

The Revelation of *Secret Mark*

The fragments of *Secret Mark* that Smith photographed are found in a letter copied into the end papers of a seventeenth-century edition of the genuine epistles of Ignatius. The letter is ostensibly from an early church father, Clement of Alexandria (d. 215), and addressed to someone named Theodore (*Theod.* I.1).¹ The letter begins by congratulating Theodore for opposing a second-century libertine sect, the Carpocratians, and proceeds to denounce the Carpocratians in very strong terms (I.2–11). In particular, the letter reassures Theodore that the Carpocratians were lying about what was taught in a secret edition of the Gospel of Mark:

Now of the things they keep saying about the divinely inspired Gospel according to Mark, some are altogether falsifications, and others, even if they do contain some true elements, nevertheless are not reported truly. For the true things being mixed with inventions, are falsified, so that, as the saying goes, even the salt loses its savor (συγκεκριραμένα γὰρ τᾶληθῆ τοῖς πλάσμασι παραχαράσσεται ὥστε · τοῦτο δὴ τὸ λεγόμενον · καὶ τὸ ἄλας μωρανθῆναι). (I.11–15)

The letter then explains the origin of this secret edition of Mark as follows:

As for Mark, then, during Peter's stay in Rome he wrote an account of the Lord's doings, not, however, declaring all of them, nor yet hinting at the secret ones, but selecting what he thought most useful for increasing the faith of those who were being instructed. But when Peter died a martyr, Mark came over to Alexandria, bringing both his own notes and those of Peter (κομίζων καὶ ταταυτοῦ [sic] καὶ τὰ τοῦ Πέτρου ὑπομνήματα), from which he transferred to his former book the things suitable to whatever makes for progress toward knowledge. Nevertheless, he yet did not divulge the things not to be uttered, nor did he write down the hierophantic teaching of the Lord, but to the stories already written he added yet others and, moreover, brought in certain sayings of which he knew the interpretation would, as a mystagogue, lead the hearers into the innermost sanctuary of that truth hidden by seven veils. Thus, in sum, he prepared matters, neither grudgingly nor incautiously, in my opinion, and, dying, he left his composition to the church in Alexandria, where it even yet is most carefully guarded, being read only to those who are being initiated into the great mysteries. (I.15–II.2)

After detailing the origin of this *Secret Mark*, the writer then quotes a passage from the text to refute a question that Theodore apparently had about this Gospel (II.20–21). The quoted passage describes the story of the resuscitation of a young man reminiscent of the raising of Lazarus in John, yet with a different ending:

And they come into Bethany. And a certain woman whose brother had died was there. And, coming, she prostrated herself before Jesus and says to him, "Son of David, have mercy on me." But the disciples rebuked her. And Jesus, being angered, went off with her into the garden where the tomb was, and straightaway a great cry was heard from the tomb. And going near Jesus rolled away the stone from the door of the tomb. And straightaway, going in where the youth was, he stretched forth his hand and raised him, seiz-

ing his hand. But the youth, looking at him, loved him and began to beseech him that he might be with him. And going out of the tomb they came into the house of the youth, for he was rich. 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 (καὶ ἔμεινε σὺν αὐτῷ τὴν νύκτα ἐκείνην), for Jesus taught him the mystery of the kingdom of God. And thence, arising, he returned to the other side of the Jordan. (II.23–III.11)

This passage is quoted presumably in full to persuade Theodore that *Secret Mark* did not contain what must have troubled him:

After these words follows the text, “And James and John come to him,” and all that section. But “naked man with naked man,” and the other things about which you wrote, are not found. And after the words, “And he comes to Jericho,” the secret Gospel adds only, “And the sister of the youth whom Jesus loved and his mother and Salome were there, and Jesus did not receive them.” (III.11–16)

Unfortunately, just as the author begins to explain what these curious passages could mean, *Theodore* ends mid-sentence right before Clement’s “true explanation” could be expounded:

But the many other things about which you wrote both seem to be and are falsifications. Now the true explanation and that which accords with the true philosophy—. (III.17–18)

Smith’s disclosure of the two-and-a-half page text is packed with much new information about early Christianity, much more than its small size would normally indicate. If genuine, the document not merely conveys two new gospel fragments, but it also supplies the only direct evidence of a letter from Clement, a new *testimonium* on the origin of the Gospel of Mark, and the earliest witness for Mark in Alexandria. The text also contains additional material about an obscure, second-century gnostic

sect, the Carpocratians. Few scholars are afforded the opportunity to discover a text as important as what Smith photographed at Mar Saba in 1958.

For such a lifetime discovery, no one could have been better prepared for *Secret Mark* than Morton Smith. Smith, while studying in Jerusalem on a traveling fellowship, had already visited Mar Saba once before in January and February of 1942 (*Secret Gospel* 1).² During this stay at Mar Saba, Smith toured the monastery, heard stories of manuscripts hidden in nearby caves, and visited its two libraries (*Secret Gospel* 4–5). Afterwards, Smith continued his studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and completed his dissertation on parallels between the Gospels and Rabbinic writings (*Secret Gospel* 7–8).³

After serving as an Episcopal priest,⁴ Smith eventually started work on a second doctorate from 1948–1950 under Werner Jaeger at Harvard, where he became interested in Greek patristic manuscripts (*Secret Gospel* 8). In 1951, Smith obtained a teaching position at Brown University and pursued this interest. For example, Smith traveled to Greece in 1951–1952 in search of manuscripts of Isidore of Pelusium, where he inspected, photographed, and transcribed dozens of Greek manuscripts, many of which he dated to the eighteenth century.⁵ According to one of his letters dated January 26, 1953, Smith had taken about 5,000 photographs during this expedition.⁶ These were unsettling times for Smith, however; he was denied tenure at Brown in 1955 and was a visiting professor at Drew before securing a position at Columbia in 1957 where he would spend the rest of his career.⁷

Smith's publications before the summer of 1958 exhibited his erudition in a wide range of subjects relevant to *Secret Mark*. For example, in 1955 Smith published a detailed analysis of Vincent Taylor's commentary on the Gospel of Mark.⁸ He had both an intimate knowledge of monastic libraries with their eighteenth-century Greek texts and a fine grasp of patristic letter transmission.⁹ While at Drew, Smith also became

interested in an early third-century heresiological text, the *Philosophumena* of Hippolytus, a text that includes a description of the Carpocratians.¹⁰ Smith's interest in Clement of Alexandria became evident as early as March 1958 when he published an article in the *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* that cited Clement of Alexandria four times.¹¹

Meanwhile, Smith had begun planning to revisit Mar Saba, located in territory then controlled by Jordan, and Smith wrote to Gershom Scholem, a professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem for whom Smith earlier worked as a research assistant. Smith stated that he would "spend the whole summer in the Near East, including a week in both Jerusalem and Istanbul, and a month in both Jordan and northern Greece, hunting for collections of manuscripts in the monasteries of Chalcidice (excluding Athos)."¹² Though exact dates are generally difficult to discern from Smith's writings, Smith revealed that he "visited Jerusalem in the summer of 1958" and obtained permission from the Patriarch, His Beatitude Benedict, to stay in the monastery of Mar Saba for two weeks and catalog its manuscript materials (*Secret Gospel* 9; *Clement* ix).¹³

The population at Mar Saba had been steadily decreasing since its height and by 1958 the number of monks had dwindled to thirteen.¹⁴ Despite the small staff at the monastery, one of the monks escorted Smith to the library in the old tower every morning and stayed with him there (*Secret Gospel* 10). In the library, Smith inspected the books and set aside those that contained manuscript material. After identifying three or four such manuscripts, he was permitted to take them to his cell and study them overnight, and the next morning the materials would be returned (11). Smith described the circumstances of his most famous find at Mar Saba as follows:

Then, one afternoon near the end of my stay, I found myself in my cell, staring incredulously at a text written in a tiny scrawl I had not even tried to read in the tower when I picked out the book containing it. But now that I came to

puzzle it out, it began, “From the letters of the most holy Clement, the author of the *Stromateis*. To Theodore,” and it went on to praise the recipient for having “shut up” the Carpocratians. The *Stromateis*, I knew, was a work by Clement of Alexandria, one of the earliest and most mysterious of the great fathers of the Church—early Christian writers of outstanding importance. I was reasonably sure that no letters of his had been preserved. So if this writing was what it claimed to be, I had a hitherto unknown text by a writer of major significance for early Church history. . . . I hastened to photograph the text and photographed it three times for good measure. Next came the question of identifying the book into the back of which it was written. The front cover and the title page were lost (most of the books in the tower library had lived hard lives), and there was nothing on the spine, but I could see that it was an edition of the letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch (another early Church father). The preface had been signed by the famous seventeenth-century Dutch scholar, Isaac Voss. Voss’ work on Ignatius had been published several times, I knew, but it occurred to me that I could date the edition by photographing the first and last preserved page and comparing them with complete volumes so I took those. (The edition turned out to be that of 1646.) Then the bell rang for vespers, and I went off, walking on air. (*Secret Gospel* 12–13)

Returning to Jerusalem, Smith developed the photographs, transcribed the text, and shared some information about the text with Gershom Scholem (*Secret Gospel* 13–14). Although Smith had demonstrated proficiency from his other cataloging efforts in dating Greek manuscripts to the eighteenth century based on the style of handwriting,¹⁵ he realized during his visit to the Near East that this text was sufficiently controversial to warrant obtaining other opinions from some of his colleagues in Athens before returning to the United States (22–23). The fruit of Smith’s cataloging was translated into modern Greek and published in a periodical of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem in 1960.¹⁶ According to Smith’s catalog, he dated fourteen

other manuscripts at Mar Saba to the eighteenth century (nos. 6, 11, 20, 22, 23, 26, 31, 34, 37, 42, 47, 48, 61, and 67), but the dating of the manuscript containing *Theodore and Secret Mark*, no. 65, was the only one that included acknowledgments of assistance.

Smith announced his secret gospel to a group of scholars at the 1960 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature,¹⁷ and then eventually published his findings in two books in 1973, one for specialists, *Clement*, and the other for the general population, *Secret Gospel*.¹⁸ The information pertinent for evaluating the provenance and authenticity of Smith's texts is dispersed among these two books and in the modern Greek translation of Smith's 1960 catalog. The catalog presents information about the manuscript collection Smith examined in 1958, *Secret Gospel* gives details on the circumstances of Smith's visits to Mar Saba, and *Clement* details Smith's case for the authenticity of the texts.

Both books, *Secret Gospel* and *Clement*, expound an interpretation of *Secret Mark* that took Smith years to develop—involving water baptism, union with Jesus, the work of the Spirit, magic, ascent into the heavens, and liberation from the Law. Smith summarized the interpretation as follows:

Thus from the differences between Paul's baptism and that of the Baptist, and from the scattered indications in the canonical Gospels and the secret Gospel of Mark, we can put together a picture of Jesus' baptism, "the mystery of the kingdom of God." It was a water baptism administered by Jesus to chosen disciples, singly and by night. The costume, for the disciple, was a linen cloth worn over the naked body. This cloth was probably removed for the baptism proper, the immersion in water, which was now reduced to a preparatory purification. After that, by unknown ceremonies, the disciple was possessed by Jesus' spirit and so united with Jesus. One with him, he participated by hallucination in Jesus' ascent into the heavens, he entered the kingdom of God, and was thereby set free from the laws ordained for and in

the lower world. Freedom from the law may have resulted in completion of the spiritual union by physical union. This certainly occurred in many forms of gnostic Christianity; how early it began there is no telling. (*Secret Gospel* 113–14)

Most of the initial reviews of Smith's work seemed impressed by his case for the antiquity of *Secret Mark* but equally mystified as to this interpretation Smith built upon it. The assessments ranged from the more respectful, e.g., "Smith's confidence in the reliability of Mark II and this exegesis of it, is misplaced,"¹⁹ to the more outraged, e.g., "Characteristically, his arguments are awash in speculation."²⁰

The reception of Smith's texts then took a decidedly different turn when Quesnell asked "the unavoidable next question," whether *Secret Mark* is a literary fake.²¹

Uncovering Literary Fakes

The stalemate over *Secret Mark* goes back to the debate between Quesnell and Smith when Quesnell dismissed all of Smith's extensive, internal arguments for the authenticity of *Secret Mark* with a single wave of the methodological wand: "Physical examinations alone can make certain we are not dealing with a contemporary."¹ Quesnell pointed out that the absence of a thorough, physical examination of the sole manuscript of *Secret Mark* raises the possibility of a contemporary hoax because the same tools that Smith used to authenticate the text on internal grounds can be used by a hoaxer to fabricate the text.² Quesnell's caution over the authenticity of *Secret Mark*, however, was not based on specific positive evidence such as errors in the manuscript or its text that *Secret Mark* was a recent fake.³

Despite the passage of nearly thirty years since Quesnell first raised his objections to the manuscript's unavailability, and more than forty-five years since Smith visited Mar Saba, a physical examination of the *Secret Mark* manuscript has yet to be performed, and the removal and loss of its pages makes any such examination unlikely in the near future.⁴ As a result, continuing to insist on a physical examination of the two-and-a-half page manuscript can at best only prolong the stalemate and at worst call into question the academy's

competence to authenticate works known only from modern-era copies and photographs.⁵

There is a way out of Quesnell's predicament. Quesnell properly insisted that the need for a physical examination is most acute in order to guard against a contemporary deception, but *Secret Mark* is now at least forty-five years old. If *Secret Mark* is a modern-era fake, "created or modified with the intention to deceive,"⁶ then *Secret Mark* should be as vulnerable to the passage of time as other false documents that purport to originate from a much earlier time. As Anthony Grafton in his survey of Western literary forgeries explained:

If any law holds for all forgery, it is quite simply that any forger, however deft, imprints the pattern and texture of his own period's life, thought and language on the past he hopes to make seem real and vivid. But the very details he deploys, however deeply they impress his immediate public, will eventually make his trickery stand out in bold relief, when they are observed by later readers who will recognize the forger's period superimposed on the forgery's. Nothing becomes obsolete like a period vision of an older period.⁷

Successful fakes are tightly coupled to the time in which they were created because they were designed to deceive a contemporary. By necessity, the faker has to include details intended for a victim who lives much later than the time of the false document's supposed creation.⁸ For example, to be successful, a fake first has to catch the intended victim's attention to be successful; otherwise, the fake will simply be ignored.⁹ Yet, the issues that attract attention in the faker's day often have more to do with their contemporary context than with what people in antiquity thought was important. As times change, so do the issues, and a fake crafted to exploit a burning issue of its day will become old-fashioned in the hindsight of history.

Mistakes are inevitable, and historical fakes can rarely withstand sustained scrutiny, especially in the physical artifact that embodies the fake.¹⁰ Thus, a forgery's success often depends on

misdirection, by inducing the intended audience to forgo somehow a detailed examination of the manuscript and overlook its flaws. A common technique is to control the authenticating process, commonly by offering an overwhelming, but ultimately misleading, mass of supporting documentation detailing how well the fake fits into contemporary expectations of what an important, revolutionary find should look like. This approach not only captures the intended target's interest, but it also prevents close inspection of the fake's flaws. The sheer volume of the accompanying documentation makes the arduous task of independently verifying every aspect of the new discovery seem potentially futile, especially if the fake promises to meet a long felt scholarly need.¹¹

The critics who are most vulnerable to being deceived are those who are contemporary with the production of the fake because they do not have the benefit of the passage of time that eventually exposes many falsifications. If the false document was skillfully crafted to pass current contemporary standards, detecting the deception can be very difficult on internal grounds because both the creator and the critics are in the same ideological moment and using the same tools. As a result, both a solid chain of custody or "provenance" and physical examination of the manuscript are vital in authenticating any contemporary discovery. When a new discovery appears financially valuable, critics are usually very good at insisting on rigorous testing and provenance, because many falsifications are forgeries in the strictest sense, i.e., perpetrated with the intent not merely to deceive but also to defraud, usually for money or fame.¹²

Not all falsifications, however, are intended to be monetarily fraudulent, and the lack of a recognizable pecuniary motive may induce critics to relax their insistence on expensive and rigorous physical testing. This is especially true for hoaxes, which are designed to deceive society's critics as an intellectual challenge or for personal reasons, usually out of the enjoyment

from fooling the experts. Nevertheless, such hoaxes have a vulnerability that strict forgeries lack—their psychological payoff depends on their eventual disclosure.¹³ Accordingly, to prevent a hoax from backfiring by becoming too successful in its deception, it is not uncommon for the hoaxer to plant deliberate mistakes or jokes as clues to the fake's true nature. For example, in a forgery designed to fool a rival, Dionysius the Renegade wrote a play in the name of Sophocles in which he embedded an acrostic reading about his rival, "Heraclides is ignorant of letters."¹⁴

The applicability of these principles can be illustrated in two different types of scholarly fakes that have occurred in the field of biblical studies.¹⁵ The first example is a strict forgery of four fragments attributed to Irenaeus of Lyons, published in 1712 by a respected Tübingen professor.¹⁶ This scholar was Christoph Matthäus Pfaff, who claimed to have discovered the fragments in a library in Turin, but the manuscripts containing the fragments could never be located (6–7). Even though Pfaff produced a massive 647-page commentary in 1715, they were disputed almost immediately by Scipio Maffei and lingered thereafter under a cloud of doubt (7–9). By the late nineteenth century, scholars voiced serious doubts over the fragments. For example, in 1884 Theodor Zahn concluded that one of the fragments could not have been from Irenaeus because it cited Hebrews as Pauline (2). It was not until 1900 that Adolf Harnack demonstrated that Pfaff was the one who forged all four fragments, in part by connecting the contents of the fragments with a controversy current in Pfaff's time between Pietism and Lutheranism (66–69).¹⁷

In retrospect, it is not surprising that the Pfaff forgeries would involve a patristic writer like Irenaeus, because Pfaff lived at a time of raging theological conflicts in which manuscripts of patristic writers were repeatedly being discovered and cited for one side or another. In fact, the book into which *Secret Mark* was copied is a typical product of that age: a 1646 Greek–Latin

edition of the shorter, genuine recension of Ignatius's letters, based on a manuscript recently discovered in Florence and used in a Protestant-Catholic controversy over the apostolic succession of bishops.¹⁸

While Pfaff's apparent motive for his forgery was to bolster a theological position, Paul R. Coleman-Norton probably composed his fake as a practical joke.¹⁹ In 1950, while in the library of a mosque in Morocco he visited during World War II, Coleman-Norton published an article claiming to have found and transcribed an otherwise unknown saying attributed to Jesus (439–40).²⁰ This saying, which Coleman-Norton called an “amusing *agraphon*,” was embedded in a commentary on Matthew 24:51 (“there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”) that presented a dialog between Jesus and a disciple who asked what would happen to people without teeth (443). Jesus' punch-line response was: “O thou of little faith, trouble not thyself; if haply they will be lacking any, teeth will be provided” (443, n. 18). In fact, jokes permeate Coleman-Norman's article. For example, the Greek text about the fate of toothless people had gaps exactly where the letter *theta* is supposed to be, which he explained as follows: “for some external agency with an affinity for three-letter combinations starting with θ has left a *lacuna* in the shape of a hole sufficiently large to pierce this part of three lines” (443, italics original). Thus, both the Greek text and the toothless person have difficulty with the letter *theta*. Presumably, the dentures provided to gnash the person's teeth would also help to pronounce that letter's dental sound.

Coleman-Norton initially submitted the article for publication to the *Harvard Theological Review*, whose editor then was Arthur Darby Nock, the same person to whom Smith would later dedicate his scholarly book, *Clement of Alexandria*. (The other book, *Secret Gospel*, was dedicated to “the one who knows.”) Nock contacted a former student of Coleman-Norton at the nearby Princeton Seminary for more information about him. That person was Bruce Metzger, who informed Nock that

he had heard Coleman-Norton tell the same joke in class before the war. Nock therefore refused to publish the *agraphon* without at least a photograph of the manuscript. Coleman-Norton was unable to provide this minimum level of evidence with the excuse that neither he nor his colleague was able to secure or photograph the manuscript before it had supposedly been acquired by someone else, never to be seen again. As a result, Coleman-Norton had to resubmit his article to a number of other journals before finding one that would eventually publish it.²¹

Metzger could deduce almost immediately that the amusing *agraphon* was a hoax because he knew Coleman-Norton had possession of the *agraphon*'s contents (the denture joke) prior to his supposed discovery of it.²² Without an ability to predict the future, discoverers do not normally possess the subject matter of their unexpected finds. Coleman-Norton's article also contained other warning signs of fakery. For example, although the eleven-page article covered a wide range of marginally relevant topics, half of which were presented in long footnotes, it contained very little information that could be used to corroborate circumstances of the discovery. Quesnell noted that this mass of irrelevant information was actually part of the deception because "it distracts the reader's attention from the lack of basic evidence by inundating him with information about everything else."²³ Needless to say, the distraction did not fool Nock, who followed up by checking into Coleman-Norton's background and insisted on examining at least a photograph of it before Nock would consider publishing it.

Nock's instincts for identifying fakes were among the best of his day, but the five decades since its publication has taken its toll on Coleman-Norton's joke such that its falsity is now obvious. It looks very much like what people in the late 1940s expected a discovery of an ancient manuscript to be. The spectacular manuscript discoveries during this time of Toura (1941), Nag Hammadi (1945), and Qumran (1947) had already gener-

ated much academic and popular interest in the romance of finding and studying unknown, ancient texts from Arab deserts. This interest turned into frustration, if not desperation, when it began to take decades for these texts to be published. Coleman-Norton's *agraphon* was too good to be true for its time—its find-story involving a visitor to a Moroccan mosque during World War II played into the largely unsatisfied demand for texts discovered in Mediterranean locales. The content of the amusing *agraphon* also was a product of its time; its punch-line parodied the then-popular fire-and-brimstone style of preaching. By the early twenty-first century, however, interest in and preaching about Hell had waned.²⁴ For all these reasons, Coleman-Norton's text looks more like an artifact of its bygone time of the late 1940s than a genuine product of antiquity.

Like Pfaff's falsification, *Secret Mark* was accompanied by a massive commentary in two books totaling about 600 pages, so massive that Smith later apologized for it as being "dreadfully complex."²⁵ Like Coleman-Norton's hoax, *Secret Mark* appeared as another ancient text emerging from the Arab desert in the mid-twentieth century. Although *Secret Mark* was spotted in a monastery rather than a mosque, even that detail firmly belongs to the mid-twentieth century. The plot of a popular evangelical thriller, *The Mystery of Mar Saba*, originally published in 1940 but frequently reprinted afterwards, revolved around the discovery of a revolutionary, ancient text in the monastery of Mar Saba that turned out to be a forgery.²⁶ And the similarities do not end there. Both *Secret Mark* and the fictional discovery reinterpret a resurrection in the Gospels in naturalistic terms. *Secret Mark* contains a story suggestive of the raising of Lazarus except that the young man was still alive in the tomb when Jesus arrived, while the novel's text contains a firsthand account by Nicodemus confessing that he had stolen the body of Jesus from the tomb.²⁷ In addition, the 1947 printing of the novel even includes a copy of the Greek text of the fictional forgery on one of the fly papers of the book.²⁸ The