion of morality; (8) homosexuality in the ancient world; (9) homosexuality in English universities familiar to Smith; (10) the Wisdom of Salome; (11) and the ancient Christian initiate's secret knowledge. These chapters are supplemented by an appendix on Morton Smith's translation of the "Letter of Clement." This superbly packaged book, lovely to read, hold, fondle, smell, and contemplate as an aesthetic object, is completed with sixty-nine pages of endnotes containing 830 entries, presented chapter by chapter. There follows twelve pages of indexes on ancient, medieval, and modern documents and scholars. The publisher has done this volume responsibly.

Merely perusing the table of contents immediately reveals to the reader that Jeffery's analysis of Smith's claims addresses them in terms of the authenticity of their references to and implications regarding five issues particularly: ancient liturgies; ancient Alexandrian ecclesiastical programs and patterns; homosexuality in the ancient and modern world; Smith's notions of morality; and Smith's spiritual responses to Christian hymnody, particularly as he experienced it in the Mar Saba monastery.

Morton Smith is noted for such works as his article "The Work of George Foote Moore," in the *Harvard Library Bulletin* 15 (1967), and books entitled *Tannaitic Parallels to the Gospels* (1951); *The Ancient Greeks* (1960); *Heroes and Gods: Spiritual Biographies in Antiquity* (with Moses Hadas, 1965); *Palestinian Parties and Politics That Shaped the Old*

Testament (1971); *The Ancient History of Western Civilization* (with Elias Bickerman) (1976); *Jesus the Magician: Charlatan or Son of God?* (1978); *Hope and History* (1980); *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh*, vol. 1: *Historical Method, Ancient Israel, Ancient Judaism*; vol. 2: *New Testament, Early Christianity, and Magic* (Shaye J. D. Cohen, ed., 1996); *What the Bible Really Says* (with R. Joseph Hoffmann, 1992). By 1973 few disputed the significance of his contribution to the scholarly fields in which he worked, and even now his subsequent work is, for the most part, esteemed by his colleagues.

However, the publication in 1973 of two books on the Clementine manuscript he claimed to have found in the Mar Saba monastery blighted his reputation and troubled his life greatly from that point on. It is these two volumes, the scholarly work entitled *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark*, and its popularized counterpart, *The Secret Gospel*, that Jeffery is at great pains to evaluate in *The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled*. It is mainly on the basis of his meticulous analysis of these two publications that Jeffery finds the purported Clementine letter Smith claims to have found at Mar Saba to be a forgery.

Mar Saba is a site east of Bethlehem where the foundation for the Great Laura monastery was laid in 483 by St. Sabbas of Caesarea. It continues to be influential in Eastern Orthodox Christianity to this time as a center of theological training and reflection as well as translation and reproduction of Christian manuscripts. It was largely responsible for the origin and development of the Byzantine Liturgical Rite with its distinctive hymnody and such memorable theologians as St. John of Damascus.

In 1941 Morton Smith, a young Harvard graduate student, was stranded in Palestine by World War II, so he spent two months at Mar Saba as an honored guest. While there he had free access to the monastery library and its special collection of ancient manuscripts in the "old tower." Surprisingly, he later claimed that at this time he had little interest in the libraries but was enamored of the monastery's exquisite icons and the solemn liturgies that nearly hypnotized him with their hymnic beauty. Indeed, he hints that he was even transported by them into something like aesthetically erotic ecstasy. He declared in his memoir in 1973 that upon returning to Harvard he "became interested in Greek manuscripts and manuscript hunting," and after his appointment to Columbia University he returned to Mar Saba for three weeks in 1958 searching for manuscripts. During this visit Smith claimed he had no interest in the liturgies but only in the manuscripts. He subsequently published a catalogue of the Mar Saba Greek manuscript holdings, ignoring all others. Moreover, Smith confusingly claimed at this time that he had no religious faith during his first visit in 1941, though we know that he was at just that time preparing for ordination as an Episcopal priest.

Jeffery cites extensively from Smith's memoirs to demonstrate his first concern about Smith's claims, namely, an apparent confusion in Smith's own testimony about the patterns of his days at Mar Saba: when the main meal and the daily liturgies were scheduled, and what were the segments of the day during which he was alone with the library cache while skipping the liturgies. Moreover, on the one hand, he claims he did not expect much from the manuscripts, yet, on the other hand, he was preoccupied with them for all his time at Mar Saba, at the expense of the worship events he had formerly so admired. Jeffery suggests that at this time Smith created the solitary opportunities when, if he were to craft the basis for a story about a Clementine letter and inscribe it in the ancient document in which he claims to have found it, he would have had the occasion to do so. Moreover, after his publications in 1973, the manuscript disappeared, and no chemical tests on the ink were ever possible.

However, weightier factors militate against the authenticity of Smith's claims. The letter he "found" is a hitherto unknown correspondence of Clement (150–215 C.E.) to Theodore regarding the heretical antinomian Carpocratians of earlier Alexandria. A suspicious peculiarity of this letter is that Clement or his forger feels the need to identify him(self) as "the author of the *Stromateis*." Surely everyone, particularly a familiar correspondent of his like Theodore, would have known that Clement had written the *Stromateis*. If he had not, there would have been no value in referring to it as a way of specifying his identity. The only value in this construction would be for a forger to notify us in modern times that this letter was to be associated with that ancient Clement, not with some other unknown personage of the same name.

Moreover, Jeffery clearly documents the history of the research carried out by others on the main questions: Is the manuscript Smith found authentic? Is it really by Clement of Alexandria? Who were the Carpocratians? If there was a secret Gospel, was it by Mark? Does the Gospel have historical or literary value? What about Jesus' ritualized homosexuality implied in Smith's claims? Jeffery then turns to an analysis of the liturgical implications of Smith's find and his interpretations of it, demonstrating that these cannot characterize a second-century document.

Jeffery summarizes, "The Secret Gospel presents three elements that appear to be liturgical: resurrection themes, a linen cloth, and a nocturnal initiation following a period of preparation. However, these elements have little to do with second-century Christian worship, particularly at Alexandria, where baptisms were associated with the baptism of Jesus by John, celebrated on Epiphany (January 6). Thus a second-century gospel read at initiations in Clement's church should show Epiphany themes [not resurrection-Easter themes] such as the blessing of waters, messianic anointing, and the descent of the Holy Spirit (70). The references here to resurrection and Easter themes are those that Smith

would have found in the 1950s in liturgical documents describing how modern Anglican liturgical specialists speculated about how early Christian worship must have been. This assessment led Maxwell E. Johnson to observe (*Worship* 82.1, 85–89) regarding Jeffery’s brilliant critique of Smith, “Students and teachers of liturgical history ... need to read this book and to do so soon! ... From this point on it will be difficult to say anything about early Lent and Christian initiation without reference to this book.”

As if this were not sufficiently devastating to Smith’s claims, Jeffery continues with a similar assessment of second-century Alexandrian lectionaries. He demonstrates with intensely documented detail that, in terms of the uses of the Bible during Lent and Holy Week at Alexandria, Constantinople, and Jerusalem, compared with Epiphany lectionaries and baptismal liturgies in Alexandria during those seasons, there is no possibility that Smith’s claims can be vindicated. “It turns out that the Secret Gospel does not fit either the Alexandrian pattern for Epiphany celebration, or Egyptian or Ethiopian evidence for the calendar of readings during Lent. The evidence shows, instead, that John’s gospel was considered more important in Egypt than Mark’s. The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3 was the most basic text for Lenten baptismal theology, not the raising of Lazarus or any similar story [which is the narrative crafted into Smith’s document]. Even if we assume that the letter ascribed to Clement was actually written a few centuries after his time, it cannot be made to fit at any point in the history of the Alexandrian liturgy” (90).

Jeffery demonstrates with careful documentation how Smith’s Secret Gospel was crafted by cutting and pasting elements from the Synoptic Gospels, the *Corpus Paulinum*, apocryphal documents, Greek magical papyri, Jewish *hekhalot* hymns from Qumran, the modern Byzantine liturgy, and a variety of other sources, to establish the claim that Jesus practiced homosexuality with his disciples. The fragmentary literary allusions, the gnostic tone, the suggestion that in contrast to the canonical picture of Jesus he had a markedly diffident disposition toward women, and the exaggerated effort to make the document more obviously Clementine in vocabulary than Clement’s authentic documents ever are reinforces the fact that this document is ingeniously crafted by a latter-day forger to warrantee Jesus as homosexual.

“What we have, then, are ... layers or concentric circles—the two excerpts of the Secret Gospel, the letter of Clement, and Smith’s interpretation—each built up from ‘scattered indications’ to imply that Jesus practiced homosexuality. The similarity in technique suggests that all the layers had the same author” (122). In his popularized book, but not in his scholarly work, Smith claimed that the Mar Saba liturgical hymnody gave him a sense of disoriented ecstasy, which, he was certain, was the essence of Jesus’ initiation rite, as

described in “Clement’s letter” as well. The disciple reached heights of *heavenly ecstasy in union with Jesus*. Jeffery refers to this notion of Smith’s as an intentional obscene joke.

Jeffery concludes this point frankly. “The study of trance experiences in connection with music, as it has developed since Smith’s era shows his representations to be absurd.... Smith’s comparison of early Christian worship as ‘shamanism,’ ‘enthusiasm,’ and mental illness show that he had not even read the bibliography on these topics that was available and respected at the time” (148). Morton Smith functioned as an ordained Episcopal priest for a number of years, never renounced his ordination, but served the majority of his professional career as a professor of history. The tracts and articles he wrote on ethics or related topics, particularly in his early career, all indicate a surprisingly rigid, fundamentalist perspective, uninformed by the standard documents and traditions of his own denomination. Moreover, he vigorously argued that this was the necessary repressive universal perspective throughout the history of Christianity. It is all the more surprising, therefore, that he pressed with such vigor to establish a most unconventional notion of Jesus as a figure who established a homosexual initiation rite. Few of us scholars would have objected to homosexuality, his or Jesus’, had there been well-established evidence for Smith’s claim. Obviously, he had an ulterior motive that became more clarified in his own mind as time unfolded between 1941 and 1973, a time during which he also became decreasingly associated with his role as an ordained priest; indeed, he said he had lost interest in the faith.

Perhaps the most devastating vulnerability of Smith’s claim is his notion regarding ancient homosexuality. Ancient Greek and Roman homosexuality, in contrast to that orientation and behavior today, was accepted in the society. It was seen as a desirable program in which an adult male pursued a pubescent boy for the purpose of cultivating the boy’s development intellectually and culturally. Erotic genital play and sexual gratification was frequently, perhaps usually, a part. The consciously cultivated role of the boy, often tutored in this by a mentor, was to coyly resist the urgent pursuits of the adult male. In this way a contract was negotiated in which the boy acquired maximum favors from his pursuer, in terms of education, endowments of money, social advancement, status, and the like. In Smith’s document, the young man pursues Jesus. He has got everything backward.

Moreover, Greco-Roman homosexuality was not misogynistic. The pursuing males had wives whose function was to produce children and manage the home and estate. This differs radically from Smith’s misogynistic Jesus in the Secret Gospel. Indeed, Smith’s notion reflects the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century English university practices of homosexuality between Dons and students. Into this university subculture “the Mar Saba text fits much better than in second-century Alexandria.... These men practiced a kind of

homosexuality that they identified with the ancient Greek kind, even though it was more misogynistic and less concerned with the status issues of boyhood and manhood. The ancient Greeks were seen [by them] as artistic rebels who practiced a higher kind of morality than the kind taught by the church. Groups that were defined as heretical by the institutional church were seen relatively positively [by this English subculture]. Some people in this subculture were particularly drawn to 'high church' Anglican liturgy that purportedly revived practices from the early church. Many of them were given to constructing satirical gospels or heresies that somewhat resemble the Secret Gospel and the Mar Saba Carpocratians" (225).

Jeffery makes us aware of a pervasive "tongue-in-cheek" humorous irony characterizing Smith's document and its interpretation. He carefully points out the jokes and tricks with which the entire saga is stacked, all designed to give clues to its inauthentic character and to derogate the very establishment posture Smith himself was at such pains to defend and enforce in his first pastoral publication. The most remarkable of these allusions and asides, and perhaps one of the most humorous, is Smith's declaration regarding his two 1973 publications of the Mar Saba document. "The whole story spans more than thirty years, from 1941 to the present. I am shocked to find how much of it I have already forgotten. No doubt if the past, like a motion picture, could be replayed, I should also be shocked to find how much of the story I have already invented. Memory is perhaps more fallacious than forgetfulness" (Smith as quoted by Jeffery, 1).

Jeffery's superb book has been widely reviewed and more widely read. The response has been vigorous for and against his scholarly research and conclusions. Those who have argued against it have in so doing largely discredited themselves, rather than succeeding in seriously denigrating Jeffrey's peerless volume. The jacket of Jeffrey's book summarizes this scholarly work with articulate appreciation. "Through close examination of the 'discovered' manuscript's text, Peter Jeffery unravels the answers to the mystery and tells the tragic tale of an estranged Episcopalian priest who forged an ancient gospel and fooled many of the best biblical scholars of his time. Jeffery shows convincingly that Smith's Secret Gospel is steeped in anachronisms and that its construction was influenced by ... twentieth-century misunderstandings of early Christian liturgy, and Smith's personal struggles with Christian sexual morality." Stephan Goranson declared that this is "a learned and lively book that ... shows even more than before that Smith wrote the Letter with Secret Mark," and Stephen C. Carlson heartily agrees.

In the *Review of Biblical Literature* for September 2007, Scott G. Brown of the University of Toronto called Jeffery's book a hermeneutic of depression and desperation. He excoriates *The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled* for not treating Smith's case for the Mar Saba document comprehensively, declaring that it addresses only issues of ecclesiology

and sexology. Brown seems not to have read Jeffery's book as closely as it deserves, and so his adjectives often surprised me by the intensity of their denigration of Jeffery's scholarship. He says Jeffery's work is unsubstantiated, confused, unclear, contrived, disturbing, implausible, and marked by misinterpretation, circular reasoning, and exegetical violence. According to Brown, Jeffrey's conclusions are sometimes projections, sometimes accurate, but for the first half of his book, wholly irrelevant. Brown thinks Jeffery's critique of Smith is a caricature of a straw man, beset by sophomoric logic, amounting to defamation of character, degrading, and vilifying, in short, "Smith bashing." Brown argues that in the end this approach is so hostile that it undermines Jeffery's own argument and alienates his supporters, a rather surprising claim so early in the game, since the evidence seems to be moving rather rapidly in the other direction, against Brown's position.

In many regards, Brown's extensive review demonstrates a high level of estimable scholarship. Obviously, he is an informed master of Clement, Philo, and their world. Unfortunately, however, while his essay demonstrates knowledge of first- and second-century Christendom, it manifests relatively less attention to the substantial research and argument of *Jeffery's* book. Brown dismisses Jeffery's argument, regarding Smith's motivation to prove Jesus to be homosexual, by the *ad hominem* note that Jeffrey is a committed orthodox Roman Catholic. This is interestingly similar to his dismissal of Smith's youthful, and therefore apparently irrelevant, article pressing for a rigid fundamentalist sexual ethics, by noting that at that time Smith was associated with a strongly orthodox Anglo-Catholic Episcopal church, St. Marys.

Brown rounds off his critique with an enigmatic question. Apparently, having come to feel that he has thoroughly eviscerated Jeffery's careful, detailed research, he wonders aloud what would make Jeffery imagine so much violent depravity on the part of Smith as to forge a document turning Jesus into a homosexual. "That," says Brown, "is the only question this book leaves me pondering." So much diatribe against Jeffery's scholarly investigation and argumentation, and that is the *only* question left in his mind? Presumably Brown is sure he has settled all the substantive issues of the case. It is interesting that no one else in the scholarly world, so far as I know, feels that either Brown or Jeffery has settled all the questions regarding Smith's claim. Jeffery, for one, never proposed he could settle them all, so far as my read of his superb work informs me.

Loren Rosen III strongly endorses Jeffery's work and connects it with Carlson's research as definitive treatment of a significant contemporary issue in the scholarly biblical and pastoral fields. Harold W. Attridge of Yale Divinity School joined in this endorsement with the definitive declaration that "The discussion of the 'Secret Gospel' has involved a generation of scholars of the New Testament and early Christianity. Jeffery's book, argued

with enormous erudition, careful judgment, sensitivity, and balance, sets the discussion on an entirely new footing.” While Adela Yarbro Collins, also at Yale, observed that, “Peter Jeffery’s book proves beyond a reasonable doubt that Morton Smith forged the discovered text. It demonstrates that he had the scholarly expertise, the wit, the sense of humor, and above all the motivation to do so.”

We shall never again be able to read any of Morton Smith’s work without being reminded of how Peter Jeffery surfaced the humor, skill, and deception in the life and work of a personally nonconformist personage, in the world of biblical scholarship, who held a clandestine urge to stuff an ironic subterfuge right up the nostril of all his esteemed colleagues in the academy and the church. This illustrates once again how true it is that the Academy is an arena of children playing games of one-upmanship, while constantly wondering why everyone else in the world largely ignores them and their enterprises. Jeffery’s book is a definitive word on one of those games and must be read by any scholar in biblical studies and ancient history who is serious and honest about those disciplines.