

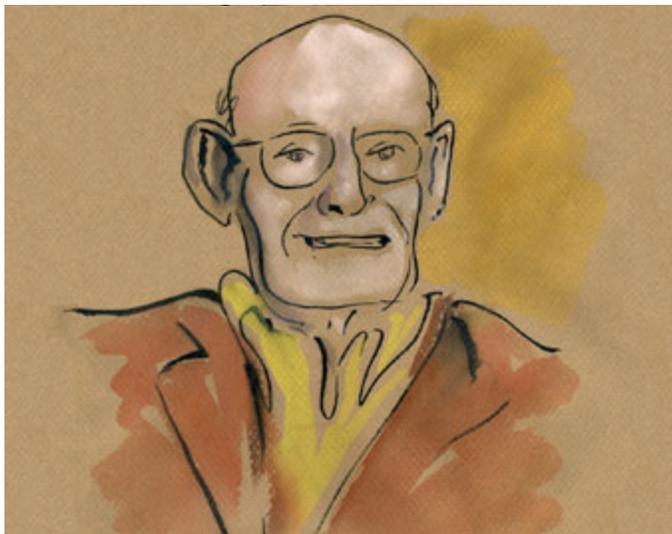
Gospel Secrets: The Biblical Controversies of Morton Smith

A new book explores the longstanding scholarly debate over a secret and libertine Gospel of Mark.

By [Anthony Grafton](#)

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Adrian Bellesguard Morton Smith

In 1973, Morton Smith, professor of ancient history at Columbia University, shook the world—or at least the world of scholars who work on early Christianity. Fifteen years before, Smith had found an unknown document in the Mar Saba Greek Orthodox monastery, fifteen kilometers southeast of Jerusalem—an ancient Christian text that no one before him had ever mentioned. A letter in Greek, originally composed in the second century by a church father, Clement of Alexandria, and addressed to one Theodore, it was handwritten in ink, in an eighteenth-century hand, on the blank end pages of a seventeenth-century printed book. Less than a thousand words long but rich in detail, the text attacked one of the wonderfully named sects that made the early centuries of Christianity so complex—the followers of Carpocrates, or Carpocratians. These heretics, as Clement and Theodore saw them, claimed that they possessed a secret version of the Gospel of Mark. Jesus, they believed, had taught his followers that they were freed from the law and could do whatever they wanted without sinning. According to one of their Christian critics, Irenaeus, they actually thought they earned salvation by “doing all those things which we dare not either speak or hear of, nay, which we must not even conceive in our thoughts.”

Clement assured Theodore that he had been right to silence these “unspeakable teachings.” But he also admitted that there was a secret version of Mark’s Gospel—a version that the Church of Alexandria made available only to initiates. In a passage that Clement quoted, Jesus raised a rich young man from the dead in Bethany. “And after six days Jesus told him what to do and in the evening the youth comes to him, wearing a

linen cloth over his naked body. And he remained with him that night, for Jesus taught him the mystery of the kingdom of God. And thence, arising, he returned to the other side of the Jordan”—a passage that suggests a libertine interpretation of its own, at least to the twenty-first-century reader. At the same time, Clement denied that an inflammatory phrase, “naked man with naked man,” which the Carpocratians had cited, came from the true secret Gospel. The evil Carpocrates had obtained a copy of the text and “polluted” it with lies.

It was an astonishing discovery. A scholar can catalog thousands of manuscripts without ever striking this kind of gold. But Smith was perfectly equipped to assess the new text. Though American by birth and most of his education, he was a great philologist in the old European style. Long before he made the Mar Saba discovery, he had mastered Latin, Greek and Hebrew, and examined and photographed Greek manuscripts in monastic libraries on Mount Athos, the island of Patmos and elsewhere. As a student, he had savored the long, hypnotic services at Mar Saba. Now he spent his time going through the collection, book by book and page by page. When his philological dreams came true, he knew exactly how to make the best of his discovery. Before he left the monastery, he photographed the letter. Back in the United States, he spent years establishing and interpreting the text and consulting many other scholars.

Though Smith announced his find as early as 1960, at a meeting of the Society for Biblical Literature, and completed his analysis of the text by the late '60s, he did not release the new document until thirteen years had passed. Then he did so in two forms at once: a scholarly monograph published by Harvard University Press, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark*, and a popular book published by Harper & Row, *The Secret Gospel*, in which Smith pardonably dramatized the religious and personal adventures he had experienced on the way to his discovery. He argued that Clement had written the letter, that the secret Gospel really went back to the early church and that Jesus, as it suggested, had offered his disciples initiation into secret libertine practices. Later in his career, Smith would develop the larger thesis that Jesus had been a practicing magician, and that his revelations were steeped in widely attested magical techniques and beliefs.

But Smith's original arguments proved provocative enough. By July 1974 he had amassed, as he told a friend, “a dossier of newspaper clippings and reviews two or three inches thick, and an even thicker pile of private letters, some of them screamingly funny.” The professional scholars chewed more slowly, of course, than the newspaper critics and religious polemicists, but within a few years they too had digested the new material and begun to respond to it—or, in some cases, to spew it out again. For more than thirty years, the document and Smith's interpretations of it have served as the grit around which layer on layer of scholarly pearl has grown. Debate is normal, of course, in scholarship—without it, we could not go on producing doctoral dissertations and scholarly articles. But most debates eventually come to an end, as one side clearly wins or all participants reach a consensus. By contrast, the secret Gospel of Mark continues to spawn commentary of radically opposed kinds.

Most experts went at least part of the way with Smith. The new letter soon found its way into critical editions of Clement's works. Few agreed that Smith's discovery offered privileged new evidence for the actual teachings of Jesus—a very ticklish subject, since the four Gospels were themselves written quite some time after Jesus' death. But a number of prominent New Testament scholars accepted the letter's internal quotations from Mark as genuinely ancient. Helmut Koester, a New Testament authority who has taught for many years at Harvard, argued that the standard text of Mark's Gospel actually derives from the secret one quoted by Clement. The long passage quoted by Clement removes an awkward transition in the text. And the fact that the young man is told to wear a single garment when he comes to Jesus for instruction could explain a curious passage in Chapter 14. According to Mark, a young man wearing a single garment was with Christ in Gethsemane when he was arrested. Though the police attempted to take him too, he fled, naked, leaving his cloak in their hands.

But it is just as possible to argue the opposite case: to dismiss the secret Gospel quotations as a pastiche

assembled from pieces of the existing text—an equally satisfactory way, after all, to explain the young man’s single garment—or even to reject Clement’s letter as a fake, like many other texts attributed to early Christian writers. The archive of recognized fakes includes the letters that St. Paul supposedly exchanged with the Roman philosopher Seneca, and as many as 900 spurious sermons ascribed to the church father John Chrysostom. Some scholars have always thought that the new Clement letter belonged there.

But almost from the start, some have suggested a much more radical explanation. In 1975 Quentin Quesnell, a Catholic New Testament scholar, argued that the manuscript was a modern forgery—presumably, though he did not say so directly, the work of Smith. This theory has continued to find supporters. Two recent books—*The Gospel Hoax*, by a lawyer named Stephen Carlson, and *The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled*, by Peter Jeffrey, a Princeton musicologist, MacArthur Fellow and renowned expert on the history of liturgy—argue that Smith composed the text. The sexual undertones of the document have led some to suggest, explicitly or by innuendo, that Smith, a gay man, forged the text for personal reasons. In fact, Smith laid relatively little emphasis on the document’s sexual implications, as opposed to the more general evidence, as he saw it, that Christ taught salvation through sin. But Jeffrey, in the course of an intricate, minutely detailed analysis, argues that Smith deliberately made his case by indirection, distracting readers from his true purpose as a magician distracts the members of his audience.

Who is right? One problem with the scholarly arguments—a problem that often comes up in arguments about the authenticity of a text—is that they have tended to move in spirals. Is the letter really by Clement? From Smith on, scholars have attacked this problem by comparing the letter’s language and syntax with those of Clement’s better-known works, using detailed indexes published in the 1930s. The document is full of words and thoughts that appear only in Clement. Some are unique. But does that mean, as Smith held, that Clement wrote it? Or that its author—perhaps Smith—steeped himself in Clement, using the modern indexes that listed every word in his writings, before he went to work? Some claim that the document uses too many words found only in Clement—is, in other words, too Clementine—to be genuine. Others disagree. In the absence of a complete corpus of his work—something we have for no ancient writer—how can we know, except by assuming what we want to prove? Stalemate threatens.

Some of the arguments, pro and con, have reached a staggering level of ingenuity. In the document, Clement warns against the Carpocratians’ interpolated Gospel: “the true things being mixed with inventions, are falsified, so that, as the saying goes, even the salt loses its savor.” This reads like an analogy between the words of the text and the Christians themselves, to whom Jesus had said, in the Gospel of Matthew, “Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savor, wherewith shall it be salted?” But Carlson argues that ancient salt—which came in lumps, not in free-flowing crystals—could not be adulterated, as Clement suggests. Only after 1910 did a chemist find a way to keep salt from clumping. He, of course, worked for Morton Salt. Could Morton Smith have mischievously added the salt reference to assert his authorship, as forgers sometimes do? The new text was entered in the last pages of the 1646 edition of the letters of Ignatius of Antioch. The corpus of Ignatius’s letters had included forgeries, which the editor of that edition, Isaac Vossius, omitted. The first page of Clement’s letter actually faces the end of the printed text of Vossius’s commentary, where the editor denounces forgers. Could Smith have chosen these endpapers for his text in order to let the cleverest readers know that he had written the letter himself? Or are these coincidences simply the result of chance? The more questions are raised, the more evidence is brought into play, the more the letter becomes a Rorschach for its readers and the harder some find it to decide what they think. Even Bart Ehrman, a University of North Carolina professor who has written some notably polemical popular works on the corruption and interpolation of all the documents of early Christianity, refuses to take a firm position on Secret Mark.

One way to arrive at certainty seems obvious: study the manuscript pages, using scientific methods to date paper and ink, and assess the script, drawing on the less scientific, but still elaborate, methods of paleography.

But if the scholarly disputes over Secret Mark resemble the caucus race from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the manuscript plays the role of the Cheshire cat. The volume of Ignatius's letters remained at Mar Saba, where Smith left it, until the 1970s. But then it was transferred to the library of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem. And here it disappeared—or so, at least, the librarians claim—without ever being subjected to chemical tests. Stasis again, so it seems.

The situation is distressing—especially for those who admire, as many do, Smith's immense learning and independence of mind. For in his case it has particularly unpleasant implications. Smith was the kind of critic who makes grown scholars tear off their own heads for fear of reading his reviews. He regularly pulverized others' publications, compiling remorseless lists of errors and responding to stupidity with searing wit—as when he suggested that the printer had omitted one word at the end of an especially conventional article in the first volume of *The Cambridge History of the Bible*: “Amen.” To a conference session in honor of one of his former students, the famously prolific and famously contentious Jacob Neusner, Smith brought two boxes of copies of Saul Lieberman's fiercely negative review of Neusner's “preliminary translation” of the Palestinian Talmud. When recognized during the question period, he read a prepared statement and then “began marching up the aisle like a staff sergeant, distributing the reviews to a stunned audience,” an academic journal reported. Sometimes, Smith was more severe than his victims deserved. But to accuse him of forgery—or deception of any kind—is to call him a hypocrite of a particularly systematic and deliberate type. The worst thing about stasis is that it leaves these suspicions undisputed.

Last year, a distinguished Israeli historian of religion, Guy Stroumsa, set out to settle the question. His interest is understandable: as a young man, he played a minor but meaningful role in the story. In 1976 Stroumsa drove three other scholars—two of whom, David Flusser and Schlomo Pines, were among the greatest of the Hebrew University greats—from Jerusalem to Mar Saba, where they picked up the Vossius edition of Ignatius, still inscribed with the inventory number Smith had given it, and transferred it to Jerusalem. Flusser apparently thought Clement's letter a fake. But Stroumsa believes the document is genuine. He ascribes most of the resistance to Smith's groundbreaking discovery to more conventional scholars' prejudices: discomfort with what they thought they knew about Smith's sexuality, on the one hand; refusal to accept a radical discovery, on the other. “It is a well-known fact among scientists and epistemologists,” Stroumsa has written, “that it takes a long time, up to thirty years, before scientific breakthroughs are widely acknowledged and their implications fully recognized. Smith published the account of his discovery in 1973. It seems the time has come to accept it.”

To prove that Smith invented nothing, Stroumsa has published a fascinating collection of primary sources: Smith's correspondence with a lifelong friend, the twentieth century's greatest Jewish scholar, Gershom Scholem. Smith, an adventurer in life as well as in scholarship, went to Jerusalem in 1940 on a Sheldon Traveling Fellowship awarded him by the Harvard Divinity School. Caught in Palestine by World War II, he spent four years there. At the Hebrew University—the pre-eminent German university in the world in those days, thanks to its faculty of erudite, brilliant refugees—Smith studied classics with Moshe Schwabe and Hans Lewy and Jewish mysticism with Scholem. He helped translate Scholem's first great book on the Kabbala, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, and translated an ancient Jewish mystical text under Scholem's supervision. More remarkably, Smith wrote a doctoral dissertation, in Hebrew, on Tannaitic (early rabbinical) parallels to the Gospels and became the Hebrew University's first Christian PhD. Returning to the United States in 1945, he began a career in the Episcopalian ministry, then moved back into scholarship and became, eventually, a professor of ancient history at Columbia University, where he taught until 1990. From 1945 until Scholem's death in 1982, the two men corresponded regularly. Their letters, which Stroumsa and associates have edited, open a new window on Smith's career, the scholarly world in which Smith flourished and the Secret Mark.

For Stroumsa, the documents make one point clear beyond doubt: Smith could not have forged Clement's

letter or Secret Mark. For Smith's letters show him discussing the material with Scholem, over time, in ways that clearly reflect a process of discovery and reflection. From the start, he was sure he had a new work of Clement's on his hands. In August 1959, Smith wrote to Scholem that "the material by Clement of Alexandria which I found at Mar Saba last year is turning out to be of great importance, and as soon as I get all minor nuisances off my hands I must work hard at it." Later that year he went into more detail, noting that the letter "contains some amazing information about the Carpocratians and the Gospel according to Mark." By early 1961 he was working up the materials that eventually went into his two books.

But the more radical conclusions took time to emerge. Not until October 1962 did Smith tell Scholem that "I am really beginning to think Carpocrates and the sort of things he represented (and especially the ascent through the heavens) were far closer to Jesus than has ever been supposed." If Smith really forged Clement's letter, then he also must have spent years deliberately deceiving one of the few scholars he deeply respected. Yet he showed remarkable equanimity when his efforts proved partly unsuccessful. When Smith's scholarly book on Secret Mark appeared, Scholem accepted the letter as Clementine. But though he appreciated Smith's evidence about the magical side of early Christianity as "very good and convincing as far as it pertains to the tradition of the original church," he also found himself "not sure whether the story can be truly taken as historical evidence about Jesus himself." Smith, in his reply, showed only gratitude for his friend's detailed critical response: "Your letter pleased me very much and I thank you most sincerely for writing me at such length about my book.... As to Jesus, I should perhaps have emphasized more strongly that *all* accounts of his teaching and practice are conjectural, and I claim to my own conjectures only that they fit the reports as well as any and better than most." This is the tone of a colleague in inquiry, not a foiled forger.

Scholem, after all, was famous as a scholar for two qualities: a passionate interest in the occult, esoteric and antinomian elements of the Jewish tradition, and a fastidious intolerance of incompetent scholarship that matched Smith's. In 1972 the Jewish scholar Amos Funkenstein and the Christian historian Martin Marty, as well as Smith, published reviews of the three volumes of *The Cambridge History of the Bible*. In the course of his detailed review of Volume 2, Funkenstein—who could quote reams of texts in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek and Latin from memory—complained that the book failed to deal with the influence of the medieval Jewish thinker Ramban (Nachmanides) on Christians like Meister Eckhart. From Scholem's erudite, minutely critical point of view, this apparently precise remark was actually a gaffe—one so serious as to reveal that Funkenstein was an ignoramus. "What kind of Jewish scholar is this," he wrote to Smith, "who can confuse the Ramban with the Rambam [Maimonides, the medieval Jewish scholar who actually influenced many Christian thinkers]?" Scholem's absolute rigor and integrity—as well as his dedication to the study of magic-inspired Saul Lieberman, an authority on the Talmud, to offer the greatest backhanded tribute in the history of scholarly irony when introducing him at the Jewish Theological Seminary: "You know that I believe that mysticism is nonsense, total and complete nonsense, but the history of nonsense is scholarship. And the man who is about to speak knows more about the history of nonsense than anyone has ever known."

No one understood Scholem's attitude better, or shared it more completely, than Smith. He took one lesson above all away with him from Jerusalem: "the difference," as he put it in 1945, "between books, on the one hand, that display a special way of thinking that is worth reflecting on, and all other books, on the other hand." Smith's sense that most scholarship was second-rate made him reluctant to become a professor, since he felt "more and more opposed to the reading of the nonsense that needs to be read to become an expert in any given research method." Even after he decided to cast his lot with *Wissenschaft*, and even after his success was assured, he wondered—as he confided to Scholem—"why is it that the study of religion attracts so many nitwits?" He took delight in witnessing the "squelches" that Scholem administered to lesser scholars during a conference discussion. Nothing pleased Smith more about the visiting professorship he helped arrange for Scholem at Brown University, it seems, than being able to explain why the university's professor of Old Testament did not want Scholem to require that students in his seminar know Hebrew: "He says he thinks there would be a number of students who would like to take a seminar with you, but who could not

meet that requirement. (He is right at least as to one student—himself...)” To Stroumsa, it seems psychologically impossible that Smith could have spent years deceiving the man to whom he owed, and whom he admired, so much, and whom he saw as one of the few who shared his sense of what makes true scholarship.

Yet the depth and rigor of Smith’s scholarship don’t necessarily absolve him from suspicion. Great scholars—scholars intolerant of complacency, stupidity and error—have also been forgers. Erasmus, the greatest of the Renaissance humanists, insisted that theologians read the New Testament in the original Greek, not just the Latin Vulgate. He also omitted a controversial verse that supported the doctrine of the Trinity from his edition of the New Testament when he found that the Greek manuscripts did not contain it. This daring scholarly move brought swarms of traditionalists out of their nests, determined to sting him. He cheerfully beat them off—until they produced a manuscript written for the occasion in which the verse appeared in Greek. In his commentaries on the texts and in his satires, Erasmus rallied scholars across Europe to join him in extirpating the folly and ignorance of conventional theologians—for instance, the Dominicans who used the Bible to support the persecution of witches. Yet we know he forged a complete work by the early Christian writer Cyprian in order to support his views about Christian martyrdom.

Smith’s letters, moreover, show that he possessed at least a couple of the qualities of the successful forger, and in spades. Unlike British and European scholars, most Americans receive relatively little training in composing ancient Greek and Latin. We have as yet produced no counterpart to “Herodotus at the Zoo,” a brilliant homage to the Greek traveler and historian Herodotus composed by the legendary expert on Athenian pottery, J.D. Beazley. Smith, however, was a gifted and assured practitioner of prose composition—he wrote his dissertation and his first letters to Scholem in Hebrew. Most philologists, as is well known, have little sense of humor—something every forger needs. But Smith’s letters are consistently witty, at others’ expense and his own. In 1960, when he decided to turn down an offer from Cornell and stay at Columbia, he explained his decision to Scholem with a characteristically neat paradox: “If I buried myself in Ithaca I should never forgive myself for having sacrificed the theater and the opera and the galleries, but so long as I stay here I can indefinitely put off going to them, and feel happy and virtuous about it.” A really good academic novelist—someone like Allegra Goodman, who wove the dismal straw of contemporary laboratory life into fictional gold in *Intuition*—could find rich material here for a tale of how the ironist of Providence and Morningside Heights became the forger of Mar Saba.

But another story—a less dramatic one suggested by the letters—seems much more likely to be the true one. When Scholem learned that the Mar Saba discoveries bore on the Carpocratians, he replied enthusiastically: “I am amazed to hear that there is still unknown information about the Carpocratians to be found. Those are the Frankists of Antiquity. Produce it as soon as possible!” The Frankists were the followers of Jacob Frank, an eighteenth-century Polish Jew who had taught that those who followed him were free from the law and should pursue salvation through ecstatic sexuality. In a famous essay published in 1937, not long before Smith joined him in Jerusalem, Scholem explored the mysteries of what he called “redemption through sin”: “It would be pointless to deny that the sexual element in this outburst was very strong: a primitive abandon such as the Jewish people would scarcely have thought itself capable of after so many centuries of discipline in the Law joined hands with perversely pathological drives to seek a common ideological rehabilitation.” In this characteristically imaginative way, Scholem, no religious believer, re-created the deep meanings that Judaism had even—or especially—for its heretics in another age.

How much of Scholem’s vision did Smith take away with him from Jerusalem? Back in America in the late 1940s, Smith wrote to Scholem as a busy, engaged Episcopalian cleric, giving sermons and organizing youth groups. Soon afterward, however, he abandoned the church for the academy. The evidence of the letters—like that of his books—makes clear that he also abandoned, and even came to despise, Christianity (in one letter to Scholem he thanked “the non-existent” for a special piece of good fortune). Again and again, over the past

200 years, Christians and Jews raised in traditional Orthodox communities have found their faith challenged, or even destroyed, when a training in scholarship forced them to confront the fact that the Bible is not infallible. Bart Ehrman, for example, has described how studying New Testament textual criticism at Princeton Theological Seminary prompted him to stop “reading the Bible as an inerrant blueprint for our faith, life, and future” and to start “seeing it as a very human book, with very human points of view, many of which differ from one another and none of which provides the inerrant guide to how we should live.”

As a midcentury Episcopalian, Smith would never have thought the Bible inerrant. But he did think almost that of Scholem. Could Scholem’s enthusiastic comparison of Carpocrates to Frank have set Smith on the way to making Jesus a magician? Could Scholem’s teaching have inspired Smith to rethink the nature of religious experience, and Christianity, and find new meanings in the life of Jesus? It seems very likely, to me at least, that Scholem’s way of thinking about redemption and salvation, religion and sex, acted slowly but irrevocably on Smith—in just the time-bomb way that great teaching often acts: like so many of the great Jewish scholars he knew, he found in history of a particular kind a way to appreciate the emotional richness of traditions to which he could no longer pledge personal loyalty. In *The Secret Gospel*, Smith described Scholem’s deep impact on him and recalled that when he told Scholem about the letter, “he pounced immediately on the mention of the Carpocratians,” whose leader supposedly “taught that sin was a means of salvation.... A remotely similar theme was important in the writings of some seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Jewish heretics whom Scholem had been studying (Sabbatai Zevi and Jacob Frank).”

The newly published letters, though they suggest and support this reading, don’t quite clinch the case: indeed, they suggest that Smith, writing years later, may have remembered as conversations exchanges that actually took place on paper. I believe that Smith really found his letter, and that Scholem gave him the framework into which he inserted it. But that’s just what I think. Many will disagree. This time, the professor is the Cheshire cat. He smiles and is gone.

[Anthony Grafton](#) Anthony Grafton, the Henry Putnam University Professor of History at Princeton University, is the author, most recently, of *The Culture of Correction in Renaissance Europe*.

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