

# THE SECRET GOSPEL OF MARK UNVEILED: REPLY TO SCOTT G. BROWN<sup>1</sup>

by Peter Jeffery

Scott G. Brown's 47-page review of my book, *The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled*, boils down to three criticisms, none of which are accurate. (1) He asserts that I don't know the meaning of the word "mystery" in the writings of Clement of Alexandria because I haven't read the bibliography. But the bibliography he recommends is decades old, and his views on this matter are well outside of current mainstream opinion. (2) Brown says I believe "that a gay Jewish teacher from Nazareth would have discarded the tradition of interpreting the Torah in favor of pedagogical pederasty, complete with a Greek philosophical agenda" (p. 32). But that is pure misrepresentation, the opposite of what I wrote. (3) Finally, Brown objects to my view that the Mar Saba text which preserves the Secret Gospel excerpts—purportedly a letter from Clement of Alexandria to an unknown Theodore—actually belongs to the modern literary genre that folklorists call an "extended double entendre." His arguments on this score indicate that he is unfamiliar with the term and does not know what it really means.

## 1. Languages of Mystery

Brown makes a good point: it would have been helpful if I had explained Clement's mystery terminology at length; my easy equation of "mystery" and "sacrament" glosses over some very relevant issues. The reason I did not delve into this subject in *The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled* is that I was already writing about it for another book, which *The Secret Gospel* book interrupted.<sup>2</sup> Understanding Clement's vocabulary requires a great deal of historical context and comparison, and the Mar Saba text fits so poorly into this history that it made no sense to put all the material into one book, as readers will see when both are available.

Brown is right to raise the question, but a useful discussion cannot take place on the basis of the bibliography he cites. Most of it was published between 1936 and 1977—essentially the bibliography Smith himself used, with a few additions.

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Jeffery, *The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled: Imagined Rituals of Sex, Death, and Madness in a Biblical Forgery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), reviewed by Scott G. Brown in *Review of Biblical Literature* (9/15/2007) [http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/5627\\_5944.pdf](http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/5627_5944.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Working title: *They Saw His Glory: How Judaism and Christianity Separated, as Told in Their Most Ancient Hymns*.

According to Brown (though he is oversimplifying here), these classic articles show that in Clement's time the word "mystery" (μυστήριον) referred only to the allegorical interpretation of texts, not yet to liturgical actions or sacraments. Hence "the [Mar Saba] letter says nothing about liturgy" (p. 14), and all the liturgical evidence I adduced is irrelevant. But this judgment is built upon three misunderstandings. First, the issue is not limited to the word "mystērion" by itself; both the letter and the genuine writings of Clement contain an extensive vocabulary of mystery theology—actually three distinct vocabularies. Second, both Clement's writings and the Mar Saba letter actually do apply mystery language to the sacramental actions of the liturgy. Third, even if they did not, it still would not follow that "the letter says nothing about liturgy." The reading and interpretation of the Bible *is* liturgy—not only because it takes place within the assembly, but because early Christians experienced the presence of the risen Christ in the reading and exposition of the scriptures (2 Pet 1:16-21), as much as in the sacramental actions of the community (Luke 24:32, 35). Clement was quite explicit about this (*Strom.* 4.134.4, 6.57.5-61.3, 7.49.4, 7.95.4-8). That is why, in ancient times, becoming a Christian meant going through a whole series of initiation rites, which included not only exorcisms and prayers, confessions and professions, anointing, immersion, and first eucharist, but also the reading and preaching of selected pericopes from the Bible in which human beings come to a true knowledge of who Christ is—just the sort of reading that the first Secret Gospel excerpt appears to be. Thus even if it were correct that the Mar Saba letter says nothing about water immersion, anointing, or eucharist, it would not be correct to conclude that it says nothing about liturgy. "The [scriptural] word is not simply an interpretation of what takes place in the action. It forms a single liturgical whole with it."<sup>3</sup>

In any case, the decades since Brown's bibliography appeared have produced numerous relevant publications. The initiation rites of the non-Christian mystery cults have been explored through both textual<sup>4</sup> and archaeological evidence.<sup>5</sup> Our understanding of early Christian sacramental and liturgical terminology has greatly improved,<sup>6</sup> and the recovery of many Gnostic writings has revealed much

---

<sup>3</sup> E. Schillebeeckx, *Revelation and Theology*, transl. N. D. Smith, 1 (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967) 53. See also Paul Janowiak, *The Holy Preaching: The Sacramentality of the Word in the Liturgical Assembly* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000). Frances Young, *Virtuoso Theology: The Bible and Interpretation* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1993; Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> For example: Robert Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, transl. Antonia Nevill (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

David B. Dodd and Christopher A. Faraone, eds., *Initiation in Ancient Greek Rituals and Narratives: New Critical Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2003). "Theme Issue: Redescribing Graeco-Roman Antiquity" *R&T* 12/3-4 (2005).

<sup>5</sup> For example: Noel D. Robertson, "The Two Processions to Eleusis and the Program of the Mysteries," *AJP* 119 (1998) 547-75. Roger Beck, "Ritual, Myth, Doctrine, and Initiation in the Mysteries of Mithras: New Evidence from a Cult Vessel," *JRS* 90 (2000) 145-80.

<sup>6</sup> For example: Louis Bouyer, *The Christian Mystery: From Pagan Myth to Christian Mysticism*, transl. Illtyd Trethowan (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990; repr. Petersham, Mass.: Saint Bede's

about the alternative sacramental systems that once competed with emerging Christianity.<sup>7</sup> It is now clear that, in Christian usage, the word “mystery” participates in three distinct glossaries, each of which must be understood on its own terms.

Apocalyptic-incarnational vocabulary: The earliest Christian uses of the word “mystery” are not indebted to the mystery cults of classical Greece, but to Jewish apocalyptic, where Greek “mystērion” translates the Persian loanword “rāz.”<sup>8</sup> The mystery here is God’s hidden knowledge, especially the divine plan of salvation history to be revealed in the last times. That is what “mystery” means in Mark 4:11<sup>9</sup> and in Paul (Rom 16:25, 1 Cor 2:6-7). Like its synonyms “Logos” and “Wisdom,” the apocalyptic sense of “mystery” was increasingly identified with the Incarnation. Thus in the post-Pauline epistles the mystery is “God’s plan to sum up all things in Christ”<sup>10</sup>—in short Christ himself (Col 1:24-2:3, Eph 1:9, 3:1-12). Clement knew this usage also (*Hypotyp.* Fr. 16, a gloss on 1 Tim 3:16): that is why his rhetorical apostrophes to the “mystic marvel” of the Incarnation readily proceed to praise of Christ’s teaching presence in the scriptures (*Protr.* 111.3), or the “truly sacred mysteries” of baptism (*Protr.* 120.1), or the “paradoxical mystery” that “he is himself the nourishment that he gives” in the eucharist.<sup>11</sup> Even the oldest article Brown cited admits that “something more than mere verbal exegesis” is involved here.<sup>12</sup> For Clement and Origen “the sacramental celebrations are considered the *locus* in

---

Publications 1995). William A. Van Roo, *The Christian Sacrament*, Analecta Gregoriana 262 (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1992) 69-97.

<sup>7</sup> For example: April D. DeConick, “The True Mysteries: Sacramentalism in the *Gospel of Philip*,” *VC* 55 (2001) 225-61.

<sup>8</sup> F. Mojtabāi, “The Iranian Background of the Judeo-Christian Concept of Rāz / Mystērion,” *Mihr – O – dād – O Bahār (Memorial Volume of Dr. Mehrdād Bahār*, ed. Ameer Kavous Balazadeh (Teheran: Anjuman-i Āṣār va Mafākhir-i Farangī, [Muslim year] 1377 [=A.D. 1998]) 343-72. Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 247-50, 404. Baby Varghese, *West Syrian Liturgical Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004) 35-42.

<sup>9</sup> Joel Marcus, *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God*, SBLDS 90 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986) 45-47; Marcus in fact finds (86-87 n. 41) that “the phrase ‘mystery of the kingdom of God’ fits better into the Markan setting than into the Secret Gospel setting.” See also R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2002) 196-99. Suzanne Watts Henderson, *Christology and Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark*, SNTSMS (Cambridge University Press, 2006) 101-26.

<sup>10</sup> Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 108-15.

<sup>11</sup> *Paed.* 1.41.3-1.43.1, translation modified from FC 23:40 (Wood).

<sup>12</sup> H. G. Marsh, “The Use of Μυστήριον in the Writings of Clement of Alexandria with Special Reference to his Sacramental Doctrine,” *JTS* 37 (1936) 64-80, see 68, 74-76 on *Paed.* 1.46.3 and 2.29.1. More recently A. H. C. van Eijk, “The Gospel of Philip and Clement of Alexandria: Gnostic and Ecclesiastical Theology on the Resurrection and the Eucharist,” *VC* 25 (1971) 94-120. Susi Hausammann, “Die Arkandisziplin als Zugang zum christlichen Mysterium bei Klemens von Alexandrien,” *Menschen suchen – Zugänge finden: Auf dem Weg zu einem religionspädagogisch verantworteten Umgang mit der Bibel: Festschrift für Christine Reents*, ed. Desmond Bell et al. (Wuppertal: Foedus-Verlag, 1999) 89-101, especially 94-95.

which the spiritual sense of Scripture (moral, allegorical, anagogical) becomes explicit and effective.”<sup>13</sup>

Cultic-philosophical vocabulary: As learned philosophers, Philo and Clement inherited a Middle Platonist school tradition, in which the ritual terminology of the pagan mystery cults was applied metaphorically to the acquisition of philosophical knowledge and growth in ethical maturity. The ultimate sources were Plato’s *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, where mystery-cult terms are applied to philosophical discussions of paederasty and the exegesis of texts on erotic madness. Philo, of course, reapplied this cultic-philosophical language to the allegorical exegesis of the Bible; from him Clement (and probably also his readers) learned to do the same.<sup>14</sup> It is this kind of allegorical exegesis that Brown has in mind when he interprets what the Mar Saba letter says, namely that the Secret Gospel was “read only to those who are being initiated into the great mysteries.” According to Brown, “the great mysteries could not denote baptism because Clement explicitly dissociated these mysteries from baptism in *Strom.* 5.11.70.7–71.1” (p. 22). In that passage, indeed, Clement speaks of “lesser” and “greater mysteries” that are experienced after baptism (*Ioutron*). And for once there is really no mystery as to what Clement was talking about. Here, as in 4.3.1-4, Clement was outlining the contents of the second half of the *Stromateis*, his special curriculum for the members of his own elite group, advanced Bible students for whom baptism was just the beginning.<sup>15</sup> After book 5 explains why it is necessary for the truth to be hidden by mysteries and symbols, book 6 outlines the lesser mysteries: the mundane categories of human knowledge that one must possess to read the Bible. The higher mysteries are described in book 7; they represent the life of the gnostic who knows God, a life that certainly includes regular participation in communal worship (7.35-49). Recognizing that we are dealing with an entire vocabulary, not just a single word, enables us to compare this three-stage curriculum with other passages where Clement organized knowledge in threes.<sup>16</sup> It also permits us to see that, since scripture reading and study had a sacramental quality in early Christian worship, Clement did use mystery-cult language to describe the Christian’s progress through the sacramental initiation rites. Hence his exegesis of 1 Cor 3:1-3:

If, then, “milk” is said by the apostle to belong to babes (*nēpiōn*), and “meat” to be the food of the full-grown/perfected (*teleiōn*), milk will be understood to be catechesis—the first food, as it were, of the soul. Meat is the mystical vision (*epoptikē theōria*), for this is the flesh and the blood of

---

<sup>13</sup> Eliseo Ruffini and Enzo Lodi, *“Mysterion” e “Sacramentum”*: *La Sacramentalità negli scritti dei padre e nei testi liturgici primitivi* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1987) 83-102, quote from 98.

<sup>14</sup> Christoph Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie bei Platon, Philon und Klemens von Alexandrien*, *Untersuchungen zur antiken Literatur und Geschichte* 26 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> Annewies van den Hoek, *Clement of Alexandria and His Use of Philo in the Stromateis: An Early Christian Reshaping of a Jewish Model*, *VCSup* (Leiden: Brill, 1988) 42, 60 171, 188.

<sup>16</sup> *Paed.* 1.1-2.1, 3.1-2. *Strom.* 1.15.1-16.3, but see *Strom.* 1.176 L. Rizzerio, *Clemente di Alessandria e la «φυσιολογία veramente gnostica»*: *Saggio sulle origini e le implicazioni di un’epistemologia e di un’ontologia «cristiane»* (Leuven: Peeters, 1996) 181-215.

the Word, that is, the comprehension of the divine power and essence. “Taste and see that sweet is the Lord,” it is said (Ps 33:9 LXX). For so he imparts of himself to those who partake of such food in a more spiritual manner (*pneumatikōteron*), when now the soul nourishes itself, according to the truth-loving Plato. The meat and drink of the divine Word is the knowledge (*gnōsis*) of the divine essence, wherefore also Plato says, in the second book of the *Republic*, “It is those that sacrifice not a sow, but some great and difficult sacrifice,” who ought to inquire respecting God. And the apostle writes, “Christ our passover was sacrificed for us (1 Cor 5.7)—a sacrifice hard to procure: in truth the Son of God consecrated for us.”<sup>17</sup>

The “milk” of catechesis (preparatory instruction for baptism)<sup>18</sup> is for the babes (a term that can be used for catechumens). It leads to the “meat” of the mature or perfected (a cultic word<sup>19</sup>). Indeed this meat is the “epoptic vision,” originally the term for what an initiate experienced in the Great Mysteries at Eleusis.<sup>20</sup> Epopitic vision involves understanding and *gnōsis* of the divine essence, like the philosophical truth Plato was writing about, but it also represents the bread and wine of the eucharist—the “meat” that is also the Passover sacrifice—because the neophyte’s first reception of Holy Communion was the summit and perfection of the initiation process that began with catechesis.

Thus it cannot be said that Clement would have refrained from using the language of the Eleusinian mysteries to describe the Christian initiation liturgy. Nor should we impose on him post-Reformation distinctions between word and sacrament. The position that the “great mysteries” of the Mar Saba letter must exclude the liturgy cannot be sustained. If anything, the more spiritual feeding that Clement identified with the epoptic vision supports the identification of the “more spiritual gospel” with the liturgical initiation process.

Tabernacle typology: The third vocabulary of mystery derives from Philo’s allegorical exegesis of the ritual prescriptions of the Torah, which in his time were still being carried out at the Temple in Jerusalem. Yet Philo also employed terminology from the Greek mysteries and Egyptian religion to describe the Therapeutae as priests and Levites, even though their worship did not involve literal blood sacrifices, but centered on banquets resembling those of Clement’s

---

<sup>17</sup> *Strom.* 5.66.2-5, citing Plato, *Ep.* 7 (341 CD) and *Respub.* 2 (378 A); translation modified from *ANF* 2: 460 (Wilson). See also Andrew L. Pratt, “Clement of Alexandria: Eucharist as Gnosis,” *GOTR* 32 (1987) 163-78.

<sup>18</sup> “Clement is a pioneer in using the word [‘catechesis’] to mean specifically ‘instruction of those preparing for baptism,’” according to Annewies van den Hoek, “The ‘Catechetical’ School of Early Christian Alexandria and Its Philonic Heritage,” *HTR* 90 (1997) 59-87, quote from 69.

<sup>19</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *Religious Experience in Earliest Christianity: A Missing Dimension in New Testament Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 69-103.

<sup>20</sup> For the terminology see Michael B. Cosmopoulos, *Greek Mysteries: The Archaeology and Ritual of Ancient Greek Secret Cults* (London: Routledge, 2003) 50-78, 197 and elsewhere.

gnostics: filled with readings, allegorical exegesis, prayer, and hymnody.<sup>21</sup> The Qumran Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice also witness to a conception of earthly worship as participation in an idealized heavenly Tabernacle. Thus it is not surprising that some Christian groups, as far back as Clement of Rome (*1 Clem.* 40-41), conceived their own earthly worship in heavenly Tabernacle terms. Clement of Alexandria was familiar with such usage,<sup>22</sup> but it was Origen who stated explicitly that the words and gestures of the liturgy (“ecclesiastical observances”) of his own church veiled hidden truths that required exegesis, in the same way that the priestly rituals commanded by Moses were types of the Christ to come.<sup>23</sup> In time, as typological exegesis grew more clearly distinct from philosophical allegory, the vocabulary of Tabernacle typology merged with the apocalyptic-incarnational vocabulary to produce the sacramental mystagogy of the great post-Nicene fathers.<sup>24</sup>

Now what we have in the Mar Saba letter is a little Tabernacle typology (“the innermost sanctuary of that truth hidden by seven veils”), but mostly mystery-cult vocabulary, though in a higher concentration than in Clement’s genuine writings. The absence of apocalyptic-incarnational usage is odd if the letter is by Clement, but not if it was written in the 1950s. The letter’s cultic language often refers to the Christian initiation process, as in the sentence, “But we are ‘children of the light,’ having been illuminated by ‘the dayspring’ of the spirit of the Lord ‘from on high.’” “Illumination” was a common locution for baptism.<sup>25</sup> Unmistakable, therefore, is the import of the letter’s statement that Mark wrote his first gospel “for increasing the faith of those who were being instructed [i.e., the catechumens],” and then “composed a more spiritual gospel for the use of those who were being perfected.” The instructed/perfected pairing obviously parallels *Paed.* 1.25-30, Clement’s most extensive discussion of the relationship between instruction and baptism.<sup>26</sup> Thus it cannot reasonably be denied that the Mar Saba letter intends to describe the Christian initiation process in Clementesque mystery language, with the two gospels of Mark corresponding to the two stages of catechesis and sacramental “perfection,” i.e. baptism.

---

<sup>21</sup> Celia Deutsch, “The Therapeutae, Text Work, Ritual, and Mystical Experience,” in *Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism*, ed. April D. DeConick, SBLSymS 11 (Leiden: Brill, 2006) 287-311.

<sup>22</sup> E. g., *Strom.* 5.39.2-40.4, 6.107.2-3, 7.3.3-4. Bogdan Bucur, “On Climbing the Cosmic Ladder: Clement of Alexandria’s Hierarchical Cosmology and Its Innovations,” *VC* 60 (2006) 251-68.

<sup>23</sup> Origen, *In Num. Hom.* 5.1.4, ed. W. A. Baehrens, GCS 30 (1921) 26-27; SC 415 (1996) 122-25. See also F. Ledegang, *Mysterium Ecclesiae: Images of the Church and Its Members in Origen*, Bibliotheca ETL 156 (Leuven: Peeters, 2001) 310-54.

<sup>24</sup> Enrico Mazza, *Mystagogy: A Theology of Liturgy in the Patristic Age*, transl. Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Pueblo, 1989) especially 10-13, 165-74.

<sup>25</sup> *Protr.* 10.94.2, *Paed.* 1.29-30, *Strom.* 5.64.4. J. Ysebaert, *Greek Baptismal Terminology: Its Origins and Early Development*, Graecitas Christianorum Primaeva 1 (Nijmegen: Dekker & Van de Vegt, 1962) 158-76.

<sup>26</sup> See especially *Paed.* 1.30.2, 1.35.3, 1.36.3, 1.38.1.

However, the letter assumes the wrong kind of baptism. In *Paed.* 1.25 the perfection received when “we were enlightened” is compared to the perfection Jesus already possessed when he was baptized by John. This follows Clement’s own theology and practice, and the Epiphany-based usage of every other Alexandrian group for which Clement gives us information.<sup>27</sup> But the Mar Saba letter, instead, identifies “perfection” with a Lazarus-like account of a young man being raised from the dead, as if it was written by someone who assumed that Easter baptism with resurrection themes was the universal early Christian practice.

## 2. “The Gay Gospel Hypothesis (Again)” Again

Scott Brown writes that I “expect Jesus and the young man to act like Greek lovers of the classical era” (p. 32). But it is time for Morton Smith’s defenders to stop repeating this baseless canard. What I actually wrote was “Since the historical Jesus presumably had even less exposure to Hellenic culture than Philo, Josephus, and Paul, it is hard to think of a *historical* reason why he would have been more accepting of homosexuality than they.” Besides, “our issue is not whether the events recounted in the Secret Gospel actually happened, or could have happened, but how there came to be a gospel fragment that says they happened.”<sup>28</sup>

If the Mar Saba letter quoted a gospel that unmistakably called Jesus a paederast, that would not necessarily tell us anything about the psychosexuality of the historical Jesus, or about what was acceptable in his community. Canonical

---

<sup>27</sup> *Strom.* 1.21.146.2 says the followers of Basilides commemorate the baptism of Jesus every January with a nocturnal vigil of readings that resembles the early Christian baptismal vigil on Epiphany. *Exc.* 77-80 and *Strom.* 4.89.2-5 quote Valentinian texts that associate baptism with an abstract, astrological victory of life over death, but the idea is escape from the physical world, not burial and resurrection of the body as in Rom 6:3-11. In any case the *Exc.* section is bracketed by passages (76, 85) invoking Jesus’ own baptism as the example to be followed, showing that this was the more pronounced emphasis; transl. in Thomas M. Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate: Italy, North Africa, and Egypt*, Message of the Fathers of the Church 6 (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992) 185-88. *Strom.* 2.44.1-4 quotes from the Shepherd of Hermas (a Roman text) on baptism as a kind of passing through death; however the passage is about the apostles, after their own biological deaths, preaching to the dead from Old Testament times. No early baptismal rite was built upon this theme. Origen’s sermons on Exodus were written after he relocated to Caesarea: Finn, *Early* 101-223. The Jordan/Epiphany interpretation remained the dominant one in Egyptian even in post-Nicene times, see Juliette Day, *The Baptismal Liturgy of Jerusalem: Fourth- and Fifth-Century Evidence from Palestine, Syria and Egypt* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007) 6-7, 90-92, 137.

<sup>28</sup> Jeffery, *The Secret Gospel of Mark Unveiled* 199-200, 195. I italicized the word “historical” to emphasize that I was not discussing any *theological* arguments about the morality of homosexuality. No statements on homosexuality were ascribed to Jesus in any known ancient text, canonical or uncanonical, until the newly discovered Gospel of Judas (38:20, 40:12) was found to contain strongly negative comments which slander that author’s opponents (the mainstream church of his day)—but no one believes these were actually uttered by the historical Jesus. Rodolphe Kasser and Gregor Wurst, *The Gospel of Judas: Critical Edition* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2007) 195, 199.

Mark, by its own account, is at least one cultural-linguistic shift away from Jesus' immediate environment: Women can initiate divorce (Mark 10:12), kosher practices require explanation (7:3), Jesus speaks in Aramaic that the evangelist translates (5:41, 7:11, 7:34). "Longer Mark" need not be any closer to Jesus than canonical Mark, especially since it is transmitted—only—in a letter that says it was written later and in Alexandria. References to homosexuality in an Alexandrian milieu are easily explained as due to the Platonic philosophy that influenced both Clement and his Carpocratian opponents: the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* are all about paederasty. "How did a carpenter from Galilee and a young man from Peraea suddenly become Greek citizens wrestling naked in a gymnasium?" Brown asks (p. 26). Easy. Clement himself called Jesus a gymnast [*gymnastē*] and a referee [*agōnothetē*] (*Quis div.* 3.6), doubtless without intending the sexual connotations such terms can have in ancient philosophical writing. But an ancient or modern opponent of Clement could have made these connotations explicit. That is just what the letter accuses the Carpocratians of doing, with their blasphemous and carnal gospel that mentions naked men in close proximity (*gymnos gymno*).

Clement's own gospel recension is hardly free of such connotations, however. The best clue to its author's intention is the way he selected and quoted from his sources: the canonical gospels. Why are several of these quotations about love between Jesus and other men?

[the youth,] looking upon him, loved him (Mark 10:21, 27)

. . . and began to beseech him that he might be with him (Mark 5:18)

[the man] whom Jesus loved (John 13:23, 19:26, 21:7, 20)

Add "wearing a linen cloth over his naked body" (Mark 14:51-52), and Jesus' refusal to meet the women. Is a pattern developing here?

Most people would not detect such implications in the other passages quoted by the Secret Gospel—until they considered Morton Smith's unique conception of man-love in Bible times. The phrase "for he was rich," quoted from Luke 18:23, refers to another young man Jesus met, and has obvious resonances with the writings of Clement.<sup>29</sup> Yet Smith treats the word "rich" as a synonym for "libertine."<sup>30</sup> Did he learn that from the Secret Gospel, or was he the evangelist who put it there? Particularly interesting is the phrase "and after six days" in the Secret Gospel, since it quotes the beginning of Mark's Transfiguration account (Mark 9:2). Smith repeatedly invoked the Transfiguration experience to represent whatever transpired in his papier-maché initiation rituals. "Jesus taught a 'mystery of the kingdom of God' in which, by means like those known from contemporary magic, initiates were given what they thought was an experience of entering the heavens[,]

<sup>29</sup> See "La lettre sur l'Évangile secret' de Marc et le Quis Dives Salvetur? de Clément d'Alexandrie" in Alain Le Boulluec, *Alexandrie antique et chrétienne: Clément et Origène*, ed. Carmelo Giuseppe Conticello, Collection des Études Augustiniennes, Série Antiquité 178 (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 2006) 291-302.

<sup>30</sup> On Luke 19:2-6 compare Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973) 188, 211 and *Jesus the Magician* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978, 1981) 133-34; the word "rich" as a synonym for "libertine" 138.

and they were thus trained to have such visions as those reworked in the transfiguration and resurrection stories.”<sup>31</sup>

In a 1981 article on “Ascent to the Heavens and the Beginning of Christianity”<sup>32</sup> Smith did exactly what the Mar Saba writer did, but more briefly: First, he combined material from ancient non-Christian religious texts with selected New Testament verses that could be read as having sexual implications; then he borrowed mystery language from a church father to give the impression of an erotically tinged initiation rite. After rehearsing the usual references to the “Mithras Liturgy” and the Hekhalot, Smith proposed interpreting John 14:6 (“I am the way”) by linking it to two verses that, like the quotations in the Secret Gospel, could be read suggestively: “the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh” (Heb 10:20) and “You shall see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man” (John 1:51). Since the latter verse alludes to Jacob’s ladder (Gen 28:12), Smith distorted a comment by Aphrahat, which correctly reads, “The ladder that Jacob saw is also the mystery of our Savior, by which just men ascend above from below.”<sup>33</sup> The word “mystery (*rāza*)” in this passage actually means “type.”<sup>34</sup> But by adding two words in brackets, and tilting the translation of “above” and “below,” Smith turned Aphrahat’s typological mystery into a rite of heavenly ascent.

Aphraates, one of the earliest Christian writers of Mesopotamia, declared, “The ladder is the mystery [initiated by] our saviour, by which righteous men ascend from the lower world to the world above” (*Demonstratio* 4.5). What mystery he had in mind is not known. It would seem to have included a technique for ascent. We may have a reflection of it in the story of the transfiguration . . . .”

What other author, ancient or modern, constructs such amalgamations out of non-Christian “magical” texts, oddly-interpreted Gospel verses, and patristic mystery talk?

We can be sure we’re not just seeing things because, in later years, Smith grew less furtive and more frank about the erotic aspect of his spurious sacraments.

Prophecy is likewise the commonest purpose of invocation in the magical papyri, but there are many others, especially erotic. *Daimones* were often sent to bring lovers, but were also asked to give the magician such power that anyone whom he called would immediately drop everything and follow him, as the disciples did when Jesus called them (Mark 1:18, 20, etc.). Beyond such particular services, *daimones* were also called to enter

---

<sup>31</sup> “Two Ascended to Heaven—Jesus and the Author of 4Q491” (1992), repr. in Morton Smith, *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh 2: New Testament, Early Christianity, and Magic*, ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World (Leiden: Brill, 1996) 68-78, quote from 77.

<sup>32</sup> Repr. in *Studies* 2, 47-67; for what follows see pp. 59-60.

<sup>33</sup> *Dem.* 4.5, ed. *Patrologia Syriaca* 1 (1894) 145-46; transl. Marie-Joseph Pierre in SC 349 (1988) 298.

<sup>34</sup> Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition*, rev. ed. (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2004) 45, cf. 21.

the magicians and unite with them, so that the magician could say, “I am you and you are I,” or, as Paul said, “I live no longer I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20). Such identification was sometimes, especially for erotic purposes, effected by physical means. The magician, when identified with a god, might identify a cup of wine with his blood—the blood of the god—and give it to another to drink. Whoever drank it would be joined to him in love. These rituals are the closest known parallels to the eucharist . . .<sup>35</sup>

It is simply not true, then, that “the Gay Gospel Hypothesis” rests on only “one comment” or “tentative conjecture” by Smith.<sup>36</sup> On the contrary, it fits a pattern that is pervasive in Smith’s writings. For Smith, the Transfiguration story was really “propaganda for a Jewish-Christian libertine group—a group that thought the Law and the Prophets had vanished from ‘the freedom in which Christ has set us free,’ as Paul put it (Gal 5:1).”<sup>37</sup> Indeed Smith posited an anonymous early transmitter of the Transfiguration story who would have been a “libertine apologist,” and a “creative thinker, not to say ‘liar,’” which means he was “as might be expected, a theologian.” Thus in Smith’s writings, as in the Mar Saba letter, the question of what actually happened “after six days” is a focus of conflict between orthodox and heretical theologians over who knows the truth. And these transfiguring mysteries always result in the “libertine” party getting the last laugh at homophobic Christianity. Only quite late in Smith’s career did he realize he had forgotten to provide for the “transfiguration” of female disciples (see Brown’s review p. 38).

Since women didn’t count for much in Smith’s view of the world, the choice of the Carpocratians to represent the “libertine” (i.e., homosexual) perspective in the Mar Saba letter seems to be another mistake pointing to Smith as author. Clement knew of a group (the followers of Basilides) who recognized a category of non-heterosexual men (*Strom.* 3.1.2-3). Clement also opposed an unnamed group that seems more deserving of the “libertine” characterization (*Strom.* 3.34-39), and actually did “corrupt boys” (*Strom.* 3.36.5). But the vice Clement ascribed to the Carpocratians was heterosexual wife-swapping, the sharing of wives like common property as in Plato’s *Republic* (*Strom.* 3.5-10, 3.25.5, 3.54.1). Whoever was trying to set up a confrontation between Clement and homosexuality, in other words, picked the wrong heretical group. Where did the Mar Saba “Clement” get the idea that the Carpocratians were particularly interested in naked men?

The answer: from Smith’s teacher Gershom Scholem, who compared the Carpocratians to certain antinomian sects descended from the seventeenth-century Jewish heresy of Sabbatai Zevi. Scholem’s opinion that these sects believed in

---

<sup>35</sup> Smith, “How Magic Was Changed by the Triumph of Christianity” (1983), repr. in *Studies 2*: 208-16, quote from 210.

<sup>36</sup> Scott G. Brown, “The Question of Motive in the Case Against Morton Smith,” *JBL* 125 (2006) 351-83, see 357.

<sup>37</sup> Morton Smith, “The Origin and History of the Transfiguration Story” (1980), repr. in *Studies 2*: 79-86, see pp. 84, 85-86.

“Redemption through Sin” appears to explain Smith’s statement that “Carpocrates was said to have taught that sin was a means of salvation.”<sup>38</sup> In short the Secret Evangelist, who assumed the wrong kind of baptismal rite, and Clement of Mar Saba, who condemned the wrong group of libertines, both had an awful lot of concerns, perceptions, and compositional strategies in common with whoever wrote Morton Smith’s publications.

### 3. The Literary Genre of the Mar Saba Text

Brown objects to my description of the Mar Saba text as an “extended double entendre,” based on an incorrect guess as to what this expression means.

Double entendre is produced by *words* and *phrases* that have more than one recognizable meaning. . . . What Jeffery is describing as an extended double entendre is mostly a series of subjective visual associations that have no semantic grounding in ambiguous words and phrases that cause the sentences as written to have double meanings (28, 29-30).

But I quoted the definition in my book (p. 270 n. 96): “A double entendre is, of course, a word or expression with two meanings, one of which is usually risqué. By extended double entendre, we refer to whole stories rather than single words or expressions.”<sup>39</sup> In other words, the secondary meaning is not “ground[ed] in ambiguous words and phrases” (as Brown supposes) because it happens on the narrative level. A classic twentieth-century example, which should be read by anyone who is uncertain about this genre, appears to be a political speech by a feminist activist, but is actually a lampoon of feminism by an anonymous male opponent.<sup>40</sup> The Mar Saba text with its Secret Gospel is the same sort of thing: an apparent screed against immorality by a Christian moralist, but actually an

---

<sup>38</sup> Morton Smith, *The Secret Gospel*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Clearlake, California: Dawn Horse Press, 1982) 14, where communication with Scholem is mentioned but no specific publication cited. Smith apparently read Scholem’s interpretation into Irenaeus’ account of the Carpocratians (*Haer.* 1.25.45). He did not acknowledge any dependency on Scholem in *Clement* 266-78, but he did do so in a private letter to Scholem, quoted in Guy G. Stroumsa, “Comments on Charles Hedrick’s Article: A Testimony,” *JECS* 11 (2003) 147-53, see p. 151. See also “The Reason for the Persecution of Paul and the Obscurity of Acts” (1967) in *Studies* 2: 87-94. This characterization of the Carpocratians is made in Gershom Scholem, “Sabbatianism and Mystical Heresy” in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Schocken, 1954) 316 and 420 n. 60; and “Redemption through Sin” in Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken, 1971; repr. 1995) 78-141 especially 132. Prof. Stroumsa has informed me that his edition of Smith’s letters to Scholem has been completed and will be published soon.

<sup>39</sup> Alan Dundes and Carl R. Pagter, *Work Hard and You Shall Be Rewarded: Urban Folklore from the Paperwork Empire* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992) 196.

<sup>40</sup> Dundes and Pagter, *Work Hard* pp. 209-10; an online text with my discussion at <http://www.music.princeton.edu/~jeffery/replytobrown.pdf>. On the sources and transmission of such texts, see p. xxi. This kind of research is continued into the era of affirmative action in Danielle M. Roemer, “Photocopy Lore and the Naturalization of the Corporate Body,” *Journal of American Folklore* 107 (1994) 121-38.

anonymous satire from the other side, by an advocate of “libertine” views whose actual position is represented by Clement’s “Carpocratian” opponents.

Scott Brown’s judgment that I am engaging in “eisegesis” (used 5 times) or “subjective visual associations” actually illustrates my point. As I wrote in my book (p. 93), one of the key characteristics of extended double entendres is deniability. Much of the humor lies not so much in the double meaning itself, as in the fact that the joker is able to feign propriety by accusing his listeners or readers of having “a dirty mind”—of reading things into the text that are not there. Smith clearly enjoyed doing just that. In every published mention of his most infamous joke, “Holy man arrested . . . naked youth escapes,” he speculates that unsophisticated ancient and modern readers would perceive this interpretation in Mark 14:46-52, though he himself knows better<sup>41</sup>—as if to distract us from noticing who keeps bringing this up. Nor was this the only passage for which Smith ascribed improbable (homo)sexual interpretations to people less insightful than he. The Corinthians misconstrued a Marcan statement that Smith presumably knew is about kosher food: “The teaching that sexual acts are morally indifferent could easily have been derived from Jesus’ reported saying, ‘There is nothing outside a human being which, by entering, can make the recipient impure.’”<sup>42</sup> The Secret Gospel is constructed from such people-will-get-the-wrong-idea passages, perhaps like the lost “writings from Jesus and his immediate disciples” that were deliberately suppressed by later Christians because of perceived “libertine” content.<sup>43</sup>

Eventually Smith stopped going to the trouble of attributing his bizarre readings to more benighted people, and began stating them as plain fact. His 1980 article, “Pauline Worship as Seen by Pagans,”<sup>44</sup> may represent some kind of nadir. After pointing out that the persecutors of early Christians accused them of practicing magic, Smith reprises his theory about baptism as a magical death-and-resurrection rite, adding the Chaldean Oracles and Apuleius to the timeworn “scattered indications” he had already assembled from the magical papyri and so on. Then he goes on to construct “another type of magic” out of arbitrary selections from another group of magical papyri: “the recalled spirits . . . of executed criminals and of persons who had died unmarried or childless were invoked to aid the magician. Jesus belonged to all three of these categories” (p. 97). Apparently the dead Jesus

---

<sup>41</sup> Morton Smith, “Clement of Alexandria and Secret Mark: The Score at the End of the First Decade,” *HTR* 75 (1982) 449-61, see 458 in n. 19. Scott G. Brown, “The Question of Motive in the Case Against Morton Smith,” *JBL* 125 (2006) 351-83, see 360. Scott G. Brown, “Factualizing the Folklore: Stephen Carlson’s Case against Morton Smith,” *HTR* 99 (2006) 291-327, see 321-22.

<sup>42</sup> “Paul’s Arguments as Evidence of the Christianity from which He Diverged” (1986) in *Studies* 2:103-9, see p. 105 (on Mark 7:15). See also Smith, *Clement* 91 (on Hippolytus, *Trad. Ap.* XXI.11); 154 (on John 11:36); 171-72 (Mark 10:21 deemed “improper”); Morton Smith, “Under the Sheet,” *New York Review of Books* 26/1 (8 Feb. 1979) <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/7916>.

<sup>43</sup> Smith, *Clement* 263-64.

<sup>44</sup> Morton Smith, “Pauline Worship as Seen by Pagans,” *HTR* 73 (1980) 241-9, repr. in *Studies* 2: 95-102, whence my page references.

haunted Paul and other early Christians as a “familiar spirit,” based on a proposed Greek etymology that was inexplicably “omitted” by “the editors of *TWNT*” (97 n. 13). Smith adds the pseudo-psychological explanation that “the lack of normal sexual satisfaction is likely to lead to compensatory connections with spirits, hence the requirement of celibacy by many shamanistic and priestly groups has probably some functional justification” (p. 97). After citing no bibliography on shamanism (or celibacy),<sup>45</sup> Smith parallels the Mar Saba text by ridiculing modern Christian worship through its putative historical roots: The English hymn “Come, Holy Ghost”<sup>46</sup> is the “fossilized remains of such [shamanistic] practices,” so that Paul’s “suggestion of what unbelievers would think if they walked into a Christian meeting (‘that you are mad’ [1 Cor] 14:23) was on the charitable side.” All this shows that pagan worship was superior: “A Pauline service devoted to effectual invocation of spirits for observable results differed from such respectable, public performances [of pagan sacrifices] as a voodoo ritual differs from solemn high Morning Prayer” (98-99). After citing no bibliography on “voodoo”<sup>47</sup> (or pagan sacrifices or Morning Prayer), Smith devotes several more paragraphs to showing that the “meetings” of the Corinthian church “were largely group *séances*” (99) leading to glossolalia. After citing no bibliography on glossolalia<sup>48</sup> (or *séances*, which date only from the nineteenth century<sup>49</sup>), Smith goes back to misrepresenting the content of ancient texts, by rewriting the Aramaic word “abba” from Rom 8:15 as “*abbaabbaabba* [italics original]” to make it look like an instance of speaking in tongues. Paul would explain “that *abba* meant ‘father’ in Aramaic (God’s language),” but then he “had to admit that the sounds were incomprehensible” (100).<sup>50</sup> The requisite sexual exegesis appears in a footnote this time (n. 22): “With *abbaabba* compare *hubbahubba* and the like in modern popular songs; ecstatic utterances in western society have probably changed little through the ages.” But in fact they’ve

---

<sup>45</sup> Smith had already dismissed Mircea Eliade’s book on shamanism for “its total and deliberate neglect of the importance of sham” in “Historical Method in the Study of Religion,” *History and Theory* 8, Beiheft 8 (1968) 8-16, see p. 15. He would go on to reject the entire contemporary field of magic research as “colonialist sociology” in “O’Keefe’s *Social Theory of Magic*,” *JQR* 74 (1984) 301-13, see 301. See now Henri-Paul Francfort and Roberte N Hamayon, eds., *The Concept of Shamanism: Uses and Abuses*, Bibliotheca Shamanistica 10 (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2001). Smith could have cited Arthur Vööbus, *Celibacy: A Requirement for Admission to Baptism in the Early Syrian Church* (Stockholm: Estonian Theological Society in Exile, 1951).

<sup>46</sup> There are several traditional English hymns with this incipit. Most are based on medieval Latin hymns, the oldest of which is *Nunc sancte nobis spiritus*, ascribed to Ambrose of Milan (died 397).

<sup>47</sup> I.e., the African-derived Haitian religion of Vodun. The question of magic was addressed in Serge Larose, “The Meaning of Africa in Haitian Vodou,” *Symbols and Sentiments: Cross-Cultural Studies in Symbolism*, ed. Ioan Lewis (New York: Academic Press, 1977). The “invocation of spirits” was described in Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1953; many reprints). The songs were studied in Harold Courlander, *The Drum and the Hoe: Life and Lore of the Haitian People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960).

<sup>48</sup> Smith could have cited Felicitas D. Goodman, “Phonetic Analysis of Glossolalia in Four Cultural Settings,” *JSSR* 8 (1969) 227-39, and her dialogue with William J. Samarin in 11 (1972) 293-99.

<sup>49</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism*, 2 vols. (New York: George H. Doran, 1926).

<sup>50</sup> Compare Smith’s rather different explanation in *JAAR* 44 (1976) 726.

changed a lot: “hubba hubba” is “World War II slang” amounting to “the verbal equivalent of a wolf whistle.”<sup>51</sup> The hit song that popularized this expression is from the 1945 popcorn movie “Doll Face,” about a burlesque-show stripper trying to make it as a legitimate actress.<sup>52</sup> Smith ends up rehearsing his theory of the eucharist as “a familiar form of love magic” (101), citing the Mar Saba letter to show that the adoption of mystery terminology by Christians must have been “one of the adjustments of Christianity to respectable Roman imperial society” (101). He concludes that early Christianity’s persecutors were right.

People who want to accuse me of “sophomoric logic, over-the-top rhetoric, and defamation of character” really need to take a serious look at what they’re defending (cf. Brown’s review, p. 44). Gratuitous insults and allegations of “Smith bashing” (45) merely distract attention from the published texts, the only source of real evidence bearing on the core question: whether the Mar Saba letter exhibits Smith’s authorial profile. True, the profile that emerges is disturbing, and has confused everyone trying to evaluate the Secret Gospel: that is why so many previous investigators have felt compelled to comment on Smith’s personality. What can it mean when the discovery of a text about falsehood, conflict, and sexuality is recounted in a personal memoir full of statements about false memories, conflict, sexuality—and insanity? But my book was the first to make real headway with such questions and move the discussion out of the realm of speculation. As the first person with counseling training and experience to address the problem, I was in a position to “hear” the contradictions, deceptions, emotions, and silences<sup>53</sup> in Smith’s authorial “voice” with somewhat more clarity than others have. Brown’s attempt to de-legitimize my efforts, with charges about “startling disparagements,” “hostile caricature,” and so on (p. 45), obscure the fact that I actually approached this sensitive matter with considerable restraint: In order to keep the focus securely on the authorial persona, I scrupulously restricted my remarks to publicly available texts, mostly by Smith himself. I did not present any new research on Smith’s unpublished writings, biography or career. I resisted the temptation to publish any of the jaw-dropping oral traditions I have heard about Smith, even though some (if accurate) would be quite revealing. I quite deliberately refrained from publishing my opinion on Smith’s most likely diagnoses. My book engaged only the textual Smith, not the historical Morton (pp. 35, 242-43). Unquestionably, a thorough, well-informed, and balanced biography of the man himself needs to be written. But I

---

<sup>51</sup> P[hyllis R.] R[andall] and R[onald] R. B[utters], “Hubba-Hubba: Its Rise and Fall,” *American Speech* 61/4 (Winter 1986) 363-65, quote from 363. See also: A. D. Weinberger, “Some Data and Conjectures on the History of ‘Hubba-Hubba,’” *American Speech* 22/1 (Feb. 1947) 34-39. John Lancaster Riordan, “A Further Note on ‘Hubba-Hubba,’” *American Speech* 22/4 (Dec. 1947) 307-8. For more recent usage see <http://www.hubba.co.nz/>.

<sup>52</sup> “Dig You Later (A Hubba-Hubba-Hubba)” sung by Perry Como and Martha Stewart (not the home economics diva). Watch the song at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RfQApffxuVg> or the whole film at <http://www.archive.org/details/dollface>.

<sup>53</sup> Vanda Scott and Lester David, “Listening to Silence,” *Journal of Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention* 19 (1998) 105-8.

decided not to undertake this, and proposed leaving the task to people who had known him. Uninformed opprobrium disguised as pop psychology (“eisegetical projection,” “attempts to get inside Smith’s head,” Brown 27, 45) will do nothing to clarify any remaining mysteries about the origins of the Secret Gospel. Let’s stick to the texts, and accept what they reveal.

Speaking of texts, I am somewhat surprised to read Brown saying that “the pederastic and sexually violent interpretation developed in the remainder of Jeffery’s book has no basis in the [Mar Saba] text and is logically incompatible with the sacramental interpretation” (p. 47). Themes of sex and violence often occur in religious texts and rituals, as everyone who has actually read the Bible knows (how about Gal 5:11-12?). Clement of Alexandria wrote many pages about the sexual and violent content of the ancient Greek mysteries, calling them “sacred initiations that are really profanities, and solemn rites that are without sanctity.”<sup>54</sup> He even proposed to derive the Greek word “mystery” etymologically from *mynos* (“defilement”), citing a widely-practiced mystery rite that commemorated a myth in which the god Dionysus, having promised Prosymnos a sexual experience in exchange for being shown the route to Hades, repaid the debt by carving a wooden phallus and sitting on it over the dead Prosymnos’ tomb (*Protr.* 2.13.1, 2.34.3-5).<sup>55</sup> The Secret Gospel, with another god at another man’s tomb, is simply turning stories like this around, turning the tables on Christian sanctimoniousness as personified by “Clement,” announcing the “good news” that it is really the Christian mysteries that are unholy profanities. The innermost sanctuary of the seven-veiled truth is nothing more than a heterosexuality as violent and depraved as Oscar Wilde’s Salomé. That was an unexceptional thing to say in the first half of the twentieth century, when a post-Wilde academic subculture identified homosexuality with Platonism, Christian heresies, rearranged scriptures, and fanciful liturgies. There are those even now who would sympathize.

#### 4. The Difference

“If Jeffery had actually started with the document, he would be able to distinguish between the text of the letter and Smith’s interpretation,” writes Brown (pp. 20-21). Actually we both agree with Smith on some points, but not the same ones: Brown agrees with him that the gospel and the letter were written by two different people in the first and second centuries. Why, then, is Brown so much

---

<sup>54</sup> *Protr.* 2.22.3; transl. LCL 92:45 (Butterworth).

<sup>55</sup> Eric Csapo, “Riding the Phallus for Dionysus: Iconology, Ritual, and Gender-Role De/Construction,” *Phoenix* 51 (1997) 253-95, especially 275-76, 2876-87. Compare: Walter Burkert, “Der geheime Reiz des Verborgenen: Antike Mysterienkulte,” *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*, ed. Hans G. Kippenberg and Guy G. Stroumsa, SHR 65 (Leiden: Brill, 1995) 79-100, see p. 92. Carla Noce, “Il Tema della nudità dell’anima,” *Origeniana Octava: Origen and the Alexandrian Tradition*, ed. L. Perrone et al. 1 (Leuven: Peeters, 2003) 679-86.

better than I am at separating the text from its discoverer? Simple: when I see striking anachronisms and stark inconsistencies, I ask what historical period they point to; Brown systematically eliminates them by substituting more ambiguous translations. Each rewording can arguably be defended within its own context, for it solves the immediate problem in a way that preserves the possibility of an early date for the letter and the gospel. But each local rewording has implications at the more global level, which Brown does not always acknowledge or pursue. As we turn from the details to the big picture, the local solutions keep piling up, with the result that it is more difficult, not less, to understand the document as a whole, or visualize it having a place in any ancient historical context.<sup>56</sup>

For instance, the emphasis on secrecy is toned down by replacing the translation “secret gospel” with the transliterations *mystikon evangelion* or “mystic gospel,” with an inconclusive discussion (and the same obsolete bibliography) as to what exactly “mystikon” should mean (p. 121ff). The result is a net loss in clarity, not a gain. The best clue to the message of the mystic gospel will be found in its many quotations from the canonical gospels—the most obvious indicator of the evangelist’s sources and interests—yet Brown attenuates the gospel’s relationship to its sources by calling these quotations “verbal echoes” (198ff.). Again, what Smith translated as “most carefully guarded” is softened by Brown to “very securely or safely kept” (135-7). The implication of this is that we should not imagine “a church archive” or “physical guarding,” since “we cannot determine . . . whether the text resided in a locked room or even if it was kept in just one place. . . . The real question is whether . . . the longer gospel . . . was relocated to a secret and secure book repository rather than to an ordinary library in a house” (135). The eventual conclusion: the *mystikon evangelion* was “‘safely kept’ . . . in the sense that it was not made available to people of unproven character, . . . this text was reserved for mature individuals who were not likely to misinterpret it” (137). How might that have worked? Did you need a letter from Clement to see it? Or a letter to Clement? Was Theodore applying? “Clement’s description of how Carpocrates used magic in order to procure a copy does imply that this text was carefully regulated. But a carefully regulated text is not necessarily one whose existence is kept secret” (137). Maybe not, but the upshot of all this uncertainty is that we can’t form a mental picture of what the historical situation might have been like. Why is a second-century mental blank preferable to the clear twentieth-century picture and vivid modern characters to which so many clues point?

As the microsolutions multiply, a comprehensive macrosolution grows more elusive. Theodore, in Smith’s translation, was not to “concede that the secret Gospel is by Mark, but should even deny it on oath,” which takes us right to the

---

<sup>56</sup> The page references in the following paragraphs are to Scott G. Brown, *Mark’s Other Gospel: Rethinking Morton Smith’s Controversial Discovery*, Studies in Christianity and Judaism 15 (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005).

nineteenth-century debate over whether Clement condoned lying.<sup>57</sup> But Brown sees a kinder, gentler situation. “There is no secrecy here, only a half-truth intended to undermine the legitimacy of one particular libertine sect” (139). Thus we move away from Smith’s picture of ferocious conflict, described in the harsh language of unspeakable teachings, carnal sins, opposition “in all ways and altogether,” falsifications, foul demons, deceitful arts, magical enslavement, utterly shameless lies, and so on, to Brown’s more laid-back suburban view: One guy advised another guy to fudge the truth a bit, so that a bunch of alleged libertines would have no authorization to read a book with a hard-to-translate name that was safely kept nowhere in particular. That could be the looking-glass version of what my book says (pp. 60, 90): try to locate this text anywhere specific in early Christian history, and it disappears.

The letter appears to assume a more organized, hierarchical church than we find in the genuine Clement. Clement of Mar Saba no longer seems to be a Christian philosopher aiming to refute heresies, but a church official conspiring with Theodore to “silence” heretics—note that the letter devotes more space to denigrating the people than to refuting their ideas, the reverse of what Clement does in book 3 of the *Stromateis*. As for the Secret Gospel, it is not a reference work in the library of Clement’s elite philosophy club, consulted by members seeking to attain the higher mysteries of exegetical gnosis. Like a holy relic, it is instead the treasured possession of a larger entity, “the church in Alexandria,” whence it was compromised by a wayward presbyter. I haven’t found a case where Clement refers to the whole city as one church in this way. The expression would be more natural in the post-Nicene period, after the “Christian schools and study circles” of Clement’s time had given way to “the imposition of episcopal control”<sup>58</sup> and the emergence of a metropolitan see of Alexandria. Yet I showed in my Chapter 4 that a post-Nicene date for the Mar Saba letter would be incompatible with Egyptian lectionary evidence. On the other hand, imagining a fifth-century ecclesiology in the second century is just the kind of mistake that would easily have been made in the mid-twentieth century.

Scott Brown smoothes out this problem by interpreting “the church in Alexandria” to mean “the group of inter-related Christian communities that existed in Alexandria.”<sup>59</sup> But this is another situation that is hard to imagine. In a city as given to rioting and factionalism as Alexandria, why should we assume that the early Christian house churches or study groups understood themselves as a network so unified as to form one “church in Alexandria,” so “inter-related” that they even shared an esoteric text? The reason for thinking so is that it would eliminate a discrepancy between the letter and Clement’s writings, allowing one to

---

<sup>57</sup> See now David Satran, “Pedagogy and Deceit in the Alexandrian Theological Tradition,” *Origeniana Quinta*, ed. Robert J. Daly, Bibliotheca ETL 105 (Leuven: Peeters, 1992) 119-24.

<sup>58</sup> Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 115, 164, see also 120-121.

<sup>59</sup> Brown, *Mark’s Other Gospel* 135.

maintain an early date for the Secret Gospel. The more common opinion, I think, is that “we are on the safest ground if we postulate a[n] extensive pluriformity in the Alexandrian Church, encouraged by an ecclesiastical structure that was considerably looser and less ‘monarchic’ than in Antioch and elsewhere.”<sup>60</sup> The earliest Christian texts from Alexandria express different views of Christology and the Church’s relationship to Judaism, after all.<sup>61</sup> The transition from diverse “voluntary associations”<sup>62</sup> or house churches to an orthodox patriarchate is likely to have been difficult and riven with conflict,<sup>63</sup> much as it was in Rome and Antioch.<sup>64</sup>

To put it another way: each of Brown’s explanations and retranslations looks cautious and reasonable and sensible on its own terms—certainly less radical than a hypothesis of forgery. But as the rephrasings accumulate, the overall picture fades out. The price of massaging away everything that might pose an obstacle to a first- or second-century dating is that not much is left. I fear a slippery slope, at the bottom of which we would find absolute certainty that the gospel is by Mark and the letter by Clement, but absolute uncertainty as to what either text is actually saying about anything. Indeed on Brown’s showing it is hard to see what the added value of the longer, “more spiritual” gospel could have been, since “despite this more esoteric orientation, the truths conveyed through L[onger] G[ospel of] M[ark, passages] 1 and 2 are still available to readers of the canonical gospel . . . featured in ‘plain’ language in the central section of the Markan gospel. What LGM 1 and 2 do is deepen a reader’s appreciation of this gospel’s christology and discipleship

---

<sup>60</sup> David T. Ruina, *Philo in Early Christian Literature: A Survey*, CRINT ser. 3 vol. 3 (Assen: Van Gorcum and Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 120.

<sup>61</sup> Birger A. Pearson, “Earliest Christianity in Egypt: Some Observations,” *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity*, ed. Pearson and James E. Goehring, SAC (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 132-59. Pearson believes (p. 155) that “Alexandrian Judaism itself was a variegated phenomenon in the first century, and that early Christianity there also would have displayed a degree of religious and theological variety, leading to the varieties of Christianity that appear more clearly in our second-century sources.”

<sup>62</sup> John S. Kloppenborg and Stephen G. Wilson, eds., *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 1996, repr. 2005) especially 54-55. Richard S. Ascough, “Translocal Relationships among Voluntary Associations and Early Christianity,” *J ECS* 5 (1997) 223-41.

<sup>63</sup> Russell, *Doctrine* 163-66. Christopher Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity: Topography and Social Conflict*, Ancient Society and History Series (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) especially 215-44. Richard A. Layton, *Didymus the Blind and His Circle in Late-Antique Alexandria: Virtue and Narrative in Biblical Scholarship* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

<sup>64</sup> Allen Brent, *Hippolytus and the Roman Church in the Third Century: Communities in Tension before the Emergence of a Monarch-Bishop* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995). Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, transl. Michael Steinhauser, ed. Marshall D. Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), especially 359-65, 381-408 on “fractionation.” Michelle Slee, *The Church in Antioch in the First Century C.E.: Communion and Conflict* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2003). Markus Bockmuehl, “Syrian Memories of Peter: Ignatius, Justin and Serapion,” *The Image of the Judaeo-Christians in Ancient Jewish and Christian Literature*, ed. Peter J. Tomson and Doris Lambers-Petry (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003) 124-46. Allen Brent, *Ignatius of Antioch: a Martyr Bishop and the Origin of Episcopacy* (New York: Continuum, 2007). Christine Shepardson, “Controlling Contested Places: John Chrysostom’s *Adversus Iudaeos* Homilies and the Spatial Politics of Religious Controversy,” *J ECS* 15 (2007) 483-516.

theology.”<sup>65</sup> How could an extra layer of obscurity deepen anyone’s appreciation of anything? And how could such a benign, unremarkable thing have become the focus of so much controversy, in Clement’s time or our own?

Even if some or many of my conclusions are wrong, my approach is basically right. The Secret Gospel’s re-use of quotes from the canonical gospels needs to be taken seriously as the major clue to its true origin. The entire vocabulary of the Mar Saba letter, not just the word “mystery,” needs to be interpreted through extensive comparison with all of Clement’s writings on the basis of up-to-date bibliography. Since this vocabulary is unquestionably being employed to describe Christian initiation practices, the letter must be evaluated in terms of current knowledge of ancient ritual and Christian liturgical history. The liturgical character of the letter is too central to ignore just because New Testament studies has not developed strong methodologies for dealing with the ritual aspects of texts. The Mar Saba letter would be a crucial primary source for liturgiology if it actually was composed in ancient times. But in fact there are many obstacles to an ancient date that must be faced, rather than denied or translated away: the wrong kind of baptism, the wrong heretics, the wrong ecclesiology, the wrong kind of homosexuality, the wrong kind of humor.

Nor can students of the Secret Gospel afford to ignore the writings of Morton Smith, where I believe the true interpretive keys will be found. This was a man who spent much of his professional life combining tidbits from unrelated ancient religious texts into historically impossible rituals, ignoring and disdaining the research on magic and liturgy that was available in his time. These imagined mystery rites consistently turn out to be extended double entendres designed to ridicule the presumed moral hypocrisy and vacuous truth-claims of modern Christianity. The Mar Saba letter is simply the most enduring and successful product of this program, the masterpiece of one man’s lifelong and highly personal campaign.

When Morton Smith’s life story is accurately and fairly told, it may well be evident that his feelings of rage were understandable, even amply justified. But the way he chose to express them in his publications was not—as every professor knows who has to teach the principles of academic honesty year after year. I have sat with some extremely psychotic people who wanted me to validate things that were both false and intentionally hurtful; I know how hard it is to acknowledge someone’s pain while refusing to condone his desire to pass it on to others. But that is what we must do. It is tragic that Smith’s long-ago impostures, like antique landmines from a half-forgotten war, are still injuring innocent and well-intentioned scholars. The time has come to break the cycle of hurt, by shelving the Secret Gospel under “twentieth-century fantasy fiction” where it belongs.

---

<sup>65</sup> Brown, *Mark’s Other Gospel* 216.

## Postscript

The *Review of Biblical Literature* has refused to publish this reply to Prof. Brown's review article, stating that "Unfortunately the board of *RBL* has laid down a policy that we do not publish replies on reviews." I find this position absurd and unjustifiable for many reasons, including the following:

1. It goes against the standard practice of scholarly periodicals in all humanistic fields. Any other journal that published a review as lengthy and disapproving as Brown's would have *invited* the author to reply, even if the review did not contain material misrepresentations, as Brown's review does.

2. *RBL*'s alleged policy has been inconsistent in any case, since they have published authors' replies in at least the following cases:

Jobes and Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint*, rev. James Barr, *RBL* 4 (2002) 7-32 has online response at [http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/1341\\_3027.pdf](http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/1341_3027.pdf) .

Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, rev. *RBL* 4 (2002) 1-6; 5 (2003) 25-31 has online response at [http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/1383\\_4661.pdf](http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/1383_4661.pdf) .

Campbell and O'Brien, *Unfolding the Deuteronomistic History*, *RBL* 5 (2003) 1-24, has responses both in print and online, at [http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/1261\\_3530.pdf](http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/1261_3530.pdf) and [http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/1261\\_3531.pdf](http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/1261_3531.pdf) .

According to Editorial Director Bob Buller, "The only cases in which *RBL* has offered an author response all involve either (1) the publication of a group of commissioned reviews plus an author response, for inclusion in *RBL*'s print edition, or (2) publication of the papers presented in a book review seminar in which an author responded to a panel of reviewers. All of the examples you listed [above] in your original email fall into one or the other of these categories." Actually, it seems to me that only the Campbell and O'Brien case fits these criteria.

3. There are no constraints that would make such a policy advisable.

a. Concerns about lack of space don't have much justification in a publication that is read mostly in its online form. One of the advantages of the online medium is that it makes repartee so much easier.

b. If every author routinely responded to every review, this would not burden anyone. Readers would not have to read all those replies unless they were interested in them. *SBL* is a large enough organization that people could be found to assist with the editing.

c. *RBL* editors would still retain the ability to refuse authorial replies that were deemed excessively petty, abusive, repetitive, whatever.

Where, then, is the problem that this policy was intended to correct? According to Mr. Buller, "It is entirely a matter of practicality: we are hard-pressed to publish the 500+ reviews each year needed to cover the field, and we simply do not have the personnel or time that would be needed to add an additional category of published pieces (i.e., author

responses, rejoinders, surrejoinders).” I reply that this policy virtually guarantees that *RBL* will be more unbalanced and less authoritative than it ought to be. Budget and personnel considerations therefore ought to be juggled so that *RBL* can live up to its status as the premier source of book reviews in Biblical Studies. Consider:

4. The prohibition against authors’ replies at the end of the review process contrasts sharply with the liberality at the beginning of the process, where any SBL member can volunteer to review a book. Since a reviewer will never have to face the author, and it is not clear how much use is made of outside referees, all of the responsibility for quality control falls on the *RBL* editorial staff, which—despite its unquestioned omniscience and exemplary dedication—cannot be expected to know everything about everything, or to make every judgment call with gyroscopic equilibrium. The perceived accuracy and evenhandedness of *RBL* reviews could only improve if reviewers who are overly biased, misinformed, or self-promoting know that they risk a confrontation with the book’s author.

5. Since *RBL* is the leading international source of reviews in the Biblical Studies field, and is available free online to everyone, any errors it publishes are far more harmful than if they had appeared in a print journal. *RBL* reviews are routinely picked up by Google Books and other websites, giving the impression that any criticisms these reviews contain are the last word of an expert and thus unanswerable. Circulating on a global scale with no possibility of refutation or rebuttal, every gaffe, blunder and falsehood is multiplied to infinity. That in itself is reason enough to insist that *RBL* have *more* safeguard mechanisms than print journals—all of which, as I said before, permit authors to reply to reviews at least in cases where there is extensive disagreement about issues of substance.

6. No good is likely to be achieved by refusing in principle to let authors defend their books. It doesn’t advance dialogue. It doesn’t promote the fine sifting of fact and opinion that eventually leads to the truth. It doesn’t inspire trust that *RBL* is presenting complete and accurate information, or that *RBL* places a high priority on effective communication or the responsible airing of differing viewpoints. All the foreseeable results of such a policy are obvious negatives. Therefore I would urge everyone associated with *RBL* now and in the future to ask themselves, and each other: How could fostering the appearance of partiality, inaccuracy, and unfairness possibly advance Biblical Studies?

© 2008  
Peter Jeffery  
Scheide Professor of Music History  
Princeton University