STEPHEN C. CARLSON, THE GOSPEL HOAX. MORTON SMITH’S INVENTION OF SECRET MARK

Bruce Chilton
Bard College

For nearly fifty years, New Testament scholars have been discussing a document, allegedly a late copy of a second-century original, that quotes bits of a “Secret Gospel of Mark.” In 1960 Morton Smith, a professor at Columbia University, announced the existence of this text at a meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, a year and a half after he said he found it in a monastic library near Jerusalem. Press coverage proved wide and instantaneous, because “Secret Mark” climaxes with an evocative image: a young man who wore only “a linen cloth over his naked body” spends the night with Jesus. That proved too good a lure to pass up: what reader of the Gospels could fail to wonder whether Jesus’ engaged in nocturnal initiations such as “Secret Mark” describes?

That controversy got in the way of resolving complications that need sorting out, because this text is not an ancient manuscript at all. “Secret Mark” is supposed to be an eighteenth-century copy of a letter written by the second-century Clement of Alexandria. (The letter is copied in the end pages of a seventeenth-century Latin book, whose appearance in the Greek Orthodox library at Mar Saba is itself a mystery.) The letter details and criticizes the teaching of Carpocrates in second-century Alexandria and quotes esoteric material in an expanded version of Mark’s Gospel.

To untangle this skein of claims over many centuries, scholars needed to ask themselves (1) whether Clement of Alexandria wrote the letter, then (2) whether Clement got Carpocrates’ teaching straight, and then—and only then—(3) whether “Secret Mark” tells us anything about Jesus and the formation of the Gospels. But reactions to the image of a homoerotic Jesus short-circuited common sense as well as sound professional judgment, and continue to do so today.
Partisan scholars opposed to “Secret Mark,” for the most part Conservative Evangelicals, have dismissed the document and those who support its picture as “radical fringe.” Because they often do so before dealing with any evidence, they inevitably seem uncritically defensive. Proponents of “Secret Mark,” on the other hand, have contended that Carpocrates’ teaching represents an early version of Mark, prior to what is in the New Testament, and that Jesus and his followers engaged in esoteric practices with sexual dimensions.

Now a book by Stephen Carlson shows us how the basics of scholarship were eclipsed by sensationalism on the Left compounded by willful dismissal on the Right, and why “Secret Mark” needs to be seen as a fraud. Carlson, a lawyer, argues his case as if in a civil proceeding, meeting the test of proof by preponderance of evidence, rather than beyond a reasonable doubt. He has mastered his brief impressively, and although in my view he does not quite prove that Smith was a forger, he does demonstrate—within the limits to certainty that incomplete evidence involves—that “Secret Mark” is someone’s forgery, and that Smith is the likely culprit.

The physical evidence of “Secret Mark” has always been problematic. Morton Smith presented fuzzy photographs he had taken in 1958 when he eventually published full studies of the document (in 1973). These and later images in color constitute the only material evidence for the existence of the document, which was moved from the Mar Saba monastery to a library in Jerusalem. The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, the legal custodian, has not released the text for further study, and past experience amply explains that reticence. But even on the basis of the photographs, Carlson shows there are signs that the copyist hesitated, lifted the pen, and retouched in the course of forming letters, telltale clues of forgery (pp. 25–35). Carlson further suggests that the fuzziness in the photographs represents what would happen if a person were to write on old, porous paper (p. 33).

Handwriting from the same scribe, in Carlson’s view, also shows up in another manuscript in the monastery. A twentieth-century

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1 See, for example, the review of Carlson’s book by Craig Blomberg in Denver Journal 9 (2006), one of many cases in which Blomberg’s adjectives precede his analysis.