

Was There a “Secret Gospel of Mark”?

One of the most intriguing episodes in New Testament scholarship concerns the reputed discovery of an *alternative* version of Mark’s Gospel—indeed, an uncensored original version of his Gospel that he wrote but then edited to avoid scandal.

Imagine! What if there was an original “director’s cut” of the Gospel of Mark? What if the version we have had in our Bible all these centuries is an edited, censored version of a much more intriguing work? And what if it were possible to recover the “deleted scenes”?

What would the impact be on Christianity? Would Bibles need to be reprinted? Wouldn’t everyone want the Bible to contain the *real* Gospel of Mark? Or would that depend on just *how* controversial the deleted material turned out to be?

We will recount the story of “Secret Mark” here, as objectively as possible—but (spoiler alert!) you should know from the outset that the great majority of scholars now doubt that such a work ever existed.

Secret Mark Discovered

In 1958 Morton Smith, a respected New Testament scholar, announced that, while doing research at the Mar Saba monastery near Jerusalem, he had found an eighteenth-century copy of an

otherwise unknown letter ascribed to Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150 to ca. 215). This letter described and quoted from an alternative version of the Gospel of Mark that the author of that Gospel had produced in Alexandria. The most extensive quotation speaks of Jesus spending the night with a naked young man and instructing the latter “in the mystery of the kingdom of God.” This episode, with its homoerotic overtones, is said to be illustrative of things Mark wrote in the Alexandrian version of his Gospel, though Clement assures his reader that the evangelist did not report the Lord’s secret doings, nor did he “divulge the things not to be uttered.”

Smith photographed the manuscript of this letter but left the letter itself in the monastery—it was later photographed again in 1976 (by a library to which it had been transferred) but then it was apparently misplaced and it has never been seen again. Scholars, of course, would want to carbon date the letter and do other tests for its validity. Its disappearance seemed suspicious and contributed to widespread belief that the library had hidden or destroyed evidence that they feared would undermine traditional views of Jesus and of Scripture.

Many scholars were prepared to accept that Clement of Alexandria had written such a letter and they were grateful that we at least possessed photographs of it. A much larger question, of course, would be whether Clement was actually correct in saying that the alternative, homoerotic version of Mark’s Gospel had been written by the evangelist. Why would he compose two versions of his own

Gospel? Was it not possible that “Secret Mark” (as the alternative version of Mark’s Gospel came to be called) was composed by some group of heretics or by some obscure cult, and that Clement had simply been fooled into thinking it had any connection with the original evangelist?

For his part, Smith accepted the validity of the letter’s claim and he proposed in subsequent publications that the Secret Gospel of Mark had existed in the early church as an alternative version of the Gospel composed by the evangelist but perhaps intended for a more select audience. Another very prominent New Testament scholar, John Dominic Crossan, took the argument further. He proposed (contrary to Clement’s claim) that Mark had written only one version of his Gospel and that the now-lost Secret Mark had been that original edition. Our current Gospel of Mark, Crossan surmised, is a later, censored version.

Crossan’s argument made logical sense to many people. The notion that Mark produced two versions of his Gospel is unnecessarily complicated. Given two versions, we should surmise that either 1) somebody added homoerotic details to a Gospel that did not contain them, or 2) somebody deleted homoerotic details from a Gospel that did contain them. The latter seems much more likely, since we know of no Christians in this time period who would have wanted the story of Jesus to include such references, but we know of

many Christians who would *not* have wanted the story of Jesus to include such references.

Smith further interpreted the controversial text as implying that Jesus initiated the naked young man into a hallucinatory experience of heaven through which a freedom from the law was obtained; though Clement did not want to admit it, this freedom from the law “may have resulted in completion of the spiritual union by physical union.”¹ Crossan and other scholars would accept this interpretation and insist that, since Secret Mark predated all four of the New Testament Gospels, it probably bore witness to an aspect of Jesus’s life and ministry that was later repressed.

Secret Mark Discredited

Most scholars did not follow Smith or Crossan in accepting the validity of “Secret Mark.” It was difficult to re-envision earliest Christianity as a movement steeped in homoeroticism on the basis of a document that no longer existed. Further, there was absolutely no hint of such elements in early Christianity in any other literature, whether that of the Christians themselves or of their opponents. For many years, most scholars who investigated the matter concluded that either a) Clement was referring to an aberrant second-century version of Mark produced by some heretical group of his day, or b) some eighteenth-century person had forged a letter in Clement’s name quoting from a version of Mark’s Gospel that had never existed. As time went by, this latter “forgery theory” achieved

prominence. Not only had there never been a secret, alternative version of Mark; most likely, there also had never even been an authentic letter from Clement attesting to such a writing.

And then, in the twentieth century, things took a darker turn.

Handwriting analysis of the photographed manuscripts of Clement's letter have convinced a majority of scholars that Smith forged the document; he completely made up the idea of a variant version of Mark's Gospel and then produced the copy of a letter from Clement as an academic hoax.

Why would he do such a thing? Smith had died before these allegations surfaced and his motives for perpetrating such a hoax are unclear. Smith, an atheist, was known for provoking conventionally faithful Christians in ways that would discomfort them. However, he was always regarded as a responsible scholar, and those who knew him insist he would not have compromised historical inquiry just to antagonize the pious. Indeed, Smith himself often tried to tone down the more controversial implications of his discovery, and if he had really wanted to challenge conventional Christian values in the manner suggested, he could have composed a forged letter that did so far more explicitly.

One hypothesis is that Smith forged the letter as a way to test the scholarly guild, to see if experts would be able to discern what he had done. Some scholars (especially Stephen Carlson) claim that Smith actually scattered clues to his own authorship of the document

throughout its contents: if one reads the letter from Clement carefully, one can see that Smith composed it in ways that he thought would enable scholars to recognize its inauthenticity.

According to this thinking, Smith intended the matter to be a short-term hoax that would be quickly unmasked; everyone could have a good laugh, and the guild would recognize the need for careful scrutiny in dealing with historical documents. But then the letter itself disappeared and things got out of hand.

We must emphasize, in conclusion, that there is not yet complete consensus that the Clement letter attesting to Secret Mark was a forgery. There continue to be scholars who defend Smith's legacy and consider it a travesty that now (when he can no longer defend himself) he is being suspected and accused of professional malfeasance that contradicts his known credibility as a scholar in all other instances.

Helmut Koester of Harvard University defended the authenticity of the Secret Gospel of Mark until his death in January 2016. But Birger Pearson, of the University of California, is perhaps more representative of former Secret Mark supporters. Pearson, a scholar of noncanonical gospels who had once published works proclaiming the authenticity of the controversial work, was publicly admitting by 2012, "I was duped."

1. Morton Smith, *The Secret Gospel: The Discovery and Interpretation of the Secret Gospel according to Mark* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 113–14.

Short Bibliography of Some Key Resources

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